Chris Rossdale
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Enclosing Critique: The Limits of Ontological Security

Dr Chris Rossdale

c.rossdale@lse.ac.uk

International Relations Department, London School of Economics & Political Science

The concept of ontological security has received increased attention in the security studies literature over the past ten years. This article develops a critical perspective towards ontological security and its mobilisation by IR scholars, arguing that substantive ethical and political resources are produced by resisting the terms of ontological security/insecurity. It argues that the aspiration to ontological security, to contiguous and stable narratives of selfhood, can (violently) obscure the ways in which such narratives are themselves implicated in power relations. Furthermore it argues that attempts to order political life into an ontological/security episteme disciplines or marginalises modes of subjectivity which resist the closure of ontological security-seeking strategies. The article engages queer figurations of subjectivity as mobilised by Judith Butler, Donna Haraway and Jack Halberstam, as well as examples from anti-militarist social movements, to demonstrate traditions which refuse and resist the framework of ontological security. It does this both in order to highlight particular practices and strategies that are written out by an epistemology oriented around ontological security/insecurity, and to show how a resistance to such ordering can enliven political action in various ways.

Keywords: Ontological security; critical theory; resistance; queer theory; militarism

Over the past fifteen years a number of scholars in the field of security studies have suggested that the concept of ontological security, as developed through the work of R. D. Laing and Anthony Giddens, can help us to understand processes of identity formation and political violence in a manner more nuanced and substantive than conventional accounts of threat, identity and security. By placing attention on 'the practices that social beings (individuals and groups) utilize to secure their sense of Self through time' (Delehanty and Steele 2009: 524), these scholars have shown that we can learn something new about how the social relations which underpin political communities and differences operate.

This article seeks to explore the relationship between ontological security and the politics of critique and, by extension, resistance. I argue that aspirations towards (or claims of) ontological security enact significant limitations on political critique and possibility, insofar as they close down the question of the subject precisely at the point where it might more productively be kept open. This functions both as a critique of everyday political practice and as a challenge to contemporary IR scholarship on ontological security, which works to order political subjectivity within an ontological security/insecurity episteme and thereby forecloses important spaces of resistance, alterity and ethical deliberation. I draw insights from feminist and queer theory, as well as examples from anti-militarist social movements, to uncover a tradition that engages with ontological security in an altogether different way. This alternative approach mobilises a politics of subjectivity which locates aspirations towards ontological security as forms of closure, and which instead embraces the subject's opacity, contingency, non-innocence and even expendability; that is, it argues that radical political change comes precisely through deconstructing the terms of ontological security and insecurity.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first, I look at the ways in which the concept ontological security has been developed, beginning with Laing's psychoanalytic account and then moving to Giddens' sociological formulation, before focusing on the ways in which ontological security has been mobilised by those working in security studies. The second part of the article introduces several critiques of ontological security-seeking behaviour. The first concerns the recognition that the process of achieving (or seeking to achieve) ontological security frequently involves forms of exclusion and othering which may be both violent and counter-productive. In Catarina Kinnvall's terms, in seeking to escape a situation of ontological insecurity, actors may attempt to securitize subjectivity. Their attempts to do so and the contours within which such narratives are possible reveal the ways in which ontological security-providing narratives are embedded within relations of power. The second critique aims to approach such concerns from a different perspective. By counterpoising Laing's conception of the subject with that of Judith Butler, I suggest that important ethico-political perspectives might be found by refusing the epistemic co-ordinates of ontological security/insecurity, and by seeking to affirm the subject's failures, contradictions and opacities. The third critique engages with the more critical approach to ontological security outlined by Brent Steele, in order to demonstrate the ways in which an analytic framework based on ontological security and insecurity runs the risk of obscuring or disciplining the kinds of critique envisaged by Butler.

The third part of the article builds on this point by highlighting practices and philosophies which affirm an alternative politics of subjectivity. I draw on Donna Haraway and Jack Halberstam's queer figurations of subjectivity, and on the prefigurative ethos of grassroots anti-militarist activists, in order to show how conceptions of subjectivity which move beyond the terms of ontological security and insecurity offer more radical and substantive approaches to political critique. In highlighting them, my intention is not to suggest that analytical frameworks around ontological security have not been used in a productive manner, but rather that they enact certain limitations insofar as they tend to marginalise that which might more effectively be placed at the heart of critical analysis.

<u>Ontological Security</u>

The intention of this article is to mobilise a critique of ordering *political* subjectivity within an ontological security/insecurity framework. As such, it might seem odd to begin with and place particular emphasis on Laing's *psychoanalytic* foundation. His concern, as a practitioner, was with the conditions of schizophrenia and psychosis, rather than with the ethico-political coordinates of political subjectivity. However, Laing's approach to psychoanalysis was an explicitly political one. He argued that mental disorders had social as well as biological causes, and that these could in part be traced to the tendency, as popular within psychiatry as amongst the general population, to depersonalize those suffering from mental disorders, to see them only through abstract categories, rather than to recognise them as 'persons-in-the-world'.

Laing's project in *The Divided Self*, where he introduced the concepts of ontological security and insecurity, was to conceptualise an existentialist approach to psychoanalysis. The task for such a psychoanalysis is not to 'cure' a patient (that is, to cause her to fit into pre-established categories of health) so much as to reconstruct 'the patient's way of being himself in his world' (2010: 25). Laing advocated a form of psychiatry which involved the psychiatrist genuinely seeking to see the patient as a person, and to ask how her behaviour is expressive of her existence rather than merely signs of a disease. These concerns, which led to Laing becoming a leading figure in the anti-psychiatry movement, derived from his existentialist philosophical commitments; it is here that we find his foundational conception of subjectivity. He argues that '[t]he experience of oneself and others as persons is primary and self-validating. It exists prior to the scientific or philosophical difficulties about how such experience is possible or how it is to be explained' (ibid., 23), and that 'within the territory of ourselves there can be only our footprints' (ibid., 37).

