Review of International Studies (2025), page 1 of 20
doi:10.1017/S0260210525100909

RIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Whose age of anxiety? Provincialising ontological insecurity

Alistair Markland

Department of International Relations, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK
Email: alistairmarkland8@hotmail.com

(Received 8 May 2024; revised 23 April 2025; accepted 24 April 2025)

Abstract

Background. The 'Age of Anxiety' has emerged as a common narrative trope in International Relations scholarship, particularly within the sub-field of ontological security studies. This narrative frames recent global crises – such as climate change, COVID-19, and declining Western-liberal hegemony – as ushering in a new era of existential uncertainty. The article critiques the universality of this thesis, arguing that it overgeneralises from the Western-liberal experience and neglects spatial and temporal diversity in the global experience of anxiety.

Methods. The article employs a critical-interpretivist methodology, drawing on postcolonial theory, the history of emotions, and ontological security studies. It draws on illustrative examples to interrogate the spatial and temporal assumptions underpinning the Age of Anxiety thesis.

Results. The article shows how the Age of Anxiety thesis reproduces Eurocentric periodisations, presenting the affective experiences of the liberal-Western lifeworld as universal, thereby marginalising subaltern experiences of anxiety. The article also identifies significant spatial and demographic variation in the circulation of anxiety, such as the uneven distribution of climate anxiety, and introduces the concept of postcolonial anxiety to foreground longue durée, haunting forms of insecurity that elude Western-centric framings.

Conclusion. The article concludes by calling for a pluriversal approach to ontological security that recognises diverse emotional communities and alternative temporalities through which anxiety can be experienced. It urges scholars to adopt more reflexive, empirically grounded, and historically sensitive analyses that decentre the Western-liberal subject.

Keywords: anxiety; emotions; global IR; ontological security; post-colonialism; security studies

Introduction

A recurrent idea has entered the International Relations (IR) canon: the claim that 'we' are living through an unprecedented period of heightened collective anxiety. This position was neatly summarised in a recent article by Nicolai Gellwitzki, who asserted that '[we] live in an age of anxiety, characterised by the uncertainties generated by globalisation and a never-ending cascade of political crises'.[1] Over the past decade, this claim has been augmented by a series of academic conferences and special issues which address 'what is at stake when anxiety becomes the driving force

[1]C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security in international relations: Object relations, unconscious phantasies, and anxiety management', *International Theory*, 17:1 (2025), pp. 118–50 (pp. 118–19).

of politics'.[2] For instance, the International Studies Association and Central and East European International Studies Association hosted a joint conference in 2019 titled 'International Relations in the Age of Anxiety'. The conference's call for papers referred to 'the current moment of anxiety and crisis in Europe and beyond', citing a confluence of anxiety-inducing problems: growing authoritarianism, austerity policies, climate change, refugees, and declining Western hegemony.[3] In 2022, the European International Studies Association hosted a similarly apocalyptic-themed conference in Athens. The conference – titled 'Pandemonium: Interrogating the Apocalyptic Imaginaries of Our Time' – appealed to a convergence of existential, geopolitical, and socio-economic challenges. The EISA's call for papers argued that 'few would disagree that the nature and intensity of contemporary global challenges raise fears, anxieties and provocations that may even call the future existence of the humankind into question'.[4]

Calls for seeing anxiety as definitive of current predicaments can also be found in Western public discourse on international affairs.[5] This reflects a broader narrative of uncertain times which appears to colour the contemporary political zeitgeist.[6] Within academic IR, this narrative has crystallised into what I label an *Age of Anxiety* (henceforth AoA) *thesis*. In other words, an intuitive story about 'our' times has transformed into a structured academic claim about why 'our' world has become uniquely anxious. This AoA thesis also captures a set of implicit causal and spatio-temporal assumptions about how, where, and when global anxiety has been accentuated. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all of the authors associated with these claims would self-identify with this 'AoA thesis'. It is important to recognise the diversity of theoretical and ontological commitments that can be found within this literature. Nevertheless, a convergence around the idea that the past decade has been one of extraordinary anxiety is evident, particularly among IR scholars associated with ontological security studies (OSS). Taking this thesis as a starting point, the article has two main aims: first, I call into question its universality. Second, speaking to OSS and theories of affect and collective moods, I seek to affirm a view of global anxiety which accounts for subaltern experiences of ontological insecurity. This critique has both a spatial and temporal dimension. To put it succinctly, I argue that the AoA thesis is an over-generalisation which papers over pluriversal diversity in the global circulation of anxiety. By relying primarily on Western case studies, and by centring the analysis of anxiety on threats to liberal subjectivity, those proclaiming a new AoA unwittingly perpetuate a universalising form of Eurocentrism which ignores spatial variance in the dynamics of affective circulation. The periodisation of 'our' current moment as one of exceptional anxiety also relies on a Western-liberal reading of contemporary history which overlooks non-Western temporalities.[7] By drawing upon post-colonial literature and counter-examples, I complicate this simplistic bookending of contemporary history, instead emphasising the plurality of temporal registers through which anxiety is experienced.

The article unfolds in three interconnected sections, each aiming to provincialise the AoA thesis. The first section begins by tracing the historical imaginary and philosophical underpinnings of this

[2]Quote taken from Politics in Times of Anxiety conference call for papers. See Critical Global Politics Research Cluster, 'Call for Papers: Politics in Times of Anxiety Conference', University of Manchester, available at: https://politicalhorizons.wordpress.com/2014/02/07/call-for-papers-politics-in-times-of-anxiety-conference-june-9-11-2014/?fbclid=IwY2xjawF7pqFleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHbJhi_HtylBJQTOkAcbVRBAX6vrWyVbm-1Rxb9fTGsfeuVZnOvcqLkAEOQ_aem_VduPAD0QS8wcwyzA82wWJA. For journal special issues, see Jelena Subotić and Filip Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn in IR: Introduction to the symposium on anxiety', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1014–19; Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56.

[3]International Studies Association, 'CEEISA-ISA Belgrade 2019: Call for Proposals' (2018), available at: {https://www.isanet.org/Conferences/CEEISA-Belgrade-2019/Call}.

[4]European International Studies Association, 'EISA PEC 2022: Call for Section Chairs' (2022), available at {https://eisa-net.org/7868-2/}.

[5]Gideon Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future: American Power in the Age of Anxiety* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p. 173.

[6]William Davies, *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018).

[7]Bahar Rumelili '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of International Relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1020–36.

thesis. By locating the new AoA within a cyclical timeline of fluctuating anxiety, OSS literature has produced a particular reading of recent history which privileges the role of conjunctural crises – including democratic backsliding, political extremism, global pandemics, and climate change – in bringing about a new era of uncertainty. Here, I critique this trope for its universalising claims. The second section develops this critique further by taking up Felix Berenskötter's challenge to study 'spaces, rather than ages, of anxiety'.[8] Here, I draw upon examples which show spatial variance in the experience of global anxiety, including the uneven spread of climate anxiety and the uneven effects of the Global War on Terror. Through discussing patterns of affect which do not synergise neatly with the Western-liberal experience, I argue that the AoA is a provincial concept inflected by a Eurocentric reading of world history.

The third section extends this analysis to the temporal domain, problematising the Eurocentric periodisations which underpin the AoA thesis. Here, I draw on the concept of 'post-colonial anxiety' to demonstrate alternative – longue durée and haunting – temporalities which challenge some of the over-simplistic historical demarcations found in the OSS literature.[9] This perspective highlights the need for an alternative understanding of anxiety, as well as global moods more generally; one which foregrounds the lived realities of subaltern populations, whose collective moods are shaped not just by the contemporary crises of the Western-liberal lifeworld, but by the enduring legacies of colonialism and racial violence. Post-colonial anxiety unveils the AoA trope to be unwittingly complicit in making the diverse emotional experiences of non-Western subjects less legible, by folding them into the dominant periodisations of the Western academy. This represents a form of epistemic erasure, where diverse temporal registers are ignored, and where the spatio-temporal imaginary of the liberal-West is calibrated as humanity's default. Building on this critique, the article's conclusion calls for greater reflexivity regarding the spatio-temporal assumptions that are baked into the analysis of global anxiety. I argue that OSS can overcome this Eurocentrism by integrating non-Western case studies, and via the integration of historical research which captures the plural temporalities through which global moods are experienced.

