

# Humanitarian Intervention and Ontological Security

Written by Brian Terranova

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BRIAN TERRANOVA, SEP 23 2010

In a realist world, states are consumed with survival because the international arena is in a state of anarchy. This may be; a state needs to survive in order to be a *state* and protect its inhabitants. However, as Brent Steele posits, states are not only concerned with their survival but have other self identity needs they regard as their ontological security. This “security of the self[1]” helps states create and maintain an identity through structures, routines, and relationships. I agree with Steele that a state does want something more than just survival, but although “a state has an interest in protecting the vision of who it is[2],” there are instances where the actions of a state have no profound effect on its ontological security. In times of crises, a state will not act in order to protect and secure its self identity. There is no “honor[3]” being sought for identity purposes; simply put, a crisis compels the state to engage in a humanitarian act because the state has a moral obligation to do so. Crises create actions and speech that put ontological security and other political motives on the backburner as well as disregard the state’s biographical narrative.

For the purpose of this paper, I will use the term “crisis” to connote large and impactful disasters, consisting of natural, health-related, and war-related incidents. I am looking at crises generally and a deeper understanding and analysis of this concept is outside the scope and argument of my paper. Naturally states will respond to different crises in different ways with different policy measures, actions, and speech. A crisis differs from Steele’s “critical situation” because where a critical situation forces a state to intervene for identity purposes, a crisis compels a state to intervene strictly for humanitarian reasons. On the one hand, if the crisis is rapidly deteriorating, a state does not always have the time to compare the consistency of its current actions to its sense of self; on the other hand, if the crisis is not one of immediate life or death, a state can still pursue and enact policies that are inconsistent with its self identity. Further, there is a difference between short- and long-term crises, such as comparing the immediate consequences of a tsunami to a drawn out war, but I will try to focus on the state’s act of responding to a crisis, be the crisis long or short, natural or manmade. It is safe to say that in times of crises some sort of humanitarian action is needed by the state.

On the contrary to my argument, there are other motives as to why a state may engage in humanitarian behavior, and it can be argued, as Steele does, that identity, along with a need to fulfill a sense of self, are top motives. Additionally, states do respond with political motives as secondary intentions. For example one can argue that the Burmese government’s response to its domestic tsunami disaster had political implications along with deliberately trying to identify itself as compassionate and humanitarian to the rest of the world. One can go a sep further and argue that states *only* act with political and identity intentions. I recognize this but I am trying to break away from this argument by focusing on the initial humanitarian effort – the early physical acts and speech acts of the state after a crisis – I believe that this effort is made morally and ethically, and consequently, does not have an effect on a state’s ontological security.

During a crisis, whether it is international or domestic, a state needs to act immediately in order to alleviate the situation at hand and to protect the most people. Ontological security is a factor in a state’s actions, but it is not the immediate reason that causes states to intervene. A state will explain the reasons behind its interventions, and these reasons are mostly moral and humanitarian related. Concerning an international crisis, an unaffected state usually responds with humanitarian action, such as sending monetary aid, supplies, or assistance to the place in need. Steele argues that states engage in humanitarian actions due to “shame,” or an identity disconnect that resulted from

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past actions and policies that are inconsistent with a state's biographical narrative.[4] Therefore a state will review its biographical narrative to understand where it acted inconsistently from its identity and will subsequently perform a humanitarian act in order to rid its shame and re-establish its sense of self. I do agree that shame can be a motivating factor for a state to reflexively examine its biographical narrative and produce a policy that is consistent with its past actions and identity. In the case of the United States and its intervention in Kosovo through NATO in the late 1990s, the US's agreement to support NATO could very well have been the cause of the US's prior inaction to preventing the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

Nevertheless, shame is not always needed to pursue humanitarian actions during an international crisis. In times of immediate and severe crises, such as an environmental disaster like a tsunami or hurricane, states need to respond quickly, regardless of how they may have acted in past, similar situations. In these cases, a state is not acting to re-establish or repair its identity; its act can be naturally construed as a moral and compassionate act, which is how the state will relay the reasons behind its actions through speech, including press conferences and interviews. An example of this would be Cuba offering to send doctors and medical supplies to the United States after Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana. Cuba and the US do not have formal diplomatic relations nor was Cuba trying to reaffirm its identity, in my opinion. Yet Cuba acted in goodwill because the US needed aid and assistance in a time of disaster. Cuba also stated its concern for the affected US people publically along with a desire to help, justifying its aid offering. With these types of humanitarian responses, states act in a way that is strictly humanitarian and moral, regardless of who is under distress.

