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# The future of critical security studies: Ethics and the politics of security

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## Abstract

‘Critical security studies’ has come to occupy a prominent place within the lexicon of International Relations and security studies over the past two decades. While disagreement exists about the boundaries of this sub-discipline or indeed some of its central commitments, in this article we argue that we can indeed talk about a ‘critical security studies’ project orienting around three central themes. The first is a fundamental critique of traditional (realist) approaches to security; the second is a concern with the politics of security — the question of what security does politically; while the third is with the ethics of security — the question of what progressive practices look like regarding security. We suggest that it is the latter two of these concerns with the politics and ethics of security that ultimately define the ‘critical security studies’ project. Taking the so-called Welsh School and Copenhagen School frameworks as archetypal examples of ‘critical security studies’ (and its limits), in this article we argue that despite its promises, scholarship in this tradition has generally fallen short of providing us with a sophisticated, convincing account of either the politics or the ethics of security. At stake in the failure to provide such an account is the fundamental question of whether we need a ‘critical security studies’ at all.

## Keywords

Copenhagen School, critical security studies, emancipation, securitization, security, Welsh School

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## Introduction

Critical security studies has come to occupy a prominent place within the lexicon of International Relations and security studies over the past two decades. While disagreement exists about the boundaries of this sub-discipline or indeed some of its central commitments, 'critical security studies' or some variation of this term features as the title of a series of texts (e.g. Booth, 2005; Burke and McDonald, 2007; Fierke, 2007; Krause and Williams, 1997; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2010), university courses (in Europe, North America and Australia) and multinational, multi-institutional research projects (e.g. CASE Collective). Drawing out the central tenets or key commitments of critical security studies is not a straightforward exercise, with narrow definitions (e.g. Booth, 2005) excluding a range of scholarship that would self-apply the critical security studies label or fit with most conceptualizations of 'critical', and broad definitions drawing together scholarship and scholars who ask very different questions of security in international relations, underpinned by what might seem to be irreconcilable philosophical commitments.

Despite this, in this article we argue that we can indeed talk about a critical security studies project. Employing a broad definition of 'critical security studies', we suggest that this project orients around three central themes. The first is a fundamental critique of the epistemology, ontology and normative implications of traditional (realist) approaches to security that continue to privilege the state as the referent object of security and the 'threat and use of force' (Walt, 1991) as the subject of security. The form and extent of this critique has been well documented, and in different ways has impacted upon the study and practice of security in international relations in general.<sup>1</sup> The latter two central themes are more fundamental, involving a move beyond critique to the articulation of a research agenda with core concerns. The first of these is a concern with the politics of security: the question of what security *does* politically. Simply, critical security studies scholarship is interested in the function of representations or discourses of security in defining group identity, enabling particular policy or legitimating particular actors as security providers. This commitment, albeit evident in different ways and to different degrees, follows the recognition that security is socially constructed and politically powerful. The second concern is with the ethics of security. Here, critical security studies scholarship is concerned with the definition of the 'good' regarding security, a concern particularly associated with attempts to define the nature and dynamics of progress. In simple terms, this has manifested itself in arguments concerning the need to either reformulate security or escape the language and logic of security altogether. It is these latter concerns with the politics and ethics of security, we argue, that ultimately define the critical security studies project.

The central argument of this article is that while concerning itself with these core themes, scholarship in the tradition of critical security studies has generally fallen short of providing us with a sophisticated, convincing framework for understanding either the politics of security or the ethics of security. Ultimately, key critical interventions on these questions tend to suggest that there is a universal security logic (whether optimistic or pessimistic, mobilizing or exceptionalist) that defines possibilities for progress regarding security, while progress itself is under-theorized across the spectrum of critical security studies research. Indeed, the most overt attempts to articulate a definition of progress

regarding security in critical terms at times ultimately endorse loosely liberal conceptions of the desirability of dialogue, the realization of basic needs and the minimization of harm. These sentiments are not inherently problematic, but they can appear limited to the point of banal in providing an ethical framework for coming to terms with the complexities of contemporary world politics. What is needed, we suggest, is a more nuanced and contextual understanding of security dynamics and practices as they inhere in a range of social, historical and political contexts.

Recognizing the limitations of existing critical security scholarship on the questions of the politics and the ethics of security is crucial given the centrality of these themes for the critical security studies project itself. While advancing powerful critiques of the limits of traditional approaches to security in both theory and practice, various critical approaches have set themselves a task of moving beyond critique to articulate a vision of how security can be understood and reformulated. If falling short of delivering on these goals, then fundamental questions must be asked about whether we need a critical security studies at all.

In this article, and perhaps despite appearances above, we offer a broadly sympathetic critique of the critical security studies project while suggesting that unconvincing responses to the question of what security does and what constitutes progress regarding security conceptions and practices constitute fundamental challenges for this project. The article proceeds in four parts. First, we briefly outline what we mean by critical security studies before defining what we mean by the two key themes of the politics of security and the ethics of security. We then discuss engagement with the politics of security and ethics of security in turn, noting respectively the tendency for scholarship in the critical security studies tradition to work with universalizing security logics and under-theorized or limited conceptualizations of progress. This applies even to those approaches that explicitly identify engaging with these concerns as a central contribution of their framework. We suggest here the possibility of focusing on the so-called Copenhagen and Welsh Schools as emblematic examples of engagement with these themes — and the limitations of this engagement — in critical security studies. In the concluding section, and employing the method of immanent critique, we point to these limitations as key bases upon which the critical security studies project can be advanced. We suggest in the process avenues for further research and possibilities for redressing these limitations. In particular, we make a case for a more nuanced understanding of the politics and ethics of security that recognizes the varied ways in which security is conceptualized and practised in different social, historical and political contexts.

