

Chapter One

On the Concept of Ontological Fear

Introduction

In this thesis I argue that various elements of collective identity crisis are deeply linked to the declining situation of the state, causing existential angst and ontological fear. Since this argument rests on the complex notions of ontological fear and ontological security/insecurity, this chapter will explore in detail and tease out some key implications of what these concepts mean to different authors and how they are taken in this thesis. I give particular emphasis to Kinnvall's conceptualization of ontological fear, for reasons that should soon become clear. Here I discuss in some detail the generating motivations for the fear Kinnvall describes, which include globalization, the increasing trend to immigrate from one's homeland, and the disruption of the traditional belonging ties. However, while I consider Kinnvall's conceptualization to be one of the most thoughtful and useful in the literature, she can be somewhat criticized for not focusing on other motivations for the generation of ontological fear that are clearly important including: de-territorialization, technological factors and (of course) the decline of the state.

A central goal of this chapter is therefore to explore the notion of ontological fear based on Kinnvall's accounts and establish the reasons that cause it in order to later interlace it with the theory of the decline of state and construct the framework of this thesis. The main conclusion offered by this chapter is that a better understanding about ontological fear is important to reinforce the main claim of this thesis on how the new ways of belonging are gaining in importance while the old or traditional collective identities related to state are suffering from a slackening and people is reconfiguring its feelings of affiliation and allegiance to state. I begin by exploring the backgrounds and foundations of ontological fear and the way this is changing and enhancing the search for, and construction of, new and

renewed ways of belonging. These new belonging ties are supposed to provide ontological security by transforming identities and widening them to diverse and more inclusive categories.

Ontological security has been defined not only as the certainty that the world surrounding us is what it appears to be, but also as the certainty of belonging to, being part of, and being accepted by a determined group. Including the personal ambit of certainty about self-identity responds to the reasoning that for an individual to trust in other people as Giddens asserted,¹ this individual first needs an assured collective identity, the certainty of being part of some group. If Giddens is correct, the factor of personal certainty about one's identity is important for achieving some level of certainty in the future (always being conscious about its unpredictability) and trusting other people. It follows that the relation between security (and, relatedly, insecurity) and identity is a close one.

The Main Causes of Uncertainty: On the Path to Ontological Fear

The relationship between security and identity has been studied by Eric Erikson² who almost 60 years ago was able to verify that stable identities are a great deterrent for the generation of anxiety with respect to the future. This work influenced studies on ontological security the basic claim of which is that, to eradicate ontological fear, a reformulation or a construction of new stable identities able to minimize existential angst, is needed. Anthony David Smith argues that “[n]ationalism is the natural response of human beings whose social world has collapsed.”³ Analyzing this affirmation, one can see a relation between what he claims as a collapsed world and the disruption of the traditional belonging ties that his thesis argues. Smith points out that nationalism functions a social construction whose central job is

¹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

² Eric Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (United States: Vintage, 1995).

³ Anthony David Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nation and Nationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 97.

to reestablish the lost ontological security—to reaffirm and in some cases redraw more solid boundaries of a collective identity—which can be one of the possible belonging links to be further developed or reformulated in new ways.

Following either kind of argument, our understanding of what lies behind the concept of ontological security is enhanced by seeing one central point: a sure and stable present avoids increased levels of insecurity and anxiety about the future. Stability allows people to be more confident about their belonging, making it easier to establish goals and future projects. The main problem is the contemporary inexistence of certainty about the present and therefore about the future. The current panorama is not as stable as it was a century ago or even some decades before the beginning of globalization—one of the main threats to certainty, but not the only one. Also an increment of migratory and technological flows, the declining of the state, and de-territorialization have created anxiety about the future, and about one's own identity and the strength of one's allegiances (ontological insecurity). In turn, this produces what has been called “ontological fear”—a concept that is not as straightforward as it may seem that requires some unraveling throughout this first chapter.

Globalization: The Sudden and Rapid Shrinking of Space and Time

Kinnvall argues that the main foundation of ontological fear is the existential angst and uncertainty that stems from the rapid occurrence of processes like globalization, the increment of migratory and technological flows, the declining of the state or de-territorialization. Existential angst is heightened by these processes because they are able to quickly transform our *routines*, a basic element for the construction and maintenance of certainty in our world and other people.⁴ The processes mentioned above threaten the basic trust in our world and

⁴ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 39.

thus the possibility to forecast what future will bring⁵ producing anxiety, which as Giddens argues “derives from the capacity – and need, indeed necessity – for the individual to think ahead, to anticipate future possibilities counterfactually in relation to present action.”⁶

Based on these notions, Kinnvall claims that major-scale changes taking place in a short period of time like globalization affects people’s perception of what is certain and thus sure. In her words,

[a] globalized world is for many a world devoid of certainty, of knowing what tomorrow holds. It’s a world where many people feel intensified levels of insecurity as the life they once led is being contested and changed at the same time. Globalization challenges simple definitions of who we are and where we come from.⁷

