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H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Philippe Bourbeau, ed. *Security: Dialogue across Disciplines*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 298 pp. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-10740-3; \$34.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-107-51473-7.

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Commissioned by Seth Offebach

In everyday narratives of being, security is and has always been a prominent feature. In the social sciences and humanities, it is the subject and object of curiosity, exploration, critique, and application. It is thus not surprising that it is once again the subject of “scientific” inquiry curated by Philippe Bourbeau in the well-researched *Security: A Dialogue Across Disciplines*.

Security: A Dialogue across Disciplines is an attempt to get different disciplinary narratives on security to speak to each other. Ultimately, the challenge is to get new and established scholars of security out of their silos so that they rethink the concept ontologically and epistemologically. A clear advocate for the idea of multidisciplinary, in this book, Bourbeau as curator aims to convince the reader that this approach to the concept of security is important because it encourages “external correctives” to existing disciplinary (methodological) gaps (p. 3).

The presumption here despite protest to the contrary is that this is desirable. To be fair, the introductory chapter acknowledges that this way of “doing” social science might be read as disciplining scholars to become more than they are. Moreover, Bourbeau’s introduction presents disciplinary silos as rigid (p. 10). This is surprising given that international relations (IR), which is perhaps the most overt discipline when it comes to security as conceived here, has evolved so much as to be characterized by a diversity of ontological and epistemological assumptions. For instance, recent feminist interventions on what security means and who the referent of security is, are characterized by diversity and interconnectedness that draws on critical theory, critiques mainstream social science, and relies on adjacent disciplines of sociology and anthropology, among others. This is an important point to make because critical approaches like feminism are increasingly mainstream even though this book ignores or treats them as marginal. In this collection, only

human security is presented as potentially transcending disciplinary boundaries.

Nevertheless, the book provides insight for scholars of core social science and humanities disciplines into how other disciplines understand and explain security, an essentially contested concept. The book is guided by three questions: What are the core research questions asked within each disciplinary context? What theoretical perspectives do these disciplines contribute to knowledge about what security means? What research methods tend to feature when security is the subject of study and what are strengths or limits of these methodologies?

As each of the disciplinary insights convey, security does lend itself to methodological pluralism, with disciplines often borrowing methods and methodologies that have been traditionally used by others. This does raise a question of ownership. By which I mean, what are the criteria for *owning* or claiming ownership to a particular methodological approach, and/or can methodologies be jointly owned? For instance, while ethnography may be accepted as an anthropological method, those who may not consider themselves anthropologists have used it extensively. In the same way, many political scientists now rely on computer experiments for their statistical modeling; we may argue that experiments are now fundamental to some political science, although with clear usage in psychology. Will certain methods always be inherent to certain disciplines, and does this outlook not challenge the broader aim of “transdisciplinarity”?

The idea that certain disciplines are already interlinked and core ideas of (in)security cannot be locked into one discipline is precisely the point made in chapter 3 by Daniel Goldstein in his reflection on the anthropologies of security. In this chapter in particular, Goldstein helps the reader delve into the antecedents of ideas es-

pecially within critical security that we may already take for granted precisely because a dialogue between disciplines already exists. For example, the idea that for anthropologists, security is a set of discourses and practices that function within a neoliberal logic and thus reproduce power hierarchies. This is how many critical security studies scholars understand their research interests. Importantly, Goldstein introduces “decoloniality” as an anthropological approach to knowledge production about security, and ethnography as the method through which this is achieved. This, again, resonates within contemporary themes in international relations and geography, where issues around the securitization of immigration are the objects of study.

Indeed, what is fascinating about this book are the existing theoretical and methodological overlaps between anthropology, geography, and international relations. Thus from the onset, the book leads one to believe that there is already a dialogue or multiple dialogues among disciplines, but perhaps these are covert—in which case, this text simply makes them overt.

A recurrent theme in this collection is the view from across disciplines that to understand security, what is prioritized as insecurity in a particular disciplinary context is essential to a comprehensive dialogue. Thus, in chapter 2, Jonathan Herington’s philosophical interrogation explores the relationship between security, fear, liberty, and the state. In this framing, what philosophy has inherited as “security” is quite essentialist and serves the interest of the state. Herington provides a historiography of security from its less tangible, existential understanding as given by the Epicureans to its contemporary understanding that relies on a Hobbesian conception. In particular a Hobbesian reading of Thucydides is instrumental in defining security in the context of a political authority, the state. On its own, philosophy does not offer a new way of looking at security; however, this particular narrative has served as a useful antecedent for international relations, the discipline most obvious about its interest in security. However, it also shows how security was constructed as a handmaiden of the state. Herington’s intervention is a very important one for contemporary security studies scholars as it serves as an important base for explanation, understanding, and critique of how “security” is manifested across disciplines such as international relations (chapter 6), international political economy (chapter 8), and criminology (chapter 9).

In chapter 4, Phillippe Le Billion argues that the instrumentalization of geography has led to complicit im-

perialist configurations of what security means and how it is practiced. In its more traditional rendering viewed through a materialist positivist lens, security enables problematic statecraft and ethically questionable security practices. Yet, Le Billion argues that a progressive branch of geography has contributed to critiquing the security practices of the state by highlighting the processes of militarization that attempt to fix the meaning of security. Specifically, this critical scholarship that draws from feminist and postmodernist methodologies helps deconstruct the positivist claims of truth. Of course the core contribution of geography to the dialogue here is about how space and politics collide either to support the violence of security or to critique the securitizing practices of security. This chapter shows the ways in which geographers especially draw on critical theory as essential reflective practice to sustain disciplinary progress, particularly through methodologies shared with those who subscribe to the critical branch of international relations that has forged critical security studies.

