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Anxiety, time, and ontological security's third-image potential

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In this article, we begin to extend ontological security to third-image theorizing. We argue that the autobiographical conceptions of international agents, along with other stories told about international politics, constitute 'the international' as a system, society, community, or inhabitable realm beyond and between first- and second-image relations. To develop this point, we focus on the relationship between narrative, anxiety, and time. We contend that ontological security issues resound in the third image once we shift from treating the international realm as social agents' external environment to treating it as a collective project in its own right. Doing so highlights the promise of ontological security studies for further differentiating international fear and anxiety, for enabling novel explanations of international phenomena, and for elaborating third-image identity formation as a wide-ranging timing effort to surmount a dynamic, processual environment full of interconnected coordination challenges.

Keywords: time; ontological security; third image; timing; anxiety

Ontological security scholars scrutinize a variety of individual and state – or 'first-' and 'second-image' – processes, but pay less attention to international – or 'third-image' – phenomena. A key component of ontological security seeking is the narration of a Self – a story that establishes identity and manages anxiety over time. In this article, we begin to extend ontological security to third-image theorizing. We argue that the autobiographical conceptions of international agents, along with other stories told about international politics, constitute 'the international' as a system, society, community, or inhabitable space beyond and between first- and second-image relations. This holds important consequences for that realm's identity, the identity of its constituents, and their possibilities for action. Indeed, the international realm shares more with individual or unit-level issues than previously acknowledged in ontological security studies (OSS) and International Relations (IR) theory more broadly.

To develop this point, we focus on this relationship between narrative, anxiety, and time. We contend that ontological security issues resound in the third image once we shift from treating the international realm as social agents' external

environment to treating it as a collective agency project in its own right. Anxiety characterizes this realm for multiple reasons, not least its complexity and agents' diverse attempts to make sense of it, both of which resist a consensus narrative about what precisely it is and how it hangs together. Moreover, features unique to the international realm also render it *particularly* anxious. We show this by distinguishing between fear and anxiety and by focusing on the anxiety management techniques found in second-image phenomena – namely attending to definite objects as threats, and 'the construction and reproduction of stable systems of meaning and morality'[1] and how these prove especially difficult in third-image processes. Doing so highlights the promise of OSS for further differentiating international fear and anxiety, for enabling novel explanations of international phenomena, and for elaborating third-image identity formation as a wide-ranging timing effort to surmount a dynamic, processual environment full of interconnected practical challenges.[2]

We begin by elaborating connections between narrative, anxiety, and time. We then pivot from the state focus in OSS toward its broader articulation in third-image theorizing, paying particular attention to the temporality and anxiety of international politics. We illustrate these implications in a third-image OSS reading of the Islamic State (IS). The conclusion suggests how third-image OSS can enrich IR and distinguish international politics from other forms of social life.

Narrative, anxiety, and the constitution of time

In OSS, anxiety results from a gap between the actor's biographical narrative and its Self-identity.[3] Additionally, OSS provides a lens for examining the more general situation of experience and existence. It is not only the mis/fit between Self-identity and narrative that matters, but also that between the narrative and the Self's wider environment – something that OSS has far overlooked. In narrative theory, the latter mis/fit bears heavily on our experience of time as either manageable or overwhelming. Amid the chaotic flux of existence, stories help agents constitute a sense of time through orderly connections, stable meanings, and intelligible outcomes[4] – a poetic form of 'emplotment' that renders time 'human'.[5] Narrative helps us apprehend and organize diverse stimuli, and thereby constitutes time as a coherent flow or duration.[6]

Some might argue that temporal and environmental features are given to experience, but the narrative theory of action understands them as *practical products* of emplotment.[7] This activity is ongoing:

> [A]t *no level* … is the narrative coherence of events and actions simply a 'given' … Rather, it is a constant task, sometimes a struggle, and when it succeeds it is an achievement. As a struggle it has an adversary, which is, described in the

[1]Steele 2008, 55; Rumelili 2015, 12–13.
[2]See Hom 2018, 76–77.
[3]Steele 2008, 55.
[4]Carr 1986, 183.
[5]Ricoeur 1984, 21.
[6]See Hom 2020, ch. 3.
[7]See Carr 1986.