It is from these reference points that Laing introduces the concepts of ontological security and insecurity. He argues that psychosis and schizophrenia might occur when there is the 'partial or almost complete absence of the assurances derived from an existential position of what I shall call *primary ontological security*: with anxieties and dangers that I shall suggest arise *only* in terms of *primary ontological insecurity*' (ibid., 39, emphasis in original). Of ontological security, Laing says:

> The individual…may experience his own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth; as spatially coextensive with the body; and, usually, as having begun in or around birth and liable to extinction with death. He thus has a firm core of ontological security (ibid., 41-42).

The ontologically insecure individual lacks these features; she does not have this stable sense of being. Laing continues:

> [The individual may feel] that his identity and autonomy are always in question. He may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an over-riding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable (ibid., 42).

Such is the condition of the ontologically insecure. An individual in such a state experiences the everyday world around herself as constantly and existentially threatening; she is perpetually faced with 'the dread of losing the 'self'' (ibid., 49). She cannot cognitively organise changes and challenges such that she can adapt and respond (that is, cannot recognise her own autonomy); instead, she feels herself to be overwhelmed, undermined or petrified by them (ibid., 43-49). She cannot form relations with others because, in having no stable place from which to greet them, they have the capacity to engulf you (ibid., 52-53). Strategies to deal with this situation frequently exacerbate the problem, as the ontologically insecure individual retreats into herself, or attempts to depersonalise others so as to neutralise their existential threat. In lacking 'a sense

of that basic unity which can abide through the most intense conflicts with oneself' (ibid., 65), the ontologically insecure person is therefore deeply vulnerable to the experience of schizophrenia or psychosis. Against psychiatric convention, Laing's schema does not establish particular grounds for designating health or sickness; instead, it seeks to outline a framework which might account for the fractures and traumas of certain forms of mental illness without enacting a depersonalisation liable merely to exacerbate the problem. From this point, some level of ontological security emerges as the precondition for meaningful personal and social interaction.

Giddens provides a sociological interpretation of Laing's insights. He argues that ontological security depends on our ability to have faith in those social narratives and routines in which we are embedded and through which our self-identity is constituted, such that we are not obsessively preoccupied with their contingent and fragile nature. Whilst we can reflect upon such narratives (whether legal, cultural, existential), a certain measure of taking them for granted allows for a sense of agency, for a sense of identity from which we can engage socially (1991: 52). In understanding self-identity as something that is continually reproduced, the task for Giddens is not to 'accept' reality, but 'to create ontological reference points as an integral aspect of "going on" in the contexts of day-to-day life' (ibid., 48). The answers on which our ontological security rests are not stable and enduring truths of the self, but are produced and enshrined through routinized practices. The coherence of these practices, and the narrative around which they form, becomes central to an actor's capacity to act, to have sufficient confidence in their space and narrative of being to make choices and interventions (ibid., 53-54). In placing certain assumptions and routines at the level of common sense, and in being able to trust in the stability of these routines, actors are able to build narratives, stories and plans without being perpetually confronted by the contingent nature of their foundations.

Whilst Giddens' explicit focus is on the experience of the individual, Croft notes that 'for him that individual is one that is embedded into an intersubjective whole in the period of late modernity; the individual cannot be understood separately and asocially, and it is this commitment to routines that is part of the socialization of the individual' (2012: 222). That is, the narratives which operate to ground our sense of ontological security are, whilst contingent, also fundamentally a part of our socio-political context (and horizon of possibilities). For both Laing and Giddens, then, the ontologically secure person has a stable sense of being, a certain measure of trust in the narratives on which that sense of being is established, and the ability to accept these narratives as contingent *to some extent*. This latter point is crucial. As Steele notes, the narratives on which we base our sense of ontological security are both rigid and fragile, able to provide a common sense upon which we can rely and yet also open to change and challenge (2005: 526). It is in this dynamic, for Giddens, that the ontologically secure person is able to realise a sense of agency. This dynamic also points towards the precarious nature of ontological security, another feature recognised by both Laing and Giddens. This precarity has been highlighted by a number of scholars working in security studies.

The study of ontological security in security studies has developed in a number of directions. Some have sought to scale the concept up to the level of the state (from Laing's focus on the individual and Giddens' sociological formulation), and so to consider how the state's need for a stable sense of identity can be mobilised to explain particular policies, particularly those which might not accord naturally with traditional conceptions of security-as-survival (Mitzen 2006b: 342). For instance, Steele looks at how we might read Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation as a narrative which made British neutrality during the American Civil War a position motivated by the need for ontological security (arguably at the expense of traditional security) (2005), and elsewhere Jennifer Mitzen uses the concept to demonstrate the ways in which the EU collective identity is woven through routines of cooperation (rather than constituted by military power) (2006a). Others have criticised this approach. Alanna Krolikoswki argues that Giddens' theory cannot be applied to corporate actors, and that it is at the social level that we might see the dynamics (and politics) of ontological security-seeking behaviour (for her, of Chinese Nationalism) as a powerful

explanatory framework (2008). Stuart Croft is also sceptical, suggesting that it would be misguided to 'separate the social institutions of the state from other social institutions', and that 'instead of reifying the state, ontological security studies should be based in understanding the intersubjective framing of the insecurities of individuals' (2012: 225), a perspective he uses to explore the (in)securitization of British Muslims. What unites this work is a focus on the ways in which dynamics of stasis and change, crisis and normality, and inclusion and exclusion often depend on the (in)abilities of agents to maintain a stable sense of Self, to avoid the dread-laden petrification of ontological insecurity and build healthy routines on which to base their identities. It is from such a space that we can begin to build a critique of ontological security.

