

Security, Identity and Interests

A SOCIOLOGY OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

BILL MCSWEENEY

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A Sociology of International Relations

Bill McSweeney addresses the central problem of international relations – security – and constructs a novel framework for its analysis. He argues for the unity of the interpersonal, societal and international levels of human behaviour and outlines a concept of security which more adequately reflects the complexity and ambiguity of the topic. This book introduces a new way of theorizing the international order, within which the idea of security takes on a broader range of meaning, inviting a more critical and interpretative approach to understanding the concept and formulating security policy. The recent shift to sociology in international relations theory has not as yet realized its critical potential for the study of security. Drawing on contemporary trends in social theory, Dr McSweeney argues that human agency and moral choice are inherent features of the construction of the social and thus international order, and hence of our conception of security and security policy.

BILL MCSWEENEY lectured in sociology at the University of York and currently heads the International Peace Studies Programme at the Irish School of Ecumenics.

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Bill McSweeney



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For Mary, Catherine, Anna, Ella, and Sammy

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Introduction

Security is a slippery term. It is employed in a bewildering range of contexts and to multiple purposes by individuals, corporations, governments and academic specialists. It is enlisted to refer to things and people, to means and ends, to external events and innermost feelings.

Its recruitment by professional theorists and policy-makers to their particular interest in modelling and practicing international relations has given it a narrow, tangible objectivity which has slipped easily into popular understanding. But this technical usage should not stop us raising questions about how a term which evokes so much of the complexity and richness of routine, human, relations can be fixed in a definition which excludes reference to the normal, the commonplace, the everyday. In the past decade, moreover, the need for a radical rethinking of security has materialized in the emergence of particular events which have not been amenable to satisfactory explanation in traditional terms.

This book can be viewed as a general response to such events and to the fundamental problem of security which they signal. More specifically, it arises out of a sense of puzzlement in regard to particular international security issues and the explanations available in the academic literature. The puzzle sprang from events which followed the ending of the Cold War, which were clearly matters of security, but the facts of which could not be accounted for satisfactorily within the conventional framework. The attempt to do so pushed the analysis progressively back to the need to rethink the concept of security.

Such rethinking had begun a decade before the collapse of communism and was stimulating a vigorous debate in policy-making and

research centres by the end of the 1980s. The inadequacy of our way of thinking about security was apparent to some theorists and political leaders even when the Cold War itself was at its most intensive, and the division between East and West looked set to endure for many decades to come. This initial demand for a deepening and broadening of the concept – which will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4 – sprang as much from a perception of the dysfunctional impact of particular Cold War policies as from the critique of the confrontation itself. The effect on developing countries of low-intensity proxy wars between the superpowers and the heightened tension consequent on the decision to deploy Intermediate Nuclear Forces in Europe in the early 1980s both placed in question the adequacy of the definition of the goal which such policies purported to serve.

But it was the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the rapid disintegration of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and the Soviet Union which followed it, which provided the shock to the theoretical systems from which international security had been born as a concept and ‘security studies’ as its appropriate academic discipline. Foremost among the factors which stimulated the need for radical reappraisal of our idea of security and the policies which can best achieve it was the very novelty of peace. The fact of not having an enemy was, for Europeans at least, an odd and singular experience, sending some in search of an underlying threat which would resurrect the security problem which had knitted together the fabric of international relations for centuries, and without which it was difficult to imagine a viable international system. For more than security was at stake. The world of anarchy and state sovereignty which governed interstate relations required insecurity as its condition. If the tangible enemy had walked away, an intangible replacement had to be found if governments, diplomats and international theorists were to sustain a coherent image of the world of international politics. If there was no identifiable enemy in a world defined as a jungle, either the real world must be different to what it was hitherto thought to be or the threats which are believed to constitute its insecurity must be rediscovered, lurking in some elusive form in the volatile relations between states.

For theorists who balked at the wholesale re-examination of the international system, the latter was the prudent option and the answer lay in defining the condition of post-Cold War Europe as a ‘security vacuum’. The absence of the enemy was as dangerous as its presence; the void in terms of military threat needed to be filled by a

military response. This was the strategy adopted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in its decision to expand the NATO alliance eastwards to embrace three of the newly independent states, rather than risk the erosion of its credibility and support among its member-states.

