

# Approaching the unsynthesizable in international politics: Giving substance to security discourses through basso ostinato?

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# Approaching the Unsynthesizable in International Politics. Giving Substance to Security Discourses through *Basso Ostinato*?<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper addresses the question how spatial difference manifests itself in International Relations discourses in an effort to theorize difference in international politics. In doing so, we focus on the concept of security in particular and demonstrate a paradox in its conceptualization. Despite the aspiration to capture global diversity, contemporary security discourses largely leave out the moment of subjectification in knowledge construction. Rather, a form subjectivity construction is promoted in these discourses, which is reliant on the other. In contrast, this paper considers the unsynthesizable cognitive void between the self and the other through the work of the Japanese political scientist Maruyama Masao and his *basso ostinato* concept. By drafting it as a heuristic device to avoid the potential of determinism for which *basso ostinato* was criticized, we apply it on the concept of comprehensive security with the intention to demonstrate that ostensibly same concepts can have different meanings in different times and spaces. In doing so, we aim to transcend the resulting misunderstandings that obstruct International Relations scholarship from contributing to what Amitav Acharya calls “Global IR”.

## Keywords

Basso Ostinato, International Relations Theory, Japanese Political Thought, Maruyama Masao, Security, Unsynthesizable

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## Introduction

Security studies have progressed significantly since the early 1990s. Moving on from traditional conceptualizations of security as the absence of (military) threat and ensuring the survival of nation-states (cf. Bellamy, 1981: 102; Walt, 1991: 212), more recent contributions have broadened our understanding of security by relating it to a wide array of previously disregarded referent objects (Wæver, 1996). Amongst others, these referent objects comprise of concerns about the environment (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998) - most recently in relation to the Anthropocene (Dalby, 2014; Keohane, 2015) - as well as the protection of human dignity and human bodies (Chandler and Hynek, 2011). In the course of these debates, a provocative question has been asked by Jef Huysmans (1998). Similar to a recent intervention by Erik Ringmar (2016) for International Relations (IR) at large, Huysmans wondered what is meant when the term “security” is being used. So far, however, this question has been left largely unanswered, although it is not given that all actors in the cognitive void of intercultural contexts refer to a putatively same term like security in the same meaning.

In the present paper, we do not claim to provide a satisfying answer to Huysmans’ question, but we intend to unravel one of its layers by investigating how difference is manifested in analytical concepts and how this affects our understanding of international politics in general and security in particular. Situating ourselves within recent debates on difference (cf. Neumann, 1996; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004; Tickner, 2011; Tickner and Blaney, 2012; Behr, 2014), we ask if difference is fully acknowledged in terms of ‘how meanings are made’, as Ringmar (2016: 101) puts it. By investigating the substance of differences, we aim to demonstrate that the concept of security is a process in the form of an ‘open becoming’, as Yaqing Qin (2016: 37) writes, due to ‘ever changing relations’ and ‘unlimited possibilities’, rather than a fixed entity. To be able to do so, we approach the unsynthesizable realm of knowledge production in international politics through the work of the Japanese political scientist Maruyama Masao and his *basso ostinato* concept in particular.

This concept denotes a substratum underlying human thought. *Basso ostinato* is in constant flux as it is socio-historically constructed; however, it is experienced by people as a relatively stable, yet intangible, intellectual framework, much in the

way Ty Solomon and Brent Steele draft affects as becomings by referring to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. However, if affect is a ‘less than conscious, embodied’ (Solomon and Steele, 2016: 10) aspect which is always in flux, how can we be conscious of the difference between self and other in the first place? If Solomon and Steele are correct, a cognitive void must exist in which the self and the other co-exist without being conscious of this void. This is what we call the unsynthesizable.

In order to get a more nuanced picture of *basso ostinato* and the unsynthesizable, we start with Maruyama’s borrowing of this concept from musicology. As a musical term, it connotes ‘a recurrent pattern of bass notes’ which is ‘an underlying motif that is independent from the treble part and, if the main theme appears in the treble part, it is bound to undergo some modifications’ (Maruyama, 1988b: 27). For Maruyama, this was visualized in ideologies that have influenced Japan throughout history but have evolved abroad, for instance Confucianism, Buddhism, Liberalism, and Marxism. Inspired by Karl Mannheim’s thought-style, he argued that if they are carefully analyzed, the underlying motif can be identified, as it is never fully integrated into the general melody. It is a specific ‘pattern of thinking’ that subtly changes the main theme. Consequently, these ideologies were gradually and almost unconsciously Japanized because they converted into slightly different ideas, bringing the melody and the underlying pattern into synchronicity without absorbing the former into the latter. Moreover, these two parts have to be perceived as continuously evolving (Maruyama, 1976; 1988b; 1992). This “unconscious consciousness”, is tacitly shared in a largely geographically defined community. Therefore, imported political ideas retain an imperceptible otherness, as heterogeneous ideas evolve alongside each other and cannot be fully integrated (Maruyama, 1961: 71).