The Subject of Ontological Security

The intention in this article is to explore or provoke a sense of possibility, of flight from the terrain of ontological security/insecurity. My argument is that both the political aspiration towards ontological security, and the intellectual attempt to sort subjectivity within an ontological security/insecurity framework, perform particular limitations on the scope of ethico-political critique (and change). In recognising this, professions of and aspirations towards ontological security emerge as potent starting points for critique, as sites for perpetual and radical problematisation. It is precisely in developing a critical posture towards ontological security that a more radical politics of subjectivity can be mobilised. This second section outlines the critique which grounds this perspective. I argue that the focus placed on 'biographical continuity' (Giddens 1991: 53) and on convincing and solid narratives of the self (Kinnvall 2004: 746) might serve to obscure the ways in which these biographies and narratives are themselves important sites of ethico-political reflection and intervention, and that obscuring (or seeking to subdue) their fractured and multiple nature comes at a cost. In short, that the aspiration to ontological security tends to depoliticise the subject, to close the (political) question of being.

This critique is mobilised in three stages. The first, which draws on Kinnvall's approach, explores the tendency for those seeking ontological security to 'securitize subjectivity', to enact a violent othering which denotes exclusionary and antagonistic differences. Such a perspective allows us to see the always-already political co-ordinates of ontological security, and so the importance of adopting a critical stance. I argue that, whilst some moves to achieve or maintain ontological security are clearly more destructive than others, all enact certain limitations. In the second stage of the argument, I counterpoise Laing's conception of primary ontological security with Butler's reflections on the opacity of the subject. Butler's argument that the subject's non-autonomy and constitution within particular regimes of truth might stand as the starting point for political critique stands in direct contrast to Laing's approach, further highlighting the issues which accompany aspirations towards ontological security. In the third stage, I engage with Steele's more critical conception of ontological security. Whilst his account of 'subjective flexibility' offers some alternatives, their enclosure within an ontological security/insecurity framework reimposes particular boundaries.

Kinnvall argues that, as an actor's ontological insecurity increases in response to a challenge to their normal routines, they often 'attempt to *securitize subjectivity*, which means an intensified search for *one* stable identity (regardless of its actual existence)' (2004: 749, emphasis in original). This securitization tends to assert identity along axes of self and other in ways which achieve ontological security at the expense of those others. She looks at ways in which processes of globalization can lead to profound experiences of ontological insecurity, that is, 'increasing rootlessness and loss of stability as people experience the effects of capitalist development, media overflow, structural adjustment policies, privatization, urbanization, unemployment, forced migration, and other similar transformative forces' (ibid., 743).

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Responses to the ontological insecurity which results from globalization founded in nationalism and religion offer a resistance rooted in a securitization of subjectivity. Kinnvall shows how the 'construction and reconstruction of historical symbols, myths, and chosen traumas supply alternative beliefs to everyday insecurity', but that the

> …more inclusionary such beliefs are, the more exclusionary they tend to be for individuals or groups not included in the definition of these beliefs. The construction of self and other is therefore almost always a way to define superior and inferior beings…Increasing ontological security for one person or group by means of nationalist and religious myths and traumas is thus likely to decrease security for those not included in the nationalist and/or religious discourse (ibid., 763).

For Kinnvall, this exclusionary securitization must be understood within Jef Huysmans' conceptualisation of security as a thick signifier. This means that we must pay attention to what goes into the social narratives we construct around ourselves, the politics of our being; 'A thick signifier approach highlights the intersubjective ordering of relations – that is, how individuals define themselves in relation to others according to their structural basis of power' (ibid., 748). It reveals these boundaries within the wider onto-political framework. The narrative on which ontological security rests is a political discourse with political effects, in the face of which we might ask: who is able to establish identity narratives? How do these narratives operate? Whose stability and sense of being is accommodated and even celebrated by such narratives? In such a context, ontological security and insecurity stand not as markers of stability and instability within a timeless and non-political episteme, but as political coordinates within a given framework, wherein particular narratives are established, particular exclusions necessitated, the logic and boundaries of subjectivity drawn.[1] This does not mean that the insecurities caused by neoliberal globalization (for instance) are not real or in serious need of redress. Rather, it places attention on the politics of ontological security-seeking strategies, both insofar as some may, in their response to insecurity, be violent and/or counter-productive, and insofar as others may signal complicity or privilege within a violent social and political order.

Mitzen, taking Kinnvall's concerns seriously, argues that not all attempts to seek ontological security securitize subjectivity. She does this by focusing on *how* we relate to our routines, distinguishing between approaches which fetishise the place of the routine, thereby closing down political contestation, and those more open responses which hold routine at a critical distance, conceptualising it as an important foundation for political agency while also subjecting it to some degree of reflexivity and political critique (2006a: 274).[2] This is an important intervention, and saves ontological security-seeking behaviour from the possible (and misplaced) charge that it ignores the politics of identity. However, I would suggest that such responses overlook the depth of the relationship between politics, subjectivity and ontological security. Mitzen's argument is that,

> With healthy basic trust, rather than avoiding disintegration, the actor can create or enact her identity(ies) and pursue her interests. Actors then can tolerate *a certain measure of uncertainty*; they do not respond to it by hardening self-boundaries, or 'securitizing subjectivity', but by, for example, reflecting on their practices and experimenting with new ones (ibid, emphasis added).

The crucial point here is the reference to a 'certain measure' of uncertainty, a gesture which simultaneously opens and closes the space for problematisation, tolerating disruption only insofar as the subject remains, essentially, safe.