In addition, there are two questions to be asked regarding state actions and inactions in connection with international crises. Why do states intervene in some crises and not others? Is the intervention or lack thereof, based on the state's ontological security? My response is that ontological security is not the basis for action or inaction due to the fact that one state cannot be the main policing force and aid distributor for the entire world. One state cannot be relied upon to act on global every crisis, because no one state has the resources to do so. In fact, most states do not have the resources to solely protect its own citizens from a domestic disaster, let alone be able to contribute to all humanitarian programs around the world. As a result, states are forced to pick and choose their interventions.

Shifting to domestic crises, a state's main concern in these types of situations is to undeniably solve the crisis, alleviate any pain and suffering that may have been caused, and promote stability and order. As a state has an obligation to its citizens, shame of past policy actions should not be factored in when helping one's own people. The state should not be concerned with serving self identity needs in times of domestic despair; rather it has the responsibility to prevent instability and any ensuing damage that may occur without the implication that this act will shape its sense of self. States also formulate speech using terms such as "state of emergency" followed up by similar language in the vicinity of: "not only will we [the state] take rapid action in response to this crisis, we will also take the necessary precautions in order to provide swift, yet sustainable solutions," usually consisting of more personnel assistance and supplies. States also make it known during the first press conference that they have already taken positive measures and will send more help as needed. Because a state has the responsibility to protect its inhabitants, and during a crisis its inhabitants need desperate help that only a government can provide, ontological security as the prime motivating factor to act can be ruled out. Moreover, there is evidence that a state's identity is influenced by domestic level groups based on their lobbying and pressure; thus it can be assumed that when a domestic crisis occurs, these groups will use their own speech acts to pressure the state to respond quickly in order to protect their fellow citizenry. The pressure exerted from the domestic groups is not based on the state's need to fulfill its self identity; rather the pressure comes from the groups' humanitarian and empathetic nature to want to help their own people. There is no reflexive analysis of shame or the care to project a certain identity because shame or identity is not a motive that drives a state to act responsibly in times of a domestic crisis.

As a brief case study for my argument, I will look at the current economic crisis in relation to the new Democratic administration led by President Barack Obama in the United States. Since the 1960s, the US has been promoting neoliberalism as the answer for economic development and prosperity throughout the world. The US's ontology and biographical narrative were linked with neoliberalism and most government administrations throughout the past forty years were consistent with promoting free market policies and principles. But when the economic crisis hit the US, the Obama administration reduced the US's support of neoliberalism and called for a new financial structure, in turn

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developing a new identity for the US[5]. President Obama and his administration stated this in many public speeches, conferences, and interviews, carefully saying that their plans are in the sole interest of the average American taxpayer; therefore the stimulus packages, the bailouts, and the proposals for a new financial structure[6] were first and foremost answers to the crisis and a way to help the American people. These efforts to restructure the financial system with more regulation are not consistent with the US's biographical narrative; in fact there is a clean break from the consistency of economic policies in the narrative. The identity aspect in connection with Obama's measures was not the main objective of the economic rescue plan as he has stated that it was designed for the average American in mind[7]. Through the Obama administration's actions and speech, the US's identity will be reformulated in the future, but initially, ontological security needs were put aside during the responses to the domestic economic crisis. The Obama administration realized that it needed to deliver policy that would soothe the pain of the crisis at home and from there could turn its attention to the international landscape.

In conclusion, a state engages in humanitarian actions not just to show the world that it is compassionate and civil, but rather that it accepts its moral obligation to do so. During times of crises, a state puts its ontological security aside and acts on the needs of the disaster area. This is prevalent in the state's speech, where it decrees that all of its measures will be acted upon quickly and for the benefit of its citizens. The humanitarian act is not a result of a past shameful action, but rather it is a pure and compassionate act in which the state undertakes morally. Consistency with the state's biographical narrative is not a priority as a state can act humanely regardless of its past experiences or actions. Moreover, the state is not acting in a committed way to any external actor. The state is merely engaging in humanitarian aid in a moral fashion, and by doing so, the state aims to promote stability and order along with helping people at risk.

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[1] Mitzen, Jennifer. "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma." *European Journal of International Relations*. Vol 12, No.3, 431-370 (2006).

[2] Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. (2008).

[3] Honor is a motive of state for self-identity purposes. *Ibid*.

[4] A state's biographical narrative consists of its actions and speech, where these actions and speech create meaning for the state that is logical and consistent with its own perceived sense of self identity.

[5] These undertakings can actually be seen as dating back to the Autumn of 2008 during the final months of George Bush's presidency.

[6] As of this writing,

[7] Although in the long-term, identity will be crucial as the rest of the world blames the US for the crisis.