

Ontological Security, the Spatial Turn and Pacific Relationality:

A Framework for Understanding Climate Change, Human Mobility and Conflict/Peace in the Pacific

Part I

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Introduction

The concept of ontological security, introduced to the field of international relations more than a decade ago, has more recently also gained prominence in peace and conflict studies. It remains a contested concept, and a lively debate has emerged about its appropriateness and added value (or lack thereof) for the study of violence, conflict, peace and security. The following text will not engage in this debate; instead, it explores the concept's usefulness in a pragmatic and eclectic manner, asking whether it can provide a framework for understanding and explaining the complex nexus of climate change-induced mobility, security and peace in the context of Pacific Islands societies.

On first examination it appears the concept could be valuable in this regard. More than other security concepts, it engages with the meaning of place and space with relation to security. Given the significance of the land–people connection for people(s) of the Pacific, such a focus offers a promising entry point for understanding the challenges to peoples' security and wellbeing under conditions of climate change-induced mobility. The question at hand is how ontological security, as fundamentally em-placed (connected to a specific material

environment as ‘ontic space’, imbued with relations and meaning), is affected and can be maintained under conditions of displacement. Put from the point of view of the affected people, the question is how to deal with ontological insecurity, and the associated dangers of conflict and violence, in the course of displacement – how to stay ontologically secure despite displacement.

Some preparatory work will be presented for the development of a theoretical-conceptual framework that allows an exploration of this politically and practically highly significant question. For this purpose, this Policy Brief presents Part I of the study which will:

1. introduce the concept of ontological security as it is currently discussed in peace and conflict studies;
2. sketch the links between ontological security and the recent ‘spatial turn’ in peace and conflict studies;
3. establish links between ontological security, the spatial turn and Pacific relationality.

These topics will be covered based on a review of the relevant literature and on previous research addressing the links between climate change and human mobility in the Pacific, and the conflict-prone aspects of climate change-induced human mobility, which has already been presented in earlier policy briefs (see Policy Briefs [Boege 2018](#), [Boege 2020](#), [Campbell 2019](#), [Tabe 2020](#), [Anisi 2020](#), [Farbotko and Kitara 2021](#)).

This will be followed in Part II (Policy Brief No. 124) by a discussion of the explanatory potential of a combination of ontological security, the spatial turn and Pacific relationality for grasping the climate change–mobility–peace/conflict nexus in the societal-cultural context of the Pacific. Finally, some conclusions and recommendations for future research, policy and practice will be presented at the end of Part II of this study. So, while Part I will deal primarily with the theoretical-conceptual framing of the problems at hand, Part II will mainly discuss the political-practical consequences of this specific framing. The list of references for both parts of the study can be found at the end of Part II.

It will become clear that the concept of ontological security is necessary but not sufficient for understanding the issues at hand. As a fundamentally Western concept, it is confined by its own positionality, its own emplacement. Only if aligned with Pacific relationality, with its unique ‘non-Western’ qualities, can it gain explanatory clout in a Pacific societal-cultural context. On the other hand, it is anticipated that the concept of Pacific relationality, which shares some common ground with ontological security, could develop traction outside of the Pacific context more easily when linked to ontological security.

1. Ontological Security

1.1. The concept

The concept of ontological security, which has its origins in psychoanalysis, sociology and social psychology (Laing, Giddens), has gained prominence in international relations

scholarship (IR) over the last decade and a half (starting with Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008), and, more recently, also in Peace and Conflict Studies.

Ontological security in the context of IR originally set out to challenge mainstream conceptions of security which present security in physical or material terms. Ontological security as an alternative conceptualisation, by contrast, focuses on the security of the self/identity. It initially referred to the security of the self/identity of states:

While physical security is (obviously) important to states, ontological security is more important because its fulfillment affirms a state's self-identity (...) Nation-states seek ontological security because they want to maintain *consistent self-concepts*, and the "Self" of states is constituted and maintained through a narrative which gives life to routinized foreign policy actions (Steele 2008, 2-3, italics in original).

In a later stage, the concept was applied not only to states, but also to agents more generally, with the distinction between ontological and physical security as one of different referents: "the self/identity in the case of ontological security, the body in the case of physical security" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 38). Moreover,

[o]ntological security is a multi-layered security concept: first of all, unlike other security concepts, ontological security is inherently multi-layered and highlights the integral linkages and the fluid nexus between the individual and the collective (group, societal, state), attitudes, beliefs, and practices, without privileging one over the other (Rumelili 2015c, 198).

This conceptualisation of security allows for the inclusion of cultural, emotional, psychological, even spiritual aspects; it acknowledges the socially constructed character of security, and it moves away from the mainstream overwhelmingly state-centric and institutionalist understanding of security.

