Security: An Essentially Contested Concept?

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There are a number of interpretations of what the definition of security is, or should be. Some have described these divergent interpretations as toxic for security studies, maintaining that the field should be concerned strictly with 'the conditions that make the use of force more likely, the ways that the use of force affects individuals, states, and societies, and the specific policies that states adopt in order to prepare for, prevent, or engage in war' (Walt 1991: 212). In contrast, others assert that security is an 'essentially contested concept' (see Buzan 1983: 6; Smith 2005), understanding the meaning of security as something that is not objectively definable, and inherently disputed. This essay examines two theoretical approaches to understanding security – structural realism and Welsh School critical theory – to demonstrate why security is best understood as an 'essentially contested concept' and the implications of this for the field. My main argument is that security is best understood as an 'essentially contested concept' because a universalised, fixed, static definition of the term is unhelpful and inconsistent with how some groups understand security.

My argument proceeds in three main sections. Firstly, I illustrate why there is contestation between approaches to show what is at stake in debates around security's meaning in order to demonstrate how vital security's contestation in terms of 'who gets what, when and how' (Lasswell 1936). Secondly, I use the two aforementioned theoretical approaches to show that a universalised, finite definition is unhelpful because of the inherent issues with statically defining security. Thirdly, I engage with counterpoints from those that believe that security should not be understood as an 'essentially contested concept', to which I argue the contrary.

There is an extensive literature disputing what constitutes an 'essentially contested concept' (see Baldwin 1997; Gallie 1956; McSweeney 1999: 84). For the sake of this essay, I define an 'essentially contested concept' as follows: an essentially contested concept is one in which there is a general consensus that a concept exists, but that there is no agreement upon what the term's meaning is. Moreover, all meanings of the term have inherent issues, whether they be conceptual, practical, or operational, and this is why there is no agreement on the meaning of such a term. In this essay I will demonstrate that there is consensus of security's existence, however there is no agreement upon what security's definition should be, whilst maintaining that there are inherent problems with defining security in finite terms. This will be further elaborated on in this paper.

Debates about Security: What Is at Stake?

Before demonstrating how security is contested, naturally it makes sense to illustrate why groups would want to contest security's meaning. In short, security is contested because of the politically mobilising and powerful connotations associated with the term (Booth 1991: 318; Buzan 1983: 2; McDonald 2012: 24).

Security is considered to be 'high politics' (McDonald 2012: 5). Thus, what security means, and – as a result – what, or who, is being protected from threats 'is potentially enabling in terms of ascribing a level of priority and importance to it, or in terms of enabling particular logics of response' (McDonald 2012: 18). Buzan has also acknowledged the political power associated with security being 'a powerful political tool in claiming attention for priority items in the competition for government attention' (1991: 370). As a result, 'security' is politically powerful and it is understandable as to why respective groups would want their security to be prioritised: security is about 'who gets what, when and how' (Lasswell 1936).

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In this respect, theoretical approaches like those examined in this essay are vital to understanding 'who gets what, when and how' (Lasswell 1936). For example, a theoretical approach to security like structural realism can become so 'dominant to the extent that it becomes established and institutionalised as the accepted basis for… acting on behalf of a particular group' (McDonald 2012: 5). In contrast to realism, theoretical approaches like the Welsh School tradition understand security differently. Unlike structural realism, the Welsh School is explicitly normative with an agenda to challenge the dominance of traditional security studies and change the world (Booth 1991: 319; McDonald 2012: 39). I will elaborate on these theoretical understandings of security in the following section.

To conclude this brief discussion about why security is contested, I have shown that security is considered to be important in the realm of high politics. McDonald supports this view by articulating 'that there is much at stake in debates about what security means, and because of this, security politics is a site of significant political contestation' (2012: 18). Groups, or in the case of this essay, theories have competing perspectives of the world tied to different ontological and epistemological values and see their vision of the world as the most legitimate. No theoretical approach wants another to become dominant in this respect, because as Robert Cox has stated 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose' (1981: 128). These different theoretical traditions and purposes are the focuses of the following section.