## **Critical security studies: Politics and ethics**

As noted, to suggest the existence of a critical security studies project is not an uncontroversial move. The term ‘critical security studies’ itself has been appropriated and defined in both narrow (e.g. Booth, 2005) and broad (e.g. Krause and Williams, 1997) terms; not all scholars whose work would seem to fit within this schema embrace this label; while the term ‘project’ suggests a unity of purpose that belies important philosophical differences. As such, defining a critical security studies project is an exercise fraught with complex questions about analytical boundaries and the politics of definition.

We argue here, however, that it is indeed possible to identify a critical security studies project. We define the boundaries of critical security studies in broad terms and, as noted earlier, suggest its orientation around three central themes. On boundaries, we ultimately endorse the understanding of critical security studies outlined by Krause and Williams (1997).<sup>2</sup> For them, critical security studies is a broad church encompassing a range of approaches and analyses drawing on elements of Marxism, feminism, Critical Theory, critical constructivism and post-structuralism. Defining the scope of critical security studies in such a way draws on Robert Cox's (1981) distinction between problem-solving theories and critical theories, itself derived from Horkheimer. Here, problem-solving theories are characterized by their willingness to take the world as it is as the starting point for analysis, while critical theories are concerned with pointing to the constitution of world orders. More fundamentally, what holds Critical Theory — so conceived — together is a broad acceptance that theoretically derived knowledge about the world is not objective or neutral, but predicated on normative choices with inherent political implications. Indeed, critical approaches seek to identify and challenge the function of knowledge produced in problem-solving theories (Heath-Kelly, 2010: 240; Reus-Smit, 2008: 56).

Applied to the study of security, such an understanding of a 'critical' approach encourages a focus on the socially constructed nature of security and a series of fundamental questions such as: 'Whose security is (or should be) prioritized?', 'What are the key threats to security and how are they identified?', 'Where do security discourses come from?' and 'Whose interests do they serve?' While traditional approaches to security position the study of security as the study of the threat and use of force by and between states in world politics (see Walt, 1991), critical approaches ultimately serve to point to the normative preferences inherent in such choices and the political implications following from such choices.

Beyond this critique of traditional security studies, and indeed flowing from it, two central concerns emerge from this brief discussion and from the work undertaken in critical security studies to date. The first is a concern with what security *does* politically. This theme encourages reflection on the role of representations of security in encouraging sets of policy responses, legitimating the roles of particular actors or indeed constituting political communities in particular ways. Some broadly critical accounts of security appear to pay little if any overt attention to questions of the politics of security, but we would argue that it is much harder to identify any critical intervention that does not articulate *some* conception of what security does or what is at stake in engagement with 'security' (whether enabling emergency measures or simply prioritizing particular issues, for example). While the politics of security is not a central concern of Welsh School approaches, for example, Booth (2007: 108–109) nevertheless endorses the idea that 'security has great power' and that the term in political language 'signifies priority'. Such a conceptualization lacks the sophistication of post-structural accounts of the role of security narratives in defining the limits of political community, but nonetheless articulates some conception of the performative effects of security discourses.

The second core concern is with the ethics of security. If conceptions of security are understood (in Coxian terms) as constitutive of social reality, then critical security studies scholarship in turn recognizes the need to pay attention to the winners and losers of particular understandings and practices of security, along with the philosophical bases

upon which endorsing such choices or outcomes might be justified. This also entails providing guidance as to what might constitute an ethically defensible security understanding or practice. At the broadest level, scholarship in the critical security studies project has responded to this question in arguing for the need to reformulate security in particular ways or indeed escape the logic and language of security altogether. Again, some analyses in the broad critical security studies project might seem reluctant to endorse a notion of the 'good' or even progress regarding security, certainly if understood in the context of a commitment to an imperative such as 'emancipation'. Post-structural analyses, for example, directly challenge a notion of progress as an Enlightenment-inspired teleology, and view meta-narratives such as 'emancipation' as dangerous (e.g. Neocleous, 2008). Such approaches ultimately, however, endorse practices of resistance in general and argue in favour of escaping the exclusionary and statist logic of security specifically. In this way, such approaches continue to articulate *some* conception of what constitutes progress in the context of security, even if defined in terms of resistance to dominant representations and practices (discourses) of security and even if stopping short of outlining a desired end-state.

While more detail will be given to these themes in the subsequent sections, our contention here is that engagement with these two themes of security (the politics and ethics of security) unifies and indeed constitutes the critical security studies project. Different variants of critical security studies certainly focus on these themes to different degrees and in radically different ways. To highlight these different positions, in the following we draw particular attention to the arguments of the Copenhagen School and Welsh School of critical security studies. The point here is not to suggest that these schools *capture* the critical security studies project, but rather that the goals and in particular the limitations of each are broadly representative of the challenges facing this project as a whole.

## The politics of security

A number of scholars from across the broad spectrum of critical security studies have been concerned with exploring the politics of security, or asking what security *does*. As noted, this has tended to entail a focus on the ways in which representations or discourses of security encourage sets of practices, legitimize particular actors or indeed constitute political communities and their limits in particular ways. While not primarily associated with insights into the political effects of representations of security, for example, the Welsh School's commitment to reorienting security around notions of emancipation is underpinned by a belief in the mobilizing potential of security. However, in the critical security studies project, direct engagement with this question has tended to come from those operating in the broadly post-structural tradition, for whom representations or discourses of world politics constitute world politics itself.

