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Forgetting ISIS: Enmity, Drive and Repetition in Security Discourse

Charlotte Heath-Kelly

Abstract: This paper explores the reconstitution and repetition of threat imaginaries in security discourse, with particular focus on the War on Terror era. Upon vanquishing the enemy (whether an individual militant or militant group) no tangible increase in 'security' is claimed by securitising actors. Instead, the security apparatus turns away and reconstructs the figuration of insecurity elsewhere. Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS replace each other as signifiers for the most profound threat to international order. The article positions this compulsive refiguration of enemies within an aversion to attaining a state of 'security'. The paper uses psychoanalytic concepts of drive and jouissance to argue that security imaginaries play out fantasies of insecurity to suture the symbiotic relationship between subjectivity and power. If enmity was permanently ended or victory attained, society would need to confront the continued experience of 'lack' (ontological insecurity) – something promised to disappear upon the resolution of hostilities. The fantasy of interpellation would collapse at this point. The article contributes to Critical Security Studies by explicitly addressing the repetitive constitution of terrorist threats. It goes beyond constructivist understandings of othering to explain why the resolution of insecurity is disavowed and why enmity is continually restaged.

Keywords: terrorism; insecurity; psychoanalysis; repetition; enmity.

Introduction¹

Security never seems to make any progress. Despite military investments, security reviews and ever more powerful technological surveillance, European and North American populations are continually represented as unsafe. The most powerful states in the world, enjoying historically unprecedented levels of health, prosperity and stability, are simultaneously the most hysterically possessed by security-related fears. The compulsion to experience the self as insecure, despite evidence to the contrary, is the starting point for this paper.

Much has been written about political anxiety in the fields of Political Theory and Sociology. Corey Robin has explored the developing permutations of fear in Western

¹ The author is very grateful to Daniel Monk and two anonymous reviewers for providing exceptional guidance through the review process. This was not an easy paper to write and I relied upon their generosity. All remaining inconsistencies are of course my own.

philosophical thought as an operational concept (Robin 2004); Frank Furedi has explored how the social alienation and declining community ties associated with contemporary neoliberalism have led to cultures of insecurity (Furedi 2002); and Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck have both written about the transformation of risk and anxiety in an age where technology produces its own, sometimes existential, dangers (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990). Fear and risk are prominent topics on Sociological and Philosophical landscapes.

Not wanting to be left behind, International Relations has also produced substantial literatures on the risk discourses and anxieties which dominate contemporary political life. Much of this research was initially located within the Copenhagen School of securitization theory, which analysed the construction of threat by political elites and the centrality of speech acts to processes of securitization (Buzan *et al.* 1998; Hansen 2012a; McDonald 2008). The functionality of securitization is here understood in terms of identity: identifying and invoking an external threat serves to performatively constitute the nation (Jackson 2005; McCrisken 2003).

In the wake of Securitization Theory, European International Relations developed a poststructuralist critique of Beck's 'Risk Society' thesis. In their rethinking of risk, Claudia Aradau and Rens Van Munster critiqued Beck's macro-sociological assumptions that risks exist independently in the world from the governmental technologies which invoke them (Aradau & Van Munster 2008). The incalculability of contemporary risks does not make them ungovernable, as Beck suggests; rather governance structures have shifted to incorporate the unpredictability of certain dangers into precautionary risk management. Incalculability becomes the modality of security². Poststructuralist IR has found fertile terrain in the idea of risks and their governance. Pushing this research beyond its focus on the security sector, Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik and Emmanuel Pierre-Guittet have explored the logics of anxiety at play in austerity politics and security governance, and the anxious and resistant subjectivities produced therein (Eklundh *et al.* 2017).

But what does it mean to centralise anxiety, fear and risk in Western political and sociological thought at a time of relative geopolitical stability and wealth? In his own take on the politics of anxiety, Mark Neocleous (2000) tackled the proliferation of (in)security and risk discourse in Sociology and International Relations, arguing that the acceleration of (in)securitization reflects the policing of civil society to protect bourgeois property and status. The articulation of pollution, terrorism and migration as security threats depoliticises them; it silences the social and political creation of these issues, enabling governing structures to pursue technocratic solutions which efface the real genesis of threats: capital accumulation.

It is important to note that the arguments made by Neocleous, poststructuralist scholars of risk, and securitization theorists *share more in common than their focus on*

² See also: Amoore & De Goede 2008; De Goede 2008;

political anxiety. They all also describe *ambivalence* within security practices towards the threat object. While politicians promise that destroying the enemy will bring about resolution and ontological stability, IR literatures show that frames of enmity enable the pursuit of other goals: biopolitical governance, identity consolidation and the furtherance of capital accumulation. There is a gap between security and its threat object. The threat object is made hyper-significant in political discourse, but it is simultaneously treated ambivalently and can be replaced at will. New objects wait in the wings as potential vessels for enmity.

