Anxiety and COVID-19: The Role of Ontological Security and Myth

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XANDER KIRKE, MAY 29 2020

The Covid-19 crisis has posed a fundamental challenge to global security. Yet this extends well beyond the economic and physical security of states. Indeed, it has posed a fundamental challenge to the 'human security', or, the survival of the human as a subject. It also provides analytical purchase to more critical approaches to security studies that conceptualize security as 'survival plus' or 'some freedom from life determining threats, and therefore space to make choices' (Booth 2007: 102). Discourses about the fundamental freedoms of the Western world, and the accompanying freedom to make choices, have been placed under severe restrictions that extend beyond anything in many people's living memories. The physical and biological threats Covid-19 poses are well-documented, as is the likely economic depression and consequential economic insecurity it will likely generate. However, there is another aspect that must be considered among scholars of security studies. That is, the threat that this poses to the fundamental lived experience of 'being'. This is often understood as our *ontological* security: a topic that is increasingly popular in International Relations (see for instance, (Steele 2008; Kinnvall 2004; Croft 2012; Mitzen 2006; Subotić 2016).

I argue that Covid-19 has posed a substantial threat to ontological security and that, crucially, this has *not* led to a vacuum of meaning. Rather, political elites have sought to address ontological *in*security by invoking political myths. While the concept of political myth has a variety of definitions, (Cassirer 1974; Flood 1996; Sorel 1999; Tudor 1972), I adopt an approximate definition to that of Chiara Bottici, who, influenced by Hans Blumenberg (Blumenberg 1985), understands them as 'work' on common narratives that make significance (*Bedeutsamkeit)* (Bottici 2007, 2009). Political myths are one of many ways in which political and media elites, but also figures within the general public, seek to restore a sense of ontological security for people at what is an anxiety inducing time. Ontological security provides resolution to the issues associated with anxiety, as philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard documented in his many works (Kierkegaard 1983, 2014).

Anxiety and Security: A Philosophical Reflection

The concept of ontological security initially coined by R.D. Laing to refer to a "continuous person" that enjoys a stable and whole existence in reality (Laing 1990). In modern times, Anthony Giddens has offered some of the most significant developments in the topic. For Giddens, ontological security concerns a "person's fundamental sense of safety in the world and includes a basic trust of other people" and obtaining this trust is "necessary in order for a person to maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety" (Giddens 1991: 37). Giddens emphasizes the importance of a continuous narrative, or "sense of self" which can be found in the self's ability to "keep the narrative going". In an ontologically secure state, we can bracket out "questions about ourselves, others, and the object-world which have to be taken for granted in order to keep on with everyday activity" (Giddens 1991: 37). The 'taken-for-granted' provides us with answers to the existential questions mentioned above. Yet these conditions are placed under threat by "critical situations" where there is a "radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind which affect substantial number of individuals, situations that threaten to destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines" (Giddens 1984: 37). If we do not have this, we risk running becoming susceptible to anxiety (*Angst,* more on this below).

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Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), ontological security has become an increasingly popular concept. It was first introduced by Jef Huysmans (Huysmans 1998) and was expanded upon by Brent Steele and Jennifer Mitzen among others (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). Steele demonstrates that states pursue social actions in service of identity needs and that, contrary to traditional rationalist approaches to IR, these actions may even compromise their physical existence (Steele 2008). Anxieties that are experienced by social agents in fact motivates states to find the sense of 'being': a response to anxiety that may be required (as outlined above). A recent special issue in *European Security* shows that the European Union has adopted various practice in order to re-secure ontological security in what has been an existentially challenging time for it (Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2019). Another excellent example would be Viktoria Akchurina and Vincent Della Sala who discuss the 'ontological security dilemma' caused over the emerging 'Eurasian space'. By this, they refer to how the behaviour of actors that enhance confidence in the identity and continuity of a political community, but also simultaneously threatens the ontological security of others (Arkchurina and Della Sala 2018).

