

The insecurity of critique

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J Peter Burgess

Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris, France & University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

'Security' is a uniquely rich object for critique. It rests on a long and noble conceptual history in Western thought. And yet the provision of security most often consists of a shoring up, through the discourses of nationality, ethnicity, political economy or even science, of what is assumed to be solid at its core but weakened through the contingencies of politics, society, ideology, and so on. The article argues that the critical force of critique stems from the fact that critique itself is a practice inescapably bound up with insecurity, and thus that the critique of security exercised since around 1997 as 'critical security studies' is self-replicating. By introducing concepts from Husserlian phenomenology, it attempts to show that insecurity is not a simple feature of an otherwise secure state of life, ripe for critical analysis that promises to expose its false premises. Rather, insecurity lies at the very foundation of critical thought. Building upon the bare and basic question, 'What does it mean to mean?', a phenomenology of security asks the straightforward question: 'What is the security-ness of security?' It permits one to ask what remains of security when all else is stripped away, what essential minimum must be retained in order for security to be security.

Keywords

Critical security studies, critique, insecurity, phenomenology, vulnerability

Man is the indestructible that can be destroyed.
(Blanchot, 1993: 130)

Introduction: A farewell to fragility

In the epilogue to his elegant and erudite treatise *Fragilité*, Jean-Louis Chrétien retraces a little-noticed historical split in the evolution of the Greek term *astheneia* ('want of strength, weakness, infirmity') in the transition from Hellenic to Roman cultures. As it happens, he points out, Latin translators render the Greek term in one of two ways: either as *infirmitas* – 'weakness' understood as an absence of force or endurance – or as *fragilitas*, corresponding to what we today would call 'fragility'. 'Infirmitas', Chrétien points out, 'is negative and designates a lack, an absence, a privation, which, all things given, is relative and indeterminate, since a being that lacks all force also

Corresponding author:

J Peter Burgess, Ecole Normale Supérieure, 48 Boulevard Jourdan, Paris, 75014, France.
Email: james.peter.burgess@ens.fr

lacks the ability to preserve its own existence'. 'Fragilitas', by contrast, 'designates the presence of a fault-line, a rupture, be it structural or circumstantial, that carries with it a horizon of events, the condition of possibility of what it points to' (Chrétien, 2017: 252).

'Infirmitas' thus refers to the absence of ability to resist whatever might endanger a living being, in particular a human being. It refers to the exposure of human beings to concrete, finite, tangible danger. This fragility is anthropological to the extent that it makes reference – either explicitly or implicitly – to the awareness of a danger or threat capable of ending human life. This means that in addition to understanding danger as finite and punctual, it understands human life as material and finite, and human experience of danger as equally finite, situational, contingent. *Infirmitas*, in other words, is an experience of danger as something palpable, a distinct experience, with a beginning and an end, one that carries finite consequences – in the extreme, the end of life. This is the concept of security that enables any range of discourses of security and insecurity in the social and human sciences. And it gives credence to the evolution of terms and concepts that support the lexicon of insecurity in the academic fields of not just international relations, politics, government, security studies or critical security studies, but also anthropology, sociology, psychology, to name but a few.

'Fragilitas', by contrast, designates, in Chrétien's vision, an infinite insecurity, a state of being whose essence consists in the enduring presence of its own unrealized demise. It is an understanding of life whose only stability is to be found in its instability. What is whole and complete, essential and sovereign in human beings is that they are unassailable in their vulnerability, invincible in their precariousness, secure in their persistent insecurity. This is the paradox of human experience. It involves not one but two classes of danger. The first is formed by the finite, real hazards to tangible human life and well-being, to property and possessions, through identified threats and observed dangers. The other corresponds to the subtle awareness that not only the bricks and mortar that hold our material lives together but also the scaffolding of consciousness, the structure of thought that assures the meaningfulness of language, the intelligibility of the self, and even the coherence of being, are fundamentally precarious.

The purpose of opening this article with Chrétien's reflection on two forms of fragility in the Western tradition is to clear a space for rethinking what insecurity actually is, to problematize the received understanding of 'insecurity' as the symmetrical opposite of 'security' and to elevate 'insecurity' from its status as the simple quality of a thing whose being is not in question to a question of being itself. Post-structuralist security theory has gone far in identifying and describing the subjectivity of security and insecurity. Walker (1997), for example, has produced a sustained critique of the 'subject of security' as the particular subject position from which security is apprehended, judged and enacted. An analogous analysis might conceivably be made of the 'subject of insecurity', in which the subjectivity of the subject would be taken as a standpoint for apprehending, judging or enacting insecurity. In both cases, the question of the security or insecurity of the subject is not asked or cannot be asked. This is, on the one hand, because of the apparent self-evidence of the subject, the presupposition of the Cartesian subject-object structure on which scientific discourse is today overwhelmingly dependent (with some notable exceptions). And, on the other hand, because the 'critique of the subject', a by-product of the 'discursive turn', has never amounted to an actual critique of the subject itself, but rather amounts to a critique of the position of the subject on an otherwise Cartesian playing field. Security may be subjective, but the subject is secure. Insecurity is a finite property of the subject, added or subtracted as a result of finite, material circumstances. Insecurity in this form is ultimately finite.

The challenge here is more risky, and more insecure. It lies in paradoxically arguing not only that the experience of being human is rife with actual, empirical insecurity – we are, after all, nothing if not frail flesh and bones – but that being itself is insecure ground. We argue that insecurity is ultimately not a contingent, remediable problem – as virtually all technologies of security presume

– but rather that it is infinitely demanding: it cannot be satiated or made secure by any finite means or measures. It is not determinate beings but rather being itself that is insecure.