David Campbell (1998), for example, has used the example of American representations of threat regarding the USSR during the Cold War to point to the ways in which such representations served to define American identity and the legitimate boundaries of national community. More recently, Richard Jackson (2005) draws broadly similar conclusions about American representations of threat in the context of the 'war on terror', pointing to the role of these representations in enabling expeditionary military

intervention, domestic violations of civil liberties and the suspension of obligations to enemy combatants. In these cases, representations of threat defined and constructed identity and community in particular ways; justified a series of exceptional practices; and constituted the world in ways that has impacted significantly upon the practices of the most powerful actors in it.

Engaging with the philosophical foundations of security in liberal societies, Michael Dillon (1996) has suggested that the promise of providing security underpins perceptions of the political legitimacy of states, ultimately suggesting a merge between liberal politics and security politics (see also Dillon and Reid, 2009). Anthony Burke (2007: 20) develops this theme, suggesting that security can be viewed 'as a political technology that enables, produces and constrains individuals within larger systems of power and institutional action'. In particular, he is concerned with showing how security ties individuals to the state through demands of citizenship, with this in turn entailing different possibilities and limitations for how we think of security and relate 'our' security to that of others. A range of feminist accounts of security politics have pointed to similar dynamics in suggesting that discourses of security serve to sustain existing hierarchies of power and the gendered identities associated with them (Peterson, 1992; Sjoberg, 2010). The so-called Paris School, meanwhile, has been concerned with *practices* of security, illustrating how security and insecurity are mutually constituted through elite knowledge and routinized bureaucratic practices. These practices in turn shape how individuals and groups conduct themselves in regard to particular issues and other groups/individuals (Bigo, 2002, 2008; Huysmans, 2006).

One prominent concern here has been with the notion of the exception, drawing on the work of Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin and more recently Giorgio Agamben. The notion of the exception concerns the ways in which representations of existential threat or crises (for Schmitt, articulated by the sovereign) enable forms of extraordinary politics 'that would otherwise be stymied by normal liberal democratic checks and balances on coercive and authoritarian regimes' (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2010: 71). Indeed, in the context of the 'war on terror', some suggest that the invocation of 'states of exception' in modern liberal societies has become a part of everyday political practice, enabling governments to instigate exceptional measures and allowing the state of exception to emerge as a 'paradigm of government' (Agamben, 2005; van Munster, 2007: 241). In a similar vein, various authors have recently drawn on the insights of Foucault in exploring the biopolitics of security. These authors are concerned with pointing to forms of government that regulate populations through the exertion of power over human life (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008).

At the heart of these (broadly post-structural) insights into the political is an abiding suspicion of security: discourses of security have profoundly problematic political implications in this schema. Security entails a logic that is exclusionary and violent, limiting individual freedom and constructing a narrow vision of national community that serves the interests of the state machinery. This abiding suspicion is articulated most directly by Mark Neocleous (2008: 5), who argues that:

security has become the master narrative through which the state shapes our lives and imaginations ... producing and organizing subjects in a way that is always already predisposed towards the exercise of violence in defence of the established order.



This suspicion of security is certainly characteristic of post-structural engagements with security, but is also a prominent feature of the work of the so-called Copenhagen School. Their approach is similarly concerned with the political effects of representations of security, with Ole Wæver (1995) drawing explicitly on Austin's speech act theory and implicitly on Schmitt's notion of exceptionalism (see Aradau, 2004; Williams, 2003) to suggest that representations of existential threat can have significant performative effects. If an issue is securitized — represented as an existential threat by a consequential political actor (usually a state's leader) and accepted as such by a relevant audience (usually the domestic population) — it is ultimately elevated from the realm of 'normal politics' to the sphere of 'panic politics' (Buzan et al., 1998: 34). Here, the way that issue is subsequently addressed is characterized by urgency, secrecy and the employment of extraordinary measures.

The concept of securitization has, of course, proved highly successful at penetrating academic debates about security and a range of analysts have applied the concept to issues as diverse as disease (e.g. Elbe, 2006; Enemark, 2009), the environment (e.g. Floyd, 2010) and asylum/immigration (e.g. Buonfino, 2004; Ceyhan and Tsoukala, 2002; McMaster, 2002; Sasse, 2005). Regarding issues such as immigration/ asylum in particular, the framework seems to have captured something important about the political effects of security language regarding issues not traditionally acknowledged as 'security' issues. Here, leaders of liberal democratic states have represented immigrants/ asylum-seekers as threats to the sovereignty of the state or social cohesion of the nation as a means of justifying the denial of their international responsibilities and enabling action (such as the deployment of troops or the closing of borders) that would traditionally be characteristic of a time of war. Here too, the normative preference expressed for desecuritization (the removal of issues from the security realm) would seem to be most consistent with progressive policy outcomes.

While not without analytical purchase and some degree of normative appeal, however, the Copenhagen School's conceptualization of the politics of security — of what security *does* — is problematic. Put simply, the suggestion that security has an inherent, universal logic (associated with urgency and exceptionalism, for example) is a claim that lacks attention to the multiple ways in which security is understood and practised in world politics. Here, and to reiterate a core claim of this article, greater attention is needed to the varied social, historical and political contexts in which security is constructed.

