For the primacy of politics and the social over security

Jef Huysmans May 2019

There are a lot of insecurities circulating in contemporary world politics. That is an ambiguous blessing for critical security studies. It sustains the research field by providing a very expansive range of political and policy concerns that can be approach from a security angle: security and aid, security and global warming, security and dataveillance, security and migration, security and borders, security and squatting, security and anxiety, security and insurances, security and weapons proliferation, to name only a few. However, it also implies that critical security studies mirrors the societal diffusion of securitisations and sustains the expansion of security knowledge through its teaching and impact ambitions despite its critical intentions. This situation is not new but continues to invite the question of how a critical security studies can focus on security without building into its security analytics a security colonisation of myriad areas of life. Studies in securitisation and differentiating subjects of security do single out the security dimensions of life and matter; they retain a disciplinary focus on matters security.

Criticality has taken on different modes, including opposing and normatively hierarchising the enactment of different security rationales (e.g. human security versus state security), exploring the discriminatory and violent consequences of security practices, and questioning the depoliticising nature of security practice (e.g. the dominance of technology and expert driven knowledge, the enactment of logics of necessity or emergency). However, it has not really addressed how to know security without centring life and matter onto security. This question is particularly challenging since it asks for a security studies that gives (re)conceptualisations of politics and the social primacy over security; or more bluntly, it asks for a security studies that focuses neither on securitisations nor on the subject of security. Such a revisiting seems particularly pertinent in a context where the expanding security agenda that partly drove and has been a condition for the success of critical security studies has been heavily institutionalised in world politics.

Two possible pathways spring to mind through which critical security studies can revisit this old question of how to critically account for the processes through which security become politically meaningful. {Walker, 1997 #133}The first is to explore ways of understanding security practices, concerns, and logics within a social and political situation that is not just or primarily driven by security but made up of entanglings between multiple and heterogeneous practices and concerns. This can be done, among others, by multiplying the actors and/or discourse beyond security focused ones or by giving primacy to complex analytical categories through which conceptions of politics or the social are mobilised, like citizenship, freedom, democracy, public, welfare, and without reducing or hierarchically subordinating them to security.

A second pathway is to engage and debate the growing literature on post-criticality. {Anker, 2017 #3069} {Bennett, 2001 #3070} This pathway is currently one of the most interesting through which to reopen the question of how social sciences and humanities can be critical. It challenges familiar repertoires of being critical, including the study of entrenched structural and institutional processes of domination and exclusion. By formulating alternative analytics that foregrounds the enchantments, creativity and resonating fragments of transformation, it analytically fractures entrenched processes and structures of security. This pathway is not a call for reintroducing the tiresome theory/practice question or a societal impact agenda but for revisiting the limits and possibilities of critique from within critical lineages in security studies.