While introduced into IR with a focus on the ontological security of states, the concept's recent movement into peace and conflict studies was accompanied by a shift to a focus on the ontological security of individuals, taking Giddens' approach to ontological security as a starting point. In this context, ontological security as 'security of being' in the world

refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. A sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security (Giddens 1990, 92; see also Kinnvall 2004).

A stable sense of self emerges on the basis of a set of biographical narratives which allows for cognitive consistency and biographical continuity. 'Self-identity' and 'basic trust' are fundamental to ontological security, with self-identity "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography" (Giddens 1991, 53). Self-identity thus refers to the continuity of the person across time and space "as interpreted reflexively by the agent.

(...) To be a 'person' is not just to be a reflective actor, but to have a concept of a person (as applied both to the self and others)." (Giddens 1991, 53). This includes the dimension of affects, feelings, emotions as integral to the self. Ontological (in)security is "intimately linked to emotions" (Kinnvall 2017, 94) and passionate attachments (de Leon 2018, 7). Self-identity, as grounded in a narrative of the self, "is not something that is just given, (...) but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991, 52). Trust, on the other hand, refers to a sense of reliability in (relation to) other persons and one's environment. "Trust of other people is like an emotional inoculation against existential anxieties" (Kinnvall 2004, 746).

Self-identity and basic trust, and thus ontological security, are grounded in the "development of relatively secure environments of day-to-day life. (...) Ontological security, in other words, is sustained primarily through routine itself" (Giddens 1991, 167). The "mechanism generating basic trust is routinization, which regularizes social life, making it, and the self, knowable" (Mitzen 2006, 346). "Routines thus serve the cognitive function of providing individuals with ways of knowing the world and how to act" (Mitzen 2006, 347). Routines particularly refer to relations with others. "Actors therefore achieve ontological security especially by routinizing their relations with significant others" (Mitzen 2006, 342).

Hence ontological security is relational; security has to be interpreted "in relational terms in which everyday interactions and norms are reproduced to create a sense of order – what most ontological security scholars refer to as routines" (Kinnvall, 2017). On the other hand, "in addition to habits and routines, a feeling of biographical continuity, and its communication to other people as such, are essential components of ontological security" (Rumelili 2015b, 11). The feeling of biographical continuity and routines establish everyday social normality, permanence and continuity, as well as predictability. This, in turn, provides for a sense of mastery and control, which is key to ontological security.

Ontological security thus puts "emphasis on the importance of that which is routine or taken-for-granted. To be ontologically secure is to enjoy a relatively stable self-identity and, thereby, to avoid the anxiety or dread that would accompany constant confrontation with life's major existential questions" (Jarvis 2018, 8). Or, to put it differently: People are

ontologically secure when they feel they have a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness that is supported and recognized in and through their relations with others. When the relationships and understandings that actors rely on become destabilized, on the other hand, ontological security is threatened, and the result may be anxiety, paralysis or violence (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017, 4).¹

¹ Rumelili draws attention to the fact that, paradoxically, conflicts can "become sources of ontological security" (Rumelili 2015a, 2) and that conflict resolution can induce "ontological insecurity, a state of general anxiety which stems from the disruption of habits and the inability to sustain a coherent narrative about doing, acting, and being" (ibid., 2). Prospects of peace after war or violent conflict (can) threaten to "unsettle the stability and consistency of self-narratives"; and ontological insecurity "generates pressures for the reinstatement of the conflict narratives and practices, which had, after all, provided consistent, firm and non-negotiable answers to existential questions about being and acting" (ibid., 2). This inverse relation between ontological (in)security and violent conflict – violent

Giddens stresses the connection between interruption or destruction of routines and anxiety: “Ontological security and routine are intimately connected (...) The predictability of the (apparently) minor routines of day-to-day life is deeply involved with a sense of psychological security. When such routines are shattered – for whatever reason – anxieties come flooding in (...)” (Giddens 1990, 98).² This threat to “the ordinariness of everyday conventions can be seen psychologically as *dread* in Kierkegaard’s sense: the prospect of being overwhelmed by anxieties that reach to the very roots of our coherent sense of ‘being in the world’” (Giddens 1991, 37, italics in original). Hence “dread, and its management, is the core of understanding ontological security” (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017, 20). Kinnvall and Mitzen refer to anxiety instead of dread, but mean the same: “managing existential anxiety is at the heart of ontological security-seeking” (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 245). As anxiety is “part of the human condition (...) there is no perfect state of ontological security – anxiety always threatens to break through” (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 246). It is important to note that “ontological security is fundamentally different from other concepts of security because it denotes freedom from anxiety rather than fear” (Rumelili 2015c, 200).