This paper explores how that ambivalence to the individual threat object works, despite simultaneous securitization processes. As I will show in this article, terrorist groups are over-signified in political rhetoric as embodiments of evil which must be destroyed to bring about peace and stability, yet paradoxically their individual destruction does not seem to matter. Just when progress might be made, another evil figure emerges. For example, the assassination of Bin Laden and the gradual dismantling of Al Qaeda did not de-escalate War on Terror imaginaries of terrorist threat, as one might have expected from their pre-eminent status as representatives of apocalyptic terror. Instead the group was steadily effaced in security imaginaries – side-lined by the transition to the figuration of ISIS. A similar transition occurred after the end of the Cold War, with the New Terrorism discourse replacing imaginaries of Soviet threat. Given this repetition in enemy figurations as harbingers of catastrophe, unbound by conventional restraints, the question of the relationship between security discourse and progress needs to be posed. How can security discourse repetitively frame enemies as the embodiment of total evil, and then replace them when their impact lessens? How does that enmity framing recede so quickly into insignificance without leaving tensions in the political imaginary? Why do security imaginaries becoming averse to obtaining a state of security at the moment an organisation is dismantled – conjuring a replacement enemy in their place? There is a relationship between avowal and disavowal, pursuit and avoidance, occurring here.

This paper engages psychoanalytic thought on drive, fantasy and *jouissance* to explore the pursuit (and preclusion) of security as an object of desire. It borrows these concepts to explore the constant pursuit, and simultaneous preclusion, of an imagined state of security, arguing that the functionality of securitisation is that of endlessly deferred gratification. The relationship between security actors and their threat object is fetishized; enemy objects serve as temporary manifestations within a libidinal economy, needing to be endlessly replaced by another such object. In the following sections I draw out the relevance of psychoanalytic thought to the repetition of threat imaginaries, and the simultaneous avowal and disavowal of security as a desired, obtainable state of being.

Appetite and Disavowal: Desire and Drive applied to Security Imaginaries

How can psychoanalytic thought help us to understand the repetition of terrorist figurations in security imaginaries and the aversion to attaining a state of security? By exploring the compulsive imagination of insecurity objects, and the sudden ambivalence towards them upon the point of nullification, one can argue that security manifests through psychoanalytic fantasy. I will show here that the realm of drive in psychoanalytic thought constitutes the fundamental compulsion to reconstitute enmity, and that individualised threat objects (Al Qaeda, the Taliban, ISIS) are simulations of *object petit a*. They are immediately discarded prior to their defeat, because they fail to satisfy the desire which motivated their pursuit.

Drawing on psychoanalytic thought in IR, especially Lacanian theory, is a complex exercise – not least because Lacan’s writings combine Freudian psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and linguistic structuralism to differing degrees across his career, with explanations of key concepts changing over time (Fink 1995). As such, this article makes no claim to distil an authentic, final interpretation of psychoanalysis in its Lacanian form, or otherwise. Rather it follows the model proposed by Jakub Eberle for the use of psychoanalytic thought in IR, that of opening up a ‘trading zone’ between different intellectual traditions (Eberle 2017). To bring psychoanalytic insights into the study of politics, it is necessary to write in an ‘in-between language’ – compromising on some of the nuances and specificities of a discipline which emerged through clinical practice, so that interdisciplinary insights might become possible. In particular, this article relies on the work of scholars who have previously translated concepts of fantasy (Eberle 2017; Žižek 1989), drive (Kapoor 2015) and jouissance (Fink 1995) for a broader academic audience.

Lacan’s foundational move was to reinterpret the Freudian unconscious *as a consequence of language* (Tomšič & Zevnik 2016). The immersion of the child into language, for Lacan, constitutes subjectivity around a ‘split’. Structures of language split the subject while they inaugurate her. Before it is born, the child’s place in language is prepared for it: the parent’s speak about the infant and try to select the perfect name for it (Fink 1995: 5-7). The child is then obliged to learn the language of its parents, which has been handed down over generations. This language is the only way the child can learn to express its wants, but language shapes those desires and provides their content. In psychoanalytic thought, the child does not know what it wants when it cries; rather the response of the parent (providing food, or shelter, or affection) will retroactively constitute the meaning of the cry (Ibid). This parental intervention functions in the same way as language. The Other (the parental intervention, or language) transforms the content of desire into something recognisable. Lacan referred to this as: ‘Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need’ (Lacan 1977b: 311), continually emphasising that the structuring of the unconscious and ego discourse through language alienates us from the phenomenological experience of being in the world.

