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Police and Critical Security Studies

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BARRY J RYAN, DEC 7 2011

Security is a dynamic complex activity that defies traditional analytical frameworks. Aiming to gain an understanding of how security operates compels the critical researcher to question concepts of subjective and objective and instead replace them with the fact of inter-subjectivity. Positivism demands inside and outside – a subjective self that tries to describe an objective other. Most of us have been educated to think that this is how we understand anything. Yes, we are told, bias and distortion can occur, but generally we get an accurate picture of things as they are –there is, we are assured, correspondence. Critical scholarship, on the other hand, assumes that subjectivity and objectivity are two words for the same phenomenon – a reality that is co-constructed of values, norms, practices, etc. It tasks a researcher with acknowledging that objectivity and subjectivity are not antithetical terms: that there is no constant opposition between the two where cause and effect is in perpetual motion. Critical research asks what if the objective/subjective dialectic is invalid? What if the world doesn't change, but that change occurs in how I encounter the world and how it encounters me? What if subjectivity and objectivity are false categories for a reality that is inter-subjectively constructed? What if? The distinction between positivist and post-positivist interpretations of existence is radical, and particularly so when a phenomenon like 'security' is introduced.

The implication that there is more than one perspective is important because security operates on positivist assumptions. Being scientific, security always stakes a claim on truth. It is presented as an objective, neutral, technical phenomenon; an apolitical solution that fixes the problem at hand. Ole Wæver *et alumni*, have well proven this attribute. The critical researcher is thus impelled to question what problem is it that security is fixing. What has broken down that so needs securing? It might be forwarded that inter-subjectivity itself is what has broken down. The coherence that actually constitutes a society has been either threatened existentially and which is entering a new way of being/fearing. Of course, it is utterly fictitious to even suggest that inter-subjectivity can break down – it can only reconstitute, become something else. It has no form to be broken other than what it takes. However the *risk* of such an event occurring; the fact that we can even imagine its very possibility appears to have a profound influence over the way twenty-first century societies in the global north are organized. We live in risk societies, as Beck so well observed.

There are two questions that flow from such a perspective. The first asks what it is breaking down when security emerges. Michel Foucault was at his most insightful when pondering this. His understanding of inter-subjectivity saw norms, values and meanings constantly circulating, ceaselessly flowing around and structuring a society. Security practices emerge with the introduction of new norms, values and meanings produced by this society. They are therefore something technical, necessary and are productive of a new way of existing. Heidegger pointed out that in moments when things go wrong or break down we are given a glimpse of the inauthentic, ritualistic existence we inhabit. Thus the carpenter hammering his thumb rather than the nail along with his pain is given insight into his existence as a carpenter. Similarly, a financial crisis reveals the insecurity of lives lived under late modern capitalism. For critical theorists of global security, this implies that new security practices emerge from and might even reveal a new inter-subjectively defined reality. The work of those who are exploring biopolitics goes one step further however. Theorists such as Mick Dillon argue that new security practices do not merely reveal a new reality being co-constituted. Dillon sees security as a political project with specific aims and strategies. It is not a reactive force, a phenomenon that emerges in response to a risk or threat. It is more likely to be an active phenomenon, a strategic force that seeks to shape inter-subjective reality. It constructs the very risks it addresses. Security is part of a plan, it is a project, and is thus something projected into the future. For Dillon security defines the operation of modern

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power.

The other question that arises from critical understandings of security concerns the constitution of a new security practice. How does it work? What new inter-subjectively agreed norms, values and meanings hold it together? More often than not one finds it to be an old security practice that has been upgraded, given added value, new functions. The work that has been undertaken by Didier Bigo on border policing is indicative. Bigo also sees modern power as being derivative of police power. He argues that the borders at the edges of our territories are no longer definitive boundaries between states. Certainly, they exist and they perform an important security function for the state. But their power has been supplemented by police power, a legal-administrative power that exists beyond and before the border. A power, for instance, that pushes the border of the EU or of EU states into the lives of people who live outside its jurisdiction. But also a power that brings the border into the everyday existence of people living within its confines. It constructs the migrant as a threat that must be encountered by each and every citizen –a physical manifestation of ‘otherness’. Moreover, it further constructs this otherness as a risk experienced within the state and outside the state that must be policed. Policing is a universal phenomenon that does not correspond to state boundaries. It is, in fact, a very difficult phenomenon to pin down.

Those who study policing tend to focus on the means rather than the ends of security. There is long tradition of commentary which describes policing as something seamless and spectral. Policing is, according to critical thinkers a form of security that is everywhere and within everything. Of course, the first instinct of someone who understands security in positivist causal terms is to reject such a claim. Security can never be vague or nebulous. Surely, security must have a foundation in an objective reality. Militants plant bombs in public places. People die, are maimed, have their entire existence mauled. Security practices enter to prevent this from occurring. Surely?

But what if this security practice existed ever before the bombing? What if it was always there, in a different form, with a different name, but nevertheless extant and functional? The security practice in this sense has not arisen due to the terrorist bombing. It has instead been reinvigorated by its tragic occurrence. Those who study police power in the context of global security are entirely animated by the implications of this perspective. It informs them that security and insecurity are co-constituted – that they are not antithetical phenomena. Taking on the assumption that police is a continually emerging and evolving security practice that is tied to a particular project, tasks us with understanding police as a security practice. Policing, it suggests, is the means of progressing and the meaning that structures modernity. The challenge therefore is to explore the specific strategies by which policing performs the dynamism that is late modernity, while it retains in its positivist, linear ontology a violence that is presented to us as civilized, progressive and rational. Ultimately, inter-subjectivity informs us that we create security in the very way we live, and that therefore we are ethically responsible for its production.

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