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Ontological Insecurities and the Politics of Contemporary Populism

Introduction for Special Issue of *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*

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The loss of faith in mainstream political parties and moderate electoral candidates seems characteristic of the *Zeitgeist* in much of the Western world and beyond. Whether in the form of the United Kingdom's vote to exit the European Union, the 2016 US Presidential election of the Republican nominee Donald Trump, the prior strength of Senator Bernie Sanders within the Democratic party primaries, or the rise of the anti-neoliberal left alongside resurgent rightist anti-migration groups in Europe, varieties of populism have gravitated from the fringes of politics into the center. They have gained traction in tandem with widespread perceptions of crises, insecurity, and alienation as markers of a 'runaway world' whose forces lie beyond the control of the many (Giddens 1999).

The urgency of populist politics calls attention to the everyday anxieties and concerns of 'ordinary' individuals in a variety of everyday settings. Although it is often invoked as a self-evident term or concept, populism's meaning depends upon the contexts within which it operates. A broad understanding of populism therefore acknowledges that it is an approach, ideology, or discourse that easily escapes definitional straightjackets but which centrally features the driving of a wedge between two antagonistic sides – the bad, corrupt elite and the good, pure people – to appeal to the 'common' person (Mudde 2004, 543).[1] While much remains undefined here both in terms of who (or what) is a populist,[2] as well as who such politics is aimed towards – both for and against – the politics of populism centralizes the power struggles and emotional contexts that involve who (or what) gets to be considered as part of the 'true' people, and who does not. Boundary-making practices, especially those

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[1] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/populist; Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist' *Government and Opposition* 39(4): 541-63, here 543.

[2] Uri Friedman, 'What is a Populist?', *The Atlantic*, 27 February 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/ ; MS, What is Populism? *The Economist* , 19 December 2016, https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/12/economist-explains-18

relating to emotionally-charged processes of exclusion based on racism, xenophobia, and nationalism, are inevitably implicated in populist politics.

How can we illuminate and analyze the divisionary politics of populism? How can we untangle the relationship between populist politics and insecurity at the intersection of individual, societal, and international levels? The contributions in this special issue grapple with the contemporary populist challenge through the conceptual lens of ontological security theory (OST). Ontological security is the 'security of being', a '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' (Giddens 1984: 375). The application of ontological security within International Relations began roughly a decade ago with works by Kinnvall (2004; 2006), Mitzen (2006), and Steele (2008a; 2008b). Over the past few years it has gained increasing traction in the discipline, with some of the most important works on the topic being offered by the contributors to this collection of original articles on populism and ontological (in)security (Browning 2016; Browning and Joenniemi 2013; 2017; Subotic 2015; Mälksoo 2015).

In this special issue, we show that three features of Ontological Security Studies prove particularly useful for understanding the workings of populism. The first is its focus on the intimate relationship between *routines and anxiety*, which also ties this contribution firmly to the crescendo of work on the everyday (Highmore 2002) and the ways in which the international is experienced and lived by 'ordinary' people (Shim 2016). Anxiety – a sense of uncertainty or unease over something that cannot quite be identified – impacts upon the way we navigate the world. Over 60 years ago, Franz L. Neumann observed that it is linked to perceptions of alienation and significantly impairs the freedom of decision-making (Neumann 1957). While anxiety has recently reemerged as key theme in analyses of populist politics,[3] it has long been a central phenomenon in the ontological security perspective, with an explicit focus on the mechanisms individuals employ to go on with their everyday lives. Agents confront anxiety and make it 'manageable' through routinized behavior and practices, which enables making the otherwise chaotic world of late modernity predictable, manageable, and even reassuring. Experts and expertization – a key feature of late modernity – are assumed to assist and counsel

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[3] In a relatively recent paper Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris summarize the prevailing view on the rise of populism as: 'Anxiety arising from contemporary events - boatloads of migrants and refugees flooding into Europe, images of the aftermath of random acts of domestic terrorism in Paris, Brussels, and Istanbul, and austerity measures-- are blamed for exacerbating economic grievances linked with rising income inequality, the loss of manufacturing jobs, and stagnant wages (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 11).

individuals and groups in the construction of 'healthy' routines to provide a sense of certainty and continuity (Giddens 1991; 1984). And yet, when anxiety re-surfaces, individuals react both through a re-fastening and rigidifying of their routines but also a general resistance to not only experts but *expertise itself*. Ignorance becomes a coping mechanism, creating an opening for populist rhetoric that portrays the rejection of facts and knowledge as the assertion of autonomy against elites while simultaneously collapsing the distinction between experts and laypeople.