Our insertion into the symbolic order thus excludes large dimensions of our experience from representation. The problem which results from this incorporation of the

subject into the symbolic order is what is left out; violence is done in this process through the exclusion of unrepresentable dimensions of experience and affect. As such, subjectification *splits* the subject. Something gets left out, and this has affective consequences (Solomon 2012). As Lacan argued in his 1958 report to the French Psychoanalysis Society, entitled 'Direction of Treatment and Principles of its Power:

Desire is an effect in the subject of the condition that is imposed on him by the existence of the discourse, to make his need pass through the defiles of the signifier [...] desire is the furrow inscribed in the course; it is, as it were, the mark of the iron of the signifier on the shoulder of the speaking subject [...] This moment of cut is haunted by the form of the bloody scrap – the pound of flesh life pays in order to turn it into the signifier of the signifiers, which it is impossible to restore, as such, to the imaginary body; it is the lost phallus of the embalmed Osiris (Lacan 1977b: 264-5).

Because the subject is constituted through this split, she is always driven by desire for unification, wholeness and resolution. Our splitness in the world drives a quest for an impossible state of unity. As Jeanne Schroeder neatly explains, 'it is easy to presume that the reason we feel lacking is that we lack something' (2003). Desire, in Lacanian theory, revolves around a fantasy about a 'thing' which will resolve the lack. The subject responds to its split condition by conceiving of an object, which Lacan named *object petit a*, as the objectification of the lack – something which, when obtained, would supposedly quench desire and unify subjectivity. Splitting, then, generates both *lack* and *desire*: *lack* is the void occupying the place where a permanent foundation for identity would be found. Given that encircling anxiety is unpleasant, the *ontological lack* is transformed into an *empirical lack* – the imagined loss of a totemic object representing the lost state of pre-linguistic enjoyment (Eberle 2017; Lacan 1977a; Stavrakakis 1999; Žižek 1989). The subject can then pursue the lost object (*object petit a*) whose recapture offers the (false) promise of completeness and wholeness.

Object petit a can either be an object of delight or disgust (Schroeder 2003). If delight, then the fantasy narrates that the rift in ourselves and the social order is caused by the lack of a wonderful object. When the wonderful object is obtained, the rift is resolved. But if *object petit a* is fantasised as an object of disgust, then the rift in subjectivity and the social order is explained by the presence of a polluting, dangerous object which needs to be removed. Integrity and unity would be restored if the problematic object could be removed (ibid). Our desire, then, constitutes *object petit a* through a fantasy about completion and unification.

What if security was the context for this imagination? What if 'security' constituted *object petit a* as both a wonderful desired object (a state of safety and wholeness) - and the presence of a foul, polluting contamination which prevents unity (such as ISIS)? This article soon takes up these questions, but first – a methodological note.

It might appear that psychoanalytic approaches are built around the theorisation of the formation of *individuals*. Comment must therefore be made on the appropriateness of psychoanalytic methodology for the analysis of the social. Psychoanalysis might have clinical applications for the individual, but it also enables political phenomena to be explored through the notion of fantasy (Burgess 2017; Hook 2017; Zevnik 2017). In psychoanalysis, fantasy is the narrative frame which constitutes the subjective sense of reality – binding subjects to the social order³ and its reproduction (Eberle 2017; Stavrakakis 1999; Žižek 1989). The function of fantasy and ideology is not to provide an escape from some objective reality (as in common parlance), instead fantasy constitutes, frames and supports our social relations. Žižek argues, for example, that there is no fundamental opposition between dreaming and waking – both involve fantasy frameworks which structure our consciousness (Žižek 1989: 44-8). In our waking fantasy, we are consumed by the imagination of a social body of which we are part, which is not split by antagonistic division but rather is produced by organic and complementary cooperation (Ibid: 142). The subject submits to interpellation to elude the traumatic Real – the ontological insecurity which lurks behind the fantasy. As Žižek surmises:

The process of interpellation-subjectivation is precisely an attempt to elude, to avoid this traumatic kernel through identification: in assuming a symbolic mandate, in recognising himself in the interpellation, the subject evades the dimension of the Thing (Žižek 1989: 205).

The subject recognises herself in the fantasies of society and nation because of the split imposed upon her by language and the Other. Fantasy sutures the subject into an imagination of collective being to resolve some of that anxiety. Importantly, for the application of psychoanalysis to political phenomena, fantasy both interpolates the self into the social, and constitutes figures of enmity who threaten that interpolation. When faced with the antagonisms which emerge within economics and politics, fantasy protects itself from collapse by imagining a polluting being which corrupts the social fabric (Ibid: 142). In Žižek's discussion, this figure takes the shape of the Jew as constituted through anti-Semitism but the figure of the terrorist works well in the contemporary era.