In doing so, globalization then threatens traditional structures, conceptions and (in some cases) metanarratives: it threatens what is established, certain, and sure. This is valid not only for the political or economic ambit, but also for questions related to identity and everyday matters. Globalization has revolutionized every life sphere from the state to individual realms, from the public to the private. Following this reasoning, Kinnvall extends the point by claiming that “[o]ntological security is maintained when home is able to provide a site of constancy in the social and material environment. Home, in this sense, constitutes a spatial context in which daily routines of human existence are performed.”⁸ In Kinnvall’s work, ‘home’ is conceived as the place whose function is to be a “bearer of security.”⁹ We find a similar approach in Greg Noble’s work “home is the place where, we typically say, we are most free

⁵ Catarina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security”, *Political Psychology* 25, no.5 (Oct. 2004 [cited Aug 17th 2007] EBSCO): available from: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=21&hid=118&sid=2ab8402f-97c0-4d7a-8986-c7767a35b09a%40sessionmgr101>

⁶ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 47.

⁷ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

⁸ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

⁹ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

to be ourselves”¹⁰ this way when people does not feel comfortably accepted and free in the space conceived as home the search for a new secure home begins.¹¹

In this respect, Giddens establishes that “[t]o be ontologically secure is to possess...‘answers’ to fundamental existential questions.”¹² And the most fundamental human questions are those related to identity (Who am I? What is my place in this world? What is my role in life?) A parallel perspective is stressed by Kinnvall, “[s]elf-identity consists of the development of a consistent feeling of biographical continuity where the individual is able to sustain a narrative about the self and answer questions about doing, acting, and being.”¹³ Therefore the loss of feeling of biographical continuity “[t]he question becomes: How does a security story order social relations?”¹⁴ The search for security then becomes a motive for social transformations as it can be the search for new collective identities able to provide the lost ontological security.¹⁵

Migration and Feeling Homeless

Another process related to ontological fear is migration that is experiencing a new and increasing wave as Jean-Marie Guéhenno argues: “[t]he process of sedentarization of the past centuries has ended, and migrations are under way again.”¹⁶ This new wave has been mainly enhanced and supported by globalization; it eased the conditions to move freely from an original place to a new one. Moreover, it has in general made it less complicated to resettle in very different places—a phenomenon that renders it much easier for individuals and even communities to move. However, it is not entirely clear that such rapid movement (to take

¹⁰ Greg Noble, “The Discomfort of Strangers: Racism, Incivility and Ontological Security in a Relaxed and Comfortable Nation,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26, no.1 (February-May 2005): 114.

¹¹ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

¹² Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 47.

¹³ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

¹⁴ Jef Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?: From Concept to Thick Signifier,” *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no.2 (1998 [cited Sept 4th 2007] Sage Journals Online): available from: <http://ejt.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/4/2/226>

¹⁵ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

¹⁶ Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, trans. Victoria Elliott (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 9.

economic advantage of, for example, seasonal or sectoral markets) is accommodated by the way in which identity has hitherto functioned. In particular, certain kinds of collective identities appear not to be able to catch-up with such rapid relocations in many cases, causing crises of identity due to sentiments of homelessness, cultural diversity and, the difficulties associated with assimilation.

Sensations of homelessness are a major cause of ontological fear and existential angst. This is not a phenomenon present only in migration flows, but also where de-territorialization has occurred; the loss of a well-delimited territory means also the loss of a well-defined 'home.' Kinnvall then identifies home as "the spatial context in which daily routines of human existence are performed."¹⁷ Home is able to provide ontological security because it possesses, and symbolizes, the certainty of what Giddens called a "daily routine"¹⁸ and because the surrounding people are similar. However, the contemporary world is an increasingly borderless (or border-fading) one in which the main concerns are that migration and de-territorialization are creating processes on a global scale. This explodes our routine understanding of, for example, a well-defined home which in many ways is fundamentally linked to our understanding of stable identities and successful collective modes of belonging (as well as the trust and security that underpin these identities). Once identity links are de-centered away from their former clear focus on (and deep and secure roots in) territoriality, then ontological insecurity and ontological fear are often the results. This can and does lead to unstable, and often perpetually shifting identity constellations that confuse rather than stabilize the patterns of group allegiance that lie behind ontological security. In other words, if any of the groups to which we belong that make up our identity (family, tribe, gender, ethnic community, local community, national community, country of citizenship, country of

¹⁷ Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism."

¹⁸ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 39-42. It is important to note, however, that Giddens questions the usefulness of routines are limited to when routines are not followed compulsively. A "blind commitment to established routines" if they are too "dogged", since they are merely "a sign of neurotic compulsion" (p. 40) rooted in a lack of trust

residence, regional community, political affiliation, economic class, philosophical/intellectual/moral outlook, religious affiliation etc.) come into conflict, we have far less guidance when it is necessary to prioritize which group should receive our primary allegiance. The more shifting (i.e. not always permanent) and less ‘centered’ or ‘grounded’ these constellations are, the more difficult prioritizing allegiance is likely to be and the more likely conditions of ontological insecurity will be.

