

Security, Identity and Interests

A Sociology of International Relations

Bill McSweeney



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
<http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Bill McSweeney 1999

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1999

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 11/12.5 Palatino [cE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

McSweeney, Bill, Dr.

Security, identity and interests : a sociology of international relations
/ Bill McSweeney.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 66177 3 (hardback). – ISBN 0 521 66630 9 (paperback)

I. International relations – Sociological aspects.

II. Series. II Title: Security, identity, and interests.

JZ1251.M37 1999

327.1'01 – dc21 99–11332 CIP

ISBN 0 521 66177 3 hardback

ISBN 0 521 66630 9 paperback

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page ix
Introduction	1
1 The meaning of security	13
Part I Objectivist approaches to international security	23
2 Early stages of development	25
3 Broadening the concept of security	45
4 Identity versus the state	68
Part II Theorizing security: the turn to sociology	79
5 A conceptual discussion	81
6 The social constructionist approach	101
7 The limits of identity theory	126
8 Agency and structure in social theory	138
9 Seeing a different world: a reflexive sociology of security	152
Part III Practising security	173
10 Doing security by stealth	175
11 Conclusion: Security and moral choice	198
<i>Bibliography</i>	220
<i>Index</i>	238

1 The meaning of security

Security, it was noted, is an elusive term. Like peace, honour, justice, it denotes a quality of relationship which resists definition. It has an active verbal form which seems to take it out of the realm of the abstruse, and a hard tangibility in its nominal form which promises something solid and measurable. But it eludes the attempt to capture it, to enclose it. It is a ubiquitous term, pressed into servicing young and old, rich and poor, the experience of the mundane and analysis of the affairs of state. Where to begin to look for its meaning, and whether it makes sense to expect a unitary meaning basic to all usages, are a challenge which calls for the joint labours of history and philosophy.

There are two images which come to mind when we think of the word. The noun 'security' evokes the picture of a solid object, like a lock, alarm, or weapon used to protect or defend against intrusion or attack. Or it denotes an investment in property, shares, pension – in some cultures, children. When such instruments or investments are in place, we imagine, 'security' as inner experience is the consequence. When the house is guarded, the street is policed, the shares are purchased, then we feel safe, defended against the indeterminate actions of others.

On the other hand, this activity may have a quite different consequence: our display of 'security' also displays vulnerability and makes us feel unsafe. Furthermore, it serves to condition attitudes in those undefined 'others' who may perceive our defence as a threat, as an incitement, even though some may read it also as a deterrent. In other words, it may limit the actions of others, but it leaves their assumed attitudes and intentions unreconstructed. Our efforts have yielded insecurity. One solution to this is to escalate.

A security industry helps individuals and families, as well as shops and corporations, to escalate. In Hollywood, armed professionals form part of a hierarchic set of security instruments, each independently subject to the logic of escalation, with the Los Angeles Police Department supervising the security guards who invigilate the systems which protect the valuables of the wealthy – each instrument a response to a classical dilemma: *Quis custodiat ipsos custodes?*

This predicament arises from the same mistrust which underlies the so-called ‘security dilemma’ in the literature of international affairs. The states’ perception of the intentions of its regional rivals causes it to escalate ‘security’ in one instrument, or in a chain of instruments, and this results in a sequential interaction of misperception, with the consequence of greater insecurity which no one intended.

This evokes a vision of security as a negative freedom – the absence of threat – and it conjures an image of tough realism familiar in the world of international politics. Even a soft realist like Arnold Wolfers saw it thus: ‘security after all is nothing but the absence of the evil of insecurity, a negative value so to speak’.¹

There is another image from which to begin an inquiry into the idea of security, and it is one which, it will be argued, equally makes sense of the concept and as plausibly merits inclusion in any attempt to define it as the restrictive definition current in international affairs.