A range of authors utilizing broadly constructivist insights, for example, have pointed to the ways in which different discourses of security have radically different implications in terms of the types and boundaries of communities they serve to construct, the limits of ethical concern for outsiders, and the types of policies and practices that might flow from them. Nils Bubandt (2005), for example, suggests that different forms or 'scales' of political community — ranging in his analysis from the global to the national to the local — can be constructed through representations of security, often in competing or contradictory ways. Maria Julia Trombetta (2008), meanwhile, has argued convincingly that rather than environmental issues being militarized through being defined as security threats, the logic associated with such issues might encourage alternative logics of security. Roxanne Doty (1998/9) points out that alternative US government policies towards Haitian refugees in the 1990s should be understood as representative of changing security discourses



(from national to human security). Stefan Elbe (2006) has shown how the securitization of HIV/AIDS has in some contexts resulted in problematic policies that have constituted those infected with the virus as potential threats to national security to be excluded, while in others it has encouraged states to focus resources on tackling the virus in ways that would have been unlikely if it remained treated as just another public health issue. And, as Rita Abrahamsen (2002) has noted, the Copenhagen School's strong distinction between the realm of 'security' on the one hand and 'politics' on the other paints a simplistic image of politics more broadly, limiting the extent to which we can recognize alternative logics at work (such as that of 'risk', for example).

Taking this criticism further, it is possible to argue that there is something of a tension here between the development of a framework that allows us to make sense of the *changing content* of security over time and space on the one hand and a commitment to the idea that there is a *fixed logic* to security on the other that should encourage us to resist or escape it.<sup>3</sup> To a significant degree, the belief in a negative and exclusionary security logic is a claim that is arguably parasitic upon security being equated in a timeless and abstract sense with a dominant *discourse* of security (tied to the nation-state and its preservation).

The above is indeed a criticism advanced stridently by Welsh School theorists, who suggest that security can and should be associated with emancipation rather than the mechanisms of the state (Bilgin, 2008; Booth, 2005, 2007; Wyn Jones, 2005). For these theorists, the profound scepticism towards security characteristic of theorists working in the tradition of post-structuralism or with the Copenhagen School framework is only justified to the extent that a narrow, exclusionary and statist vision of security is accepted as timeless and inevitable. And yet in subsequently equating security with the concept of emancipation, Welsh School theorists arguably similarly endorse a set logic of security. Specifically, they can be accused of ignoring the possibility of negative implications flowing from an association of a particular issue with the language and logic of security (see Aradau, 2004; CASE Collective, 2006: 456; Neocleous, 2008). And in attempting to use (the power of) security to advance emancipatory ends, little attention is given to the question of whether a better pragmatic basis for realizing such ends might be through the language of justice, human rights or even economics, for example.

Ultimately, the tendency to characterize the politics of security as either benign (in the case of the Welsh School) or pernicious (in the case of the Copenhagen School or post-structuralists) suggests a problematic binary in the critical security studies project. These positions serve to either deny an association of security with a (sedimented) realist security discourse or a logic of exceptionalism (in the case of the Welsh School) or perversely *require* that discourse and logic to remain dominant across time and space for the broader rejection of security to make sense (in the case of post-structuralism and the Copenhagen School). While this oversimplifies matters somewhat, missing in such accounts is recognition of the temporal and spatial specificity of security logics. In short, missing is recognition that security *does* different things at different times and in different places (see Ciuta, 2009). While this is a particularly striking omission for approaches that have precisely set themselves the task of exploring the politics of security and the implications of securitization, it is an omission that questions the capacity of the critical security studies project as a whole to develop a convincing account of the politics of security. In the final pages, we suggest the need for the critical security studies project to better recognize

these variegated security logics, and to come to terms with the (albeit complex) relationship between sedimented and dominant security discourses on the one hand, and the possibilities for change and difference on the other.

## Security and ethics

If it is somewhat controversial to suggest that there is a critical security studies project orienting around a concern with the politics of security, it is certainly controversial to suggest that this project is similarly characterized by a concern with definitions of the 'good' or progress regarding security. As noted, scholars working in the post-structural tradition have been deeply suspicious of Enlightenment notions of progress in general and imperatives such as emancipation specifically, while many analysts have defined their concerns in terms of advancing our understanding of security dynamics in world politics rather than articulating progressive security visions. The latter is applicable to 'critical constructivist' literature, which is primarily concerned with understanding how particular security conceptions and practices become possible in world politics (e.g. Doty, 1993; Weldes, 1996). While some working in this tradition have identified their goal as facilitating the 'imagining of alternative lifeworlds' through denaturalizing 'dominant constructions' (Weldes et al., 1999: 13), such a commitment is arguably closer to a vision of the *possibility* of progress rather than a vision of progress or the good itself. And notwithstanding the attempt from some constructivists to shift mainstream variants towards an explicit engagement with ethics (e.g. Hoffman, 2009; Price, 2008), it is difficult to discern how this could result in clear guidance as to what progress regarding security means. Ultimately, as a framework for exploring the social constitution of the world through the interaction between structures and agents, the constructivist tradition lacks the philosophical resources to make claims about the nature of progress or morality.

The picture regarding the role of ethics or conceptions of progress regarding security in critical security studies is further complicated by discourses such as 'human security'. This discourse developed primarily from the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) 1994 Human Development Report, which defined human security as a concern with both 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want' (UNDP, 1995). This vision of security constituted a radical critique of the failure of states to provide for the well-being of populations and attempted to reformulate security to focus on the rights and needs of people rather than the preservation of states. Indeed, in this context, the UNDP's 'human security' discourse articulated a foundational conception of the good regarding security absent from most normatively driven accounts of security. It is worth noting here that in terms of articulating an ethical vision, theorists working in the critical security studies project have largely shied away from the definition of foundational claims of the 'good' and instead focused on what constitutes progress, usually defined in terms of expanding dialogic space. This is even true of so-called Welsh School approaches to emancipation, to be discussed.