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> most general way, temporal disorder, confusion, incoherence, chaos. … To experience, to act, to live *in the most general sense*, is to maintain and if necessary to restore the narrative coherence of time itself.[8]

Continuous narrative interpretation turns blooming stimuli into a coherent experience. Emplotment then times several such experiences in a loosely serial order establishing a 'now', a 'then', and a 'to come'.[9]

The narrative constitution of time holds important consequences for agency. Actors become such by releasing tensions or fulfilling goals emanating from the story's theme. To exercise agency 'is to make the constant attempt to *surmount time* in exactly the way the story-teller does. It is the attempt to *dominate the flow of events* by gathering them together in the forward-backward grasp of the narrative act'.[10] Self-identity narratives, then, must grapple with two important issues: (1) the coherence of 'inner Selves', which are an 'environment of their own';[11] and (2) the coherence of those Selves' external environments, the constellation of stimuli of which they must 'make sense' in order to persist.[12] The boundary between the narrating Self and its external environment is blurry in at least two respects. First, Self and environment emerge from the same narrative. Because they are co-constituted, changes in one implicate or directly stimulate changes in the other. Second, other actors populate the external environment, and some play the role of the Self's constitutive Other(s). So while we often think of a social agent acting *in* some free-standing setting and reacting *to* or *against* other agents, in an equally important sense the Self interpenetrates this wider context of actors and changes. Distinguishing one from the other (as we do by necessity below) represents an analytical abstraction from the messy fluidity of social life.

The deeply entangled Self is an anxious one. Although most OSS focuses on the first issue above, the temporal value of the narrative suggests the second is just as important. An unstable Self is unsettling but so is the incoherence or fluidity of its Self-understood world.[13] These tensions add an outward focus to OSS's emphasis on the inner Self, incorporating additional sources of discontinuity and anxiety to its account of social life. This is not to downplay anxiety emanating from within or 'below' the second image, national Self, such as 'internal others' (i.e. 'strangers') and non-state actors.[14] Instead, it complements them by considering how the world beyond or above the Self might also produce ontological insecurity. Every narrative unfolds a *self*-sufficient world of its own, so even autobiographies must propound a stable stage on which the Self acts and *emerges*

[8]Carr 1986, 96, emphasis added. Also Ricoeur 1984, 52. Cash 2020 refers similarly to the psychological struggle 'to avoid the collapse of "time…"'.

[9]While Arfi 2020 asserts the 'out-of-jointness' of time, we highlight narrative's capacity *to time* fragmentary experiences.

[10]Carr 1986, 61–62, emphasis added.

[11]Steele 2008, 34.

[12]Carr 1986, 96.

[13]Solomon 2014, 674. This issue resonates with questions about whether anxiety emanates from unit-level uncertainty or international factors (Zarakol 2010, 6).

[14]Steele 2008, 64; more on both below.

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as such.[15] If the material for the stage changes too drastically, unexpectedly, or often, agents struggle to enact their Self and to comprehend their temporal environment.[16] Thanks to cognitive (we can ingest only a finite amount of information), intellectual (we can digest only part of that), and narrative limitations (every story reduces experience), there is no guarantee that significant, unpredicted, and indeed unpredictable changes will not also threaten an agent's entire worldview along with its identity. Both internal and external changes may produce anxiety in the Self as it attempts the twin tasks of establishing internal (self-identity) and external (temporal order) continuity.

Bahar Rumelili argues that anxiety is a 'constitutive condition' of existence.[17] One consequence of our discussion is that it is the need *to time*, and situations in need of such timing, that engender anxiety.[18] Good timing transforms a constant barrage of ambiguous and jumbly stimuli into a useful series, but the very need to do so reminds us of 'the infinity of possibility', its lack of stable entities (i.e. its 'no-thing-ness'), and its 'dizzy[ing]' manifestation of 'non-being'.[19]

Drawing out these aspects of OSS foregrounds the interplay of order and meaning with discordant and 'critical situations' in which 'circumstances of a radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind … threaten or destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines'.[20] This interplay is temporal, for it is precisely the 'fear of chaos' and the anxiety entailed by social life that drives agents to develop and institutionalize routines, and more generally to go on in the first place.[21] Social agents continue to act, react, and reflect because they are finite, anxious beings in a complex and dynamic environment. This is not just a question of autobiographical continuity, it is also a matter of the Self's hookup with its temporal context. As we discuss in the next section, matters of disorder or disjuncture not only challenge a social agent to react consistent with its identity commitments, they also destabilize its world-building narrative and that story's temporal vision of how experiences and change processes hang together, with important implications for anxiety.