Critique – which we understand as one form or another of the practice of putting foundations into question – will be the central actor in this drama. In fact, critique not only illustrates but also enacts the indispensable insecurity of foundations in general. If we understand critique in the way that Foucault does, as the practice of reconstruction of what brings truth to be truth, particularly in relation to power, then critique is always necessarily, albeit in any of a wide range of different expressions, a re-enactment of the discovery of insecurity at the core of all things. This article will try to explain why this is so.

In a first step, we will clarify what we understand by critique by returning to Foucault's 1978 lecture 'What Is Critique?', building a platform for our argument based on a basic agreement with his notion of critique as the suspension or bracketing of judgement, where 'judgement' does not refer to an evaluation or an assessment but rather to 'discernment'. Second, in order to link Foucault's notion of critique to our hypothesis that critique is fundamentally a moment of insecurity, we briefly outline the emergence of critical security studies as a special case of critique, one whose meaningfulness requires the direct bracketing of its own relation to security and insecurity. The aim will be to show, third, that critical security studies is a privileged case of how critique occults or even represses its own insecurity. The discussion will also attempt to show just how the fragility of critical security studies can be spotted at the very moment of its work in critiquing security. Fourth, on the basis of the clarification of the insecurity at the heart of critique, we will attempt to revise and redefine the conventional concept of security as one that is not attached to the security of things by developing the basic terms of a phenomenology of security. Applying the phenomenological method to the concept of security, we will attempt to make plain the tacit requirements for consciousness of security and insecurity by reducing security to its very core essence. This will permit us, in conclusion, to formulate a concept of 'thing-less insecurity' in order to draw closer to a description of the fundamental insecurity at the heart of critique.

Foucault's practice of critique

Foucault's 'What Is Critique? Critique and *Aufklärung*' is the transcription of a lecture delivered to the French Philosophical Society in 1978, first published only in 1990, then in English translation in 1997 (Foucault, 1997). In the address, Foucault adopts an explicit and somewhat ironic position toward Kant's well-travelled 1784 essay 'What Is Enlightenment?' by responding to the question 'what is critique?' Among the many 'routes' he claims one could take to discuss the 'critical attitude', Foucault suggests the following 'variation': It begins with a relationship of tutelage, between the Christian church and its subjects. Foucault identifies in this process the appearance of what he regards as a new and 'singular' idea, foreign to antiquity, namely, 'that each individual, whatever his age or status, from the beginning to the end of his life and in his every action, had to be governed and had to let himself be governed, that is to say directed toward his salvation, by someone to whom he was bound by a total, meticulous, detailed relationship of obedience' (Foucault, 1997: 43). Salvation, according to Foucault, was understood as a practice of the managing of individual souls through various mechanisms of obedience and control. The path to redemption was not self-evident. The individual could not see the path of deliverance, did not understand it and was incapable of following it; rather, he or she was dependent on supervision, on a relation of obedience to a superior, all in a three-part relationship to truth: truth as 'dogma', truth implying 'a special and individualising knowledge of individuals', and truth in the sense 'that this direction is deployed like a reflective technique, comprising general rules, particular knowledge, precepts, methods of examinations, confessions, interviews, etc.' (Foucault, 1997: 43).

This is what for seasoned readers of Foucault is the clearly recognizable entwinement of power and truth in the institutional logic of Christian governmentality. In typical genealogical fashion, Foucault identifies the concrete historical moment of its emergence in the Christian High Middle Ages, its novelty relative to the regimes of antiquity, then a three-part system of governmentality: a diffuse, unquestioned and universal source of authority external to the individual; the condensation of that authority in the experience of the individual; and a system of self-regulation for its concrete operationalization. It is in the tension between the fields of truth and power that we recognize the historical ‘dimension and breadth’ of the governmentalization ‘of both society and the individual’. This is what Foucault identifies as what he calls ‘the critical attitude’ (Foucault, 1997: 44–45).

The critical attitude towards the specific configuration of authority and truth that Foucault identifies and describes in the moment of pastoral Christianity is thus not one of simple resistance or militancy. It is neither a rebuttal nor a denial, neither a correction nor a strategy of ‘speaking truth to power’. It is less interested in what might be true or false than in the construction of truth and its effects. Moreover, even though Foucault explicitly claims affinity with a certain interpretation of the Kantian critical approach inspired and traceable to the famous 1784 essay and the Enlightenment moment in general, he has little interest in the ‘Critical Theory’ approach, itself inspired by the Frankfurt School and its inheritors.

Indeed, as we know, Foucault undertakes his own project of critical security studies in his highly influential lectures at the Collège de France, in particular the lectures from 1975 to 1979: ‘*Society Must Be Defended*’ (1975–1976), *Security, Territory, Population* (1977–1978) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978–1979) form the basis for a remarkable ‘critique of security’ and a full-fledged branch of critical security studies oriented around biopolitics (Foucault, 2003, 2007, 2010). Nonetheless, highly influential approaches to governmentality that were initiated by Foucault but subsequently have taken on a life of their own differ in kind from those that remain attached to the critique of a certain theoretical tradition of realism and committed to the project of exposing the premises and logics of that theory within a more or less mainstream discourse of international relations.