This is a positive image, evoked typically in the adjectival, rather than the nominative, form of the term. When we speak of ‘security’ in the nominative, we associate the word with objects, commodities, which have a specific function in relation to other commodities. There is a certain security, or confidence, in the fact that they are objects, tangible, visible, capable of being weighed, measured or counted. They protect things and prevent something happening. When we speak of ‘secure’, on the other hand, it suggests enabling, making something possible. (The familiar distinction between ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’ illustrates the difference, and it is closely related.)

This positive connotation of the adjectival form contrasts with the negative freedom from material threats. The mythical image is that of Mother and Child – hardly an icon to grace the walls of the Rand Corporation or the Pentagon. The condition of security which it represents is commonly thought of as that which the mother provides

¹ Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1962, p. 153.

for the child, but it is really a property of the relationship, a quality making each secure in the other.

It is this human sense of security, embodied in the primal relationship, which, it will be argued, carries a profound message for our understanding of international security and security policy.

The temptation to dismiss such imagery as sentimental, feminine, utopian, and therefore incapable of transfer to the international arena for rigorous analysis, is powerful in the world of policy and scholarship which specializes in these matters. No doubt one reason for this is the exclusion of women from the policy-making and theory-building community which sets the conceptual terms on which security is pursued and the topic is studied.²

Another reason why security, as a commodity rather than a relationship, seems more attractive is the considerable advantage it offers to the student schooled in the conviction that the social order can be expressed in the form of scientific generalizations. Trained to see the sciences as superior to the humanities, the student raised in the security studies tradition and faced with a choice between two commanding images of the subject matter will naturally opt for the more tangible, operational, the one which makes more sense in scientific terms. In these terms, rigour is equated with measurement of objective facts. The world of sentiment is a subject of reasoning and philosophy, poetry and sociology, but the 'real world' of material threats and vulnerabilities is one where knowledge can be translated into numbers, accumulated into a progressive science, and sold on the promise that it 'works'.

Perhaps the most common objection to human security as the foundation of policy and research is the difficulty of translating it to the collective level of the state. It makes sense to speak of states as actors, but it is hardly meaningful to attribute moral sentiment to them as well. We cannot aggregate the human feelings of being secure or insecure and arrive at a sensible measure for the state, from which to construct a security policy. This is a theoretical problem which will be addressed later in part II. What can be noted here is the way the problem is posed in the orthodox tradition of security studies. The centrality of the state-as-actor is assumed, and with it the need to measure, or quantify, the conditions in which its security or insecurity is achieved. The meaning of security is thus determined by a prior theoretical assumption of the primacy of the state, the irrelevance of

² See chapter 5 for further discussion of this point.

sub-units within it, and the choice of a quantitative method of inquiry appropriate to the state as the irreducible and material unit.

Of course the bifurcation of security into the material world 'out there' and the inner world of human relationship, reflected in the nominative and adjectival forms of the word, exaggerates the gap between the two images. They are not mutually exclusive: the subject who wants to be secure also needs to be defended; the Rambo warrior may have something to say to the Mother and Child. The point is that one view of security dominates the academic discipline and is presented, not as an option, a choice, but as the only one which is valid and relevant.

I want to show that there is a choice; that the alternative image is indispensable to making sense of the concept; and that it demands more subtle analysis, not less, to incorporate it into an adequate definition; that the assumption of security studies which ignores the human dimension is contradicted by the practical dependence of policy-makers and theorists alike on the human individual as the ultimate referent, or subject, of security. Thus the individual is ignored in conceptualizing the idea of security at the state level, only to be reinstated as its basic rationale – as it must be – in order to make sense of, and legitimize, the policy derived.

Contrary to the orthodox view of security studies, security must make sense at the basic level of the individual human being for it to make sense at the international level. The nominative form, and its commanding image of security as a commodity, needs to be complemented by the adjectival usage as a relationship. We shall return to these rival images later in this chapter.

