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Anxiety, Ambivalence and Sublimation: Ontological In/security and the World Risk Society*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to expand the social-theoretical and psychoanalytic range of research on ontological in/security, by exploring parallel concerns addressed by Beck, Kristeva, Butler and Žižek. These include, first, the psychic roots of othering processes and their encoding into cultural repertoires. Second, the difficulties and possibilities of displacing othering processes within national and international politics. Third, the disruptive effects of globalising processes on the symbolic efficiency of cultures and on their encoded defences against ontological insecurity. Fourth, the crucial significance for political and international relations of the qualitative characteristics of those defences against ontological insecurity that gain predominance within cultural repertoires and their variable norms of recognition. Likewise, the significance of those norms of recognition that challenge established norms and successfully reorganise cultural repertoires.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Cultures of Anarchy, Symbolic Efficiency, Norms of Recognition, Othering Processes.

Kaygı, Kararsızlık ve Yüceltme: Ontolojik Güven(siz)lik ve Dünya Risk Toplumu

ÖZET

Bu makale, Beck, Kristeva, Butler ve Žižek tarafından ele alınan paralel kaygıları araştırarak, ontolojik güven(siz)liğe ilişkin sosyo-teorik ve psikanalitik araştırma kapsamını genişletmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bunlar, ilk olarak, ötekileştirme süreçlerinin psikik köklerini ve bunların kültürel dağarcıklara kodlanmasını içermektedir. İkincisi, ulusal ve uluslararası siyasette ötekileştirme süreçlerinin yerinden edilmesinin zorlukları ve olanaklarıdır. Üçüncüsü, küreselleşme süreçlerinin kültürlerin sembolik yeterliliği ve ontolojik güvensizliğe karşı kodlanmış savunmaları üzerindeki yıkıcı etkileridir. Dördüncüsü ise, kültürel dağarcıklarda ağırlık kazanan ontolojik güvensizliğe karşı bu savunmaların niteliksel özelliklerinin ve değişken tanınma normlarının siyasi ve uluslararası ilişkiler için hayati önemidir. Benzer şekilde, yerleşik normlara meydan okuyan ve kültürel dağarcıkları başarılı bir şekilde yeniden organize eden tanıma normlarının önemidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Psikanaliz, Anarşi Kültürü, Sembolik Yeterlilik, Tanınma Normları, Ötekileştirme Süreçleri.

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Introduction

Over the past 15 years or so, a focus on ontological security and its disorienting and destabilising other, ontological insecurity, has developed in the broad research field of International Relations (IR). This very focus has itself produced a further broadening of IR research. It has encouraged a new awareness of the significance of psychic processes operating at the level of individual human subjects, as they confront the disruptions of globalization and as they negotiate attempts by state institutions and political elites to address and/or exploit the psychological need for ontological security.¹ Beyond that focus on individuals, the foundational work of Jennifer Mitzen and Brent Steele has extended the range of ontological security concerns by directly addressing the state and its interactions with other states.² While this scaling up beyond the individual to the state as subject and agent has met with criticism, it has generated significant research outcomes and has demonstrated its value in the analysis of states and their mutual interactions.³

Another major pay-off from the incorporation of ontological security theory into IR is the enhanced focus on emotions and affects that it has delivered. Profoundly disorienting anxiety is the central affect and emotion highlighted by Ronald Laing in his harrowing accounts of those individuals who succumbed to the terrors of ontological insecurity.⁴ Likewise, Anthony Giddens recognises the place that emotions play in both the loss and maintenance of ontological security.⁵ In both cases this focus on affects and emotions arises from an engagement with psychoanalytic theory, even when, as with Giddens, that is supplemented by his ethno-methodological concern with the maintenance or collapse of the routines of everyday life. Laing also highlighted how routines serve as defences against disabling anxiety and the ontological insecurity it generates.

In this article it is my intention to build upon the insights of the ontological security literature, while also attempting to extend it.⁶ To do so, I reach beyond the usual reference points for the discussion of ontological in/security by addressing parallel discussions that, while not directly referencing the term “ontological security”, nevertheless address the same psychic, cultural and political issues and dilemmas that are integral to its discussion. These parallel discussions share with the explicit ontological security literature an engagement with psychoanalytic theory, and that engagement will be central to my own discussion.

In analysing contemporary world politics from the local to the global, Slavoj Žižek refers to the demise of “symbolic efficiency”, Ulrich Beck to the loss of trust and the excoriating effects of “linear doubt”, Julia Kristeva highlights the risks entailed in human subjects remaining “strangers to ourselves”

1 See, Catarina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security”, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No 5, 2004, p. 741–767.

2 See, for instance, Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma”, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No 3, 2006, p. 341–370. Also see: Brent Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, New York, Routledge, 2008.

3 For an influential critique of “scaling up” beyond the individual, see: Alana Krolikowski, ‘State Personhood in Ontological Security Theories of International Relations and Chinese Nationalism: A Sceptical View’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No 1, 2008, p. 109–133.

4 Ronald Laing, *The Divided Self*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965.

5 Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990.

6 For an excellent, recent overview of the strengths and insights afforded IR studies by the incorporation of concerns with ontological security, see: Catarina Kinnvall, Ian Manners and Jennifer Mitzen, “Introduction: Ontological (in)security in the European Union”, *European Security*, Vol. 27, No 3, 2018, p. 249–265.

and Judith Butler highlights human vulnerability, commencing with the helplessness and dependency on others of the human infant and thereafter develops an account of precarious life that is always already deeply embedded in “variable norms of recognition”.⁷ All four recognise how globalisation and/or the world risk society have heightened anxiety by destabilising established ways of being, thinking, feeling and relating, especially as these have derived from ideologies of nation, class, gender, race and ethnicity. Despite some significant differences, all four converge in recognising the declining capacity of established cultures and institutions to quell or contain anxiety and, implicitly, to support defences against ontological insecurity. Yet, at the same time – and this is a principal part of my argument – ontological insecurity is so destabilising that it must be defended against with whatever means are either already available or can be created.⁸ Further, these means of defence are both psychic and cultural and, very significantly, they are qualitatively variable. Some defences promote qualitatively different constructions of the international, the national, the sub-national and the personal, as against others.

