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“Vision of Itself” in Foreign Policy Analysis: From the Role of Ideas to Identity and Recognition¹

Abstract: For Henry Kissinger, a stable international order is not only based on a balance of power, but also on a balance of identities, of “visions of itself”. How do our observational theories of international relations come to understand this practical maxim? This article shows that rationalist theories, methodological underpinnings fall short of satisfactorily addressing the issue, while constructivism’s and post-structuralism’s social ontology and relational understanding of identity provide a better starting point. And yet, when we return from the level of explanatory theory back to foreign policy practice, constructivist theorizing, precisely for its focus on identity, risks of being abused for the purpose of nationalist apologies of the very kind that makes a balance of identities impossible.

Keywords: foreign policy analysis, constructivism, rationalism, ontological security theory, identity, methodology

Henry Kissinger once remarked that “an exact balance is [...] chimerical, above all, because while powers may appear to outsiders as factors in a security arrangement, they appear domestically as expressions of historical existence. No power will submit to a settlement, however well balanced and however ‘secure’, which seems totally to deny its vision of itself” (Kissinger, 1957, p. 146). In his view, states have visions of themselves, and any security arrangement that does not sufficiently recognize them is bound to fail. The balance of power only works with a balance of identities.

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Yet, for scholars of foreign policy, Kissinger's practical lead of diplomatic experience was left unfollowed until the arrival of constructivism. "Vision of itself" does not figure prominently in realist and liberal institutionalist foreign policy analysis. As the first section will show: it cannot. Integrating identity and our relational self, constituted in social recognition, asks for an ontology other than individualism and for a theory of action other than utilitarianism, both of which became prevalent for the two main paradigms.

In contrast, Kissinger's insight was explicitly taken up and further developed by both constructivist (Kratochwil, 1978, p. 201) and poststructuralist scholars (Wæver, 1995) working on identity and foreign policy, as a second section will elaborate. I show how these methodological underpinnings are more congenial for the treatment of ideas and identity. Yet such approaches meet a different set of problems. Their often homeostatic assumptions lead to functionalist accounts, and they need to deal with the difficult issue of the state being theoretically treated as a person. Most importantly, there is the risk of turning an observational theory primarily concerned with understanding the role of state identity in foreign policy behaviour into an apology for a nationalist foreign policy strategy.

1. Rationalist analysis of ideas and identity and its limits

Among other pernicious effects of the underlying binary of realism–idealism in IR, there is a persistent misunderstanding that ideas are the stuff of liberals, whereas realists are mainly focused on power. Putting it this way already makes clear how unfair this is for realists, even if some of them may use that very argument. Realists know the power of ideas perfectly well, being certainly aware of propaganda and indoctrination. No good realist foreign policy strategist would be foolish enough to leave the battle of hearts and minds to the other side. No good realist observer would exclude such ideational factors from an analysis of power. The issue is, rather, *how* to combine the ideational with other factors in an analysis. Here, the more open rationalist move of US IR in the 1980s has helped to clarify the theoretical positions – and their limits.

Rationalist theories of action

Rationalist explanations follow a triangle made powerful by the rationality assumption. Rational choice entails an individualist theory of action. It makes two main assumptions about human behaviour. First, humans are self-interested utility maximizers; and second, humans choose rationally on the basis of a consistent (transitive) preference ranking. If A is preferred to B and B to C, A should

be preferred to C. A straightforward and parsimonious theory of action derives from this basic depiction of self-interest and rationality. Once we know the desires of individuals (their preferences), as well as their beliefs about how to realize them, we can deduce their rational behaviour. Indeed, as Keith Dowding (1991, p. 23) has succinctly put it:

The three go together in a triangle of explanation and given any two of the triumvirate the third may be predicted and explained [...] This is a behaviouralist theory of action, since it is studying the behaviour of individuals that allows us to understand their beliefs (by making assumptions about their desires) or their desires (by making assumptions about their beliefs). We may understand both by making assumptions about different aspects of each.

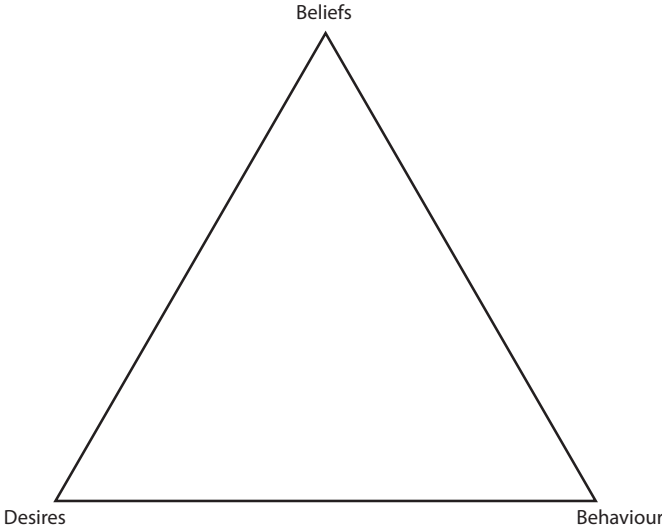


Figure 1. The rationalist behaviouralist theory of action

When information is limited, realist analysts (and others) will rely on an explanation that infers beliefs from the other two factors on the basis of the consistency between the three parts provided by rationality: behaviour is the visible starting point and preferences are assumed to be known through realist theory, so the only variable to be inferred is (shifts in) beliefs. In this way, the analysis is truly behaviouralist, since it does away with any information on the *actual* process of how the decision and behaviour have come about. It is a form of rationalism where foreign policy decision-making is left in an analytical black box, a mere conduit between an input (stimulus) and an output (response).