Routines are ‘shattered’ and anxieties ‘come flooding in’ “whenever fateful moments intervene” – then “the sense of ontological security is likely to come under immediate strain” (Giddens 1991, 185). The reference to dread and fateful moments show that crisis and trauma are crucial for the understanding of ontological insecurity. Ontological insecurity is an extreme state in which the individuals’ “sense of self is fractured or disabled” (Rumelili 2015b, 11). Trauma as an exceptional state confirms the importance of ontological security and the disruptiveness of ontological insecurity (on trauma see Bleiker and Hutchinson 2008). “By exposing ontological insecurity, trauma is the exception that proves the rule of how deeply individuals rely on routine” (Mitzen 2006, 348). “Ontological insecurity refers to such a state of disruption, where subjects have lost their stabilizing anchor, their ability to sustain a linear narrative through which they can answer questions about doing, acting, and being” (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 246).

As will be argued later in this Policy Brief, climate change-induced displacement can be seen as a ‘fateful moment’ in Giddens’ sense, bringing about a “state of disruption” which leads to dread/anxiety and thus ontological insecurity. Hence the need to find ways of reconstructing ontological security.

conflict as a source of ontological security, ontological insecurity as an effect of conflict resolution – is not explored in this Policy Brief.

² For Giddens, it is important to differentiate between fear and anxiety: “Fear is a response to a specific threat and therefore has a definite object (...), anxiety is a generalised state of the emotions of the individual” (Giddens 1991, 43). “Anxiety is essentially fear which has lost its object through unconsciously formed emotive tensions that express ‘internal dangers’ rather than externalised threats” (Giddens 1991, 44). Anxiety is thus “less an emotion than a general psychic condition or mood, a ‘fear of fear’ or unease that can trigger a range of emotions and behaviors. This amorphousness of anxiety as opposed to fear, that is, its lack of a defined object, makes it more difficult to grasp causally, empirically, and conceptually as a social phenomenon” (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 241).

1.2. Ontological security as emplaced security

Ontological security is inextricably linked to ‘feeling at home’ (Kinnvall 2004; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018), of belonging to a particular place/space (on ‘place/space’ see below). This rootedness “is an important source of ontological security” (Ejdus 2017, 25). Specific material places or environments become ‘ontic spaces’: “Once incorporated into the narrative of the self, material environments become ontic spaces” (Ejdus 2017, 38), imbued with meaning, history, practices, routines, relationships. An ‘ontic space’ “serves as an important source of ontological security for individuals” (Ejdus 2017, 27).

Given the fundamental significance of being emplaced for being ontologically secure, leaving one’s place and losing one’s ontic space can be problematic or disruptive; (voluntary) migration and planned relocation can be, and (forced) displacement actually is, dangerous, it is laden with uncertainty, fear and anxiety, it can lead or does lead to ontological insecurity. Migration “is often characterized by a sense of powerlessness and dependence (...) mixed with an acute anxiety about (...) new circumstances and strong feelings of homelessness” (Kinnvall 2004, 747). It is a ‘critical situation’ which necessitates the re-establishment of the certitudes of institutional routines (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018, 827). These routines, which are constitutive for ontological security, are threatened or destroyed in the critical situation or ‘fateful moment’ (Giddens) of migration, relocation or displacement. In other words: If ontological security is embedded in material environment as ‘ontic space’, the question arises as to how ontological security can be maintained or re-established when people (have to) leave that environment/ontic space. Physical displacement comes with anxiety or dread, it entails the danger of becoming ontologically—not only physically—insecure.

Climate change as an existential threat directly affects the security of being which is linked to (a sense of) place. The effects of climate change fundamentally change places and environments; they can even make places uninhabitable or make them disappear altogether (think of low-lying atolls or coastal regions) and hence force people to move. Climate change thus fundamentally challenges ontological security. However, “very little is known about ontological security in cases of climate change displacement. This is one research and policy vacuum where a deeper understanding of ontological security may prove useful” (Farbotko 2019, 257).

The concept of ontological security invites us to ask what constitutes ontological uncertainty or insecurity for migrants or relocated or displaced people, and how they (try to) maintain ontological security in the face of migration, relocation, displacement. This means to engage with questions asked by people who are moving or will have to move, questions such as: “Are we still who we were? Will we still be ‘us’ in the future? What is our future identity going to be? How will we know what our culture and identity is and should be?” (Farbotko 2019, 254). Such questions so far hardly matter “in the rather technocratic world of climate change adaptation projects, or in relocation and migration governance. Ontological security is currently a concept effectively absent from adaptation policy and practice” (Farbotko 2019, 254). As a consequence, climate change-induced movement more often than not “ends up becoming a secondary disaster” (Oliver-Smith 2009, 124). In order to prevent such ‘secondary disasters’, “(n)ew conceptual frameworks are needed in which

ontological security is taken seriously in adaptation planning and relocation planning in particular” (Farbotko 2019, 255).

In this regard, more recent proposals for a partial reformulation of the concept of ontological security can be helpful. If we see ontological security as “not just a question of stability but also adaptability, i.e., openness towards and the ability to cope with change” (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 32), this opens up new avenues for addressing the dilemma of maintaining ontological security in the face of displacement.