Competing Perspectives: Structural Realism and Welsh School Critical Theory

The previous section contextualised why groups would want to compete over what security means. This section attempts to show how security is contested. Furthermore, I argue that finite and fixed definitions like the ones compared in this section are not helpful because they have inherent conceptual, normative and practical problems. As a result, I conclude that it is impractical to define security in static terms and it is better to understand security as contested. The two theoretical conceptualisations of security used in this essay – realism and Welsh School critical theory – will be used because of the fundamentally different meaning prescribed to security by each theory. Additionally, I will use these two understandings to demonstrate the parameters of a static definition. As a result, these two theories in particular are extremely apt to demonstrate how security is contested. They are highly complex and will inevitably be simplified for concision.

Although all realists theorise the world differently, and thus prescribe a different meaning to security, all definitions tend to revolve around the preservation and protection of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state (Carnesale and Nacht 1976: 2). The referent object – what, or who, is being secured – in this instance is the state within an anarchic international system in which no higher authority sits above states. Threats to the state generally come in the form of external military threats, while the means of attaining security are a state's own military. Furthermore, realism sees security studies as 'the conditions that make the use of force more likely, the ways that the use of force affects individuals, states, and societies, and the specific policies that states adopt in order to prepare for, prevent, or engage in war' (Walt 1991: 212).

The Welsh School approach conceptualises security fundamentally differently to traditional approaches. The Welsh School defines security as emancipation (Booth 1991: 319; McDonald 2012: 43). Emancipation is perceived as 'the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do' (Booth 1991: 319). These 'phyiscal and human constrains' are not deterministically defined, but rather are context-specific (McDonald 2012: 48). In contrast to a realist understanding of security, the Welsh School normatively outlines that people should be the referent objects of security as opposed to the state because the moral purpose of the state is to enforce a social contract and protect its population.

The two different conceptualisations of security labelled above exemplify how security is contested because there is no agreement as to what the term means. Both make strong, but different claims about what security means. Nevertheless, I maintain that permanently fixing security's definition as anything more than 'freedom from danger or harm', 'the preservation of a group's core values' (McDonald 2012: 11-12), or the 'absence of threats' (Booth 1991: 319), would be limiting because of the problems associated with this. I do this by illustrating the shortcomings and criticisms of permanently fixing security's meaning in the way that Welsh School and realist understandings do. As a result, security should be understood as an 'essentially contested concept' because there is no definition of the term

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that is sensitive to the way security can be understood or practiced by all actors.

The Welsh School in particular has criticised the realist understanding of security. Realists see the state as the central actor in world politics and thus understand security to be concerned with the protection of the state (Carnesale and Nacht 1976: 2; Walt 1991: 213). Welsh School scholars disagree with this, arguing that the central role of the state is not to protect itself but to enforce a social contract and protect its population especially given that the state is provided with legitimacy through the consent of its people (Booth 1991: 319; McDonald 2012: 43). In this respect Booth asserts that 'states… should be treated as means and not ends [of security]' (1991: 319). In line with this, a realist understanding of security is also insensitive to how states can be significant sources of insecurity to their own people (Kolodziej 1992: 423; McDonald 2012: 43). Likewise, 'many states are deeply implicated in the creation of other forms of insecurity for their own populations, for example, in such issues as food and environmental security' (Wyn Jones 1999: 99).

A further critique of realism's state-centric understanding of security is its 'timelessness'. Booth (1991: 322) has been critical of realism for creating a theory of security that is eternal and timeless and insensitive to change. It can also be questioned how realism can form such an understanding of security considering that the modern state system is considered to have started in 1648 (Booth 1991: 320; Kolodziej 1992: 424). Furthermore, it is argued that 'states are too diverse in their character to serve as the basis for a comprehensive theory of security' (Booth 1991: 320). Critical theorists have also condemned state-centrism because it is empirically unhelpful (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010: 20). In this respect, wars between states are fought not nearly as frequently as wars within states and so traditional security understandings are not empirically helpful in understanding new, localised wars that include non-state actors (see Kaldor 1999).

Despite these criticisms of realism, the Welsh School approach to security still has inherent problems with its understanding of security. Although Welsh School critical theory does provide a powerful and convincing critique of traditional understandings of security, the Welsh School understanding of security has shortcomings as well.