Accordingly, a rationalist foreign policy strategy can affect the behaviour of other actors by trying to influence their beliefs or, and this is more complicated, their desires (see figure 2).

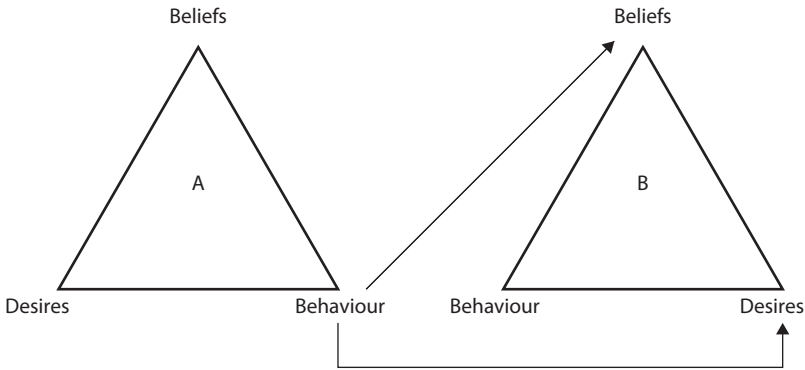


Figure 2. Rationalist strategies to influence the behaviour of others

Clearly, a black box model cannot really work; if anything, FPA became prominent for opening up that box. One path was adding more process factors. Over the years, and generally staying within a rationalist picture, it added factor after factor that would inform the national interest (preferences, desire): from individual psychology (operational code), public opinion, party preferences, to lobbies and bureaucracies, and more, would do. This led to fragmentation and increasing theoretical frustration.

Another strategy therefore consisted in lifting the theoretical argument to a higher level of abstraction and inquiring into the origins of beliefs and desires more generally. Obviously, beliefs and preferences are neither idiosyncratic nor reducible to a single utilitarian calculation. But that does not mean they are arbitrary. Neoliberal institutionalists have oriented some of their research in FPA to the normative context and shared practices (“regimes”) within which actors form their beliefs, define their interests, and decide their action. Hence, rather than seeing this as influenced by another actor or domestic factors, the analysis moves to a higher level in which shared ideas are prime influencers. Although this sounds antithetical to realists, there is not much to oppose it once a rationalist setup is followed: ideas do not just fall from heaven, and they resonate because of a shared ideational and normative context. Hence, Stephen Krasner had no real choice but to admit the place of regimes as not only intervening but also as autonomous variables in structural explanations (see, respectively, Krasner, 1982a; 1982b), the “neo-neo synthesis” of neorealism and neoliberalism (Wæver, 1996). All seems set. Having ideas and norms now as autonomous variables that

influence beliefs, they may also influence preferences, since beliefs and preferences may not be independent of each other.

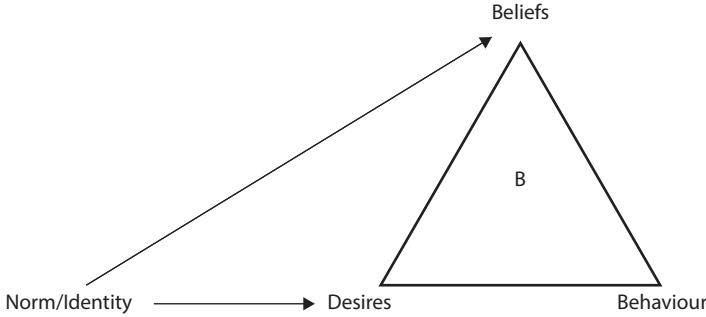


Figure 3. Constructivism as theory of action: norms and identity constituting desires and beliefs

But, as we will see, such moves would undermine the neopositivist methodologies and meta-theory on which established IR rationalism relies. In the end, the latter imposes a straitjacket on how to think beliefs and their effects: It narrows the ontology to individualism, conceives of ideas as objects, and imposes a vision of ideas as relevant only if causally efficient.

The contradictions of rationalist analysis

In their programmatic statement, Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane (1993) establish the model for the rationalist analysis of ideas in foreign policy. They define ideas as beliefs, that is, mental states. And they see them as necessary to overcome problems that rational action may face: “Our argument is that ideas influence policy when the principled or causal beliefs they embody provide road maps that increase actors’ clarity about goals or ends-means relationships, when they affect outcomes of strategic situations in which there is no unique equilibrium, and when they become embedded in political institutions” (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993, p. 3). In other words, there is simply no rational action without beliefs, neither for the actors themselves, nor for their observers. Yet, in setting up the analysis, they insist that the null hypothesis is an interest-based explanation of action, which is defined as autonomous from any role of beliefs. This is meant to isolate the specific causal effect that beliefs can have. This constitutes a surely curious move when a pragmatic argument about operationalization is meant to prime a meta-theoretical one: while we know that beliefs can influence interests and that both are intrinsically connected, let’s just test them against each other as if they were not. Also, despite writing that beliefs are mental states,

we can then ascribe efficient causality to them, as if there were external factors, like billiard balls. Finally, although allowing for the social embeddedness of beliefs (and norms), their content is analyzed in an individualist setup as if that very social nature were of no relevance. All opening acknowledgments of the intrinsic problems of the rationalist model in dealing with beliefs are eventually taken back in the actual approach. Yet, none of this will do. The analysis of ideas and identity will have to wait for a more consistent meta-theoretical setup.