The relationship between desire, figures of enmity and the attainment of ontological security is a powerful triad in psychoanalytic thought – one with pertinent applications for Critical Security Studies. Fantasies can never satisfy the desire for ontological wholeness, so desire constitutes a totemic object (*object petit a*) which promises to alleviate lack. These *object petit a – objets petit autres*: objects with only a little otherness – are conceived in Lacanian thought as objects which were once thought to be part of the self (the mother's breast, a favourite blanket) but were then cut away as the infant discovers its own

³ Of course, there are multiple domains of social order and fantasy: the national, transnational and international, for example. All of these might impact differently upon the individual, collective or even global body. But it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the interplay between various fantasies and their impact upon persons and groups.

boundaries (Silvermann 1999: 98). Entry into the symbolic realm castrates the subject of these objects, imbuing them with a powerful resonance as objects of desire. Lacan emphasises that the cutting away of these objects causes them to be associated with orifices of the body, given their passing and removal (Lacan 1975). As Bruce Fink develops the concept of *object a*, they are the *remainder* produced when the hypothetical unity between mother and child breaks down (Fink 1995: 59). By clinging on to *object a*, the subject is able to ignore her division – which is the Lacanian understanding of fantasy, formalised with the matheme [barred S, diamond, a] which is to be read: the divided subject in relation to *object a* (Ibid).

This desire for *object a*, fantasising the replication of the *jouissance* felt in the hypothetical state of mother-child unity, supplies a sense of being to the subject. But, of course, this fantasy object cannot fulfil the function with which it is tasked. It is overdetermined. If the object were somehow attained, it would provide itself unworthy and the fantasy would collapse – with traumatic results. As such, these objects must remain out of reach. Importantly, a (security) narrative is created about why the object is out of reach: someone has taken it from us; or perhaps an enemy stands in the way of us attaining ontological completeness (Eberle 2017). Enmity then comes to structure the objectification of desire.

It is here that the final concept in our ‘trading zone’, that of drive, becomes necessary to understand the repetitive figuration of enemies. Drive helps us to distinguish between individual objects of desire and the generalised compulsion to pursue. In Lacan’s formulation of drive, our entrapment in the symbolic order (castration) causes us to be haunted by the lost object (which would reinstate our ‘wholeness’). But drive differs from desire: it is the relentless encirclement of the lost object, which compulsively re-enacts our castration rather than trying to obtain *object petit a* (Lacan 1977a: 164-8). Drive is the unceasing looping around the object of desire, involving repetitive disavowals that this particular object is sufficient, and the repetitive restaging of the fantasy. This encirclement, and delayed gratification, generates *jouissance* – which, although loosely translates as enjoyment, reaches beyond pleasure to the excessive, the ecstatic, and masochistic delight taken in failure (Kapoor 2015; see also Hook 2017). The distinction between desire and drive plays out in terms of satisfaction: desire’s object never satisfies, so it moves from object to object in repetitive fashion; whereas recurring failure *is* the satisfaction (*jouissance*) generated by drive’s re-enactment of loss (Kapoor 2015; Žižek 2009: 62-3). As Žižek summarises: ‘the weird movement called ‘drive’ is not driven by the ‘impossible’ quest for the lost object; it is a push to directly enact the ‘loss’—the gap, cut, distance—itself’ (2008: 32).

This distinction between desire and drive helps us to understand the repetitive function of threat imaginaries. Security is averse to vanquishing a particular enemy (*object petit a*) and making progress towards a state of security because the object of desire can

never satisfy the fantasy. It fails and enmity must be restaged with a new enemy blocking the path to ontological security. And yet, the mythical ideal of a state of security still remains charged – we don't grow tired of our struggle to reach it. We don't tire of our failure because the repetitive encirclement of *object a* is in itself 'enjoyable'. Jouissance is generated by the imagination of an evil other repeatedly blocking the perfect interpellation of the subject (drive).

Given desire's pursuit of ontological gratification through destroying the enemy (which necessarily fails), and drive's enjoyment of the pursuit *as failed*, a constant stream of enemy figurations is produced to sustain the social fantasy of international society. Insecurity scenarios endlessly recur as totemic charades within a libidinal economy. And if we reflect upon this object-ambivalence and the recurrence of enmity, we are able to conceive of a significant doxa in political discourse: that security is teleological and *aims* at some goal. Within public security discourse, we are presented with the assumption that security practice occurs to neutralise a given threat: it does stuff, to bring about change in the world. Critical Security Studies has, of course, already radically disrupted *part* of that narrative, by decoupling the *purpose* of security discourse from the threat-object. The field instead shows that (amongst other things) security does not function as the neutralisation of really-existing-threats, but through the juxtaposed constitution of the referent object of security vis-à-vis the threat object (Buzan et al. 1998; Campbell 1992; Jackson 2005). Broadly speaking, the constructivist position argues that security works by instituting a dialectic of identity between that which is to be secured and the dangerous.