In employing *basso ostinato*, it is our aspiration to discuss one way by which humans can arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the unsynthesizable by accepting the ‘parallel processing’ (Maruyama, 1996b: 188) between the self and the other. Following Barry Buzan and Richard Little (2001: 34), we want to tell ‘different stories about IR’ in ‘parallel’ and not ‘in opposition to each other’, in order ‘to develop concepts ... from non-Western contexts on their own terms and to apply them ... to other contexts’ (Acharya, 2014: 650). To do so, we follow

Huysmans' (2002: 52) advice and draft *basso ostinato* as a heuristic device by proceeding in a historical mode as outlined by Richard Devetak (2014). As *basso ostinato* is a concept that Maruyama developed throughout the Showa-Period (1926-1989), the specific temporal and spatial context has to be traced in order to gain a more profound understanding of this concept. This includes engaging with the languages that played a role in formulating *basso ostinato*, as languages constitute an *a priori* for imaging, formulating, and constructing life-worlds (Koselleck, 2002: 24-26). This also means that this paper carefully calibrates the language-dependent meaning of *basso ostinato* while translating it into English, thus preparing it to be used within Anglophone academia. As Maruyama was deeply influenced by Weimar Republic humanities, the authors' language competencies are combined to provide a kaleidoscope of the socio-political and cultural constellations that are submerged in Maruyama's concept. Consequently, the first two sections of this paper trace the intellectual background of *basso ostinato* and provide a contextualization within Japanese social sciences. Furthermore, we theorize IR in a historical mode in order to do justice to 'historical meta-epistemology' (Bell, 2009: 15), which allows us to reconsider seemingly self-evident assumptions that dominate the discipline. In addition, the pitfalls of transcendentalism are avoided (Devetak, 2014: 446) by calibrating between the 'coherence constraints' (Bevir, 1997: 167) that influenced Maruyama's theorizing to the same extent as ours. Hence, ours is an abductive approach as we treat *basso ostinato* 'as a heuristic strategy for pragmatic research' as one way to approach the unsynthesizable in order to find a 'way through the complexities of the social world (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009: 711). To give evidence to this potential, the third section engages in a discussion regarding the employment of *basso ostinato* in twenty-first century IR-theorizing by focusing on security studies.

### **Tracing the Origins of *Basso Ostinato*: Central European Sociology of Knowledge and the Problem of Synthesis**

At the turn of the twentieth century a socio-economic, political, and cultural crisis shook Central Europe that stimulated intellectual discourses, leading to the establishment of new academic disciplines. In Germany, sociology of knowledge in particular became constitutive with the aim of mapping these socio-political

disruptions, problematizing the rise of ideologies as a consequence, and discussing potential pathways to transcend ideologies (Lichtblau, 1996: 458). Mannheim also joined these discussions, and his *Ideology and Utopia* had a considerable impact on scholars across the disciplines. He even found an eager readership in Japan, a country that had equally perceived itself to be in a crisis (Maruyama, 1989: 185). One of Mannheim's readers was Maruyama.

Since only two of Maruyama's works have been translated into English (*Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics* (1966a) and *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (1974)), he is primarily recognized as a scholar of Japanese political thought. However, Maruyama had extensively studied the contributions of German humanities during his secondary and tertiary education, and it was only when he took up an academic assistantship at Tokyo University's Faculty of Law that he immersed himself in Japanese political thought. Nanbara Shigeru, Maruyama's mentor, had advised him to do so, partly because this would later offer him more promising career opportunities in light of a changing political climate (Karube, 2008: 74-76). This refocusing in terms of his research, however, did not mean that Maruyama discarded his earlier studies. Rather, his training in German humanities provided the backbone for his approach to Japanese political thought, and it was Mannheim's sociology of knowledge in particular that helped him in this regard (Maruyama, 1974: xxvii), as commonly noted in the literature (cf. Barshay, 1992: 381-382; Karube, 2008: 80; Sasaki, 2012: 72).

In Japan, Maruyama is often critically appraised as a modernist (Bellah, 2003: 143) because he challenged Japan's political *status quo* and engaged in establishing 'a process of contestation in which new visions of self and other emerge', as Leigh Jenco (2012: 101) puts it. To support a sustainable democratic order in Japan, Maruyama tried to support his fellow citizens in their strife to establish a (self)critical and skeptical subjectivity (Barshay, 1992: 395-400). This is supposed to enable them to transcend narratives of historical determinism and attempts at social planning to retain the political *status quo*. For Maruyama (1997; 2012), the evolving political sphere ought to provide a forum in which socio-political differences can be freely expressed and discussed in order to establish a societal reality that is able to reconcile these differences towards a spatio-temporally conditioned common good. In other words, as the societal composition constantly

changes, the political remains in flux (Maruyama, 1989: 193). What makes Maruyama's humanistic thought specifically Japanese is best understood by considering that he argued for a democracy that would rejuvenate the entrenched political elites, who prevented people from developing their subjectivity by engaging with distinctively Japanese sources from the Tokugawa and Meiji period (Maruyama, 1966b; 1974; 1997). This means that Maruyama developed his critical stance within Japanese thought (Bellah, 2003: 141-142) for which Mannheim's stimulus in particular was indispensable. It was this outside influence that provided Maruyama (1989: 184) with the epistemological tools that allowed him to reflect upon the spatio-temporal conditionality of his own knowledge; this 'localization' (Acharya, 2014: 653) freed him to see Japanese political thought in a new and different light.

Two aspects in Mannheim's oeuvre were especially important for Maruyama in developing *basso ostinato*. First, Maruyama (1974: xxviii; 1988a: 68; 1989: 197; 2007: 21) repeatedly referred to Mannheim's spatio-temporal conditionality of knowledge (*Seinsgebundenheit des Denkens*) and aspect-structure (*Aspektstruktur*). Employing the former, however, did not imply that human understandings of their life-worlds are a distortion of reality or that objectivity is impossible. Rather, Maruyama followed Mannheim's assumption that this merely visualizes the selectivity with which people approach their life-worlds, as some of their elements are emphasized while others are being neglected. This is the case because the conditionality of knowledge is determined by the specific interests of the social group in which people are embedded. Being exposed to these interests, people are affected in terms of the way they imagine and construct their life-worlds. In other words, most people forgo the capacity to critically (self)reflect on the conditionality of their knowledge-construction, as it is being hampered by a multitude of systemic knowledge-power relations within their social groups (Mannheim, 1985: 269). It is because of this social embeddedness that a thought-collective evolves in which people tend to universalize their knowledge by granting it the status of normality, leading to socio-cultural spatio-centrism and tempo-centrism. In accordance with Gerard van der Ree (2014: 222), it can be argued that a 'zero-sum perspective' evolves in which other thought-collectives are being experienced as ontological security threats. Consequently, there is an ideological