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[1] Also see Croft (2012: 225-232).
[2] Also see Steele (2005: 526-528; 2008: 57-63)

Mitzen conceptualises healthy basic trust as a feeling of being at home; '[a] home provides refuge from the threats and surveillance of the outside world. Homes provide constancy, stable spaces to perform the routines of daily life and thus to reproduce self-conceptions. Knowing there is a space in which it is possible to be one's self provides the confidence necessary to assert one's self and to experiment with new identities' (ibid). The metaphor is powerful, but reveals the limitations of such a perspective insofar as it rarefies the experience of the home. This emerges when considered in contrast to Greg Noble's reflections on the experience of migrant Australians and their sense of ontological security as related to the experience of 'home'; as Noble argues, the 'feeling of being at home' is itself precisely a politicised and contingent space, a marker of exclusion, and a site of violence (2005). This is, of course, an insight with considerable precedence in feminist thought. '[S]table private space[s]' are not insulated from the politics of identity or subjectivity. In fact, they are often the most powerful sites, precisely because they are the most hidden. The claim to ontological security, to a core space of being which operates as the condition of possibility for engaging with or encountering the world, is liable to foreclose the politics and power relations involved in the constitution of such spaces. The pragmatism which reserves a privileged safe space often masks precisely that point from which boundaries flow.

It is here that we might counterpoise Laing's position with that of Butler. To do so, it is useful first to highlight several specific features of Laing's conception of the ontologically secure subject. These derive from his existentialist phenomenology, and I highlight them not to suggest that all those who situate ontological security as an aspiration or precondition for political action share this philosophy so much as to demonstrate the ways in which an approach that begins with Butler might take us in a very different direction. These features are Laing's conception of the ontologically secure subject as self-consciously authentic, consistent, and autonomous. As regards the first two, he writes that the ontologically secure person has 'a sense of his presence in the world as real, alive, whole, and in a temporal sense, a continuous person' and that this person encounters 'all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity' (2010: 39). These operate as 'unquestionable self-validating certainties' (ibid.). He further characterises such persons as 'real and alive and complete' (ibid., 40), as 'having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness' (ibid., 41), and as having a sense of 'basic unity' (ibid., 65). The ontologically secure subject has an identifiable, continuous and singular core, and they are aware of it as *their* core, as themselves.

The ontologically secure subject also experiences themselves as *autonomous*. Laing writes that their 'identity and autonomy are never in question', whereas for the ontologically insecure their 'identity and autonomy are always in question' (ibid., 41-42). This is important, because a 'firm sense of one's own autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another', and that 'uncertainty about the stability of [one's] autonomy lays [one] open to the dread lest in any relationship [one] will lose [one's] autonomy and identity' (ibid., 44). Laing adds an important dimension to this conception of autonomy when he claims that 'within the territory of ourselves there can be only our footprints', that in a prior sense there is a core of our self which remains unimpeachably and untouchably us (ibid., 37).

Whilst she never uses the term ontological security, I would suggest that we can read Butler as offering an account of the subject that stands in contrast to Laing's authentic, autonomous conceptualisation here. In her 2007 book *Giving and Account of Oneself,* Butler restates the problems of ontological security in a manner which celebrates precisely that which Laing rejects, acknowledging the subject's instability, non-autonomy and biographical incompleteness as a potent source for ethical reflection. Butler argues that there are five 'vexations' which interrupt our attempts to offer a coherent personal narrative, to achieve certain or true knowledge about ourselves:

There is (1) a non-narrativizable *exposure* that establishes my singularity, and there are (2) *primary relations,* irrecoverable, that form lasting and recurrent impressions in the history of my life, and so (3) a history that establishes my *partial opacity* to myself. Lastly, there are (4) *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author...[and]...(5) the *structure of address* in which [my account] takes place (2005: 39, emphasis in original).

Butler disagrees with the charge that a perspective which decenters the subject undermines the capacity for ethical deliberation, arguing that, on the contrary, the opacity of the subject to itself might offer a fruitful space from which to begin to think about ethics and responsibility. This is because this opacity signifies the non-autonomy of the subject, highlighting its foundations in and dependence on others, its essential relationality (ibid., 19-20). Our '"incoherence" establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us' (ibid., 64). This is not supposed to deny that some degree of self-knowledge is vital, but that it is limited, that it is in my foreignness to myself that I find 'the source of my ethical connection with others' (ibid., 84). Attempts to impose coherent narratives over this opacity run the risk of foreclosing important ethical resources, privileging that which accords with dominant narratives over 'moments of interruption, stoppage, open-endedness – in enigmatic articulations that *cannot easily be translated into narrative form'* (ibid., 63-4, emphasis added). Butler, then, establishes a powerful framework from which to think the problem of narrative and identity, suggesting that it is from the incompleteness of these that we should proceed.

Butler's contribution, however, does not end here: there is a more explicit (Foucauldian) politics in her move to displace the authentic and autonomous subject. She notes that to

…call into question a regime of truth, where that regime of truth governs subjectiviation, is to call into question the truth of myself and, indeed, to question my ability to tell the truth about myself, to give an account of myself...if I question the regime of truth, I question, too, the regime through which being, and my own ontological status, is allocated. Critique is not merely *of* a given social practice or a certain horizon of intelligibility within which practices and institutions appear, it also implies that I come into question for myself (ibid., 23).

Political critique cannot be held at a safe distance, nor grounded in a knowing and coherent subject; it must hold the subject in existential contingency, as a problem *for* politics. To think otherwise is to impose a narrative which expels responsibility in the service of security, refuses to take account of interconnectedness through a mastery of narrative. Butler makes this point powerfully when diagnosing practices of judgment. She argues that '[c]ondemnation, denunciation, and excoriation work as quick ways to posit an ontological difference between judge and judged, even to purge oneself of another...we establish the other as nonrecognizable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we then condemn...it moralizes a self by disavowing commonality with the judged' (ibid., 46). Butler argues that an ethics of responsibility needs to remain sceptical of such practices, keeping the question of the subject radically open. She is careful to acknowledge that such a responsibility does not operate along lines wherein we believe ourselves to be intertwined with or responsible for every act of violence: 'guilt of this sort exacerbates our sense of omnipotence, sometimes under the very sign of its critique' (ibid., 101). Rather, she seeks, in Levinasian terms, an infinite responsibility which takes account of our shared norms, regimes and narratives, and which therefore prioritises explorations (and disruptions) of relationality and subjectiviation.

