

# *Theory Talks*

*Presents*

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## THEORY TALK #26

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### JENNIFER MITZEN ON ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY, MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY, AND STATES' ADDICTION TO WAR

#### Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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# JENNIFER MITZEN ON ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY, MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY, AND STATES' ADDICTION TO WAR



**IR is all about war. That is, our work is to an extent based on the imperative that war is to be avoided. But what if states develop a dependency on conflict, what if war becomes an addiction that co-determines their *raison d'être* in important ways? In this Talk, Jennifer Mitzen shows – amongst others – how the most important thing seems to be not the nature of state relations but rather their stability, and, in this line of thought, she probes into the history of multilateral diplomacy to show how it provokes peace for surprising reasons.**

**What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?**

I won't presume to say what the big debate is; and I wonder whether IR is still defined by its big debates among paradigms, the way it used to be. When I'm immersed in something I tend to think of its questions as the 'big' debate. So now, for example, I think it's important to understand the effects of talking in public. World politics is full of public talk; the United States just elected a president who stresses talking to adversaries 'without preconditions'; and we don't know enough about how talking in public works and the effects it produces. So to me, debates among rationalists, constructivists, legal scholars, and so on, on the impact of talk and the prospects for deliberation in world politics seem most challenging and interesting.

That research question could be embedded in a Big Debate, like rational choice vs. constructivism or realism vs. idealism; but why? The larger debates didn't drive the research, and the goal isn't to figure out which paradigm gets it right. So it wouldn't make sense to approach the question as a partisan on a particular side of a debate. Knowing the big debates is certainly helpful for learning the field. But it seems like for doing research and answering real world questions debates can sometimes overemphasize differences when it can be more productive to be open to or highlight overlaps and synergies.

**How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?**

A strong influence was the graduate school environment at the University of Chicago, where I received my Ph. D. As an undergraduate I had been an economics major, and didn't take any international relations courses. A journalistic internship after college led me to think about graduate school; and I applied to Chicago's Committee on International Relations master's

program, and afterward for the Political Science PhD. So I came to graduate school with little IR background. And what was unique about the U of Chicago environment was its intellectual openness and interdisciplinarity. There was the freedom and encouragement to experiment intellectually, and the opportunity to present ideas and get feedback in workshop settings across a range of disciplines, methods, and worldviews. There also was a culture of critical engagement with each other's ideas. So I'd say it was the interplay of people that I got in touch with in that intellectual environment that helped me to both learn the field and to keep its boundaries porous.

In terms of intellectual influences for particular ideas, a graduate seminar on Hannah Arendt is what initially spurred thinking about what it might mean for states to govern together. This eventually morphed into a focus on Habermas and public spheres, and now has led me to the collective intentionality literature, for insights into plural subjecthood and action. And I happened to be reading on [Heinz Kohut and self-psychology](#) as I was doing the empirical work for my dissertation. This led to ontological security, and to speculating about whether it might be possible to scale up the need for ontological security from individuals to states.

### **What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?**

To start with, a PhD, one that includes broad training in theories of IR, in a wide range of methods, and in an appreciation for all of them. It also seems important to say that being a specialist in IR isn't just about the training. You can have the best training in the world, but it boils down to, first, whether you have a good question and second, whether you're curious about and/or feel you have something to say about international politics. Not that you need to enter graduate school with a fully formed dissertation topic or the germs of a breakthrough theoretical contribution. But caring about world politics and about ideas really needs to be there. Without it, why sit down every day in front of the computer, struggling through writing blocks, conceptual dead-ends, messy empirics, and so on?

### **A lot of theorists in IR have chosen to look back into diplomatic history to develop their ideas. You've looked at [the Concert of Europe](#). Why?**

First, I find the Concert of Europe intrinsically interesting – it's the first security institution, the first experiment with using multilateral diplomacy to manage the balance of power. It's also interesting because the Concert is often treated as a model for contemporary security governance. After the Cold War, it was frequently seen as a model for the new Europe; after the US unilateralism of the early 2000s it has appeared again, as part of a debate about a multilateral alternative. With some scholars advocating a 'council of democracies' to enforce international norms, others raise the example of the Concert as preferable for being less institutionalized and more pluralistic. So actually, developing my argument by probing the 19th century does not take me very far from today's debates.

Finally, I think we haven't yet absorbed the lessons of the Concert. We take for granted that states can solve problems by sitting in a room together, debating policy specifics. But this makes

the role of talking solely one of information exchange. While that is important, talking in public has a lot more force.

To get a sense of its power, it's useful to step back to when talking together was not taken for granted. Before the Concert, great powers had only ever cooperated to help defeat one another, so forum discussions appeared threatening. So by examining the early phases of multilateral diplomacy, it's easier to see that before meetings could be for information exchange they had to serve a deeper function, of pulling states together and helping them solve the problem of violence.

**What's the role of argument and deliberation in international politics? How does it matter for the response of the international community if, for example, states state their intentions 'nicely' before invading a country?**

Public talk, that is, multilateral diplomacy, is perhaps the most important legitimizing tool for international action. NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo is generally perceived as legitimate because of the arguments advanced in the diplomacy surrounding it. The U.S.-led invasion in Iraq is not, at least partly because of how the US conducted its multilateral diplomacy.

Taking the Iraq case, where the U.S. went to the Security Council but acted anyway, one could certainly argue that U.S. talk was cheap. But think about if the U.S. had *not* announced its plans in the Security Council. It's very likely that the legitimacy of the Security Council as the primary institution for managing global security would have been damaged, since it would have given license to other great powers to do the same. And the U.S. has paid a price for its unilateralism, since it greatly diminished American 'soft power.' There are always rule-breakers, in any society; and so the proposition is not that states engaging in public talk won't break international rules. The proposition is rather that being a hypocrite in a context where a state can be called out as a hypocrite – that is, where there are forums for and a discourse of joint problem-solving – is costly.