element in aspect-structure (Mannheim, 1985: 265-266). Embedded within their social group, people are characterized by a 'collective unconscious[ness]' (Mannheim, 1985: 40), as they believe that one's aspect-structure captures all of reality and, therefore, they violently aim to impose it onto other aspect-structures. It is then the task of social scientists to transcend this spatio-centrism and tempo-centrism, and to highlight the conditionality of knowledge by visualizing the nexus between the selectivity of one's perspective and the will of one's social group. Hence, social scientists have 'to protect one's work from "direct subordination to political forces", and the "far more difficult" task of "bracketing," that is of "preventing subjective value judgments from insinuating themselves into the cognition of political phenomena"' (Maruyama, in Barshay, 1992: 398).

Second, by uncovering the selectivity of knowledge-construction, sociology of knowledge faces a 'problem of synthesis', as Wolfgang Schneider (2003: 458) writes. This problem indicates that stressing the conditionality of knowledge does not yet enable it to transcend critical-empirical reflections and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Rather, people need to be able to move beyond their own aspect-structure in order to develop the ability to willfully contribute to the construction of their life-worlds. Hence, as Andrew Barshay (2005: 131) contends, a 'theory and practice of this-worldly transcendence' has to be achieved. People need to understand their own aspect-structure and reject any attempts to ideologize it. For Mannheim (1985: 301), in order to achieve this transcendence, solutions to this problem cannot be abstract, but instead have to consider the specific historical and socio-cultural situation. In other words, existential conditionality not only affects peoples' knowledge-construction, but also their ability to transcend their limits. What Mannheim (1985: 5) suggested here is a form of perspectivist objectivity which we also find in Maruyama (1981: 518-519). Objectivity is only gained through a careful hermeneutical interpretation of a specific situation, guided by a conceptual framework that contextualizes and gives meaning to the myriad of relations that crystallize in this specific moment. For this reason, due to the amorphousness of reality, objectivity can only be claimed for a specific perspective and moment in time.

Solutions to the problem of synthesis therefore are manifold and vary in scope. To provide more substantial solutions by enlarging the perspectivist objectivity, Mannheim suggested reaching for higher levels of abstraction in one's thought-development that are fostered by overlapping social groups. Intellectuals in particular are able to engage in abstract knowledge-construction as they are 'socially unattached' (Mannheim, 1985: 155) and they have the ability to transgress socio-political boundaries more easily. Mannheim's elitist approach has received much criticism and also Maruyama, following his concerns to establish democratic practices in Japan, eventually pursued a different path in finding a solution to the problem of synthesis. As Barshay (1992: 379) notes, Maruyama aimed to unravel Japan's ideologized aspect-structure by re-engaging with its intellectual and spiritual traditions. Eventually, this becomes a much more democratic process, as it is potentially accessible by everyone, although 'the process of attaining this wisdom takes a lifetime of practice and study. Its borders are made permeable not by means of prior intellectual or ethnic background, but by means of ... very hard work' (Jenco, 2007: 752-753). To provide a basic framework that enables access to a wider understanding about reality beyond one's aspect-structure, Maruyama (1989: 199-200) developed *basso ostinato* in a similar manner as Jenco. As the next chapter shows, *basso ostinato* enabled Maruyama to incorporate the spatial side of aspect-structure, while not renouncing its temporal aspects. In Maruyama's (1989: 192)<sup>2</sup> words, 'adding on to previous thought-styles or ideas does not happen as a so-called "additive synthesis", but as an adjustment of the way of looking at a problem (*Problemstellung*)'.

### **Going Beyond European Sociology of Knowledge: The Japanese Question on Power and Space**

While lecturing in Japan in 1978, Michel Foucault referred to Maruyama's work on Edo Period (1603-1868) Confucianism. Comparing pastoral power in Western societies and the 'function and role of Confucianism in the Far East' (Foucault and Watanabe, 2007: 161), Foucault argued that these modes of power emerged concurrently in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for similar reasons. Yet,

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are by the authors.

drawing on Maruyama, he stressed that while pastoral power rests on individual promises of salvation in an afterlife, Confucianism promotes a this-worldly essentialism (Karube, 2006: 202-203). This episode might seem anecdotal, but Foucault acknowledged a difference that had driven much of Maruyama's intellectual endeavor. It was this enterprise, originally drafted as a series of articles and later published as *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, through which Maruyama approached the unsynthesizable by conceiving of *basso ostinato*.

### *Modernity: Singular, or Plural?*

Throughout the rest of his life, Maruyama further developed *basso ostinato*. His plan was to trace its elements from three fields: history, politics, and ethics (Maruyama, 1996b: 178-179). On history, Maruyama published a paper in 1972, identifying three pivotal terms: become (*naru*), next (*tsugi*), and momentum (*ikioi*). A short essay on politics was published in English (1988b), in which he extracted a series of concepts related to *matsurigoto* (governmental affairs). On ethics, Maruyama (1976) talked in the United States, in which he focused on a pair of binary concepts: pure mind (*kiyoki kokoro*) and dirty mind (*kitanaki kokoro*). These *basso ostinati* were meant to help scholars isolate the crucial cognitive gap that arises in the process of knowledge transfer, but it remained an inaccessible concept and it has been criticized for being deterministic (cf. Koyasu, 1986; Kan, 1999; Yamaguchi, 2000; Kimura, 2014).