In the context of this article, Butler's approach has force insofar as it demands a politicisation of ontological narrative, foreclosure and differentiation. The pre-established or prior contours of the subject are a limited and limiting space from which to begin ethical reflection; indeed, it is the terrain of these contours themselves, and those auto-narratives which are most easily accepted, which most easily 'fit' within dominant regimes of truth, which might provoke the injunction to problematise. To proceed otherwise is

to conduct a politics which proceeds *within*, rather than as critical engagement *with*, onto-political logics. In this sense, ontological security-seeking behaviour should be challenged as a project which interrupts spaces of relationality and responsibility, and forecloses the question of the subject. Those features which Laing holds most central, authenticity and autonomy, are precisely those which should be deferred: in relying upon existential safe spaces, the subject's sovereignty remains unchallenged, and critique is disciplined within familiar boundaries.

In his 2008 book *Ontological Security in International Relations* Steele develops a conception of ontological security which incorporates some of these concerns. He acknowledges that the experience of existential anxiety is an inescapable feature of the human condition (2008: 61) and that, whilst we can impose some routinized order on this anxiety, we can never truly be ontologically secure (ibid., 48). Rather than view this as a problem, however, it is precisely this understanding that gives energy to Steele's account. The constant angst that the subject experiences, caught between necessary but artificial routines and a more fundamental but formless sense of the self, constitutes a dialectic that 'provides agents with the ability to abandon those intrinsic elements which contaminate the realization of a healthy sense of ontological security' (ibid., 63). Beyond Mitzen's 'flexible routines', Steele invokes a form of 'subjective flexibility', which eschews safe spaces and completeness in favour of a more 'radical disruption of the self' (ibid., 55). This flexibility accommodates an approach to moral obligation which refuses to shield the subject (ibid., 46-48), in a manner which bears some resemblance to my argument here.

Steele's account, acknowledging the always-political and always-contested nature of ontological security narratives, is both highly nuanced and often persuasive.[3] However, even his more critical account imposes certain limitations, which can be framed both politically and analytically. In political terms, whilst Steele acknowledges that important resources come from the subject's impossible relationship with ontological security, these are set out in a manner which still holds ontological security as a guiding aspiration. The values of angst, contradiction, opacity and non-autonomy are thus subordinated, conceptualised as impediments to being which might (usefully) be traversed *en route* to an authentic, autonomous whole. Safe space, coherence and truth remain the goal, wholeness the horizon. Whilst Steele looks optimistically for the virtues that might flow from this perpetually frustrated process, I would argue that, within such a framework, strategies which offset, pacify or straightforwardly ignore the non-innocence of the subject become all but certain.

In analytical terms, Steele's project folds a mass of political contestations within a framework of ontological security and insecurity, outlining a wide range of strategies (primarily of state representatives, but also of NGOs, social movements, international organisations and others) as attempts to respond to ontological insecurity, or to achieve or preserve ontological security. Whilst this analysis generates important insights, it also positions things in a binary (or dialectical) framework where it may be more productive to look at that which resists such a binary. The binary analytic writes out (or disciplines) those movements, agents and practices which cut across, move beyond or disrupt the terrain of ontological in/security, which demonstrate alternative conceptions of critical subjectivity that take the contours of ontological security as their object, and which explore modes of becoming beyond these terms. The third and final section of this paper explores precisely such interventions.

Resisting Ontological Security

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[3] A similar argument is made in Delehanty and Steele (2009: 531-556). I would also suggest that Chris Browning and Pertti Joenniemi's work outlining 'non-securitizing' approaches to ontological security (2012), and Kinnvall and Jitka Lindén's work on dialogical selves (2010), take us in similar directions, whilst being open to the same criticisms.

Thus far, I have argued that framing political action and possibility within the terms of ontological security and insecurity imposes certain limits. The final section of this article outlines several ways in which political interventions can be seen to take place beyond or in contestation with such limits. Doing so challenges assumptions that ontological security is an obvious or universal aspiration, demonstrates that more critical or radical political projects can emerge from such a posture, and reveals the analytical limitations of approaches which tend to fold activity and contestation exclusively within an ontological security/insecurity episteme. The first part looks at how the queer figurations of subjectivity mobilised by Donna Haraway and Jack Halberstam offer resources beyond the terms of ontological security and insecurity. In the second, I look at how these disruptions can be located in existing social movements. Engaging with examples from anti-militarist social movements, I argue that their focus on militarized subjectivity, radical understandings of autonomy, and their prefigurative practice of resistance demonstrates an approach to political contestation that cannot be adequately captured within an ontological security/insecurity framework. Indeed, it should be understood precisely on the terms that it deconstructs such a framework.

Whilst not necessarily expressed in these terms, many critical political traditions have advocated a subversive posture with regards to ontological security and insecurity. This can emerge in the name of ethics (Butler 2007, Anzaldua 2007), survival (Malkki 1995), radical creativity (Bertalan 2011, Rossdale 2015) and more. Queer Theory in particular provides resources for reimagining the subject in this fashion, precisely because those working in this field have looked to denaturalise the supposedly stable identities and binaries which constitute contemporary sexual and gender identities. The essential instability of such identities, and the manifold violences involved in the imposition of stable narratives, provokes the exploration of identities which offend against the terms of ontological security and insecurity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queer as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically' (1994: 8, emphasis in original) elegantly places queerness in contrast to the stabilities and continuities of ontological security.