While articulating a foundational vision of security and advancing a fundamental critique of traditional approaches, however, 'human security' is ultimately better understood (in Coxian terms) as problem-solving in orientation (Christie, 2010; Newman, 2010). Indeed, critical security scholars have been particularly suspicious of 'human

security', not least given the compromises its advocates have been prepared to make with state power and established structures of governance. As Booth (2007: 324) puts it, 'human security has taken on the image of the velvet glove on the iron hand of hard power'. In this respect, critics suggest that human security has been co-opted by Western states as a guise for the continued promotion of liberal forms of governance around the world. Human security has, in this sense become part of the ideological trappings which have helped foster the linking together of security and liberal development policies by many Western states and which at their most pernicious have become a cover and support for neo-imperialist policies of military intervention in the developing world (Christie, 2010; Duffield, 2007; Newman, 2010).

As such, some scholarship which directly articulates a vision of the 'good' regarding security (such as 'human security') falls outside reasonable limits of the critical security studies project, while some approaches within this project (most notably critical constructivism and post-structuralism) appear reluctant to articulate even a notion of progress regarding security. Despite the unwillingness of the latter to articulate an explicit conception of progress, such a conception is evident in the expressed commitment to opening up space for communities to articulate alternative visions of security in the case of critical constructivism, or in the commitment to resist the logic of security altogether in the case of post-structuralism. The latter also largely applies to the Copenhagen School's commitment to desecuritization, a point we will return to later. In these senses, we can indeed talk about engagement with the ethics of security as a core component of a critical security studies project, even while such engagement has oriented towards more pragmatic visions of progress than foundational claims regarding the constitution of the 'good'.

While these approaches have therefore engaged with the meaning of progress regarding security, it is the so-called Welsh School that has been most prominent within critical security studies in articulating a particular vision of progress and linking that vision to an understanding of security. Named for its origins among scholars at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth — particularly Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones — this approach to security is characterized by a commitment to emancipation. Booth argued in 1991 that traditional approaches to security wrongly privileged the state and the preservation of state regimes at the expense of individuals. While generations of traditional security scholars had simply accepted the primacy of the state as the referent object of security, for Booth (1991: 319), states were at best the means rather than the ends of security (see also McSweeney, 1999). Indeed, for Booth, many states were not only failing in their job of providing security but were actively undermining the welfare of their citizens. This pointed both to the limitations of traditional approaches in neglecting such issues and to the potential for states to be privileged and reified within traditional frameworks. It also implied a criticism of those early attempts to 'redefine' security that focused ultimately on the question of which issues should be included on the security agenda rather than the more fundamental question of whose security was at stake (on this, see Krause and Williams, 1996).

In its commitment to emancipation, this vision of security drew on the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. The intellectual debt owed to the Frankfurt School was at times implicit rather than explicit, and different strands or variants of Critical Theory informed

different interpretations of both the means and definition of emancipation.<sup>4</sup> In Booth's earliest interventions, emancipation, and its role in the study of security, is defined in a relatively straightforward manner. It 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' (1991: 319). It is viewed as a normative imperative for scholars and practitioners of security to advocate or promote; and its relationship to security is defined as simply as possible: for Booth (1991: 319), 'emancipation, theoretically, is security'.

While this understanding was reiterated in later work (e.g. Bilgin et al., 1998: 153), by 2007 Booth's definition of terms within the framework itself had shifted in subtle but not unimportant ways. Here, Booth (2007: 112) defined emancipation as:

the securing of people from those oppressions that stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do, compatible with the freedom of others. It provides a threefold framework for politics: a philosophical anchorage for knowledge, a theory of progress for society, and a practice of resistance against oppression.

In this definition, emancipation shifts further from an end-state or foundational claim to a set of processes or attitudes. Such a shift arguably mirrors a shift in Frankfurt School thinking on emancipation. While first-generation Frankfurt School theorists such as Horkheimer (1972) defined emancipation as a normative imperative tied to material conditions, later theorists such as Habermas (1972) engaged more directly with the possibility for analysts to develop criteria for progressive (i.e. emancipatory) change, most notably through the process of communication. This latter focus on progress and dialogue is evident in Richard Wyn Jones' and Andrew Linklater's critical engagement with security. Wyn Jones (1999: 76–78) suggests the need to orient around the Habermasian-inspired notion of 'concrete utopias': realizable visions for progressive change rather than abstract visions of future worlds. Andrew Linklater (2005: 120–121), meanwhile, draws on a more deliberative strand of Critical Theory in endorsing Karl-Otto Apel's definition of emancipation as 'advances in "nonrepressive deliberation"'. For Linklater (2005: 116), 'dialogue and deliberation' constitute 'the crucial link between political community and human security'. Here, the recovery of 'voice' for 'the voiceless, the unrepresented, the powerless' (Wyn Jones, 1999: 159) is defined as the central means through which emancipation and security can be achieved.

This normative concern with developing more open and inclusive dialogue ultimately shares much with the Copenhagen School commitment to desecuritization. Flowing from its general pessimism towards the logic of security, Ole Wæver has articulated a normative preference for 'desecuritization', defined as 'the shifting of issues out of the emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere' (Buzan et al., 1998: 4).<sup>5</sup> If security issues are ultimately defined and addressed in exclusive and militaristic terms — if security is the site of 'panic politics' (Buzan et al., 1998: 34) — then the best option is to pursue the removal of issues from the security agenda rather than hope to harness the political priority that comes with defining issues as 'security' issues. There is certainly acknowledgement that some issues may be better dealt with in the realm of security than outside (particularly those that require emergency measures or

the suspension of the normal rules of the political game for dealing with them), but desecuritization is defined as the general preference or 'ideal' (Wæver, 2000: 251). Ole Wæver (2004: 10) articulates this as a response to a broader 'scepticism towards security', which he sees as having 'often anti-democratic and anti-creative implications'. The point to note here is that in suggesting a general preference for desecuritization as the basis for escaping the illiberal logic of security, a case is made for the sphere of deliberation (through a broadly liberal democratic process) as a basis for more progressive practices (see McDonald, 2011).