For instance, populism is one response to ontological insecurity that is qualitatively distinct from some other possible responses. By promoting the revitalisation of populist nationalisms and particularisms, populist ideologies wage war against otherness and difference. Instead of cultivating a capacity for creative and contemplative ambivalence, in which our own internal otherness (the unconscious) and our physical vulnerability are recognised as characteristics that are common to all human subjects, populist ideologies encode and propagate psychic processes of splitting and projection. They do so in the attempt to establish as proper what Wendy Brown identifies as the social imaginary central to the desire for border walls, namely wishes for “potency, protection, containment, and even innocence”.⁹

Populist ideologies construct a split world of friend and enemy, however their capacity to organise this world – their society or polity, their field of international relations, etc. – is faltering. They, too, have lost their symbolic efficiency.¹⁰ The complexities generated by globalisation and the world risk society defy friend-enemy solutions. Rather, attempts to solve, dissolve, or resolve such complexities by relying on the friend-enemy distinction multiply the downsides of such populist mentalities, as the Trump Presidency so painfully illustrated. At the same time, this destabilisation opens the possibility for creative and productive change in which new or re-invented modes of being, thinking, feeling, and relating to others are trialled and occasionally socially instituted. The “Black Lives Matter” movement in the United States contains such a transformative potential.

This is the dilemma: as the deeply embedded discourses of nation, race, gender, class, and ethnicity lose their capacity to authoritatively organise identities and social relations – as they lose their symbolic efficiency – they nevertheless hold out the false promise of “potency, protection, containment, and even innocence” as a protection against ontological insecurity. However, even in this

7 See: Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London & New York, Verso, 1999; Ulrich Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016; Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, London & New York, Verso, 2004.

8 Bahar Rumelili develops a somewhat similar claim when she argues: “Although anxieties are experienced individually, the objects of fear, systems of meaning, and standards of morality through which individuals contain anxiety are socially and politically produced”. See: Bahar Rumelili, “Ontological (in)securities and Peace Anxieties”, Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*, London & New York, Routledge, 2016, especially p. 13.

9 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, New York, Zone Books, 2010, p. 114.

10 The term “symbolic efficiency” originates with Claude Lévi-Strauss, “L’efficacité symbolique”, *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, Vol. 135, No 1, 1949. It was adopted by Lacan and, subsequently, by Žižek, where it figures prominently in *The Ticklish Subject*, particularly in Žižek’s discussion of the “risk society”.

dystopian desert of social and political relations, Beck discovers a potential upside, Kristeva a transformative potential for subjective modification, and Butler recognises a potential opening onto transformative norms of recognition, while, contrariwise, Žižek discerns a collapse into narcissism.

For instance, Kristeva proposes an engagement with strangeness that begins with the unconscious and the recognition that we are “strangers to ourselves”. She posits a world of “nations without nationalism” as antidote to the hazards of a cult of origins.¹¹ Kristeva counters the psychic defences of repression, abjection and splitting and projection with sublimation in which anxiety transforms into intensity, creativity, and a meditative welcoming of strangeness as the one universal quality that disarms all exclusivist particularisms. She champions what I term the capacity to dwell in ambivalence; a capacity that may be achieved, according to Kristeva, by recognising and reconciling with the stranger within and thereby modifying the effects of the unconscious in psychic, social and political life.¹² However, where Kristeva falters is in a failure to adequately address how such a subjective modification may be supported by instituted cultural formations.

Ontological Insecurity Must Be Defended Against, One Way or Another

After that brief overview, let me begin my entry into this complex territory by referencing Samuel Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*, as the play depicts what may be characterised as the ground zero of ontological insecurity.¹³ It is not perverse or devastated nature that generates such ontological insecurity, but rather the loss of symbolic efficiency, in which the cultural supports that cocoon subjectivity and identity, and that also organise the character of social and political relations, have themselves collapsed or are in demise. *Waiting for Godot* powerfully depicts the inherent connection between the demise of symbolic efficiency and the rise of ontological insecurity.¹⁴

In *The Divided Self* Ronald Laing writes:

“With Samuel Beckett, for instance, one enters a world in which there is no contradictory sense of the self in its ‘health and validity’ to mitigate the despair, terror, and boredom of existence. In such a way, the two tramps who wait for Godot are condemned to live:

ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression that we exist?

VLADIMIR (impatiently): Yes, yes, we’re magicians. But let us persevere in what we have resolved, before we forget.”¹⁵

The desperate need to defend against ontological insecurity is so powerful that, as Estragon says, “we always find something” to ward off the collapse into chaos. As elaborated in *The Divided Self*, even the most distressed of Laing’s “patients” turned to whatever was available to hold themselves together, until even that defensive move caught them out. As Laing highlights, their desperate need to defend against ontological insecurity led them to embrace their very vulnerability as a last-resort defence. Laing

11 Julia Kristeva, *Nations without Nationalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.

12 See: John Cash, “To Dwell in Ambivalence: On the Promise and Dilemmas of Beck’s ‘the Art of Doubt’”, Anthony Elliott and Eric L. Hsu (eds.), *The Consequences of Global Disasters*, London & New York, Routledge, 2016.

13 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, London, Faber & Faber, 1956.

