

SECURITY IMAGINARY. A NEW PERSPECTIVE
ON SECURITY IDENTITY AND ETHNIC VIOLENCE

LUCIAN-ȘTEFAN DUMITRESCU*

Abstract. *Security identity has received many different interpretations. Some of them are fueled by a too conservative perspective and, thus, consider collective identities to be free-floating entities, whereas others are underpinned by a too liberal approach that stresses the importance of identification and therefore the lack of any social constraints in choosing a certain identity. This theoretical article brings to the fore the concept of security imaginary, which is presented as the outward-looking dimension of every collective identity. I argue that when the security imaginary tends to become over-assertive it creates supplementary threats to the security identity of the neighbouring social groups. I also point out that under certain circumstances a too aggressive security imaginary might be conducive for ethnic tensions although security imaginary per se cannot trigger ethnic violence.*

Keywords: *security identity, security imaginary, collective identity, ethnic violence, interethnic relations.*

Security Imaginary

One of the main motives that demarcates constructivism from realism and liberalism is the former's particular way of understanding national interest in comparison to the latter's. Constructivism depicts national interest as contingent, historically determined and defined in accordance to the political elites' interests, whereas realist and liberal thinkers tend to understand national interest as predetermined, rigid and immutable. For a better understanding of the national interest tackled from a constructivist angle, I bring into focus the issue of security imaginary. By employing the concept of security imaginary, I seek to shed light on the mechanisms, narratives and values that are used in order to build the national interest. Jutta Weldes points out that one state's position in the realm of world politics is deeply influenced not by its interests and threats, nor by its resources and policies but rather by its security imaginary. What is usually understood as the national interest of a certain state is rather part of a wider concept, namely security imaginary, and therefore whoever seeks to understand

* Scientific Researcher at the Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations; postdoctoral researcher at the "Carol I" National Defense University; dulust@gmail.com.

the national interest of a certain state needs to take a closer look on the security imaginary of that state.

What is worth stressing about the security imaginary, is that it includes the process of identification. In other words, by crafting a security imaginary, a certain state becomes not only a subject of world politics. Thanks to that security imaginary, the state becomes an international actor that represents an “imagined community”, namely a nation. Which means that once a security imaginary has been forged, an “imagined community” gets simultaneously a international identity. This is how the “security imaginary” becomes the outward-looking dimension of the national identity, which capitalizes on its inward-looking dimension, that is, myths, symbols, rituals, heroes, golden ages etc. That is why security imaginary turns into a very important constituent of the political security of one state. For those readers who are not quite conversant with the realm of security studies, one mention should be made. Political security refers basically to the political ideology that legitimizes the political domination wielded by a certain state over its population and territory. Those states that faces political insecurity have failed to produce what Dominique Schnapper has called “formal citizens”. The less formal citizens a state has, the more political control it needs to exert in order to make sure that its citizens are law abiding ones. In other words, political security can be equated with political legitimacy, and security imaginary, as the outward dimension of national identity, is a very important constituent of that legitimacy. “The success and strength of the interpellation forged are highlighted in the case of the United States, in the ubiquitous use of the term “we” by Americans in discussing U.S. foreign policy and state actions”¹. Jutta Weldes points out that thanks to an emphatic security imaginary, American citizens tend to strongly identify with the U.S.’s foreign policies and actions. Consequently, a certain way of looking at world politics emerges out of this identification. For instance, American citizens have the penchant to say that “we, Americans” defeated the communists, “we, Americans” retaliated against the Japanese, and last but not least, “we, Americans” ousted Saddam Hussein and brought peace to the Iraqi people. As one can easily notice, security imaginary is a key constituent of the imagined community of “we, the people”. Therefore, security imaginary plays a pivotal role with respect to the issue of political security of every state. I’ve mentioned so far that security imaginary is a key ingredient in the process of collective identity formation. In other words, security imaginary disseminates social representations regarding the stature a state has in the realm of international relations. But considering that I’ve brought the security imaginary into discussion with respect to the national interest’s formation process, I now turn to the nexus between the former and the latter. “National interests are thus social constructions that emerge out of the representations enabled by and produced out of the security imaginary of the state. National interests are an ideological effect of the security imaginary and its representations”².