The age of anxiety: Fluctuations, conjunctions, and a 'crisis' temporality

Because the AoA literature is engaged in the act of historical periodisation, it is necessary to begin the analysis by dissecting its distinctive temporal imaginary. This is an imaginary which connects current predicaments with resonant moments from modern history. For instance, Bahar Rumelili has compared recent times to the affective conditions of the late 1910s, referring to Paul Valéry's 1919 essay *Crisis of the Mind*.[10] For Valéry, the First World War was followed by an intellectual crisis involving a loss of faith in teleologies of progress, as well as a loss of certitude regarding the future of European civilisation.[11] Like Rumelili, the legal scholar and former University of Cambridge vice chancellor Stephen Toope has written about the connections between the interwar years and our 'new age of anxiety', citing the 'period of fear, economic collapse, inequality and growing anger' that followed the demise of the Weimar Republic in Germany.[12] Drawing additional historical parallels, both Rumelili and Toope also spotlight anxieties which manifested in the direct aftermath of the Second World War.[13] In both cases, the current AoA is juxtaposed with the mid-20th century's classic AoA. These examples suggest that there is nothing new about the claim that we are living in exceptionally anxious times. The current AoA is envisioned as one moment of extremity within a

[8]Felix Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical Gestalt of political leaders', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1057–63 (p. 1062).

[9]Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. xix.

[10]Paul Valéry, 'The crisis of the mind', in Jackson Matthews (ed.), *Collected Works of Paul Valery, Volume 10: History and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1919] 1962), pp. 23–36; Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', pp. 1020–1.

[11]Paul Valéry, 'The crisis of the mind', p. 25.

[12]Stephen Toope, *A Rule of Law for Our New Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 13–14.

[13]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'; Toope, *A Rule of Law*.

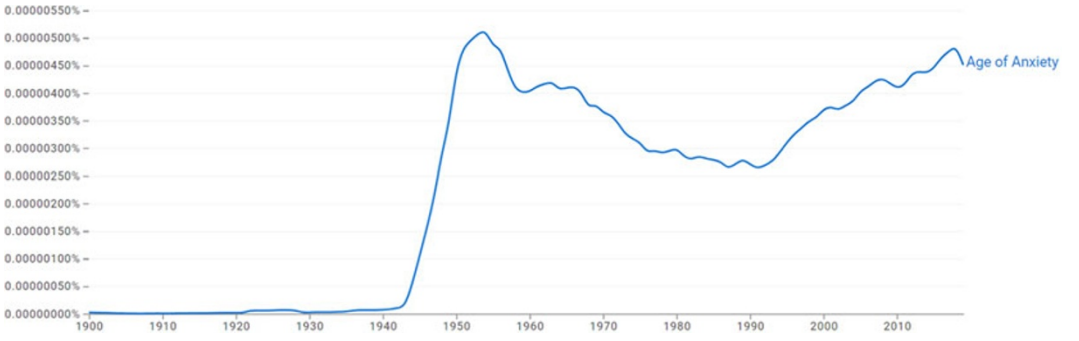

Figure 1. The prevalence of 'Age of Anxiety' in English-language texts according to Google Books N-Gram viewer, 1900–2019.

fluctuating pattern of re-emerging crises over the longue durée. As seen in Figure 1, this pattern can be visualised by studying fluctuations in textual references to this phrase within historic English language texts digitised by Google Books.[14]

Figure 1 shows that the AoA trope arose rapidly from obscurity in the early 1940s towards peak prominence in the early 1950s. This classic AoA can be associated with the proliferation of existentialist literature both during and after the Second World War. In the microcosm of Francophone philosophy of the early 1940s, authors like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus centred existential anxiety as a popular theme of ontological and literary concern.[15] Within the English language, Kinnvall and Mitzen trace the phrase back to W. H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, a lengthy poem published in 1947 which dealt with themes of social and spiritual alienation in the context of urbanised modernity.[16] During the Second World War, Auden had worked in the Morale Division of the US Strategic Bombing Survey, studying the psychological impact of Allied bombing in Germany and discovering the extent of the Nazi Holocaust.[17] It was in this context that Auden's *The Age of Anxiety* came to signify the sense of purposelessness that many demobilised soldiers felt in the post-war years.[18] Auden's poem was followed in 1950 by the American psychologist Rollo May's *The Meaning of Anxiety*, which – drawing on Camus – defined that era as an 'Overt Age of Anxiety' in contrast to the 'covert' anxieties of the 1930s.[19] For May, the anxieties of this era were augmented by conditions of capitalist modernity, competitive individualism, declining religiosity, war, and nuclear weapons, while the overtness of this anxiety was rooted in an anxious reflexivity encouraged by existentialist thought.[20] A year later, *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety* by the spiritual writer Alan Watts appealed to similar themes: conditions of modernity – technology, science, and secularism – had brought about 'a time when human life seems to be so peculiarly insecure and uncertain.'[21]

[14]Google Books (2024), Google Books Ngram Viewer. Available at: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Age+of+Anxiety&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3 (Accessed 10 December 2024). Google's N-Gram data only captured texts up to the year 2019. It is not able to gauge the recent prevalence of the phrase across English-language texts digitised by Google.

[15]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, [1943] 2020); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Open Road, [1947] 2018); Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage International, [1942] 1991).

[16]Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 242; Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1947] 2011).

[17]Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*, p. xii–xiii.

[18]Ibid., p. xv.

[19]Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* (Potomac, MA: Pickle Partners Publishing, 1950), p. 11.

[20]Ibid., pp. 12–18; Rollo May, *Man's Search for Himself* (London: Norton and Company, 1953), pp. 29–30.

[21]Alan Watts, *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1951), p. 9.

Figure 1 also shows that textual references to an AoA declined after the late 1960s, before slowly rising again in the post–Cold War years. This fluctuation echoes the temporal narrative present in the contemporary AoA literature. Comparing the anxieties of the late 1910s and late 1940s with current conditions, Rumelili suggests 'a periodic pattern of anxiety appearing, subsiding, and then re-appearing as a public mood in international relations over time'.[22] According to the critical legal theorist Renata Salecl, post-war anxiety gave way to an 'age of abundance' in the 1960s.[23] Within this temporal imaginary, the latter Cold War years are seen as a time of relative certitude and prosperity. However, among those who deploy the AoA trope, there is less agreement on how the post–Cold War years should be characterised. In the context of the 'End of History', some have proclaimed the post–Cold War years as an 'Age of Optimism'.[24] Against a prior (and brief) moment of liberal certitude, the current moment of anxiety is painted as a violent departure, where 'the optimism that marked the turn of the millennium has been rent asunder'.[25] Yet, in contrast to the certitudes of the Cold War, others have labelled the turn of the millennium as another AoA, rather than an 'Age of Optimism'. For Homi Bhabha, this was related to intensifying ethnonationalism, migration, and cultural displacement in the immediate post–Cold War years.[26] For Salecl, the AoA was an apt moniker for the 1990s and early 2000s – a time of neoliberal hegemony, defined by the dislocating dynamics of the global capitalist system.[27]

Discrepancies over when and how to bookend periods of heightened anxiety show this exercise of affective periodisation to be highly contentious. However, this has not discouraged a recent wave of IR scholarship that has sought to define current predicaments through this very lens. This recent usage is most closely associated with scholars working within the field of OSS, particularly those drawing on existentialist and Lacanian-psychoanalytic traditions. An early articulation of the contemporary AoA thesis can be found in *Politics of Anxiety*, an edited volume by Eklundh, Guittet, and Zevnik published in 2017.[28] Within this volume's introduction, the authors conclude that there is clear empirical evidence 'that we live in anxious times, if anxious means an uncertainty about the future, and a present discomfort caused by this uncertainty'.[29] Crucially, the authors draw a line between the risk society literature of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the current moment of collective anxiety. The classic risk society literature, led by the likes of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, emphasised the proliferation of risks in the context of late modernity, globalisation, and technological change.[30] For Eklundh, Guittet, and Zevnik, today's anxieties are fundamentally different to the risk society because of the declining capacity of the state (or corporate actors like insurance companies) to manage risks or provide security.[31] In this reflexive AoA, populations are increasingly aware that 'despite knowing the risks, being presented with the solutions, there is little guarantee that those solutions will deliver the expected outcome'.[32] The authors therefore erect a qualitative distinction between the periods before and after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, an event which heralded a new era of economic and political instability, as well as declining public faith in governments' ability to assuage global insecurities.

[22] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1026.

[23] Renata Salecl, *On Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

[24] Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future*, p. 99; Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 242.

[25] Andrew Hom and Cian O'Driscoll, 'Existentialism and international relations: In it up to our necks', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 783–94 (p. 789).

[26] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, [1994] 2012), p. 202.

[27] Salecl, *On Anxiety*, p. 30.

[28] Emmy Eklundh, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, and Andreja Zevnik (eds), *Politics of Anxiety* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017).

[29] Emmy Eklundh, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, and Andreja Zevnik (eds), 'Introduction', in Emmy Eklundh, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, and Andreja Zevnik (eds), *Politics of Anxiety* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), pp. 1–16 (p. 1).

[30] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: SAGE, [1986] 1992); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

[31] Eklundh, Guittet and Zevnik, 'Introduction', p. 5.

[32] Ibid., p. 6.

