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**What security makes possible: Some
thoughts on critical security studies**

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Abstract

It has become commonplace to accept that security is a ‘contested concept’. *How* contested, however, seems to be what is at stake for critical approaches to security. With the US Congress poised to ask for a National Intelligence Estimate on the security impacts of human-induced climate change; with terrorism, people movements and disease the focus of national security policy; and with various conceptualisations of human security informing national policy and new global norms, we are well into the ‘broadening and deepening’ phase once seen as revolutionary. At the same time, state-centric discourses of security remain very powerful, and global patterns of insecurity, violence and conflict are getting more destructive and uncontrollable.

In this light, this paper surveys some of the key insights and approaches in the broad area of critical security studies, especially the securitisation theme of the Copenhagen School and the emancipatory agenda of the Welsh School. It assesses their value and their limitations, and puts forward an argument for the value of a deeper line of critique that puts security’s ontological claims into question. Without breaking with the ideal of emancipation, this is also to question security’s status as a end, and to reveal it as a form of power which may conceal other agendas and produce insecurity. This line of critique is of use not only for rethinking state responses to military threats, secessionism, terrorism and people movements; it has value for retaining critical perspective in a time of such apparent innovation.

What security makes possible: some thoughts on critical security studies

ANTHONY BURKE*

In mid-April 2007 newspapers reported that the US Congress was poised to ask for a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the ‘national security implications’ of human-induced climate change. The media were referring to a bill sponsored by Democrat Senator Dick Durbin and Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, which the *Boston Globe* reported was expected to pass easily. The call for an NIE on climate change and security was the major recommendation of a report written for the CNA Corporation by a group of retired US army and naval leaders on the issue.¹ That call came as the United Nations Security Council also placed climate change on its agenda for the first time.² The *Sydney Morning Herald* stated that ‘American politicians are so concerned about the threats posed by the effects of global warming, they are legislating to elevate it to an official defence issue’. The fear appears to be that ‘climate change could trigger new humanitarian crises and force countries to go to war over diminishing water and energy resources’.³ One lawmaker was quoted as saying ‘[Submarines] take advantage of the ocean having certain characteristics ... You could wind up with weapons that are no longer optimal because they were designed for the climate that existed thirty years before’.⁴ Other concerns—well overdue given the experience of the last few years, culminating in the 2005 destruction of New Orleans—include ‘extreme weather events’ such as hurricanes. Hence the *Herald’s* witty headline:

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¹ CNA Corporation, *National security and the threat of climate change* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2007).

² ‘Bill ties climate to national security’, *Boston Globe*, 9 April 2007.

³ Tom Allard, Mark Forbes and agencies, ‘US braces for global warring’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 2007, p. 1.

⁴ ‘Bill ties climate to national security’.

‘US braces for global warring’. It also reported that Australia’s Office of National Assessments is conducting its own study of the security implications of climate change.⁵

These developments are in many ways surprising, given the long hostility of both national governments to arguments for concerted efforts to restructure energy economies to seek whatever mitigation of climate change can still be achieved. And both, whatever their strongly neoconservative character, hold to a crudely realist understanding of international relations, to the primacy and value of military power, the weakness of international law, and the privileges ordained by primacy. Indeed we can surmise that the George W. Bush administration is well behind Congress on these issues, and that the probable results (both analytical and policy-related) of the ONA study may be contingent upon a clearer sense of the political wind-direction. The traditional and very narrow nature of official Australian security thinking could be observed in the 2005 ‘Defence update’, which stated that ‘the first duty of the Australian government is to provide for the security and defence of Australia and Australian interests’, rather than those of the international community or human beings in general.⁶ This view appears to move away from earlier signs of more human-centred innovation in the 2000 defence white paper, which, following the East Timor intervention, stated that:

the United Nations has been responding to a growing sense in the international community that crises causing avoidable human suffering cannot be ignored just because they happen within the borders of a sovereign state. The trend to a more active and effective UN security role ... is welcome.

In this way the government recognised ‘new demands on the armed forces of many countries ... for humanitarian relief, evacuations, peacekeeping and peace-enforcement’ and accepted that ‘this is an important and lasting trend, with significant implications for our Defence Force’.⁷ It is arguable that such thinking was at least one element of subsequent commitments to East Timor, Bougainville and Solomon Islands, but it coexists uneasily—in

⁵ Allard, Forbes and agencies, ‘US braces for global warring’, p. 1.

⁶ ‘Australia’s national security: A defence update 2005’ (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2005), p. 1.

⁷ ‘Defence 2000: Our future defence force’ (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), pp. viii-ix, 10.

normative terms—with the persistence of a self-regarding state-centric paradigm.)