This means to move beyond Giddens’s understanding of ontological security as security of being to an understanding of ontological security as security of becoming. This shift “away from too strong an identification with ontological security as a ‘security of being’ – something individuals can possess or have – towards an understanding of ontological security that emphasizes a ‘security of becoming’” (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 253) allows for the possibility of maintaining or re-constructing ontological security even in the face of ‘fateful moments’ such as forced displacement. Such a move is supported by the differentiation of self and identities: the self

should be viewed as analytically distinct from the identities it reaches for in order to secure a sense of being in the world. (...) dislocatory events will challenge existing identifications, potentially generating anxiety. In such situations, subjects may well try and cling onto existing articulations of selfhood. However, while stability is an important element of ontological security, upholding a distinction between self and identity (identification) enables us to highlight that, at its core, ontological security also requires flexibility and adaptability (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 44).

Moreover, the ‘onto-political’ character of security, its dependence on specific historical, societal and cultural contexts, has to be given more prominence. An understanding of security as vernacular security allows the capturing of this ‘onto-political’ character:

Uncertainty is ontological because, as Giddens (1991) suggests, it is an existential feature of the human condition; and yet it is always socially expressed because different societies have different ways of socially producing it, discursively portraying it, symbolically representing it and politically managing it (Bubandt 2005, 277).

Hence “uncertainty is always ontologically based and politically inflected” (Bubandt 2005, 291). This ‘onto-political’ combination of the ontological and the political draws attention to the specifics of the societal context in which uncertainty and security play out. Ontological uncertainty can be defined “as the socially constructed anxiety that shapes pertinent kinds of danger, fears and concerns for a particular community at a particular time” (Bubandt 2005, 277). The ‘particular community’ at a ‘particular time’ is the subject of vernacular security studies. Vernacular security basically deals with what specific people in a specific context at a specific time think of when they talk about security. “Vernacular security is precisely, and only, whatever people understand or construct security to mean in the context of their everyday lives” (Jarvis 2018 12). This conceptualisation of security acknowledges that “(...) security, far from being a stable or universally homogenous concept,

is contextually and historically linked to shifting ontologies of uncertainty” (Bubandt 2005, 291; see also Jarvis 2018). As will be shown later, in the Pacific context, for example, “... vernacular understandings of security transcend the rational, secular realm of conventional security provision, also reaching out into spiritual, other-worldly dimensions” (Boege and Hunt 2020, 511).

As will be demonstrated later, this more contextualised, more dynamic conceptualisation of ontological security which leaves behind the more static and substantialist aspects of the concept, allows for its alignment with Pacific relationality as an approach to address the disruptions, fears, anxieties, challenges to ontological security that come with climate change-induced mobility.

2. The ‘Spatial Turn’ in Peace and Conflict Studies

2.1. Place, space, and scale

The rather recent interest in the concept of ontological security in Peace and Conflict Studies coincides with a ‘spatial turn’ in the discipline.³ This is not surprising – there are apparent links: ontological security as “emplaced security” (Brigg and George 2020) has a spatial dimension, and the spatial turn addresses the onto-political dimension of peace and security. For research interested in the nexus of climate change, human mobility, conflict and peace and security, it seems to be promising to explore the explanatory potential of a combination of these two approaches. For this research, the concepts of place, space and scale are fundamental as it deals with movement between places and spaces and across scales. Hence, in this section a brief introduction into the ‘spatial turn’ is presented.

The spatial turn begets research that investigates the interconnectedness between space, peace and conflict (Bjoerkdahl and Kappler 2017). It is based on the premise that “place and space are fundamental to political ordering, to governance and to security” (Brigg and George 2020, 415). It responds to the question of how we can understand peace/conflict in spatial terms (Bjoerkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016). “For the spatial turn, space and place are not inert or neutral containers, but dynamic webs of interconnection across time and place” (Brown 2020, 432).

Place and space have to be differentiated.⁴ Place refers to a fixed material locality.⁵ Space is the “symbolic, ideational counterpart” of place (Bjoerkdahl and Kappler 2019, 2), “the ideational extension of physical presence, i.e., place” (Bjoerkdahl and Kappler 2019, 4).

³ On the spatial turn in peace and conflict studies see the Special Issue of *Cooperation and Conflict* 2020 (55, 4), in particular the introduction by Brigg and George (2020).

⁴ This differentiation of the terms place and space is specific to the particular discourse of the spatial turn. There are of course other understandings of place and space out there, both in academia and everyday parlance. For our purposes we will stick with this differentiation.