A broad range of scholars within OSS, including Brent Steele, Catarina Kinnvall, Jennifer Mitzen, and Bahar Rumelili, have referred to the AoA.[33] Scholarship by Subotić and Ejdus, Nicolai Gellwitzki, Jelena Cupać, Dahlia Simangan, and Andrew Hom has also alluded to this idea, as well as publications by public intellectuals like the aforementioned Stephen Toope, and Gideon Rachman, foreign affairs correspondent at the *Financial Times*.[34] Within this literature, the AoA is commonly seen as a conjunctural phenomenon. A confluence of multiple (geo)political, ideological, economic, technological, environmental, and pathogenic crises is seen to have brought about an acute state of existential uncertainty. Here, the AoA is often discussed in global, universalising terms.[35] The first-person plural pronouns 'we' and 'our' are used to give a sense of a 'global existential crisis' covering 'us', the entirety of humanity.[36] This framing begs a couple of critical questions: from what subject position do these authors speak from when they make these universalising utterances, and is it even possible to generalise about a global affective condition, from the position of a 'planetary We'?[37]

Before I develop a fully fledged critique of these universalising tendencies, it is important to clarify how this AoA has been theorised, and to evaluate its evidentiary basis. The theorisation of ages of anxiety has been given clearest articulation by Rumelili, who – drawing on Heidegger's existentialist concept of 'mood' – defines these ages as historical periods in which 'the mood of anxiety is the prevalent way of attuning to the world'.[38] Here, the public mood of anxiety is seen to emerge from a convergence of catastrophic events with particular structural and political conditions. Rumelili has particularly highlighted the role of the Covid-19 pandemic in triggering 'a shared sense of living through unprecedented times', which 'has captured people to a degree than ever seen before in recent memory'.[39] Alongside Covid-19, uncertainty around the future of the global order, unpredictable terrorist attacks, and the growth of radical fundamentalist ideologies have spawned 'a pervasive anxiety about what we do not know and what we cannot control, rather than the fear of a specific and known enemy'.[40] The lack of a known enemy is important here. Based on a Heideggerian distinction between fear and anxiety, this era is dubbed an Age of

[33]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'; Brent Steele, 'Nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide: Inescapable dread in the 2020s', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1037–43 (p. 1037); Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 242.

[34]Subotić and Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn', p. 1014; Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security'; Jelena Cupać, 'The anxiety dilemma: Locating the Western Balkans in the age of anxiety', *Journal of Regional Security*, 15:1 (2020), pp. 7–38 (p. 7); Dahlia Simangan, 'How should IR deal with the "end of the world"? Existential anxieties and possibilities in the Anthropocene', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 855–871 (p. 870); Andrew Hom, 'Heidegger's heritage: The temporal politics of authenticity, then and now', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 885–904 (p. 899); Toope, *A Rule of Law*; Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future*, p. 173.

[35]Not all of these scholars are consistent in making universalising claims. For instance, Catarina Kinnvall has published multiple articles which do not conform to this universalising tendency. She has written about masculinised ontological insecurities in India, as well as co-authoring an article with Svensson that explores ontological insecurity through subaltern temporalities, and an article with Nesbitt-Larking on Muslim diasporas in post-colonial Europe. See: Catarina Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 283–302; Catarina Kinnvall and Ted Svensson, 'Ontological security and the limits to a common world: Subaltern pasts and the inner-worldliness of the Tablighi Jama'at', *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 333–52; Catarina Kinnvall and Paul Nesbitt-Larking, 'Security, subjectivity and space in postcolonial Europe: Muslims in the diaspora', *European Security*, 18.3 (2009), pp. 305–25.

[36]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'; Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security'; Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 1; Hom, 'Heidegger's heritage', p. 885.

[37]Scott Hamilton, 'I am uncertain, but we are not: A new subjectivity of the Anthropocene', *Review of International Studies*, 45.4 (2019), pp. 607–26 (p. 625).

[38]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1025.

[39]Bahar Rumelili, 'COVID-19: Uncertainty in a mood of anxiety', *International Relations*, 37:1 (2023), pp. 149–55 (p. 149).

[40]Bahar Rumelili, 'Introduction to the Special Issue: Anxiety and change in International Relations', *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 19:73 (2022), pp. 1–11.

Anxiety and not an Age of Fear due to the absence of specific objects to which individuals or collectives might attach their fears.[41] The new AoA is therefore partly defined by the unfathomability of threats facing human collectives, where anxieties cannot easily be transmuted into fears through attachment to identifiable threats. This point chimes with Eklundh, Guittet, and Zevnik's argument that we have moved on from a situation where governments could appear to manage the risks of late modernity. Instead, we are (allegedly) in a situation where the world seems unknowable and ungovernable. Rumelili draws on an existentialist reading, where anxiety is not merely an affective state, but a fundamental mode of existence rooted in the subject's awareness of their mortality and the unknowability of the future.[42] Once within this climate of radical contingency, Rumelili contends that populations become attuned to react negatively to any kind of change; even gradual or expected changes are experienced as crises.[43] The mood of anxiety therefore has a self-perpetuating quality, as novel challenges reinforce a sense that routines have been broken and that authoritative actors have lost control.

Beyond Rumelili's existentialist reading, IR literature has also begun to theorise anxiety through a psychoanalytic lens rooted in the work of Jacques Lacan. Unlike the Heideggerian view, which considers anxiety as a transient mood, Lacan locates anxiety within processes of subject formation, centred on the subject's relation to the symbolic order.[44] Under this view, anxiety is a foundational condition of existence structured by the human subject's unattainable desire for completeness.[45] Although this view sees anxiety as 'a constant and not a variable', anxiety can still be made more or less explicit, depending on the subject's immersion in fantasies which help to temporarily repress anxious feelings.[46] In OSS and beyond, this Lacanian idea of fantasy has been used to theorise how certain political narratives, such as populism, nationalism, and Islamophobia, tap into the subject's desire for ontological security.[47] Fantasmatic narratives allow individuals to evade antagonisms which are inherent to human subjectivity.[48] However, through a Lacanian lens, such fantasies are never complete, and desires are frequently subject to rupture. Therefore, on a societal level, collective anxieties are exacerbated by specific historical disruptions which interrupt these fantasies. For instance, catastrophic events like financial crises and global pandemics may undermine the fantasmatic narratives which help prevent subjects from being overwhelmed by anxiety.[49]

Whether one theorises anxiety through the prism of existentialism or psychoanalysis, unforeseen events and crises play a similar role in bringing collective anxiety to the fore. When it comes to discussions of a new AoA, a causal narrative is at stake: the 21st century has seen an unprecedented series of global emergencies which have (allegedly) brought about a widespread sense of unease and uncertainty. As suggested already, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic is a common reference point. The pandemic disrupted everyday routines for societies across the world, as well as undermining certainties regarding scientific knowledge and expertise.[50] For Rumelili, Covid-19 was pivotal in heightening awareness of possibilities that are unforeseen, thus attuning subjects

[41] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 179.

[42] Rumelili, 'COVID-19', p. 151.

[43] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1026.

[44] Andreja Zevnik, 'Anxiety, subjectivity and the possibility of emancipatory politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1050–56 (p. 1055).

[45] Ibid., p. 1052; Nina Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies', *International Studies Review*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 1–21 (p. 15).

[46] Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 247.

[47] Christopher Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 222–44; Nadya Ali and Ben Whitham, 'The unbearable anxiety of being: Ideological fantasies of British Muslims beyond the politics of security', *Security Dialogue*, 49:5 (2018), pp. 400–17; Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva', pp. 283–302.

[48] Ali and Whitham, 'The unbearable anxiety', p. 404..

[49] Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 246.

[50] Catarina Kinnvall and Ted Svensson, 'Exploring the populist "mind": Anxiety, fantasy, and everyday populism', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 526–542 (p. 531); Steele, 'Nowhere to run to', p. 1040.

to the world through the mood of anxiety.[51] It is important to note that this literature on ontological insecurity and Covid-19 was mostly penned during the pandemic. With the benefit of hindsight, we might question the longevity and presentism of these insights. Today, routines have been restored and Covid-19 has been largely desecuritised. Even in the midst of the pandemic, populations adapted themselves to new conditions. For example, if we look at YouGov data on the moods of Britain's population over the course of the pandemic, we can see that although there was a spike in the categories of (dis)contentment, stress, and fear in March 2020, these metrics quickly dissipated in the succeeding months.[52] Rather than simply ushering an era of heightened anxiety, populations quickly adapted to the new normal. Proponents of the AoA thesis may therefore be overestimating the durability of anxious circulations induced by the pandemic.