The second Ontological Security Studies feature relevant to the study of populist politics focuses on the relationship between *narratives and memory*. While a 'narrative turn' in the study of international politics increasingly perforates the disciplinary mainstream, which this special issue directly speaks to, OST literatures has long engaged with questions of how narratives shape not only the Self, and who gets to belong, but also the Other and who gets excluded. Narrative, from the perspective of ontological security, is seen as sense-making device that allows projecting, even protecting, conceptions of stable selfhood across time and space (Mälksoo 2015; Kinnvall 2004; 2016). As such, narrative is integral to individual and collective memory, something that relates not only to the past, but also the present and future. The complex interplay between narrative and memory in the context of ontological security also attends to the construction of routinized behavior as a way to alleviate anxiety: agents recall a comforting narrative regarding the 'past' to not only make the present reassuring, but as a basis or script for what should be done by the agent or group in the near future. The psychological need for continuity thus becomes an entry point for a populist politics that utilizes promises to regenerate and reinforce past notions of belonging and inclusion, in particular when agents experience trauma and anxiety.

This brings us to the third and final feature of Ontological Security Studies useful for understanding the workings of populist politics addressed in this special issue, *crisis and insecurity*. To be ontologically secure requires, as R.D. Laing (2010: 39 [1961]) put it, an understanding of ourselves as 'real, alive, whole, and in a temporal sense, a continuous person', with a firm sense of the reality and identity of Us and Others. While some degree of ontological insecurity is inescapable (Steele 2008: 48), because disjunctions foster anxiety and the loss of confidence in the possibility of biographical continuity of the Self, such critical situations have proven to be a key part of the ontological security story. But, as we show in this collection, the exponential rise of 'radical disruptions agents face of an unpredictable kind'

(Giddens 1984: 61) often associated with late modernity have called our notions of Self and Others constantly into question, critical situations also both enable and are created and performed by the populist politics (see also Moffitt 2016: Ch. 5).

The special issue includes eight contributions that approach the topics of ontological security and populism from a range of angles, spaces, and places, and speak to the three key themes of anxiety and routine, narrative and memory. In *'Why are they still so angry'? Leave Voters, the Brexit Referendum and the False Promise of Populism*, Chris Browning engages with the anxious dynamics following the 2016 Brexit vote in Britain. Browning rightly notes that while considerable attention has been devoted to highlighting the anxieties generated amongst those identifying with the Remain camp, much less attention has focused on the effects of Brexit on Leave voters. This is perhaps because Brexit has been depicted for them as being essentially unproblematic, a moment of fulfilment of long held dreams, a resolution of angst and anxiety, and as such a source of joy and euphoria. Yet despite the 'victory' many Leavers remain wracked by ontological anxieties, and often appear decidedly unhappy and angry. In short, 'winning' has not provided the closure that the Referendum promised. The study demonstrates several key causes of continued ontological anxiety for Leave voters, including: (i) the fact that many never expected to win in the first place, (ii) the fact that Trump's victory in the US presidential election has fundamentally problematized key goals of some Leave voters to reposition Britain as a fundamentally Anglospheric country, (iii) the fact that the promised 'clean' break with the EU is turning into an increasingly messy and expensive divorce, and (iv) the fact that many Leave voters have been destabilised by accusations of parochial racism by opponents. Theoretically, however, Browning considers whether this should come as any surprise and whether or not closure around ontological security is ever a possibility. Arguing it is not – and in turn suggesting that the promise of closure is therefore an inherently problematic and unethical political strategy – in turn raises broader questions about the rise of populist movements across Europe, movements that are posing fundamental challenges to their respective polities and to the European order in general, but which this paper will argue ultimately only proffer false promises that threaten to exacerbate the ontological anxieties of those to whom they appeal.