In the above sense, it is possible to identify a shared normative agenda between Welsh School and Copenhagen School approaches orienting around the expansion of realms of deliberation. In both cases, however — and particularly for the Copenhagen School — the foundations upon which deliberation and open dialogue are to be preferred or the manner in which they are to be pursued are weakly defined. Desecuritization ultimately entails a preference for dealing with issues in a realm broadly defined as a liberal democratic political one, but more specifically as one in which policies and practices regarding particular issues emerge as a result of much more open discussion and dialogue between a range of actors. In large part, the normative desirability of this state is simply implied in opposition to the illiberal implications of a securitized sphere (Hansen, 2010). There is little within this framework to develop the philosophical or pragmatic reasons for favouring open political deliberation and debate, while the relationship between deliberation and policy outcomes (or of course the basis for assessing the 'progressiveness' of policy outcomes) is simply not addressed in the framework itself (see McDonald, 2008, 2011). In these senses, the normative commitment to desecuritization does not provide theorists of security with a sufficient basis for making sense of what progress looks like regarding security.

While drawing on a more explicit philosophy of deliberation and communicative action tied to later Frankfurt School thought, the commitment to deliberation in the Welsh School framework is also problematic in different ways. First, and most obviously, the extent to which 'communicative action with emancipatory intent' or 'advances in non-repressive dialogue' do indeed inform Welsh School understandings of emancipation is open to question. Those scholars who have pointed most directly to the centrality of progress through dialogue and deliberation in the context of security — such as Andrew Linklater (2005) — have not been central to the development of a Critical Theory-inspired theory of security per se. Richard Wyn Jones' (1999) work provides the most sustained account of the relationship between security, ethics and (Frankfurt School) Critical Theory, but his survey of Critical Theory draws more on Horkheimer than Habermas and stops short of providing a sustained account of the role he sees deliberation playing in the realization of emancipation.

Second, and related to the ambiguous role of dialogue in Welsh School conceptions of emancipation, complex questions about emancipation and dialogue are elided in Welsh School theorizing. In particular, questions about what unrestricted deliberation might mean, the contexts in which it might emerge and/or become institutionalized, and whether indeed such deliberation is viewed as synonymous with emancipation or a context for its realization are fundamental questions that are insufficiently addressed in the Welsh School framework. This is particularly applicable to Booth's work. While shifting

towards a procedural understanding of emancipation and noting the importance of deliberation in later work (Booth, 2007: 102–116), Booth arguably prioritizes a foundational and material element to both emancipation and security, tying both to the material conditions of survival (Booth, 2007: 102, 165). The idea of an inherent tension between the focus on spheres of production and deliberation, for example, might be overdrawn (Linklater, 2001: 30), but the relationship between deliberation and material conditions regarding emancipation and security raises complex questions that need more sustained exploration.

Of course, this ambiguity also suggests an alternative understanding of emancipation within the Welsh School tied to the material conditions of people's existence: to 'real people in real places' in Booth's words. This more material conception is evident in Booth's (2007: 102) account of security as 'survival plus', defined in terms of conditions for human survival along with space to make life choices. It is here, however, that Booth's framework is closer to endorsing a broadly liberal commitment to equality more reminiscent of security discourses such as 'human security'. Indeed, sophisticated recent analyses of 'human security' (Barnett et al., 2010: 18) have precisely endorsed such a conception in positioning human security as 'a variable condition in which people and communities have the capacity to manage stresses to their needs, rights and values'. Booth's tendency towards a loosely liberal set of ethical commitments is also evident in his discussion of a critical security studies response to difficult questions such as the legitimacy of the use of force and so-called humanitarian intervention. While again providing a powerful critique of discourses of 'just war', Booth shies away from engaging with the role of violence or the question of what emancipation looks like in the context of genocide/mass violence, simply endorsing the general point that if military force is deployed, such forces are obliged to do less harm than they prevent (Booth, 2007: 313–315; cf. Peoples, 2011). In these senses, Booth's work ultimately fails to provide students of security with a sophisticated moral compass for making sense of and evaluating contemporary security dynamics in world politics.

While developing an important critique of the equation of security with the preservation of the state and articulating a normative imperative in the form of emancipation, the Welsh School framework ultimately stops short of providing us with a sophisticated ethical framework for engaging security, either in foundational or procedural terms. This is the result of ambiguity and inconsistencies within the framework (about the role of deliberation, for example), with the failure to engage systematically with difficult but fundamental questions about violence and the role of states, for example, and the broader failure to engage sufficiently with the possibility that the logic of security may have illiberal effects, rendering its linkage to emancipation (at least potentially) problematic. The latter has been well noted by post-structuralists and Copenhagen School theorists, but such accounts similarly tend to stop short of providing us with a sophisticated account of what progress might mean beyond broad commitments to resistance or desecuritization. Applied to the broader critical security studies project, it seems accurate to say that such a project falls short of providing us with a genuine account of security ethics that is able to come to terms with the complex nature of contemporary world politics.



## Conclusion: Where to from here? The future of critical security studies

If the critical security studies project is deficient in providing us with a sophisticated and convincing understanding of either the politics or ethics of security — two core animating themes of its research agenda — where does this leave such a project? Does the contribution of critical security studies extend no further than a compelling critique of traditional approaches to security on a range of analytical and normative grounds?

