



Nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide: inescapable dread in the 2020s

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Abstract

This article appraises Professor Rumelili's important central focus on anxiety by broadening the scope of the challenges the age of anxiety poses. With reference to recent events, such as the covid-19 pandemic and authoritarian politics, it argues that practices and strategies once thought to alleviate anxiety are now resources for it. The article concludes by calling for scholars to consider the possibility of anxiety as a structural feature of global politics, and organising our theoretical interventions, analyses, and politics around that constitutive feature. Ontological security, therefore, proves more elusive than ever before.

Keywords Anxiety · Covid-19 · Existentialism · Ontological security · Structure

Professor Rumelili's provocative keynote address is an urgently needed statement on the import of existentialism in ontological security studies. Further, it is perhaps even more important now considering subsequent events since Rumelili gave this address. 2020 generated so much anxiety, not least of which through a global pandemic, economic disruption, continued climate change, racial strife, and a further fragmentation of political communities. We are indeed in an 'Age of Anxiety'.

Why is a turn past social psychology and sociology to existentialist insights, as expressed by Rumelili (and others—see Kirke 2020), so useful in this present age of anxiety? Because the depth and breadth at which 2020 has been dislocating is truly other-worldly; it has called into question humanity's meaningful existence. Existentialism provides a necessary deepening for understanding ontological insecurity in contemporary life. I furthermore wholly endorse Rumelili's turn to 'moods' as a way of characterising this all-encompassing collective experience of anxiety, and find it firmly convincing that she has effectively traced this to the 'rising appeal of nativism, populism, and authoritarianism today'.

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My purpose in this symposium response is not to point out where Rumelili is wrong. Far from it. Her existentialist inroads into anxiety are absolutely, devastatingly right. Rather, I want to suggest that the scope of the problem is even larger, and I would suggest, even more daunting for this particular ‘age of anxiety’. Rumelili’s focus on the confrontation of anxiety, stemming from existentialist thought, keys in on the transformation of anxiety to fear by locating a definite object. This indeed sheds light on a centerpiece of populist authoritarian politics, one that other ontological security scholars have studied and articulated since Kinnvall’s first explorations (2004,2007). But it also elides the other forms of managing anxiety that are a central focus for the psychological and sociological strands in ontological security studies. And, I want to suggest, that even these forms are failing to alleviate anxiety. In fact, drawing from recent events and studies on ontological insecurity in an era of populism and US decline, I argue that these forms of anxiety management are now *sources of anxiety* in their own right (see Steele 2019). Thus, this article should be read as a pivot from Rumelili’s keynote (rather than a critique) as a further urgent call for taking seriously the age of anxiety, and anxiety itself, as a constitutive feature of global politics in the 2020s. And it should be read as a warning that the search for ontological security now and in the immediate future will prove more elusive than ever. Put another way, those looking for instruction on the ‘emancipatory’ possibilities of anxiety will have to look elsewhere, as I do not in this article or any of my other work see escape from this pervasive anxiety as an option.

To begin, the distinction between fear and anxiety is one that Rumelili calls attention to in several sections of her address. Rumelili brings up the now timely example of the fear of death, especially from illness, via Tillich:

Although distinct from fear, existentialist conceptions emphasize that anxiety is often disguised as and evaded through fear [...] anxiety leads the individual into establishing objects of fear because only fear has an object that can be faced, attacked, and endured [...] Although the ultimate cause of one’s death can never be known, fear is directed toward possible causes, and leads the individual to seek various protective measures, such as leading a healthy lifestyle, wearing a seatbelt, or carrying a gun.

What is interesting in the context of 2020 is how the various anxiety-generating phenomena have proven fairly resistant to attempts at turning the anxiety into fear, turning an ambiguous subject to a definite object strategy. Pandemics generally, and the covid-19 pandemic of 2020 specifically, are real ‘threats’ that nevertheless remain submerged and concealed in anxiety-generating phenomena par excellence. For a while, even US President Donald Trump recognised this, calling covid-19 the ‘hidden enemy’. Alas, the temptation was too great for Trump to transform anxiety into fear by fastening the pandemic to the community of its origins through xenophobic appeals to his base. Thus was born the ‘China virus’ in his discourse, blaming continuously the entire effects of the pandemic on China. It of course did not alleviate the anxiety over the pandemic nor did it effectively confront the pandemic as its own threat, despite Trump’s ‘Jacksonian’ base’s fantasy that continuously blaming China for a horrifically mismanaged pandemic in



the US would make it all go away. Most other large industrialised countries in 2020 dealt more effectively with that same virus, and they do not seem to use the whining crutch of blaming it all on China, because they do not have to. The securitising did lead to a substantial spike in hate incidents targeting Asian-Americans (Donaghue 2020), illustrating yet again how the drive for ontological security of one community generates ontological and physical insecurity for others, and how ‘ontological security proves useful for analysing the struggles over identity at different levels of analysis simultaneously’ (Steele 2019: 326). But it did not slow down the damage of the pandemic in the US, where, as of this writing, deaths approach 560,000.

