

Interdependence – an Obsolete Concept?

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As far as many of us can remember, internationalism and the emergence of a global consciousness have been self-evident realities. The Cold War, environmentalism, the “oil crisis” and, then, the dramatic collapse of East-West confrontation all made us aware of just how interconnected our national societies and communities are. To think globally, and holistically, was logical. It just made sense.

For those of us who study International Relations, borders, conflict resolution and matters related to security, there seems no way of escaping the reality of mutual reliance in an interdependent world. And yet, what we now see in the world, and read in social media, among other places, is an increasing denial of interdependence, as if we could just shut out the noise from the outside world and get on with our everyday lives. What many appear to desire, in other words, is independence, not interdependence.

Why is this? Why this dramatic shift in focus? And how could it affect us? The GLASE consortium (www.glase.fi), funded by the Academy of Finland’s Strategic Research Council, is addressing this and other questions regarding security in the contemporary world. As GLASE seeks to better understand the interrelated nature of local, national and global security, the move to a more insular view seems at first glance counter-intuitive. But we can find reasons for it in a wider globalization backlash which involves fear of a loss of local control and domination by transnational economic interests. In addition, as Paul Arbair forcefully argues, we are facing a crisis of complexity, in which a desire for clear and decisive action based on simple solutions has complicated political debate. This helps explain the “Brexit” referendum, Donald Trump’s surprising electoral victory as well as increasing populist sentiment within the EU.

Turning away from interdependence may have major consequences for security, both locally and more globally. For example, without global action, the repercus-

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sions of a deteriorating environmental situation many threaten the stability of many states: drought, flooding and rising sea levels could translate into more forced migration and regional conflict. While emerging countries are certainly more vulnerable, Europe and North America will not be shielded, even by higher walls or border fences. Furthermore, the industrialised countries are facing unprecedented economic challenges. Many of the promises of job creation, e.g. through protecting local markets, simply cannot be kept, and popular frustration over decreasing material security could play into the hands of authoritarian leaders.

For this reason, a major security threat lies in the institutionalisation of culturalist and nationalist reactions to globalization. In national conservative circles particularly, internationalism and globalisation are seen as threats to cultural diversity, drivers of a global monoculture that is wiping out diversity rather than increasing it (see Deneen 2009). This view of the world (and diversity) is founded on an identitarian (neo-Herderian!) and highly distorted ideal of the world as composed of countless cultural monocultures and clearly bounded, and often incompatible, cultural spaces. For example, both European and national identity are understood as organic and primordial rather than constructed. Identity is destiny rather than choice. In addition, much quasi-identitarian, national-conservative sentiment closely associates Christian faith with cultural concepts of Europe. Historical experience, including the emergence and spread of Christendom, but also the common experience of the Enlightenment define what is, what is not, and what can never be Europe.

National identity and patriotism are not by definition negative sentiments. However, nationalism becomes a problem when, exacerbated by socio-economic stress and geopolitical instability, it results in obscurantism, identity bordering and an aggravated accentuation of perceived difference between people, cultures and states. Revanchism, therefore, is anything but benign and, at heart, revanchist identity politics are anti-democratic and authoritarian. To quote O'Meara (2013: 168), a follower of identity ideas who does not cloak his opinions in mainstream conservatism, by the 'democratic levelling of liberalism' that 'suppresses very healthy expressions of authority and superiority' and that robs national societies of the 'the collective liberty of a people of nation to pursue its destiny as it took cultural, historical and biological form rather than merely economical.'

Political xenophobia needs to be understood in political terms and within this context, the concept of ontological security (Rumelili 2015) is particularly salient, as it emphasizes aspects of national identity that are prone to radicalization as well as equates bordering processes to securitization. The revanchist link between

identitary bordering and ontological security involves an amplified insistence on the ethics of the particular – ‘a metaphysical struggle for the meaning of space and locality’, to quote Drenthen (2010, 323). Nationalist populism has achieved a degree of commonsense status through threat scenarios of terrorism, increasing social burdens, and islamophobia as well as a general dislike of the European Union. In terms of extreme geographies, it engenders and justifies practices of everyday border-making that transform individuals and groups into ‘security subjects’ merely on the base of personal traits. Securitization is the process by which specific issues, phenomena and/or groups are framed in terms of security (see Waever 1995, Balzacq 2005). However, states and state-like institutions have no monopoly here; one of the most salient and potentially problematic aspects of securitization is the framing of threat in ways that emphasize national and cultural uniqueness in everyday terms (Larsen et. al. 2009) and through the appropriation of ‘popular geopolitics’ that emphasise cultural clashes and outright religious wars. (Shim 2016, Williams and Boyce 2013).

In conclusion, the consequences of weakened democracy could in fact be dire. In a rather alarming tone in an article in the Guardian George Monbiot of the Guardian writes: “*Eventually the anger that cannot be assuaged through policy will be turned outwards, towards other nations (...) I now believe that we will see war between the major powers within my lifetime.*” Alternative scenarios to increasing conflict require an honest political debate about the global impacts of local action and the commitments and responsibilities that we share. Independence, if understood as greater citizen participation, democracy, inclusion and capacity-building could in fact be a vital resource. However, denial of mutual reliance and reluctance to engage in common action will have higher social, economic and environmental costs that we perhaps presently imagine.

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