⁵ The physicality, materiality and fixity of place, however, is also linked to social construction: “the boundaries that are understood to demarcate a place are created through social imaginings and meaning making. Such boundaries do not pre-exist imaginings...people determine where one place

Space does not exist independently from or prior to interactions; it is “the product of interrelations (...) constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny” (Massey 2005, 31; also Massey 1999, 2). Space is shaped by agency, and agency is shaped by space; space shapes society and society shapes space (Lefebvre 1991). Space is

both a complex social construction and the condition in which individuals and groups interact. (...) There is thus a mutually constitutive relationship between space and the societies that inhabit it: space is shaped by social interactions and at the same time it shapes these interactions (Bjoerkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016, 3).

Accordingly, “what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations”, with social relations “never still; they are inherently dynamic” (Massey 1994, 2).

Such a conceptualisation of space rescues it from its position “of stasis, passivity and depoliticization” (Massey 1994, 6). As space is a product of relations “which are necessarily embedded material practices *which have to be carried out*, it is always in a process of becoming; it is always being made. It is never finished; never closed” (Massey 1999, 2, italics in original; also Massey 2005, 32). This conceptualisation explicitly turns away from previously dominant understandings of the spatial “as the sphere of stasis and of fixity” (Massey 1999, 6).

Space as socially constructed is “in a constant state of reproduction” (Grenfell, 2018: 242), always in the process of being made, “constituted in the course of everyday life” (Henrizi 2015, 77). As space is constructed socially and reproduced via recurring patterns of social interaction, it is always contested terrain, and hence the production of space “is highly political” (Bjoerkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2016, 4). Spaces have multiple layers of meaning, with certain meanings privileged over others.

Social construction and political contestation of spaces are connected to a specific material place, but they are also open to numerous inter-scalar influences that intersect in a specific material place. Scale refers to the vertical organisation of space. As is the case with space, scales are not given, but socially produced and reproduced – “products of wider social, political, economic and cultural processes rather than (...) pre-defined arenas within which such processes unfold” (MacKinnon 2010, 23). Therefore “any spatial scale such as ‘the national’ or ‘the regional’ is itself a product of wider processes and social relations” (MacKinnon 2010, 23; Swyngedouw 1997, 140). One has to be aware of “the historical construction and transformation of scale through social processes” (MacKinnon 2010, 32). Space, on the other hand,

can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the

begins and another ends” (Grenfell 2020, 464). Accordingly, the “identity” of place has to be understood “as constructed through relations with elsewhere” (Massey 1999, 10), horizontally with other places and vertically across scales.

geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace (Massey 1994, 4).

“Spatial scales are never fixed, but are perpetually redefined, contested, and restructured in terms of their extent, content, relative importance, and interrelations” (Swyngedouw 1997, 141). Scale

is neither an ontologically given and a priori definable geographical territory nor a politically neutral discursive strategy in the construction of narratives. Scale, both in its metaphorical use and material construction, is highly fluid and dynamic, and both processes and effects can easily move from scale to scale and affect different people in different ways, depending on the scale at which the process operates. (...) Scale is, consequently, not socially or politically neutral, but embodies and expresses power relationships (Swyngedouw 1997, 140).

Micro-political scales such as the neighbourhood, the household and the sphere of social reproduction are intertwined with national or global scales, “shaped by, responding to, or resisting” activities at other scales” (George 2020, 523). Roger Mac Ginty introduces the concept of ‘circuitry’ as an analytical device for connecting the hyper-local and local to other scales like the national, international or transnational (Mac Ginty 2019). “The concept of circuitry encourages us to foreground ideas of connectivity and the need (...) to pay attention to the interstices between categories and levels of analysis” (Mac Ginty 2019, 248). Its main advantage is “that it allows us to see the international and transnational as connected to individual, everyday and ontological concerns with security and identity” (Mac Ginty 2019, 248).

The value of this approach is demonstrated, for example, by Nicole George through her exploration of the linkages between scales referring to the case of women’s political engagement in Solomon Islands. She points to the importance of “narratives of emplaced identity” which allow women “to reflect on their strength they derived from their relationship to place at the local scale, and how this might provide an important foundation point from which to navigate new political spaces” (George 2020, 527). Women draw political power and standing from their local space, and this enables them to challenge “the ways politics were negotiated at other scales” (George 2020, 530). By “rescaling or scaling down” they “lay claim to political credentials and strengths” that are grounded in place “and that can be mobilized to amplify their political voice at other political scales” (George 2020, 530). Hence ‘emplaced identity’ deriving from the ‘small spaces’ of family and community can become “a source of power, legitimacy and inspiration” (George 2020, 531).

Closer to the topic of this Policy Brief, McNamara, Clissold and Westoby demonstrate how the “marketplace scale” is an entry point for climate change adaptation in a country like Vanuatu (McNamara, Clissold and Westoby 2020).