But immigrant collectivities are not the only ones experiencing ontological fear and existential angst; societies in which immigrants attempt to be inserted are also subject to these sentiments. The lack of well-defined borders can also produce a perception of a *threatened* home and what home represents (threatened traditions, language, religion, ethnicity, culture and so on). The introduction of new groups into an existing order may well cause a condition of unpredictability and a kind of resistance to toleration that ends in conflict and even violence. And it is clear that conceptions of the *other*, the natural human desire of maintaining one’s own identity in relation to an ‘other’ and defending its continuity in view of perceived threats, still appear to be the most likely reactions to strong threats against one’s identity. This is not something I contest in this thesis. However, it is worth exploring the current reconfiguration of identity links in some detail to see if a better understanding of how globalization and other processes are affecting them provide not only the disadvantages associated with ontological fear and insecurity, but also some more positive opportunities for dealing with them successfully. A better knowledge of the categories consequently can increase inclusiveness and thus tolerance, because the other is a figure created by the collective imagination.¹⁹

New and diverse elements, and their potential for generating ontological fear and existential angst, are not only introduced into dissimilar societies by migratory flows. They

¹⁹ For a further understanding on the concept of abjection and the imaginary other see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay of Abjection* (New York: Columbia Press, 1982), 4.

are also introduced by information and technology (IT)—subjects that Kinnvall does not dwell on. No one can deny the flow of technology as one of the benefits of globalization; response time has been shortened while the limits and reach of commerce and communications had grown.²⁰ However, this is a double-edged sword because of its vast limits and the impossibility to control it, which can and has made available more access to those forces (and groups) that threaten, or seek to threaten, the stability of group identities and/or the values that comprise them. 9/11 and other major terrorist attacks form the inevitable examples of how difficult it is to prevent groups from seeking to threaten the stability and certainty of a rival group by using technology.

De-territorialization

It is well known that the increasing porousness of national borders is an element invigorated by globalization that is often seen as an indication of the declining situation of the state. De-territorialization is thus a related cause of existential angst and ontological fear. The state's importance and source of power is not founded anymore at the geostrategic level, as realist theories used to argue,²¹ but in the ability to influence organizations, other states, collectivities or even individuals.²² Territoriality has played an important role because it provides a “homeland” to human groups who feel both identified with it and secure upon it; while there are always exceptions, it most often provides a defined space on which identities (collective and individual) are formed and reformed. This is particularly the case when talking

²⁰ See Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State: Rise of Regional Economies* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1996), 28-30. Sheila Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging: The Politics of Identity in a Changing World* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 14-5 and Mathew Horsman & Andrew Marshall, *After the Nation-State: Citizens, Tribalism and the New World Disorder* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 47.

²¹ See Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Problem of Sovereignty Reconsidered,” *Columbia Law Review* 48, no. 3 (April 1948): 341-65 and Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Massachusetts: Addison Wesley, 1979). Also Halford J. Mckinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” in *The Geopolitics Reader*, eds. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1998), 34-8. Karl Haushofer, “Why Geopolitik?,” in *The Geopolitics Reader*, eds. Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1998), 40-2.

²² John Gerard Ruggie, “Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations,” *International Organization* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1993):139-74. For a historical perspective see Peter J. Taylor, “State as Container: Territoriality in the Modern World-System,” in *State/Space: A Reader*, eds. Neil Brenner, Bob Jessop, Martin Jones, and Gordon MacLeod (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 101-14. Also Joseph Nye Jr., “The Changing Nature of World Power,” *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no.2 (Summer 1990): 177-92.

about formal political identities or ways of belonging such as citizenship of a particular state (e.g., being a citizen of Spain or the United States with the associated rights this brings), or membership of a particular community whose identity is attached to a specific area at a fundamental emotional level (e.g., being a Basque or a Cherokee).

Ontological fear appears when a previously well-defined territory that hitherto has secured a stable collective identity becomes blurred and permits more contact between distinct groups, thus offering both more value choice and more potential value conflict. A good example would be Amish teenagers in the United States who feel unable to rejoin the Amish community after living for some months in the wider American society and who are subsequently “shunned” from their original community.²³ It is important to note very clearly that the blurring of physical borders and consequent ontological insecurity is not something only experienced in the recent era of globalization. I merely wish to make the valid point that globalization has, in fact, increased the possibility of such blurs happening rapidly and in a widespread manner.

In the past, the importance of territoriality and borders has been proved by wars whose goal was to move frontiers²⁴ and gain power when this was based on geostrategy and territory. However, in a globalized and rootless world where identity links have been broken and the state is declining in power and autonomy over its people, the meaning and importance of perforated and uneven/unfocused borders is not what it used to be.²⁵ Allegiance to the land is minimal too and even security questions have profited from the almost cancelled borders

²³ For a superb account of some of the problems experienced see Donald B. Kraybill, “Plotting Social Change Across Four Affiliation,” in *Amish Struggle with Modernity*, eds. Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan (New England: University Press of New England, 1994), 73-4. Amish Communities possess a rigid code of conduct to avoid some of the temptations that can be found in the modern world. For a further reading on Amish core values see John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 144, 155.

²⁴ Horsman & Marshall, *After the Nation-State*: 44.

