

The Field of Security Studies: In Rude Health or a Chronic State of Disrepair?

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Is the Field of Security Studies in Rude Health or in a Chronic State of Disrepair?

Introduction

Within the international relations (IR) sub-discipline of Security Studies, some scholars, primarily scholars nourishing traditional perspectives, argue that the field itself is in a chronic state of disrepair. This seemingly orthodox assertion is due to the misconception that security theories that stray from the militaristic and state-centric conventions are futile, even in exceptional times.[1] Contrary to these traditionally Realist (both classical and structural variations) and Liberal, and often American-centric[2] security approaches, this paper claims that the very process of scholars 'deepening' and 'broadening' the IR sub-discipline of security studies demonstrates that the field is in rude health. Moreover, the evolution of this burgeoning sub-discipline to encompass contemporary areas of security, formerly marginalised under traditional theories, creates a more sophisticated and well rounded 'continuum of approaches'.[3] This paper will further argue that the post-Cold War evolution of security studies, to a more robust and pluralistic sub-discipline of 'critical' security studies encourages scholars to challenge established agendas and seek a more thorough understanding of security concepts.[4] This variability and divergence within the field is a healthy and thoughtful act to advance security concepts *vis-à-vis* the ever-evolving and persistent global security threats. To demonstrate this paper's central argument, a concise discussion of the security agenda's developments will be presented through the Social Constructivist 'deepening' approach and through the 'broadening' of the discipline that emerged from critical security scholars and the pedagogical devices established within two Eurocentric critical security schools, Copenhagen and Aberystwyth.

Demand for a 'Non-traditional' Approach

Globalisation has increased the risk of localised security threats, such as the Islamic State (IS)[5], Ebola, or even 2014's oil deflation, to spread rapidly across state boundaries and become international crises.[6] These already antagonistic forces are compound largely as states lose the capacity to respond militarily to (most) threats as unilateral actors. Aside from the larger states (US, China, Russia, etc.), smaller states have had little choice but to cede their sovereignty to collective trade or security arrangements like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or the European Union (EU).[7] Understanding why and how the global community faces these challenges requires a re-evaluation of the traditional security studies approaches, whereas defending against a state's use of force has routinely been the primary focus.[8]

According to Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, the term 'traditional', when referring to the field of Security Studies, denotes 'perspectives in the study of security that prioritise the state as the referent object of security, and focus primarily on military threats to the security of the state'.[9] These traditional theories concerning security were predominant during the Cold War period from 1945 to 1989. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought a change to the strategic environment that demanded renewed attempts at reaching a more inclusive approach to analysing modern security threats.[10]

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Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, as well as other contemporary or Neorealist contributors to the traditional state-centric methodology argue that the influence of non-traditional approaches to the field is merely a persuasive examination of the traditional methods using fashionable analytical and normative means.[11] Moreover, these scholars put a great deal of emphasis on what John Herz termed the 'security dilemma', in which a cyclical security paradox originates from states inadvertently threatening one another while attempting to secure their own borders and interests, regardless of how each state's implemented security measures were meant to be perceived.[12] While Realism and the security dilemma have been effective at creating an understanding of bipolar Cold War era politics, the evolving transnational threats have rendered traditional theories insufficient – 'Security is no longer a zero-sum game and therefore all countries and cultures are dependent on one another in the pursuit of true global security'.[13] Moreover, without overhauling or modifying traditional security theories, negating or transcending the security dilemma is not plausible. The field of security studies demands a deeper approach to identifying *what* and *who* needs to be secured, not simply concluding that security is merely a state requirement.

Liberal perspectives to security differ from those in the Realist camp, but are still considered traditional approaches to the field.[14] Political Liberalism acknowledges contributions to security from non-state organisations, emphasises restraint in the use of force and peace through cooperation. However, Patrick Morgan concludes that Liberalism, like Realism, has still always focused on 'the deliberate use of force by states (and some other actors) for various purposes'.[15] The theory also neglects to see that security exceeds a state's acquisition of power and that threats go beyond inter-state conflicts.[16] Thus, Realists and Liberals within the traditional framework have largely ignored many cultural, environmental, or ethical aspects within the field, failing to comprehend existing threats and their implications to security – chronic symptoms of a field in disrepair. These underrepresented scholarly endeavours prompted a Security Studies revitalisation spearheaded by Social Constructivists and the burgeoning critical security schools.