The inconsistency between meta-theory and methodology was already exposed for regime theory. Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie (1986) had welcomed regime theory for its move to include normative factors into the more general structural understanding of international order and yet found it wanting in its attempt to reduce them to external objects. They saw this move as being prompted by a positivist understanding of reality where the analysis needs to be purely causal and not also constitutive, and where causality is understood in the relation of mutually external units or factors. Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes (1997) see this reinforced by the “ideas as commodities” metaphor, in which ideas can be acquired, exchanged, and sold. An idea is just a different form of object or good, and hence subsumable under the external and causal analysis used for material factors.

But beliefs do not just hit actors and force them to do things. That type of causality simply does not work for this phenomenon. Beliefs are not external causes, but at best internal reasons for action. Those reasons may or may not be conscious to the actors; they are multiple, heterogeneous, and potentially conflicting. After all, it was exactly for these subjective effects that beliefs have been often reduced to material or objective needs, as proposed by both utilitarianism and (some form of) Marxism, which reduce actors to mere through-puts. Hence a dilemma: either they are important, but then not reducible, and so both theoretical and methodological consequences ensue; or they are reducible, but then, despite all statements to the contrary, they return to being only secondary for the analysis, playing the role of a residual or ad hoc variable to explain instrumentally unexplained outcomes. Rationalism needs to go the latter way: by trying to stick to a positivist and utilitarian setup, whether scholars acknowledge it or not, all openings are withdrawn again.

But, most importantly, beliefs are not just mental states. There is a significant difference between a belief that is understood as some individual mental state leading to action and beliefs that are social by definition since they are embedded in wider normative or other ideational systems to which actors attach meaning and act. Let me use both Max Weber and the rationalist idea of “common knowledge” as ways to show that beliefs are not about subjectivity, but intersubjectivity, with both theoretical and methodological consequences.

Weber famously distinguished between instrumental rationality and value rationality or rationality of ultimate ends. The former is the classical utilitarian

understanding in which an actor tries to achieve a cost-efficient usage of means to reach an end, while comparing and choosing between alternative options. The latter refers to a different type of consistent, hence rational, behaviour in which actors choose their action in terms of reaching certain values, potentially independent of any concerns of other consequences; the aim informs the choice of means, irrespective of costs (but not all means are necessarily justified; that depends on the end).

In the utilitarian setup, whenever the cost-benefit calculation goes wrong, besides incomplete information and other circumstances, one can refer to erroneous beliefs or ideologies that lead to "irrational" action. Value rationality hence becomes the residual explanation when instrumental rationality does not work. But the underlying instrumental and utilitarian frame is preserved as the default explanation. In this way, the theory can never go wrong, since it can always be tweaked in this way to conform to the behavioural outcome (Allison, 1971; Steinbruner, 1974, p. 47; Pizzorno, 2007, chap. 4).

But Weber would not have spent what feels like several thousands of pages on world religions and cosmologies were it not fundamental for his sociological theory. For him, the relationship is the other way round: value rationality is not the exception, but the default. Here, instrumental rationality is but the form value rationality takes in a specific cultural or social environment where utilitarian efficiency becomes the overarching value. It is a special case that cannot just be assumed, but needs to be justified through an analysis of the social and normative context.

This reversal can also be illustrated through the closest that rationalist theory gets to the idea of intersubjectivity, namely *common knowledge*. Game theorists have met the problem that some coordination problems, irresolvable by independent individual calculation in theory, are resolved in practice, namely through a kind of knowledge that A knows that B knows that A knows that B... Indeed, common knowledge is based on a logically infinite regress of anticipation of the others' beliefs, where agent A in an interaction believes something that others believe, too, and that they believe A also believes, who, in turn, and so on. As Wendt puts it, "Common knowledge requires 'interlocking' beliefs, not just everyone having the same beliefs" (Wendt, 1999, p. 160). Knowing that others know what you know, also about them, hence provides a common backdrop against which coordination can happen. Tom Schelling has given famous examples of this, including where to meet in a city without having given any previous information about it. When there is common knowledge, actors will coordinate blindly.

No doubt this scheme is a very helpful and welcome inclusion of wider ideational concerns. Yet, it is still severely limited for our concerns about Kissinger's "vision of itself". First, the setup remains one of strategic interaction, where all that is varied is the belief that then affects behaviour. Interests or identities are

untouched in this analysis. The amount of socialization into a set of ideas is hence purely limited to beliefs, not “character”, to use Kissinger’s term.

Also, the origins of this background knowledge are not clear. Yet they may be the relevant issue. Take the following example. You are invited to a dinner and the host expresses the intention to serve fish. You know that the host assumes you know that this implies that you should bring the wine, white wine to boot. This is taken for granted, and goes without saying, as background knowledge does. Yet, recently, having met new friends, the host prefers different beer types to be paired with the food, preferably from some hip micro-brewery, and may have assumed you to know this. So, when you arrive with the wine, the coordination functioned, since there is wine for the food. But then, also it did not. One could now argue that the relevant common knowledge should have included the “vision of itself”, here informed by the host’s identification with a certain social group with a distinctive taste. It cannot take for granted that we all share the same social environment with the same norms. What this amounts to, however, is that in this game of mutual anticipation, one needs to think about preferences and interests in terms of the “circles of recognition”, to use Alessandro Pizzorno’s (1986, p. 367) term, that constitute (not cause) them in the first place. The analysis is only about beliefs – but those beliefs include a constitutive link between norms and/or identity and interests that the very approach neglects. Apparently, actors know more about the thicker social role of ideas than their rationalist observers.