Aside from Covid-19, the dislocating effects of the deregulated global market economy are also cited as triggers of widespread anxiety. Highlighting stagnating living standards and youth unemployment, Eklundh, Guittet, and Zevnik pinpoint the 2008 Global Financial Crisis as a key moment in bringing about a more anxious world.[53] For Kinnvall and Svensson, the uncertainties fostered by economic globalisation have bolstered authoritarian political movements across the world.[54] Economic uncertainties have undermined trust in traditional political authorities, playing into the hands of populist and far-right nationalist movements.[55] Rather than merely responding to these uncertainties, populist agitators have acted as 'identity entrepreneurs', spewing divisive narratives which help to entrench a sense of existential crisis.[56] These movements, which provide 'fantasies of fulfilment' in the Lacanian sense, provide a path for transmuting generalised anxieties into specific fears of racialised out-groups, particularly through securitising immigrants and other minorities.[57] Yet, rather than promoting greater certitude through attachments to object-specific fears, these securitising moves often contribute to heightened paranoia and ontological insecurity.[58]

These trends may reflect a shift in (in)security politics from external threats to internal ones, where the body politic becomes the primary site of danger. For J. Peter Burgess, 'the shift in our time from an experience of security threats as exogenous to our nation-state reality complex towards a more reflexive, indigenous experience of danger mirrors the rise of a new age of anxiety'.[59] Yet this internalisation of insecurity is also coupled with the re-emergence of interstate warfare and great power competition. Specifically, Rumelili picks out Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a moment which 'further undermined the sense of a "mastery" of future'.[60] The growth of endogenous and exogenous insecurities are not mutually incompatible trends: data shows that we have seen an uptick of battle-related deaths in both intra- and interstate conflicts in recent years.[61] Indeed, the intra/inter or internal/external distinction is less useful in grasping the transnational nature

[51] Rumelili, 'COVID-19', pp. 149–50.

[52] Contentment, stress, and fear were selected here as they are the YouGov mood categories that most closely approximate anxiety: YouGov, *Britain's Mood, Measured Weekly* (2024). Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/britains-mood-measured-weekly.

[53] Eklundh, Guittet and Zevnik, 'Introduction', p. 1.

[54] Kinnvall and Svensson, 'Exploring the populist "mind"', p. 528.

[55] Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 14.

[56] Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann, 'Populism and the affective politics of humiliation narratives', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:1 (2021), pp. 1–11 (pp. 3 and 8); Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical Gestalt', p. 1058; Steele, 'Nowhere to run to', p. 1038.

[57] Kinnvall and Svensson, 'Exploring the populist "mind"', p. 537.

[58] Stuart Croft, 'Constructing ontological insecurity: The insecuritization of Britain's Muslims', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33:2 (2012), pp. 219–235 (p. 231).

[59] J. Peter Burgess, 'For want of not: Lacan's conception of anxiety', in Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik, and Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet (eds), *Politics of Anxiety* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 17–35 (p. 18).

[60] Rumelili, 'COVID-19', p. 153.

[61] Siri Aas Rustad, 'Conflict trends: A global overview, 1946–2023', *PRIO Paper* (Oslo: PRIO, 2024). Available at: https://www.prio.org/publications/14006.

of many contemporary predicaments, as highlighted by the transversal salience of issues like terrorism and climate change.[62] Reflecting this transversality, Dahlia Simangan has described this moment as the 'epoch of anxiety', where the Anthropocene fosters a greater existential awareness of humanity's contingency vis-à-vis the natural world.[63] Similar concerns relating to humanity's survival can be found in relation to nuclear weapons, as reflected in Rhys Crilley's research on 'Atomic Anxiety in the New Nuclear Age'.[64] Others point towards the role of newer technologies: the current digital and social media landscape arguably lubricates circulations of affect, allowing anxieties to be transmitted more rapidly across borders.[65] Meanwhile, the emergence of artificial intelligence and cyberwarfare raise further questions about humanity's future.[66]

In sum, the AoA literature draws on a plethora of causal factors and empirical examples. These crises, uncertainties, and unforeseen events converge, helping to constitute the AoA as a kind of emergent property. Yet these empirical reference points are not based on granular case studies. Aside from Rumelili's 2021 article, systematic efforts to periodise contemporary history according to anxiety or other moods are largely absent from this literature.[67] Instead, the bulk of the literature is more theoretically oriented: the primary objective is the theorisation of ontological insecurity and existential anxiety as emergent concepts in the field of IR. Here, the AoA is deployed in an ancillary role. It is used as a justificatory device, legitimising claims that IR scholarship should centre anxiety as a core concept for understanding global insecurity today. Appealing to the idea that the current moment is one of heightened anxiety appears to justify the primary endeavour: to explore IR through the theoretical prisms of existentialism and Lacanian psychoanalysis.[68] As well as justifying these theoretical innovations, the AoA also supports normative innovation. This is reflected in the recent normative turn within the OSS literature, which has seen scholars debating whether existential anxiety can be harnessed productively, in more or less emancipatory ways.[69] Beyond OSS, Toope makes this normative manoeuvre explicit, arguing that it is 'precisely because we live in an age of anxiety, marked by radical uncertainty' that we can 'be liberated to build upon foundations of thought and models of past action that are our shared heritage'.[70]

There is a great deal of merit to the recent theoretical and normative debates that have drawn upon the concept of anxiety. OSS has helped advance conceptions of global insecurity beyond traditional materialist analysis and beyond the politics of fear, instead deepening our understanding of the relationship between uncertainty and subjectivity. However, because attention has been placed on theoretical innovation, rather than the development of concepts which cohere with contextually sensitive case studies, the AoA thesis falls into the trap of excessive generalisation. The result is a kind of 'leapfrogging' effect. OSS scholarship has been guilty of leaping over the empirical task of tracing contextually specific moods, instead landing on the comforting ground of theoretical innovation. In the remainder of this article, I engage with some of the problems which arise from this abdication of contextually sensitive empirics. The first problem pertains to how the AoA thesis overlooks spatial variations in the circulation of anxiety. Specifically, OSS literature has privileged a Eurocentric reading of collective mood which ignores qualitative and quantitative differences in how moods are experienced across Western and non-Western lifeworlds. This links to a second problem that is explored in the final section: by bookending ages of anxiety according to a largely

[62]Salecl, *On Anxiety*, p. 2; Rumelili, 'Introduction to the Special Issue', p. 1; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', pp. 242–3; Eklundh, Guittet, and Zevnik, 'Introduction', p. 1; Steele, 'Nowhere to run to', p. 1037; Subotić and Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn', p. 1015.

[63]Simangan, 'How should IR deal with the "end of the world"?', p. 870.

[64]Rhys Crilley, 'Atomic anxiety in the New Nuclear Age', *Atomic Anxiety*. Available at: https://atomicanxiety.com/about-2/.

[65]Andrew Ross, *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019), p. 30; Kinnvall and Svensson, 'Exploring the populist "mind"', p. 530.

[66]Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 73; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', pp. 242–3.

[67]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'.

[68]Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security'.

[69]Subotić and Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn', pp. 1017–18; Hom, 'Heidegger's heritage', pp. 885–904.

[70]Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 242.

Eurocentric timeline, this periodisation ignores spatio-temporal diversity in the experience of anxiety. This is best illustrated by studying how the temporal register of post-colonial anxieties differs from the kind of Western-liberal anxiety found in OSS and mainstream IR.

Spaces of anxiety and emotional communities

In an article about the mobilisation of anxieties by political elites, Felix Berenskötter has suggested that 'perhaps we should speak of spaces, rather than ages, of anxiety'.[71] Responding to Rumelili's article on '[Our] age of anxiety', Berenskötter argued that collective moods vary according to diverse meaning systems, both internationally and within territorially bounded societies.[72] This section takes up Berenskötter's challenge. In focusing on the temporal demarcation of anxiety, the AoA literature overlooks the spatial pluralism of collective moods. Here, we can take a lesson from historical research on emotions, particularly Barbara Rosenwein's work on *Emotional Communities*.[73] Rosenwein's scholarship has relevance to the question of defining distinct 'ages' according to particular emotional repertoires. Studying emotions in early Middle Ages Europe, she criticised the overly simplistic tendency to reduce the entirety of the Middle Ages to a single emotional repertoire, such as stereotyping early medieval people as child-like or impulsive.[74] To the contrary, Rosenwein found evidence of a multiplicity of coexisting emotional communities in medieval Europe. Here, Berenskötter's 'spaces of anxiety' and Rosenwein's 'emotional communities' resonate with emotional approaches to IR, and particularly the social constructivist theorisation of emotions – a view which posits that 'how one feels often depends on culturally framed interpretations'.[75] Even in an era of hyper-globalisation, the world is composed of a complex pluriverse of overlapping sociocultural spaces with a diversity of emotional repertoires. According to this sociological and historically informed perspective, we should expect significant variations in how emotions and collective moods are interpreted, processed, and articulated across (and within) different societies. This begs a few interlinked questions: how much can the AoA thesis be generalised at the level of truly 'global' politics? Is the *world* experiencing a wave of unprecedented anxiety, or are there significant geographical, spatial, and racialised variations in the quality and temporality of anxious circulations?