Security as an object of critique

‘Security’ is a uniquely rich object for critique. This is because it maps faithfully onto the long and noble conceptual history of Western thought, giving nourishment to its finest moments and participating vigorously in most of its well-studied calamities. One notion or another of ‘security’ has played a role as a pillar of the historical struggles in the name of ‘civilization’: from its presence within a kind of proto-humanist ethics (Pyrrho and Epicurus), its latinization and popularization by Roman rhetoricians (Cicero, Quintilian, Tacitus), its evolution through the spiritual alibis of the moralism of the High Middle Ages (Aquinas), its adoption as a component of social contract theory in the 17th century (Hobbes, Locke, Bentham), its mobilization as a core component of classical liberalism in the 18th century (Smith, Bentham), then adoption as a component of doctrines of civil justice in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Mill, Say) and the rise of the administrative state and the bureaucratization and technologization of security in the 20th century, up until its digitization and transformation into information surveillance in our time (Zedner, 2009: 26–48).

The morally and politically uncertain evolution of the concept and practice of security in the 20th century is equally inseparable from the evolution of a new episteme through the ambitions of the fledgling social sciences and the creation of the field of international relations, first institutionalized in the years following the Treaty of Versailles and coinciding with the formation of the Wilson Doctrine in 1918. ‘Security studies’ as a unique subdiscipline within international studies

was well served by the vicissitudes of the Cold War, unfolding primarily within the limitations of military discourse related to the scientific study of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence. For better or worse, as the nuclear agenda matured, the field of concepts of security flattened and expanded to include non-military components of national security, starting with economic and environmental resources, then expanding rapidly, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to encompass a plethora of new security threats and new security objects (Buzan and Hansen, 2009: 1–6, 66–100). The history of Cold War security is a rich and well-documented topic, particularly in the security studies and international relations handbook cottage industry (Burgess, 2012; Carlsnaes et al., 2013; Collins, 2007a; Dunn Caveltly and Mauer, 2010; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2014; Shogimen and Nederman, 2009; Williams and Dawson, 2008). The crucial remark for our purposes is that the end of the Cold War played a distinct role in triggering a change in the way security was conceptualized, studied and, not least, understood and experienced.

What is it about security that leaves it so ripe for critique? First of all, a half-century of security research has not calmed the waters of discord over its many definitions. Collins proposes a tabular overview of ‘definitions of security’, stretching from Wolfers’ (1962) classic Cold War *Discord and Collaboration* to Kolodziej’s (2005) *Security and International Relations*, comparable to Buzan’s celebrated 1983 list (see Buzan, 1991: 35–36). The definitions proposed generally traverse the Cold War focus on the security of the nation-state, variously parsed into questions of internal versus external vulnerabilities, subjective and objective dangers, values under threat, freedoms under duress, aggression held at bay, etc. (Collins, 2007b: 3).

Yet, despite wide variation in historical reach, ontological scope, epistemological structuring and political valence, more or less all of the conceptions proposed share a common prophylactic ethos: security as negation, refutation, reversion, antithesis (Burgess, 2015: 94–99). The world is divided into two spheres. One constitutes the safe, the good, the pure, the true, the just and the beautiful. The other is all that opposes itself to this by either refuting, disdaining or threatening it: the dangerous, the evil, the impure, the false, the unjust, the despicable. The *Oxford English Dictionary* condenses this sentiment as ‘the state of being free from danger or threat’.¹ The provision of security thus consists, on the one hand, in shoring up, through the discourses of nationality, ethnicity, political economy or even science, the somewhat shaky ontological foundations of the positive/negative divide, then enacting a more or less hard-handed policy to operationalize the security measure in populations. The negativity of security is in most security scholarship the ground level. With rare exceptions, security is uncritically construed as ‘negative’, as something missing, as absence, as exclusion (Gjørvi, 2012; Roe, 2008). Enter critique.

The search engines tell us that ‘critical security studies’ finds its origin in the pages of Krause and Williams’s (1997a) *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. For the editors of the ground-breaking collection, the enterprise of security studies becomes a ‘critical’ one from the moment the awareness of contingency becomes part of the analysis of the thing itself, in this case security: ‘Contemporary debates over the nature of security often float on a sea of unvoiced assumptions and deeper theoretical issues concerning to what and to whom the term security refers. It is even difficult to gain a perspective on how the central claims and assumptions of the various strands of debate are related to controversies over the theory and practice of security’ (Krause and Williams, 1997b: 34). The ‘critical’ response to blindness or indifference to the ‘assumptions’ and ‘deeper critical issues’ of studying security is to deconstruct, one by one, these assumptions and issues, beginning with the most common and influential ones. It is difficult to overstate the importance of critical security studies in clarifying this work in relation to the legacy of neorealism (Krause and Williams, 1997a), the ‘subject’ of security (Walker, 1997), identity and community (Booth, 1997), and the subaltern (Ayoob, 1997), among many others. And yet, though these authors – particularly Krause and Williams – hint at the criticality of the critical (‘no longer objective in the

sense of a fixed reality that the analyst can only mirror, reality as the realm of subjective practices and structures becomes self-reflexive' – Krause and Williams, 1997b: 50), this mode of critique, like security itself, is reactive and corrective. The assumptions of security studies are regarded as obstacles to appropriate understanding. The task of a critical approach is to clear them away, refine analytic approaches, adjust interpretive models and enhance practice in order to make space for a more accurate, useful or authentic understanding.