The Welsh School approach understands security to be for people, and is defined as 'emancipation' (Booth 1991: 319). Emancipation is defined as 'the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do' (Booth 1991: 319). This is relatively vague which makes operationalizing and applying an emancipatory framework to world politics problematic (McDonald 2012: 45). Furthermore, an issue never addressed is how groups and/or individuals can be freed without placing further physical and human constraints on others.

Postcolonial perspectives have also been critical of the Welsh School's cosmopolitan understanding of security. This is despite Wyn Jones asserting that the Welsh School framework is 'for the voiceless, the unrepresented, the powerless, and its purpose is their emancipation' (1999: 159). Ayoob (1997: 127) has criticised universalising emancipation arguing that it is a fundamentally Western idea rooted in Western philosophy and is 'far removed from Third World' understandings of security. It is argued that 'one should not… run away with the concept [of emancipation] to make it all things to all people' (Ayoob 1997: 139). Thus, while seemingly 'cosmopolitan', the Welsh School's approach is considered to be deeply Eurocentric and is inconsistent with how some understand security, particularly those in the 'Third World'.

Although I have provided two, albeit brief, critiques of two diametrically opposed conceptualisations of security meanings I hope to have advanced one point in particular. Any sort of static definition of security will undoubtedly be met with criticism; the key criteria of what constitutes an 'essentially contested concept' as outlined in the introduction of this paper. As aforementioned, security can be loosely defined, in as being 'freedom from danger or harm', 'the preservation of a group's core values' (McDonald 2012: 11-12), or the 'absence of threats' (Booth 1991: 319). This is the extent to which security's meaning should, and can be fixed. Finitely defining security as anything more than this would be inconsistent with how some define, practice, and understand security, or how its meaning changes over time. Thus, security is best understood as an 'essentially contested concept' because any sort of fixed definition of security would be unwise; all static definitions have inherent problems.

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Objections to Security's Contestation

Although this essay has argued that security is an 'essentially contested concept' using two alternative theoretical understanding of security's meaning, both theoretical approaches object to security's contestation. Booth has deterministically outlined that 'security… *is* emancipation' (1991: 319, emphasis added), while Walt (1991: 213) has asserted that any conceptualisation of security's meaning outside of the traditional realist approach puts the field's intellectual coherence at risk. However, does understanding security as an 'essentially contested concept' necessarily 'destroy [security's] intellectual coherence and make it more difficult to devise solutions to… important problems' (Walt 1991: 213)?

'Important problems' change over time and are context-based. Moreover, 'important problems' could also be considered an 'essentially contested concept' and each theoretical framework will inevitably consider different phenomena to be 'important problems'. As a result, fixing security's definition can also mean turning a blind eye to 'important problems'. This is problematic considering that security prescribes importance to issues 'in terms of enabling particular logics of response' (McDonald 2012: 18). Security's meaning and important problems are context-based, and different groups understand both of these terms differently in different contexts. Fixing security's definition in any sort of way makes it a useless concept in this regard.

This does not destroy the 'intellectual coherence of the field' either. I would argue the contrary. If the 'important problems' change, then so must the field and so must security's meaning. In this regard, fixing security's definition destroys the intellectual coherence of the field because it ultimately destroys the term's utility with respect to devising solutions to important problems. This is particularly the case if the term security is politically enabling, as I argued in the first section.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that security is best understood as an 'essentially contested concept', because a fixed definition of security is not helpful and is inconsistent with how particular groups understand security, or how security's meaning changes in context. My argument has proceeded in three main sections. Firstly, I showed why security is an 'essentially contested concept' by showing what is at stake in debates about security's meaning. Secondly, I demonstrated that permanently fixing a definition of security is nonsensical because all definitions have inherent problems – whether they be conceptual, normative, or practical – and thus security should be understood as a contested concept. Thirdly, I illustrated that the field's 'intellectual coherence' is not in danger as a result of security's contestation because 'important problems' change over time and fixing a definition of security comes with the risk of ignoring or overlooking important problems. Thus, security is an 'essentially contested concept'.

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