

## Review - Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security

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STEPHEN MICHAEL CHRISTIAN, MAY 24 2017

***Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security***  
**by Bahar Rumelili (ed.),**  
**Routledge: New York, 2015**

Ontological security, the sense of stability of a coherent self-identity and the recognition of that identity in the world, has grown into a large body of literature in international relations. Bahar Rumelili's *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security* (2015) further develops this body through bridging it with conflict resolution studies. This volume shows how peace cannot be maintained without addressing both material and, as the book's contributors stress, identity-related concerns for all major conflicting parties.

Rumelili (10-29) emphasizes the roles that anxiety and fear (an important differentiation that other ontological security theorists rarely make) have in producing and ending interstate and interparty conflicts. While anxiety is this internalized emotion that unconsciously drives people's actions, fear is one's apprehension of specific objects. Anxiety itself comes from three sources. First is death, which causes people to protect themselves. Second is meaninglessness, which drives people's conviction in a body of meanings, traditions, and authorities. And the third source is guilt, which makes individuals strive to act morally. While it should have explained why such wider conception of guilt is more appropriate than separating guilt from shame (i.e. Steele 2008), emphasizing multiple forms of anxiety clarifies prior theorists' arguments on why actors would want to abide by morals and defend a system of knowledge. Rumelili proposes that

conflicts help contain existential anxieties respectively by establishing definite objects of fear, producing systems of meaning that clearly differentiate friends from enemies, and setting unequivocal moral standards premised on the necessity for survival (13).

While conflicts constitute physical insecurity, they counterintuitively provide ontological security through directing general anxieties towards fearing specific objects. Facilitating or participation in conflict negotiations and resolutions, accordingly, generates "peace anxieties" (13) that displace these psychologically important objects of fear. Peace anxieties produce two diverging drives in actors. On the one hand, they might desire to return to or maintain the conflict and its related object(s) of fear. On the other hand, a realm of new choices opens so that actors can pursue peace. Anxieties are displaced by states and societies onto specific objects of fear that are politically produced through securitization. However, domestic and international contexts are constantly changing, and these changes can affect the emphasis and understandings societies and parties give to a conflict.

The book is divided into three parts. Part one studies long-lasting international conflicts. Amir Lupovici demonstrates that, because conflicting political groups in Israel drives the state to maintain an ambivalent policy where Hamas is treated as a political enemy and Fatah as being a moderate and negotiable party, the Israel-Palestine conflict post-Oslo has vacillated between the unstable conflict and conflict-in-resolution ideal types (33-51). Ayşe Betül Çelik discusses how the Kurdish Issue, in order to be resolved peacefully, requires actors to work through multiple levels of society in order to generate anxiety among Turks and challenge their prior understandings of the Kurds and the conflict (52-70). Finally, Neophytos G. Loizides reviews the reactions to ethnic nationalism within and between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities and how mediation attempts have tried to navigate through the multiple

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identities on the island through shifting international and domestic settings (71-95).

Part two demonstrates relations of ontological (in)security in conflict resolution processes. Audra Mitchell's chapter uses the peace process in Northern Ireland to make an analytically useful contribution to ontological security theory with a modified conceptualization of Martin Heidegger's philosophy to differentiate between things that fall into an ontic category (specific things) and those that belong to some sort of "meta-category" (101) that subordinates such ontic things. Mitchell's case also challenges the simplified Self/Other assumption; there can be "other Others" (104) that the Self must identify with or against and "other Selves" (104) that fracture within a collective Self (99-116). Lastly, Pinar Bilgin and Başak İnce's chapter focuses on the ontological (in)security of both the forced migrants and the integrated civilians in early modern republican Turkey vis-à-vis the "model citizen" (117) regime and how that regime's made the acceptance of difference difficult (117-33).

Part three shows how ontological security and new meanings are achieved in post-conflict societies. Pertti Joenniemi explains how the Åland Islands' inhabitants have, since the League of Nations-backed territorial settlement, created new collective self-narratives, with particular attention given towards Finland's participation in the European Union (135-53). Christopher S. Browning and Joenniemi analyze how Finnish politicians strategized de-securitize the loss of Karelia to the Russians. Finally, Oliver P. Richmond both postulates that neo-liberalism can worsen, through privileging certain "mono-ontologies" (173), in-group/out-group conflicts in post-colonial communities and explains the importance of localized and pluralistic "peace formation[s]" (179) that gathers various context-specific, state-wide, and international knowledges and resources for maintaining ontological security (172-92).

Ontological security theorists often assume that conflicts secure actors' self-identities. However, these well-researched and well-argued studies cogently problematize this assumption. Oftentimes, conflicts simultaneously produce ontological security *and* insecurity in political rivals. This is an important insight given the intellectual debate between critical and conservative approaches to ontological security. Likewise, a common approach ontological security theory is to believe that ontological security is the norm for political actors (e.g. Mitzen 2006), but these case studies (notably, as Rumelili points out, those discussing the Cyprus and Israel-Palestine conflicts) (195) put this belief into question with evidence that ontological insecurity does not completely disappear and can even be exacerbated during times of conflict.

Despite the book's insightfulness, the authors hold onto the questionable assumption that actors always seek a coherent self-identity. This precludes the possibility of "ethico-political perspectives...seeking to affirm the subject's failures, contradictions, and opacities" (Rossdale 2015, 370). While Rumelili acknowledges that the search of ontological security is not always ethical (197), the chapters' authors seem to problematically assume that alternatives to an intelligible sense of self are pathological or debilitating.

## References

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Stephen Michael Christian studied at the University of Utah and has a BA in political science from Georgia Gwinnett College. Michael focuses on incorporating disability studies into international political theory. The European Journal of International Relations recently published his article Autism in International Relations.