

Political extremism, conflict identities and the search for ontological security in contemporary established democracies

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This paper argues that a key element driving political instability and politically extreme movements in contemporary liberal democracies is found in the search for ontological security by groups disaffected under globalisation and the uncertain conditions of late modernity. It suggests that in many cases, such organisations have found a panacea to anxieties generated by these processes in hardened identities based primarily on fighting for their own survival against the perceived existing political, social and cultural order.

The past decade has seen an undeniable trend towards political polarisation and radicalisation with global democracies. This has produced a growing willingness in significant portions of democratic populations to engage in mass acts of political extremism, including protests, riots, terrorism and even insurrection. Individual cases of such groups, their activities and narratives have generally been addressed in scholarship and analysis discretely: Qanon, ANTIFA, MAGA, Hinduvata, Right Sector, the Yellow Vests, the list goes on. Each of these case studies present their own myriad of material and ideological causes and unique features. However, in aggregate they represent an increasingly ubiquitous challenge to global democracy and liberal ideals responding to a common phenomenon: widespread ontological insecurity. This brief argues that this loss of ontological security is crucial in accounting for the growing environment of political, social and cultural tension roiling across the liberal democratic world. It posits that the drive to alleviate the existential angst and uncertainty of the current moment has, at its most extreme, produced a myriad of rejectionist ‘fighting identities’ that have demonstrated growing salience and appeal in expanding audiences. Here, violence, unrest, struggle and other radical disruptions challenging the existing political order are increasingly

seen as crucial to maintaining a coherent and fulfilling sense of self.

Ontological security and the hardening of identity in the face of uncertainty

A foundational definition of ontological security was provided by Giddens (1984, p. 375) as “confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity”. He would later expand on this, emphasising the importance of “a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual.”(Giddens, 1990, pp. 124-125) Since this foundational work, numerous other scholars have refined and reemphasised their understandings of the concept, with focuses on different types of individual agents, groups, movements and states. Despite this heterogeneity, a few essential principles remain consistent across these various understandings:

- Individuals pursue ontological security.
- This security is derived from routines that provide identity.
- The legitimacy of such routines and their attached identities are generally derived from and defined by a larger community.
- Change and unpredictability are corrosive to ontological security.(Rich, 2017, p. 56)

While ontological security can be drawn from any number of origins¹, Kinnvall(2004, p. 742) notes that fundamentalist or revivalist religious and nationalist identities are particularly potent sources, as they provide:

Powerful stories and beliefs because of their ability to convey a picture of security, stability, and simple answers. They do this by being portrayed as resting on solid ground, as being true, thus creating a sense that the world really is what it appears to be.

This assertion is illustrated by the widespread surge of religious fundamentalism and ethno-nationalism during periods of political, economic and upheaval across the 20th century. Such intense identity structures produced ontological security by providing clear narratives through which to comprehend uncertain and complex conditions. These same stories

¹Sources range from anything as broad as being a home owner, a parent, or a member of a local football team or a terrorist group, or one’s profession.

had the added appeal of a claimed historical continuity, and offered clear and comprehensible solutions to perceived sources of existential anxiety, imparting adherents with a sense of confidence. (Juergensmeyer, 1993) During these times of great change, disruption and dislocation, the hardened identities born out of simple narratives of good and evil found in indisputable ‘truths’ of blood and spirit imparted comfort to believers, making sense of uncertainty and chaos and providing task, purpose and meaning.²

The parallels between these earlier periods and the current moment in which many of the utopian promises of liberalism have failed to manifest are hard to miss. For good or ill, social, cultural, sexual and political meanings, routines, mythologies and narratives have become increasingly unmoored, decentralised and contested. Many have celebrated these as necessary for the sake of progress and justice. But others have shown far less enthusiasm, with this uncertainty amplifying, rather than allaying, a deep sense of existential unease at the nature of society and politics. Change and disruption to the existing order is seen as deleterious. In such an environment, the demand for compelling, concrete stories that account for this sense of loss and provide a communal panacea to its ill effects has grown intensely. It seems little coincidence that meta-narratives such as Make America Great Again and Qanon that not only create a sense of legibility and culpability for the current moment of unpredictability, but also have fostered welcoming communities around these ideas, have found appeal in large swathes of liberal democratic societies experiencing such disruptions.