**Your work on international politics seems to be concerned solely with interstate relations. Is IR still all about states? That is, can state agency solve that small number of very important problems in the world?**

Well, I should say that I think that IR is not all about states. I have, however, two reasons to focus on them anyway. First, states can either obstruct global problem solving or facilitate it. As long as state action is required on an issue, it's important to understand inter-state dynamics. Second, states are the world's principal legitimate public goods providers. Who else can we turn to, for basic safety, health, and security? Not our neighbors, or NGOs, or stakeholders, or corporations. The only mechanism through which these are provided reliably and with accountability is government. What we have now is a situation where we seem to agree that there are global public goods, but there is no world state. As long as states remain the principal actors responsible for human wellbeing, in a holistic sense, then how they work together to create a public space and provide public goods, is an important focus of study.

**In your 2006 article, *Ontological Security in World Politics*, you argue that states might**

**want to uphold even conflicts in their search for stable surroundings or 'ontological security'. Can you explain that, and give an example?**

The question that fascinated me was: how could it be possible that a state might 'want' a conflict? We assume states want to avoid conflict. Yet there are cases, like the Cold War, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and others, where parties seem deeply attached to the conflict; and their attachment seems to be keeping the conflict alive. Realists who look to the security dilemma would explain this anomaly with the concept of uncertainty, but uncertainty about one another's intentions seems insufficient to explain how states can keep a conflict alive for over fifty years. I propose that the problem is more one of certainty than uncertainty. Conflicts are routinized relationships, and routines secure identities. The premise is that all social actors value agency, their ability to choose and pursue goals, and that ability rests on knowing their preferences and interests. Agency rests on identity. This means actors need to feel they have stable identities; they need ontological security.

The reason we should treat stable identity as something actors seek, rather than something that can be assumed, has to do with uncertainty – deep, profound uncertainty – and our intrinsic fear of it. Social life is full of danger, and it's not just the known unknowns, but also the unknown unknowns, that we fear. But if we were actively aware of all the dangers all the time, our anxiety would be so intense that it would be impossible to act at all. Routines, especially routines with significant others, hold this uncertainty at bay. The platform of stability they create helps aspiring agents know who they are. So, when faced with a new or uncertain environment, actors tend to routinize their relationships, to create the stability or certainty they need in order to be agentic. Then, because actors value agency, they get attached to the routines, even if the relationships they create are physically harmful. That's the pathology of ontological security.

**The argument that states need 'ontological security' is based partly on psychological ideas. Applied to states, how far can the psychological analogy go?**

This is a very good question. A lot of theorizing about states is in some way or another based on an analogy with individuals. In IR, realists assume that states have egoistic 'personalities' and are driven by a need for material security, while neo-liberals argue that we should analyze the state as a rational decision maker. Those both are psychological assumptions about states. In arguing that states, besides physical security, also need ontological security, I just take the realist-rationalist argument to a more general level. In fact, since rational action emanates from preferences or desires, states cannot be rational actors without having a sense of stable identity.

**Anarchy is, for realists, the most structural characteristic of the international system. However, if public diplomacy matters, couldn't one argue that there is no anarchy between states?**

It depends on what we mean by anarchy. If we're talking about the fact that the use of force is de-centralized and not unified into a world state, then of course there is still anarchy. But when anarchy is defined as a distribution of political authority, namely as the flip side of sovereignty, where sovereignty implies that all political authority is inside the state and none is between them, then whether anarchy exists is an open question. This isn't a new insight – several scholars have been challenging the premise of anarchy on these grounds for a long time. So, in order to know

whether to accept or reject the premise of anarchy, the first question is, how is political authority constituted? Then, where is it located? According to public sphere theory, political authority is discursively constituted and we need to look at structures of communication and at how actions are decided upon and rationalized. From here, whether there's anarchy or not in a given issue is an empirical question. Again, a lot of scholars have recognized the limits of anarchy as an assumption about the structure of world politics; what I add is to come at it from a public sphere perspective.

### **Is your approach to world politics optimistic?**

Actually, in one sense my approach is quite pessimistic. The need for ontological security helps us see how conflicts can become sources of identity, and so subject to attachment dynamics that cause them to persist and to be hard to let go of. Conflicts can be a lot more important to participants – and therefore a lot stickier – than even realists recognize.

On the more hopeful side, what I've written on world politics, in particular on the role of publicity and discussion, implies that change is possible. Under some conditions, public talk can help states change the way they interact, in a positive direction and toward cooperative, salutary ends that otherwise would not be possible. This does not mean change is inevitable or even always possible. But it offers an outline for how to think about moving forward, in a way that can lessen the sense that we're always only muddling through.

**Jennifer Mitzen is assistant professor of Political Science at the Ohio State University. Professor Mitzen has research and teaching interests in international relations theory, global governance, international organization, and post-conflict reconciliation. She is completing a book manuscript on the impact of publicity and deliberation on great power politics, with particular attention to the evolution of conference diplomacy in 19th century Europe. Other research includes the impact of needs for ontological security on international politics.**

#### *Related links*

- [Faculty Profile at Ohio State](#)
- Read Mitzen's *Ontological Security in World Politics* (European Journal of IR, 2006) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Mitzen's *Reading Habermas in Anarchy: Multilateral Diplomacy and Global Public Spheres* (American Political Science Review, 2005) [here](#) (pdf)