Security, in this reading, is thus *somewhat* ambivalent towards the threat-object. However, while social constructivist contributions to CSS explore the functionality of threat imaginaries, *they rarely address the sudden disinterest in the threat-object (n1), upon the point of transition to a newer, more extreme threat object (n2)*. If security discourse was solely occupied with the constitution of identity through juxtaposition against an enemy, à la social constructivism, then it *should have no aversion to 'victory'*. The defeat of an enemy need not invalidate or disrupt the production of self-identity, because this constitution could continue through memory practices. Vast academic literatures explore this very phenomenon of identity formation through post-conflict memory (Connerton 1989; Heath-Kelly 2013; Winter 1995; Young 1993). By itself, the social-constructivist reading of security cannot account for the profound *aversion* to resolution within security imaginaries. It cannot account for security's radical ambivalence towards the threat-object, such that it loses interest before the enemy (n1) is destroyed – already favouring a bigger, badder, even-more-apocalyptic enemy (n2). However, as I will argue in the following sections, these dynamics of repetition, compulsion and aversion can be modelled through the application of psychoanalytic concepts of drive and desire.

Forgetting Bin Laden and the Taliban, and Preparing to Forget ISIS

To return to the starting premise of this paper, security never seems to make any progress. Despite engaging in myriad military battles, the defeat of enemies does not bring security – rather the enemy seems to respawn in another arena, as the eternally recurrent presence of insecurity. Insecurity is never resolved by the neutralisation of individual ‘threat objects’ like the Soviet Union, the Taliban or Al Qaeda. They are quickly forgotten and their neutralisation does not confer a state of security upon the world. Indeed, the disappearance of an enemy provokes consternation and dislocation for international actors deprived of the object of their attentions. Barry Buzan, for example, has noted that Washington experienced a ‘threat deficit’ at the end of the Cold War (Buzan 2007). He argues that the US’ attempts to find a replacement threat object for the Soviet Union involved figuring Japan, China, the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ and then ‘rogue states’ as enemies of international society – before the War on Terror appropriated the mantle of the new long war. Similarly, Alexandra Homolar analyses the shift in US foreign policy strategic narratives after the end of the Cold War, finding that the absence of the Soviet threat was paradoxically interpreted as somewhat threatening: narrated as the coming of a new era of uncertainty (Homolar 2011). The *absence of the Soviet enemy* was discursively reinscribed as a move away from ‘traditional and predictable’ global political order. This reification of a global state of uncertainty then enabled strategic discourse to constitute ‘irrational’ and ‘unpredictable’ actors as the new embodiment of insecurity: rogue states (Homolar 2011: 710).

Complimentary research by Chin Kuei Tsui has also noted nostalgia for enmity in US strategic discourse in the aftermath of the Cold War. The collapse of anxieties about mutually assured nuclear destruction did not foster a climate of security and relaxation. Instead, security and cultural industries rapidly intensified their figuration of a new apocalyptic enemy - the religiously inspired terrorist – especially during the Clinton administration (Tsui 2016).

We might suggest that such constructivist research into US strategic narratives in the post-Cold War period implicitly invokes loneliness and ontological insecurity. Buzan adopts the most pragmatic framing the ‘threat deficit’ experienced by the United States, describing America’s new found unipolar status in terms of the absence of a unifying object against which to legitimise American global leadership (Buzan 2007). Being alone at the top caused the US difficulty in corralling support for its leadership. Homolar also engages the theme of loneliness implicitly, but more provocatively. To paraphrase her argument, the demise of the Soviet Union left the United States profoundly *uncertain of its purpose* as an international actor – leading to the *repurposing of uncertainty* in strategic narratives. Loneliness and uncertainty was felt as a deeply disorienting position, but was then operationalised as a tactic to reinvent American global identity. The loss of traditional international relations and the unpredictability of rogue states constituted the new global frame of enmity in which America would operate and find its place (Homolar 2011).

In this section I will also reflect on the ontological significance of losing one's enemy. Going beyond constructivist research, I will show that even the prospect of nullifying one's opponent is effaced by political leaders and in political commentary. It is averted and discursively effaced as a possibility – because, I argue, removing the block between society and *object petit a* risks exposing the insufficiency of the object of our desire: that we would remain lacking, despite attaining the thing we supposedly needed to complete us. Where Buzan, Tsui and Homolar explore the *articulation of new enemies* in a condition of 'threat deficit', I explore the related processes of *forgetting enmity frames* which have ceased to be useful. The forgetting, or designification, of certain enemies is required to both avoid a cliff-edge where enmity discourse loses its other, and to enable the reconstitution of enmity around other objects.