OSS in IR's third-image

So far we have intimated how the international realm problematizes individual states' ontological security by throwing up changes that vitiate their senses of Self and time. While this adds to IR's account of the anxious Self, the discussion has

[15]Ricoeur 1984, xi, 81. This extends OSS claims that autobiography marks 'one manifestation of a "reality production"' (Steele 2008, 11) and Berenskoetter's 2020 view of narratives as one of three primary anxiety-controlling mechanisms.

[16]Like Cash 2020, this challenges the OSS claim that greater internalization only inhibits dynamism and possibility.

[17]Rumelili 2020.

[18]By 'to time' we mean synthesizing meaningful change continua out of the wider, overwhelming flux of experience, as elaborated in Hom 2020, ch. 1.

[19]Rumelili 2020.

[20]Steele 2008, 51.

[21]Ibid., 60. Berenskoetter 2020 similarly refers to routines as 'locking the [Self] into … the "*longue duree*" of institutional time'.

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not yet fully leveraged narrative's third-image potential. To do so, we need to shift the referent object of ontological security from states and other individual agents *within* the international realm, which remains a focus in most of this Symposium, to the international realm itself.

There are strong precedents for this, evidenced by how the international realm regularly gets characterized as a stand-alone environment or substantive entity. Practitioners regularly refer to the 'international community', 'international order', 'international economic system', or simply 'the world' in the singular. English School theorists contend that 'international society' emerges within the anarchic system[22] that provides structural realism's independent variable.[23] When scholars invoke the power of 'history' or 'time' as an explanation for otherwise unintelligible phenomena[24] or conflate anarchy (lack of government) with disorder and chaos, they imply that the international realm is cohesive enough to possess causal powers.

Although third-image theorizing usually evokes the neo-neo debate on the strategic implications of anarchy, we propose to treat the international realm as *a communal product toward which individual actors strive*. This flows from our argument that Selves and their environments are not distinct and given but rather co-constitutively interwoven in the stories social agents compose and enact. While we acknowledge the Self's external environment is bigger or somehow *more* than that which comprises its interior being, we think it is especially important here to focus on the ways in which both the Self and its wider context emerge together and remain contingent on each other.

Approaching the third image this way comports with critical constructivist discussions of the co-constitution of the international realm and its actors.[25] It draws various international agents together in a collective project to establish and maintain a shared ground of agency. Although they may conflict and compete, foment rivalries, go to war, and pursue other un-civil behaviors, international agents remain partners in the ongoing creation of the milieu that grants them their *raison d'être* – an anti-social collective, at times, but *never* an *a*social one, as implied by the fact that we refer to *inter*-national *relations* rather than extra-national beyonds or foreign voids.

Narrative theory's emphasis on time and anxiety is especially useful for bridging OSS 'up' to the third image. International agents belong to a loosely-knit group and 'whatever else a group may be about, it must see to its own self-maintenance'.[26] In this sense, the international realm is not so different from its individual constituents' autobiographical composition: 'like an individual, a [group] at any moment has a sense of its origins and the prospect of its own death as it seeks to articulate its own internal coherence and integrity over time'.[27] For instance, accounts of the modern international system often refer to its origin in the Treaties of Westphalia

[22]Bull 2002.

[23]Waltz 1979.

[24]See Hutchings 2008, 28–53; Hom 2020, introduction, ch. 3.

[25]For example, Onuf 2012. It also links OSS to post-structural discussions of how foreign policy discourses 'first produc[e] representations of international or regional communities' (Weber 1995, 106).

[26]Carr 1986, 163.

[27]Ibid., 164.

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in 1648, while challenges to the constitutive principles of that system, such as al Qaeda and the IS, confront it with conceptual instability. Both of these – the myth of a shared beginning and the specter of dissolution – reinforce the international realm's coherence and identity as some*thing* that did come into being, that might cease to be, and that therefore currently is.[28]

International laws and norms reinforce the idea of a substantive entity rather than a negatively constituted space. Territorial sovereignty, treaties, and legal conventions all reinforce the sense of an international 'there there'. As Carr[29] discusses, 'conventions, constitutions, laws, and hierarchical structure' are crucial to a collective precisely because it is not mortal in the way that individuals are. A collective does not enjoy biological reproduction, nor does it face inevitable physical expiration. So a collective agent or project is at once more durable and *more vulnerable* than a biological individual – it is not naturally finite, but neither is it ontologically affirmed simply by its material presence. To exist, in each moment a collective must reproduce itself by enacting a cogent narrative that avoids the tug of decoherence and its intimation of non-being.[30]

Inasmuch as international agents understand themselves as populating a society or community, as positioned within a system, or simply as occupying a shared time and space, their wider environment becomes a matter of ontological security. They need not fully *identify* with this project as strongly as individuals do with national identities to share a stake in its existence as a viable ground for agency.[31] As Hidemi Suganami maintains, '[i]f agents are narratively constituted, so also is society', and 'the whole social world' can be understood as a 'gigantic river of innumerable stories about itself and its components'.[32] Such a collective project still requires constant maintenance in that its ontological persistence and temporal order depends on the stories told about it.[33] This point suggests that a wide range of stories support the formation of the 'international' as a collective identity.