¹ Jutta Weldes, *Constructing National Interests. The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 105.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

Geopolitics has been and still is a contested domain within social sciences. Irrespective of its background – geographical, political, economic or cultural –, geopolitics has been mainly challenged due to its lack of generality and specific methodology. Nowadays, geopolitics, that has drawn massively on the methods employed in social sciences, seems to have found its way, methodologically speaking. It has also broadened its area of interest with its new focuses on ethnic conflict, collective identities formation, civil society, ways of writing security etc. The reason why I've brought geopolitics into focus, is that a certain type of geopolitics, namely the formal one, is closely related to the issue of security imaginary. According to Klaus Dodds³, there are three different types of geopolitics. A practical type, that is practised by the state within its specialized institutions, a popular type, that is generally employed by mass-media and entertainment producers, and a third type, that is of interest for this section. Formal geopolitics refers to the contribution that intellectuals of statecraft bring to the field of geopolitics. For instance, Rand Corporation, the American Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution and other public and private institutions house the intellectuals or the ideologues of the dominant security imaginary. Thus, formal geopolitics resembles a sociology of knowledge that makes a foray into how knowledge is produced in the realm of geopolitics. In other words, formal geopolitics is tantamount with a sociology of knowledge of the security imaginary.

One thing needs to be stated pretty clearly. Forging one state's security imaginary is not a way of manipulating people considering that there is a certain intellectual tradition of the security imaginary that cannot be completely disregarded. Moreover, security imaginary is not only an intellectual construction. It is first and foremost a cultural and historical assemblage that can vacillate only within certain limits. According to Hans Morgenthau, the security imaginary provides the cultural and political context out of which national interest is crafted. Secondly, considering that security imaginaries are underpinned by a cultural and historical tradition, they create doxas, namely ideas and representations that are taken for granted even by those politicians, military people and also intellectuals whose task is to reassess the security imaginary in order to come up with a coherent national interest's formula. To sum it up, security imaginary is not just rhetoric. It is much more than this since it helps reassess the national interest through a cultural and intellectual tradition that has already produced doxas, namely ideas that are taken for granted. From this perspective, one can easily understand that security imaginaries become institutionalized and this is how their ideas, values, representations, memories etc. steadily mould not only the way foreign policy is conceived but also one larger community's perspective on its outside environment.

Maria Mälksoo contends that security imaginary is an important constituent of every collective identity. Talking about collective identities might be pretty tricky mainly because collective identities are diffuse phenomena that are difficult to explore. Identity works from the assumption that it refers to rituals, symbols, narratives and other institutional mechanisms that forge the feeling of

³ Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics. A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.

