Book review


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The Realist view on state security dominated International Relations (IR) scholarship for so many years, that the ossified, unitary, over-cautious, power-seeking, rational state actor became almost the exclusive unit within interactions in world politics (almost since the Neoliberal account stressed the importance of non-state actors). Such a materialist-laden view neglected all types of emotions (with the exception of fear and its derivates insecurity and anxiety pertaining to the security dilemma) and actually excluded emotions from the ‘rationality’ of world politics. For a long time the idea that states are mostly concerned with their physical security, and that this preoccupation was based on a lucid, logical and rational thinking, incorporated the entire reading of international relations and interactions. The role of emotions in world politics was considered either insufficient to lead to a systematic examination of state behaviour or it was analyzed insofar as to indicate misperceptions, and thus emotions were treated as “deviations from rationality”.

Constructivist scholars, though, tackled the issue of need (dis)satisfaction and the resulting emotions; for instance, Alexander Wendt emphasized the social construction of fear and anxiety and explained how people experience the emotion of satisfaction when needs are met, and how they experience anxiety, fear or frustration when such needs are not met. Furthermore, Wendt listed five major “material needs”, physical security, ontological security, sociation, self-esteem, and transcendence, and he explains ontological security in terms of “human beings need [to have] relatively stable expectations about the natural and

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especially social world around them.”3 Since Alexander Wendt’s major contribution to IR literature is based on both challenging and completing the (Neo)Realist materialist and individualist account of international relations (and proving its poverty for that matter) with a social reading of inter-state interactions, the author is emphasizing, *inter alia*, the need to stress both physical security and ontological security in understanding world politics, since “along with the need for physical security, [ontological security] pushes human beings [...] to seek out recognition of their standing from society.”4


The approach of Brent Steele is drawing on the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens, who (in his highly relevant book *Modernity and Self-Identity*) defines ontological security as “a sense of continuity and order in events”. Brent Steele is organizing his theorizing on ontological security by tackling first the overwhelming emphasis that mainstream IR literature places on the core of the concept of security, namely *survival*. The traditional account of security is based on survival, the latter being consider the prerequisite of states’ achieving their goals. Indeed, the survival element of security is ubiquitous in major Realist and Neorealist scholars’ accounts (such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer), but it is also integrated in the work of famous English School scholar Hedley Bull. In Steele’s theorizing, though, feeling “insecure” does not necessarily mean having one’s own survival at stake. Rather, according to Brent Steele,

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insecurity refers to situations whereby “individuals are uncomfortable with who they are”; consequently, “ontological security, as opposed to security as survival, is security as being” (p. 51).

According to Steele, just as individual agents “reflexively monitor” their actions and exhibit a tendency to reproduce certain actions “in the form of routines which contribute to the sense of ‘continuity and order’”, so too state agents could be confronted with “critical situations” which trigger “an uncomfortable disconnect with the Self” and, thus, threaten the continuity and order in states’ actions. As mentioned, the arguments of Steele are built on the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens and on the distinction between anxiety and fear; while identity threats produce anxiety, fear is a response to a specific threat, and “thus anxiety comes about when someone’s identity is challenged; fear arises when someone’s survival is threatened” (p. 51). Furthermore, Steele believes that “consistently ignored threats to ontological security produce [...] ‘shame’” for state agents (p. 3). The author is using “shame” as a metaphor meant to indicate “the radical disconnect produced when national ontological security is disrupted” and posits that “ontological security sees shame, anxiety, memory, and narrative as connected components of the process” that secures states’ self-identity through time (p. 54). Using self-interrogative reflexivity (explained in extenso in the last chapter called The future of ontological security in international relations, pp. 150-163), Steele argues that state agents constantly monitor their behaviour and produce biographical narratives with the purpose of explaining their actions or past behaviours. Therefore, “shame occurs when actors feel anxiety about the ability of their narrative to reflect how they see themselves; or, put another way, when there exists too much distance between this biographical narrative and self-identity” (pp. 54-55).