Threat objects can collapse – but to sustain the social fantasy of enmity, and thus interpellation, a process of forgetting is engaged. Forgetting refers to the designification of an individual threat object as the referent of enmity while putting another such object into its place. This discursive forgetting is happening even now. ISIS are being militarily edged out of their Iraqi and Syrian territories (at the time of writing). Yet the celebratory narratives found in media reporting and political speeches are tempered with caution, anxiety, and – above all – the designification of ISIS' caliphate as the embodiment of enmity. The discussion of their defeat engenders a complex avowal and disavowal of victory whereby the organisation transitions into history, to be replaced by another threat object.

ISIS were once the most widely mediatised terrorist organisation in history (Al-Dayel & Anfinson 2017), objects of fascination and horror in public discourse, as well as recipients of condemnation from every possible international political organisation. But the tone of US strategic discourse on ISIS makes clear that they are passing into oblivion and disregard. The strategic and journalistic treatments of ISIS are careful not to triumphally proclaim victory however. Instead, they emphasise that new manifestations of threat will emerge in the organisation's place. For example, in anticipation of the collapse of the ISIS caliphate the United States' Military Academy at Westpoint has commissioned a report called 'The Fight Goes On: The Islamic State's Continuing Military Efforts in Liberated Cities'. In it, the report's authors, Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, urge policymakers not to understand the liberation of cities in Syria and Iraq from ISIS as the finalisation of their mission, but as a continuing campaign against jihadist violence through counterinsurgency and the performance of post-conflict reconstruction. The report opens with the bold statement that:

The word "liberation" carries with it a tremendous sense of finality and accomplishment. It suggests freedom from something that was previously oppressed [... but] much remains to be accomplished after liberation (Milton & al-'Ubaydi 2017: 1).

In this fascinating strategic missive, we see the simultaneous avowal and disavowal of security as a state of being. ISIS is carefully acknowledged as an enemy signifier upon whose defeat 'liberation' will necessarily occur (their signification of enmity is not revoked),

however that liberation is not final. The report carefully adjusts expectations for the security environment after the removal of ISIS control – emphasising and detailing the 1,468 self-reported ISIS attacks in 16 Iraqi and Syrian cities after liberation (Ibid). In keeping with the opening sentences of the report, security is carefully disavowed through a proxy discussion of liberation’s aftermath. While liberation from ISIS is viewed as a strategic success, this liberation will be challenged by the continued presence of jihadist cells, post-conflict instability, and the metastasizing of the jihadist threat. Security is obtained, but also immediately sublimated by the emergence of new threats.

Something equally fascinating happens to temporality in this strategic discourse. The signification of enmity is moved into the past tense (ISIS are treated as an already defeated entity, despite continuing efforts to destroy them in Iraq and Syria) as well as simultaneously projected into the future. Before victory over ISIS is even attained, security actors foretell the continuation of insecurity after the ‘liberation’ - making reference to the Hydra-like self-propagation of jihadism. As Daniel Benjamin has emphasised: “Simply having ISIS go away doesn't mean that the jihadist problem goes away” (Benjamin quoted in Trofimov 2016). Their military defeat in Iraq and Syria, if it comes, will then not lead to a cliff-edge of ‘threat deficit’ for the United States because the continuation of the jihadist threat has been foretold.

This discursive process of forgetting ISIS effectively evacuates the present tense of enmity – ISIS *have represented* the apocalyptic enemy of international society, and will (in slightly different and uncertain form) retake their position as threat object *in the future*. In preparing the fantasy of international society for the defeat of ISIS, the organisation is designifed as the present-tense manifestation of enmity. As such, when military operations in Syria and Iraq claim victory over ISIS, no threat-deficit will emerge. Instead ISIS’ caliphate will already have been forgotten, in anticipation of the next manifestation of jihadism. Strategic actors carefully practice an aversion to attaining progress in international security, eternally deferring the state of security until the dispatching of the next threat object. In the moment of ISIS’ collapse, enmity will already have transitioned to a new *object petit a*.

This deferral of security upon the destruction of a militant organisation has occurred before. It was particularly well demonstrated in the celebration of Bin Laden’s death, and then gradual erasure of his life, from public discourse. The suddenness of his execution could not be prepared for in as much detail as the gradual dismantling of the ISIS organisation, so the dynamics by which forgetting (designification) occurred are interesting. They are evident in initial stages of public celebration of Bin Laden’s death, then the careful movement of his legacy into the past tense while rhetoric about replacement threat objects intensified. The world’s most wanted man was discursively erased, such that he never fully signified catastrophic threat in the first place.