Field of Security Studies Gets 'Critical'

Seeking positive developments in international peace, security theorists began to advance traditional theories to encompass contemporary issues. This furthering of the theoretical developments within the field of Security Studies is exactly why the field is in excellent condition – Critical Theory scholars are challenging the established norms in search of a better approach to security. The term 'critical' has been added to the discipline, not as a defining characteristic, but as a way to encompass varying perspectives from security scholars who label their work beyond the scope of traditional security theories.[17] Within the 'continuum of approaches', critical security theorists often differ in many respects, though tend to share the belief that security is a derivative concept, meaning that the way people think about security comes from how people experience the world.[18] Arguing that security is derived and not a rigid notion has been a fundamental step in reinvigorating the field of Security Studies into its current state of rude health. Debates within the community are commonplace, but reflect healthy discourse to help understand the complex phenomenon within the field's purview of international security.[19]

Deepening

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the world acquired a greater sense of self-examination – security scholars needed to deepen their approach.[20] Bridging the gap between the rigid traditional and 'critical' conceptual frameworks of security are the Social Constructivists. The Constructivist approach, and its branches of Conventional and Critical Constructivism, deepen the discipline and reaffirm the assumptions that security and insecurity are both socially and linguistically constructed, linking arguments made initially by Liberal Peace Researchers (sociological factors) and by Poststructuralists (linguistic factors).[21] The term 'deepening' articulates 'a theoretical approach to security that connects our understanding of security's deeply rooted assumptions about the nature of political life more generally'.[22] Constructivists began to deepen the field by identifying referent objects of security rather than just the state and by looking into cultural and ontological aspects of security. For example, new questions emerged – 'Who is being secured? Who is doing the securing? What is it to be secure?' [23] By taking a sociological approach, the Constructivists argue not all world actors act rationally, and at times, state foreign policies demonstrate emotional, moral, or ideological decision-making opposed to objective gains.[24]

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Broadening

Now that the field of Security Studies was becoming more ontologically aware, the discipline needed to broaden (widen) its approach to viewing security threats beyond military force and foster a more cooperative international environment.[25] Barry Buzan *et al*, with the development of the Copenhagen School, now argued that non-military issues could be perceived as security threats, as well as military action that does not directly affect the state could still be seen as threatening.[26] This development has been crucial for the field of Security Studies and for politicians alike. With today's contemporary threats, such as the Ebola spread or IS, governments are actively pursuing aggressors who do not pose an immediate threat to their own state's security but have been deemed threatening within political discourse.

The Copenhagen School approach also provides a rationale that while state or sub-state (i.e., IS) military manoeuvres remain predominantly regional (i.e., IS in Iraq and Syria), the actions could be 'securitised' as threats to a non-regional actor.[27] It is an issue of politicising a threat at the state level, then giving equitable focus for decision makers to allocate resources to combat the threat *vis-à-vis* other state-deemed threats.[28] Ole Wæver further articulates that for a threat to even become securitised there must be a politicised 'speech act' calling for extraordinary measures to be enacted against an existential threat at the state level.[29] This focus on the politics of security is crucial for CSS to continue as a healthy intellectual endeavour, where preceding traditional theories have too readily omitted what and how non-traditional threats become securitised.[30]

The act of securitising issues has been adopted to other critical schools as well, and even though some scholars challenge Buzan and Wæver's initial framework, most recognise the importance and relevance of securitisation's core principles and the broadening of threatening issues within Security Studies.[31] Identification of threats not previously criticised within Security Studies communities reinvigorated the IR sub-discipline's intellectual vitality. For example, Critical Theorists, such as Richard Ullman and Jessica Mathews, argue that demographic pressures and resource depletion as well as environmental problems posed global threats.[32] Sean Lynn-Jones and Stephen Miller included extreme nationalism as an internal threat to societies.[33] In addition, Peter Peterson along with James Sebenius and Mohammed Ayoob (in a separate study) discussed even more existential threats originating internally, such as extreme poverty, under-developing class-systems and lack of educational institutions as being the primary concern for stability.[34] These security challenges presented in scholarly works reinforce this paper's central argument by demonstrating the evolution of a more critical and sophisticated approach to security concerns by addressing 'who is being secured', and 'who is doing the securing'. [35]