²⁵ Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Timothy W. Luke, “Present and the (DIS)integration: Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization in the New World Order,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 48, no.3 (September 1994): 381-98. Also Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction* (New York: San Martin’s Press, 2000). Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1996). And Ruggie, “Territoriality and Beyond”, 139-74.

what happened at the terrorist attacks of September 11.²⁶ Since that moment, people's security was perceived as threatened and the state was not able to provide the security that it historically granted.²⁷ 'Population-not-trusting-state-anymore' is a factual demonstration of the rupture of the link between state and people and also an attestation of its declining situation. Kinnvall extends the point by claiming that,

[b]ecause of the state's decreasing involvement in the economic sector, the image of the government as a welfare provider has also been undermined in many societies, creating an authority vacuum in which new groups and leaders have emerged as a response to individuals' desire for security and welfare.²⁸ It is also an affirmation that people are looking for its lost security, identification support, and certainty in other actors who will still prove its efficiency in the out coming years.²⁹

As Horsman and Marshall point out "the existence of borders is first and foremost a function of the need for state to defend itself."³⁰ Once the state has assured its survival, borders acquire an economical also related to security as "the point of control for movements of goods and capital"³¹ as well as to demarcate rights over natural sources.³² Therefore, historically, borders have been used to divide states however globalization is now promoting the gradual cancelation of borders in order to benefit from opportunities offered by globalization.³³ A good example is the European Union whose borders are increasingly losing definition and their former meaning, leading to the redefinition and conformation of the European superstate.

²⁶ Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 2, 66.

²⁷ Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 47.

²⁸ Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism"

²⁹ Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism"

³⁰ Horsman & Marshall, *After the Nation-State*: 44.

³¹ Horsman & Marshall, *After the Nation-State*: 46.

³² Horsman & Marshall, *After the Nation-State*: 46. See also Saule Bakenova's argument in "Interpreting the Emergence of Water Export Policy in Canada," *Politics and Policy* vol. 36, no. 4 (forthcoming August 2008) which documents the problems Canada is having in deciding who has rights over its water supply since NAFTA.

³³ Horsman & Marshall, *After the Nation-State*: 57. See also Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 13.

Henk Van Houtum³⁴ offers an example of the European reshaping of borders led by the construction and strengthening of the European Union. Therefore strict controls on borders and the necessity of a passport are habits that are fading along with the political borders between member countries. But the elimination of these and the increase of migration facilitate increasing interaction between different collective identity groups producing uncertainty and thus ontological fear. The European Union has also faced problems about the old disagreements and rivalries between member countries, providing one excellent example of a new form of identity so important to parts of the later arguments in this thesis. That new form of identity is the special evolution of a “European identity.” However, the formal nature of this supra-identity has not eclipsed the original (often single) identities of the member states and/or nations and would not be likely to be prioritized if a member’s Euro-identity came into conflict with their national identity, or any other strong group identity. This does not necessarily mean that all new ways of belonging are not very capable of providing identification or stimulating allegiance than traditional forms of identity; but the specific *invented* model European identity is not yet really appearing to rival more traditional forms.

A pertinent example of the efficiency of the construction of new belonging ties is the gradually disappearing of the Franco-German frontier, enhanced by trade, daily economy, commerce and monetary movement of goods.³⁵ The possible new link providing identification is a more inclusive one than citizenship, shared language or shared cultural values. It allowed old rivalries and geographical borders to be forgotten to generate profits from globalization, achieve economical stability and some grade of predictability.

³⁴ Henk Van Houtum, “Borders of Comfort: Spatial Economic Bordering Process in the European Union,” in *New Borders for a Changing Europe: Cross-Border Cooperation and Governance*, eds. James Anderson, Liam O’Dowd and Thomas M. Wilson (London Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 37-58.

³⁵ See Horsman & Marshall, *After the Nation-State*, 57-58 for a detailed account of how this fading border has promoted new alignments of identity that appear to have forged new belonging ties and kept ontological fear away.

Ontological Security vs. Other Conceptions of Security

If it has been established that the external sense of security is also important for the personal security and vice versa, the end of the Cold War and the aftermath of September 11th confirms the importance of this security to identity questions. Now, it is well known that how to conceptualize the term ‘security’ has been a topic of wide debate and constant revision for a long time. What is less well known and understood is that it is only through the variety of competing conceptions of security that has emerged from this debate that ontological fear has been recognized as important, has been analyzed and explanations advanced. The result has been the creation of rival or parallel theories that, on some level, challenge fixed notions of collective identity construction as well as fixed views of how “security” should be understood. Jef Huysmans³⁶ debates the meaning of “security,” and argues that to find the real meaning it is necessary to find the “real” signifier (the one where the meaning of “security” does not depend on the relation it has with the word placed next to it). Alternatively, the military-based conception has allowed Mitzen,³⁷ for example, to argue that military conflicts between states can be avoided through building an environment that focuses on a routine, which would be the product of the ontological security and stable identities.

Another important rival perspective is found in Bill McSweeney’s work³⁸ which also stresses the importance of routine and affirms that ontological security is the base for the construction of the state’s security. Several details of the argument and his reasons for making it are presented shortly, but for now it is important to point out that McSweeney’s work lacks two important elements that can be seen to be key causes of ontological fear and the disruption of collective identities, these are: the present situation of the state, which is in decline and the surrounding panorama which is uncertain. Without a focus on these points,

³⁶ Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?”