Two significant queer interventions help to demonstrate how such approaches seek to conceptualise (and practice) disruptive modes of subjectivity. They stand alongside Butler's account of the opaque subject as interventions which seek to conceptualise the fractured, incoherent, incomplete nature of being not as impediments to be overcome, but as points from which to explore. In her famous 'Cyborg Manifesto' Haraway offers tools for thinking about the politics and possibilities of the contradictory, partial and incoherent subject. She blends social theory and science fiction in order to provoke imagination about the possibilities for subjectivities not bounded by rationalist ontologies, subjectivities for whom the impossibility of ontological security is the very condition of possibility for meaningful political life:

> By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation (1991: 150).

The cyborg is an ironic creature, which affirms 'contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically', and which holds 'incompatible things together because both or all are necessary or true' (ibid., 149); the 'cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence' (ibid., 151). In a cyborg world, people are 'not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints...Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters. Cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate' (ibid., 154).

In looking for a politics that could 'embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves' and which remains nonetheless 'faithful, effective – and,

ironically, socialist-feminist' (ibid., 157), Haraway remains painfully aware of the ways in which we have been produced as subjects within particular regimes. She argues that '[w]e are excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body. But with the loss of innocence in our origin, there is no expulsion from the Garden either. Our politics lose the indulgence of guilt with the *naïveté* of innocence' (ibid.), and that

> "we" cannot claim innocence from practising...dominations. White women, including socialist feminists, discovered (that is, were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the non-innocence of the category 'woman'. That consciousness changes the geography of all previous categories; it denatures them as heat denatures a fragile protein...Innocence, and the corollary insistence on victimhood as the only ground for insight, has done enough damage (ibid.).

This does not mean that we are trapped, but it does mean that we have to take the subject as the object of critique. From such spaces, for Haraway, there is always possibility; '[t]he main trouble with cyborgs...is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism...But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential' (ibid., 151).

Haraway cautions that, in seeking to find strategies for intervention which do not follow the route taken by much of 20th century radicalism in reasserting the place of stable and totalising categories, 'we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connection' (ibid., 160-161). Taking the lines of ontological differentiation as political boundaries, and holding ontological security-seeking behaviour in critical space, does not mean the suspension of drawing such lines; to do so would itself be a depoliticising move, in which the creative moments vital for resistance are endlessly deferred.

What we get from Haraway is an approach to resistance which holds the subject in a ceaseless and creative irony, an ontological dissonance or discomfort which celebrates incompleteness and expendability as the precondition of otherness. In this sense, a refusal of ontological security-seeking behaviour becomes a deeply creative commitment, a ceaseless experimentation which seeks to break down dominant regimes by exploring alternative relations and ways of being. The ceaselessness and contradictory nature of such resistance seeks to avoid establishing new stabilities, instead fostering spaces in which subjectivity remains an open (and political) question, in which narratives of security fail to impose themselves and depoliticise ontology.

Halberstam's work on failure takes us in a different direction. In spite of a political and social culture obsessed with success, winning and victories, he recovers 'the queer art of failure', an ironic but perfectly serious posture which affirms fracture, breakage and incoherence. Where dominant standards of success so frequently reflect particular configurations of (capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchal) power, 'failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world…failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods' (2011: 2-3). Against the demands for a good, coherent story about ourselves, for authenticity and for stability, Halberstam invites us to take (and even enjoy) our ontological failures as starting points for an alternative ethics of the self.

Amongst a number of concepts (including stupidity, incoherence and incompleteness), Halberstam rehabilitates the practice of forgetting. He suggests that for 'women and queer people, forgetfulness can be a useful tool for jamming the smooth operations of the normal and the ordinary' (ibid., 70). Whilst forgetfulness *can* be a mode of domination, it can also (when mobilised by those for whom continuity signifies subjugation) become 'a rupture with the eternally self-generating present, a break with a self-

authorizing past, and an opportunity for a non-hetero-reproductive future'. Alongside other examples, this point is illustrated through a reading of the film *Finding Nemo,* specifically as regards the character Dory, who suffers from short-term memory loss:

> Dory's forgetfulness does more than simply interrupt the Oedipal relationship. She actually signals a new version of selfhood, a queer version that depends upon disconnection from the family and contingent relations to friends and improvised relations to community. In fact, because of her short-term memory loss she actively blocks the transformation of Marlin, Nemo, and herself into nuclearity; she is not Nemo's mother substitute nor Marlin's new wife, she cannot remember her relation to either fish, and so she is forced, and happily so, to create relation anew every five minutes or so. Forgetfulness has long been associated with radical action and a revolutionary relation to the now. The situationists understood themselves to be "partisans of forgetting," allowing them to "forget the past" and "live in the present." Furthermore situationists saw forgetting as the weapon of the proletariat, who have no past and for whom the choice is only and always "now or never. Dory links this radical forgetting as a break with history to a notion of queer forgetting within which the forgetful subject, among other things, forgets family and tradition and lineage and biological relation and lives to create relationality anew in each moment and for each context and without a teleology and on behalf of the chaotic potentiality of the random action (ibid., 80).

Dory's lack of ontological security, of consistent, temporally continuous, reflexive answers about herself, of a stable sense of being, is not a reason for dread, nor does it foreclose the possibility for social relations. Indeed, it multiplies them dramatically, in the process calling us to consider other forms of radical forgetting. This does not ignore the fact that forgetting can be a traumatic or violent act; it does, however, suggest that the field of possibility is not so obviously contained.

The poetics of Haraway and Halberstam provide two provocative routes for thinking subjectivities against and beyond the terms of ontological security/insecurity. However, such disruptions are not confined to textual explorations; they can be identified in everyday social movement practices. The following discussion highlights some key features of anti-militarist resistance, arguing that we can view them both as critically engaging with the subject, and as doing so in a manner which continually disrupts the terrain of ontological security.