The Aberystwyth or Welsh School, later dubbed *the* Critical Security Studies (CSS) School, builds on the idea of a broadened security agenda. Founding contributors to the approach, Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones advocate for the concept of emancipation to establish a groundwork for true security; which within CSS, Booth defines emancipation as the 'freeing of people from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do'.[36] The theory is an important tool that attempts to cover elite driven or national security perspectives, as well as the 'bottom-up' approach of comprehensive security, which contends with issues of underdevelopment and oppression.[37] Emancipation addresses the ontological query of '*what* is it to be secure'. [38] The CSS School acknowledges the underlying systemic issues in national security that directly affect global security; however, it goes beyond treating externalised symptoms (inter-state conflict) and attacks the root of internal strife and insecurity at the very human level (domestic issues resonating at the global level) – a healthy development in the field when juxtaposed with traditional theories.[39]

Challenges to the Field of Security Studies

As this paper has argued, Security Studies, with the development of CSS and constructivist approaches, is in a good condition. However, the field still faces challenges as it continues developing. The critical methodologies must allow for cross-pollination of ideas throughout the critical schools and Constructivist theories. They must move beyond analytical utility and focus on enhancement of each school's normative utility to recommend positive change among the populace.[40] The critical security schools must transcend the arbitrary theoretical borders and avoid counterproductive rigidity between the other critical security approaches. The scholars should also understand that

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discourse might not always be the best answer for escaping Realist dilemmas and other parochial rationalities.[41] Lastly, securitisation theory needs to account for future analyses that consider security issues from within specific social, historical and political circumstances. More specifically, the Copenhagen School will need to contend with the societal issues at the individual level, as opposed to society as a constructed whole.[42] Continual reflection and refinement of the contemporary approaches *does not* demonstrate that the critical approaches are weak, but that they are adapting with global political and societal changes.

Conclusion

The field of Security Studies and the security agenda are transitioning – established theories are being scrutinised and reconsidered. Over the last decade, scholars within the field have increasingly shifted from state-centric and military threats to human security, external global threats and internal concerns.[43] While traditional state and military threats are still relevant, they are not the only emerging and persistent threats that require analysis. Scholars within the field of Security Studies have identified this weakness within the traditionally Realist, and to an extent Liberal perspectives, which if having gone unaltered would have left the IR sub-discipline in a chronic state of disrepair. Instead, with the Social Constructivist and the pedagogical devices used within the Eurocentric critical security schools, the field has adopted a more holistic security agenda.[44] The new cooperative and ‘bottom-up’ humanistic perspectives on security can provide practitioners a nuanced approach that could ameliorate dangerous power balancing within the security dilemma.[45]

The field of Security Studies *is* in rude health, as today scholars expand the security agenda and question the assumptions made by traditional security theories. Any academic discipline which refuses to question its founding conventions is corrosive. The field requires critical reflexivity and for scholars to make adaptations that seek to answer dynamic changes within global security. As long as scholars continue to engage with security theories critically, promote debate among pupils, and seek to better the global community, the discipline can remain resilient amidst ever-changing global threats.

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[3] Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, p.3.

[4] Capitalised 'Critical Security Studies (CSS) refers to the Welsh School, whereas css (lower case refer to the discipline itself. B. Buzan, and L. Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 188.

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[9] Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, p.4.

[10] Hough p. 10.

[11] Walt, p. 212; Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 1-3; J. J. Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions,' *International Security* 19:1(1994), pp. 11-12.

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[14] Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, p. 5.

[15] Morgan, p. 40.

[16] Hough, p. 9

[17] For the purposes of this essay, discussions on the Paris School, Feminism, Post-structuralism, Post-colonialism and a detailed account of Human Security are outstanding, though important advancements the field of critical security studies. See, B. Buzan and L. Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 188; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, p. 1.

[18] Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, p. 4.

[19] M. Neocleous, *Critique of Security* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 185.

[20] Hough, p. 6; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, p. 4.

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[22] Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, p. 29

[23] C. Browning and M. McDonald, 'The future of critical security studies: Ethics and the politics of security', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(2011), p. 248; Hough, p. 6.

[24] Hough, p. 6

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[27] *Ibid*; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, pp. 93-94.

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