Spatial variance in the experience of anxiety

Within the AoA literature, there is some recognition of sociocultural variance in the experience of anxiety. For instance, Rumelili notes that 'prevalent social understandings of anxiety may shape how our attunement to the world in anxiety is expressed, performed, and acted upon'.[76] This echoes Rosenwein's concept of 'emotional repertoires': social norms and cultural expectations help determine how emotions are felt, displayed, and interpreted.[77] Likewise, Toope points out that how we react to global challenges in the AoA depends on intersectional standpoints, including age, socio-economic status, gender, and cultural heritage.[78] Here, we find some acknowledgement that the experience of anxiety is contingent and contextually specific. Yet these are isolated comments that are dwarfed by the literature's more universalising tendencies. As mentioned already, first-person-plural pronouns are used to frame the AoA as an 'our-problem' or 'we-problem' for *all* of

[71] Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical Gestalt', p. 1062.
[72] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'; Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical Gestalt', p. 1061.
[73] Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
[74] Ibid., p. 23.
[75] Jonathan Mercer, 'Feeling like a state: Social emotion and identity', *International Theory*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 515–535 (p. 523).
[76] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1026.
[77] Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, p. 2.
[78] Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 16.

humanity.[79] Even where authors do not refer to the AoA in explicitly global terms, this universalising tendency is implicit in the lack of acknowledgement of spatial variability or the possibility of emotional pluriverses.

To illustrate the importance of considering pluriversal spaces of anxiety, we can look at climate change – an issue which is arguably a paragon of planetary-level insecurity. As an existential threat to long-term human survival, climate change and biodiversity loss can be interpreted as a universal challenge. Indeed, the call for papers for the EISA's Pandemonium conference in 2022 referred to climate change and ecological degradation as a crisis of 'humanity'.[80] It is no surprise that those deploying the AoA trope cite the climate crisis as one of the key issues that has helped bring about a new era of uncertainty.[81] In the context of the ongoing ecological crisis, Simangan has described the Anthropocene as the 'epoch of anxiety'.[82] Yet Simangan also recognises the dangers of universalising the Anthropos, especially as both the culpability and effects of climate change are not evenly distributed.[83] Yet this global unevenness also applies to the collective experience of climate anxiety. Here, we can take a look at quantitative surveys which illustrate pluriversal variation. Conducting large-N surveys in 32 countries, Ogunbode et al. found wide variations in the geographical distribution of climate anxiety.[84] This study evidenced that feeling 'very or extremely anxious' about climate change was in the 25 to 30 per cent range for most countries. However, some countries scored much higher, such as Turkey at 50 per cent, Brazil at 43.6 per cent, and the United Arab Emirates at 39.4 per cent. Meanwhile, these anxieties were less prominent in other countries, as with Russia (5 per cent), Romania (14.4 per cent), and Malaysia (15.2 per cent). Wide variations in the experience of climate anxiety were also found in a 2023 study by Niedzwiedz and Katikireddi, as well as a 2021 study by Hickman et al.[85] These studies imply that eco-anxiety is not the provincial concern of the West. However, given the wide deviations between countries, they also suggest that we should heed Berenskötter's call to consider spatial variations in the circulation of anxiety.[86]

Even if we are experiencing a global planetary crisis, how this crisis is processed affectively depends on a complex set of political, economic, and social mediations which differ from one context to another. It is important to note here that spatial variation does not necessarily denote methodological nationalism. Spatiality can refer here not just to geographical borders but also to (often informal and transversal) social spaces which sometimes cut across territorial lines. For example, climate anxiety is particularly concentrated among younger populations, irrespective of nationality.[87] In the United States, there is evidence that climate anxiety is more prevalent among both younger generations as well as people who identify as Hispanic.[88] These demographic variances chime with Berenskötter's original argument vis-à-vis spaces of anxiety, where he cites the

[79]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'; Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security'; Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 13.

[80]EISA, 'EISA PEC 2022'.

[81]Steele, 'Nowhere to run to', p. 1037; Hom, 'Heidegger's heritage', p. 885; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', pp. 242–3; Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. xiii; Subotić and Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn', p. 1015.

[82]Simangan, 'How should IR deal with the "end of the world"?', p. 870.

[83]Ibid., pp. 862–3.

[84]Charles Ogunbode, Rouven Doran and Daniel Hanss et al., 'Climate anxiety, wellbeing and pro-environmental action: Correlates of negative emotional responses to climate change in 32 countries', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 84 (2022), pp. 1–14.

[85]Claire Niedzwiedz and S. Vittal Katikireddi, 'Determinants of eco-anxiety: Cross-national study of 52,219 participants from 25 European countries', *European Journal of Public Health*, 33:2 (2023), pp. 000–000 (p. 28); Caroline Hickman, Elizabeth Marks and Panu Pihkala et al. 'Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: A global survey', *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5:12 (2021), pp. 863–873 (p. 866).

[86]Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical Gestalt', pp. 1061–2.

[87]Caroline Hickman, 'Eco-anxiety in children and young people: A rational response, irreconcilable despair, or both?', *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 77:1 (2024), pp. 356–368 (p. 358).

[88]Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 'The prevalence of climate change psychological distress among American adults' (2022), Yale University. Available at: https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/climate-change-psychological-distress-prevalence/.

example of how different US presidents elicit divergent reactions from polarised political constituencies.[89] This supports the idea that partially autonomous emotional communities coexist within national contexts. For example, populist demagogues like Donald Trump may provide a fantasy of fulfilment for one audience, while generating existential anxiety for another. These examples illustrate that there is more than one way in which we can demarcate spaces of anxiety: we can recognise differences between territorially bounded spaces (e.g. nation-states), as well as different sub-national communities (e.g. minority communities living in Western countries), or groups which transcend national boundaries (e.g. the Western cosmopolitan liberals who make up the bulk of academic IR). As I will explore below, what is important here is to acknowledge the pluriversality of semi-autonomous spatial arrangements through which anxiety is experienced. Recognising this allows us to move beyond the homogenising tendency that is present within the AoA literature.

Provincialising the Age of Anxiety

The AoA is a situated narrative, inflected by a specifically Eurocentric form of universalism. In the Saidian tradition, post-colonial literature has tended to highlight the classic problem of Orientalist othering, where the racialised other is reified through notions of essential difference.[90] In contrast, rather than emphasising Orientalised difference, Eurocentric universalisation erases difference, while assuming that the Western experience is representative of universal human experience. The AoA literature is arguably guilty of this fallacy. This is partly due to the fact that this literature builds (primarily) on case studies from the West and Global North. For example, in *Politics of Anxiety*, Eklundh, Guitter, and Zevnik refer primarily to examples from Europe and North America, discussing the rise of Trump, Brexit, Black Lives Matter, and European populist parties.[91] Kinnvall and Mitzen also cite examples which are largely specific to the European and North American experience, as do Subotić and Ejdus.[92] Here, my critique of the AoA discourse, which is partly a subset of OSS scholarship, should not be mistaken as a critique of OSS in general: there are plenty of studies that draw upon non-Western case studies within the OSS canon.[93] Many of these studies avoid the Eurocentric universalising that is characteristic of publications which espouse the AoA narrative.

By emphasising the threat of growing authoritarianism and right-wing populism, the literature outlined in the first section tends to see threats to the liberal international order (LIO) as central to heightened global anxiety.[94] The implicit referent object across these studies is the Western-liberal subject. This discourse taps into a declinist zeitgeist which highlights the beleaguered status of liberal subjectivity in the context of multi-pronged crises and uncertainties. Particular causality is ascribed to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and faltering neoliberal capitalism, which are seen as precursors to a new era of anxiety.[95] However, while this crisis of capitalism had globally

[89]Berenskötter, 'Anxiety and the biographical Gestalt', p. 1061.

[90]Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978); Carmina Yu Untalan, 'Decentering the self, seeing like the other: Toward a postcolonial approach to ontological security', *International Political Sociology*, 14:1 (2020), pp. 40–56 (p. 45).

[91]Eklundh, Guitter and Zevnik, 'Introduction', p. 9.

[92]Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 243; Subotić and Ejdus, 'Towards the existentialist turn', p. 1014–15.

[93]Untalan, 'Decentering the self', pp. 40–56; Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva', pp. 283–302; Marco A. Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64; Carmina Yu Untalan, 'Perforating colour lines: Japan and the problem of race in the "non-West"', *Review of International Studies*, 51:1 (2025), pp. 102–120; Chris Deacon, 'Perpetual ontological crisis: National division, enduring anxieties and South Korea's discursive relationship with Japan', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:4 (2023), pp. 1041–65; Ayşe Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23.