Also, we can easily agree that reducing this encounter to a mere coordination game may miss that which is relevant for understanding the (future) social relation between those agents. Common meals are rituals. What if the host decides to go with the wine this time, rather than priggishly parading the fancy beer, hence humiliating the guest? What if the guest cannot be bothered, let alone humiliated, since she could not care less about the host and accepted the invitation only out of some form of politeness? We move from a theory of instrumental action to one of symbolic action and social recognition. Behaviour is understood as a practice informed by the tacit, ritualized, and open rules of recognition in their respective spheres and social fields. Identity is always part of a relation, and that relation is part of wider fields within which we learn to distinguish ourselves by constructing a biography of ourselves (the “vision of itself”) that narrates identity across time as well as identification with and difference to others.

2. Identity in constructivist and poststructuralist Foreign Policy Analysis

Constructivism is often amalgamated with the analysis of the role of norms. But for foreign policy analysis, a second constructivist research program has also been important, one focusing on the link between identity and interests and behaviour, which is central for thinking "visions of itself". In the following section, an early study by Audie Klotz will serve as an initial background to provide a link between the two. After that, this section discusses a series of theoretical research programs that move from the external and domestic relations of identity formation to the study of national biographies, and finally to the poststructuralist reversal and studies of ontological security, where identity practices are to be understood as ways to see an always precarious identification (de)stabilized.

Constructivist takes on foreign policy analysis

Why would a US right-wing government obsessed with the Cold War competition in all parts of the world decide to abandon a highly reliable Western ally? Why would the Reagan administration end up undermining the South African apartheid government? By putting the question in this manner, Klotz (1995) *de facto* follows the setup envisaged by Goldstein and Keohane: the interest explanation (Cold War competition) is the null hypothesis that defines the puzzle, and an ideational analysis is meant to fix it. Her explanation shows how anti-apartheid norms trumped strategic interests. But the analysis shows more. She insists that apartheid was a practice simply no longer acceptable within US domestic politics. It harked back to and justified racial discrimination when the US had moved on to a self-understanding in which this was no longer defensible. However, racist parts of the US public and government may have been, apartheid was not just an informal, but a legal form of segregation, and such segregation was no longer publicly justifiable in race politics. It stood for the race politics of a US that the US had officially left behind. What the US *stood for* was driven by what the by now different US stood for.

This is the main inspiration for constructivism-inspired foreign policy analysis centering on identity: identity and norms are not independent of, if residual, to interests, but they inform and constitute the latter in the first place (Jepperson et al., 1996). Here, Goldstein and Keohane's point that the very counterposition of ideas and interests is ontologically untenable is not just acknowledged but also followed up. As a result, as John Ruggie somewhat wryly put it, rationalism may well have a place in the explanation, but "a core constructivist research concern is what happens before the neo-utilitarian model kicks in" (Ruggie, 1998, p. 867, original emphasis). One has to start there, or, if not, justify why not. The burden

of justification is turned around: ideational factors are not only relevant when they provide residual explanatory power to utilitarianism. Instead, if one does start with utilitarianism, one needs to carefully justify why it can do without understanding ideas through their wider social context and without endogenizing identity formation in the explanation. That justification is, in turn, necessary to justify the selection of a rationalist theory as the general framework to start with. It is perhaps hardly surprising that some rationalists shy away from this implication of being a special case in need of constant justification. It is much nicer if rationalism provides the null hypothesis.

Jutta Weldes and Ted Hopf have provided the textbook research approaches of two complementary constructivist foreign policy traditions, one addressing more the practices of identification with regard to the relational other abroad, and the other addressing them more through identification practices within a society. In an enviably clear approach, Weldes (1999) builds up her research puzzle. She shows how Cuban, Soviet, and US understandings of the Cuban missile crisis differ. This is not simply meant to show that all countries see the world through their lenses or how they deem fit, but to raise the issue why the Cuban interpretation was so easily dismissed. In the aftermath of the botched Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban justification for having Soviet missiles was that it was for sheer defense: not being able to trust the US to respect Cuba's sovereignty, given the US-supported invasion attempt to topple the regime, a credible deterrence was needed. A Soviet coupling and a nuclear deterrence was arguably the best strategy for this, if achieved as a *fait accompli*. In Weldes' close reading of the documents of the ExComm responsible for deciding the US response, that particular justification and rationale for the missile installation never seriously figures, however, even in a discussion which did not address a public audience. So, she asks: "How come?" – and not: "why?," since it refers to a process-focused version of causation.

Weldes uses discourse analysis to reconstruct the foreign policy identity of the US as it appears in these documents and in the wider social context. According to her, that particular reading *could not* seriously figure in the discussion since it would have profoundly contradicted the US's vision of itself, to use Kissinger's term. Identity discourses hence inform what and how we understand. She argues, in her wording, how that particular understanding would have "interpellated" a US identity as an imperialist power bound to invade smaller and relatively speaking defenseless countries when it saw fit. Accepting the Cuban justification of a necessary defense would portray the US in a manner that is excluded from the latter's self-identification, its identity discourses. That discourse has several scripts. It is not homogeneous. There are interventionists and isolationists, for instance, America First or the multilateral liberal order (much of this discussion is already foreshadowed in Hoffmann, 1978). But the underlying implicit consensus or *doxa* is about a certain US exceptionalism.

Hence, discourse analysis cannot predict in a generic manner which script will become dominant and inform the understanding of world affairs. It is not deterministic in this sense. It answers "how possible?" questions, not "why?" questions, if by the latter we imply an efficient causal explanation (Doty, 1993; Vennesson, 2008). But, once fitted with the historical and empirical detail of the specific case, it can exclude certain understandings, since they would be outside the boundaries of existing identity discourses. These identity discourses can originate in three different environments. Critical geopolitics distinguishes between the formal, practical, and popular levels, i.e. the discursive fields of the observers, the practitioners, and civil society that inform the way state identity is conceived and through this also constituted and negotiated (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998).