We would argue that there is a future in critical security studies. This future will ultimately be determined by the extent to which scholars recognize the limits and tensions of existing approaches (especially ‘Schools’) and take up the challenge of moving beyond first principles or universalized assumptions about security to engage in nuanced, reflexive and context-specific analyses of the politics and ethics of security. Indeed, we make such a case using the critical theoretical tool of immanent critique, defined here as a method of critique concerned with locating possibilities for progressive change in existing social and political orders.<sup>6</sup> In this context, we note in particular the possibility for building upon the tensions and limits in existing critical security studies scholarship to move this research project forward. We identify two key imperatives for this project by way of conclusion.

The first of these imperatives concerns the need to develop understandings of the politics of security that are context-specific; that recognize and interrogate the role of different security discourses and their effects in different settings; and that come to terms with sedimented meanings and logics without endorsing these as timeless and inevitable. In terms of context-specificity, the Western-centric nature of (critical) security studies has ultimately encouraged a focus on how security ‘works’ in liberal democratic settings. This is particularly applicable to the Copenhagen School framework, whose dichotomy between ‘panic politics’ and ‘normal politics’ ultimately suggests a conception of politics parasitic on a liberal democratic political context (see McDonald, 2008; Williams, 2003). While some have attempted to explore securitization dynamics outside these settings (e.g. Wilkinson, 2007), the framework itself continues to work with a security–politics dichotomy that may be wholly unfamiliar to those outside liberal democratic states. In a fundamentally illiberal state regime such as Burma or North Korea, for example, what does the language of security do and what does ‘normal politics’ mean? In what ways do different cultural, social and historical contexts determine different security logics, and how do these dynamics look in terms of communities above and below the state? And can we accept the claim that there is no difference in the logic or effects of securitization if security is understood as referring to the welfare of the most vulnerable in global society, for example, rather than the territorial preservation of the nation-state? Here, the failure to differentiate between logics of security on the basis of what *understanding* of security inheres in a particular discourse potentially blinds Copenhagen School and post-structural theorists of security to (the possibility of) *difference* in security dynamics and logics in different places, for different actors and at different times. In the case of the Copenhagen School, such parsimony might be in part a response to the desire to provide analytical boundaries around the study of security rather than ‘descend’ into contextual analysis (see Williams, 2010: 213–216), but it nonetheless results in a partial and (we would argue) Western-centric image of the politics of security.



Ultimately, these points suggest the need for far more nuance than is currently evident in critical security studies scholarship. As noted earlier, the critical security studies project appears bifurcated between opposing logics of security that position the logic of security as inherently pernicious (Copenhagen School, post-structuralism) or inherently progressive (Welsh School). In a sense, these 'Schools' correct the limits and tendencies of each other in important ways, suggesting (immanent) possibilities for a more nuanced understanding of the politics of security in the critical security studies project as a whole. Copenhagen School and post-structural theorists explore the logic of security that follows from the dominant discourse of security in contemporary world politics, rightly cautioning against any assumed linkage between security and progress and pointing to the ways in which the promise of security can be used to justify illiberal practices. The Welsh School framework, meanwhile, recognizes that this dominant discourse of security does not necessarily capture the essence of security across time and space, in the process pointing to possibilities for progressive change in security dynamics and practices. In a sense, these different approaches to the logic of security broadly reflect structural and agential tendencies in International Relations more generally. We would argue that they suggest the need to take seriously the political limitations associated with dominant security discourses while recognizing and exploring the possibility for security to mean and do something different.

A brief analysis of the different constitutive security logics underlying various security communities around the world provides ample evidence of the problems of universalizing claims about the politics of security. As Rumelili (2008) has noted, an instructive comparison can be drawn between the EU and ASEAN, in particular in terms of how these organizations' conception of self-identity results in them relating themselves to otherness very differently. Propounding an inherently inclusive (i.e. democratic) identity and normative agenda, the EU is liable to locate otherness in an inferior position to itself, as something to transform and render acceptable/normal. Otherness is therefore something to be eradicated and to the extent to which it rejects transformation, it becomes destabilizing and potentially threatening. Such processes are, for example, clearly evident in the European Neighbourhood Policy (Browning and Pertti, 2008). In contrast, ASEAN operates with a largely exclusivist (i.e. civilizational, geographic, ethnic) identity where norms of sovereignty and non-interference dominate. This, Rumelili suggests, facilitates more equitable relationships with otherness since the goal in such relationships is not one of conversion to the cause. In terms of the politics of security, what becomes evident here is how concepts of security and subjectivity are intimately connected to conceptions of identity and the limits of political community in different contexts.

The second imperative for the future of the critical security studies project concerns the ethics of security. We advanced the claim that a shared concern with expanding the realm of dialogue underpins much of the critical security studies project, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. But to the extent that an ethics of security — a conception of the good or progress regarding security — orients around a concern with such a position, this commitment needs to be acknowledged and defended. A range of pressing questions suggest themselves here, including the bases for prioritizing open dialogue; the relationship between spheres of deliberation and material conditions of existence; the

possibilities for and limitations to the establishment of open dialogue; and the broader relationship between dialogue and outcomes. Elaborating on these commitments would also entail engaging with the argument that movements towards greater dialogue could potentially encourage the desire to exclude power, identity, emotion and other central features of global politics (see Price, 2008).