Critical alternatives

And yet critical security studies, in virtually all its dominant incarnations, has never generated a critique of security as such, of the 'security-ness' of security, of what makes consciousness of security distinct from consciousness of any other phenomenon. Security itself does not in the history of security studies appear in any strong sense as the object of critique. It is true that critical security studies has generated a valuable but restricted critique of a certain number of concepts of state, of society, of individuality, of the environment, of the political, of humanity, all derivatives of a restricted notion of security-being (Burgess, 2011: 41–45) and of the position from which security is declared or enacted. Indeed, even before the first-generation conceptualization of Krause and Williams recognized the immediate political valence of the critical as part of an understanding of 'critical security studies', a small group of bold theorists – R. B. J. Walker (1993), William Connolly (1991), David Campbell (1998), Michael Shapiro (1992), James Der Derian (1993) and, not least, Michael Dillon (1996) – took steps to open up and problematize the ontological foundations of security, whose conceptualization was already spawning considerable research. In this corpus, security is accessory: the critique that is exercised, even in Dillon's extended reflection on security in a Heideggerian optic, remains critically focused on what is thought, meant, pronounced or undertaken in the name of security. These accounts essentially analyse security as the name of a distraction, a diversion, deflection or detour, responding to this implicit or explicit political disingenuousness with a more authentic account of what is actually being thought, meant, pronounced or undertaken. Nonetheless, though a certain critical engagement with security has from the outset been seized upon as implicitly political, any kind of critique of the being of security has been absent.

This is in part due to what might be called a drive for closure. The importance of the political project of critical security studies inevitably consists in stabilizing, anchoring or fixing the understanding of the politic act or agency that is operating, in good or bad faith, through the discourse of security. To put it another way, despite important differences between them, practices of critique in the form of critical security studies tend to share one common trait: They take as their aim, and the criterion for their success, a state of being or of knowledge that is no longer the object of critique, that no longer invites critique. And although they do not in all cases explicitly envisage or mobilize for a general transformation of security analysis, they take for granted or have as a fundamental premise that such a transformation is the baseline. Such practices build upon the noble assumption that critique is a practice of rectification, that it obeys a linear logic of iterating toward a more perfect state, a more authentic concept, a more exact and transparent correspondence between theory and empirical reality. To the extent that critical security studies builds upon this ethos of truth and clarity, it is inseparable from certain kind of realism. Moreover, the disentanglement of truth and power, described by Foucault as a trope on classical Enlightenment, remains the absolute horizon of critical thought. Power is the foremost occluding moment in critical analysis.

Beyond the original renegades of the 1990s, critical alternatives to the ontological circularity of critical security studies are sparse, assuming, of course, that critique is the answer to the question that has not yet been fully posed here. Actor Network Theory–inspired authors like Bennett (2010)

and Salter (2015) or non-linear critical practitioners like Enloe (2004) and Huysmans (2011), queer theorists like Berlant (2011), affect theorists like Frost (2010) or Massumi (2002, 2010), or threat ontologists like Prozorov (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) all hint in their own ways that getting to the bottom of security will never involve getting to the bottom of something.

This is not caused by some kind of hubris trap. Few critical theorists would be so bold or pretentious as to claim that, through their critical work, they are able to put things right, to set the tables straight, to enlighten, to emancipate, to equalize, etc. But there is little doubt that the ethos of the critical project, be it applied to security studies or to any other object of reflection or research, consists of a determined quest to move us from where we are to a place more true, more authentic, more just or more real. The cardinal aim of critique is to re-establish what is lost in the fog. Whether or not this aim is an explicit strategy of the critical activity, or functions as one of its assumptions, critical security studies never lets go of the promise that something more real is to be obtained, that something more whole, unified, integral, inherent, indispensable, self-present – in other words, secure – is the finality of the enterprise. Critical security studies seems to be incapable of thinking the thought, let alone enacting the practice, that the finality of critique is instability, irregularity, incoherence, inconstancy, precarity, vulnerability – in short, insecurity. What is the source of this recalcitrance, and what would it mean to overcome it?

It was Michael Dillon who, in his iconoclastic *Politics of Security* (Dillon, 1996), went the farthest in showing the way to a critique of the being of security that would not end with security, that security of things depends fundamentally on the security of the security of things. Drawing on Nietzsche's inversion of the notion of fear as the foundational term of existence to the foundational drive for knowledge, Dillon wonders why the blossoming literature of security in the late 1980s and early 1990s never asks the question of security 'as such': 'It evokes security as a ground and seeks largely to specify its properties; how security might be attained and which are the most basic, effective, or cost effective means of doing so' (Dillon, 1996: 18) while avoiding the very question of security. It is because, he answers, the very question is grounded upon 'secure subjectivities'. The metaphysical question of security is the 'masque of mastery: securing some foundation upon which to establish the sum total of what is knowable with certainty' (Dillon, 1996: 14–15). The question that remains is the one we are trying to address in this article: 'If the truth of security compels us to secure security, why, how and where is that grounding compulsion grounded?' (Dillon, 1996: 14–15).

It becomes quickly clear that critical security studies is not simply one case of critique among others. Unlike other forms of critique, critical security studies has a double valence. While it bears the basic characteristics of critique, as we have set them out, it raises the stakes of criticality through its twofold relation to itself, already observed from within a different discourse by Chrétien in our opening.

Following Foucault and others, we have seen that critique plays out in the notion of genealogy in the tension between truth and power (Foucault, 1997: 64–65), and that such a genealogical approach to security studies contributes to a better understanding of the premises and presuppositions of a variety of sciences of security, and to a more faithful representation of the way these sciences play out in reality. In other words, in the narrow sense of the term, critical security studies embodies the ethos and aims of the historical critical project, encapsulated by Foucault's 1978 summary. In its engagement with the emergence of security knowledge, critical security studies enacts a broad form of critique.