After announcement of Bin Laden’s death, spontaneous street parties demonstrated the outbreak of jouissance which greeted the attainment of security, the successful

resolution of the object blocking the path of desire. Ecstatic crowds gathered outside the White House and Ground Zero in Manhattan, drinking beer, and chanting 'U-S-A; U-S-A!' (Weeks 2011). Yet this drove multiple commentators, the Roman Catholic Church included, to comment on the ethical impropriety of such celebrations of death. Simultaneously, security experts chastened revellers to recognise that the battle against jihadism was not over and may have even intensified (Ibid). Psychoanalytic readings of fantasy help us to understand these outbreaks of joy, the efforts of political leaders and commentators to quell the celebrations, and the effort to refocus attention on the continuing relations of enmity which structured the war in Afghanistan.

Fantasy interpolates us within the social order, through our identification with particular descriptors (man, woman, academic). Fantasy also protects its structuring of reality from collapse by inventing figures (enemies) which prevent our perfect interpolation in the social order and our attainment of ontological security (Žižek 1989). When one such manifestation of blockage (Bin Laden) was killed, people celebrated as if their interpolation within the social fabric was complete and their attainment of wholeness and joy would be everlasting. Time magazine's photo essay of the jubilant scenes which greeted his death is a particular testament to this overflowing of jouissance (Time Magazine 2011). The phallic resonance of the patriotic fervour was not lost on *The Daily Show's* Jon Stewart who satirized the US' recovery from impotence by showing the state of Florida rising to erection on the national map (Hansen 2012b). However this celebration of wholeness, patriotism and completion endangered the social fantasy, and had to be sublimated by reminders of continuing enmity and insecurity, because – as Žižek reminds us – drive and desire continue without end (Žižek 1989). If Bin Laden's death had signified the attainment of some progress in the War on Terror, then the fantasy would struggle to explain the continuing feelings of lack experienced by the population (feelings generated by the original castration of entering the symbolic realm). As such, the attention of the American public had to be redirected through admonishment by religious organisations and reminders from security officials that the jihadist threat still blocked the path to security (Weeks 2011).

To protect the social fantasy and to refigure objects of enmity, Washington engaged in a sophisticated discursive strategy of designification and forgetting Bin Laden. As Lee Jarvis and Jack Holland have argued, the Obama administration followed the announcement of Osama Bin Laden's death with a discourse dominated by descriptions of his sudden corporeal absence: he was 'dead', 'deceased', 'taken off the battlefield', 'off the streets' and 'gone' (Jarvis & Holland 2014). This, I argue, began the process of designifying Bin Laden as the object of enmity not by denying that he ever posed a threat, but by asserting the past tense nature of that enmity. This began the process of uncoupling the individualised threat object from its status in the enmity frame and preparing the space for another such object. Washington's narrative then demonstrated several narrative stages which progressively abstracted from the corporeal details of Bin Laden's assassination: first, the narrativisation of the military operation in heroic terms, then the re-inscription of War on Terror foreign

policy as legitimate, and finally the re-articulation of American 'values' as a key narrative within the story (Jarvis & Holland 2014). The language used to describe the killing progressively changed from triumphalist to anaesthetised, while the corporeal scene of the dead body and military operation progressively vanished through stages of abstraction. In place of Bin Laden, the securitization of the Taliban as the primary threat to international society could continue.

Bin Laden was discursively 'forgotten' – de-articulated as the pre-eminent signifier of insecurity, discursively de-coupled from his previous embodiment of terror. This 'forgetting' of Bin Laden protected the fantasy of international society from its own success. It did not have to account for the continued experience of lack during a state of security, because the attainment of security was disavowed - postponed because of the repetition of the enmity imaginary around another *object petit a*.

Importantly, this designification work does not only occur upon the military defeat or death of the threat object. The same work of 'forgetting' the enemy occurs after unsuccessful wars, for example the United States' retreat from hostilities in Afghanistan. Of course, it would be humiliating for the United States to address its failure to subdue militant organisations in one of the world's poorest countries, but the forgetting of conflict with Afghanistan in public discourse exceeds that. Instead, the designification is so effective that few commentators recognise the repetitive constitution of new threat objects in identical terms to that of the Taliban. For example, in 2015 Dominic Tierney noted that public opinion and media discourse in the US were raucously advocating war against a 'Wahhabi Islamist insurgency group in a strategic region bordering Iran'. In this case, the group was ISIS. The urgent arguments made for intervention focused on the uniqueness of the threat posed by the ISIS caliphate – totally forgetting the fact that the US *was already at war with a Wahhabi Islamist insurgent group in a strategic region bordering Iran* (the Taliban in Afghanistan) (Tierney 2015).

The discursive designification of the Taliban had, by 2015, erased the previous figuration of the group as the most prominent threat to international security – described by President Obama as the 'centre of gravity in the fight against international terrorism' (Obama quoted in Tierney 2015). Obama's troop surge of 2009 put almost 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan, and the cost of US intervention reached \$100 billion per year in 2011. But the lack of military progress changed the appetite for war in Afghanistan – pushing Obama to withdraw troops and expenditure, and leading the US public into a profound amnesia about the conflict. Between 2011 and 2015, this designification wiped the previous figuration of the Taliban as enemy-incarnate from public discourse, enabling securitisation

to once again constitute a threat imaginary around a (supposedly novel and unprecedented) Wahhabi militant group⁴.