Yet there are two, interdependent additional features of late modernity that have historically assisted in the management of anxiety (see also Browning 2018). In ontological security and structuration theory, agents confront anxiety and make it ‘manageable’ through *routinised* behaviour and practices, which enables making the otherwise chaotic world of late modernity predictable, manageable, and even reassuring. Routines are thus a source of predictability and order that alleviates anxiety. Related, experts and expertisation are assumed to assist and counsel individuals and groups in the construction of ‘healthy’ routines to provide a sense of certainty and continuity (Giddens 1991, 1984).

As I shall note momentarily, there are issues with both of these as management strategies for anxiety, just as there is via the authoritarian push towards turning anxiety into fear via the politics of blame and xenophobia that Rumelili denotes and that has caught the attention of a number of ontological security studies in just the past few years (see Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017, 2020; Steele and Homolar 2019). But that does not mean that we still do not try out these mechanisms. In fact, they represent a reflex, as well as a *reflexive* way to handle overwhelming anxiety that remains embedded in late modernity. Xander Kirke, in his own existentialist contribution to ontological security studies, summarises how the covid-19 pandemic represented a major disruption to routines and thus brought about even more pronounced anxiety than just a year earlier (when Rumelili was giving her 2019 CEEISA/ISA keynote address):

Covid-19 has, for many, developed and facilitated anxiety on the basis that our daily activities, trust-relations which we take for granted, and the freedom to determine our being-in-the-world were very suddenly ruptured. At a minimum, social distancing has reduced our capacity for other-regarding actions, as has closing key sites for sociality (bars, cafes, restaurants, etc.). Encounters with others that are supposed to be a part of our routines may now contribute to anxiety since social distancing, by necessity, requires differentiating the self from others in an inevitably cautious manner. Indeed, the undertones imply that others are a threat to our physical safety (Kirke 2020).

In light of this massive dislocation, people across the world reconstituted their routines, figuring out virtual ways to simulate ‘sociality’, such as with ‘Zoom’ happy hours (Koncius 2020), online ‘dance parties’ or evening ‘singing’ from



windows and rooftops (as in Italy during the early and quite severe stages of the pandemic), or the ‘clap for our carers’ in the UK every evening at 8pm. Further, experts from the World Health Organisation to national infectious disease doctors (such as Dr Anthony Fauci in the US) were called upon to discern, diagnose, and provide timelines and prognoses for the pandemic, sometimes making the rounds on international cable networks like the BBC, CNN, or Sky News. The global and national ontological insecurity complexes kicked into high gear and, for a time, it seemed that while the virus could not be weakened, the deep existential anxiety it helped foster could be mitigated.

Nevertheless, as ontological security scholars have been pointing out in more recent studies, both of these ‘go-to’ solutions for anxiety proved at best ephemeral, and perhaps even became their own *sources* of anxiety in an era of covid and populism.

In the United States, for example, the impatient need amongst US Americans for instant gratification had them missing their old routines: going to work, going to the mall, hitting the bars, getting a haircut, sending children to school, and so on. Cheered on by their own impatient and pretentious leader who told his base to ‘liberate’ particular states where pandemic precautions and restrictions were in place (Mauger and Leblanc 2020), protests broke out across the country within only a month after the first widespread shutdowns to slow the virus. The quintessential, and repeated, phrase in many of these protests—‘getting back to normal’—reflects the attachment of individuals to their routines (Alemany 2020). And the president, not to be outdone, missed his own routines, like the self-affirmation political rallies that he had hosted throughout his presidency to packed indoor stadiums. He, too, returned to this routine, beginning with a rally in July 2020 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that led to its own spike of covid cases three weeks later (Astor and Weiland 2020). Thus, a return to routines important for the identity of self and community facilitated *further* anxiety and physical insecurity in the face of an unprecedented pandemic.

Expertise provides specialised knowledge and counsel to individuals in order to make life more predictable and stable. These systems that sustain expert knowledge ‘depend in an essential way on *trust*’ (Giddens 1991: 18, emphasis in the original), while the expertise that goes into ‘abstract systems [is] opaque to the majority’ (ibid.: 30). Crucial as well is the additional ‘methodological principle of doubt’, embedded in expert systems, as a way to reflexively update approaches to problems with better solutions. This ‘updating’ happened throughout the pandemic, with incoming information changing assumed priors by the epistemic community of medical experts, epidemiologists, virologists, and public health officials (Farr 2020). Yet it is precisely the latter ‘methodological principle’, doubt and corrigibility of expert knowledge, that has undermined the former, ‘essential trust’, amongst especially skeptical Americans who missed their pre-covid routines, and *vis-à-vis* the experts that provided them counsel.