Before discussing *basso ostinato*'s potential for security studies, Maruyama's struggle to elaborate this concept, in which his wartime experience played a decisive role, has to be further explicated. During the interwar period, Japanese scholarship still heavily debated whether world history can be conceived of as a singular or plural process. This is of importance, as the former would imply acknowledgment of Western superiority. However, many scholars began to argue for the latter because of the need to justify an anticipated world war and the thrust for their *sui generis* identity. Until then, Japan had been aiming to escape from Asia in their efforts to avoid colonization and, in doing so, had become part of the West, as Fukuzawa Yukichi (1934: 40-43) famously maintained. This is because Meiji Japan imported elements of European political systems (Tsuda,

1938; Maruyama, 1961), turning the country into the first non-Western Westphalian state. Thereby, Japan embraced a 'pluralistic Eurocentric institutionalism', as outlined by Martin Hall and John Hobson (2010: 217-218), meaning that Japan acted as a willful follower of the West by affirming the universality of its political trajectory.

In its attempt to turn into a Western state, Japan believed that it had gained the status of a great power after defeating Russia in 1905, but soon thereafter it came to realize that Western states were not going to accept Japan as an equal. Even today, Japan is (inter)nationally perceived as the 'abnormal' Western state (Hagström, 2015; generally Hobson and Sharman, 2005: 88). Becoming suspicious of Western claims of universalism, Japanese politicians and scholars began to emphasize their nation's historical superiority and saw a necessity in overcoming modernity, as it was perceived as an equivalent to the West (Maruyama, 1974: xxx). Although Japanese historiography still often neglects this point, the dominant discourse during the first half of the twentieth century asserted that world history had to be conceived of as plurality (Nishida, 1982; Koyama, 2001; Shimizu, 2015), arguing that there is not *one* world history, but many world *histories*. This rhetoric, helping them to argue for equality with, and later even superiority over, the West, served as a justification for pursuing the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and eventually ideologized the entire Japanese society (Maruyama, 1961; Takeuchi, 1979; Samuels, 2007).

Maruyama critically reflected on this overcoming modernity debate via intellectual history. He was puzzled that, despite the importation of Western nationalism, Japan had developed a different type of modern nation-state; thus, he assessed this problem in terms of political subjectivity. Despite Japanese claims of being a modern democratic state with a constitutional monarchy, the political situation was far from it, as the 'formation of free subjects (*jiyuu naru shutai*)' (Maruyama, 1964: 20) was hampered through the aspect-structure of the *kokutai*, eventually leading to the abolishment of the political sphere altogether. The *kokutai* argued that the *Tenno* is a direct descendant of the sun-goddess *Amaterasu* (Maruyama, 1988a: 45), and this divine ancestry put the Japanese emperor at the center of a hierarchical society based around concentric circles (Sasaki, 2012: 38-40). This discouraged the public from critically questioning political decisions (Maruyama,

1974: 171), as it is an example of taking ‘a reified present and extrapolat[ing] this back in time to render all history amenable to transhistorical, universalist analysis’ (Hobson and Lawson, 2008: 430). By a priori determining the *Tenno*’s rule as virtuous, Maruyama (1966a: 87) argued that ‘a system of irresponsibility’ was established, which allowed Japanese rulers to justify their political decisions as part of inevitable, pre-determined historical processes. As a consequence, ‘societal intolerance’ (Maruyama, 1961: 16) existed in Japan towards dissenting voices, eventually rendering the country internally inclusive but externally ‘closed’ (Maruyama, 1992: 196).

It was this discomfort with the depoliticization of Japanese society that primarily encouraged Maruyama to work on the history of Edo Confucianism, but he also had an ‘extra-academic motive’ (Maruyama, 1974: xxxii). Strongly objecting to the dominant discourses of overcoming Western modernity, he was eager to demonstrate the universality of human history by stressing Japan’s contribution to it. At least in this point, he believed in one world history rather than in its plurality by elucidating the process of Confucianism’s internal collapse, which had provided Tokugawa Japan with its most salient source of social cohesiveness. These two motives translated into two syntheses which Maruyama tried to accomplish in his work. As discussed, the latter aspiration aimed to synthesize theory and practice. By determining the *kokutai* as aspect-structure, he aimed to uncover a more comprehensive picture of modernity. The former, by contrast, was a methodological task. Maruyama’s (1996a: 334) ambition was to investigate ‘how to synthesize the internal continuity within the category of thinking and the consecutive transformation of meaning within the same category’. For him, it often appeared to be continuity that plays a crucial role in this transformation. Given Japan’s exceptional homogeneity, its modern intellectual history was a demonstration of this paradox, and initially he had hoped that Mannheim’s methodology would provide an epistemological tool to simultaneously establish the two syntheses. Although his hope proved to be ill-founded, Maruyama discovered a site of ‘creative misunderstanding’ where an idea becomes meaningful through textual appraisal by locals, as argued by Jenco (2012: 99). At this site, meanings of an identical idea are never fully integrated but remain different among multiple

actors below the level of consciousness. To explain this in more detail, we have to return to Foucault's lecture.

### *Creative Misunderstandings? Awareness of Plurality*

As Foucault argued, political power expressed itself differently in Japan's Confucian tradition in comparison to Western countries. However, Maruyama (1974) had noticed that power in Japan also diverged from the Chinese understanding because Japan had, over several centuries, developed its own unique Confucian tradition. At first glance, the Meiji Restoration had replaced this traditional political system with a Western one. However, despite this transformation, the essential power structure remained the same. Maruyama (1961: 12-15) argued that, as a result of importations of different traditions of thought, an 'unstructured tradition' had developed in Japan. It was there that imported knowledge was modified to the extent that cannot be simply equated to the original, as it was constantly classified and (re)interpreted 'in terms of the familiar' (Skinner, 1969: 5) without being reified. Mannheim's sociology of knowledge did not help Maruyama (1961: 68) in this regard, as it did not account for these exceptional 'epistemological characteristics' in a specific community. Therefore, the issue at stake was how seemingly identical knowledge is translated in a different epistemological tradition, and how the identified gap can be filled. The various cognitions, which developed in different social contexts, cannot be presumed to compose parts of the same entity; the assumed cognitive object and the tangible cognitions do not have one-on-one relations, even if a cursory assessment initially indicates similarity (Maruyama, 1996a). It is not only an 'adjustment of the way of looking at a problem' but also different way of thinking that plays a crucial role in this subtle mutation.