Usage and meaning

Etymologically, the noun 'security' has evolved from a positive, comforting term to a negative one. From being a psychological condition of the care-free into which we are easily lulled – 'mortals chiefest enemy' as the witches describe it in *Macbeth* – it is a material condition which we worry about, tighten, fear. 'Secure' once meant 'careless' (se + cura), or 'freedom from concern' – almost the reverse of current usage implying 'careful'. Thus, warning of domestic discontent and its threat to the state, Bacon wrote 'Neither let any Prince, or State, be secure concerning Discontentments.' Although this 'careless' sense of the term dropped out of usage at the end of the

eighteenth century, the 'Saturday Review' could still capture it in the middle of the nineteenth: 'Every government knew exactly when there was reason for alarm, and when there was excuse for security.'³

This old sense of the word derives from the same root, and overlaps in meaning, with the English 'sure', French 'sûr'. Larousse Modern Dictionary notes the French usage: 'Do not confuse *sécurité*, the feeling of having nothing to fear, and *sûreté*, the state of having nothing to fear.' The connotation of 'careless' is thus related to the sense of 'certitude' carried by the term 'sure'. The Oxford English Dictionary expresses it as 'having or affording ground for confidence; safe; (objectively) certain'.⁴ Etymologically, therefore, the freedom of security is related to the possession of knowledge, confidence in the predictability of things, in knowing the objective order. Nietzsche reflects this usage when he asks rhetorically if our need for knowledge is not:

precisely this need for the familiar, the will to uncover everything strange, unusual, and questionable, something that no longer disturbs us? Is it not the *instinct of fear* that bids us to know? And is the jubilation of those who obtain knowledge not the jubilation over the restoration of a sense of security?⁵

The verb 'to secure' was first predicated of people. It became attached to states, metonymically, allowing England to be described in 1889 as 'rich because she has for so many years been secure'. A secure object, such as a fixing, bridge, or possession, is probably a late development in the usage of the term.⁶ Eighteenth-century examples of usage illustrate the emergence of a new sense of establishing a person in a position of comfort, an office, or privilege, rather than protecting from perceived threats. This may indicate the impact of capitalist social and economic change.⁷

It appears that the meaning of the noun 'security' has narrowed over the centuries, by contrast with the adjective and verb. Though we

³ *Saturday Review*, 17 July 1858, cited in OED.

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. ix, p. 370.

⁵ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 355, cited in James Der Derian, 'The value of security: Hobbes, Marx, Nietzsche, and Baudrillard', in David Campbell and Michael Dillon (eds.), *The Political Subject of Violence*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993, p. 102. This link between security and knowledge will be further discussed in chapter 9.

⁶ *The Spectator*, 21 December 1889, cited in OED.

⁷ Paul Chilton, 'Security and semantic change', unpublished ms, n.d.

commonly speak of a secure person, we do not routinely use the nominal form, without specifying one's 'sense', or 'feeling' of security.⁸ The noun became attached to, and interchangeable with, property, land, money, fortifications – these things are said to have, or to be, 'security' – and to the means by which such things are made secure: armies, weapons. To speak of military weapons as 'security' can be unpacked etymologically as 'the means by which the thing (property, money, institution) is protected to secure the person'.

Montesquieu understood 'security' in relation to political freedom: 'political freedom consists in security, or at least in the opinion which one has of one's security'.⁹ Adam Smith, likewise, referred to the 'liberty and security of individuals', the freedom from the prospect of violent attack on the person or the person's property;¹⁰ the sovereign, as individual, shared in this liberty; but what the state must do in order to ensure such freedom for the individual is not 'security', but defence: 'the first duty of the sovereign, that of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies'.¹¹

Emma Rothschild locates the meaning of 'security' as a concept relating to individuals and groups, as well as states, in the period from the mid-seventeenth century to the French Revolution. 'Its most consistent sense – and the sense that is most suggestive for modern international politics', she writes, 'was indeed of a condition, or an objective, that constituted a *relationship* between individuals and states or societies'.¹² This followed the earlier usage of Leibnitz, defining the state as 'a great society of which the object is common security'.¹³

'Security', thus, is a human value overlapping with the values of freedom, order, solidarity. In this semantic complex, the state is understood as an agent of, or instrument for, the protection of values proper to human nature, and deriving their meaning and priority from the human individuals in whom they resided. The state was an instrument for the achievement of these values – and the sovereign as an individual shared in them – but the state was not their subject, the

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *De l'Esprit des Lois*, cited in Emma Rothschild, 'What is security?', *Daedalus*, 124/3, 1995, p. 61.