In sum, the designification of Bin Laden, the Taliban and ISIS demonstrate the radical ambivalence of security imaginaries towards discrete threat objects. As objects of threat discourse, they were oversignified as apocalyptic enemies. Terrorist imaginaries positioned the militant groups as blocks to the path of desire which necessitated intense strategic action. Paradoxically however, the dismantling of these groups did, and does, not result in an increase in security but rather acts as prelude to the recurrence of enemy figuration. This section has begun to unpack the paradox of repetition and disavowal in security discourse, showing how discursive designification ‘forgets’ enemies – sometimes in advance of their military defeat – to preclude the attainment of a state of security. Security is disavowed because the social fantasy of international society is reliant upon enmity as a vehicle for drive and desire. As Buzan and Homolar have shown, the disappearance of an enemy results in the uncomfortable situation of ‘threat deficit’ (Buzan 2007; Homolar 2011). Rather than enjoying a period of calm, political elites scramble to constitute a new strategic purpose with which to stabilise the social fantasy of interpolation. While the word limit has restricted a full engagement with both psychoanalytic theory and contemporary security, the paper contends that libidinal economies drive the repetitive terrorist imaginaries which structure the social fantasy of global politics. Further research could and should be undertaken on the way the alt-right, neoconservative and neoliberal security imaginaries deploy fantasy through terrorist imaginaries, noting any variances in the repetitive figuration of enmity. The totalising and amplified tenor of the alt-right’s security imaginaries might indicate a historical process of intensification and fragmentation, where repetitive threat construction has had effects upon the identification with a national (or transnational) self⁵.

Conclusion

Security never seems to make any progress. This article has treated this aphorism as a symptom, arguing that security discourse is radically ambivalent to its threat object and eternal defers the experience of closure.

To date, Critical Security Studies have explored degrees of ambivalence between security practices and their threat objects - such as constructivist arguments that

⁴ One consequence of focusing on the discursive ‘forgetting’ whereby security imaginaries transition between objects is that the differences between militant groups can be flattened out. The Taliban and ISIS were/are, to some extent, geographically situated entities in control of territory; Al Qaeda, however, maintained a presence in countries and regions ostensibly controlled by nation states or tribal leaders. Each had/has its own particular ideology. These different groups may come to stand in for each other in security imaginaries, but we must recognise that these repetitive constitutions of enmity elide fundamental and contextual differences between organisations.

⁵ I am indebted to Reviewer 2 for this point, and for broader provocations regarding the effects repetitive enmity frames might have upon populations.

securitization doesn't operate to identify and nullify an objective danger, but uses the figure of the enemy to reconstitute political identity and leadership (Buzan et al. 1998; Hansen 2012a; Jackson 2005; McCrisken 2003). But this does not account for the repetitive constitution of threat objects. In the constructivist model states could potentially encounter the enemy and take satisfaction in its defeat – conjuring political identity through conflict memory (Connerton 1989; Heath-Kelly 2013; Winter 1995; Young 1993). Yet, upon vanquishing the enemy no tangible increase in 'security' is claimed by securitising actors. Instead, the security apparatus turns away and reconstructs the figuration of insecurity elsewhere. Despite their apparent differences, ISIS, the Taliban, and Al Qaeda replace each other as signifiers for the most profound threat to international order.

This article has positioned the compulsive refiguration of enemies within an aversion to attaining a state of 'security'. The radical ambivalence between security imaginaries and their threat objects is constituted through social fantasy, drive and desire. The compulsion to imagine enemies in security discourse is the result of libidinal economy – *the process cannot stop* without endangering the social fantasies of nation and international society. Enmity is repetitively staged because the castration of the subject generates lack, and lack must be effaced through the symbolic.

Using psychoanalytic concepts, the paper reflected on terrorist imaginaries as symptoms of castration. Our entrapment in the symbolic order (castration) causes us to be haunted by the lost object which would reinstate our 'wholeness' (a state of security). By clinging on to *object a*, the subject is able to ignore her division. However *object a* always fails to satisfy our desire, leading to repetitive imagination of replacement objects and the creation of a narrative about a foul, polluting presence (the enemy) which blocks our attainment of wholeness. Enemies can be substituted at will – replaced by other such figurations of blockage. It is drive, the appetite for the endless failed pursuit of ontological security, which generates the disavowal of security at the very moment at which it might be attained. If security were to 'make progress' it would expose lack as a permanent condition of being, damaging interpolation in the social fantasy.

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