Analyzing from within Japanese history of thought, Maruyama gradually became convinced that it was not only a question of perspective and conditionality of knowledge that restricted free subjects to evolve in Japan, but rather fundamental structural differences rooted in everyday practices and experiences (Watsuji, 2011). Renouncing his earlier wartime conviction, modernity had to become *modernities*. Knowledge can only turn into power after it is localized within the unique social structure, as in each society the structure evolves differently.

Maruyama (1996c: 131) argued that it was particularly geopolitics whose methodology allows geopolitical and geohistorical conditionalities of the society under scrutiny to be calibrated. In doing so, Maruyama aimed to expand Mannheim's sociology of knowledge to the global space because he could focus on *basso ostinato* in contingent foreign knowledge encounters with local knowledge. These encounters are spatial and repetitive in function, as the emergence of the intersection is considered to be deeply rooted in everyday practices. Hence, these practices are historically formed under a specific spatio-temporal condition (Maruyama, 1996c; 1997). With this concept, Maruyama tried to capture the site of creation where ostensibly repeated nodes take place, albeit in constant flux. At this intersection, foreign knowledge gradually affects and is being affected by local knowledge and, thereby, is embedded in a new geographical location. Once knowledge is attached to its new location it develops into new forms, irrespective of its origin. However, the two forms of knowledge - local and foreign - never amalgamate; they only synchronize at the site like the barely perceptible bass notes and the main theme in a piece of music.

Defining his task as 'finding a clue of enquiring the style of thought which has been relentlessly streaming under the various modes of historical consciousness down to the modern era', Maruyama (1992: 295-298) tried to identify the 'category as substratum' by extracting the banal terms mentioned above as keywords by exploring some of the oldest Japanese texts<sup>1</sup> dating back to the eighth and ninth centuries. This, what contemporary IR-scholarship (cf. Friedrichs and Kratchowil, 2009; Friedrichs, 2009; Sil, 2009) would identify as an abductive approach, was a 'sort of circular argument' because he had identified the bass notes *a priori* in contemporary discourses, and then projected them into the past (Maruyama, 1992: 298). However, there is a danger in proceeding in this manner. Besides the difficulty of unearthing something that belongs to a subconscious realm, any attempt to reify it in textual form can create stereotypes and subsequently be criticized as historical and geographical determinism. As Charles Taylor argues (in Thrift, 1996: 9), 'to situate our understanding in practice is to see it as implicit in our activity'. Pinning down this implicitness can result in mistreating subjects (and objects) - the result of discourses - as producers of discourses (Müller, 2008). Consequently, 'the role of language in shaping experience' (Nelson, 1992: 41) is

expunged and this procedure can eventually lead to stereotypes by codifying a specific reality (Bhabha, 1983: 23). It is for this reason that it has remained a difficult concept to date, with only a few scholars attempting to engage with it. Indeed, Japanese scholarship (cf. Koyasu, 1986) has even accused Maruyama of supporting Japanese wartime propaganda. Maruyama refuted these accusations, arguing that Japan's 'exceptional homogeneity' is based on its unique geography, but it does not make the motif stable. Rather, the motif is bound to change as conditions are continuously transforming (Maruyama, 1996c). Still, by extracting the terms, he risked justifying Japan's alleged perpetual uniqueness by reifying the subject as the discourse producer.

### **The Substance of Difference: *Basso Ostinato* and Comprehensive Security**

In consideration of these criticisms, *basso ostinato* needs to be fine-tuned as a heuristic device. We achieve this by first situating it within current assemblage thought (cf. Collier and Ong, 2005; Anderson et al., 2012; Dittmer, 2013; Acuto and Simon, 2014) and pragmatism in IR (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009; Hellman, 2009; Abraham and Abramson, 2015). On this basis, we frame a collective (in our case Japan) as a community of experience developed in an imagined relational space (Harvey, 2006) in an effort to escape determinism by simultaneously emphasizing its communal character, as well as stressing individual elements. As this community belongs to a relational space, it is individually perceived but still shared between people. In it, a specific collective identity can be observed, but it is merely an aggregate of individual perceptions. People continuously (re)define themselves by imagining a particular environment that is, however, continuously changing, assembling often unconsciously around a specific nodal point. In a second step, *basso ostinato* is employed as a heuristic device in contemporary debates in security studies because it 'allows us to see how ideas located in different times and regions diverge from the style of thought we have created on the basis of materials drawn from a particular time and space' (Nelson, 1992: 40).

#### ***Basso Ostinato as a Heuristic Device***

To be able to use Maruyama's concept as a heuristic device, we start with two insights from the previous chapters. First, when intellectual history is understood

through historicization and geographicalization, the either-or-question between “true” consciousness and “false” consciousness is dissolved because scholars can focus on difference itself, rather than on the validity of interpretations. As recently stressed by Qin (2016: 38), this is because every human perspective is constrained by a specific conditionality of knowledge, which is why it projects reality as much as it contributes to its distortion, and the nexus between the two bring about subjectivity. Even the possibility that people are talking about an analogous but factually different object has to be taken into consideration. Thus, when the idea of absolute truth is abandoned, the possibility arises to consider misunderstandings in a more productive way by conceiving of knowledge as ‘knowledges’ (Thrift, 1999: 303). As Mannheim (1985: 168) remarks, ‘a *Weltanschauung* is not of necessity a source of error, but often gives access to spheres of knowledge otherwise closed’. Indeed, cultural otherness is what ‘makes learning of any type possible’ (Jenco, 2015: 23). However, knowledge needs to address existing ‘figurations of alterity’ (Guillaume, 2003: 88) in a foreign space. The result of this process might look like the same knowledge but in practice it contains an unsynthesizable cognitive void, denying a linear developmental model of intellectual history in international contexts.