³⁷ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics and Implications for the Study of European Security,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no.3 (2006 [cited Aug 17th 2007] Sage Journals Online): available from: <http://ejt.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/12/3/341>.

³⁸ Bill Mc Sweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

McSweeney's circular arguments are less than persuasive precisely because the present decline of the state disrupts (and may even, in some cases, destroy) the very ontological security McSweeney argues is a necessary "condition" for the state to be secure. It seems to be a case of the chicken and the egg!

These works provide evidence of the renewed importance of individual security and its relation with the collective one after the end of the Cold War and most of all after September 11. But it was the magnitude of the events on that day so firmly connected and interlaced the military allusions that previously dominated how the word was understood with the meanings involved in the study of ontological fear? The point is one that is worth looking at in more detail since it helps to extend further our understanding of the deeper elements of the notions of ontological fear and ontological security.

McSweeney³⁹ argues that 'security' is not only a military-based issue, but an everyday human need. As such, he claims that establishing a policy on security understood this way would avoid ontological fear and insecurity. When individual security is stable, it makes possible a further predictability or routine of the social order and security. Consequently, a stable social order, based on the normalization of social interactions, avoids ontological insecurity and also social insecurity. McSweeney extends the point of ontological security by claiming that

[i]t is the security of social relations experienced in confidence in our capacity to understand, monitor and manage them in day-to-day activities. It is from this elemental experience... that we derive the social order as the general condition of ontological security and the structural focus of security policy.⁴⁰

In other words, trustworthy, predictable routines produce ontological security which, in turn, produces the social (and political) order that creates security policies...which maintain

³⁹ McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*.

⁴⁰ McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*, 208.

trustworthy predictable routines...that produce ontological security...that produces social order...and so on.

Even if this circular argument were true, it does nothing to account for what might happen to the production and maintenance of ontological security *if the social order loses* or is forced to abandon its predictable routines—for example, as a result of processes of globalization or the terrorist attacks of 9/11. As I have tried to show earlier in this thesis, both these things have contributed to a destabilization of previous practices and routines that would, presumably, disrupt the maintenance cycle of ontological security in McSweeney's account. And, as I will show in chapter two, the decline of the state merely makes this disruption worse. In chapters two and three I therefore construct the different argument (which can hopefully bypass the circularity and other problems that face McSweeney) that rather than helping to maintain ontological security, the contemporary state is failing miserably in its task of promoting ontological security through its security policies.

McSweeney just does not consider states' declining situations and external threats, two of the elements that I argue to be generators of existential angst and ontological fear. In other words, contrary to what this thesis argues, McSweeney asserts that ontological security is the key for a state's security because the normalisation of social interactions allows predictability of the context and confidence. "Ontological security relates to the self its social competence, its confidence in actor's capacity to manage relations with others. It is... a sense of being safely in cognitive control of the interaction context."⁴¹ In this thesis I argue it is the other way around (if there is a 'way' at all).

Another criticism presents itself here if one applies this claim to group psychology as well as to individuals: even if a society possesses confidence in its social interactions and thus enjoys a good level of ontological security, there are always external threats that cannot be controlled or routinised as Mc Sweeney argues. A state cannot be certain of other actors'

⁴¹ Mc Sweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*, 157.

intentions and actions, even if communication and declarations of peaceful intentions do become routine. Furthermore, with the appearance of new international actors, new international threats have also emerged; in such a multiplicity it is almost impossible for a state to know every actor's intentions, goals, values, interests, etc. even if what they declare they feel or believe is really true.

Moreover, on identity and security issues, McSweeney argues that routine and stability allow confidence in the social order, with the exception of "when this confidence in the social order is threatened or disrupted that we can speak of a breach of identity and a security problem."⁴² But security is not the only disruption of the traditional way of belonging to, and being protected by, a community. Clearly there is political belonging (citizenship) that is grounded (at least since Locke's time in the western democracies) on the state somehow providing security for its citizens in return for their political obedience and obligation. Once that protection is breached, confidence in a government is, indeed, subject to serious question. Yet there are also cultural, linguistic, historical, and many other forms of disruption of how traditional collective identities may now be practiced and expressed. These, as I later show, also need to be taken into account as well as military-based (or indeed needs-based) conceptions of security.

Despite the fact that the works mentioned above are specifically devoted to existential angst in the international ambit and identity questions, the main concepts and approaches of the majority of them are dissimilar to the one pursued throughout this thesis. Several works focus clearly on a military-based view of ontological security. Two are worth examining here primarily to extend the depth of how the concept of ontological security will be understood and developed in this thesis, but also to demonstrate the limitations of understanding it in a way that is too closely associated with only military-based conceptions of security.

⁴² McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*, 209.