First, and closest to extant OSS concerns, we can appraise international actors' autobiographical narratives as modes of Self-presentation but also as the building blocks of a general effort to configure their wider environment as a coherent, whole, world. Pace Shakespeare, all the world's a stage *constituted merely by* its players. This need not necessarily shift the 'who' that experiences international anxiety. Powerful states might see their own ontological security as coterminous with the international realm. Hegemons often find systemic disorder and important events 'out there' bearing directly on their Self-identity.[34] Much like Weldes' study of how American discourses of leadership and strength helped produce the Cuban Missile Crisis,[35] we recall recent concerns in the United States about a world it no longer seems able to control, lead, or manage (setting aside the possibility that such influence was always limited and ephemeral). Russian incursions

[28]On the ontological security of threatening routines, see Mitzen 2006.
[29]Carr 1986, 164.
[30]Ibid., 166–68.
[31]See Mitzen 2018, 396, 404.
[32]Suganami 1999, 379.
[33]Carr 1986, 134–50.
[34]Steele 2010, 31.
[35]Weldes 1999.

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into Georgia and Ukraine, the robust and rapid rise of IS, the catastrophe of Syria – all of these suggest an increasingly shaky international stage on which US agency founders.[36] In such cases, it is often difficult to disaggregate national from international anxiety.

Small states also might find their national Selves implicated directly by international identity as Belgium did in 1914.[37] This produces quite counterintuitive practices. Arfi focuses on the 'small nations' habit of turning 'anxiety into fear' based on a 'leap of faith' that they can cope better with fear.[38] But the Belgian case adds a wrinkle to this process, with structural implications. Belgium's autobiography emphasized its status as a neutral state with duties to European society on the whole, a society where neutral powers *must* defend themselves against aggression to preserve the norm of neutrality as a societal good. Belgian anxiety about upholding a value of European international society trumped existential fear and encouraged an 'act of national suicide' where 'Belgian military advisers and decision makers were fully aware of which consequences would likely follow their decision' to reject Germany's ultimatum and resist invasion.[39] Belgium was a 'mortal nation' but one that took a different 'leap of faith' by sacrificing its existential security to confront the ontological insecurities associated with its dereliction of societal duty as a neutral party.[40] Through national death, Belgium staved off anxiety about international-societal dissolution. This episode also poses a counterpoint to Berenskoetter's argument that attachments to continuity and stability inhibit 'radical forms of agency', for Belgium chose collective continuity over individual existence.[41] Finally, this illustrates how porous the boundary between international agents and their wider environment can be, and broaches the possibility that it is precisely this fuzziness that drives agents to act in surprising ways.

Second, narratives that are not actor-autobiographical (i.e. not told by and about a state, sub-state, or institutional Self) are still *international* autobiographies insofar as they propound some account of an international realm *per se*. We call these *international autocosmographies*, indicating a reversal of narrative focus or priority. Unitary autobiographies primarily construct an agent within some political cosmos, which they also constitute as a secondary effect. International autocosmographies primarily construct a political cosmos containing states and other agents. This realm exemplifies Suganami's 'whole social world' assembled from 'innumerable stories' of the agentic, systemic, and societal variety. It stems not only from practical political discourses but also from theoretical, historical, and legal accounts explicating its origins, its development, and its ligatures and limits.[42] Although undoubtedly different, each of these posit some entity – a society, system, level, etc. – beyond the state that is not simply a void, that is more coherent than chaotic flux, and whose presence depends upon certain features, constitutive agents, and actions. Reflecting a variety of purposes, these different accounts nurture a

[36]See Obama 2007.
[37]Steele 2008, ch. 5.
[38]Arfi 2020.
[39]Steele 2008, 108–09.
[40]Contra Arfi 2020.
[41]Berenskoetter 2020.
[42]E.g., Waltz 1979; Onuf 2012.