Where difficult questions emerge about this and other dimensions of an 'ethical' engagement with security — such as the role of violence in the Welsh School framework, for example (Peoples, 2011) — these need to be confronted. If there is a consistency across critical security studies scholarship in this sense, it is that ethical commitments are evident (in commitments to resistance, desecuritization or emancipation, for example) but are insufficiently developed to provide a genuine account of what constitutes ethical action regarding security. Indeed, immanent possibilities for the development of the critical security studies project arise from these (often implied) commitments that need drawing out and examining in the context of difficult dilemmas in world politics. This process of drawing out ethical commitments should be viewed as a reflexive movement towards recognizing the assumptions and potential implications of one's own theorizing, a position central to both broader definitions of Critical Theory (see Cox, 1981) and to the compelling critique of traditional security studies as insufficiently engaged with the ethics and effects of its own theorizing about world politics. And it needs also to be matched up with the preceding understanding of the politics of security. Is the expansion of deliberation and movement away from violence, for example, always progressive, and does it require the rejection of security as a political category or its reform?

The example of Australian debates around the arrival by boat of asylum-seekers in 2010 illustrates tensions and ambiguities at work regarding the ethics of security, particularly as understood in key critical approaches to the study of security. In that context, Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard's call for 'a frank, open, honest national conversation' about asylum and border security particularly encouraged the articulation of negative and exclusionary views of asylum-seekers, paradoxically rendering the (re)securitization of asylum in the Australian context more likely (see McDonald, 2011). Particularly striking here was the Prime Minister's suggestion that this national conversation should take place outside the limits imposed by political correctness that would otherwise discourage the articulation of right-wing or racist sentiments towards asylum-seekers. In this example, the apparent opening of dialogic space encouraged by the Prime Minister was intimately related to the movement towards exclusionary security logics and practices orienting around the imperatives of 'border security'.

The point of this example is not to illustrate the limits of open dialogue per se, but rather to illustrate two broader claims regarding the relationship between security and ethics in the critical security studies project that we make here. First, while normative preferences are evident, these are often insufficiently developed or robust to enable the ethical adjudication between different practices or outcomes. The normative preference for deliberation evident in the commitment to desecuritization, for example, is not sufficiently robust to enable us to engage with difficult questions concerning the forms of deliberation that should be encouraged or even the circumstances in which 'hate speech', for example, might be curtailed (on this, see Gelber, 2010). Second, and to return to the central argument of the article, the Australian example reminds us of the need to explore the implications of security conceptions and practices in particular contexts, rather than

assume that a particular security logic will inhere — or outcomes will follow — from the use of the term ‘security’ or a stated political commitment to ‘dialogue’.

The core challenge for the critical security studies project is ultimately moving beyond critique and agenda-setting and towards a contextual analysis of security dynamics and practices in global politics. There is no question that a focus on the politics of security and the ethics of security are crucial intellectual endeavours too readily elided or ignored in traditional approaches to the study of security. For this reason alone we need a ‘critical security studies project’. However, universalizing claims concerning the politics of security — found in the securitization framework and much post-structural engagement with security — must ultimately give way to nuanced analyses of the ways in which security is constructed and challenged in particular social, historical and political contexts. A range of theorists have — in different ways — sought to engage with precisely this question, illustrating the various ways in which security dynamics ‘play out’ in different settings in terms of constructing community (e.g. Bubandt, 2005), challenging identity binaries (e.g. Avant, 2007) or enabling space for different forms of political response (e.g. Doty, 1998/9). Yet these insights ultimately remain marginal to key ‘Schools’ and conceptual frameworks of security, and are too often forgotten in our search for the universal in a complex world.

Beyond the development of nuance in our understanding of the ‘politics of security’, the critical security studies project urgently needs to move beyond normative ‘leaps of faith’ concerning the ethics of security. This particularly applies to the Copenhagen and Welsh School preference for dialogue as a progressive means of escaping exclusive and illiberal security logics and practices. While genuinely open dialogue regarding the construction of security and threat has much to recommend it, crucial here is the need for advocates to reflect upon and lay bare the bases upon which these claims are made in philosophical terms, and to reflexively examine the implications of alternative security conceptions and practices in analytical terms rather than assume particular dynamics to be progressive. This too suggests the need to move towards a focus on the particular social, historical and political contexts in which security is constructed and practised in global politics.

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## Notes

1. This particularly applies to the argument that the study of security should be broadened beyond the traditional concern with the threat and use of military force between states, a position endorsed by a wide range of states and intergovernmental organizations and evident in almost all contemporary surveys of the security studies field.

2. For a broadly similar definition, see Burke and McDonald eds (2007) and Peoples and Vaughan-Williams (2010: 1–13).
3. Indeed, this view is particularly odd given that Ole Wæver (2002) has himself developed a conceptual history of security, which illustrates that security has not always meant the same things or (crucially) had the same significance for the organization of social and political worlds as it does today.
4. Columba Peoples (2011) notes that Richard Wyn Jones' work in the Welsh School tradition drew more explicitly on the Frankfurt School than Booth's work, while Chris Brown (2010) has pointed to the ways in which the primary association with a Marxist rather than Habermasian view of emancipation has limited the extent to which the Welsh School can conceptualize progress effectively.
5. An important precursor to this argument was made by Daniel Deudney (1990) in cautioning against including environmental issues on the security agenda. It should be noted that Lene Hansen (2010) has recently attempted to refine the concept of desecuritization by pointing to normative/political imperatives linked to different approaches to desecuritization, while Wæver himself (2008) has attempted to provide nuance to his earlier association of desecuritization by exploring the conditions or process of successful desecuritization.
6. On various definitions of immanent critique in critical international relations theory as it applies to security, see Wyn Jones (1999: 24–25), Fierke (2007: 167–185), Booth (2007: 43–45, 250) and Peoples and Vaughan-Williams (2010: 21, 24).

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