Ted Hopf (2002), in particular, opened up this constructivist analysis by including societal discourses such as novels or movies. His approach also aimed to distinguish and compare the respective importance of (external) role recognition and (internal) self-identifications for informing the understanding of the leading decision-makers, showing that, for the majority of his cases, the domestic discourses prevailed, therefore prompting him to call his approach societal constructivism (for a similar design, see also Hopf, 2012). This may not necessarily be persuasive, though, since role recognition is often included or anticipated in societal discourses and surely so when the analysis focuses on state decision-makers. In other words, although it makes sense to assume that such a relational practice as identity formation needs to be approached by analytically distinguishing the different spheres of relations and circles of recognition, in this case domestic and foreign relations, the very moment one moves to the level of the actor exposed to these discursive fields, the multiple spheres are mediated and no longer separated. Still, the approach has the advantage of clearly showing that identity discourses are never homogeneous, nor do they have only one single script. It is within the identity discourse that the different specific identity scripts are related, and are often set against each other.

Identification, or identity as process

From here, the analysis of identity in foreign policy analysis made two significant steps forward. First, it specified identity in that all identity discourses are relational and are both national biographies that diachronically construct continuity over time and synchronically constitute distinctions that define the self with regard to an Other (Pizzorno, 1986, p. 368).² Second, the poststructuralist

² This is closely connected to the research agenda on collective memories in foreign policy analysis. For cases in CEE, this has been analyzed by, for instance, Elizaveta Gaufman (2017), Maria Mälksoo (2009; 2015) and Jelena Subotić (2020a; 2020b). This, in turn, relates to the materiality

twist reversed the explanatory arrow: whereas constructivism tends to read from existing identity discourses to foreign policy behaviour, poststructuralism takes the always precarious identity formation as its very core of analysis and looks into how foreign practices do not just express a certain identity, but actually intervene in its very constitution and (de)stabilization.

Identity is constituted over time. Narratives are there to construct a continuity that can be called a self. In this way, a prominent way to understand identity discourses is to treat them as national biographies (Berenskoetter, 2014b; for an analysis of Ricoeur's approach to memory and identity in IR, see Kopper, 2012), constantly updated, if not rewritten, with multiple competing scripts. In this biographical practice, the self is re-constituted through that which it is not over time. Hence, any identity discourse is systematically connected to an Other (see e.g. Neumann, 1996; 1999). This Other, however, does not need to be an enemy (Hansen, 2006). Indeed, in an interesting twist, also friends are others who inform identity narratives in significant ways (Berenskoetter, 2007; 2014a; Roshchin, 2006).

Finally, such othering may not be primarily geopolitical, but can also be temporal. As Ole Wæver remarked, "Europe's other is Europe's own past which should not be allowed to become its future" (Wæver, 1998, p. 90), an identity discourse whose content closely overlaps with Germany's foreign policy identity. When then Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld tried to divide Europe, enlisting "new" Europe for the Bush administration's war in Iraq, Germany was faced with a difficult choice: continue to be a friend of the US, also in recognition of the US effort for German security, or accept that this friend was undermining the EU, which is intrinsically related to German identity. Given the centrality of the EU in Germany's own temporal othering, it becomes more easily understandable why the Schröder government decided for the (old) EU and against the US (besides the strategic misconception of this war, lacking moreover legal and political (UNSC) legitimacy). Obviously, geopolitical and temporal othering cannot always be distinguished so clearly (Prozorov, 2010; Rumelili, 2004). But it is an interesting twist that othering in identity discourses can be self-reflexive (Diez, 2004, p. 321), which produces, in particular for the EU, a very provisional sense of identity.

The other major research path consists of the poststructuralist reversal: rather than seeing identity discourses as informing certain understandings and hence predisposed to a limited set of foreign policy actions, it looks back on how these very understandings lead to actions which re-inscribe certain identity scripts. Or put more strongly, it looks at how action fixes (or not) an always

of many practices of 'commemoration' that feed into the scripts of national biographies. See, e.g., Heath-Kelly (2016).

precarious identity in search of recognition. Identity is not the start of an analysis of action, but the analysis of action has the purpose of understanding identity processes.

The starting point is the "dangerous liaison" between constructivist theorizing and the very nature of identity (Zehfuss, 2001). Identity is always in the process of being re-inscribed. Hence, one cannot simply assume that in any given situation there is a stable identity from which the explanation originates. In contrast, the process in which the identity discourses are affected by events and actions may become the privileged focus for the analysis. This reversal, famously introduced by David Campbell (1990; 1992), starts the analysis from the practices that provide continuity to an ever-unaccomplished identity, and sees understandings and actions as potential ways to stabilize these processes. Jutta Weldes also sees the US reaction to the Cuban missile installations as an attempt to return credibility to a particular masculinist and macho US role in international affairs, trying not to appear "weak" (see also Weldes, 1996, p. 46). Rather than seeing the Cuban missile crisis as a (given) security crisis, she sees it primarily as an (ongoing) identity crisis that prompted its own security concerns.

In this context, the analysis moves toward the very identity discourses themselves, their history, their composition in multiple scripts, what will constitute threats to them, and how actions and understandings fix, but also undermine, them. In an almost complete reversal of the usual understanding of the national interest as being driven by given physical security concerns, there *can* be moments in which states' identities are so much accustomed to an enemy other that its disappearance induces insecurity. Georgy Arbatov, Director of the Institute for USA and Canada Studies and advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev, is widely quoted for saying in an interview to a US journalist in 1988 that "[w]e are going to do a terrible thing to you—we are going to deprive you of your enemy". In such cases, states are looking for matches of pre-defined danger and threats, looking for an enemy other that stabilizes the self: "On a deep level, they prefer conflict to cooperation, because only through conflict do they know who they are" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 361). There can hence be a national (identity) interest in insecurity. In an echo of Kissinger's concern with identity and absolute security, this specifies why peace-building and diplomacy may turn out to be far more complicated (Rumelili, 2015b).