Jennifer Mitzen argues that by having stable identities and ontological security, states would be able to maintain harmonious international relations with strategic partners, thus avoiding military conflicts. She nevertheless adds that it is possible to have military capacities *without* affecting ontological security and perception of threats provided that, first, these capacities are public and, second, that states let their peaceful intentions be routinely known. Individual ontological security is therefore important because it is easier for actors to perform in a routinised environment since this means certainty. In Mitzen's words,

[o]ntological insecurity is the deep, incapacitating fear of not being able to get by in the world, not knowing which dangers actively to ward off versus forget about. When you are ontologically insecure, all your energy gets bound up in immediate need-meeting, because you cannot organize your threat environment.⁴³

It is true that certainties and routines allow us to have ontological security, in fact I argue that uncertainty is a foundational cause of ontological fear and that the current situation of states is not certain at all. Nevertheless I disagree with Mitzen's relation between ontological security and military capabilities as well as the redefinition of identities according to military threats for at least four reasons. First, I am convinced that the increment of military capabilities has ontological fear rather than ontological security at its base. As Huysmans have asserted "the signifier 'security' does not describe social relations but changes them into security relations."⁴⁴ Therefore Mitzen's approach on ontological fear and its relationship with military capacities evidence a subsistent fear of what future will bring and the possible threats this can represent.

It is also true that the dynamic of *otherness* has always been present in the construction of identities. However, when the *other* becomes an enemy or a threat, existential angst gets enhanced and leads to ontological fear. Following Giddens, Kinnvall establishes that "[t]rust

⁴³ Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics."

⁴⁴ Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean?"

of other people is like an emotional inoculation against existential anxieties.”⁴⁵ If this is correct, then it follows that if trust in the surrounding world and people has been lost, there are more probabilities to “anticipate future possibilities counterfactually in relation to present action”⁴⁶ which, for Giddens, is the main cause behind the experience of anxiety. Finally, an incapacity to anticipate future possibilities means an incapacity to possess answers to fundamental questions (such as the probability of one’s future existence) which, based on Giddens’s reasoning, leads to ontological insecurity.⁴⁷ For the reasons previously presented I conclude that Mitzen’s conception of the *other-as-a-threat* generates uncertainty and thus ontological fear instead of positive routines reinforcing certainty and ontological security.

Second, as I will show in chapter two, the main reason for the rupture and redefinition of identity is not military threats but an already present crisis, the product of the decline of the state. Finally, Mitzen’s work does not include processes like globalisation, migration, de-territorialisation or sovereignty claims as other reasons contributing to the elevation of ontological fear. If the position I have been forwarding in this chapter is valid and worth pursuing, these reasons clearly need to be taken into account in any valid conception of contemporary ontological insecurity.

By contrast, Huysmans’ work on security is interesting because he assesses that the “real” definition of the term in recent years has been neglected or distorted. Huysmans’ objective is therefore to extend the analysis of the word ‘security’ to the cultural and personal ambits as well as to the relationship with others but always maintaining a clear idea of the meaning of the word ‘security.’ Huysmans affirms that it is possible to have a better understanding of what security means for International Relations

by looking at how security involves a particular mediation of death and life...which implies a mixture of two independent forms of security – ontological security which concerns the

⁴⁵ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

⁴⁶ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 47.

⁴⁷ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 47.

meditation of chaos and order, and daily security which concerns the mediation of friends and enemies.⁴⁸

It is clear that here Huysmans is differentiating between two types of security and the concerns of each one, but he is certain that the meaning of the word ‘security’ is relative to the question to which it is applied. I agree with Huysmans that there is no single definition of the concept of security; but I do not share his idea of finding what he calls “a thick signifier” for the concept since security is a personal experience as is identity, which makes it very difficult to standardise or impose a rigid approach as to what security is. Obviously some kind of broad agreement is desirable for people to talk together about security issues with any deep level of communication. But this is not to go as far as saying that we should once-and-for-all bind our conception of security (especially ontological in/security) to one particular meaning, or one particular set of them, no matter how ‘thickly’ they are defined. Doing so would mean that we would stop questioning, discussing and revising a concept that is quite obviously far more complicated and context specific than Huysmans is really prepared to admit.

On ontological fear, Huysmans argues that ontological security consists of the mediation of relationships with strangers, while daily security consists of mediating with enemies.

Daily security orders social relations – introduces a level of certainty – by objectifying the abstract fear of death through enemy constructions...widening security agendas articulate the inability to fix threatening forces and the referent object which receives the threats... thus creates a condition of ontological insecurity – the impression of chaos.⁴⁹

Even though I agree with Huysmans about the angst produced by the uncertainty of not knowing the possible threats, the scope he gives to ontological fear is problematic. The main reason behind my opposition is that, in addition to the dimension of *the other* in the analysis of ontological security, I assume a personal dimension too. That dimension does not deal with

⁴⁸ Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?”

⁴⁹ Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?”

the question of knowing who the stranger is, or the threat it represents, instead it deals with who the person is and where do they belong. Finally, I would like to remark that as well as Mitzen's work, Huysmans' analysis falls into the military-based sense of the word 'security' since he refers to external threats unable to be known, enemies, risks, etc.