To begin, it is important to understand the ways in which anti-militarists conceptualise militarism beyond traditional understandings, that is, beyond a series of institutions which facilitate the conduct of violence and warfare. Whilst such features are clearly important, anti-militarists also understand militarism as a form of subjectivity. As one pamphlet writer puts it,

> …militarism is not just war as such. It is a social hierarchy of order givers and order takers. It is obedience, domination and submission. It is the capacity to perceive other human beings as abstractions, mere numbers, death counts. It is, at the same time, the domination of strategic considerations and efficiency for its own sake over life and the willingness to sacrifice oneself for a 'Great Cause' that one has been taught to believe in' (Landstreicher 2009: 85).

Such conceptualisations have significant implications for resistance.[4] Merely targeting institutional arrangements is insufficient; resistance to militarism entails a critical engagement with abstraction and calculation, with the place and flow of authority and obedience, with the ways in which subjectivity is implicated in, constituted through and performative of precisely that which is resisted. There is no safe space; in the words of one female Turkish conscientious objector, 'Militarism is always like a unannounced

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[4] Feminist IR scholars have made very similar arguments. See Spike Peterson 2010; Sjoberg 2007; Cohn 2000; Enloe 1989: 93-123.

and shameless guest in every aspect of life [sic]' (Ülker 2010: 110). Resistance must therefore take the subject as an object of critique, recognising its contours as themselves complicit in the performance of those social relations and imaginaries which make militarism possible. Failure to do so leaves too much intact. As Landstreicher goes on to argue, 'destructive attack is a legitimate and necessary response [to militarised institutions]. But to militarize this struggle, to transform it essentially into a question of strategies and tactics, of opposing forces and numbers, is to begin to create within our struggle that which we are trying to destroy' (2009: 86).

Such understandings led Philip Berrigan, a Catholic priest who helped to form the 'Plowshares' movement and who spent time in prison for breaking into military bases and physically dismantling military equipment, to view resistance as a process fundamentally concerned with demilitarising the self: 'We try to disarm ourselves by disarming the missiles' (cited in Laffin 2003: 3). Similarly, Estefanía Gómez Vásquez describes being a conscientious objector as 'inscribing a different history on my body' (2010: 136). In order to challenge militarism, those very narratives which constitute the reference points for ontological security must be called into question; the subject's opacities, imbrications, contradictions and violent foundations must be brought to the fore. As Haraway writes, 'I have a body and mind as much constructed by the post-Second World War arms race and cold war as by the women's movements' (1991: 173), an insight that stands in significant contrast with Laing's claim that 'within the territory of ourselves there can be only our footprints' (2010: 37).

This alone does not mark all aspirations towards ontological security as problematic, or function to criticise those analyses which fold contestation within an ontological security/insecurity framework. As Steele shows, an ontological security analytic can reveal the ways in which social movements highlight the violences of *particular* identity narratives and aide in the construction of new narratives (and practices) (2008: 152-153). Indeed, it is on such terms that he elsewhere analyses the anti-militarist campaign of Cindy Sheehan (Steele 2010: 49-50). However, such analyses have significant limitations with respect to the ways in which disruptions to ontological security narratives are folded back into the process of subjectification. In Steele's formulation, there is a place for deconstruction, but it is always directed towards the resolution of the (unity of the) Self (2008: 65). Although Steele acknowledges and celebrates the fact that such resolution is impossible, its status as the horizon of possibility (the consequence of an ontological security/insecurity analytic) encloses the nature of critical subjectivity. In looking beyond such terms, we can see social movements not only contesting or deconstructing particular subjectivities and narratives, but precisely advocating a more deconstructive attitude towards subjectivity itself.

This can be seen in the prefigurative ethos that runs through many anti-militarist spaces. 'Prefigurative' politics refers to those traditions which seek, for ethical, political and ontological reasons, to reflect the change desired in the means used to achieve it, to begin to build a new world in the shell of the old (Maeckelbergh 2011). In the context of anti-militarism it refers to the manifold attempts to operate in ways which do not reproduce militarised subjectivities. Anti-militarists actively seek to subvert forms of organisation based on authority and submission, on abstraction, and on sovereign community, and to experiment with alternative forms of relationality and community; new subjectivities.

Decisions are made by consensus, as groups seek to displace the exclusions and atomisations of traditional forms of deliberation (Rossdale 2013: 167-172; Graeber 2009: 287-358). Peace camps are organised along non-hierarchical lines (with varying degrees of success), in ways which disrupt logics of obedience and authority and which provide spaces for experimentation with alternative forms of relation and exchange (Rossdale 2013: 137-141; Sylvester 1992: 168; Cockburn 2012: 37-38). Activists recognise the power of internalised respect for authority and, further disrupting militarised logics of obedience, practice disobeying orders from the police and security guards in order to carry out protest actions more effectively (Rossdale 2013: 173-179); and in understanding the ways in which certain gendered identities intersect with

state-military orders, activists work to both highlight such operations while exploring and challenging their own gendered performances (Rossdale 2013: 183-191: Cockburn 2012).

Pertinently, such experiments are frequently enacted under the banner of autonomy, a signifier which affirms the desire on the part of activists to organise without a hierarchical structure or hegemonic standard of legitimacy, whether in the form of the state or the party. However, I would suggest that this autonomy is not the 'genuine privacy' Laing invokes (2010: 37), which designates a space, coalition or subject as separate from or innocent in the performance of militarised social relations. Rather, activist conceptions might be seen in the sense suggested by Stevphen Shukaitis, who argues that autonomy

> is not something that is possessed by an individual subject so much as a relation created between subjects; that is, it is a form of sociality and openness to the other created through cooperative relations…Autonomy is more a notion that is useful in the mutual shaping and crafting of the social field, rather than something that precedes it (2009: 18).