Like all forms of critique, the critique at the bottom of critical security studies is an emancipatory one, a transformational one. But what is the ultimate guide to this transformation, especially when Foucault (1997: 65) admonishes us that 'essential fragility' is the basis of that transformation. How, then, can power be the foundation? We are powerless to answer this question. For it is

the question before the question, the question one must answer in order to answer any question. 'Support for this network of intelligible relationships is in the logic inherent to the context of interactions with its always variable margins of non-certainty' (Foucault, 1997: 64). What is behind the empowerment to understand power and the critique of power?

From a certain point of view, one can easily get the impression that this empowerment emerges through the positive accumulation of legitimating texts, the development of institutions, the formation of new communities, etc. From a genealogical point of view, on the other hand, another story can be told, one about the emergence of a concept in a field of contentious forces, channelled by unequal impulses, wandering across uneven terrain toward uncertain purposes, and leading to more or less unforeseeable consequences. And, like the birth of any concept of merit or consequence, the coming into being of 'critical security studies' was a fragile one, precarious, unexpected and unprepared. By the same token, the environment of security studies in which it emerged, having been constituted in the absence of critique, was necessarily destabilized by its appearance. The arrival of critical security studies was disruptive, fractious, errant, disorderly. Its utility was yet to be discovered by its practitioners. And, as with any meaningful concept of merit, its emergence comes as a surprise, a shock, even a revelation. The emergence of 'critical security studies' was a moment of contingency, a moment where the line between the being and the non-being of a concept and a practice was paper thin. And yet what was the alternative? To be sure, a notion whose meaning were necessary, inevitable, inexorable would not be a notion at all. The meaningfulness of any notion only appears against the spectre of its meaninglessness. The fragility of the notion and practice of critical security studies is very condition of its meaningfulness and usefulness. It is a concept's contingency, its insecurity, that forms the precondition of its being.

These claims are by no means meant to impugn the virtues of critical security studies or indict its practice. On the contrary. If anything, they mean to celebrate the essential function of insecurity itself, the probity of fragility, the indispensable foundational function of uncertainty. Critical security studies is only one very good illustration among countless many of the misunderstood and perhaps even maligned ethos of critique: its inherent fragility. Critique cannot be imagined as immovable reference simply arriving on the scene, unambiguously knowing and unproblematically being. Neither complete knowledge nor full being is an initial premise for the work of critique. The criticality of critique stems from its instability. If it were otherwise, there would be no critical function or position, only dogma. In the extreme, critique carries out its labour and reaches its goals only by throwing caution to the winds and by rendering itself fully vigorous through a kind of self-disgorgement, a Deleuzian body without organs, 'permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 40). In short, the authentic mode of critique, in critical security studies and elsewhere, is a fundamental enactment of insecurity. In the moment when critique does its critical work, and such moments can only be fleeting, it does so by leveraging its own precariousness, like leaping from a ledge of stone that is simultaneously crumbling beneath us, both there and not there, its fleeting stability to be found only in the movement of scrambling away from it.

How, then, do we approach critique? By what signs can we spot it? How do we align ourselves to practise it, and on what grounds can we justify it? If the paradox of critique is worthy of the name, it cannot be grasped by naively renouncing stasis and certainty, nor by abandoning the critical analysis. And yet the case of the critique of security through various forms of critical security studies enacts this paradox. This is because security, like our crumbling stone ledge, has the distinction of containing the kernel of its own non-being. Like a phantom limb or a distant memory, only present in the experience of its absence, security can only be security by virtue of its insecurity. Its insecurity is its essence, its core. How might we describe such a core, something that by our

own admission isn't there? One way of drawing the contours of such an absent thing is through the tools of phenomenology.

Toward a phenomenology of security

Phenomenological method, first developed by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), continues to leave a significant mark on contemporary thought, though its greatest influence was on Continental philosophers of the mid-20th Century (Heidegger, Gadamer, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Derrida, etc.). Today, 'phenomenological analysis' remains vital as an alternative psychological analysis (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; Van Manen, 2014), even if this might seem somewhat unexpected, since Husserl's original project in his early *Prolegomena to Logical Investigations* (1900) was a critique of psychologism, the tendency to interpret phenomena purely in terms of the individual subjective effects they had on individual observers.

Husserl's phenomenological method is in its simplest form a technique for description, nearly an empirical science. What sets it apart from positive science is that the object to be described is consciousness itself. It is a way of observing that aims to account for objects of consciousness, or, more exactly, for the necessary conditions under which something can present itself as the object of consciousness, what Husserl calls a 'unit' of consciousness or 'intentional act'. In concrete terms, if we take a simple object, say a book, and seek to know what it is that makes the book, or any book, appear to us as a book, to be a meaningful object of consciousness, we would, according to Husserl, reconstruct its essence, its book-ness, by stripping away all of the properties that make this particular book particular and stopping at limit-properties needed to consciously establish the book as a book, its book-ness. The premise of the phenomenological method is that these properties are different from the properties that set a particular book apart. Indeed, they do not belong to the book at all, but are rather proper to the structure of consciousness or intentionality that is required to apprehend the book. 'Units' or 'intentional acts' are reduced to the level where the external reality of the object, whether it 'exists' or not, is no longer in play, only the structure or 'logic' of its experience, only its status as a phenomenon – that is, as an object of consciousness or as an act of 'intention' (Husserl, 2001: 119, 194, 210).

This methodological strategy is applied in order to arrive at the 'thing itself', the object as it would appear independently of any empirical contingencies, timeless and placeless. This notion, inspired by Kant, is reached through what Husserl calls 'eidetic reduction', a concept and procedure that evolves through Husserl's career. In its most mature form it is 'the ... reduction which leads from the psychological phenomenon to the pure "essence", or, understood as object of thought, from factual ("empirical") to "essential" universality' (Husserl, 2012: 4). The central tool in the procedure is the phenomenological method known as *epoche* or 'bracketing'. A phenomenological description of an object describes it in all its detail from the first-person perspective. The aim of the method is to isolate the minimum conditions for cognition, for making a given object of perception or of consciousness. How, then, can the phenomenological reduction lead to an understanding of the essence of security?