14 See: John Cash, “Waiting for Sociality: The (Re)birth, Astride a Grave, of the Social”, Ghassan Hage (ed.), *Waiting*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 2009, p. 27-38.

15 Laing, p. 40-41.

explains that “(t)he most general expression of this principle is that when the risk is loss of being, the defence is to lapse into a state of non-being with, however, all the time the inner reservation that this lapsing into non-being is just a game, just pretending”. The problem, however, is that “the individual may find that the pretence has been in the pretending and that, in a more real way than he had bargained for, he has actually lapsed into that very state of non-being he has so much dreaded”.¹⁶

Fortunately, for most individuals and for most institutions, including the state, such desperate and self-immolating defences are not necessary. Instead, they routinely turn to the available cultural field to organise an identity and an understanding of the proper way to be, think, feel, and relate. However, as the cultural field is itself multiple and various and marked by qualitatively distinct norms for the construction of self and other and power, authority and violence, the cultural norms that dominate at any moment carry significant implications for how ontological insecurity is defended against and for the social and political effects that follow. For instance, when a populist discourse succeeds in promoting and establishing as proper, for a significant proportion of the political elite and the broader population, a cultural repertoire organised and dominated by the friend-enemy distinction, the effect of that populist discourse is to radically narrow the degrees of freedom available for the performance of political identifications and relations. The Trump Presidency and its aftermath highlight the perverse effects of such a narrowing, which generated a reweighting of the cultural repertoire such that a Hobbesian culture of anarchy was promoted and, for many, established as proper.¹⁷ In turn this generated widespread support amongst Republicans for the multiply debunked claim that the election was “stolen”. We have since seen that, for the majority of Republicans, the “Big Lie” that the Presidential election was “stolen” has become integral to that political identity.¹⁸

Subjectivity, Sociality, and the World Risk Society

As if the rise of populism is not concerning enough, Beck depicts an even more challenging situation. However, he also finds hope for a metamorphosis in social relations, institutions, technologies and, significantly, the organisation of human subjectivity and sociality that is prompted, indeed demanded, by the very extremity of the situation created by what he terms the world risk society. For Beck, the extremity of global risks itself accelerates the need for a great transformation incorporating political, social, and economic change, along with technological change and profound cultural and subjective re-organisation. Only a new “ethics of a post-industrial and radically modern identity and social contract” can save us from mutually assured self-destruction.¹⁹ In his posthumously published book, *The Metamorphosis of the World*, Beck sets out a summary account of the thorough-going social and political metamorphosis that could arise from the stark threats that stalk the world risk society:

“Global risk is the day-to-day sense of insecurity that we can no longer accept. It opens our eyes and raises our hopes. This encouragement is its paradox. ... Thus life and survival within the horizon of global risk follow a logic that is diametrically opposed to war. In this situation it is

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁷ Alexander Wendt outlines the Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian cultures of anarchy in *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

¹⁸ See: Harry Enten, “Polls Show Majority of Republicans Mistakenly Think the 2020 Election wasn’t Legitimate”, 11 April 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/11/politics/voting-restrictions-analysis/index.html> (Accessed 31 May 2021).

¹⁹ Ulrich Beck, “The Art of Doubt”, *The Reinvention of Politics*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997, p. 162.

rational to overcome the us-them opposition and to acknowledge the other as a partner rather than as an enemy to be destroyed. The logic of risk directs its gaze towards the explosion of plurality in the world, which the friend-foe gaze denies. World risk society opens up a moral space that might (though by no means necessarily will) give birth to a civil culture of responsibility that transcends old antagonisms and creates new alliances as well as new lines of conflict.”²⁰

While detailing the scale of the mega-hazards that the world confronts in the 21st century, Beck discerns a potential upside to these dread prospects. The extent of these mega-hazards creates an imperative for transformation, including in the relation to otherness and difference. As Beck proposes, the logic of risk (the rational response to risk) is to overcome the friend-foe gaze and “to acknowledge the other as a partner rather than as an enemy to be destroyed”. In this I fully concur, but I think that Beck’s anticipated upside is even more demanding and difficult to achieve than he fully recognises. However, in a largely overlooked essay “The Art of Doubt” he comes closest to addressing the kinds of subjective or psychic changes that grasping such an upside would entail and the corresponding cultural changes it would rely on. Having written about this elsewhere, I will briefly outline that argument here.²¹

Beck anticipates a transformed “ethics of a post-industrial and radically modern identity and social contract” that may displace the logics and mentalities of what he terms “linear doubt” with its demand for certainty and its corrosive effects on both our physical and cultural worlds. In place of linear doubt, Beck champions “reflexive doubt” which, he argues, “will overcome industrialism’s arrogant faith in technology and will establish tolerance and curiosity with respect to the otherness of others”.²² This is “the art of doubt” that Beck anticipates as the necessary antidote to the corrosive destructiveness of linear doubt. Having characterised the world risk society as one dominated by insecurity, Beck argues that, when met with “reflexive doubt” such pervasive insecurity has a transformative potential that reaches all the way into human subjectivity. He writes:

“However one imagines the new modernity, it will be characterized in all areas by an enhanced quantum, probably even by a new quality of insecurity: as variation, variety, change and ambivalence, but also as threat and as dangers that exceed the customary standards of calculation. In the conventional view this implies fear, with all the expected political consequences. Yet this need not necessarily be the case. This all-encompassing and all-permeating insecurity is not just the dark side of freedom. What is important instead is to discover it as the bright side. The introduction of insecurity into our thought and deeds may help to achieve the reduction of objectives, slowness, revisability and ability to learn, the care, consideration, tolerance and irony that are necessary for the change to a new modernity.”²³