Ontological security

To finally locate Kissinger's insight, the analysis of the "vision of itself" has been crucial for the burgeoning research program on ontological security. Initially inspired by social psychology and Anthony Giddens' social theory (Giddens, 1991, chap. 2), ontological security refers to the idea that "human beings

need relatively stable expectations about the natural and especially social world around them” (Wendt, 1999, p. 131). It “entails having a consistent sense of self and having that sense affirmed by others” (Zarakol, 2010, p. 6) so as to be able to sustain a coherent autobiographic narrative. Since this “pushes human beings in a conservative, homeostatic direction, and to seek out recognition of their standing from society” (Wendt, 1999, p. 131), “[o]ntological security does not presuppose a threat to identity but underlines an ongoing concern with its stability” (Rumelili, 2015a, p. 58).

The analysis of ontological security initially targeted what one could call status anxieties and foreign policy pathologies. Some examples will suffice. Analyzing the Israeli case, Amir Lupovici (2016) shows that deterrence is not just a passive theory that observes reality, but intervenes in reality when it becomes intrinsically connected to the foreign policy / security identity of a country. This “deterrence identity” affects the interpretation of events, the legitimacy of politics, and behaviour in such a way as to make deterrence become an end in itself. The problems of deterrence appear, then, paradoxically solvable only by more of the same – a classical learning pathology. In this case, states do not use deterrence to defend their security, but end up practicing security policies to defend their deterrence identity. Other approaches insist on the varied mobilization of different biographic narratives to stabilize biographies. This has been applied to Serbia, for instance (Ejdus, 2018; 2020; Subotić, 2016). When various identity scripts are challenged at the same time, Lupovici (2012) speaks of an “ontological dissonance”, which can lead decision-makers to strategies of avoidance, which, in turn, can exacerbate the foreign policy crises.

A major research issue is the study of the systematic ontological insecurity for those whose integration into international society is deferred and/or comes from the outside of that which is considered the civilizational standard, those “forced [...] to rearticulate their new state identities around the anxiety of ‘demonstrable’ inferiority and the goal of catching up with the West by following its ‘standards’” (Zarakol, 2011, p. 62; there are however also other forms of stigma management that do not lead to such insecurity, as analysed by Adler-Nissen, 2014). This makes ontological security studies particularly fruitful for analyzing foreign policies at the periphery of the international order (Ejdus, 2017; Vieira, 2017). Indeed, some countries may get stuck in identity discourses that offer different scripts which are alternatively mobilized to meet crises without ever being able to provide a stabilized self, such as in the case of Turkey (Bilgin, 2012) or Russia (Astrov and Morozova, 2012; Morozov, 2015).

Methodologically speaking, this focus on processes of (self-)recognition within different circles and the intersubjective meanings is accessed through discourse analysis, which is more than mere text analysis. Discourses are often misunderstood as being only talk, instead of meaning worlds, its analysis the mere examination of texts, instead of symbolic systems. Hence, practices

like commemorations are "discursive" in that they mobilize, often in a ritualized manner, a meaning world. Also, discourse analysis is not primarily geared toward finding out what actors intended. There is idle talk and deception *en masse*, instrumentalized usages of ideas, and so on. But that does not undermine at all the significance of discourse analysis to access the meaning worlds of actors. When actors wish to use propaganda, they need to know the audience and what resonates. When they invoke human rights, they may not believe in a word they say, but their discourses show the normative content needed to legitimate certain acts. In other words, far from being a drawback, having access only to the public side of the discourse is all that counts for discourse analysis to reconstruct the meaning world, the common sense, that which is authorized to be said, and that which is not and left out. Private lies tell a public story. Discourse analysis is about the latter.

Methodological / theoretical problems: Homeostatis and anthropomorphization

Anthropomorphization is underlying all rationalist analysis where actors are assumed to have interests, ideas, aims, indeed a "character", as Kissinger called it. But it is arguably more pronounced for discursive methodologies and theories of social recognition when applied to IR. There are three proposed solutions to this problem, none perfect (for a good discussion, see also Narozhna, 2020).

One consists in arguing that states are persons in international society (Wendt, 2004). Here, anthropomorphization is not metaphorical, but ontological in the figure of a (social) person. That is an ambitious take, and one that has met resistance (Jackson, 2004; Neumann, 2004; Wight, 2004; yet see also the discussion in Lerner, 2021). A second solution consists in focusing on the actual decision-makers and hence not scaling up at all. Yet, for this to work, some collective ideas and identifications need to enter the picture. Hopf (2002, chap. 1) achieves this by positing that identity is a cognitive device that stabilizes human orientations and understandings in their social environment. This creates societally shared discursive formations composed of different identity scripts. Decision-makers, as members of the same society, rely on these when understanding the situations in foreign policy. Alternatively, this link can be made by using other forms of social psychology, as in the study of nationalist mobilization (Kinnvall, 2004; 2017), or, put slightly differently, by focusing on the ways and processes / institutions that provide ontological security to members of a society (Zarakol, 2017), i.e. defending not the self but the wider social context (Pratt, 2017).