Fighting identities

At its most extreme, ontological security can be drawn from identities forged out of conflict and its perpetuation. Such entrenched ‘fighting identities’ can emerge under prolonged conditions where “conflict persists and comes to fulfil identity needs”. (Mitzen, 2006, p. 343) Rather than being perceived as exceptional circumstances, conflict, violence, struggle and even war can instead become seen as the necessary condition in which one’s identity flourishes. The fight itself imparts routine, camaraderie, mission and clarity (Vlahos, 2008), a dynamic itself identified commonly as an impediment for soldiers struggling to transition back to peaceful civilian life. (Junger, 2016) Conflict, in effect, becomes a source of ontological security.

This has significant implications for deradicalization and demobilisation. Within such a fighting mindset, the prospect of returning to politics in which engaging with one’s ideological

²A clear example can be found in the ‘stabbed in the back’ and international Zionist conspiracy narratives promoted by the Nazis. Not only did these present a simple explanation for German national humiliation and decline in the wake of the First World War, they also provided a solution to this indignity.

rivals is normal represents a failure of the cause.³ To cease conflict is to return to uncertainty, doubt and unpredictability – in effect, to return to the very state of ontological insecurity that led to the fight in the first place. Peace itself can come to be seen as an unnatural and undesirable state.⁴ (Mitzen, 2006, p. 343)

A quick survey of the political and cultural landscape of the United States in 2021 sees a growing abundance of groups who display traits of such ‘fighting identities’ based around resisting ontological insecurity: Boogaloo Bois, Qanon adherents, left-wing antifascist and antigovernment protestors, The Proud Boys, and the Three Percenters; to name but a few. While all groups maintain their own distinct characteristics, motivations, goals and ideological predilections, they demonstrate consistency in the centrality of politically extreme and fringe activities driving their mobilisation – rallying for the fight. Such organisations also display some comfort with the threat or use violence against perceived enemies, whether state or non-state. Crucially, these same groups have routinized such behaviours⁵, and constructed persistent, unified communal identities around them that serve to not only validate past actions, but legitimise future ones. All identify the uncertainty and unpredictability of the current moment as central to their motivations, although they all maintain their own discrete ideological explanations for the perceived material and metaphysical conditions. Nevertheless, despite this diversity, all groups are unified by the fact their existence is partially explained as a militant response to conditions of ontological insecurity. These dynamics have only been amplified under the social, cultural and political conditions of the Trump presidency. The US is far from the only democratic state dealing with this challenge in 2021, with a surge in similar grass roots combative organisations across much of the past decade.

Policy implications

Without judging the morality or validity of individual groups and causes, ontological security, its loss and subsequent pursuit through militant fighting identities, goes significant ways in explaining the general climate of tension that seems increasingly pervasive throughout the global democratic terrain. Indeed, numerous scholars have employed the concept to explore

³Rivals become dehumanised and reduced to homogenised stereotypes for which any reconciliation can seem impossible. For example, in American discourse some leftists claim all political opposition as irredeemable Nazis and fascists who should be treated as abject enemies. On the far right, many describe rivals eclectically as Satanic paedophile cannibals or faceless and degenerate Communists.

⁴A trope of fascist ideology

⁵Such routines can include acts of performative intimidation, such as open-carry marches, organised and pre-planned street brawling with political opposition, hostile confrontation with state authorities, violent hazing and induction rituals, etc.

the effects of ontological insecurity on the political and social terrain of the current period (See Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Kinnvall, 2019; Steele & Homolar, 2019 for examples). As Fukuyama argues(2018), the assertion of identity, and through it the quest for ontological security, has increasingly has taken a central role in democratic politics in the recent past. Within this, behaviours once confined to the most extreme of minorities have become increasingly normalised within larger and larger segments of society. Whether such a growth portends sporadic and parochial violence, or the beginnings of something on a far larger scale, is difficult to predict. Ultimately, however, the collective challenged posed by the proliferation of such fighting identities are likely to affect significant social ills within the societies that they fester and will likely only be able to resolve through some form of deliberate national level of deradicalization. What forms these will take will undoubtedly be specific to the state and territories that foster them, but may include efforts to rekindle and modernise broad-based intersubjective civic nationalisms, new and creative ways to affect widespread deglorification of violence, and national works that foster a sense of unified purpose in citizens. Key to each of these will be the goal of creating new and cohesive identities and positive routines that are both engaging and promote wider social goods that are fulfilling to participants. Such programs may take years or decades to have their desired effect, but should be considered as soon as possible.

The role of ontological security and the subsequent fighting identities it has fostered in modern democracies remains poorly understood. While it is far from the only cause of the current widespread political tensions and unrest seen across much of the democratic world, the increasing existential ambiguity of the moment has likely contributed significantly to widespread political radicalisation and extremism currently witnessed. Promoting a common understanding of these factors should be considered key for policy makers, politicians and civil society alike.

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