Second, if it is this cognitive void that enables the assimilation of foreign knowledge, it must be there where people develop their subjectivity. This conclusion was unsettling for Maruyama, who had begun his intellectual endeavor with the ambition to diminish misinterpretation of foreign knowledge because, as the second synthesis alludes, Maruyama’s research from the beginning held a politicized assumption (generally Huysmans, 2002: 43). In this respect, Maruyama’s orientation contains the danger of altering this analytical device into a tool for teleological reasoning, which was his reason for refusing to think more about the importance of space for *basso ostinato*, although the relation was unavoidable as he conceived of modernity as modernities. As mentioned, Maruyama thought it was the aspect-structure represented as *kokutai* in Japanese society that hampered the comprehension of foreign knowledge, which impeded the Japanese people from experiencing themselves as free subjects. In order to unearth the falsity of *kokutai*, he further elaborated *basso ostinato*. However, what if it was this embodiment of Japanese history that generated the misunderstanding which

facilitates the whole process of comprehension of the unknown? If so, it is this “falsity” that has enabled Japan to establish itself as the first non-Western modern nation-state, allowing it to join a putative universal history. In other words, it was the very idea of the *kokutai* that helped people to reestablish a political sphere by conceiving of Japan as part of the globe.

Therefore, foreign knowledge cannot be understood comprehensively, but it is only accepted when it has gained meaning in reference to already-existing local ideas. Thus, his second synthesis - of universal theory and local practice - proved to be a failure because Japan’s experience demonstrates that knowledge can be aptly localized only through a radical but automatic adjustment. However, it was the first synthesis - of continuity and change in analysis of intellectual history - that *basso ostinato* can shed further light on because it depicts entangled relations that are ‘as much internal as they are external’ (Allen, 2012: 191). What comprises an assemblage therefore is not just the internality of an autonomous subject, but internality *in relation to* externality. Yet, because the linkage is only manifested in the unsynthesizable cognitive void, it remains largely unnoticed. Hence, anticipating contemporary discourses in geography (cf. Livingstone, 2005; Ibert, 2007), Maruyama perceived this process as collective and active, yet unconscious. Because of his wartime experience, Maruyama was suspicious of this cognitive void and aimed to overcome it. His perpetual aspiration for cosmopolitanism and modernism to establish a “healthy” political subjectivity in Japan led him to this conclusion. As a corollary, Maruyama realized its contradictory character. Although it rests on the irreconcilability between different *basso ostinati*, it links local practices to a putative universal theory. This means that this concept helps IR-scholarship to understand that a universal issue can only be understood locally, where it is perceived through the lenses of site-specific knowledge with the potential that this issue is “misunderstood”. This makes the process a product of multiple relations, but it contains ‘an emergent “thingness”’ (Allen, 2012: 190), giving substance to an issue of universal appeal. Knowledge is thus de-contextualized and re-contextualized across diverse social and cultural situations beyond territory and context (Collier and Ong, 2005). What is required, therefore, is an investigation ‘at the point where the global is inserted and translated into the local’ (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2009: 6). *Basso ostinato* can help to

rearticulate this point and, in fact, it can render this distinction between the global and local altogether obsolete. This is because a ‘geography of relations’ (Allen, 2012: 192) can be mapped, helping to surpass assumptions that processes of localizing knowledge only happen in spatial proximity. Rather, *basso ostinato* indicates that the linkage between local and global is primarily taking place unconsciously. This is where the positive aspect of the void arises. To understand the unknown, people find a clue in reference to the known (Skinner, 1969). In this process, knowledge is automatically morphed into an indigenous idea. However, because it happens at the nascent stage of the process, it is often left unnoticed, although this cognitive gap of the unsynthesizable persists even after developing a deeper mutual understanding due to its autopoietic character.

### *Thick Signifier and Comprehensive Security*

In order to account for the prospects of *basso ostinato*, we begin by identifying how difference relates to the issues the international community is facing. The intellectual struggle of Maruyama indicates that difference can be too subtle to notice, but it is still fundamental. It is not just about what it means, but particularly the way it means. Hence, following Patrick Jackson (2009: 658), we aim for a ‘systematic demonstration of what one gets, empirically, if one apprehends the world with a given sensibility’. It is a ‘disciplined effort to envision what the world would look like if explained and understood according to some ideal-typically elaborated set of value-commitments’.

To exemplify this further, we take up the concept of security as an example. Looking at the discipline at large, recent scholarship has asked to what extent analytical tools that were developed in contemporary Western academia are applicable to other spatio-temporal contexts (Buzan and Lawson, 2015: 378; also Acharya, 2014). However, in order to know the effect of intercultural decontextualizations and recontextualizations, we need to first investigate the system of localization. Even with security, one of the main concepts of IR, this is not yet given, as Buzan already pointed out in 1983. For him, it is ‘an unexplored and essentially contested concept’ (in Buzan and Hansen, 2009: 135; also Dalby, 1997: 6). This is because its investigation has been largely limited to questions of its referent object as delineated by Buzan and Lene Hansen (2009: 135). Since the