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collective effort to constitute the international realm – IR's third image – as a dynamic place that hangs together enough for international politics to be possible.

In IR, we often think of theoretical differences as a matter of perspectives or ways of cutting into 'the international'. However, even a plethora of international auto-cosmographies addressing different phenomena and producing different temporal orders helps 'world' the international as a nominally common ground for action.[43] The importance of this is that despite much variation, whenever scholars or practitioners refer to 'the international' as a self-sufficient stage for foreign relations, they recapitulate a coherent vision of that realm complete with a recognizable identity and manageable dynamics. Individual third-image theories, practical accounts, and formal codifications all provide tributaries of the 'gigantic river' that narratively (re-)produces the international as a cohesive and temporal entity.

International anxieties

The international realm only exists and persists as an identifiable entity if there is some intersubjective consensus on its features and limits; when its ontological status falters so does the world that international actors inhabit. The third image also depends on an orderly sense of time provided by the stories told about it. By 'telling and retelling of stories … a society's components form a *continuously present* collectivity of a particular standing and identity'[44] – in this case a formally anarchic yet intelligible, somewhat cohesive, and more or less manageable space for foreign relations. The more people talk about the international, the more it manifests being and durative presence. At the limit, the product of effective and collective narration comes to seem like a pre-existing and independently 'real' structure. Yet stories told about the international realm differ, and they often do so with a greater range and diversity than stories about individual agents. This fosters anxiety in the collective third image Self in at least four respects.

First, given how contentious international political practices and theories are, insofar as each feeds this 'gigantic river' of the international, every theoretical debate and practical–political conflict destabilizes that realm's internal coherence. Numerous IR approaches examine how such clashes trouble individual agents, but OSS can reframe the international by foregrounding its built-in tension between cosmographic-identity stakes and intra-cosmographic sticking points. Because the third image has no overarching referent (a point we return to below), its ontological security depends on the ability of a huge collection of stories to stitch together some minimal cohesion in the midst of dissensus and incommensurable values. The idea that the international realm comes into being through the sort of diverse and discordant narratives that produce anxiety in other agents suggests it emerges and unfolds as an intrinsically anxious, ontologically insecure entity.

Second, unless they are explicit accounts of the international realm (e.g. systemic IR theories or global political histories), these stories (e.g. a historical account of a

[43]Agathangelou and Ling 2009. This realm does not accommodate all global denizens (Agathangelou and Ling 2009, but practices of inclusion/exclusion still refer to and thus reproduce a shared space that makes inclusion/exclusion meaningful.

[44]Suganami 1999, 379, emphasis added.

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particular war or national origin story) configure the international as a backdrop or secondary element. Consequently, the collective international project is a much more dispersed and diffuse affair, both spatially – in the sense of numerous accounts – and temporally – in the sense that it is provisional and vulnerable to contrary murmurs and outright challenges. These aspects render it never quite fully, completely present.[45]

Third, because international politics is co-constitutive with individual actors and because the border between the two is fuzzy rather than distinct, international politics may *take on* actor-internal anxieties. In critical situations, individual agents experience anxiety about whether their identity remains adequate to a changing world, *whose own* identity as an inhabitable environment also comes into question because it depends on those agents' participation. These three issues inhibit the second anxiety management mechanism mentioned earlier, the (re)production of stable meaning systems. This task is challenging enough in unit-level situations, but it only increases in third-image contexts characterized by more contested and more dispersed accounts.

Finally, the international Self is coterminous with its inhabitable world. For other narratively constituted beings, discord remains challenging but might reinforce identity cohesion *if* understood to emerge outside that Self as a constitutive Other.[46] Even in confronting the Self, external Others offer a common experience of an 'independent object' beyond the in-group that encourages a 'we-relationship' within.[47] They also offer sites where nebulous anxiety can be turned into concrete fear.

Unlike other collective projects, the international Self lacks a ready constitutive Other. A state or institution can define itself against its direct counterparts. The international realm has no clear analog.[48] Inasmuch as it must be (re)produced without the help of external Others, this marks a novel experiment in political imagination. No 'external threat[s]' or 'outsiders' reinforce the cohesion and coherence of its 'inside'.[49] It hangs together only by virtue of its internal constitution.[50] Taken together, these four points suggest that 'the international' is never quite settled and persists instead as a bubbling and often troubling milieu.