belongingness between an individual and a certain social group. In order to have a better grasp on collective identities' formation processes one needs to have a closer look at power mechanisms employed by different institutions that aim at legitimizing themselves. In other words, collective identities are not free-floating entities, but rather symbolic and ritual assemblages that are steadily reinforced by institutions such as the church or the nation-state. It is already a common place in the realm of social sciences that collective identities have two dimensions, namely an inward-looking one and a outward-looking one. The security imaginary, which is the main focus of this section, refers to this outward-looking dimension of collective identities. Maria Mälksoo draws a far-fetched line between social imaginary and security imaginary. She argues that whereas social imaginary refers to the way a certain collectivity defines, reassesses and reinvents its own self, security imaginary describes the relationship between this constantly changing self and its outer environment. The far-fetched line that I mentioned earlier is heuristically useful, so that the reader have a better grasp, conceptually speaking, on the difference between social imaginary and security imaginary. Otherwise, in social reality the difference between the social imaginary and the security imaginary is not so clear-cut. Nevertheless, an observation is needed at this moment of discussion. When collective identities do not have a developed security imaginary, they tend to be rather defensive. This is what happens when the otherness of a certain social groups is not clear at all. New political actors, or, to put it differently, political actors that have an anti-geopolitical contour, such as the European Union, tend to "other" their past instead of a certain nation-state, ethnic or religious group. Other collective identities, who are massively reliant on their security imaginary for their coherence, constantly strive to detect another otherness once the old one has withered away or stopped playing an important political, ideological or military role in the sphere of international relations, as was the case of the USSR at the end of the Cold War. It is worth stressing that once the Cold War came to an end, Samuel Huntington argued that one effective alterity of the U.S. needs to meet three requirements: to be a military power, to be impelled by a collectivistic ideology and to be ethnically different⁴. It is worth pointing out that whereas military power centers usually forge security imaginary that orientalize another political actor, civil power centers tend to craft a security imaginary that creates a temporal otherness instead of a territorial one. Another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration when addressing the question of security imaginary, is that the latter is an eloquent example of social power. Not only that security imaginary is a "way of naming, ordering and representing security reality", but it also produces social representations which make clear for both the people that influence a state's security practices and the people that are depicted through these representations "who and what our enemies are, in what ways are we threatened by them, and how we might best deal with these threats"⁵. There are two different ways of examining the security imaginary. There is a formal

⁴ Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Simon & Schuster, 2005.

⁵ Maria Mälksoo, *The Politics of Becoming European. A Study of Polish and Baltic post-Cold War Security Imaginaries*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 59.

security imaginary, that can be explored by looking at foreign and security policy speeches, military strategies, policy debates, academic lectures and reports, memoirs and so on. And there is also an informal or popular security imaginary that refers to security practices of ordinary people. The latter can be examined by having a close look at personal interviews, internet comments, blogs, magazine and newspapers editorials, radio programs that are broadcasted by local producers who doesn't have a national audience.

Security Identity

The type of security related to collective identities is called societal security and has been coined by the Copenhagen School in the early '90s. In order to avoid further confusions, I renamed the abovementioned term from societal security into identity security. As all the readers who are conversant with the Copenhagen School's theories have already learnt, identity security refers to those particular threats that might stop a collective identity from reproducing itself. As I've stated earlier, one usual mistake made with respect to collective identities is that some authors tend to present them as reified and free-floating structures. From my perspective, and also from a constructivist perspective, collective identity is rather a cultural and political process that is constantly nourished by a certain institution that seeks to legitimize itself. Therefore, collective identity describes a social process of reproducing the myths, symbols, rituals, language etc. associated either with a power center controlled by a certain dominant minority or with the particular institutions of an ethnic minority. The issue of identity security surges up in times of institutional uncertainty but also following peace treaties that liquidate imperial structures so that on the ruins of prior empires arise nation states that initiate more or less emphatic nation-building processes. Identity has always been a two-way street. In other words, in order to cristallize itself every collective identity has always needed an otherness, that is either a different political actor or a temporal alterity, such as one particular state's past. Considering that identity formation presupposes a constant cultural and political interaction between at least two social groups, gains for one social group in term of collective identity might turn into identity losses for the other social group. A good example in this sense is the nation-building processes specific to interwar years, when the new states that had emerged on the rumbles of empires employed very aggressive identity politics regarding their national minorities. Under such circumstances, the collective identity of the dominant ethnicity that controlled the state was constantly reinforced, whilst the collective identities of the other national minorities was steadily weakened. From my perspective, security identity refers to those threats that imperil the cultural reproduction of one group's collective identity with the consequence that the feeling of belongingness between the members of that social group constantly recedes. Under these circumstances, security identity threats imply agency either from the dominant ethnicity that is willing to have the upper hand in terms of identity and cultural domination, or from another minority group that vies for influence in the field of

identity politics or even from intellectual elites of a certain group, elites that are seeking either to subvert the collective identity of the group or to reinvent it by employing other myths, symbols, rituals, heroes and so on. To sum it up, security identity depicts the process of subverting the identity routine of a certain ethnic group. Michael Billig has coined a very interesting concept for highlighting the identity routine of a certain social group⁶. “Banal nationalism” refers to those symbols, rituals, myths that are employed on daily basis in order to keep the collective identity of a certain ethnic group afloat. Once the mechanisms that constantly reinforce this banal nationalism start being subverted the cultural routine is altered with direct consequences on the feeling of belongingness shared by the members of a certain social group. Negative emotions, such as fear, panic and anger, usually surge up once the identity routine of a certain social group has been plagued.