While most of Beck’s work is unduly cognitive in its understanding of the reflective processes that support the structurally under-determined, and hence not inevitable, metamorphosis he optimistically anticipates, in “The Art of Doubt” he uncharacteristically turns to a psychoanalytic conceptualisation to characterise the modes of human subjectivity and sociality that are potentially generated by the dilemmas of the world risk society. As he writes: “No, the destruction of the old

20 Beck, *The Metamorphosis of the World*, p. 43.

21 Cash, “To Dwell in Ambivalence”.

22 Beck, “The Art of Doubt”, p. 162.

23 Ibid., p. 168.

grand illusions is not a loss, but rather a necessity in order to discover the breadth of smallness, the joys of relativism, ambiguity, multiple egos, affirmed drives (which had previously bowed down to the rule of a superego).²⁴ In this way, Beck draws on psychoanalytic concepts to convey the psychic qualities that he regards as central to the cosmopolitan subjectivity he envisages. Instead of the psychic defences of splitting and projection (into friend and foe) and in place of repression and surrender to a punitive superego, Beck anticipates psychic reorganisation (“multiple egos”) and constructive and creative defences against insecurity and anxiety. Such defences involve sublimation, we can deduce, as according to Beck they “affirm” rather than repress and distort the drives, presumably through alternate gratifications that the defence of sublimation enables.

Beck’s anticipation of “multiple egos” has clear limitations. As I will outline in my discussion of Kristeva below, the modification of the subject’s relation to his or her unconscious, so that we no longer remain “strangers to ourselves”, is a better way of characterising the psychic reorganization that Beck regards as necessary to escape the hegemony of the friend-enemy distinction. The strength of Beck’s incorporation of psychoanalytic concepts is that it opens onto psychic processes that do not rely on “othering”. Hence, it is worth stressing that not all defences against anxiety involve splitting and projection. In Kleinian theory the so-called depressive position preserves the complexity of both the other and the subject and resists the collapse of the self-other relation into a split world of good or bad, friend or enemy. Instead, reparation and care predominate.²⁵ This mode of psychic organisation supports the very capacities that Beck regards as essential in the world risk society; namely “revisability and ability to learn, the care, consideration, tolerance and irony that are necessary for the change to a new modernity”. It displaces the defences of splitting and projection that predominate in Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position and that attack and persecute the other, thereby projecting onto the other those aspects of one’s own psychic experience that are unacceptable to the ego and that threaten its disintegration. Instead, the other is constructed as complex and multi-faceted, like the self. By dwelling in ambivalence rather than splitting ambivalence, this psychic position supports difference, complexity, and negotiation.²⁶ It also supports the psychic defence of sublimation.

It is worth highlighting that sublimation is itself a psychic defence, although a strikingly unusual, indeed unique, one. Unlike all the other psychic defences, with sublimation the drives are “affirmed”, to use Beck’s formulation. To be more precise, the drives are “affirmed” because sublimation involves no diminution in the force of psychic energy as it achieves expression in socially and culturally valued forms and activities. The intensity of the drive is preserved as the aim is transformed and its object modified. In Freudian terms, there is no counter-cathexis to counter the force of the drive, unlike with every other defence mechanism.²⁷ Hence, sublimation as a defence against anxiety and ontological insecurity displaces friend-enemy constructions. It enables a modified relation to unconscious processes that supports constructive engagement with the otherness of others, because it has already achieved such a relation to what Kristeva identifies as the stranger within, the internal other, the unconscious.

24 Ibid., p. 162.

25 Melanie Klein, *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis, 1921-1945*, London, Hogarth Press, 1948.

26 For a parallel discussion of ambivalence, focussed on the stranger, see: Felix Berenskötter and Nicola Nymalm, “States of Ambivalence: Recovering the Concept of ‘the Stranger’ in International Relations”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 47, No 1, 2021, p. 19-38.

27 See: John Cash, “Sublime Intensity: In the Realm of Sublimation”, Ghassan Hage and Emma Kowal (eds.), *Force, Movement, Intensity*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 2011, p. 66-79.

Subjectivity and Politics - Julia Kristeva and Nations without Nationalism

Indeed, we can deepen Beck's insight into the subjective qualities that the insecurities of the world risk society render essential, while not inevitable, by turning to Kristeva's parallel concern with cosmopolitanism and her advocacy of a transitional international order of "nations without nationalism".²⁸ Kristeva's principal claim is that while we remain "strangers to ourselves" we will fail to achieve the promised "rights of man and citizen" as initially proclaimed by the French National Assembly, in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*.²⁹ In other words, egalitarian norms alone cannot forestall the decline into friend-enemy constructions of the national and international field, with all that follows. Something further is required, and psychoanalysis illuminates what that is. Kristeva writes:

"Yes, let us have universality for the rights of man, provided we integrate in that universality not only the smug principle according to which "all men are brothers" but also that portion of conflict, hatred, violence, and destructiveness that for two centuries since the Declaration has ceaselessly been unloaded upon the realities of wars and fratricidal closeness and that the Freudian discovery of the unconscious tells us is a surely 'modifiable' but yet constituent portion of the human psyche."³⁰

To overcome inherent limitations of the Declaration and of those many national constitutions and international declarations it has since influenced and inspired, the unconscious needs to be both incorporated and modified. Incorporated because it is a "constituent portion of the human psyche" and to deny it is to risk, indeed, to ensure its return. And modified because if left as the unmodified repressed it will return in destructive forms that poison social relations and that mutilate the subject – a self-mutilation that is then projected onto the other, the stranger. How this transformation is to be achieved – how human subjects can live together while modifying rather than repressing the passions that distort and destroy relations with the other, the stranger – that is the issue Kristeva raises. As she puts it: "Freud brings us the courage to call ourselves disintegrated in order not to integrate foreigners and even less to hunt them down".³¹ Hence, Kristeva focusses on the dual need to both modify subjectivity while also instituting norms that support equality, singularity, and difference. Only the combination of those two internally related processes can undo the perverse effects of a psychic organisation in which we are "strangers to ourselves".