¹⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, cited in Rothschild, 'What is security?', pp. 61/62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹² Rothschild, 'What is security?', p. 61.

¹³ Onno Klopp (ed.), *Die Werke von Leibnitz*, Klindworth, Hannover, 1864–1873, cited in Rothschild, 'What is security?', p. 61.

grounding of their meaning and the site of their relevance, or the calculus by which they were to be understood and measured.

The common modern sense of 'security' as an attribute of the state, ensured by military and diplomatic means, came into political usage at the end of the eighteenth century, aided by reasoning about the nature of the social contract, which likened the state to the individual. The theory of the social contract was understood by Rousseau, as it was also by Locke and Montesquieu, as the product of individual desire for security and liberty: 'this is the fundamental problem to which the institution of the state provides the solution'. Rothschild concludes:

It was in the military period of the French Revolution, above all, that the security of individuals was subsumed, as a political epigram, in the security of the nation.¹⁴

From 'defence' to 'security'

Most countries have a Department of 'Defence', yet describe the function of this state institution as 'security', not 'defence'. The change from 'War Department' to 'Defence' was a function of the changed conditions of peacetime, making the existing label obviously anomalous. No such obvious change of conditions accompanied the shift of terminology from 'defence' to 'security'. What is conveyed by this choice of label can be inferred from its origins in the United States, where it first occurred.

The shift to 'security' was linked to the concept of 'national interest' and to the perception of its content in relation to the new idea and doctrine of 'national security'. We get some idea of the political background which stimulated the change, in the concerns expressed before and during World War II. A growing preoccupation with the organization of defence/security arose out of the need to unify the administration of the armed services and a concomitant concern to link the functions of the State Department and the 'defence' sector.

Daniel Yergin cites a seminar prior to American entry into the war, in which the concept of national security was invoked to understand the relationship between military and foreign policy matters. Two years earlier, Walter Lippmann had warned that the American desire for peace and the security of her geographic location had 'diverted

¹⁴ Rothschild, 'What is security?', p. 64; citation from Rousseau, *Oeuvres Completes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1964, vol. III.

our attention from the idea of national security'. But the term 'national security' was not common in political discourse until the mid 1940s.¹⁵ The concern with the unification of the armed services, during and after the war, added force to the need expressed for closer relationships between all the institutions seen as relevant to the novel and complex interests and vulnerabilities which presented themselves to the victorious power after 1945. 'National security' was an idea, a doctrine, and an institution, designed to bridge the traditional division between the interests of the state abroad and those of the state at home, and to merge the culture of everyday life with that of the defence of the national interest.¹⁶

The National Security Act of 1947 established the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency to implement this design, and to promote the doctrine of total security. The law made the military a partner in the economy, and set the task for the National Security Council 'to advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign and military policies relating to the national security . . .'.¹⁷ The idea of harnessing domestic culture to the service of foreign policy in the name of security was taken up enthusiastically and imitated by most Latin American countries, with less foreign than domestic threats in mind – Brazil in 1964, Argentina in 1966, soon followed by Uruguay, Bolivia, Chile and others, each with their integrated intelligence function on the pattern of the American CIA.¹⁸

One can speculate that the change from 'defence' to 'security' was required to escape the material and territorial limits set by the semantic legacy of 'defence', with its narrow military meaning clearly inadequate to the comprehensive scope now required. 'Our national security can only be assured on a very broad and comprehensive front', Navy Secretary James Forrestal told the Senate Committee on

¹⁵ Walter Lippmann, *US Foreign policy: Shield of the Republic*, Pocket Books, New York, 1943, cited in Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State*, Pelican, London, 1977, p. 194.

¹⁶ The state need to saturate everyday life with the resonance of state security is ironic, given the resistance of orthodox security specialists to view the routine of mundane social relations as analytically relevant to the study of security and security policy. The theoretical significance of everyday life is a central part of the discussion in part II.