Other theorists saw in the end of the Cold War the challenge and opportunity to reassess the concept of security in the context of a sweeping examination of traditional ways of seeing the world in which security and insecurity arise. Drawing insights from social theory and philosophy, a variety of schools of thought united in the critique of the scientific pretensions of mainstream international theorizing and of its central concept of security. The incapacity of this mainstream to account for the dramatic turn of events at the beginning of the 1990s led its critics to question the basic assumptions which had directed scholarly inquiry for a generation. A narrow, state-centred and military-focused definition of security served the needs of a discipline confident in its ability to map the international order objectively and to apply the methods of natural science to the relations between states. The critique of this positivistic approach to the social introduced an instability-of-the-object into the study of international affairs: how actors construct their relations and theorizing is chronically implicated in creating and recreating the world which theorists observe. Security and insecurity are a relational quality, not a material distribution of capabilities, threats and vulnerabilities independent of such relations.

The end of the Cold War encouraged particular developments in international politics which also directed critical attention to international security questions. The emergence of nationalism as a force in Eastern Europe raised the problem of the relevance of domestic factors in the relations between states and the relevance to security of the internal structure of states against the traditional emphasis on the international. One important feature of this newly visible domestic dimension coincided with broader intellectual trends to elevate the concept of identity and to shift the weight of analysis from the materialist focus of positivism to the cultural and the social. Collective identity in its nationalist and ethnic form emerged to prominence in the debate and rhetoric on the new European order, both as a potential threat to the state and as a value threatened by it. The new emphasis on identity in postmodernist cultural theory reinforced its significance for international scholars, who began to explore its analytical potential

for understanding the nature of the international system and the capacity of states within it to learn to manage their security.

If the priority accorded to the state and the international over the domestic was rudely questioned by the events accompanying the end of the Cold War, the collapse of communism also stimulated movement in the opposite direction. The retreat into the domestic micro-processes of identity formation was matched by the related extending across national borders of the forces which govern personal and institutional relations. Globalization, the term which expresses this dual process of fragmentation and expansion of social relations, was not a creature of the Cold War or of its ending. But it was accelerated and dramatically exposed by the end of the superpower confrontation which, until then, had relatively isolated one half of the world from the economic, political and cultural spillover of the other.

The central position of the state in the literature of security studies, and the dominance of the idea that 'national security' represents an attainable and indispensable goal for the achievement of security, could not be sustained in the face of such global interdependence on the one hand and the fragmentation of the state into competing ethnic and other institutional allegiances on the other. From both developments – fragmentation into new political entities and the expansion of global links of interdependence – the orthodox concentration on state security could not be upheld. From the beginning of the 1980s, ideas about 'common' security and the regional interdependence of security had challenged the myth of the unitary nation-state and its need and capacity to secure itself. The end of the Cold War exposed the fragility of the state in the face of complex forces within it and of trans-state limitations on its practical sovereignty outside it. In terms of military, economic, environmental and cultural factors impinging directly or indirectly on society and state institutions alike, the threats to security after the Cold War are not conceptually very different from those which endangered state and people before it, though our knowledge of them undoubtedly raises our sense of vulnerability. It is in the inadequacy of the range of responses to such threats that the poverty of our traditional conception of security is mostly revealed.

The traditional emphasis on military response to counter threats to the state – whether military or non-military – still counts its ardent supporters within the ranks of academic and military strategists. At the end of a century of many hundreds of wars which failed to demonstrate their utility in terms of the goals of the main participants

and the human cost of pursuing them, militarist rhetoric has lost credibility. As a principle based on an assumption about human nature and international anarchy, it failed spectacularly to accommodate the ending of the Cold War. The grain of wisdom in its guiding adage – *si vis pacem, para bellum* – serves to deflect attention from the question of identity, which is central to our conception of security and to any attempt to match security policy to the threats to which it is a response. If the identity of states is eternally fixed in egoism, the preparation for war must indeed be the indispensable basis of security policy. If the structure which determines the relations between states is objectively and inescapably anarchic, then insecurity is an environmental constant and the condition of peace must be the eternal vigilance of military autarky. But then how did the Cold War end?

Several current problems of security policy raise similar doubts about the traditional framework and analysis of security, in each of which the question of identity emerges as a fact prominent in discourse and as a tool of understanding. What conception of security underlies the continued integration of the European Union? The Northern Ireland peace process was made possible by transforming the security policy of the principal actor which had manifestly failed to achieve its objectives. The narrow, militaristic definition of security is hardly an adequate basis for understanding the dynamics of this process. By contrast with these two, a third phenomenon presents itself as a direct consequence of the demise of communism and the ending of the Cold War. How do we assess the security implications of NATO expansion? Some comments about each will help to explain why they are viewed as anomalies ill-adapted to the explanatory framework of orthodox security studies.