Now, since a Self may work on itself, past international orders could provide this Other in principle.[51] For instance, numerous agents have constructed and legitimized novel orders *against* past arrangements deemed responsible for catastrophe. Territorial sovereignty followed the wars of religion; the Napoleonic Wars produced

[45]Like other provisional projects, this means that the international may seem 'close to nowhere, halfway across', and yet 'never more here' (The Tragically Hip 2002, track 10).

[46]Carr 1986, 159.

[47]Ibid., 134.

[48]Although when they bracket 'out' phenomena as insufficiently political (i.e. merely 'relations') or systemic (i.e. unit-level), parsimonious theories manage anxiety by constructing conceptual Others that implicitly define the properly international Self (Waltz 1979).

[49]Carr 1986, 135.

[50]Indicatively, the age of exploration, which produced ideas of earth as a single world, was 'crucial to the development of science fiction' as 'an imaginative space in which humanity might encounter radically different beings—aliens, the material embodiments of … alterity' and of our 'fear of the unknown' (Roberts 2016, 75, 86).

[51]Steele 2008.

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the Concert of Europe; World War II, the United Nations. Such orders define themselves by what they leave supposedly behind – extremism, (European) imperial ambition, totalitarianism and genocide. Yet temporal Othering on an international scale does not easily resolve the tension between competing interpretations of the past, which constrains new prospects and raises the possibility that the international was never 'there' as much as we thought. This is because temporal Othering depends on the ability to index contemporary Others to a coherent account of the *past* Self.[52]

Third-image anxiety owes much to this tension between collective project and internal interpretive differences. Whereas external difference readily becomes a definite object and existential threat, internal inconsistencies or dissents primarily highlight an anxious, 'uncomfortable disconnect [with the] Self'.[53] This does not depend on any particular identifiable source of instability – indeed, it is the *not* knowing what will emerge or the prospect of the 'unknown' bubbling up *within* a purportedly coherent environment that generates ontological insecurity.[54] Because the international realm's sources of in/security necessarily come from within, this challenges not only particular narratives but narrative competency as such – the possibility of a viable ground for social relations on a global scale. Loosely collected and contentious narration helps constitute the international realm as a recognizable whole, but one where the possibility of an ordering principle is continually called into question. There may be a there there, but it remains exceedingly difficult to discern just *what* there is in a durable sense. Its peculiar narrative constitution renders the international minimally apprehensible to many but fully comprehensible to none – and thus arch anxious.

Anxiety, not fear, then, is an intrinsic attribute of international politics. Other than thermonuclear war or climate change, there are comparatively few things that threaten the existential viability of the realm. Contrary to conventional Hobbesian presentations of a fear-driven 'state of nature', we should understand the international as a persistently anxious attempt to nurture a collaborative social whole under dynamic and uncertain conditions, and one with no recourse to the anxiety-management resources of constructing against external objects or turning these into threats.[55]

This is not to say that existential threats and fear do not influence international politics. However, these phenomena tend to emanate from dyadic or second-image issues where one state (or small group) threatens another, engendering unitary or regional fear. Or they already fit comfortably within stories like structural realism's formally anarchic system churning cycles of competition, conflict, and balancing.[56] Through autocosmographic narration, ontological security suggests that we should also look at ideas, events, and processes that unsettle the workings and order of the international whole. These signal an uncomfortable disconnect of the international Self. Possible sources include practical challenges to international ordering principles but also conceptual alternatives to mainstream third-image theories. All

[52]See Hom and Steele 2016, 191–93.
[53]Steele 2008, 51–52.
[54]See Rumelili 2015, 12.
[55]Rumelili 2020 develops an anxiety-based reading of Hobbes.
[56]Waltz 1979.

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challenge the view of the international system as composed solely of territorial sovereign states under anarchy – either by expanding the definition and roster of members or by challenging the sense that such a community functions smoothly, predictably, and continuously. While these challenges may not be strictly systemic, they mark internal sources of disruption analogous to those domestic 'strangers' who 'cause anxiety' in the nation-state because they undermine its ability to provide order and thus express the possibility of chaos *within* that order.[57] In contrast with the international *system* where formal anarchy leads to chronic fear,[58] we view the 'international' as a realm of *conceptual* anarchy that exists as such through diverse stories that destabilize all organizing principles, habituated interactions, and other repertoires of ordering. Because they emerge from and announce a vulnerability *within*, these international-internal strangers engender one of two responses. Either autobiographies and autocosmographies can be revised to accommodate them or other inhabitants can securitize them, moving them from the anxious category of 'stranger-other' to 'stranger-enemy', an existential threat eligible for coercive responses[59] but still unsettling to an international project born and raised in anxiety.