[94]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1022; Cupać, 'The anxiety dilemma', p. 13.

[95]Eklundh, Guitter and Zevnik, 'Introduction', p. 1; Luke Howie and Perri Campbell, *Crisis and Terror in the Age of Anxiety: 9/11, the Global Financial Crisis and ISIS* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 246.

reverberating effects, these effects were not distributed in a uniform manner. Economic malaise in the post-2008 period has disproportionately impacted advanced industrial economies.[96] Despite the setbacks of the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries across the Global South and East have boomed over the past decade, and the Human Development Index has largely been on a steady upward trajectory.[97] Therefore, it is important to highlight that a sense of decline is not universal. Such a universalising perspective ignores diverse socio-economic trajectories. This blind spot leads to the (mis)perception that provincial concerns are universals. By ignoring spatial variance and speaking in the name of the global, while at the same time relying on European or North American examples, this literature implicitly treats non-Western contexts as merely an addendum to the Western-liberal lifeworld. This critique echoes Barkawi and Laffey's broader criticism of Eurocentric security studies for its interpretation of non-Western subjects as merely 'marginal or derivative elements of world politics', wherein scholarship renders their experiences through 'categories derived from great power politics in the North'.[98]

Treating the Western-liberal experience of anxiety as universal risks erasing the contingent ways that anxiety is experienced outside of the West's provincial space of anxiety. By speaking in the name of a 'planetary We', as Scott Hamilton puts it, we potentially lose sight of 'the multitude of overlapping worlds and forms of being(s) existing around us today'.[99] When folding global affect into Western affect, the AoA trope papers over qualitative differences in how anxieties manifest in metropolitan versus post-colonial spaces. This is most clearly exemplified in the way that the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has been portrayed in this literature. For Rumelili, the securitisation that occurred in the wake of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks in the early 2000s was successful in transmuting anxieties into fears, thus ensuring the triumph of a 'mood of fear', defined by relative certitude, rather than a more uncertain 'mood of anxiety'.[100] This view overestimates the capacity of governments to contain anxiety in the aftermath of large-scale terrorist attacks. After viscerally shocking and catastrophic events, the ability of governments to control the circulation of anxieties through counterterrorism policies and securitising moves is limited. Although the media and policymakers may be able to home in on objects of fear, as with the image of the jihadi terrorist or 'rogue' leaders like Saddam Hussein, the unpredictable nature of terrorism renders the transmutation of fear into anxiety partial and incomplete. Indeed, it was partly the capacity of terror attacks to spread anxiety in the context of intense mass media coverage which made it such a salient form of psychological warfare in the early 21st century.[101]

The view of terrorism-as-fear and not terrorism-as-anxiety also underplays the extent to which securitising moves after 9/11 were productive of novel (often racialised) anxieties, particularly for those living beyond the bounds of the securitised Western-liberal lifeworld.[102] The GWOT generated new practices of hyper-securitisation, surveillance, and racial profiling which actively fed new circulations of anxiety for large segments of the world's population.[103] This applies to both spaces of violent intervention in the Global South, as well as to Muslim and other non-white communities living in Western countries. Regarding the latter, Stuart Croft identifies a paradox of (in)securitisation, where attempts to shore up the ontological security of the majority community through the securitisation of minorities generates existential insecurities for those racialised

[96]Laurence Ball, 'Long-term damage from the Great Recession in OECD countries', *European Journal of Economics and Economic Policies*, 11:2 (2014), pp. 149–60.

[97]United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2023/24. Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping Our Future in a Transforming World* (New York: United Nations, 2023), p. 3.

[98]Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment in security studies', *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006), pp. 329–352 (p. 332).

[99]Hamilton, 'I am uncertain', p. 625.

[100]Rumelili, 'COVID-19', p. 153.

[101]Brigette Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 123.

[102]Howie and Campbell, *Crisis and Terror in the Age of Anxiety*, p. 12.

[103]Ali and Whitham, 'The unbearable anxiety', p. 401.

others.[104] Relatedly, Ali and Whitham draw on the idea of the 'conceptual Jew', where the anxieties of the majority community are projected onto minorities through racialised, fantasmatic narratives.[105] For Ali, in contemporary Western societies, it is Muslim populations – subject to surveillance and intense governmental and media scrutiny – who have borne the brunt of this 'hypervisibalisation'.[106] Subaltern populations in the Global South have also been subject to the uneven anxiety-inducing effects of the GWOT. This is exemplified by the paradoxical effects of drone warfare. As Christine Agius has argued, while the use of drones for counter-insurgency purposes has provided some sense of security for many in the Global North, 'drone strikes create deep insecurity within postcolonial borderspaces, impacting communities already subject to multiple forms and legacies of power and control'.[107]

These examples illustrate that, by centring the Western-liberal subject as the key referent object, the AoA thesis overlooks qualitatively different experiences of anxiety found among diverse emotional communities. By framing the AoA as a universal condition, rather than a provincial one, we lose sight of the nuanced and paradoxical ways that ontological insecurities play out across diverse social spaces. However, this is not merely a problem of spatiality; there is also a temporal misjudgement being enacted here. As the next section will explore, periodising 'our' AoA involves a particular temporal imaginary that is also provincial in scope. To highlight the importance of shifting from spatiality to temporality, we can refer to the example mentioned above. The insecuritisation of minority communities in Western societies did not emerge overnight. Likewise, these anxieties did not simply stem from the kinds of conjunctural crises that the AoA literature homes in on. Instead, they are the product of much longer-term exclusions and processes of othering and racialisation which stretch back decades, if not centuries.[108] Therefore, by centring the subaltern in our analysis of anxiety, we not only bring spatial variance into focus, but we can also highlight temporal variance – a dimension which significantly undermines the universalising bookends of the AoA thesis.

Post-colonial anxiety: Beyond Western-liberal temporality

The first section of this article opened with a discussion of the temporal narrative found within the AoA thesis. Authors like Rumelili, Toope, and Rachman referred to a fluctuating pattern where periods of relative certitude or contentment give way to periods of accentuated anxiety.[109] This reflects a cyclical conception of time, where history proceeds episodically in the wake of recurring shocks and crises.[110] This is a more tragic conception of modern history than the linear temporality of traditional Enlightenment thought. By drawing parallels with Europe's darkest moments from the 20th century, these authors invoked a sense of backsliding, a reversion to war, fascism, and spiritual malaise. The idea of a new AoA also closely approximates the breakdown of an Enlightenment teleology, where the progressive certitudes of the 'End of History' have faltered under the strains of the LIO's conjunctural crises.[111] According to Rumelili's theorisation, the mood of anxiety encapsulates a temporal horizon which can no longer be oriented towards the future, as the future has become so uncertain and unfathomable.[112] Eklundh, Guitter, and Zevnik concur – we have entered a new political temporality focused on the present, rather than the future.[113]

[104] Croft, 'Constructing ontological insecurity', p. 199.
[105] Ali and Whitham, 'The unbearable anxiety', pp. 406–7.
[106] Nadya Ali, 'Seeing and unseeing Prevent's racialized borders', *Security Dialogue*, 51:6 (2020), pp. 579–596 (p. 588).
[107] Christine Agius, 'Ordering without bordering: Drones, the unbordering of late modern warfare and ontological insecurity' *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 370–386 (p. 370).
[108] Nadine El-Enany, *Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 4–5.
[109] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1026; Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future*, p. 93 and 173; Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 13.
[110] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1025–6.
[111] Rachman, *Zero-Sum Future*, pp. 4–5 and 99.
[112] Rumelili, 'COVID-19', p. 152.
[113] Eklundh, Guitter and Zevnik, 'Introduction', p. 5.