Basing studies of ontological fear on conception of security restricted to limits the scope and range of these studies. This makes it more difficult to obtain a wider and more comprehensive depiction of the current situation as well as the causes and possible options to be made. On this I am in general agreement with Amy Below's argument against conceptions of security that are understood only in terms of their reference to military security. Below remarks that "national security has been a high policy priority for the United States. Unfortunately, this has come at the detriment of other policies and relationships with foreign nations."⁵⁰ Consequently, Below claims quite correctly that policies related to issues like the environment, identity, immigration and many others are reduced to a secondary role unless they represent a threat to the state's security. This overlooked and limited conception of security restricts a state's participation in international life, meetings and processes like those of the World Trade Organization, the United Nations or even the Six Party Talks for the case of the United States, and so on.

Limiting conceptions of the meaning of security also affects the relations between states, since excessive mistrust in relations with other states is far more likely when a state is heavily concentrating on ensuring its own security. The point that needs to be made to complement Below's argument is that security threats are not only related to those contemplated in a military-based conception of security. There are other issues whose influence is vital for the overall security as the environmental ones argued in Below's work or the identity ones with which this thesis is dealing. Then a redefinition of the conception of

⁵⁰ Amy Below, "The Missing Link, Regionalism as a First Step Toward Globalizing U.S. Environmental Security Policy," *Politics and Policy* vol. 35, no. 4 (December 2007), 702.

security as Below argues,⁵¹ could constitute the first step in the construction of the much needed certainties in a world lacking of them. This redefinition would also be valid for identities since security's individual sphere would make the construction of new identities more able to provide ontological security than the traditional ones.

The Slackening of State Belonging Links and the Search for New Ones

The reconfiguration of the concept of security would mean a major transformation which states are not, I think, altogether well disposed to accept. It would clearly be an explicit recognition of their inability to perform their historical role as providers. This section of chapter one has the task to show that the ontological question possesses a relation with the appearance and increasing importance of new international actors; since it allows a multiple and overlapping allegiances and belonging ties.

In this respect, Croucher emphasizes the relationship between mutual obligations and rights between the state and its citizens⁵² because the existence of the state allowed the existence of citizens and establishes what this term means and implies, while the existence of citizens performed the same role for states. Croucher extends the point by claiming that

[s]tates, defined in terms of sovereignty, territoriality, and bureaucratic-administrative apparati, comprise the containers in and mechanisms through which citizens rule and are ruled. Meanwhile, the authority and legitimacy states possess come from the citizens, the population the represent, serve, protect, and defend.⁵³

Furthermore the declining situation of states (and the concept of the state) has made them more inefficient in providing economic, political or social certainty to people, which generates a slackening of people's will and conviction to maintain an allegiance and belonging link with state. As a consequence of the loss of the state, a strong referent of

⁵¹ Below, "The Missing Link," 712-3.

⁵² Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 47.

⁵³ Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 47.

stability and certainty people had began a search to construct or renew collective identities more able to provide them ontological security. However, the relation between the lessened capacities of states as provider and the subsequent people's reconsideration on belonging and allegiance will be explored in chapter two. Here I would like to point out that the old or traditional belonging link to the state has its foremost focus on western liberal democratic citizenship in order to easily establish a point of reference with the new collective identities which, as I will more extensively argue in subsequent chapters, are performing a central role in people's reconfiguration of their feelings of affiliation and allegiance.

In direct contrast to denying the importance of cultural changes and identity politics to International Relations in theory and practice, Croucher makes the relation between globalization and belonging the centre of her argument. She makes a special consideration for states since they represent a relevant connector for all these processes. According to her "states are relevant, and often significant, factors in that relation."⁵⁴ The main reason to affirm this is that they are the frame and in some cases a direct participant in the transforming processes of belonging.

Croucher recognizes the decreasing ability of the state to satisfy its population's needs—especially the one of stable identity, so she is aware of their current condition. Then she forecasts a situation in which states will face claims of sovereignty and rights by their own populations, movements that come from the internal sphere of the state, or as she calls it *from below*.⁵⁵ On Croucher's account, this implosion will be a product of both the massive spread of liberal theory and practices through globalization, and a society's better understanding of its own rights. These two elements have empowered people to always ask for more and better conditions, services, and even security (physical and psychological) leading state to an aggravation of its inability to meet its obligations. Under this situation,

⁵⁴ Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 42.

⁵⁵ Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 59.

globalization acts as a catalyst which increases the gap between people and state and, consequently, adds to the difficulty of maintaining its primary role in the international system.

Croucher extends the point by claiming that

most definitions of citizenship point to a set of mutual obligations between states and their members. Globalization affects the capacity and willingness of both parties to meet those obligations... it also provide citizens with new avenues outlets for protection of rights typically guaranteed by states and facilitates for of mobilization and attachment... that transcend the sovereign, territorial state.⁵⁶

Croucher's affirmation is a valuable one since it is possible to observe how people recognize that the state can no longer supply all their needs and thus find in new international actors the security, support and well-being that states cannot provide. It is also important to note Croucher's awareness that it is the present declining condition of the states that increases this prediction feasibility. Finally, I would like to add that despite her account of the new transformations affecting contemporary collective identity construction in the western world relies heavily on a traditional view of citizenship that is tied to the very traditional, autonomous, sovereign (western) conception of the state that is no longer able to describe the experiences of most states in the twenty-first century. This leads Croucher to trust in "superimposed" or "modified" identities of the kind found in the European Union that I mentioned earlier in this chapter. As a result, she does not search elsewhere and explore other potential or new modes of expressing belonging and collective identity based on cultural, economic, linguistically or even technological affinities that may not be underpinned by possessing common or adjacent territories.