Saul Newman is on similar territory when he argues that 'by autonomy, I do not mean a fully achieved situation of freedom and independence, but rather an ongoing project, a continual invention and experimentation with new practices of freedom, conducted associatively, producing alternative ethical relations between the self and others' (2012: 277). In such a context, rather than a property or ontologically prior condition of interrelation, autonomy becomes a ceaseless project of exploration, identification, and experimentation. It is indissociable from attempts to explore logics of subjectification, insofar as it demands that we interrogate the processes through which our relationality (and therefore responsibility) is constituted, and look to build projects which ceaselessly interrupt our selves. Such conceptions are clearly at odds with Laing's; this is important not only because, in calling for a sense of autonomy which perpetually disrupts the narratives through which it is constituted, it signifies alternatives beyond the terms of ontological security/insecurity. It is important because it reveals Laing's conception of autonomy as precisely political, keeping that safe which might more productively be called into question. As Christine Sylvester makes clear, the history of the autonomous, self-determining, non-dependent subject is in many ways precisely the history of the militarised (and masculinised) subject (1992).

A similar argument should be made with respect to prefiguration. The attempt to prefigure alternative subjectivities is not a linear or idealistic procession towards more perfect selves. In seeking to fashion alternatives to militarism, activists frequently fail, as hierarchies form in purported spaces of non-hierarchy, alternative decision making practices break down, and militarised masculinities emerge. In Halberstam's shadow, such 'failures' might be recognised as fresh opportunities for learning and resistance, wherein the depth of our imbrications are revealed. Such a process is necessarily difficult; as one activist states, '[d]ealing with our own alienation and conditioning is a very hard and unromantic task, which has no room for heroes and martyrs…chucking a brick through a pane of glass or building an incendiary device is piss easy in comparison' (cited in Abramsky 2001: 563).

The experiments are not pointless (and are often highly effective), but neither are they perfect; prefiguration does not signify an unproblematic configuration of means in accordance with already-known ends, but a dynamic interplay whereby speculative experiments in alternatives to militarism are explored and deconstructed in the process of action. As a process, it demands its own perpetuity; to believe oneself to have succeeded or arrived is (as with autonomy) to proceed a manner which overlooks the manifold ways in which one is always folded within relations of power. Nonetheless prefiguration retains a creative spirit which, in Haraway's terms, affirms contradiction and non-innocence as opportunities to fashion new selves which don't coalesce into new totalities. It is an ethos of critique and of subjectivity which recognises that it is often our common sense narratives and practices which must be interrogated and called into question. It therefore takes energy from a suspicious stance towards claims of or aspirations towards

ontological security, and in demanding a perpetual experimentation and politicisation, works to resist enclosure within the terms of the wider dialectic.

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to highlight the limits of a political imaginary based on ontological security and insecurity. This critique has been targeted both at conceptions of political action which hold ontological security as an aspiration, and at analytical perspectives which impose an ontological security/insecurity framework. In challenging ontological security-seeking behaviour, my intention has not been to reverse the dichotomy, but to highlight some ways in which particular limitations are placed on the scope of ethical and political critique (and resistance) when we think within such an imaginary. In Huysmans' terms, my argument 'is not a celebration of the reign of the undetermined – of ontological insecurity as such – which would be a reign of chaos. It is a (plea for the) search for new life strategies which would not exclude death from life but which would emphasize a life within ambivalence' (1998: 247).

I have made three arguments. The first is that attempts to achieve ontological security are often violent or othering, drawing lines of exclusion in an attempt to securitize subjectivity. Whilst some responses are clearly more dangerous than others, none can claim innocence. This latter point emerges when we conceptualise ontological security not as an abstract psychological experience, but as an accordance with wider political and social frameworks, wherein comfort frequently signifies some degree of privilege and/or complicity. The second argument builds on this first to suggest that important resources might in fact come from taking a suspicious stance towards the contours of ontological security. Mobilising Butler, I suggested that it is in our discontinuities, opacities and non-autonomies, our impossible relationship with ontological security, that we might locate our ethical and political obligations and recognise the ways in which our subjectivity is implicated within dominant regimes. Such a perspective demands a politics of subjectivity that remains deeply suspicious of aspirations towards ontological security: an approach which seeks to overcome such ruptures, to adapt only insofar as they can be pacified, cannot take them to its core.

The third argument is that such problems exist not only for ontological security-seeking behaviour, but for analytical frameworks which mobilise an ontological security/insecurity episteme (and therefore for much of the academic work on the subject). Whilst this work does have significant explanatory potential, it also performs certain limitations. By sorting political action within a landscape wherein processes of change, stasis, resistance, exclusion, and self-development are conceptualised insofar as they demonstrate types of response to ontological (in)security, such approaches fail to make space for political practices which resist the framework and which explore alternative politics of subjectivity. I would suggest that such practices exemplify some particularly incisive forms of critique and resistance, and therefore that the ontological security/insecurity framework emerges as having a somewhat conservative foundation. That is, it remarginalises that which might more productively be placed at the centre of critical analysis.

My intention in this article is neither to disregard the traumas of ontological insecurity, nor to make the claim that all aspirations to or senses of ontological security are straightforwardly bad. Rather, it is to insist that an account of subjectivity which places ontological security and insecurity as the sole axes of possibility is severely limiting. I have suggested that explorations and critical postures beyond these terms can be conceptualised, in part by placing attention on precisely that which ontological security offsets: opacity, contradiction, non-autonomy, failure. Against such conceptualisations, we might think more about those accounts which take these contradictions and complexities into the heart of becoming, which provoke

restless and incomplete subjects and which seek to creatively unsettle the margins of ontological security/insecurity.

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