According to the theorists of the Copenhagen School there are three major threats to security identity. The first one is *migration*, which is a social and political process that might affect in a negative vein the influence that certain ethnic group used to have in the realm of cultural reproduction. Once an ethnic groups cannot retain its upper hand in the field of cultural reproduction, its symbols, rituals, myths and, consequently, its internal cohesion might be altered dramatically. *Horizontal competition* is another type of threat identified by the theorists of security identity. An eloquent example in this sense is the case of Canadians that fear Americanization. But the pivotal threat specific to identity security is *vertical competition* that arises out of nation building processes through which the dominant ethnicity, that usually controls the state, seeks to assert its cultural and symbolic domination over other ethnic minorities that inhabit the national territory. Under such circumstances, depending also on the democratic quality of the political regime, ethnic minorities might retain or, on the contrary, lose their specific collective identity practices and values. How do ethnic minorities manage to cope with security threats in the field of identity security? “Generally, minorities strive for one of three basic options: to dominate the existing government (e.g., Tutsis, whites under apartheid), to form their own government (Slovenes, Zionists), or to be left alone (traditionally, Jews in Europe)”⁷.

Bill McSweeney, who defines identity security as the “ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions”⁸, considers that the emergence of this new line of inquiry that dwells on security identity has been a successful attempt for Barry Buzan who actively thought to rectify the central position held by the state in the field of security studies. Security identity is nothing else, claims Bill McSweeney, but an intellectual effort made by Buzan in order to grant agency to both human groups and sub-state groups. Beyond that, McSweeney argues that security identity refers not to a free-floating cultural

⁶ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, SAGE Publications, 1995.

⁷ Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 122.

⁸ Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests. A Sociology of International Relations*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 70.

entity but is rather a “process of negotiation among people and interest groups. Being English, Irish, Danish is a consequence of a political process, and it is that process, not the label which symbolizes it, which constitute the reality which needs explication. (...) Contrary to the author’s claim, identity is not to be taken as an independent variable, *tout court*; it is often the outcome of a labelling process which reflects a conflict of interests at the political level”⁹. True, the Copenhagen School’s intellectuals manner of conceptualizing identity security is fraught with different exaggerations. The most salient of them is the assumption that collective identities are free-floating entities that have agency by themselves. And yet there is one aspect that needs to be taken into consideration here. Undoubtedly, for intellectuals that share a constructivist perspective, collective identities are social constructions. Still, constructivist intellectuals are realist enough to understand that once a collective identity has been forged it cannot be deconstructed instantly. On the contrary, cultural residues of a prior collective identity, be they religious or cultural or national ones, continue to persist a long period of time after that collective identity started withering away. Moreover, and this is where the Copenhagen intellectuals might be right, ordinary people (informants), especially those who have been influenced by hierarchical religious imaginaries¹⁰, tend to perceive collective identities as things in the world, that are out there and have an independent existence from institutions such as the church or the nation-state. And this is where Bill McSweeney ushers in some exaggerations, too. He claims that societies do not have prior identities and people are free to choose among the identities that they have at their disposal. In order to get rid of the ascriptive character of certain identities, one needs to amass social recognition for that. I’ve already stated that identity is a two-way street. It is, in other words, an interactional process. If one fails to amass social recognition for its new identity, the ascriptive character of the identity it has been trying to get rid of might persist indefinitely. In other words, although the ability of one individual to choose his/her identity exists, it is heavily reliant on getting social underpinning for the new identity. And this is where the problem with the issue of identification lies. Individuals have agency, but their agency in choosing among different identities is limited by the structural conditions of a certain society. And here lies the trouble with Bill McSweeney’s perspective. In trying to rectify a too conservative perspective shared by the Copenhagen School’s intellectuals in the question of collective identity, McSweeney has come up with a too liberal perspective. Collective identities, and especially their religious and national constituents, change gradually and usually slower than, for instance, patterns of industrial production. Granted, Schumpeter’s creative destruction alters collective identities. But whilst the institutional setting altered by the creative destruction is usually quickly replaced by a different setting, the collective identity specific to the old setting, with its informal values and practices, continues to survive indefinitely.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁰ Bruce Kapferer, *Legends of people, myths of state, violence, intolerance and political culture in Sri Lanka and Australia*, Smithsonian Institution, 1988.