The intentionality of security

Such a reduction would imply conceptually bracketing all of the concept's non-essential properties in order to arrive at its irreducible core. It means putting out of play any property without which security cannot be an intelligible object of consciousness, without which security cannot be thought. In other words, it consists of asking what properties or qualities of security can be dispensed with or ejected without compromising the minimum conditions for security to coherently

appear to us. This includes all empirical qualities that might evolve in space and time. (The thought that phenomenological reduction is in a sense an assault on the security of the concept of security is an irony to which we will return.)

There is also an important irony in the fact that some of the scientific security discourse has already laid the groundwork for the phenomenological reduction. A common and significant split in the use of the concept of security of particular interest for phenomenological analysis appears in the differentiation between the subject and the object of security in large swaths of the theoretical literature. According to this differentiation, the 'subject' of security – the position from which threat is ascertained, declared or experienced – is distinct from the 'object' of security – the position that is exposed to danger or threat is conceptualized as distinct. This distinction, the cleft between the experience of threat and the threat proper, is the space that a phenomenology of security would seek to close or 'reduce' to its minimum form.

As an illustration, already in his classic 1952 Cold War article "National Security" as an Ambiguous Symbol', Wolfers sets out the distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' security:

while wealth measures the amount of a nation's material possessions, and power its ability to control the actions of others, security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked (Wolfers, 1952: 484–485).

In this passage, 'security' is conceptualized relative to 'values', the latter being understood as strategic resources indicative of military target 'value'. In the strategic jargon of attack and defence, 'objective security' refers to the resources a country has and would rather protect for present and future strategic purposes, while 'subjective security' refers to the fear that they might be compromised: two different strategic positions, building on one logic of strategic military resource management. This distinction, however, outlives the Cold War logic of strategic thinking along a binary East–West axis. Following the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the subject/object divide remains meaningful and continues to be thematized in the 'new security' literature (Baldwin, 1997; Buzan et al., 1998; Glaser, 1997; Huysmans, 1998; Sperling and Kirchner, 1998), particularly in relation to the subsidiary concept of 'human security' (Alkire, 2003; Burgess and Owen, 2004; Tadjbakhsh, 2005), which is buoyed by the 1994 United Nations Human Development Report on 'human security', which defines the concept as 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want' – in other words, subjective and objective security (United Nations Development Programme, 1994: 24).

A phenomenological reduction, however, asks precisely what remains when this distinction disappears, when the gap between subject and object of security, the distinction between the threatened and the threat, is reduced to nothing. The becoming-objective of subjective experience (Husserl, 2002: 16–20) and the becoming-subjective of objective experience test the limits of a Western metaphysics of knowledge that is profoundly rooted in modern thought since its origins with Descartes. It should be added that the subject–object opposition is also among the pillars of Husserl's systematic thought, and therefore in some sense represents the limits of our analysis.

The Western concept of security – and insecurity – is founded on the distinction between subject and object. Security and insecurity are experiences of danger, of threat to what one has, what one is, supported by judgements of value of what one has or is. One individual's insecurity relative to a certain kind of danger may not correspond to another individual's perception of the same danger. There are strong hints that a phenomenological analysis would not hold up, say, when faced with an oriental concept of security, leading to the suggestion that the announced 'globalization of security' consists essentially in a 'Westernization of security'.

In the second of his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl (1977: 46–49) clarifies what he regards as the ‘particularity of intentional analysis’. Even though the phenomenological method is reductive, seeking to clear away and simplify, its aim is essentially transcendental in a very Kantian sense. It asks: what are the characteristics of the transcendental subject – the subject presupposed by science but that precedes and ‘transcends’ any particular object of science – or, in our case, what is the transcendental subject of security studies, the science of security? What are the universal presuppositions of security studies without which it would lose its intelligibility? In §12, ‘The Idea of a Transcendental Foundation of Knowledge’, Husserl departs from Descartes’ own discovery of the *cogito*, the autonomy of the subject vis-a-vis its object. Yet, instead of understanding subjectivity and the objective world it relates to as a single sphere of being, Husserl claims that the transcendental subject precedes all objective knowledge. The phenomenological analysis, he believes, thus reveals a new ‘sphere of being’ as the sphere of transcendental experience – in our case, the transcendental experience of security and insecurity.

In order to clarify the phenomenological (or ‘transcendental’) structure of security, we return to the well-travelled discursive structure of security ‘subject’, ‘object’ and ‘threat’ (securitization theory would, of course, add ‘audience’). How does this structure respond to a phenomenological reduction? What characterizes transcendental knowledge of security and insecurity? Few would disagree that the three nodes of the structure are inseparable, that the meaningfulness of each depends on at least one of the others. The phenomenological reduction asks after the minimum conditions of this dependence.

Threat-less insecurity

The baseline structure of security analysis starts with an object of security, an object-of-threat, affirmed by a subject. It is, of course, trivial to reaffirm that such an object is insecure, but our special aim is to actually track the insecurity of the object. The analysis of an object-under threat begins with the identification of two objects: the object that is threatened and the threat. At one level, these are linked together through a simple logic of predication: one property of the object is to be threatened by the threat. The phenomenological reduction goes one step further by asking what the consciousness of threat actually is, and whether and to what degree and under what circumstances the threat is actually a condition of consciousness of the threat.