As we saw in the last section, Western-liberal subjects are the primary referent objects discussed in this literature. This Eurocentrism colours the universalising ideas present within the discourse – *Western* anxieties are read as *global* anxieties. The AoA's temporal register is also influenced by this Eurocentricity. The chronology that narrates the historical transitions between ages of certitude and ages of anxiety are largely based on key moments in the provincially Western experience of world history. For instance, it was the collective mood surrounding Europe's World Wars which was, for Rumelili, the forerunner of the contemporary AoA.[114] The latter Cold War years receive comparably less attention in this timeline of anxious fluctuation – the implication being that this period marked a time of relative certitude, particularly regarding the politics of fear that oriented the East–West rivalry. This perception of the post-1945 era as simply one of great power competition – rendered here through the certitudes of mutual fear – reflects a specifically Eurocentric reading.[115] Yet the Eurocentrism of this chronology is perhaps most evident in the portrayal of the post–Cold War years as a period of relative certitude and optimism.[116] This optimism is indicative of a Western-liberal triumphalism. The provinciality of this perspective is best illustrated by the fact that while Western democracies were celebrating their newly found hegemony after 1989, former Soviet countries were going through a period of crisis and humiliation.[117]

Security studies' embedment in a Eurocentric chronology is nothing new. In their classic post-colonial critique of security studies, Barkawi and Laffey highlighted the extent to which the discipline's spatio-temporal assumptions are rooted in the Western experience:

> Eurocentric historical geographies and periodisations are very much in evidence in the common narratives of world history that underpin security studies. For example, the wars of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France give way to the nineteenth century Concert of Europe, which in turn leads to the half-century conflict to prevent German hegemony. The period after 1945 is seen as one of 'East–West' struggle, that is, between competing coalitions organised around the US and the USSR. In terms of spatial assumptions, what is most evident about these very conventional and widely accepted periodisations is that world politics is taken to be happening almost exclusively in Europe, or latterly in the Northern hemisphere.[118]

Perceived through a post-colonial lens, this provincial spatio-temporal ordering generates a kind of epistemic erasure, where the agency of non-Western populations is muted, and their diverse temporalities go unrecognised. When it comes to the task of conceptualising global circulations of anxiety, if we rely only on historical coordinates derived from a Western chronology, then we inevitably overlook the more complex and nuanced ways that anxiety is experienced beyond the Western lifeworld. This is not a novel insight. The provincialism of Western temporality has been the subject of much post-colonial literature. Therefore, to extend my critique of the AoA thesis, I will finish this article by drawing upon post-colonial perspectives which emphasise a different spatio-temporal reading of anxiety to that which is found in the bulk of the OSS literature. This reading complicates recent efforts to periodise 'our' contemporary times as one of extraordinary anxiety by emphasising the longue durée experience of anxiety present in many post-colonial contexts.

[114]Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1020.

[115]Barkawi and Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment', pp. 334–5.

[116]Gideon Rachman *Zero-Sum Future*, p. 93; Toope, *A Rule of Law*, p. 242; Hom and O'Driscoll, 'Existentialism and international relations', p. 789.

[117]Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 97; Maria Mälksoo, 'Militant memocracy in International Relations: Mnemonical status anxiety and memory laws in Eastern Europe', *Review of International Studies*, 47:4 (2021), pp. 489–507 (p. 496).)

[118]Barkawi and Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment', p. 334.

Post-colonial anxiety and the longue durée

The concept of 'post-colonial anxiety' captures a spatio-temporal phenomenon which is not accounted for in the AoA literature. Post-colonial anxiety suggests that, decades after decolonisation, imperial governance still casts an anxious shadow over post-colonial peoples and spaces. Sankaran Krishna once used this term to specifically describe the troubled desire of post-colonial elites to mimic the European model of nation-building bequeathed to them by their former imperial rulers.[119] This perspective echoes the psychoanalytic approach to post-colonial identity found in the works of Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha. For Fanon, colonial conquest cast whiteness as a master signifier which, through the internalisation of ideas of racial inferiority, produced a 'psychoexistential complex' among non-white (post-)colonial subjects.[120] Likewise, for Bhabha, the unachievable desire to emulate the colonial master produces a liminal and alienated subjectivity.[121] These authors therefore point towards a very different form of anxiety to that which is experienced among white-Western populations – one characterised by the destabilising effects that racial ordering has on subaltern subjectivity.

These psychoanalytic theories of post-colonial subjectivity have been taken up by a handful of scholars in OSS. For example, Bilgic and Pilcher have developed the concept of 'postcolonial status anxiety', defined as 'the emotional driving force of the postcolonial subject to feel complete, to be whole, in racialised, gendered and classed hierarchies'.[122] They deploy this concept to examine Turkey's enduring inferiority complex in its relations with the West. Similarly, studying Brazilian political elites and drawing on Lacan, Vieira posits that a frustrated and unachievable desire to emulate the 'ego-ideal' of the Western other has been a central part of Brazilian foreign policy discourse since its independence from Portugal in 1822.[123] Also building on a Lacanian theory of racial anxiety, Untalan argues that violent racial fantasies cultivated in imperial Japan in the first half of the 20th century 'emerged out of Japan's anxiety towards their internalised inferiority against the Other'.[124] Likewise, drawing on both Fanon and Said, Maureen Sioh has made a similar argument in relation to Asia's 'Tiger' economies: for these states, 'capitalist success becomes an antidote to the imperial legacy of anxiety internalised as self-hatred'.[125]

Post-colonial anxiety denotes a very different temporal logic to that which is found in Eurocentric discourse. This is because it disrupts the linear relationship between past and present.[126] Under this lagging view of time, the past is not a closed chapter. It is continually reinscribed into the present, rendering the past as dynamic and alive. This reflects Avery Gordon's hauntology, where past traumas are seen to linger into the present.[127] Ann Laura Stoler's concept of 'imperial debris' is also instructive here: imperial processes 'occupy multiple historical tenses', saturating 'the subsoil of people's lives and persist[ing], sometimes subjacently, over a longer durée'.[128] For Achille Mbembe, the post-colonial condition entails an 'entangled' conception of time which 'encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay

[119] Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, p. xix.

[120] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, [1952] 2008), p. 5.

[121] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 59–60.

[122] Ali Bilgic and Jordan Pilcher, 'Desires, fantasies and hierarchies: Postcolonial status anxiety through ontological security', *Alternatives*, 48:1 (2023), pp. 3–19 (p. 5).

[123] Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security', p. 143.

[124] Untalan, 'Perforating colour lines', p. 14.

[125] Maureen Sioh, 'The hollow within: Anxiety and performing postcolonial financial policies', *Third World Quarterly*, 31:4 (2010), pp. 581–597 (p. 589).

[126] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 254.

[127] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. xvi.

[128] Ann Laura Stoler, 'Introduction: The rot remains', in Ann Laura Stoler (ed.), *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 1–36 (pp. 5 and 10).

one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another'.[129] This post-colonial temporality challenges the temporal logic baked into the AoA thesis. Rather than a fluctuating timeline punctuated by moments of conjunctural crisis, post-colonial temporality blurs the lines between past and present. Post-colonial anxiety resists simplistic periodisations which bookend 'our' current age as one of extraordinary uncertainty. It offers an alternative temporal imaginary in which the anxieties of the contemporary moment are not exceptional, but part of longue durée processes of racialised violence which entangle the past within the present.

An illustrative example of the difficulties of bookending post-colonial anxiety can be found in the study of racialised violence in contemporary Britain. In July and August of 2024, violent far-right anti-immigration riots spread across cities in England and Northern Ireland. Mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers were targeted in violent and racially motivated attacks.[130] Hypothetically, this spike in racialised violence could be read through the prism of the AoA. OSS literature has highlighted how the nativist fantasies projected by far-right movements become symbolically effective in the 'mood of anxiety'.[131] For Andrew Hom, the extremist politics of the present moment is precisely an outcome of existentialist questions which have become more salient in the current cultural and intellectual milieu.[132] However, this reading omits the longue durée. Britain's contemporary political history is punctuated by episodes of organised racial violence. From the street violence of the English Defence League in the early 2010s, and far-right riots which played out in Oldham and Bradford in 2001, to anti-Black racist attacks in south-east London in the early 1990s, and violence against Bengalis in London's Tower Hamlets during the 1970s and 1980s, urban spaces in modern Britain have experienced recurrent outbursts in racialised violence which have victimised various minority communities.[133]

These episodes of violence do not correspond neatly with the bookends of the AoA thesis. Whether we are talking about non-white minorities or the majority white population, racially inflected ontological insecurities are nothing new in Britain, nor in other Western contexts. These more entrenched anxieties persist beyond the moments of conjunctural crisis highlighted in the AoA literature. The longue durée character of collective anxiety is perhaps most viscerally evident among Britain's non-white minorities, whose heritages are largely intwined with Britain's imperial history. Here, the concept of post-colonial anxiety is instructive. Under this view, colonialism encouraged a fractured sense of identity, with post-colonial migrants and their descendants caught between othering, racial violence, and often-unobtainable demands to replicate the ego-ideal of the host society.[134] As El-Enany argues, legacies of colonial dispossession combine with modern racial bordering practices to ensure continuity in the existential insecurity felt by Britain's non-white minorities.[135] The hauntings of the colonial past are thus reinscribed in the post-colonial present through state-driven discriminatory practices, such as the UK government's hostile environment policy, alongside the street-level violence of the organised far right.[136]

[129] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 14.

[130] House of Commons Library, 'Policing response to the 2024 summer riots', UK Parliament. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/policing-response-to-the-2024-summer-riots.

[131] Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety', p. 1029.

[132] Hom, 'Heidegger's heritage', p. 900.