To understand why such a modification is urgently needed in the contemporary globalising world, Kristeva directs her attention, initially, to the psychic processes integral to becoming a human subject. The struggle to separate from immersion in the mother-infant dyad relies on the capacity for abjection of the other and this abjection leaves a trace that marks psychic organisation. Klein's processes of splitting and projection serve a similar foundational role in stabilising the ego and its assumed integrity. Kristeva references Freud in this regard:

"In the beginning was hatred, Freud said basically (contrary to the well-known biblical and evangelical statement), as he discovered that the human child differentiates itself from its

28 Kristeva, *Nations without Nationalism*.

29 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 148.

30 Julia Kristeva, "What of Tomorrow's Nation?" in *Nations without Nationalism*, p. 27, my emphasis.

31 Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 191-192.

mother through a rejection affect, and through the “no” sign as prototype of language and of all symbolism. To recognise the impetus of that hatred aroused by the other, within our own psychic dramas of psychosexual individuation - that is what psychoanalysis leads us to.”³²

It follows that a social and political order in which individuals are both recognised and related to as equally entitled citizen-subjects relies on an escape from domination by the traces, marks, and fault-lines of our becoming a subject. Unless their effect is modified, when confronted by circumstances that generate anxiety those traces propel human subjects towards rejection of the other and towards hatred and aggression, as the primary means of defending against ontological insecurity.

While Kristeva helpfully extends and deepens Beck’s account of a potentially transformed subjectivity that can creatively meet the insecurity and uncertainty of the world risk society, she offers a very thin explanation of how accepting the stranger within might be achieved across whole populations and social institutions. This follows from her failure to adequately recognise the central role played by cultural formations in the organisation of subjectivity. For Kristeva, in her writing on “nations without nationalism” and “strangers to ourselves”, cultural forms and social imaginaries are principally of relevance as a source of norms and ideals that can support the modification of subjectivity through providing opportunities for meditative reflection. They are resources for the kinds of subjective modifications that are potentially available within psychoanalytic psychotherapy; not equivalent, of course, but nevertheless cognate. This has the awkward effect of placing the individual subject in an oddly centred position within a process that is far more deeply embedded in the interplay of culture and psyche than Kristeva allows in this political context. No doubt significant numbers of individuals can and do reflectively work on themselves in this meditative way and reorganise the relation between ego and id processes (recognising that the ego is largely unconscious, and the id is entirely so.). However, Kristeva’s focus on singularity tends to eclipse the sociality of the subject and the inevitable immersion of that subject within a cultural field that offers qualitatively distinct ways of defending against ontological insecurity. While some of these culturally encoded defences draw on psychic processes of splitting and projection, crucially, other culturally encoded defences do not. The significance of this point will be developed below.

Of course, Kristeva is well-acquainted with the power of cultural works, particularly literary works of avant-garde authors, about which she writes brilliantly. However, she is less alert to how cultural forms enter, and persist within, the ongoing reiteration of subjectivity and political identities and relations. The argument that I will go on to develop more fully below addresses that imbrication of culture, subjectivity, and the performance of political identities, first via a discussion of Judith Butler’s concerns with vulnerability, loss, mourning and variable norms of recognition. More broadly, however, my argument is that while some cultural forms that are drawn upon to defend against ontological insecurity encode and promote psychic defence mechanisms that generate friend-enemy constructions, this is not a feature of all cultural forms resorted to for this defensive purpose. Indeed, as indicated above, alternate cultural forms encode “depressive position” defences that preserve rather than split ambivalence. They construct the other as complex and multi-faceted, just like the subject. Once such a cultural form is deeply instituted and, thereby, has established its unconscious defences as integral to the proper way to be, think, feel, and relate to self and others, it opens the possibility of a further qualitative reorganisation in which the drives are “affirmed” creatively through sublimation.

32 Kristeva, “What of Tomorrow’s Nation?”, p. 29-30.

Scaling Up - From Psychic Modification to Variable Norms of Recognition

Writing in the dark shadows of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, Butler mourned the lost opportunity that these events had generated; namely the opportunity to recognise and value a shared human vulnerability through the adoption of norms of recognition that regard the injury and death of others in war-torn or conflict-ridden societies across the globe as warranting a similar sense of loss as that felt for those who are 'one of us'. In her essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics", Butler asks, "What makes for a grievable life" and proposes "reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss".³³ Butler regrets the response by the United States to the events of September 11, seeing it as having opted, as previously, for norms of recognition that derealise vulnerable others exposed to the effects of United States military action. For instance, she references the "200,000 Iraqi children killed during the Gulf War and its aftermath", who were typically omitted from the American national discourse of loss and grief. Butler emphasises how prevailing norms of recognition determine which lives are "othered" and derealised and which are recognised as worthy of grief and mourning.

Such a linkage between the individual, the national and the international involves a "scaling up". Butler sketches in an explanation of how she justifies such a move:

"Nations are not the same as individual psyches, but both can be described as "subjects," albeit of different orders. When the United States acts, it establishes a conception of what it means to act as an American, establishes a norm by which that subject might be known. In recent months, a subject has been instated at the national level, a sovereign and extra-legal subject, a violent and self-centered subject; its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multilateral relations, its ties to the international community. It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features "other to" itself."³⁴

Butler's discussion specifies one qualitatively distinct set of norms of recognition that rely on "othering" processes. But Butler is well-aware that norms of recognition are variable. As she writes: "if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through 'variable forms of recognition', then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject".³⁵

In *Senses of the Subject*, Butler develops this conceptualisation of variable norms of recognition in ways that are consistent with my own intended usage.