These questions apply at every level. They are not just questions of our political inclinations, but our very fundamental sense of being. Indeed, the observations made by scholars of ontological security in this regard are long preceded by existentialist philosophers. Søren Kierkegaard, who was a direct influence on Giddens (Landkildehus 2011), argued that the human capacity to reflect is representative of the fact that we are "infinitely interested in existing." This does not mean we are solely concerned with survival, as many traditional scholars of security may assert in regards to states, but also the kind of lives we wish to live and, in particular, what we wish to be and/or become (Kierkegaard 1992: 219). This is one consequence of a fundamental condition of *Angst* that must be differentiated from fear since fear refers to "something definite" whereas "anxiety [*Angst*] is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (Kierkegaard 2014: 139). Put in other words, fear usually has a concrete object rather than what we may call a "directionlessness". *Angst* is deeply distressing insofar as it is aimless, ambiguous, whereas fear is a concrete object that one may know how to respond to. Yet this is not a purely individual, introspective thing. Simon Pratt has pointed out that actors seek not just to find coherence and stability of the self, but also of the broader social contexts in which they live (Pratt 2017).

The importance of such relations is implied in the existentialist philosophical canon that precedes the study of ontological security. It is more explicitly stated in the work of Martin Heidegger, who emphasises that the world of *Dasein* is a "with-world", and our 'being-with' (*Mitsein*) (Heidegger 1962: 153-55).[1] What defines the sense of being that ontological security scholars emphasise is not understandable without also acknowledging the mutual relations and processes that are core to our daily experiences. Covid-19 has presented unique challenges to our sense of self, identity, and the way we act 'within-the-world.' Our daily lives, work, and usual activities, or "institutionalised routines", (Giddens 1991: 61) that help us make significance of an ambiguous world have undoubtedly been curtailed. Covid-19 has, for many, developed and facilitated anxiety on the basis that our daily activities, trust-relations which we take for granted, and the freedom to determine our being-in-the-world were very suddenly ruptured.

At a minimum, social distancing has reduced our capacity for other-regarding actions, as has closing key sites for sociality (bars, cafes, restaurants, etc). Encounters with others that are supposed to be a part of our routines may now contribute to anxiety since social distancing, by necessity, requires differentiating the self from others in an inevitably cautious manner. Indeed, the undertones imply that others are a threat to our physical safety. Yet with these divisions have not always dominated our daily experiences. One reason for this, I argue, is the process of myth-making.

Ontological Security and Myth

My argument here is that political myths that posit societies as united against Covid-19 have strengthened a collective resolve and, crucially, *re-established* ontological security. To explain this, I must first conceptualise what I mean by a 'myth'. This requires a brief introduction to the works of Hans Blumenberg, a generally under-explored philosopher in anglophone academia.[2] To be brief, Blumenberg notes that reality without a sense of significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) risks overwhelming us into believing we have little control over our conditions of existence. Countless simultaneous events occur in the world and most of these are completely indifferent to us, who we are, and

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our perceived roles within the world. This condition is one of extreme *Angst,* (as clarified above), which for Blumenberg is a state of "indefinite anticipation" or the "intentionality of consciousness without an object", in which the "whole horizon" becomes the totality. Yet, we may never experience this, because our ancestors and ourselves have always found filtering mechanisms in the world or, symbolic practices that mediate it. This may be, among many things, philosophy, science, art and, indeed, myth (Blumenberg 1985: 3-5). Crucially, no myth is created from nothing. By this, I mean that human beings ensure myths evolve, change, and adapt to suit the conditions of existence for a socio-political group, something that Blumenberg understands as the "work on myth" (Blumenberg 1985, 2014). Rather than being a static or fixed object, myths are continually invoked and re-interpreted. They contain a "high degree of constancy in their narrative core and… an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation" (Blumenberg 1985: 34). This variation allows for myths to adapt to an extraordinarily array of socio-political situations. As Bottici elucidates for us:

…it is in light of the continual change in their present conditions that human beings are impelled to go back to their political narratives, revise them in light of their new needs and exigencies through their reception, or, when this is not possible, dismiss them (Bottici 2007: 187).