[133] Joel Busher, 'Why even misleading identity claims matter: The evolution of the English Defence League', *Political Studies*, 66.2 (2018), pp. 323–338 (pp. 325–6); Arun Kundnani, 'From Oldham to Bradford: The violence of the violated', *Institute of Race Relations* (1 October 2001). Available at: https://irr.org.uk/article/from-oldham-to-bradford-the-violence-of-the-violated; Carl Haacke, 'Racist violence in the United Kingdom', Human Rights Watch (1 April 1997). Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/1997/04/01/racist-violence-united-kingdom; Anita Mureithi, 'How Brick Lane fought back against racism', Open Democracy (26 July 2022). Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/brick-lane-racism-altab-ali-turning-point/.

[134] Giorgio Shani, 'Human security as ontological security: A post-colonial approach', *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 275–93 (p. 283); Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security', p. 143; Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking, 'Security, subjectivity and space in postcolonial Europe', p. 313.

[135] El-Enany, *Bordering Britain*, pp. 28–9.

[136] Ibid., p. 25.

Unlike the conjunctural-crisis temporality of Western-liberal anxiety, which centres on ruptures in Enlightenment progress, post-colonial anxiety reflects a haunting continuity where the past – colonial violence, exclusion, and exploitation – continues to structure the present. A post-colonial lens reveals how subaltern subjects have navigated anxiety as a structural and recursive reality, rather than a product of short-term conjunctural crises. Although the recent wave of populist-nationalism across the Western world may augment these anxieties, it is clear that they have not arisen overnight. Therefore, by studying how collective moods play out differently among those outside the dominant Western-liberal imaginary, we can unearth diverse temporal logics which complicate generalising efforts to periodise contemporary history according to simplistic ages of anxiety.

It is important to consider that the Eurocentric lens through which global anxiety has been studied in IR is not just problematic in descriptive-empirical terms. Political, epistemological, and ontological stakes must also be considered. By defaulting to the Western-liberal experience of anxiety, and by treating this provincial spatio-temporal imaginary as universal, those repeating the AoA trope have inadvertently contributed to the epistemic marginalisation of non-Western populations and their unique experiences of anxiety (and collective moods more broadly). This imaginary effectively treats non-Western pluriverses as a mere addendum to the 'core' ontological insecurities of the liberal West. The universalising Eurocentrism of the AoA trope subsequently delegitimises non-Western experiences which do not fit neatly into its timeline of conjunctural crises. The insistence on a singular and homogenised AoA effectively displaces alternative ways of knowing and experiencing ontological insecurity.

Finally, by focusing on uncertainty around the future of the LIO as a key trigger behind a global mood of anxiety, the AoA narrative elevates the Western-liberal subject as *the* central referent object in IR's analysis. At best, this entails an implicit hierarchical ordering, where the insecurities of Europeans and North Americans take precedent over the rest of the world. Post-colonial subjects, whose anxieties are rooted in colonial histories and ongoing racialisation, are downgraded within this hierarchisation. This downgrading renders their experiences as illegible within dominant security discourses. At worst, this Eurocentric reading of global anxiety lacks a critical interrogation of the ways that the Western-liberal subject's privileged position contributes to ongoing (in)securitisation practices which perpetuate various forms of violence and marginalisation affecting subaltern populations. This is illustrated by the uneven effects of counterterrorism policies or the intensified surveillance and policing of migrants in the wake of racialised populism. Responding to these pitfalls, greater reflexivity is needed around how OSS might be implicated in the reproduction of exclusionary narratives. In other words, the idea that 'we' are living in an AoA is not a neutral one. It is rooted in a provincial experience of collective mood, which simultaneously privileges a Western-liberal subjectivity while silencing others. Future scholarship therefore needs to become more attentive to the risk of epistemic erasure, especially when articulating universalising concepts rooted in provincial lifeworlds.

Conclusion

Overall, this article has warned against the excessively homogenising tendencies of the AoA literature. The AoA thesis unwittingly forecloses the possibility of witnessing a multiplicity of affective patterns within diverse spaces across the globe. As the first section highlighted, this foreclosure is the product of the trope's emergence as an ancillary device within OSS debates. The idea that 'we' are living in a period of exceptional anxiety is motivated more by a desire to justify theoretical manoeuvres (towards centring existential anxiety as a core concept in IR) rather than an empirical endeavour to explore the diverse contexts in which anxieties develop. A lack of critical engagement with how we bookend anxiety has also led to a number of excessive generalisations about the scale and temporality of anxious circulation. As seen in the last section, the AoA literature

repeats some of the same provincial readings of historical geography which are found within the traditional security studies literature.[137]

Moving beyond deconstructionist critique, a positive affirmation of an alternative approach is also needed. A critical exploration of global anxiety starts with heightened reflexivity regarding the spatio-temporal assumptions that are baked into IR's periodisations, as well as the prime subjects who are prioritised in narratives of insecurity. Recognising pluriversality, such an approach requires greater context specificity.[138] Methodologically, this demands richer empirical case studies drawn from a multitude of contexts, providing perspectives on affective circulation beyond the Western-liberal experience. It is important to note here that collective anxiety is not easily observable, and its triggers are difficult to identify. While quantitative surveys can be useful in identifying broad geographical discrepancies in collective moods, as with eco-anxiety, there is a need for more in-depth qualitative case studies, complemented by discourse analysis and ethnographic research, to provide greater sensitivity to spatial variation. Thankfully, a subset of the OSS literature has already begun to engage in this task. For example, OSS research which focuses on the Global South, particularly from the likes of Marco Vieira, Carmina Yu Untalan, and Christine Agius, has spotlighted contextually specific forms of existential anxiety which circulate among post-colonial subjects.[139] Likewise, Kinnvall and Svensson emphasise how religious movements, such as the Tablighi Jama'at, generate ontological security by embodying non-linear notions of time which challenge secular-modernist temporalities.[140] It is instructive that the temporal horizon of the anxieties documented in these non-Western case studies do not align neatly with the AoA thesis.

While zooming our analytical lens into non-Western contexts reveals many of the pitfalls inherent within the endeavour to define 'our' era as one of extraordinary anxiety, it is also important to avoid reifying a binary distinction between the West and the rest. The overall lesson here is not to simply divide the world into West/non-West, colonial/post-colonial, or North/South, but to recognise the pluriversal spaces in which different affective dynamics prosper, according to diverse temporalities. This means being attentive to the nuanced ways that anxieties manifest across spaces of anxieties, both within and beyond national boundaries.

A move towards greater transdisciplinarity could also aid in capturing spatio-temporal variances in the experience of anxiety. OSS is already part of the way there, to the extent that it has successfully integrated theories and concepts from fields as diverse as sociology, psychoanalysis, and existential philosophy. However, comprehending the spatio-temporal diversity of global anxiety also requires the integration of historical research. Here, I am particularly referring to the history of emotions discussed in the second section, as well as post-colonial histories which spotlight the unique ways that anxieties are experienced beyond the common-sense imaginary of Western IR. This is necessary not just to provide more accurate periodisations which capture historical fluctuations in collective moods, but also in order to become attentive to the haunting legacies of the longue durée – particularly in post-colonial contexts. This enables a shift away from the presentism of the AoA thesis, considering longer-term processes which generate recursive anxieties. As outlined in the final section, greater attention to post-colonial histories can also help OSS challenge some of the embedded Eurocentric spatio-temporal orderings which have plagued IR for the entirety of its disciplinary history.[141] Unfortunately, the AoA thesis has contributed to the reproduction of these provincial readings. To the contrary, recognising that wildly different temporal experiences of anxiety persist across different emotional communities complicates these overly simplistic attempts to bookend the recent past. Therefore, when scholars look to periodise blocks

[137] Barkawi and Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment', p. 334.

[138] Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics: The Real and the Possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

[139] Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security'; Untalan, 'Decentering the self', p. 5; Agius, 'Ordering without bordering', p. 370.

[140] Kinnvall and Svensson, 'Ontological security and the limits to a common world', p. 334.

[141] Barkawi and Laffey, 'The postcolonial moment', p. 331.

of time according to narrow affective categories (such as 'anxiety', 'fear', or 'optimism'), we should ask: which provincial temporal assumptions are being baked into the analysis, and whose experiences are being used as the foundation for these generalisations and periodisations? In simple terms: *whose* age of anxiety?

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525100909.

Acknowledgement. I would like to thank all of those who provided constructive feedback on earlier drafts. Particular thanks go to the three anonymous reviewers for their excellent comments and suggestions. My gratitude also goes to colleagues at the University of Sussex, as well as those who provided me with feedback at the European Workshops in International Studies in Istanbul.

Alistair Markland, PhD, has lectured at the University of Sussex, Oxford Brookes University and Aston University. Alistair's research is focused on the politics of human rights and humanitarianism, drawing on international political sociology, ontological security studies, and the study of affect in international relations.

Cite this article: Alistair Markland, 'Whose age of anxiety? Provincialising ontological insecurity', *Review of International Studies* (2025), pp. 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525100909