“Critical security studies” is a response to the dominant security scholarship that took its cue from the Hobbesian *securitas*. Security studies in international relations is really about referents (pp. 113-118). In other words, for IR scholars, understanding security is dependent on knowing what is to be secured. Hence, as an evolution of Hobbes, security in the early days of international relations had the state as its core referent. This “mainstream/traditional security” relied on realism as its foundational theory (p. 118). Bourbeau et al. take the reader through a genealogy of security studies which seems repetitive of the one already undertaken by Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen in *Evolution of International Security Studies* (2009). Where there is some fascinating reflection is on the “practice turn” in security studies that moves away from the traditional versus critical divide. However, this section of the chapter is concise and does not delve into the broader implications of the practice turn, which is now sixteen years old. While the methodologies of international relations sometimes map onto the traditional/critical divide, on the whole, the discipline promotes interdisciplinarity. It is thus less restrictive than the subject of chapter 7, psychology.

On the whole this rendering of psychology’s take on security is quite conservative. Psychology, as the authors of the chapter state, engages with security because it can predict and explain violent conflict or peaceful relations. In this sense, it too draws on the philosophical tradition of Hobbes, where security is about fear or safety. In psychology, unlike IR, the goal of prediction is overt.

While the state is one referent, the individual is also important for psychologists. Methodologically, psychology also mirrors typical positivist strands of contemporary security studies from the IR perspective in its use of quantitative methodologies. Psychologists however, are quite partial to the use experiments to understand perceptions of insecurity and consequently security. Furthermore, psychology is a field that has been quite explicit about affect or the implications of emotions for understanding security, a path usually eschewed by other social science disciplines. Indeed the link between emotions and security has only gained currency recently in international relations, for example with the radically innovative collection edited by Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory, *Emotions, Politics and War* (2015).

Unlike some of the other disciplines in the book, sociology and international political economy are not natural frames for security. Yet, for Lisa Stampnitzky and Gregor Mattson sociology is the discipline that most overtly makes the case for the importance of understanding security and insecurity as related but distinct. In addressing this, the authors of chapter 5 show how the multiple meanings and usage of security and insecurity makes it difficult to study and pin down the main sociological contributions to the debate. They argue, on the whole, that sociology by its nature tends to focus on different strands of insecurity; but to make innovative contributions innovations they urge sociologists to study security more. Here the benefit of the sociological lens is the ways in which it may address three issues: what is enacted in the name of security; what is included as security and what is excluded; and finally how practices of security move to and function in different social settings. This chapter is quite powerful then, because it presents a research agenda for future sociologists and encourages their interaction with other social scientists.

Although similar to sociology because it does not find security a natural fit, international political economy (IPE) is effectively ignorant of security despite the theoretical links it shares with IR on the whole. IPE's situation within this book is uneasy. For example, IPE is given the same weight as IR even though it is as much of a subdiscipline as what is now called "security studies." The logic for this is unclear. Moreover, compared to the others this contribution was mostly descriptive, without conceptual usefulness to the overarching narrative of the book.

In the final two chapters for this collection, on criminology and international law, the authors reflect on the historical evolution of both disciplines, and the move

from the mainstream to the marginal and how security is important to both disciplines. With criminology taking its cue from the early philosophical conceptualizations of security, this traditional rendering led to a section on "The Emergence of a Crime-Centered Criminology" whose focus is much more on interpersonal safety and state control. However, those who want to reflect more on the security implications of criminology as a discipline call attention to how insecurities are manifested when state control is enacted for safety. Of course the discourse of security in criminology is also vulnerable to co-option as Jan Froestad et al. show. In using the example of the United States, the authors show how crimes like mass killings in a particular context (9/11) when "securitized," justify new modes of governance and control that treat the crime and the subsequent mode of protection as exceptional, even at the expense of civil liberties.

In international law, security and its broader theoretical and methodological implications appear to be ignored or irrelevant. Yet Wouter Werner's contribution is able to show that underneath the seemingly impenetrable façade of international law is a discipline driven by close connections to the other "international" disciplines. The author, however, acknowledges a fundamental shortcoming of this analysis; that it is too focused on the mainstream. Yet, there can be significant innovation in international law. The work of legal scholars like Gina Heathcoate, whose *The Law and the Use of Force: A feminist analysis* (2011) links feminist methodologies and ethics to international law and international relations to the study of the United Nations, is a perfect example of the multidisciplinary that Bourbeau and the other authors in this collection desire.

On the whole, this book is evidence of the values of interdisciplinarity. In calling attention to the ways in which different disciplines do research, this collection also makes a compelling case for methodological dialogue, not just pluralism. Its place, however, is not to convince us that a dialogue is needed; rather, it is to show that dialogues are already going on. The dialogues draw on linkages based on common disciplinary antecedents and overlapping methodological choices in certain instances.

Sometimes, the choice of focus appears uneven. While some chapters acknowledge the divide between "mainstream" and "critical" approaches to their respective disciplines and consequently how security is conceptualized and studied, others are not as focused. In this regard, it may have been useful then to have a conclud-

ing chapter that linked the common threads between the contributions' application of their theories and methodologies.

Overall, this text successfully defends itself against those who fear that a broader understanding of security

might lead not to plurality but rather to intellectual incoherence. It weaves together a new story for security that has the potential not to be dominated by international relations, but instead highlight important connections from the social sciences and humanities for a more reflexive consideration of security scholarship.

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