"It is always possible to refer to a norm as a singular kind of thing, but let us remember that norms tend to arrive in clusters, interconnected, and that they have both spatial and temporal dimensions inseparable from what they are, how they act, and how they form what they act upon.

A norm may be said to precede us, to circulate in the world before it touches upon us. When it does make its landing, it acts in several different ways: norms impress themselves upon us,

33 Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 20.

34 Ibid., p. 41.

35 Ibid., p. 43, my emphasis.

and that impression opens up an affective register. Norms form us, but only because there is already some proximate and involuntary relation to their impress; they require and intensify our impressionability. Norms act on us from all sides, that is, in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways; they act upon a sensibility at the same time that they form it; they lead us to feel in certain ways, and those feelings can enter into our thinking even, as we might well end up thinking about them. They condition and form us, and yet they are hardly finished with that work once we start to emerge as thinking and speaking beings. Rather, they continue to act according to an iterative logic that ends for any of us only when life ends, though the life of norms, of discourse more generally, continues on with a tenacity that is quite indifferent to our finitude.”³⁶

While this account begins with a focus on the dependent infant, helpless and vulnerable in the hands of others, to whom he or she must attach emotionally to survive, hopefully thrive, and “emerge as (a) thinking and speaking being(s)”, Butler quickly includes the socially instituted norms that precede and await the infant and child and that themselves persist for so long as they are reiterated within discourse.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Butler’s account of the relation between norms of recognition and the subjectivities and inter-subjective relations they organize is her emphasis on affects and feelings. Norms are understood as cultural forms that organize how we feel as well as think and relate. Some norms do this in ways that are qualitatively different from others – indeed we could start to characterize them in an IR context, following Wendt, as Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian.³⁷ The further point is that they are instituted in clusters and that they continue to mark themselves upon our subjectivity throughout life through an “iterative logic”. My preferred way of putting this is to talk of a cultural repertoire that has been formed iteratively over time, having been drawn from the extant cultural field within which the parties in interaction relate to each other. This cultural repertoire clusters together qualitatively different norms of recognition that compete to organize the relationship between individuals, groups, institutions, or states. The cultural repertoire is itself internally structured for the moment and it is iteratively constructed and reconstructed. Hence, at any moment, it promotes one norm of recognition, or weighted mixture of norms, ahead of others, or other weighted combinations.³⁸

Butler also incorporates norms into her understanding of how change is produced or achieved:

“Of course, it is possible to break with certain norms as they exercise the power to craft us, but that can happen only by the intervention of countervailing norms. And if the latter can and does happen, it means simply that the “matrix of relations” that forms the subject is not an integrated and harmonious network, but a field of potential disharmony, antagonism, and contest.”³⁹

Norms and countervailing norms of recognition coexist within a disharmonious and internally antagonistic field. Consequently, the spectre of ontological insecurity may haunt an organized identity and pattern of relationships, and Butler is right to argue that subjects (and we can include states-in-interaction) can only “break with certain norms ... by the intervention of countervailing norms”. The alternative is to disintegrate and become incapable of recognition of self or others,

36 Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2015, p. 5.

37 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

38 For a fuller account, see: John Cash, “Psychoanalysis, Cultures of Anarchy, and Ontological Insecurity”, *International Theory*, Vol. 12, No 2, 2020, pp. 306–321.

39 Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, p. 9.

to fall into chaos. While that is possible, of course, and is clearly a reality for some individuals, it is less likely for social institutions, including states, than it is for deeply troubled individuals. One possibility in such extreme circumstances would be the adoption of Hobbesian norms of recognition and a stabilizing of identity via unconscious mechanisms of splitting and projection – as in the friend-enemy distinction. However, this is not inevitable as other, qualitatively distinct responses to the threat of ontological insecurity are possible. These include the capacity to dwell in ambivalence and thereby resist the siren call of the friend-enemy distinction. They may also include the capacity to sublimate aggressivity, hatred, envy and other destructive drives and affects. It follows that the displacement of othering processes involves a political battle within the cultural and discursive field to determine which of the variable norms of recognition can embed themselves as the proper form of common-sense and, thereby, as the proper way to construct self and other and authority, power, and violence, while defending against threats to ontological security.⁴⁰

The World Risk Society and the Demise of Symbolic Efficiency

Zizek identifies the demise of symbolic efficiency as a profoundly destabilising process that has emerged in the contemporary world. Shared understandings of how to be, think, feel, act, and relate that were previously guaranteed by the big Other – the symbolic order – and internalised as the ego ideal, have lost their symbolic efficiency. As a substitute, a series of agencies and committees, or “substitute small big Others”, have arisen that attempt to regulate behaviour across a diverse range of institutional settings. As Zizek writes:

“Perhaps the most eye-catching facet of this new status of the nonexistence of the big Other is the sprouting of ‘committees’ destined to decide upon the so-called ethical dilemmas which crop up when technological developments ever-increasingly affect our life-world: not only cyberspace but also domains as diverse as medicine and biogenetics on the one hand, and the rules of sexual conduct and the protection of human rights on the other, confront us with the need to invent the basic rules of proper ethical conduct, since we lack any form of big Other, any symbolic point of reference that would serve as a safe and unproblematic moral anchor.”⁴¹

In this discussion Zizek draws heavily, if critically, on Beck’s and Giddens’ argument that, in the world risk society, globalization combined with individualization has generated a new dilemma. While human subjects are freed from the demands of conventional identities and roles, they are nevertheless required to choose. Deprived of, but also freed from, the authority of “a safe and unproblematic moral anchor” they are compelled to self-reflexively construct an identity for themselves and to negotiate their improvised way through the complexity of contemporary societies. As unusually heavy demands are placed on the individual subject, a need for resilience in the face of uncertainty and insecurity becomes a necessary attribute. However, according to Zizek, the “nonexistence of the big Other” and the resultant demise of symbolic efficiency renders such resilient subjects a disappearing type. As he puts it concerning the theorists of the risk society:

40 For more detail, see: John Cash, “The Dilemmas of Ontological Insecurity in a Postcolonising Northern Ireland”, *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 20, No 3, 2017, p. 387-410.