Finally, there is the possibility of seeing a state's identity not as being scaled up but as being the ascription of international and / or domestic society. Hence,

anthropomorphization is not an attribute assigned by the observer who imposes an anthropomorphic grid when analyzing a collective actor; it is the various social contexts that attribute such anthropomorphic traits to collective actors, while accordingly making sense of their acts, something the observer then registers and analyses (Guzzini, 2012a). States, then, *are* what their circles of recognition make of them, to reuse Pizzorno's term mentioned above. Put into a more narrative approach to identity (Somers, 1994), Erik Ringmar writes that: "States too can be intentional, interest-driven, actors, we may conclude, provided that we tell stories which identify them as such" (Ringmar, 1996, p. 75). This solution has the advantage of overcoming the paradox that, although observers and practitioners routinely declare that states are not persons, they refer to them as such in ways that influence their understanding and actions, and not only in terms of legal personality and liability. It also allows an empirical check on such attributions by analyzing practices of recognition (in its many meanings) within domestic and international society. Yet it may miss the social psychological component that links it to domestic national identity practices (Guzzini, 2017). De facto, most analyses, depending on whether they concentrate more on the domestic or external social context, will use versions of the last two, with their respective limitations, and often explore the tensions between the two (e.g. Subotić and Zarakol, 2013).

Ontological security has its specific problems. The major unease stems from the "conservative, homeostatic direction" noted by Wendt above that tends to provide functionalist analyses that, in turn, favor securitization strategies for re-establishing an "identity equilibrium" and hence have the usual problems with understanding both agency and change. If all starts from anxiety and its fixing, then ontological security pays a similar price to that paid by constructivist foreign policy analysis earlier when it took identity discourses as stable (Bucher and Jasper, 2016). Whereas the poststructuralist twist of reversing the focus from action to identity processes is taken seriously, the parallel insistence of the openness of such processes has been partly lost.

There have been different ways of dealing with this fundamental problem, but almost all of them open up for more contingency in the re-articulation of narratives and identity scripts. Rather than a functionalist fix, it becomes an open process. One line consisted in finding in the initial inspirational literature – be it Laing or Giddens, but also the existentialist takes in Hobbes and then in Heidegger and Kierkegaard – indications that anxiety not only induces crises to be fixed, but also generates opportunities to be explored (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 2020; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020; Rumelili, 2020), where securitization would not be the default coping strategy (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017). This allows for a conceptualization of agency that can be more emancipatory (Berenskötter, 2020) and may also involve desecuritization moves that bring ontological security closer to classical peace research concerns (Browning

and Joenniemi, 2017). As Lupovici's point about ontological dissonance implies, there is no necessity that crises be resolved rather than being constantly patched up and their solution hence adjourned.

In the analysis of identity crisis, the greater openness of the process is achieved by including more process factors in the analysis, not only for the link between interpretations and behaviour, but already for establishing the contours of the narrative struggles. Such factors include the analysis of the hierarchies, habitus, and practices in the foreign policy expert field, the ideational path dependency of political cultures, and the struggles within the political field itself (Guzzini, 2012a). The idea of an "identity crisis" hence does not refer to an external event that "hits" identity discourses, but to the predispositions of identity discourses that may find it difficult to keep consistency in the interpretation of events. The end of the Cold War unsurprisingly unsettled identity scripts in Russia, but also oddly in Italy and not in Germany and the Czech Republic, which were, however, states newly constituted in this form (Guzzini, 2012b). As seen, an international crisis, even a war, may stabilize identity scripts. To constitute the event and assess its effects, the analysis is from the discursive field via scripts and interpretations to the event, an "interpretivist process-tracing", not the other way round.

Political problems: The blackmail of identity as diplomatic practice

Now we can close the circle and return to the world of practice so central to IR. We started with realism, including Kissinger to some extent, in its attempt to translate practical maxims into scientific theories, an attempt destined to betray either practical knowledge or scientific criteria (Guzzini, 1998). Here, the link comes in reverse. What happens when an observational theory is re-translated into a political doctrine and policy justification, as also happened to democratic peace theory? (See also Ish-Shalom, 2006; 2013). What happens when ideas about identity mechanisms travel into the world of practice; when the search for recognition is not simply a long-standing practice of international politics, but becomes implicitly justified through our social theories; and when practitioners (or scholars), aware of this justification, use it to defend as untouchable an identity script of their predilection, any infringement of which would count as undermining a vital interest?

This ontologically reflexive twist is a temptation, in particular with ontological security, however much observers of ontological security have warned about it. It is not too hard to see how ontological security can move from being an observational concept to a practical one. Just as the idea of a sphere of interest, ontological security, if used as a doctrine, defines a red line. But it is a specific red line, since it does not allow for much of a compromise. Indeed, as Maria Mälksoo (2015, p. 223) has argued, the problem is that such a move normalizes and

makes inevitable “a state’s need to seek and sustain the intactness and consistency of its identity [which] could dangerously depoliticize the act of protecting a biographical narrative of the state”, normalizing, in turn, strategies of securitization. To avoid this, Mälksoo (2015, p. 230) argues for a politics of memory based on the “radical interdependence of the self and the other”. For this, not all memories are structured equally well. It is quite evident that a memory politics based on geopolitical othering ends to fix the self in a way more independent of the other. By contrast, a temporal othering where one’s past is one’s other, such as in the Holocaust memory script undergirding EU identity discourses, allows spatial others in a country’s sphere of recognition to be invited to criticize and redefine the self. That makes them qualitatively different.