The full-frontal assault on experts in the United States happened in many places and spaces. From up high, it manifested *vis-à-vis* the Trump administration’s increasingly contentious relationship with, and eventual withdrawal from, the WHO in June of 2020. Even within Trump’s coronavirus task force, Dr Anthony Fauci came under increased criticism by Trump himself over a variety of recommendations



(such as not sending children back to school), criticism echoed by Trump's base. Such attacks represent, in one analyst's assessment, the 'rejection of science in the virus fight' (Collinson 2020). And this assault is facilitated by another feature of late modernity—technology—specifically social media platforms that spread disinformation far and wide especially to a population that is cooped up in households (Browne 2020).

And what of the other US Americans during the pandemic? The ones who abided by the recommendations of public health experts and the medical community? They who have stuck to their newly constituted routines? With the politicisation of expert knowledge, now even those healthier routines are fraught with anxiety. Going out to the grocery store may involve running into an 'anti-masker' who not only exposes everyone around them to potential infection but also berates fellow shoppers and store clerks to their tirades. Such confrontations were increasingly common throughout the United States (Czachor 2020). It may entail dealing with a former friend, or once close family member, who thinks that covid precautions are all overblown and that the virus is itself a 'hoax'. More broadly, parents across the United States faced the difficult situations of their children staying at home for schooling. Others had to worry about their children and the imperfect protocols that were implemented by schools that have actually opened back up. And all of this during a time of radical economic uncertainty. In short, routines have become their own sources of anxiety in 2020.

Conclusion: the end game

While I have focused in this response on the US's handling of anxiety, I agree with Rumelili that 'anxiety has a continuous effect on international relations as a constitutive condition' (see also Rumelili 2020). This is, in her view (and in my own work with Andy Hom—see Hom and Steele 2020), a *deeper* condition than the ordering principle of anarchy (or hierarchy, or heteronomy, or something else). As a result, it can explain 'the power competition in the state of nature, can be ultimately traced to the human desire to know and shape the—ultimately unknowable—future in Hobbesian thought' (Rumelili keynote).

But I think it can explain more than that. The conditional depth identified by Rumelili is important, because the US is not the only country where some of the oppositional dynamics to covid-mitigation can be found (Ward 2020). When Rumelili makes that important point about anxiety as a 'constitutive condition' of international relations—she is making a bold and important claim. Anxiety, manifested in pervasive ontological insecurity, is not going anywhere. It cannot be transcended. It will not end. *We will not emancipate ourselves or others from it.* Different political communities can only, therefore, manage it better or worse than others.

What is the end game to all of this? Here Waltz's (1979) four decades-old counsel about structures provides insight, with a bit of a 2010s twist. The twist is that the structure of global politics itself does not predispose states per se to 'power competition', but rather *anxiety management*. Some political communities are better equipped, due to issues that ontological security scholars have been writing about



for some time, to handle pervasive anxiety because of a healthier society-wide environment of community trust. And some are not. What will happen to the latter, those that do not continuously and effectively confront anxiety? In the words of Waltz, the structure will select them out: ‘to say that “the structure selects” means simply that those who conform to accepted and successful practices more often rise to the top and are likelier to stay there. The game one has to win is defined by the structure that determines the kind of player who is likely to prosper’ (Waltz 1979: 92).

In a time of global anxiety, fuelled by crises like climate change, pandemics, and economic deprivation, it may be that despite its hegemonic ‘power’ status, the United States is least equipped for our contemporary era. Thus a country grappling with its own inability to ‘win’ (Subotic and Steele 2018) the game of global politics for the past two decades (or more), faces the likelihood of a global structure that it simply cannot conform to via ‘accepted and successful practices’. The US has deterred its great power rivals for over half a century, or more. But anxiety is tearing through it as a polity like a hot knife through butter. The result is perhaps more ironic than tragic,¹ but entails a rapid disintegration that is nevertheless all the more painful to watch.

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¹ I distinguish these two deliberately, as I have in past work (Steele 2010). There, I delineated irony via Niebuhr and Rorty. Ironic outcomes are expressed not as an ‘intention’ for good that involves evil means, but rather a *pretension* of a subject that results in the opposite outcome (Steele 2010: 96): As Niebuhr located it, irony involves a case of ‘strength becom[ing] weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation’ (Niebuhr 2008: xxiv).



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