41 Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 332.

“their subject remains the modern subject, able to reason and reflect freely, to decide on and select his/her set of norms and so on. ... [they] unproblematically rely on the fact that, in the conditions of the disintegration of symbolic Trust, the reflexive subject of the Enlightenment somehow, inexplicably, survives intact.”⁴²

While that may be a sound critique of Giddens, we know from my earlier discussion of Beck’s “art of doubt”, with its account of a profoundly transformed subjectivity which Beck regards as a necessary although not inevitable feature of a transformed social order, that this is a misleading characterization of Beck by Zizek. It fails to notice that Beck’s reflexive doubter is not what Zizek characterizes as “the reflexive subject of the Enlightenment”. Rather, for Beck, the linear doubter characteristic of Enlightenment reason is undermined by the structural characteristics of the world risk society. Driven by the risks entailed in that structural transformation, the linear doubter is eclipsed and, ideally, displaced by subjects capable of practicing reflexive doubt. While this potential metamorphosis in which the linear doubter is transformed into the reflexive doubter is structurally under-determined, according to Beck it remains essential, if mutually assured destruction through warfare or ecological catastrophe is to be avoided. Clearly, Zizek and Beck are at cross-purposes, with Zizek addressing Beck’s linear doubter while Beck anticipates a structurally under-determined, yet essential, transformation of subjectivity in which subjects capable of reflexive doubt predominate. However, despite failing to engage with Beck’s anticipation of transformed subjectivities capable of enacting “the art of doubt”, Zizek’s significant contribution is the clarity with which his focus on the demise of symbolic efficiency illuminates the sources of ontological insecurity in the contemporary world.

Zizek also argues that the demise of symbolic efficiency promotes the formation of narcissistic subjects, a clear counterpoint to Beck’s reflexive doubters. For Zizek, Narcissus has replaced Oedipus, with the effect that the superego has escaped from the pacifying influence of the ego-ideal. The consequence is that the super-ego “orders you to enjoy doing what you have to do”.⁴³ A further consequence is that subjects freed from the authority of the symbolic order introduce domination and submission into their private lives. Most of all, they consume, following the super-ego demand “to enjoy doing what you have to do” and, thereby, reproduce the capitalist social order. We should note that such subjects would be particularly susceptible to the othering defences against ontological insecurity that predominate in national and international politics.

In this way Zizek provides an alternative to Beck’s subjects who exercise the art of doubt. My larger argument about the dynamic co-presence of competing norms of recognition within the cultural repertoires of states and other social institutions provides a means of grasping how these competing forms of subjectivity are both products of the demise of symbolic efficiency and are locked in an ongoing conflict that is enacted within cultural repertoires, as well as within psychic life. They are best understood, not as character types, but rather as competing forms of subjectivity organised through the emotional investments and the identifications formed with one or more of the variable norms of recognition co-present in the cultural repertoires of nation-states and other social and political institutions.

42 Ibid., p. 342.

43 Ibid., p. 268.

Conclusion

As I hope will be apparent, I have elaborated my own argument in a kind of meditative dialogue with several significant others, while focussing on the theme of this special issue on “Anxiety and Change in International Relations”. While addressing the powerful resistances to change arising from the ontological insecurities generated by globalisation and the world risk society, I have also outlined the cultural norms and the forms of subjectivity that a successful change would entail and the pressing need for these to be collectively realised, even if only partially.

How should we understand “change” in this context? Would effective change eradicate such othering norms, or, rather, displace and/or temper them by establishing the propriety of alternative norms of recognition and instituting, or at least validating, these alternative norms as the proper way to be, think, feel, and relate? As indicated in my earlier discussion, displacement and a re-balancing of the cultural repertoire, rather than the eradication of othering defences and the Hobbesian culture of anarchy, is the best way to conceptualise how effective change may be generated and instituted. My own argument that the cultural repertoires drawn upon by states in their interactions with other states are themselves a dynamic amalgam of qualitatively distinct cultures of anarchy is pertinent here, as is my reframing of that argument in terms borrowed from Butler.⁴⁴ That discussion highlights that, as Butler puts it, any “break with certain norms” requires “the intervention of countervailing norms”. In other words, displacement of certain norms of recognition involves a re-weighting of the cultural repertoire such that alternative norms gain legitimacy and are drawn upon as the proper way to organise identities and relations with others. It is important to note that displaced norms do not thereby disappear. Rather, they continue to haunt the newly instituted pattern of identities and relations and may reclaim legitimacy under circumstances that disrupt the capacity of the newly instituted norms of recognition to defend against ontological insecurity.⁴⁵ The further point is that cultural repertoires typically contain competing norms of recognition that may be drawn on selectively either to consolidate the already-established norms, or to disrupt those norms by validating alternative ones.