This normalizing move can already be prepared for, if unwittingly, in academic analysis. In a carefully drafted analysis, Molly Krasnodębska (2021) shows how Poland’s foreign policy in recent decades needs to be understood not only in terms of physical but also ontological security coping with various stigmatizations. She proposes analyzing Poland’s strategic culture to understand the tools (the “how”) with which policy makers dealt with Poland’s perceived stigmatization with the objective of achieving ontological security (the “what for”). Whereas her analysis can clearly show such processes of stigmatization, her theoretical framework takes for granted that Poland’s policy is a mere reaction, culturally mediated, to a stigma imposed from the outside. It does not allow for the possibility that the specific self-constructions of an actor may be such as to look for such stigmas to stabilize the self. But identity discourses inform not only what counts as a stigma, but, potentially, whether such stigmas, or any other construction of “Others”, are looked for in the first place. Just as some countries need physical insecurity to stabilize their ontological security, they may also need (and hence may look for) threats to their identity to provide a coherent national biography (for an analysis of Italy’s identity discourses that need to construct the bad German other, see Focardi, 2013). This is an empirical question, not a necessity; but a reflexive framework of analysis, as required by Mälksoo’s critique, must account for it, lest it risks normalizing certain identity discourses and practices.

The wider practical implications of normalizing ontological security have to do with a similar twist, namely that it is the country itself which can define the legitimate red line of its “vision of itself”. Yet all of the classical international practices, such as spheres of influence, only work when they are recognized by others. Unilateral actions can be part of their establishment, but not more. However, whereas shared rules that define the acceptance of such practices have been established over time, which “visions of itself” would be legitimate and which not is more difficult to establish.

If actors decide that there is a completely untouchable “vision of itself” that any security arrangement will have to accept, a world order can easily become

impossible. Kissinger saw such an order threatened by the rise of a revolutionary power. Such an actor is characterized not merely by feeling threatened – that is a condition shared by all states – but that “*nothing can reassure it*. Only absolute security – the neutralization of the opponent – is considered a sufficient guarantee, and thus the desire of one power for absolute security means absolute insecurity for all the others” (Kissinger, 1957, p. 2, original emphasis). The construction of a legitimate order thus needs the creation of a balance, so that no “vision of itself” be disregarded to such an extent that an actor, unable to reach the expected recognition of that vision, ends up looking for absolute security, there being nothing left to lose. Yet, claiming that for reasons of ontological security no compromise is possible reproduces Kissinger’s problem of absolute security in a different vein; it only works by pushing all adjustments onto other identities. Claiming a historical status of victimhood can come in handy in this context (Lerner, 2019), since any further adjustment would only increase such victimhood. By refusing to update their status and identity or to re-consider their place in the world in the realm of the others, states impose a blackmail on the international order. Any world order is then at the mercy of the least flexible or self-reflexive foreign policy identity.

It is therefore important to note that although great power status and recognition involve the privilege to make fewer compromises, the “vision of itself” is objectively never the property of an actor alone; it is social. Its invocation for foreign policy purposes is hence always contestable. If ontological security is erroneously translated into a self-centered doctrine to justify uncompromising foreign policy action, it leads to diplomatic pathologies. It expresses, metaphorically speaking, a form of narcissism (see also the discussion in Hagström, 2021). In fact, in this case, it is not that a given ontological insecurity justifies uncompromising behaviour; uncompromising behaviour serves to essentialize a certain definition of the vision of oneself. Such a temptation is visible in many political justifications of foreign policies, as analyzed, for instance, in research on foreign policy discourses in CEE, and in particular in Russia (see, for instance, Akchurina and Della Sala, 2018; Freire, 2020; Hansen, 2016; Kazharski, 2019; Narozhna, 2022).

Hence, a constructivist analysis of identity and ontological security goes along with Kissinger in that foreign policy is also about the “character” of an actor: “credibility for a state plays the role of character for a human being” (interview of Kissinger in Goldberg, 2016; for a similar take by a Brazilian scholar-diplomat, see Lafer, 2000; 2004). But this character is attributed by the social circle of recognition, not the state alone. Kissinger wrote as if these historical experiences and identities were fixed. They are not, since identities are relational and constituted in social recognition, and national histories include multiple scripts that are continuously rewritten. And a functioning diplomacy for a world order always involves the very delicate adaptation of these state histories and identities.

That a country makes no compromise for reasons of ontological security can be a valid finding of an observational theory that assesses foreign policy behaviour from the outside; it is a pathology of world order if used as a practical doctrine.

Conclusion

Kissinger's concern with "vision of the self" cannot be consistently accommodated in a rationalist framework of analysis because of its individualist understanding of beliefs, its objectivation as an external cause, and the exogenization of interest formation that neglects the constitutive role of ideas and identity. The constructivist and then poststructuralist research agenda on identity remedies this situation by framing the role of ideas within a more appropriate sociological theory, yet meeting problems of their own. In this process, the question of identity has not only moved center stage but also shifted beyond Kissinger's take.

For Kissinger, that vision of itself was surely contingent to some extent, but it was something given that could be threatened by events and decisions. Seeing how particular events may pose problems for such identities (and identity discourses) is surely part of the previously mentioned research programs (and also for the concept of societal security, as introduced by Wæver, 1993). But there has been a further twist, in that such identity discourses are never given or stable. Identities are relational and hence part of continuous recognition practices for an identity that *is*, by being, always *in the making*. No actor ever has an identity that is guaranteed to be at one with the "vision of itself".

With this in mind, we can return to Kissinger's plea for a balance of identities as a precondition for a stable international order. Such a balance can only work, if it is not misused to condone nationalist strategies that naturalize and homogenize these identities. For the balance of identities to play its part in a security order, identities need to be respected, but kept open and constantly re-negotiated in international society.

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