If we claim, for example, ‘the battalion is threatened by the proximity of the insurgents’, the authenticity or validity of the battalion is taken for granted. In addition to being a battalion, however, it also has the property of being under threat by insurgents. The phenomenological analysis will ask what the preconditions of the battalion’s insecurity essentially are. The answer is a general or universal consciousness of threat under which this specific threat – the insurgents – may be assimilated. This is the structure of thought or consciousness that permits that assertion of the battalion being under threat. By multiplying examples, we quickly discover that the experience of insecurity does not depend on any particular type of threatening object. The object is interchangeable, and therefore essentially dispensable. The condition for thinking the thought of threat, of the insecurity caused by the threat, lies in the consciousness of the external object as a security threat. The transcendental experience of insecurity lies in the structure of the transcendental subject, the general or universal position from which the object is identified as a threat.

This is what Husserl calls the ‘intentionality’ of the subject of insecurity. An external object is threatened only to the degree it can be ‘intended’ as supporting the property of insecurity. Like a biological virus that itself has no significance but nonetheless plays the role of delivery agent of disease, the designation by consciousness of exposure to the object of danger – let’s call it insecurity – precedes the danger itself, a necessary, yet ground-less precondition of security.

Object-less insecurity

A similar structure of consciousness operates to link the subject of security to the object-under-threat. This relation, however, is somewhat more complex in that it depends in turn on the relationship between the subject and the threat to the object. In general terms, the relation of the conscious subject to any given object also obeys a logic of intentionality. This means that any experience of the world by a conscious subject approaches the world, opens itself to the world in the attitude of consciousness of it. In formulaic terms: consciousness is consciousness of something. The object of consciousness is already 'intended' by the structure of consciousness. Indeed, in order to become an object of consciousness, this intention must be operative. There is no consciousness without this intention, without this pre-experiential experience of the reaching out into the world, of expecting or anticipating the object. It is this structure of anticipation, of already being in the world, seeking the world before the object presents itself, that interests us particularly in relation to security.

If the object of security – that is, the object that is under threat – is an object of consciousness, it is so because it is already intended, already anticipated through the intentionality of its relation to the subject, already pre-consciously conscious as the object-of-threat. As a consequence, the subject of security – or, in Husserl's terminology, the 'transcendental subject' of security – cannot identify and establish a relation with an object of consciousness if the intentional structure of grasping the object is not threatened, exposed to some danger. To put it simply, if there is no threat then security consciousness is not at all possible. In other words, the consciousness of security requires the structure of insecurity, that the object-under-threat be already structured through a transcendental consciousness of threat. The transcendental subject of security is already, at any moment of its being, burdened by insecurity.

The subject of insecurity

Summarizing, insecurity is a constituent part of the transcendental subject of security in two ways. First, it is present through the intentional structure of threat, which reflects the presence of threat in the possibility of consciousness of threat. Even before the insurgents in the example above show up, the insecurity of the battalion is sustained through their presence as imaginary. The objective, physical reality of the threat is not required. Second, insecurity is present in the transcendental structure of the relation to any threatened object, which contains the conceptual trace of the inherent insecurity of the object. Together, but in two different ways, the threat-relation and the object-relation of the intentional subject affirm the inherent insecurity of the transcendental subject of security.

Thus, if we are to ask after the most indispensable foundation critique, the question would sound something like: What is it impossible to think security without? What is the phenomenological zero-point of security? What is the form of consciousness that permits security to be thought at all, let alone understood or acted upon?

Conclusion

The paradox of insecurity, like all aporias, cannot be totalized, closed, tied up with ribbon. In a zen kind of way, this is, of course, a solace. What would a world look like in which security were a thing that could be given or taken, crisply and completely, where succour were available over the counter? The only way for the subject of critique to approach and touch its object is by surrendering to it by abandoning the exercise of judging the true and pursuing only the grounds upon which the true is ascertained as true. Critique is exactly the moment of groundlessness. Where judgement of truth remains (i.e. that is true and this is false), then the task of critique is incomplete. Critique

is fulfilled at the moment of the disappearance of what we would call 'true', at the moment when only the conditions of truth remain, as a kind of residue or ashes of truth. The trick lies in the aporia that critique needs the true in order to do its work. Epistemologically speaking, of course, critique wants to get things right. But more importantly, morally speaking, critique needs to do its work in the light of an enterprise – namely, unmasking the true – that has meaning. The closer critique comes to its aim, the more its grounds become unstable, until the point where, asymptotically, the goal is reached and there remains no foundation at all. Of course, no critique arrives at this melodramatically catastrophic state. The point is that critique, as a matter of tactics, can only do its work by trying to arrive there, by seeking the means to surrender to its insecurity. In this sense, critique is the closest embodiment or enactment we have of this foundational insecurity, and of the ethics that springs from it.

Unfortunately, the approach of seeking security by debunking false or inappropriate security measures will not bring us closer to understanding the foundational insecurity of our world. Foundational insecurity is not 'bad security', a condition to be corrected, to be 'judged' or perhaps 'truth-ed' (in Foucault's way of conceptualizing critique), through critical security approaches of one sort or another, as generally all theories of security presuppose. Insecurity can only be approached as through the eyes of cosmic travellers trying to get a glimpse of a black hole, whereby the knowledge they seek presents itself at the moment of its disappearance.