In 1990, the European Community initiated the process of political union against the background of German unification, the end of the Soviet threat, and the historical opportunity and need which these events created to develop a more fully integrated foreign and security policy for the EC.¹ In the optimistic climate of the time, with the internal market on the verge of completion and the Cold War on the verge of extinction, the process of integration was moved dramatically

¹ The expression 'European Community', or EC, or 'Community' will be used throughout to denote the organization of European states up to the adoption of 'European Union' by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, unless greater precision is required by the context.

towards the 'high politics' of common defence and integrated political structures. The vision of a Europe bound by constitutional and political ties in a community structured to withstand the inevitable disintegrative pressures of economic association alone, seemed to be within grasp. Within two years, however, the people of Denmark led a popular movement of resistance to the fulfilment of that dream – at least in the form in which it was offered by member-states and the Community in the Maastricht Treaty on European Union.

European integration has always been a response to a security problem. There is little dispute about this. The disagreement touches on the nature of the security problem which stimulated integration in the 1950s and the interpretation of the security policy which was the founding members' response to it.

On one side of the argument, the policy embodied in the Community is an integral part of a complex alliance of Western European states under the hegemony of the United States to balance against the perceived threat of the Soviet Union. There is nothing in such a policy to indicate a major departure from the traditional practices of states from the end of the nineteenth century to shore up their territorial vulnerability by banding together in a military alliance. As long as the threat of one superpower persists, it is in the material and immediate self-interest of the threatened states to ally themselves with the enemies of that power. When the threat recedes, the alliance weakens, to be replaced by other configurations of military power. The simple logic of alliance theory corresponds with commonsense observation of everyday behaviour in the schoolyard.

The sudden jolt which Maastricht delivered to the complacency of state leaderships and Community bureaucracy seemed to validate this jungle theory of alliance formation and cooperation between states. If the close cooperation which developed from the European Coal and Steel Community and intensified over the period of the Cold War was a function of the common threat from Eastern Europe, the removal of that threat in 1991 should see the unravelling of the Community. In this view, the establishment of the European Community was 'an epiphenomenon of the Cold War', as one theorist expresses it; it was driven primarily by 'political reasons that had more to do with security than standards of living'.²

It seems equally plausible, however, that the Cold War inhibited,

² Review by Anthony Hartley, *The World Today*, January 1994, pp. 19–20.

rather than caused, European integration. Undoubtedly the emergence of a common enemy and the allocation of the defence role to NATO played some part in the cohesion of the Community, but its most visible effect over the period of the Cold War was to *prevent* the integration of a military dimension with the economic and political. It does not explain the degree of legal, political and economic integration achieved over that period to point to the fear of a common enemy as its primary cause. The upgrading of common interest in the progressive development of interstate and trans-state integration, with the inescapable pooling of state sovereignty which this entailed, represents a security policy which cannot be reduced to the military balancing of alliance theory.

The concept of security itself, furthermore, is problematic in its usage in relation to integration. What the school of thought represented in the citation above shares is a conception of security reduced to its narrowest military dimension. In this light, it is obviously correct to judge that the 'security' function was undertaken by NATO, while the Community embarked on the non-security dimensions of cooperation. Indeed it was only with the Single European Act in 1987 that we find explicit reference to 'security' in the legal instruments binding the member-states in a Community, and then only in respect of what was termed its 'economic and political aspects'.

Yet it is clear that whatever the personal motives of the individuals who founded it, the EU was a security policy from its inception. Even with the calculated exclusion of military defence, the process of integration itself bound the member-states in a network of interdependence which made the recourse to military means of resolving disputes progressively more difficult. It is not necessary to impute idealistic motives to the individuals who founded the Community to see that the product of their endeavours had the consequence of creating a 'security community' – whether they intended it or not. The addition of the military sector under the rubric of 'political union' was inhibited by the Cold War, but never abandoned as an aspiration. At the end of the Cold War, when the newly liberated states of Eastern Europe looked for international instruments to institutionalize their new freedom, membership of the European Union presented itself as the obvious means to that end. Even without an army, the EU was seen by candidate countries in Eastern Europe as a community capable of embodying the reality of security against the range of threats to their new independence. Survey research in six Eastern

European countries over the period 1990–1996 showed that public support for joining NATO was consistently lower than represented by their governments, and substantially lower than support for EU membership.³

The traditional understanding of security and security policy represents European integration as a non-security policy in response to a specific security problem. The evidence points as plausibly to the need to conceptualize European integration as a security policy in response to a non-specific and non-military security problem. While NATO membership offers maximum military security with minimal cost to formal sovereignty, the EU offers a broader spectrum of security, no military guarantee and makes substantial demands on formal sovereignty. Which offers the better chance of securing Europe depends on how we understand security and security policy.