linguistic turn in the 1980s, IR has conceptualized security as a practice, rather than as an objective concept. Particularly constructivist and poststructuralist scholarship contributed to this insight by demonstrating that security politics rests on the construction of an alien other (cf. Dalby, 1988; Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006; Browning, 2008). In many cases, their aspirations are guided by finding alternatives through uncovering the ideological function of dominant security discourses (cf. Neumann, 1999; Huysmans, 2002). In other words, security is considered to be manipulable by autonomous subjects (Müller, 2008). A corollary of this ambition has been the emphasis on overcoming boundaries, and in doing so, many of their contributions share the ambition of Maruyama's second synthesis. However, as already mentioned, Maruyama's ambition had failed. The initial development of discourse is essentially beyond the control of people because it largely evolves unconsciously. It is in this sense that this putative construction is indeed contingent. Thus, security discourses are better characterized as '*performativity* rather than *construction*' (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007: 46; italics in the original). As Ringmar (2016: 119) argues, 'states, as well as the international system in which they interact, are imagined only as they are performed'. This means, however, that we have to shift our attention from boundaries to within the spaces confined by these boundaries (Sassen, 2013), and focus on *where* a specific discourse is performed. If Maruyama is right, then it is not around the boundaries where different worldviews collide, but within communities which are connected to the outside through an unconscious cognitive gap.

To shift this focus, security has to be conceived in the more substantial sense as Huysmans (1998) has suggested by drawing on the term 'thick signifier'. He notes that 'the meaning of security does not just depend on the specific analytical questions it raises, it also articulates particular understandings of our relation to nature, other human beings and the self' (Huysmans, 1998: 228). "Thick", therefore, signifies a heterogeneous assemblage of actors, histories, and (im)material contexts that securitize an issue in a specific space. *Basso ostinato* can help to further uncover the substance of this thickness through which IR can gain a deeper knowledge of security as a manifestation of everyday relations in a geographically defined, yet ever-changing community. Hence, security is site-specific (Allen, 2003) and it highlights the relation between what Rita Abrahamsen

and Michael Williams (2009: 14) call in reference to Michael Barnett and Raymond Duval ‘compulsory power’ and ‘productive power’. While compulsory power signifies the ability to control the actions of others through the use of violence, productive power is characteristic of actors that can influence site-specific relations to their advantage (also Qin, 2016: 43). In this sense, security is ‘a *result* or effect of productive power, and agents of productive power in specific sites’ (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2009: 14, emphasis in the original). Hence, productive power shifts the meaning of security, and it is affected by conceptualizations of security at the same time. *Basso ostinato* tells us that these shifts are connected at each site to what people perceive to be an internal continuity through elements of mundane, everyday life. However, these elements ‘may and indeed do endure in many respects, but that is not the same as saying that there is a fixed, unchangeable essence to them’ (Allen, 2012: 192).

Within these current security discourses, several different conceptions have evolved. One of them is comprehensive security, whose terminological origin can be traced back to Japanese discourses during the 1970s and 1980s. In what follows, we demonstrate how *basso ostinato* illuminates difference by taking comprehensive security as an example. We trace its development in Japanese scholarship and contrast it to Western scholarship in order to show how the specific meaning of a term performs differently in different spaces. Comprehensive security first appeared as an official term in a document from 1980 titled *Report of the Comprehensive National Security Study Group*, prepared by a group of scholars who had been commissioned by the Japanese Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi. By referring to this form of security as *sogo* (total), its rapporteurs aimed to devise a more appropriate conceptualization of security with the purpose of readdressing Japan’s foreign policy in light of a changing world. At the time this report was prepared, Japan had been struggling with the changing geopolitical conditions in East Asia, particularly after Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 and the following rapprochement between the two countries, and the faltering global economic situation after the second oil crisis in 1979.

In Western scholarship, however, this Japanese understanding of security has been frequently misrepresented. This is because the same notion rests on different *basso ostinati*, as already evidenced in the first use of comprehensive security in

Anglophone literature. John Chapman, Reinhard Drifte, and I.T.M. Gow (1983: xvi) argue in their book on *Japan's Quest for Comprehensive Security* that this concept is merely 'a smoke-screen behind which the hawks can expand defense spending' and it merely cloaks Japan's economic interests. This reading of comprehensive security as the ruthless pursuit of economic interests came to be a common ground in Western scholarship to understand this "new" conception. This is confirmed in an influential piece by Akaha Tsuneo (1991: 324) in which he argued that 'in the early 1980s Japan adopted a "comprehensive security" (*sogo anzen hoshō*) policy with greater emphasis on economic and diplomatic means than on military means for pursuing the nation's security'. Emphasizing this economic aspect further, Richard Samuels (2007: 3) argues that Japanese pragmatism subordinates 'military to economic sector, deliberately practicing mercantile realism to generate prosperity and provide security at the same time' ever since Japan encountered Western modernity after having been forced to open its country. Although presenting a more nuanced reading, Buzan and Hansen (2009: 136) still indicate a largely analogous comprehension by delineating comprehensive security as '[r]etain[ing] a national security focus but widened the agenda away from just military security to other concerns, particularly economic, political, and environmental threats'.

This is not to argue that these Western interpretations misread Japan's real intentions, but they overlook a specific spatio-historical aspect of the debate because Japan's comprehensive concept of security transcended the at that time predominant Western reading of security as the absence of military threat. Rather, *basso ostinato* as a heuristic device alienates 'from the concern of our immediate life-experience' (Rytövuori-Apunen, 2009: 644). In this way, *basso ostinato* unearths that this seemingly realist, and at best potentially new, conceptualization of security was indeed neither a realist conception, nor was it new from a Japanese perspective (Hughes, 2004: 120-127). The initial report from 1980 already gave this indication by referring back to the wartime period in its conceptualization of comprehensive security. This report argued that Japan attained modernization less than a century after its forced opening, despite its cultural differences from the West. The 'mission of Japan in world history' is to contribute to 'the order of building relations between the South and the North'.