In the context of the ‘spatial turn’ and the accompanying conceptualisation of place, space and scale, the ‘local’, which is of crucial importance for the study of climate change-induced

mobility, conflict, peace and security is also re-conceptualised.⁶ It is understood not as another ('lower') 'level' ('beneath' the national and international) of politics, but as "a sphere of activity that is constantly being made and remade, sometimes with replication and sometimes with change. It is made, remade and negotiated through the everyday actions of inhabitants, as well as those of exogenous and institutional actors" (MacGinty 2015, 851). This understanding of the local follows a "relational conceptualisation of space" (Henrizi 2015, 77).

The locale/the locality is co-created and shared by a variety of interacting local, national, regional and international actors and institutions in the course of their everyday interactions across places and scales. The local hence is not an isolated place, but it is the product—and the site—of interactions across scales. At the same time, however, "we cannot completely deterritorialise the local. It retains a physical meaning": homes, food gardens, bus stops, roads, schools, markets, shops ...; these spaces "are often very difficult for outsiders to access. They are often zones of informality, yet also the places where important interactions take place..." (Mac Ginty 2016, 205).

From an ontological security perspective, the space of 'the home' is of particular prominence at the local scale: "ontological security is very much connected with the home" (Mac Ginty 2019, 239).⁷ And 'the home' is understood here not just as the physicality of the house, but as the socially constructed space of everyday routines which provides for a deep sense of belonging and interconnectedness.⁸ Home "as a bearer of security" links together "a material environment with a deeply emotional set of meanings relating to permanence and continuity (...) Home, in this sense constitutes a spatial context in which daily routines of human existence are performed. It is a domain where people feel most in control of their lives..." (Kinnvall 2004, 747). Hence the "importance of the home and the immediate vicinity of the home to perceptions of (in)security." In the home as place/space/scale, everyday security⁹ and ontological security intersect.

⁶ In fact, the 'local turn' in critical studies of peacebuilding preceded the current 'spatial turn' (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). Over the last years it has informed a broad range of peacebuilding research and influenced peacebuilding practice. See, inter alia, Richmond 2009; Higate and Henry 2010; Richmond and Mitchell 2012; Autesserre 2014; Mac Ginty 2014; Mac Ginty 2019; Bjoerkdahl, Hall and Svensson 2019; Richmond 2020. For recent critical discussions of the concept see Randazzo 2016; Guillaume and Huysmans 2019; Millar 2020.

⁷ The Everyday Peace Indicators project found ample evidence of the significance of 'home' for security (Mac Ginty 2019).

⁸ One has to keep in mind though, that the home "is not always associated with notions of safety and security. It may be the site of abuse, power imbalances, such as patriarchy, and narrow horizons" (Mac Ginty 2019, 241).

⁹ On everyday security or everyday peace see Randazzo 2016; Millar 2020; Guillaume and Huysmans 2019. Randazzo understands the everyday as the "realm of contingent relationality" (Randazzo 2016, 1359), "a realm of complex interconnectedness where multiple actors and networks exist, interact and overlay" (Randazzo 2016, 1354). Millar conceptualises the everyday as the space of 'un-thought' / 'intuitive' / 'reflex' normal or routine social activities, practices, habits. These are not explicitly political, but "pre-political" (Millar 2020). They nevertheless contribute to the security of individuals and groups in their everyday lives in their respective spaces. They "focus on the management of dread at the level of the 'everyday'" (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017, 20). Such an understanding of everyday-ness links with ontological security. Similar to ontological security, it focuses on the security

2.2. A caveat: the spatial turn as a phenomenon of Western academic thinking

While the 'spatial turn' and the discovery of place and space as of major significance for peace and security is 'new' to peace and conflict studies, their importance has been deeply ingrained in indigenous peoples' traditional ways of knowing and being in the world "over thousands of years" (Brigg 2020, 541) The 'spatial turn' in peace and conflict studies is Western/Eurocentric and anthropocentric. It

represents the working through of a European conceptual and analytical problem that other peoples simply may not have. Aboriginal Australian peoples, for instance, do not share this problem. Aboriginal Australian approaches to space, place and scale secure highly sophisticated forms of socio-political order through complex forms of relationality grounded in landscape. This approach to space, place and scale enables long-term and 'emplaced' security. Adjectives such as 'vernacular' and 'ontological' hardly seem necessary, (...) (Brigg 2020, 545).

In an Australian indigenous understanding, for example, place/space constantly "co-becomes" – constituted through relationships (Bawaka Country 2016, 458). This means "to think space relationally, as co-constituted by the associations, networks and interactions of diverse agents and materialities" (Bawaka Country 2016, 459). Moreover, in an indigenous understanding the notion of space "as socially embedded and socially constituted may be extended to incorporate and acknowledge the more-than-human world" (Bawaka Country et al. 2016, 464). Place is space which contains relations, and is constituted by relations, between humans, land/place and non-humans. This space/place has agency of its own (places, for example, can recognise people). Local agency in this understanding is agency of the place, this is an alternative to anthropocentric conceptions of agency.