¹⁷ Cited in Marcus G. Raskin, *The Politics of National Security*, Transaction, New Brunswick, 1979, p. 32.

¹⁸ José Comblin, *The Church and the National Security State*, Orbis, Marknoll, 1979, pp. 64ff.

Military Affairs, and he explained: 'I am using the word "security" here consistently and continuously rather than defence.'¹⁹

A once-isolationist power now identified new global interests, at variance with its historic identity as a nation set apart from others, and new alien identities abroad which would facilitate a transformation of its own identity, in line with its new interests. As American James Der Derian puts it:

Did not our collective identity . . . become transfigured into a new god, that was born and fearful of a nuclear, internationalist, interventionist power? The evidence is in the reconceptualization; as distance, oceans, and borders become less of a protective barrier to alien identities, and a new international economy required penetration into other worlds, *national interest* became too weak a semantic guide. We found a stronger one in *national security*, as embodied and institutionalized by the National Security Act of 1947 . . .²⁰

'Security' in the Cold War had come a long way from its carefree origins and from its primary usage in reference to the person. Now it belonged primarily to the state; people, like the armed forces, were its instruments, and also, potentially, its enemies. The metonymy of language had moved the referent from the person to the thing, and to the instrument; the politics of national interest, in the conditions of the time, attached it literally to the state.

The content of 'national interest' had changed, from one of welfare in the early years of the New Deal, to one 'practically synonymous with the formula of national security' a decade later.²¹ The state had become an organism, appropriating to itself the capacity for *cura* and its derivatives.

Yet the paradox remains, that the doctrine of the primacy of state in matters of security is parasitic on the belief of individual persons in their own primacy in the same respect. A nation can only be mobilized for national security in peacetime if the majority of the people identify the state and its enemies as the highest expression of their own personal security and fear. But what drives the security project, and defines its content and appropriate instruments, is the internal logic of the state. In the name of the people, and of a philosophical conception of human nature rooted in a human ideal of liberty, solidarity and

¹⁹ Cited in Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, p. 194.

²⁰ Der Derian, 'The value of security', p. 109.

²¹ Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, p. 148.

order, security was appropriated by the state and operationalized by its theorists and specialist agencies.²²

If the real world appears to confirm the policy-maker's beliefs in the primacy of the state and the essential insecurity of the environment in which it lives, this does not make it an objective world independent of policy and its implementation. The paradox of national security is reproduced through the practices of state and people, who define the term, objectify the reality, and implement the policies which it prescribes. The world of the Cold War really did look like the hostile arena to which a foreign policy, premised on the fundamental fear of physical survival, seemed the only rational option. That the security of individuals should be – in Rothschild's words above – 'subsumed in the security of the nation', under such conditions, was a heavy price to pay, but there was no alternative, it appeared.

The reproduction of the paradox of 'national security' is procured through state practices, which draw in the members of a society to an imagined community, whose fragile bonds were created by ancestors and must be recreated eternally by their debtors. Nietzsche expresses it in his sociological interpretation of religion:

The conviction reigns that it is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of their ancestors that the tribe *exists* – and that one has to *pay them back* with sacrifices and accomplishments: one thus recognizes a *debt* that constantly grows greater, since these forebears never cease, in their continued existence as powerful spirits, to accord the tribe new advantages and new strength.²³

We learn to know the meaning of security through the practices which embody a particular interpretation of it. The state ritual of remembering the sacrifices of the dead remembers also the danger of others and the centrality of the state in confronting it, and, in the process, *re-members* the individuals in the community. 'We live in an age of instability and uncertainty' is the message intoned throughout the ages. Adam might have made the same observation to Eve on their exit from Paradise, but in that mythical moment, unlike now, it was a message devoid of an institutional agenda.

²² The role of competition among the armed services and of their think-tanks in accomplishing this transition is well described in Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1983; see also Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, pp. 193ff.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Vintage Books, New York, 1969, pp. 88/89.