Populism is intrinsically a battle over not only contemporary politics but the politics of the past. In, *Political Memory after State Death: The Abandoned Yugoslav National Pavilion at Auschwitz*, Jelena Suboti builds on the growing research nexus between ontological security

and memory studies to explore the relationship between political memory, everyday cultural practices, and ideological movements after state death. Subotic argues, first, that in the aftermath of state death, political memory is transformed, replaced and substituted in a different, more violent set of processes than ontological security scholarship currently allows. Secondly, Subotic provokes ontological security scholarship to provide a more integrated discussion of ideological narratives, in order to more fully account for the impact national memories have on the rise of political movements. Subotic illustrates these arguments with the case study of the abandoned Yugoslav national pavilion at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum. Tracing the history of Yugoslav Holocaust remembrance through the ideological and cultural practices that framed the national exhibition at Auschwitz since the end of World War II until today, Subotic discloses ways in which the contemporary nationalized memory of the Holocaust has focused on delegitimizing former Yugoslav states' communist past. This memory replacement – evident in the everyday cultural practices of memorialization - has allowed Yugoslav successor states to completely discard anti-fascist ideology and resistance as integral to the memory of the Holocaust only because it was also integral to communism. Once anti-fascism is removed from Holocaust memory, this opens up political space for a revival and ideological normalization of populist – and at its most extreme - fascist ideological movements in the present.

Turkey is the focus of Zeynep Gulsah Capan and Ayse Zarakol's article, *Turkey's Ambivalent Self: Ontological Insecurity in Kemalism vs. Erdo an's Populism*. Since Brexit and Trump have ushered in the era of handwringing about populism, it has become commonplace to refer to Erdo an as one of the forerunners of the populist authoritarian wave, along with Putin, Orban and Modi, to name a few. No doubt that Erdo an is better known these days for his authoritarian turn, his usurpation of executive powers, his jailing of journalists and dissidents, his crackdown on the Kurds and his near-total control of the media. But to what extent is he also a populist and if he is one, when did he become one? Capan and Zarakol argue that while sources of Turkish ontological insecurity have remained relatively constant since the nineteenth century, the ways of dealing with them have changed. Kemalism and what may be called 'Erdo anism' today are both offered as solutions to Turkey's ontological security problems. Kemalism was essentially an elitist (or vanguardist), progressive and assimilationist 'thick' ideology; 'Erdo anism' is populist, moralising and divisive 'thin' ideology. Neither is particularly equipped to solve Turkey's ontological insecurity, but neither elitism nor populism

is a direct consequence of ontological insecurity. They argue that the manifestation of either strategy at a given point in time is mediated by both local and global causes that have to be understood in their historical contingency.

In *Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the Masculinization of Indian Politics*, Catarina Kinnvall addresses the particular narratives and discourses that respond to increased feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and fear, so called 'ontological insecurities', and their connections to the imaginaries of populist politics in India. Kinnvall argues that populist narratives of 'nationhood' and 'religious resurgence' have been used in Indian domestic and foreign policy to create exceptionalities in which religious resurgence is tied up with nationalist and religious doctrines in the hands of populist political leaders, such as Narendra Modi, the current Indian Prime Minister. Kinnvall discusses how the Indian state and Indian foreign policy are being rethought, re-justified and reimagined through Hindu nationalism, described as 'anxious nationalism'. Kinnvall focuses specifically on the gendered narratives of 'nationhood' and 'religious resurgence' that can explain the desires and ruptures involved in ontological security seeking at home and abroad. Yet Kinnvall also discloses how such narratives can be challenged through everyday practices, thus allowing for different imaginations of the Indian state.

