

Review - The Routledge Handbook of New Security Studies

Written by Stephane J. Baele

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STEPHANE J. BAELE, JUL 4 2013

The Routledge Handbook of New Security Studies

By: Peter Burgess

New York: Routledge, 2010

The changes in security policies and practices that followed the fall of the Soviet Union deserve intense inquiry. Edited by Peter Burgess (PRIO, Oslo) and written by both prominent authors (e.g. Krause, Dunn Cavelty, Walters) and newer scholars (e.g. Kuhlau, Owen), *The Routledge Handbook of New Security Studies* comes to grips with this novelty by exposing and detailing the “array of harms that had been marginalized due to the prioritization of macro threats during the Cold War [and appeared] suddenly in view” (p.39). The research agenda on offer is, therefore, vast and ever-changing. Among others, the reader will encounter chapters on pressing issues such as food security, cyber security, the gender dimension of security, or the privatization of security.

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Despite the above, scholars in IR and security studies may welcome this volume with some scepticism, for two interrelated reasons. First, because most of the changes at stake here are not new anymore, and second, because there are recent handbooks of security studies already circulating that tackle the same topics – without referring to their ‘newness’. It is questionable that Routledge published the *Handbook of Security Studies* just a year before releasing the Handbook discussed here. While it is clear that the latter had the ambition to offer a panorama of the *new* topics in security studies whereas the former had the aim of providing a more encompassing approach to security, the two end up covering the same issues with the former being more comprehensive thanks to its sections on methods, theories, and more “classical” issues.

It would be an error, though, to ground a review on such a first-hand comparison. On a first reading, the *Handbook of New Security Studies* appears to possess a very specific coherence that places it at a unique position in security studies. Generally speaking, the Handbook privileges a specific way of analyzing security; almost all contributions belong to a common theoretical family, which contributes to the coherence of the whole. While arguments drawing from thinkers like Foucault, Bigo, and more generally from papers published by journals such as *Millennium*, *European Journal of International Relations* or *Security Dialogue* abound, the reader will be surprised to encounter few references to studies coming from the likes of *Security Studies*, *International Organization*, *Terrorism & Political Violence* or the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. Far from being a detail of what it does and does not do, this imbalance is particularly telling of the general theoretical orientation of the book. In this regard, the reader wonders why Burgess claims in his introduction that the book “represents neither a school nor a movement, neither a theory nor empirical field” (p.1), given that entire research programmes that participate in the flourishing of contemporary security studies are absent from the volume. In particular, the vast literature using econometrical tools to inquire on the determinants of conflicts, the psychological approaches to terrorism, the philosophical debate on the acceptability of state violence, or the criminological discussions on transnational crime or repression and incarceration, are not considered. Many of these studies are clearly “new”, and perhaps the real “newness” of security studies during 1990-2000 has been their permeability to cross-disciplinary moves, mostly from and towards economics.

While having a coherent theoretical tone is usually a force, the problem here is that this identity is not clearly exposed and justified, as Burgess’ quote reflects. Even if he does acknowledge that securitization theory has an important influence on the volume, the book still presents an indistinct identity which is its Achilles’ heel. This problem is, in a way, primarily formal and as such could have been prevented by a less ambivalent and more fleshed-out introduction on the one hand, and by a less hermetic structure on the other hand.

The chapters are distributed across four sections: “new security concepts”, “new security objects”, “new security subjects”, and “new security practices”. To be sure some fields seem to resist structuration attempts and security is one of them, but still, this fourfold structure is particularly ill-inspired. Definitions of the four classes lack precision, leading one to wonder why some security “subjects” have not been counted as “concepts”, why some “concepts” are not “objects”, and the like. This contestable structure does not contribute to providing the book with a clear project and identity.

The introduction is too light at 3 pages to convincingly deliver a justification for this confusing structure and to settle the space of discussion. Highly cautious formulas (such as the one cited above) add to the reader’s confusion: the handbook is “not intended as a survey of the latest and greatest in security studies” (p.1), the “presentation does not have the ambition of an exhaustive coverage of themes, methods, and objects of the field of security studies” (p.2), the “volume does not carry out such a critique but instead aims to provide a certain point of departure for doing so” (p.1). I could not help having the opinion that this structuration actually reflects, at least in part, the avoidance of the alternative theoretical approaches and methods, the most serious hiatus of this volume being that it does not inquire into the diverse (mostly quantitative) methods at hand in the field. This is especially regrettable since methods are arguably the most perennial vulnerability of studies that empirically implement securitization theory.

Should the reader make their way beyond this undistinguishable identity and catchy but abstruse structure, their enthusiasm will without doubt increase throughout the numerous contributions. Here stands the major force of the volume: the richness of its content – which is, at the end of the day, probably the most important criterion to judge a book. Thanks to concise, straight-to-the-point contributions that seem to have as their sole (and most pertinent) aim

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the exposition of the major researches on specific new security issues, the Handbook offers a journey across an impressive number of finely explained topics and concepts such as cyber crime or human security. The reader has at hand 24 compact chapters, each one covering a single issue to a broadly high standard.

As regards these enjoyable contributions, it is my view that the editor could have, again, reinforced the clarity of the project by asking the contributors to construct their chapters according to a single template made transparent to the reader. This would have been useful because it is claimed that concepts, subjects, objects and practices under study here are “new” in comparison to the state of security (studies) before the end of the Cold War, a “newness” which is not always incontestable. Furthermore, no critical and constructive reflection is present on the newness of the various security objects/subjects/concepts/practices and on the tensions that exist between the particular theoretical lineage of the book and the alternative traditions. Thus, a quality foreword would have also been useful to step back and reflect on the many contributions of the volume.

In sum, the substance of the book could have been structured around a more fleshed-out introduction, developed through a less hermetic structure, and critically reflected upon in a foreword that regards the merits of other available approaches (traditional IR theories, as well as economic, philosophical or psychological approaches). Despite this criticism, the chapters offer quality concise expositions of new security issues and should be read as such (and not as original analytical pieces of research or empirical contributions). As long as readers are attuned with the theoretical approach favoured here and are fully aware that different ways of investigating security are at hand elsewhere, the book is a resource for graduate and doctoral students in the early stages of their research.

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