What could be particularly interesting to ontological security scholars here is that this process of finding significance (translated from the German *Bedeutsamkeit*), appears to be very closely aligned with that of ontological security. Indeed, the under-explored overlaps between ontological security and political myth have begun to be addressed by myself and Vincent Della Sala (Kirke 2017; Della Sala 2017). Since political myths address anxieties, provide certainty, and function as a 'lens' through which we interpret our political world (Bennett 1980), it is somewhat surprising that this trend has not, to my knowledge, been analyzed in any great detail prior to these works. For now, perhaps we could understand the process of finding significance to ground us within the absolutism of reality as ontologically "securitising".[3]

How do this apply to politics? We may find some answers in the widely-read works of Murray Edelman. Edelman argued that a public reluctance or inability to engage with the intricacies of politics creates a sense of ambiguity and anxiety (Edelman 1967, 1975, 1985). This necessitates myths and other linguistic devices which provide the illusion of simplicity and coherence. Stories involving heroic leadership, struggle, and sacrifice are often expressed through metaphors that have significance to specific groups. These are continually repeated within political discourse, serving to "intensify some perceptions and screen others out of attention," as well as providing mental maps for individuals to make sense of the world around them (Edelman 1967: 217-23; 1985: 225-26). But this raises a further question: does a myth need to be true? Not necessarily. What matters is the *function* of the myth. Since we can understand them as a form of cognitive schemata, one that presents the world through dramatic narrative means, we may interpret them as phenomena that *simplify* the world. It is this simplicity that makes them comprehendible and familiar to the vast majority of people. This simplicity may also help us maintain ontological security if it allows us to form consistent narratives about ourselves, others, and complicated events in the world. It also enables us to attribute significance to events in a reasonably uncomplicated manner, which in turn provides fertile ground to re-apply myths in completely different contexts.

Mythologising the Pandemic in the UK

In the discourse of the United Kingdom (UK), there appear to be two sources of mythologization, one of which has succeeded and the other which has unusually struggled to make a foothold. One is the 'Blitz Spirit' that has been discussed at length by other authors (see for instance: Calder 1992; Kelsey 2011, 2015). The second, and perhaps most pertinent, is the myth of the National Health Service (NHS) and health workers.[4] While the second has been far more effective than the first, both have been recalled and adapted to serve the exigencies of the present. In the case of the NHS, we have even begun to see the emergency of weekly national rituals that hold significant symbolic value. We might assume that ontological *in*security may lead us towards moderate rebellion. In other words, we may wish to re-impose the routinized structures that gave us the sense of trust we require. Yet, despite some well-documented exceptions (Duncan, 2020; Taggeschau, 2020; Jeffrey 2020; Marrow, 2020), compliance has been remarkably consistent. It may well be that myth has assisted in this process.

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The so-called 'Blitz myth' has been deployed as a lens for interpreting the struggle with Covid-19 by certain areas of the press. This was particularly common in politically right-leaning media outlets. Walters makes parallels between the 'war-footing' that Boris Johnson had put the country on, comparing it to Winston Churchill's 'their finest hour speech' (Walters, 2020). Alexander Brown of *The Sun* similarly interprets Boris Johnson's claim that there is a 'national challenge' as one that 'evokes the Blitz spirit' (Brown, 2020). What is striking, however, is that neither speech cited directly invokes the Blitz. Rather, it appears that these two media-examples recognize the under-current political myth of the Blitz as a lens of interpretation. This is repeated elsewhere. Sean O'Grady for the *Independent* claims that the Queen similarly invoked the 'Blitz Spirit', but questions whether Britons are 'up to the task' (O'Grady, 2020).

The Blitz myth is peculiar insofar as it actually depicts, in a paradoxically dramatized form, an era in which ontological security was maintained by stubborn resistance to the enemy. It is powerful and adaptable owing its relative simplicity yet heavy emotional value. It also embodies symbols and themes that most Britons would at least be able to comprehend. As Mark Connelly describes:

It [The Blitz] has a great script: a small gang of fiercely independent people refuse to cave in to the bad guys. The bad guys decide to punish the wilful defiance in an appalling show of might. Despite the hardships, the small gang becomes more tightly bound, laughs in the face of terror, takes everything the forces of evil can dish out and sends them packing (Connelly 2005: 131).