Economic cooperation is in this regard ‘the only assertive way’ to ‘promote friendly relations’ (Sogo Anzenhosho Kenkyu Gurupu, 1980). Notwithstanding Japan’s brutal imperial regime in which tens of thousands of women were forced into prostitution, the idea of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere also spread among Japanese scholarship as a potential for its members to break free from European suppression through a comprehensive “humanistic” and economic cooperation that could overcome both capitalism and communism (Showa Kenkyukai, 1939; Royama, 1941; Ezawa, 1941). It is in this regard that it linked to the wartime notion of *kokubo* (protecting the national land) in terms of ‘particular understandings of our relation to nature, other human beings and the self’ (Huysmans, 1998: 228). Indeed, this comprehensive understanding of security was already being used as a means for common development, as exemplified in a confidential document by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1936. In this document, economy does not refer to individual gains, and therefore to a selfish reference to exploitation, but it is employed to depict co-prosperity through co-operation and sustainability. This holistic reasoning reflects early twentieth century statements of Japanese intellectuals, such as the one by the philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro (1937), who argued that ‘Japan fills a unique status in modern world civilization’ due to its versatile political, economic, and cultural relations, and even its climate (Sevilla 2014).

This longstanding comprehensive understanding of security continues in Japan’s post-war security arrangements in which Japan largely abandoned its military capability. This is evidenced in the influential “Yoshida Doctrine”, which evolved in light of the nuclear arms race that forced Japan to react due to its close ties with the USA and its proximity to China and the Soviet Union. Named after Japan’s first Prime Minister after the Second World War Yoshida Shigeru, this doctrine formed the basis for Japanese foreign policy after the Second World War. Commonly, it is interpreted to be a prime example of Japan’s pragmatist security policy that prioritizes economic growth (cf. Pyle, 1996; Samuels, 2007). However, reading it in this way falls short of seeing that Japan continues to employ a pre-war comprehensive understanding in which economy forms just one, albeit significant aspect of security (Nakanishi, 2004). This continuation is further evidenced in Japan’s promotion of human security. Although this is gradually

changing under the current Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (Auslin, 2016), human security has been a pillar of Japan's diplomatic efforts since the early 1990s. Alongside Japan, Canada and Norway in particular have campaigned for human security internationally. While it may be that human security sustains Canada's aspiration as a middle-power and supports Norway's ambitions for a permanent membership to the UN Security Council (Buzan and Hansen, 2009: 204), it resonates with Japan's comprehensive security, helping Japan to find ways to cooperate with a group of culturally and geographically diverse countries.

Tracing the *basso ostinato* of Japan's understanding of security is an example of how, in this case, the concept of security is performed differently in different contexts, despite employing the same term. The critique and negligence of Anglophone academia is a reflection of their own security-related *basso ostinati*, and consequently we see a cognitive void between the different *basso ostinati*. This is not the place to argue that one conceptualization of security is more apt for current international politics than the other. Previous scholarship (cf. Shani, 2008; Ringmar, 2012) has addressed this question for international politics at large. Rather, it helps to clarify how meaning performs. If these substantial differences, which are related to how meanings perform and how people connect security to their life-worlds, had been known before the discussion on comprehensive security emerged in the 1980s, this discussion might have taken a different, and for both sides more fruitful, direction.

## Conclusion

Amitav Acharya (2014: 656-657) concluded his presidential address at the ISA Annual Convention with the following remark:

'[t]he study of IR should not obscure, but celebrate the differences among its different theoretical, epistemological, and methodological approaches. But in so doing, it should also strive for greater respect for diversity in our knowledge sources and claims, historical experiences, and beliefs and approaches about world order. The challenge is not just to make the study of IR "safe" for diversity but also be enriched by that diversity'.

It was the intention of our paper to contribute to this ambition. We did not aim to achieve this contribution merely empirically by unearthing experiences and approaches beyond the Western repertoire, or to further the potential of incorporating these differences into IR's theorizing, but ours was particularly a historico-theoretical discussion into a more substantial issue, as we reflected on the space that exists between the self and other. By focusing on contemporary security discourses, we demonstrated that merely charting these differences does not establish them as repositories of multiplicities *per se* (Ling, 2014); rather, the discipline needs to further reflect on this unsynthesizable space in the self and other, as it is in this space that foreign knowledge is localized and something can be created 'which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination' (Arendt, 1961: 151).

We believe that Maruyama's *basso ostinato* is particularly useful for this discussion. Reflecting upon *basso ostinato* is a continuous process with an unsatisfying result. We will never be able to fully grasp this underlying pattern that literally makes "us", as it is in constant flux. However, it enables people to realize that there are boundaries between them and others. These boundaries are not fortifying a belligerent international realm, but their realization enables people to engage in this realm because this awareness frees people to greet differences in the sense envisaged by Acharya (2014; also Qin, 2016) and work together open-mindedly, as knowing about one's own boundaries helps people to understand that the other is beyond them; therefore, it is only with the other through which we can gain a deeper understanding about our life-worlds, as we gain an enhanced perspective through which we can give meaning to them.

As Maruyama's life-long project demonstrates, Japan's difficulty as the first follower of Western modernity has led to a fundamental inconsistency between foreign (European) theory and local (Japanese) practice. Nakamura Yujiro (1971) points out that many Japanese scholars have tried to employ Western thought by replacing the subject and interpreting it in the local context. However, these attempts have often ended up as a mere direct translation or arbitrary interpretation to plunge into an 'unbounded subjectivism', as these Western thoughts have not yet been consciously filtered through the 'logic of Japanese language'. Instead, Nakamura suggests an alternative: starting with an

acknowledgment that any social institution, including language, is the objectification of human will. Any traveling theory between cultures is then acknowledged as a product of multiple straightjackets, containing unsynthesizable subjectivities. Only by knowing this limitation to our objectivity, can we transcend boundaries for a truly mutual understanding, and it was this aspiration towards an alternative path that drove Maruyama.

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