A second puzzle concerns the shift in the policy adopted by Britain in respect of security in Northern Ireland. Here the ending of the Cold War also provides a signal for reassessing the evidence, though its impact is not so clear for our understanding of the change of policy.⁴ British security policy in Northern Ireland was directed towards the military defeat of the enemy, the IRA, and the defence of the union of Northern Ireland with mainland Britain. How did it happen that a ceasefire on the part of the IRA in August 1994 was welcomed with enthusiasm by its nationalist supporters and viewed with despondency and suspicion on the part of the unionist community which had been the target of so much IRA violence? Why should the IRA, in an act of apparent surrender, now abandon the instrument of violence by which, for three decades and more, they have single-mindedly pursued their goal of British withdrawal? Almost four years after the ceasefire, the Belfast Agreement of May 1998 was the culmination of protracted negotiations on fundamental changes in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

The facts are susceptible of a range of interpretations: British security policy, traditionally focused on the goal of military victory, has finally succeeded in weakening the IRA – materially in its capacity for violence, politically in terms of its legitimacy with the nationalist

³ Georgeta V. Pourchot, 'NATO enlargement and democracy in Eastern Europe', *European Security*, 6/4, 1997, pp. 157–174.

⁴ On the impact of the end of the Cold War on conflict in Northern Ireland see Michael Cox, 'Bringing in the "international": the IRA ceasefire and the end of the Cold War', *International Affairs*, 73/4, 1996, pp. 671–693.

population, and organizationally in respect of its internal coherence. In effect, this explanation points to an IRA surrender. It is the final vindication of the verge-of-collapse theory, rehearsed at regular intervals since 1969 by British security spokespersons, only to be repeatedly rebutted by an IRA very much alive and active. An alternative version of this theory points to the United States rather than Britain as the source of the collapse. Without continued US support, directly and through political pressure on Britain, the IRA could not sustain its military activity. Given the evidence of increasing American concern to find a solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland since the mid 1980s, it is inferred that US pressure was exercised in favour of a solution coinciding with the demands of the British government for a military victory.

Both accounts are weakened by lack of supporting evidence and by their failure to make sense of the known facts – most obviously, the dissonant reactions of republican and unionist supporters to the alleged capitulation of the IRA. I shall argue that a more persuasive case can be made to support the view that the ceasefire was announced in the context of the continuing strength and capacity of the IRA, of increasing US pressure on the British government for a radical shift of security policy away from the goal of military victory, and of a weakening of British resolve arising from a new awareness of British interests in the province. Of central importance in this new policy were the changing identities of the main actors and the role of the sovereign governments in London and Dublin in managing them.

If European integration presents itself as a security policy in response to unspecified threats, a third puzzle in the security geography of the post-Cold War period provides a contrast, a foil for the first. In response to intangible threats from Eastern Europe, NATO expansion is proposed as a very tangible and traditional security policy. It, too, presents a challenge to the traditional analysis of international security.

After the defeat of Germany in World War II, the Western European states dismantled the alliance which had accomplished the victory and began the process of integrating the defeated state into a peace-time community and a separate military alliance. How should we understand the expansion of that military alliance after the collapse of the enemy to which it owes its origin and from which exclusively it drew its solidarity and acquired its prestige and military efficiency? Here again the ending of the Cold War provides the sharp focus for

evaluating the divergent views on security and security policy. With the American announcement, on behalf of NATO, that its enlargement to selected new democracies of the former Warsaw Treaty Organization was scheduled for the fiftieth anniversary of NATO's founding in 1949, significant contours in the map of European security for the future have been made visible. After some years of speculation, lobbying, and bargaining between likely new entrants, the security question raised by the demise of communism has been answered by the only remaining superpower.