From Security Identity to Theories of Ethnic Conflict

As it has been stated from the very beginning of this article, its primary target is to propose a new understanding of security identity. This new understanding of security identity, which revolves around the concept of security imaginary, can provide a new theory of ethnic conflict or, at least, a new angle for theories of ethnic conflict that dwell on the issue of ancient hatreds. What is striking in Ashutosh Varshney's *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life. Hindus and Muslims in India*, beside the emphasis on the importance of social capital conceived as a buffer zone against ethnic violence, is that the author demarcates ethnic violence from ethnic conflict from the very beginning of his book¹¹. Ashutosh Varshney argues that ethnic conflict is not a worrisome political problem as long as it takes place in an institutionalised setting, such as parliaments, assemblies or in bureaucracies. Ethnic violence is not worrisome not even when it happens on the streets, a theoretical stance that might seem exaggerated. The explanation for this is that Varshney suggests a pretty loose conceptualization of ethnic violence. From this perspective, ethnic bargaining for identity resources such as more newspapers for indigenous peoples or more religious freedoms for immigrants is pretty close to ethnic violence, according to Varshney. *Essentialism* is the first theory of ethnic conflict that Varshney comes up with. This perspective claims that ancient animosities play a pivotal role in triggering contemporary ethnic conflicts. Essentialism also proposes a second line of inquiry according to which ethnicity is an integral and indelible part of all human beings. Therefore, expanding on Walker Connor's dictum – "Man is a national, not a rational animal" – Varshney draws the conclusion that the intense emotions provoked by our inherited ethnicity cannot be superseded by rational calculus. Obviously, every theory has its flaws, and essentialism makes no exception. For instance, essentialism fails to explain why ethnic groups that live peacefully in a certain area get engaged in violent conflicts in other areas that are not quite remote. *Instrumentalism* is the theory of ethnic conflict that dwells on the ability of the political elite to either build bridges among ethnic groups or to create social and economic cleavages. From this theoretical perspective, the role played by political elites in creating circumstances either detrimental or conducive for ethnic violence is pivotal. Instrumentalism pretty much exaggerates the ability of political elites to have a very intimate understanding of ethnicity, a complete control of mechanisms of collective identity formation so that ancient hatreds can be easily overcome irrespective of certain social circumstances, such as culture of distrust, low capacity states, weak civil society, underdeveloped civic culture and so on. Another way of grasping the cause of ethnic conflicts is by using *constructivist theories* that usually work from the assumption that ethnic identities are rather modern ones and incapable of creating violent emotions over divisive identity issues. Therefore, constructivists, or at least some of them, turn their attention from identity and cultural factors to economic factors in their attempt to explore and explain the

¹¹ Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life. Hindus and Muslims in India*, London, Yale University Press, 2002.