International anxiety and the Islamic State

For example, although it began officially in 1999, the IS attained international prominence from 2010 on, when its new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, greatly expanded its reach by forcefully taking territory in Syria and Iraq. In 2014 after US airstrikes, the IS began a kidnapping and beheading campaign, publicized online, as well as undertaking terrorist attacks from Pakistan to the United Kingdom and a series of IS-'inspired' attacks even further afield. At this point, an international coalition began forcefully rolling back IS territorial and operational gains. At the time of writing, IS had lost most of its territory and Donald Trump declared it '100% defeated', although other leaders and his own officials insisted it would remain a problem going forward.[60] Defeated but not defunct, IS still preoccupies many national and international security agendas.

IS challenges multiple autocosmographies by its forceful re-bordering of sacrosanct territory, its spectacular affronts to international norms, and its proposal to replace national ordering principles with denominational ones in a 'territorial caliphate'.[61] In strictly systemic terms, as a non-state actor, the IS is an external Other but one whose conquest of large swathes of Iraq and Syria directly challenged the territorial sovereignty that defines the system's functionally identical units. In broader terms, IS is an internal stranger, an agent birthed from within and by the dynamics of the 'international community'. In addition to Levantine military campaigns, IS attacks on citizens abroad highlight the contingency of both national collectives[62] and the international order they help constitute.[63] Part of what makes IS so

[57]Steele 2008, 71, 64.
[58]Waltz 1979.
[59]Carr 1986, 135; Weber 1995, 54; Kinnvall 2004, 751–3; also Steele 2008, 64.
[60]Lister 2019.
[61]See Friis 2017, 18.
[62]Ibid., 16.
[63]Mendelsohn 2005.

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unsettling, so productive of widespread fear and anxiety, and another expression of what Berenskoetter might call 'radical agency',[64] is its ability to move seamlessly back and forth between these security registers, evincing an existential challenge to some states and an ontological problem for the international realm as a whole.

In line with this Symposium's animating concerns, we argue that international reactions to IS depend more on the latter – the most important political effects of IS stem from the ways it engenders international anxiety, not fear. Other than Iraq and Syria for brief amounts of time (ca. 2015, for instance), IS posed no survival threat to states – especially its most ardent Western adversaries. But its seemingly random terror campaigns and their increasingly global reach generated significant temporal uncertainty. Its claims to a superior political ordering principle (e.g. a 'new caliphate') posed an internal source of disorder and challenged the ontology of the international realm as a common space for state or state-based action unfolding in an orderly and intelligible fashion. Indeed, IS proposed entirely different modes of co-existence, different 'right[s] to punish', and, crucially, different ways to use violence to produce 'civil order' and 'a comprehensive vision of society' than those on which the modern international order rests.[65] The problem of IS is not just territorial governance, but *who* can mobilize 'chaos and order in chorus – destruction and creation at once' as well as *how* and *when* they should do so.[66] By threatening various polities with sporadic violence, IS deliberately undercut the promise and the premise of a well-ordered and secure international whole.

Ontologically insecure actors often elect to push internal sources of anxiety 'out' and turn them into objects of fear. International responses deny IS legitimacy. In terms of military action, this comports with previous attempts to re-establish international order in the face of sub-state provocations.[67] Yet, tellingly, these responses work in tandem with vigorous *narrative* efforts to excommunicate IS from the international realm: IS 'shocks the conscience of the *entire world*',[68] so 'we' must 'degrade and destroy' or 'bomb the hell out of' it as a matter of 'shared security'. Doing so will 'replace chaos with peace'.[69] These ways of talking about IS highlight the ontological struggle it poses between two ways of deploying violence to induce an ordered international Self from chaos. They have become international common sense, even though IS poses no credible threat to the existential survival of states or the states system and even though (according to traditional security logics) fixing it to a delimited territorial container would make it more deterrable than other, loosely networked organizations.

National security logics of survival, threat, and deterrence cannot explain the vociferous, collective, and near-unanimous response of powerful international actors to this Lilliputian challenge. OSS can through a focus on the tension between anxiety, collective identity, and a stable sense of time. The Janus ideas of sovereignty and anarchy, norms such as diplomacy and the keeping of contracts, and the laws

[64]Berenskoetter 2020.

[65]Friis 2017, 8–13. IS's reliance on violence to construct order further destabilizes international selves by recalling their own legacies of constitutive violence.