Drawing attention to indigenous ways of knowing space, makes us realise that the 'spatial turn' is itself emplaced – in the North/West, in the space of Western knowledge and academia, in "global circuits of professional knowledge production" (Brigg 2020, 549). The 'knower' of the spatial turn, however, although "relationally bound rather than self-subsistent" (Brigg 2020, 538), is—in this Western academic discourse—presented as abstract and non-emplaced:

In much study of international security, the knowing subject appears to ideally speak from no place, but for all places. Emplacement entails recognition that one is always speaking or observing from somewhere. This, however, enables a different appreciation of, and engagement with, others (Brown 2020, 434).

of people, and on the social construction of security through routines. Guillaume and Huysmans suggest seeing the everyday not as a distinct level or scale of politics (e.g., 'micro') (2019, 286 and 292). Their conceptualisation of the everyday "is not a reversing move that favours the micro over the macro. Rather, it deletes levels as key analytical tools" (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 283), and it understands the everyday not as a "distinct realm of social life but rather a point of view on social life" (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 281).

3. Linking Ontological Security to Pacific Relationality

In order to make the concept of ontological security fruitful for the study of the climate change, mobility, conflict/peace nexus in a Pacific context, it has to be linked to Pacific relationality.¹⁰

From the presentation of ontological security in the sections above, it has become clear that it is a deeply 'Western' concept, firmly grounded in Western worldviews and academic disciplines. First and foremost, it is "a concept that has been developed with the individual in mind" (Rumelili 2015b, 10), with the individual understood as an autonomous entity (and this also applies to 'the state' conceptualised as an individual). Pacific relationality provides an alternative. Admittedly, relationality also matters in ontological security and in the 'spatial turn', but Pacific relationality puts relationality in a much more radical way into the centre of the understanding of being in the world. It embodies a relational ontology which gives priority to relations over entities. It takes human beings not as isolated 'individuals', as the sovereign self, but as members of communities, defined through their—rational, affective and spiritual—relationships with other human beings as well as with actors beyond the human sphere, in nature and the spirit world.¹¹

Pacific relationality embraces "both individuality and communality, unity and diversity, visibility and invisibility, male and female, top and bottom, secular and sacred, heaven and earth, God and the world, (...), tangible and intangible. Relationality is a both/and way of thinking" (Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017, 11). Being relational "is about wrestling to understand the 'individual' as part of the 'community' and the 'community' as imaged in the 'individual' (...) it is about being able to have a fluid and holistic grasp of both" (Vaai 2017, 26). 'Community' is not confined to presently living human beings, but has to be understood in a holistic cosmic way, including people, land, ocean, ancestors, spirits, unborn generations, trees, animals, mountains, God – they are all part of the community in a Pacific relational way of being in and understanding the world, and they all exist only relationally, and they all are agents in their own right. "Everything is entangled in a web of connectivity which is constantly in motion, constantly co-becoming" (Bawaka Country 2016, 462); and co-becoming "is not human-centred" (Bawaka Country et al. 2016, 463). This challenges us "to centre relationality, decentre the human and attend to the vibrant agency of more-than-human beings" (Bawaka Country et al. 2016, 457). Pacific relationality thus transcends a human-centred perspective, and it conceptualises personhood as genuinely "relational and contextual" (Nabobo-Baba 2017, 163).¹² "The individual or self, then, is because he/she is

¹⁰ In the following, the focus will be on 'Pacific' relationality. Relationality, however, is at the core of worldviews and life among indigenous peoples all over the world, be it in Australia, Africa, Asia or the Americas. For Aboriginal Australia see e.g., Bawaka Country 2016, for Native American North America see e.g., Booth 2003, Walker 2004 or Watts 2013.

¹¹ On relationality in a Melanesian context and the understanding of the Melanesian 'va' – 'the space between', that is: a relational space that separates and joins, not least connecting the spiritual and the secular – see the contributions in Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017.

¹² For this relational understanding of personhood in a Melanesian cultural context see also Nanau 2017.

in essence a unit of the tribe or vanua which fosters one” (Nabobo-Baba 2017, 169; italics in original).