Kinnvall does search elsewhere and outstanding among some of her ideas is how the construction of a religious-nationalist type of identity can illustrate contemporary reconfigurations of belonging ties. She argues that both religion and nation are powerful

⁵⁶ Croucher, *Globalization and Belonging*, 52-3.

responses to ontological fear because “religion, like nationalism, supplies existential answers to individuals’ quests for security by essentializing the product and providing a picture of totality, unity, and wholeness.”⁵⁷ In the introduction of this thesis I discussed how comforting it is to have a single truth because the multiplication of sources among which to decide implies a major responsibility derived from the possible consequences of one’s decisions. Nevertheless, universalism implies the loss of human freedom and creativity. The Enlightenment, on the contrary, praised “reason, knowledge, progress, freedom, and ethical action.”⁵⁸ However, excessive individualism can also lead individuals to uncertainty and misunderstanding, as Charles Taylor argues.

We can’t understand human life merely in terms of individual subjects who frame representations about and respond to others, because a great deal of human action happens only insofar as the agent understands and constitutes him or herself as an integral part of “we.”⁵⁹

Kinnvall also recognizes the relevance of avoiding an excessive individualism in the construction of collective identities, indeed she argues that collective identities based on religion and nation are more able to avoid ontological fear because, “in comparison to other discursive identity constructions, both national and religious identity make claims to a monolithic and abstract identity—that is, to *one* stable identity that answers to the need for securitized subjectivity.”⁶⁰

Kinnvall’s concludes that,

the strength of nationalism and religion as powerful identity-signifiers lies in their ability to convey unity, security and, inclusiveness in times of crisis. In conveying this beliefs they provide

⁵⁷ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

⁵⁸ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

⁵⁹ Charles Taylor, “To Follow a Rule...,” in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma and Moishe Poston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 52.

⁶⁰ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

the idea of a “home,” a place where subjectivity can be anchored and securitized, giving both protection and safety from the stranger, the abject-other.⁶¹

This conclusion shows the plausible negative and positive effects of the exploration and reconfiguration of the new ways of identification with which I agree. In the first instance, it is indeed useful to reaffirm individual identity, adjusting it to the current moment and space. In the second instance, this reconfiguration is also relevant because it avoids the feeling of homelessness and promotes tolerance in spite of the evident difficulty these processes contain.

On the future situation and repercussions of a new exploration of identity ties, I consider that a wider and better exploration of new and more adequate ways of identification will have two important functions. First, the reconfiguration and reevaluation of identities could offer a major opportunity to understand and explain how international society works and responds to global challenges. This logic is obviously based on the premise that individual identity and ontological security constitutes a basic aim for collective identities.⁶² Then the exploration and reconfiguration of identity links allows a more flexible and adequate way for people to deal with the uncertainty of the contemporary panorama.⁶³

Second, the inclusion of elements of analysis of international relations such as identity questions, religion, culture and many others allows this discipline to be less rigid, less positivist and more true to the interdisciplinary character that so many International Relations scholars are so fond of drawing attention to. This way, by being more flexible, new concepts derived from everyday life can be included in the analysis and explanation of some contemporary phenomena that the traditional theory is not able to bring some light.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

⁶² Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 33, 36.

⁶³ Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism.”

⁶⁴ Iranzo Dosdad, “Religión y Relaciones Internacionales: Genealogías,” *Foro Interno: Anuario de Teoría Política*, no.6 (2006): 44.

Conclusion

The main objective of this chapter was to show the theoretical possibility and the practical importance of importing Catarina Kinnvall's theory on ontological insecurity and creation of new (or renewed) collective identities to the realm of international relations, to provide more satisfactory answers when combined with international relations' theories like the decline of state. A better view of what the causes and implications of ontological fear are permitted me to establish part on the main framework on which this thesis is based. It also supported the main claim of this thesis that the slackening of feelings of affiliation and allegiance to state have enhanced ontological fear and promoted the search or construction of new or renewed collective identities based on other categories of identification.

To achieve this result, I first explored the concept of ontological security/insecurity to achieve a better understanding on the causes that lead to existential angst and thus ontological fear. By analyzing individually the relationship between globalization, de-territorialization and migration, I was able to ground how the search for security works in the process of avoiding ontological fear. Once it was established that security is a key factor in the reconfiguration of new collective identities, I discussed various types of security relations related to ontological fear in order to determine how ontological security is diverse from other types of security. Finally, and based on the previous findings, I analyzed what the possible role of the old ways of belonging to a state (foremost western democratic citizenship) would be in the enhancement of ontological fear and the search for more ontologically secure and comfortable identities, which will be the central aim of chapter two. Furthermore the last section of this chapter reinforced the subhypothesis drawn on the introduction by demonstrating that there is a relationship between the new international actors and ontological fear, which is mainly based on the ability of those new international actors to provide adequate and secure identity avoiding ontological fear.