[66]Friis 2017, 16.

[67]Mendelsohn 2005.

[68]Ackerman 2014.

[69]Usborne 2016.

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of war are types of reflexive routines that orient inhabitants toward a shared realm amidst a welter of confusing stimuli, indicate how they should 'grasp and live' their foreign affairs,[70] and prevent them from having to 'learn' each foreign interaction anew without any extant social cues, habits, or expectations.[71] Without them, political actors would be not so much constrained by various material or structural factors as unfettered and thus paralyzed by myriad possibilities. Absent ordering principles that lend the international realm a minimal sense of cohesion and order, it would be difficult to grasp together in a single image. Moreover, it would be an uninhabitable flux, utterly indeterminate and chaotic, and full of anxiety. In this way, the international realm shares much with its constituent parts in that its foundational narratives and practices function to reduce the 'dizzying' effects of a blank slate or a sheer, chaotic flux.[72]

This helps explain why novel actors with alternative proposals – even weak ones like IS – produce international crises full of anxiety. They confront international inhabitants not with an elimination threat but with the dissolution of working narratives and a return to the void of overwhelming possibilities. Such challengers kill comparatively few but broach paralysis for all by throwing the possibility of a stable *international* realm into radical doubt.

Recall that while external shocks may disturb our clockwork routines and remind us of the destabilizing flux of time, they also reinforce a constitutive story of the collective that they confront, a collective whose 'way of being in and dealing with time'[73] actually benefits from such experiences if it can re-inscribe them in a smooth temporal trajectory. International political challenges necessarily come from within. So rather than tempering (challenging, then galvanizing) the international collective, these instances of difference offer few constitutive Othering benefits and thoroughly complicate the identity of the temporal, cosmographical stage for an international agency. They present the international project only with the angst-ridden work of the Self *on itself*, affected through dispersed and contentious autocosmographies and their fraught, laborious revision. The most expeditious response to internal strangeness may therefore be to re-emplot them as existential threats rather than undertaking the wholesale revision of various third-image narratives. When international-internal 'strangers' and conceptual challenges like IS emerge, the community response tends toward conservatism and securitization.

Conclusion

We have argued that by focusing on narrative and time, ontological security can recast third-image theorizing around the pervasive issue of anxiety, which is particularly difficult to manage at the international level with the practices and routines typically featured in OSS. First, while international orders of the past may provide a type of Other, they prove less useful as objects of fear than elements of Whiggish origin stories.[74]

[70]Steele 2008, 61.

[71]Mitzen 2006.

[72]See Steele 2008, 61.

[73]Carr 1986, 149–50, 185.

[74]They can excommunicate contemporary difference, but this is not so much the revisionary work of the Self on the Self as it is an effort to turn part of the Self into an Other.

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Second, while the (re)production of stable systems of meaning and morality via narratives help the international realm hang together, different actors within that realm narrate its identity, meaning, and morality differently. Insofar as these constitutive stories inherently call into question the possibility of a stable and decisive principle for ordering 'the international', they make anxiety its pervasive condition and ontological *insecurity* its baseline.

Narrative theory helps reinforce OSS's account of agent-internal dynamics by showing how environmental changes can stimulate anxiety as much as biographical disconnects can. We have argued that in such cases, an agent's sense of time may falter along with its sense of Self. Narrative theory also helps contextualize the international as a collective effort to grapple with pure possibility rather than as an impersonal and constraining framework for state action. On this view, the international emerges from manifold stories, routines, and processes that optimally offer its constituents a temporally structured ground for action.

OSS can thus understand *international* politics as continuous with but also different from first- and second-image theorizing. In all three, Self-identity and an orderly sense of time are essential to social life and purposeful action. But compared with individual human and unit-level phenomena, which are ensconced in external ordering structures, the third image focuses our view on the acme of ontological tension. The international realm is where the struggle between collective identity and routinized actions, on the one hand, and pure possibilities and the overwhelming 'flux of time', on the other, remains most fraught, in part because international ordering practices are more multiplicitous and ambiguous than their individual and domestic counterparts. It is where the basic human relationship to time and its modern clockwork variant, which privileges standardization and routine, play for the largest and highest stakes: the identities of social agents and their dynamic cosmos. It is where constitutive narratives that work on lower levels falter due to complexity, scale, or unforeseen consequences. It is where 'our' (however understood) ability to establish a sense of Self and a sense of time matters the most and requires the greatest effort.

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