The method of *epoche* or phenomenological reduction poses the question of the object of security as one whose non-essential elements can be bracketed, peeled away and set aside in order to reveal what is more essential, more original, more authentic or more real. This method continuously reflects upon what the minimum conditions for thinking security are, under the general presumption that there exists an enduring, indestructible essence of security, a 'security-ness'. Thus, if we understand the aim of critical security studies to be to get to the bottom of what security actually is – an admittedly controversial summary – then the method of phenomenological reduction has a chance of getting us a closer glimpse of what we seek.

However, the phenomenological approach differs from the critical security approach in interesting ways, making thinkable elements of security hitherto unthinkable or, slightly more modestly, unthought. For example, at first glance, it is clear that the phenomenological approach will bracket all forms of normativity or ethical claims. We have only to remember that the impossibility of justifying the normative character of thought in the psychologistic framework was the initial inspiration for phenomenology. Thus, the emancipatory critical security studies framework would necessarily be bracketed by the analysis and its value assertions set aside as inessential or even illusionary. While security can be associated with emancipation and certain forms of freedom, these can easily be shown to be inessential to it. Emancipation is not an essential component of security and can arguably be party to its weakening or destruction. When the phenomenological analysis does seem to arrive at the essence of security, its eidetic essence produces an unexpected insight, an insight that does not follow from the critical security approaches but that could contribute to enhancing them: the irreducible foundation of consciousness is insecurity.

Nonetheless, no amount of critical genealogy seems to be capable of moving beyond the horizon of insecurity discovered by a phenomenological analysis. And, to be fair, not even phenomenological reduction can move beyond the fundamental insecurity it discovers at the bottom of consciousness. Still, the hypothesis of the insecurity of critique goes far beyond the empirical insecurity of individuals, societies, states, etc. as claimed by the realist camp of international relations theory. The argument for the insecurity of critique belongs to an entirely different order. It would also claim, for example, that the foundation of any realist approach is equally or perhaps even more unstable.

Critique's inability to master its object stems from the reality that critique itself is a practice inescapably bound up with insecurity, and thus that the critique of security exercised in the orbit of the discourse called, since around 1997, 'critical security studies' is self-replicating. While stopping short of calling critical security studies a tautology, we can, by introducing concepts borrowed from Husserlian phenomenology, begin to glimpse that insecurity is not a simple feature of an otherwise secure state of life, ripe for critical analysis that promises to expose the false premises of the security discourse. Instead, insecurity is the very foundation of critical thought. Where the phenomenological method builds upon the bare and basic question 'what does it mean to mean?', a phenomenology of security asks an even more hauntingly straightforward question: 'what does it mean to be secure?' (literally, 'what is the security-ness of security?'). And phenomenology does its best to organize an approximate answer to the question of what remains of security when all else is stripped away, when all that is left is the essential minimum that must be retained in order for security to be security. It is insecurity itself.

It is important to underscore that the fundamental insecurity at the heart of experience, that which precedes any extant position, any consciousness or experience, does not only apply to the field of security studies and its proxies. Moreover, it would be ungenerous to reproach practitioners of security studies for not showing more interest in the esoteric question of their own being. By laying out these positions, this article has attempted to increase the validity of a broader, more pervasive concept of insecurity. It has argued that insecurity is not only not identical to an existential logic of what can and cannot make us dead, though it is, of course, that too. It has tried to show that insecurity is not identical to the vulnerability of things that might possibly be destroyed or cease to exist, nor can it be equated with the precarity of self-esteem in ego psychology or more broadly the psychic life of security. Nor is it trying to argue that insecurity is at issue as a more generalized theory of 'ontological insecurity' that would affirm that everything presently in existence faces the horizon of its own disappearance. Rather, it is arguing that the precondition for the existence of things is in a foundational way insecure.

This means that the position from which critique is exercised can be neither self-supporting nor self-certain. If it were so, then critique would consist of nothing more than an indifferent regard upon a field of half-baked derivatives of what it knows with certainty to exist with authenticity. Its 'foundation' – the early Derrida would have perhaps said '~~foundation~~' or 'foundation-under-erasure' in order to try to capture that paradoxical thought that the foundation of critique is its foundation-less-ness (see, for example, Derrida, 1981: 11) – is insecurity. Its undecidability, both in epistemological and in ontological terms, is the ethos of critique.

Critique that is worthy of the name must in the end be resigned to this ultimate precariousness while at the same time never being at ease with it. Plagued by a kind of metaphysical neurosis, well-practised critique reveals itself as an ethical project: emphatically insisting on truth, determined in its search for wisdom, resolute in its quest for beauty, all the while knowing full well, or at least suspecting, that these noble things cannot themselves be their own foundations. This is by no means an argument against critique or an admonishment to cease critique, only a critique of it. In one way or another, millennia of philosophers and poets have described the profoundly human experience of critique. Practitioners of critique should not discard it. Not because it is true or false, wise or foolhardy, but rather because this tragic misalignment is the force that drives it.

Unfortunately, in order to retain the coherence of this politically and morally indispensable practice called critique, we also have no choice but to take its own epistemological, ontological and ethical foundations for granted as somehow prior to, beneath or beyond critique, beyond the substance and the concept, and grounded by a subtle and inescapable pathos for the human: both damned and saved, lost and found, driven by desperation, desire or Nietzschean *ressentiment*,

critique is fundamentally ethical because it stems from a core that cannot be stabilized by anything beyond itself. The pre-critical foundation of critique is precarity itself.

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Note

1. See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/security> (accessed 28 September 2018).

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J Peter Burgess is Professor and Director of the Chair in Geopolitics of Risk at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris; Professor at the Centre for Advanced Security Theory (CAST), University of Copenhagen; and Research Professor at the Centre for Law, Science, Technology and Society Studies (LSTS) of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Email: james.peter.burgess@ens.fr.