emergence of ethnic conflicts. Last, but not least, *postmodern theories* argue that power relations are deeply involved in the formation of the social knowledge that creates ethnic violence. From this perspective, collective identities are just narratives produced by the knowledge elite who gets the chance to disseminate its divisive theories through institutions of public education, think tanks, internet, tv programs, scientific magazines etc. Where constructivists clearly differ from their postmodern counterparts is with respect to the endurance of collective identities. In counterpoint to postmodernist thinkers, who tend to believe that collective identities hardly have an impact on group's consciousness, constructivist theorists are reluctant to consider collective identities as masks. For constructivists, collective identities, although are constructed, are embedded in popular consciousness and do not easily alter. *Institutionalism* starts from the assumption that there is a pretty clear connection between ethnic conflict and political institutions. From this perspective, ethnic conflict is usually avoided in societies with consociational democracies. What institutionalism fail to account for is that within the same consociational democracy different patterns of ethnic conflict and ethnic peace tend to occur. The theoretical breakthrough that Ashutosh Varshney's book provides refers to the importance of interethnic relations for avoiding ethnic clashes. "(...) it is civic engagement across ethnic groups that turns out to be critical, not civic engagement per se. *Interethnic* or intercommunal engagement makes for peace, not *intraethnic* or intracommunal engagement. Intercommunal engagement leads to the formation of what might be called institutionalized peace systems"¹².

In Lieu of Conclusion

The theories of security identity that I've presented are too narrow for three different reasons. In the perspective employed by the Copenhagen School, collective identity is a very rigid, free-floating and completely independent cultural entity. Consequently, for the Copenhagen School's intellectuals use a too conservative perspective on collective identity, it is displayed as a reified entity instead of as a political and cultural process that is continuously negotiated between the elites and the masses. In Bill McSweeney's account of security identity, the issue of collective identity is presented as having too much agency. In other words, McSweeney disregards completely the residual character of collective identities and in turn places too much emphasis on identification. But as I've already mentioned, although individuals have a certain autonomy in choosing among different possible identities, the ascriptive character of certain ethnic or religious identities cannot be removed completely unless social recognition is amassed for this scope. When social recognition for a new identity is weak, the ascriptive character of an identity that somebody seeks to get rid of steadily surges up. Last, but not least, another reason why the conception of security identity tend to be a little bit too narrow is that it completely disregards the concept of security

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 46.

imaginary. As I've already mentioned, the security imaginary refers to the outward-looking dimension of a certain society's collective identity. Once the security imaginary becomes too assertive, it creates insecurities among social groups whose collective identities have not so salient security imaginaries. The conclusion that one can draw is that threats to security identity are not only related to ways of blocking the reproducing of the cultural routine – banal nationalism – specific to a social group. Threats to security identity can stem from an over-assertive security imaginary of a certain social groups. Under such circumstances, although the cultural routine of a certain social groups is not blocked, the feeling of “we, the people” is aggressively challenged by the “we, the people” disseminated by the social group with an over-assertive security imaginary. Especially in social settings dominated by culture of distrust, low capacity states and weak civil societies, the over-assertive security imaginary of a certain ethnic groups can create negative emotions among the members of neighbouring ethnic groups. And although it cannot be a factor that might trigger *per se* an ethnic conflict an over-assertive security imaginary could be a threat to the security identity of another ethnic groups and, subsequently, a factor that might embitter ethnic relations at the regional level.

This work was possible with the financial support of the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/ 159/1.5/S/138822 with the title “Transnational network of integrated management of intelligent doctoral and postdoctoral research in the fields of Military Science, Security and Intelligence, Public order and National Security – Continuous formation programme for elite researchers” – “SmartSPODAS”.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Billig, Michael, *Banal Nationalism*, SAGE Publications, 1995;
 Buzan, Barry, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998;
 Dodds, Klaus, *Geopolitics. A Very Short Introduction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014;
 Huntington, Samuel, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Simon & Schuster, 2005;
 Kapferer, Bruce, *Legends of people, myths of state, violence, intolerance and political culture in Sri Lanka and Australia*, Smithsonian Institute, 1988;
 Mälksoo, Maria, *The Politics of Becoming European. A Study of Polish and Baltic post-Cold War Security Imaginaries*, London, Routledge, 2010;
 McSweeney, Bill, *Security, Identity and Interests. A Sociology of International Relations*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004;
 Varshney, Ashutosh, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life. Hindus and Muslims in India*, London, Yale University Press, 2002;
 Weldes, Jutta, *Constructing National Interests. The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.