Precisely what the significance of the new development is may still be a matter of contention, but there is little dispute about the victory of NATO in the battle for survival between the security agencies competing for the hegemonic role in post-Cold War Europe. The United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Western European Union (WEU) as an integral part of the EU remain marginalized. They will have a role in the future management of military security, but the executive function goes to the agency with the military experience and firepower. The security question posed by the collapse of bipolarity was defined as a 'security vacuum', a demand on the West to 'export stability' to Central and East European states, and the answer which emerged from the years of debate, of lobbying, of bargaining with likely winners and losers, was NATO. At least in its capacity to survive what seemed to be a terminal condition, the Atlantic Alliance has demonstrated the proud boast to have been 'the most successful defensive alliance in history'.⁵ For the medium term, at least, it is game, set and match to NATO.

NATO expansion challenges the views of theorists of alliance behaviour and presents a problem of interpretation for analysts of every persuasion. If NATO expansion is the solution, what is the problem? What do military alliances do when the threat which gave rise to them, and persisted throughout their existence, disappears? What is the question to which a military alliance without an identifiable enemy is the answer? In particular, NATO expansion is accompanied by the widespread acknowledgment that Russia poses a security problem of some dimensions for Europe, and its relationship with the United States is critical to clarifying it. Additionally, it is held

⁵ North Atlantic Council, 'London Declaration on a transformed Alliance', July 1990, para. 2.

that the enlargement of the Alliance redresses the fateful division of Europe at Yalta. If Russia is no longer an enemy, and the overriding security problem in Europe is US–Russian relations, how do we interpret the decision announced at Madrid in July 1997 and judge its likely consequences for the people whose security depends on it?

These are some of the concrete issues which raise the general conceptual and explanatory problem brought into sharper relief by the ending of the Cold War, and they will be drawn upon again to illustrate various aspects of the argument which follows. Many others might equally be addressed in terms of the efficacy of traditional military conceptions of security and the need to reassess the complex dynamic involved in threat-perception and the appropriate security response. Both the Middle East and former Yugoslavia are subjects of a security policy which is styled a ‘peace process’, while the Basque problem in Northern Spain has yet to acquire one. All three raise problems of analysis which draw into relief the adequacy of conventional ideas about security and its appropriate instruments.

In the chapters which follow, a case will be presented to show that the world in which we live is not one – and never was one – which presents itself to us for independent response to its objective stability or uncertainty, like a volcanic region which will punish its inhabitants who do not understand its structure and respect its sovereignty. Our response is a condition of the social world we inhabit; our security policy is a choice we make among options – limited by history, by the ‘accomplishments of our ancestors’, in Nietzsche’s phrase, but always entailing human agency and choice.

Following analysis of the usage and etymology of the term ‘security’ in the next chapter, part I of the study addresses what is loosely called objectivist approaches to international security, characterized broadly by their common subscription to the application of scientific methodology to the social order. These approaches are surveyed in chapter 2, and their advocates criticized for their objectivist and narrow focus on perceived threats and military vulnerabilities in respect of the state. By their own criteria of assessment, the methods and assumptions they employ are judged inadequate to address the inherent ambiguities of the central concern of their work.

Attempts to broaden the concept of security are examined in chapters 3 and 4, with particular attention to the seminal work of Barry Buzan. Chapter 3 offers an extended critique of his work,

widely deemed to have transformed the study of international security. It is argued that Buzan, while providing a more useful analytical framework, fails to account for the fundamental idea which links the security of the state to the human perception of insecurity on which state policies rest for their legitimacy. His extension of the concept of security to include what is termed 'societal identity' is discussed in chapter 4. While this work is seen to compromise the basic framework of the earlier Buzan, the linking of 'security' with 'identity' points to more promising possibilities.

Part II of the study is an attempt to develop an analytical and theoretical framework for realizing these possibilities. Following an extended conceptual analysis in chapter 5, an alternative sociological approach to international security is presented in the next three chapters of part II. Security is seen as inextricably related to identity, and security policy to the reconstruction of collective identity. In the process of reproducing collective identity lies the key to the production and reproduction of security and security policy. It is argued, however, that a current trend in the literature on identity is deficient in its capacity to explain the facts on the ground in particular concrete instances. Even when understood as a socially constructed reality, it is argued, the rise and transformation of collective identity – and the security questions entailed – cannot be explained without equal emphasis on the role of material interests. Finally, in the last two chapters, the discussion of the practice of security draws together the concrete issues which provide an empirical grounding of the book with the conceptual and philosophical analysis of part II.

We choose our security problems as we choose the interests and identity which accompany them. This terse compression of the overall argument will be qualified, of course. It serves here to highlight the general thrust of the discussion and to measure the distance to be travelled between the idea of security criticized in part I and the alternative approach of part III.