For example, Angela Merkel’s frequent reiteration of “Wir schaffen das” throughout 2015, despite fierce opposition, is an example of a very different norm of recognition being drawn from the cultural repertoire of a reunited Germany and foregrounded by a principal political figure to challenge the more deeply sedimented othering norms concerning irregular immigration that were dominant within Germany and across the EU. Writing in *Politico*, Delcker elaborates on Merkel’s famous phrase as follows:

“The German “Wir schaffen das” does not express the same degree of enthusiasm as “we can do it” does in English. Instead, it implies “we will manage the situation, because we have no other choice.” Merkel’s complete sentence, in its original context, would more accurately translate as, “We have managed so many things — we will also manage this situation.”⁴⁶

44 Cash, “Psychoanalysis, Cultures of Anarchy, and Ontological Insecurity”.

45 See: Cash, “The Dilemmas of Ontological Insecurity”.

46 Janosch Delcker, “The Phrase that Haunts Angela Merkel”, 19 August 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-phrase-that-haunts-angela-merkel/> (Accessed 20 October 2021).

Strikingly, Merkel's recognition of the difficulties and anxieties inevitably involved in such a welcoming of approximately one million refugees in a brief period, joined to an optimism about the capacity to manage and benefit from such a policy, involves dwelling in ambivalence rather than turning to defences of splitting and projection. This is exactly the mentality that Mitzen outlines in her account of her alternative to a homeland imaginary dominated by othering processes. Mitzen terms this alternative the "homespace" imaginary and characterises it as not "sharply bordered or perfectly comfortable" and as one needing to "accommodate anxiety and discomfort".⁴⁷ In Kleinian terms, this is a social imaginary deeply encoded with the psychic defences of the depressive position and, therefore, able to contain rather than split ambivalence while dealing with complexity and difficulties. In Kristeva's terms, it is a social imaginary of "nations without nationalism". In short, it is an alternative norm of recognition with significant implications for social and political relations.

Three main concerns have been addressed throughout my discussion. The first relates to the psychic roots of othering processes and their encoding into cultural repertoires. Clearly, these are a major impediment to change, particularly in the context of anxiety and international relations. The second relates to the thorny issue of displacing the prevalence of such othering processes within national and international politics, as well as in other aspects of psychic and social life. The third concern relates to the effects of contemporary globalising processes on the symbolic efficiency of cultures, norms, and social imaginaries, and on the need to defend against the ontological insecurity that these disruptive globalising processes can generate. As each of these concerns has been addressed above, I will comment briefly by way of conclusion.

Taking the third concern first, Beck, Kristeva, Butler, and Žižek all emphasise that globalisation has generated insecurity that is no longer routinely forestalled or shielded by stable cultural conventions, roles and identities. While not explicitly addressing the ontological security literature, their arguments indicate the enhanced scope and scale of ontological insecurity in contemporary societies. My own addition to this concern is to highlight that ontological insecurity is so psychologically intolerable that it must be defended against with whatever resources are available or can be created or cobbled together. Hence, the particular norms of recognition drawn upon to defend against ontological insecurity take on vast political significance. Whether they split or, instead, contain ambivalence and whether they dissolve or, instead, incorporate complexity become central to their implications for national and international conflict or cooperation, and indeed for ethno-political conflict as well.

My further point is that psychic defences against ontological insecurity, ranging from those that rely on splitting and projection to those that support the capacity to dwell in ambivalence, are encoded in varying weightings within the cultures of institutions, including nation-states and states-in-interaction. Once established within the culture of an institution as the proper way to defend against anxiety, the predominant encoded defences are routinely drawn upon by individuals performing their role-identity as agents of that institution, or as members of that nation-state. While institutions vary in the degrees of freedom they allow their agents in this regard, for an agent to be recognised as a competent agent, a capacity to defend against anxiety in preferred or prescribed ways is a routine expectation. To the extent that subjects (including as citizens) identify with such institutions, including the nation, they thereby also tend to draw on the dominant, culturally encoded mechanisms of defence,

47 Jennifer Mitzen, "Feeling at Home in Europe: Migration, Ontological Security, and the Political Psychology of EU Bordering", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 39, No 6, 2018, p. 1384.

so that they will be recognised as a proper agent or citizen. It is through shared identifications with the culture of an institution and its differentially weighted norms and encoded defences that ‘scaling up’ from individuals to institutions is produced.⁴⁸

In the face of so many influences that promote othering processes, the prospect of displacing such harm-inducing mentalities across international relations, societies or institutions rests on the qualitative variability of the cultural field. That variability creates the possibility to render as proper, alternate cultural repertoires that validate norms of recognition encoded with psychic defences that contain rather than split ambivalence and that incorporate rather than dissect complexity. While Beck’s reflexive modernisation may undercut the authority of established institutions and practices – producing a demise of symbolic efficiency – the change in mentalities that Beck addresses under the category of reflexive doubt is best understood through a focus on the re-weighting of cultural repertoires and their corresponding norms of recognition. These alternate norms of recognition are structured by what Melanie Klein characterises as the depressive position and their redemptive virtue is that they promote respect and care for the other, as well as for the stranger within. Consequently, they support the capacity for sublimation, a central feature of both Beck’s “art of doubt” and Kristeva’s account of the unconscious as “a surely modifiable but yet constituent portion of the human psyche”.⁴⁹ Hence, the political project to institute, or at least initiate, such a cultural and subjective transformation involves the re-weighting of cultural repertoires by establishing as proper, cultural forms and norms of recognition that support the capacity to dwell in ambivalence and that resist othering processes such as splitting and projection. That is a difficult ask and task, but it is one that we see attempted every day, while also resisted every day. Obviously, it is a task worth persevering with, for all our sakes.

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48 For a more detailed discussion of the encoding of psychic defence mechanisms within the cultures of institutions, see Cash “Psychoanalysis, Cultures of Anarchy and Ontological Insecurity”, p. 315-316.

49 Kristeva, “What of Tomorrow’s Nation?” p. 27.

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