Vernacular Securities and Everyday Life

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MICHAEL LISTER AND LEE JARVIS, JUN 19 2013

In a recent panel at the ISA conference, discussion turned to the need for a 'vernacular turn' within International Relations (IR).[1] This discussion pointed to the lack of work done on how 'ordinary' individuals construct knowledge about global political dynamics by scholars within this and related fields such as Security Studies. Despite the swathe of contemporary critical research on issues such as terrorism and counter-terrorism,[2] far too little effort has been spent speaking with and listening to the stories that people have to tell about how (in)security is understood and experienced in the context of everyday life. While scholars in other areas of the field, such as IPE, have begun engaging the 'everyday' in their work, the dominance of traditional statist and militaristic assumptions have largely militated against any similar movement within Security Studies: critical or otherwise.[3]

Building on the work of those in other disciplines,[4] we have been trying to address this gap in a research project focusing on the everyday politics of anti-terrorism initiatives and security practices.[5] In a recently published article, we detail some of the findings from this work, explaining why we think further engagement of this sort vital for future studies of security.[6] Our project used a focus group methodology to explore how this term is understood and discussed away from either elite discourse or academic debate. Six very different understandings emerged in our groups. The first, and most straightforward, saw security simply as (physical) *survival*: 'security means… to protect your life', as one participant put it. A second understood security as *belonging*: as the experience of feeling rooted in, and part of, social and physical communities. A third extended this view a little further by viewing security in terms of *hospitality*. As one participant in one of our focus groups put it: 'if we feel welcome we'd probably feel more secure'. A fourth conception viewed security in terms of *equality*; that being secure meant being treated in the same way as everyone else, while a fifth viewed security as coterminous with *liberty*. Here to be secure was to, 'feel that you can do what you want and be where you want within the confines of the law'. A final understanding departed by all of the above, viewing this term in a *negative* sense, as associated with 'martial law', intrusion and curtailment of liberties.

As the above findings suggest, different publics across the UK – and it is reasonable to imagine this to be true elsewhere – understand security in remarkably different ways. Some of these understandings are familiar from debates that have taken place across security studies for some time (freedom, survival, and so on). Others – such as thinking about security in terms of hospitality and equality – may be a little more surprising. Beyond this heterogeneity, however, our research also suggests that the language of security does important things in everyday life as much as it does in the discourse of political or military leaders. In the first instance, people we spoke to used the language of security to position or locate themselves in the world around them. This included demonstrating their opposition to particular political projects (security as a negative), and articulating the variety of things needed for life's continuation (security as survival). In the second instance, and perhaps more interesting, was the speed with which discussions of (in)security led our participants to try to empathise with other people and the different types of fears they may have. As one of our participants put it in a discussion about the impact of anti-terrorism powers: "you know, I'm a black person, but gosh, if I was a Muslim, I think that would be even more… I'd be even more nervous about travelling".

Our argument, ultimately, is that there is considerable need for further research of this kind. Speaking on behalf of the security of others should, we believe, fundamentally involve speaking with others. Without this, Security Studies as an academic pursuit greatly reduces its authority to discuss contemporary sources of insecurity, or indeed, the dynamics through which such insecurities are understood and imagined across social and political life. Publics, our

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findings indicate, experience and perceive (in)security in a plurality of ways and contexts. Engaging with this diversity, we believe, is a vital way of expanding research that has already been done on other types of security discourse and knowledge.[7]

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[1] The panel was titled, 'International Security and Public Opinion', and convened by Nick Vaughan-Williams with Columba Peoples and Richard Jackson as Chair and Discussant respectively.

[2] For a recent introduction to critical security research, see Peoples, C. and Vaughan-Williams, N.*Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge. For an overview of critical research on terrorism more specifically, see Jackson, R., Jarvis, L., Gunning, J., and Breen Smyth, M. (2011) *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

[3] For an exception to this trend, see Noxolo, P. and Huysmans, J. (eds.) (2009)*Community, Citizenship and the 'War on Terror': Security and Insecurity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

[4] Especially, Bubandt, N. (2005) 'Vernacular Security: The Politics of Feeling Safe in Global, National and Local Worlds', *Security Dialogue*, 36 (3).

[5] Further details on the research project, including other publications are available here: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-000-22-3765/read

[6] Jarvis, L. and Lister, M. (2013) 'Vernacular Securities and Their Study: A Qualitative Analysis and Research Agenda', *International Relations*, 27 (2).

[7] Please see Jarvis and Lister 'Vernacular Securities', for a fuller discussion of these findings and their significance.

About the author:

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