This relationality is fundamentally embedded in connection to place/space. Everyone and everything is related, “*in a bounded relationship to each other in, through and as part of place/space/Country*” (Bawaka Country et al. 2016, 460, italics in original). Place/space itself is to be understood “as relational, as always emerging, as human *and* more-than-human, and as both bounded *and* constituted through flows and relationships” (Bawaka Country et al. 2016, 460, italics in original). It is the site of “multi-faceted, embedded relations amongst and between humans and non-humans” (Bawaka Country et al. 2016, 464). Accordingly, “environments entail relations between people and spirits, animals and plants, deities and materialized ancestors” (Emde, Duerr and Schorch 2020, 6). Beings are understood not as being in a place, but “as beings that *are* place/space, that co-become with it. Place/space is irrepressibly alive” (Bawaka Country et al. 2016, 466).¹³ Accordingly, “indigenous peoples do not just belong to a place; rather, they often see themselves as embodying place itself” (Tiatia-Seath, Tupou and Fookes 2020, 401). This echoes the “relational understanding of the world” which underlies Massey’s conceptualisation of space (referred to above), with its focus on “the relational constructedness of things” (Massey 2005, 33). In this conceptualisation of space as well as in Pacific relationality space, relations, and entities/identities “are all coconstitutive” (Massey 2005, 33). Not to forget that in the Pacific, place/space does not only mean the landscape, but also the seascape, the starscape, the spiritscape (McGavin 2017, 126).

From this relational understanding of space flow deep links to place which

create moral relationships of responsibility to protect and care for the environment (...) shaping belief systems, identity, language, knowledge and livelihood practices (...) Indigenous institutions and collective action produce, reproduce, and sustain the material and socio-cultural values deriving from place; and high levels of agency stem from the confidence derived from place-specific knowledge. (...) relationships with place provide the basis of what it means to be Indigenous by linking the past, present, and future (Ford et al. 2020, 539-540).

In this ontology, Cartesian dualistic distinctions such as society/people versus nature or culture versus environment or emotions versus rationality or subject versus object or human versus non-human are non-existent. Consequently, the ‘environment’ or the ‘climate’ cannot be understood in an anthropocentric, dualistic and substantialist manner (as separate from people, society and the sacred), they have to be understood cosmologically. Accordingly, “we can never confine the climate change discussions to the physical material dimensions; rather, we have to take into serious consideration the spiritual dimension that shapes the being and structure of the multiple relationships in the household” (Vaai 2019,

¹³ Native Americans share this worldview: Land “is alive and thinking and (...) humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (Watts 2013, 21). The “agency that place possesses can be thought of in a similar way that Western thinkers locate agency in human beings” (Watts 2013, 23).

13) – with household understood in the encompassing way inherent in the Greek ‘oikos’ as an inclusive, holistic, relational concept embracing the whole inhabited earth (Vaai 2019).

Such a ‘whole of life’ approach, the idea of an all-embracing network of life, does not have the human being in isolation at its centre, but understands human beings and human society relationally, in relation to other-than-human beings, both in the material and spiritual worlds (Vaai 2019). And it does not see humans as ‘the crown of creation’, but as embedded in a network of relations of reciprocal exchange with other life forms. Cartesian dualism and extractive attitudes towards nature do not fit into this ‘whole of life’ approach, nor do concepts of land as ‘property’ or ‘land ownership’ – they are alien concepts introduced from the outside.

From such a position even a concept like human security is found wanting. With its focus on the individual human being it remains an inherently Western concept (which posits to be universal), with an atomistic, anthropocentric approach “that focuses on individuals as discrete, autonomous units rather than as selves-in-relationship” (Walker 2004, 535), and that separates humans from the natural (and super-natural) world and other-than-human beings, putting man over nature and over other-than-human beings, degrading them to ‘natural resources’ that are to be ‘managed’, ‘used’ and ‘exploited’ in the interest of humans. It compartmentalises and upholds the society/nature and human/non-human divides which are alien to Pacific and other indigenous concepts of relationality. ‘Society’ is not just human, but revolves around interactions between humans “animals, the spirit world, and the mineral and plant world (...) rather than solely interactions amongst human beings” (Watts 2013, 21). In this worldview, which sees humans as part of—rather than removed from and superior to—the natural order, “maintaining essential relationships (...) ‘kinship’ with other living beings” is of “vital importance” (Booth 2003, 336). Hence it does not make sense to talk about human security as isolated from these interactions and relations, from the web of life which also includes plants, animals, rivers, rocks....

The “compartmentalized narrative”, however, which is still inherent also in the concept of human security, “shapes climate discussions today, and continues to advance human-centric development at the expense of everything else” (Vaai 2019, 4). This narrative “is a foreign concept to the Pacific” (Vaai 2019, 5). And so is ontological security. Linking it to Pacific relationality, however, allows us to take the concept beyond dominant Western framings of the self, of society and political order and thus opens up new perspectives for exploring climate change, mobility, conflict/peace.

The second part of this study (Policy Brief No. 124) explores what this could look like. It focuses on the significance of the land/people connection (the vanua) and the challenges associated with migration, relocation and displacement stemming from this connection. The theoretical and practical-political question that has to be addressed is how to maintain this connection, perhaps in new forms, and thus how to overcome ontological insecurity, in the face of these challenges. Flowing from the discussion of this question, some conclusions and recommendations will be presented at the end of Part II.

(A full list of references can be found at the end of Part II).

The Author

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