The concept biographical narrative (which Anthony Giddens termed “the narrative of the self”) is used by Steele in order to prove that state agents need to explain, justify and “argue” the co-constitutive relation between policies and their sense of self-identity. As such, “actors must create meanings for their actions to be logically consistent with their identities” (p. 11). In other words (of the author), “states ‘talk’ about their actions in identity terms” and “those specific ‘tellings’ which link by implication a policy with a description or understanding of a state ‘self’ constitute a state’s biographical narrative” (p. 10).
As Steele himself acknowledges in the very introduction of his book, “the central argument is that states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence” (p. 2). The author draws our attention to the fact that IR scholars posit that states’ moral, humanitarian, or honour-driven actions should be interpreted as “non-strategic”, since moral behaviour is believed to be “costly”, humanitarian actions/interventions are not consistent with the “strategic” or “realist” interests of states (and also compromise the interests that states must meet in order to preserve their physical existence), and, last, but not least, honour is believed to be “dangerous”. Indeed, the mainstream IR theory claims that neither moral, nor humanitarian or honour-driven behaviours belong to rational thinking in world politics; even more, the traditional understanding of security is centred on the calculation that states make in their foreign policies and on the main driving goal in interstate relations, namely, (physical) survival. And yet, Brent Steele raises relevant questions, such as: Why do states feel compelled to pursue moral, humanitarian or honour-driven actions? To what extent/how do they serve the national interests of states? And how are moral actions rational? Steele claims that such actions serve the self-identity needs of states and this is precisely why he is using an ontological security approach, since “such actions are rational pursuits to fulfill the drive for ontological security [...]” (p. 2).

The daring, but valid and supported, belief of Brent Steele points to the fact that, while physical security is clearly important to states, “ontological security is more important because its fulfilment affirms a state’s identity (i.e. it affirms not only its physical existence but primarily how a state sees itself and secondarily how it wants to be seen by others)” (pp. 2-3).

It is our belief that the brilliant and insightful theorizing of Brent Steele’s Ontological Security in International Relations. Self-Identity and the IR State resides not only in his conceptual framework of ontological security (which alone would have been relevant to IR scholarship), but mainly in the case studies selected and analyzed through the lenses of ontological security approaches, which successfully validate the author’s assertions.

The author uses the examples of British neutrality during the American Civil War in order to prove that the British assessment of the
meanings of the American war indicated reflexive behaviour and that an ontological security account is most adequate to interpret the way in which British opinion leaders “artfully avoided adopting a policy which would have seriously threatened British self-identity” (p. 76); Steele’s ontological security interpretation is highly accurate in showing how a “moral” action, such as neutrality is, in fact, indicative for “self-help behaviour, because it is a form of identity reinforcement (see pp. 76-93).

A second study dwells on Belgium’s decision to fight Germany in 1914 and the insightful value of it is centred on the way in which honour-driven actions, even though reflecting the overwhelming possibility of state demise, are selected by decision makers and supported by opinion leaders. The Belgium’s behaviour at the beginning of the First World War provides evidence for Steele’s ontological security arguments; in fact, this case validates one of Steele’s main assumptions, namely that nation-states are more attached to self-identity than to physical survival. In the worlds of Brent Steele, the chapter shows how “in pursuing self-identity needs a state can completely jeopardize its own physical existence” (p. 95).

The last study, entitled Haunted by the past: Shame and NATO’s Kosovo Operation, is used to prove the difficulty in explaining the intervention when one is employing prevailing and materialist approaches. The ontological security framework is relevant here since it shows how previous policy decisions of intervening states motivated them to take action via NATO in 1999. The chief argument of the authors rests on the fact that NATO members that contributed to the mission were faced with self-identity threats (the gross violations of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo) and thus they were confronted with “a metaphorical sense of ‘shame’ over past historical memories and experiences” (p. 115). By showing how the “memory” of Rwanda, Somalia, and Bosnia “haunted” state leaders, the author argues that while each of the intervening state (USA, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy) had an individual source of ontological insecurity when faced with the Kosovo Albanian plight, “these individual insecurities mobilized into a collective security action” (p. 115).

Brent Steele’s Ontological Security in International Relations is not only an innovative approach to the concept of security, but it also reflects an in-depth understanding of both traditional and critical IR theory.