In *Japan's 'Korea Threat': insights from ontological security*, Shogo Suzuki investigates the political dynamics that foster the emergence of threat perceptions and security dilemmas between established liberal democracies. From the ontological insight of 'security as being', Suzuki investigates the identity dynamics involved in the Japanese Right's views of South Korea. Despite it being a liberal democracy and not challenging Japan militarily, Japan's emerging Radical Right has attempted to secure Japan's identity from the 'Korea threat' by labeling South Korea a 'non-democracy' - a tactic that has also been adopted by the Japanese government. Such political insults, Suzuki suggests, that target Japan's ontological security could unwittingly result in the emergence of security dilemmas between the two main democracies in Northeast Asia.

The United States are the empirical focal point of two contributions. Brent Steele draws connections between the politics of the past, present and future in *Welcome home! Routines, Ontological Insecurity, and the Politics of US Military Reunion Videos*. Steele explores the genre of military 'reunion' videos that proliferated in the United States throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s, and presents it as an important populist device in contemporary US

society, and a key feature of US ontological insecurity. As he demonstrates, the videos should be considered examples of the 'encounters' theorized by both Anthony Giddens and Erving Goffman. Both private and public 'social occasions' with performative qualities of 'day-to-day life', Steele argues that they disclose the institutional and societal routines of not only a family but broader layers and circles of the US political community. As they relate to not only loss but redemption, the article therefore provides a convincing account for when, how, and *why* these videos have proliferated by consulting the everyday features of ontological security.

In *The Power of Trump-Speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security*, Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz explore the public appeal of populist politics with a focus on Trump's communicative practices on the 2016 campaign trail. Linking together Laing's (1960) and Giddens's (1991) notion of ontological security with Tversky and Kahnemann's (1990) work on 'loss frames' and prospect theory, they locate much of the lure of the 45th president in the way 'Trump Speak' was able to trigger voters' cognitive biases in his favor. As Homolar and Scholz demonstrate, by building his rhetorical toolkit around augmenting existing grievances and emphasizing the prospect of further rupture and defeat, Trump generated ontological insecurity, manifested simultaneously in a sense of loss and a desire for belonging. This widened the frame of political possibility in American elections, ultimately opening up a pathway for success for an outsider candidate such as Trump.

A combination of undemocratic developments in Hungary and Poland and the Eastern Europeans' foot-dragging about solidary burden-sharing at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe has brought back the familiar allusions of Eastern Europeans as troublemakers for European unity and peace. In *The Normative Threat of Subtle Subversion: 'Eastern Europe' as an Ontological Insecurity Trope for the EU*, Maria Mälksoo offers a discursive dissection of 'eastern Europe' as a subtly subversive challenge to Europe's security of 'self', entailing a fear of being overrun by an 'Other' perceived as endangering one's particular normative and cultural order. Proceeding from Ingrid Creppell's (2011) notion of normative threat, Mälksoo argues that the reappearance of 'eastern Europe' as an ontological insecurity trope points at a set of deeper anxieties within Europe, some are related to doubts about the efficacy of integration and the legitimacy of the European Union, and others are(?) more contingent regarding the defense of the European political order from a populist upsurge amidst 'resurgent nationalism'.

Ontological security started out as an approach to understand individuals in their own daily, social settings, coming to grips not only with the psychological struggles of the Self but

the ways in which individuals can 'cope' with the chaos of late modernity. While much of the wave of scholarship on ontological security in the context of international politics has transposed it to the state, at times even at the cost of losing its individual-level core, it has been recently appropriated in a series of works back to that 'everyday' level of analysis (Innes 2017; Kinnvall, Manners and Mitzen 2018). This special issue on *Ontological Insecurities and the Politics of Contemporary Populism* makes a further significant step in this direction, not losing sight of contributing to the expanding deliberations over ontological security in International Relations in empirical, theoretical, and methodological ways. Yet its primary contribution is towards not only an understanding but an intellectual, pedagogical, and even *ethical* confrontation of the politics of populism that seems not only a daunting, but urgent, concern of contemporary global politics today.

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