This myth has been used to generate ontological security in a multitude of circumstances, but especially in response to terrorist attacks (Kirke 2017). It reminds individuals of their identities (particularly in a collective form), encourages re-establishing a sense of consistent being, and reassures citizens of the ability to continue with routinized practices. However, there are some serious problems with attributing the Blitz spirit as a universalizing myth that makes significance of the ambiguities of Covid-19. Whereas there was little contestation of the 'Blitz spirit' following terrorist attacks, there has been a clear, and indeed *explicit* counter-narrative evoked by other prominent sources. It has been referred to as 'bunk' (Fielding 2020) and Richard Overy, writing in the Guardian, refers to it as 'cruel' (Overy 2020). As such, there appears to be a divide where many view the Blitz spirit as appropriate, perhaps inspiring, and others feel it to be the opposite.

Yet, myths need to be accepted by a social group in order to actually function as myths and thereby contribute to generating ontological security. In the current Covid-19 pandemic, new routines, new practices, and even a sense of identity remain important. Rather than the 'Blitz spirit', what appears to be transpiring is the mythologization of the NHS and its workers. The NHS has always been an immensely valued part of British society. It is almost always a top priority in any election campaign and consistently polls highly as a major issue in the UK. Myths often have contain themes of heroism, and we have seen discourses about the heroism and strength of workers themselves.. A new tradition has begun in the United Kingdom, entitled 'clap for our carers'. The process is simple: every Thursday evening at 8pm, people come to their windows or front doors and perform a ritual of clapping as a symbol of appreciation (which also refers to other key-workers, but has an NHS focus). This began on March 26th and has been widely participated in by the general public, but also by public figures such as the Prime Minister and Royal Family (ITV News , 2020). It appears that we have adopted a component of a myth that many scholars consider to be crucial: ritual. Indeed, the importance of ritual in myth was emphasized by numerous scholars historically (Frazer 1963; Eliade 1963; Tudor 1972), although it may not be an *inevitable* part of a myth – see (Bottici 2007; Bottici and Challand 2006, 2010, 2013). It would be fairer to consider each myth on its own terms and, as such, observe how and whether this tradition evolves.

Conclusion

"I will say that this is an adventure that every human being must go through – to learn to be anxious… whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate" (Kierkegaard 2014: 139). With this, Kierkegaard offers us an optimistic interpretation of *Angst,* and this may be comforting to those who experience it. We are clearly in a situation where our ontological security has been compromised. Without normality, trust, and even self-consistency that Giddens saw as essential to ontological security, our 'being-in-the-world', and more specifically, our

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'being-with' has been challenged. Social isolation raises a plethora of mental-health issues, and there will likely be negative long-term consequences for this.

As part of developing the 'new normal', we are seeing a dramatic narrative that valorizes those who provide us with that which is essential; those on the 'front-lines' who allow us to maintain a semblance of normality. In other words, the trust levels required for us to engage in practices that allow us to be ontologically secure. The acts we undertake to provide us with a conceived sense of consistency in who we are and how we relate to others have been compromised. The observation here is that the process of finding significance is also one of finding ontological security. Indeed, finding significance itself is a pre-condition of ontological security. If the arguments made here about the relation between myth and ontological security are correct, one may question whether myth is necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, it may be that some form of myth, especially in politics, is an inevitability that should be assessed based on the normative consequences. This consequentialist position may allow us to reflect on current and evolving circumstances. It would seem fair to conclude that myths that lift the collective morale, that does not necessarily 'other', but instead strengthens collective bonds, may be a positive and necessary development in these challenging times.

Notes

[1] Martin Heidegger's work is notoriously complex to read. For a good introduction, I recommend Michael Watts introductory book *The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger*. See (Watts, 2011).

[2] Hans Blumenberg's work is exceptional owing to the breadth of themes he covers. To understand his work, it is not sufficient to just stop at his works on anxiety and significance. For a comprehensive discussion on his works see in particular the various publications of Angus Nicholls, in particular his 2014 work *Myth and the Human Sciences*: Hans Blumenberg's theory of myth (Nicholls 2014, 2016). For an introductory text, see

[3] I understand that using this phrase may cause confusion due to the similarity it has with securitisation theory. I am not using it in this context. Rather, I am trying to emphasise that it is a constant process of creating security.

[4] Much of this discourse also incorporates designated 'key workers', particularly retail workers, who have allowed the country to continue functioning in many crucial respects.

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