Such a self-regarding paradigm provides the context for the many references in the 2005 ‘Update’ to non-state threats to security such as terrorism, disease, illegal migration, piracy, and more. These have been present in Australian defence policy since at least 2000, when illegal migration appeared in that year’s white paper at the behest, I was told by a well-placed source, of Cabinet rather than defence department officials.⁸ How serious the government was in this line of thinking became clear the next year, when the *Tampa* was stormed by the SAS, the naval and air Operation Relex II was begun, and Minister for Immigration Philip Ruddock began to speak of mandatory detention as crucial to a policy of deterrence aimed at asylum seekers—as if every boat that appeared offshore was a menacing weapon aimed at the heart of the Australian way of life.⁹

These developments, and the ease with which many Australians accepted arguments that refugees, terrorism and Islam were issues crucial to our national integrity and security requiring a coercive and exclusionary national response, came as a shock to many. However they were presaged, even if ambiguously, in some scholarly literature and in Southeast Asian security concepts and paradigms. For example, the RAND Corporation scholar Peter Chalk argued that unregulated people movements (UPMs) ‘have the potential to challenge the integrity of both sending and receiving states’.¹⁰ Alan Dupont has made similar arguments. While acknowledging that accepting a link between UPMs and international security ‘masks sharp differences of view over whose security is being threatened—that of the refugees ... or that of the receiving countries who care and provide for them’, Dupont still claimed that ‘these are not mutually incompatible positions. UPMs are a measure of both human and national insecurity’.¹¹ In a more recent analysis he stated that the ‘sudden large influxes of people

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁹ Anthony Burke, ‘Epilogue’, in Anthony Burke, *In fear of security: Australia’s invasion anxiety* (Sydney: Pluto Press Australia, 2001).

¹⁰ Peter Chalk, *Non-military security and global order: The impact of extremism, violence and chaos on national and international security* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 155.

¹¹ Alan Dupont, *East Asia imperilled: Transnational threats to security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 136.

who are ethnically and religiously different from the indigenous inhabitants, strikes at the whole notion of nationhood'.¹² A similar analysis came from Ole Wæver and his Copenhagen School colleagues during the 1990s, which argued for a new referent of 'societal security' to be added to 'national security' and both endorsed and questioned the inclusion (or 'securitisation') of migration in state and regional security agendas.¹³

In Southeast Asia, sub-state and non-state threats have long been folded into notions of 'comprehensive security' which lie at the core of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) thinking—forming a core principle of the ASEAN Regional Forum, for example. In a very different way, concepts and discourses of 'human security' have also become influential. These have shifted the focus from threats to states to threats to individuals, and from discrete events to structures and processes—and have been taken up by non-governmental organisations, UN agencies and many governments.¹⁴ Likewise, ideas of 'environmental security', which are represented by the Congressional concerns about climate change, have only recently become the focus of states, but for well over a decade have been the subject of intense debate amongst commentators and scholars.¹⁵

In short, it is clear that security is now about far more than it was during the Cold War, and that states and scholars alike have moved well beyond the influential arguments of Stephen Walt in 1991 that security studies 'should focus on the threat, use and control of military force'.¹⁶ We are well into the 'broadening and deepening' phase of conceptualising security, a move once seen as revolutionary or at least remarkable. In this light, we would be right to ask if this is necessarily a good thing, and put the process under

¹² Alan Dupont, 'Transnational security', in Robert Ayson and Desmond Ball (eds), *Strategy and security in the Asia-Pacific* (Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2006), p. 114.

¹³ Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and desecuritization', in Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed.), *On security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86.

¹⁴ ASEAN Secretariat, 'The ASEAN Regional Forum: A concept paper', 1995, Annex A, Principle 2, <www.aseansec.org/3635.htm>. See also Anthony Burke and Mathew McDonald, 'Introduction', in Anthony Burke and Matthew McDonald (eds), *Critical security in the Asia-Pacific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ See Simon Dalby, *Environmental security* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Stephen Walt, 'The renaissance of security studies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 35(2) 1991: 211–39.

considerable scrutiny. In this paper, I want to step back a little from detailed debate about how we deal with both ‘new’ and ‘old’ security issues, to instead focus upon the conceptual resources available to us in even beginning to do so. This is to put the background discourses, histories and frameworks that shape and constrain our understanding of security into relief, so we can interrogate their most basic paradigmatic assumptions. This will I hope help us to make better security policy, but it will also lead us into some more profound and possibly unsettling questions about the value and function—political and sociological—of security *as such*.

The first move this paper makes is to put the ‘broadening’ impetus in security discourse into question. The innovations it has brought are still conservative in nature: still concerned with threats to states and with their impact upon, or susceptibility to, military means. Some immediate questions arise: Is it appropriate to conceive new events and processes in such ways? Will they generate appropriate and reasonable policy and societal responses? Will they in fact provide anything recognisable as security—and, if so, what kind, to whom, and for how long? And if not, how are we to go about rethinking and reshaping security, in theory and practice?

However the ability to ask and answer such questions, and to conceive better solutions, will in turn be framed by a series of critical discourses which also have the potential to both enable and limit understanding. It is these critical discourses that I examine in this paper. In doing so I aim to enter into a sympathetic but critical dialogue with some of the more important theories (my focus will be on Welsh School critical theory and Copenhagen School work on securitisation, although feminism, human security and some poststructuralist work also contribute to this debate). I will focus in particular on four key dimensions of these approaches:

- (1) the normative alternatives being offered;
- (2) the sociological insights they make possible;
- (3) whether the approaches see security as an end or a practice, which has implications for both sociological and normative analysis; and
- (4) how they conceive the relation of security to politics.

I will explore their insights and their limitations, and finally, drawing on some of my own work, outline a deeper line of critique which they have failed to pursue.

THE WELSH SCHOOL

One important alternative line of approach to broadening security in realist terms has come from the so-called ‘Welsh School’ of critical security studies, promoted by scholars based at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, such as Ken Booth, Richard Wyn Jones and Andrew Linklater. They have in turn drawn on a tradition of political theory, from Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx through to the Frankfurt School theorists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas.¹⁷ What is most distinctive and valuable about their approach is their desire to radically re-conceive security as the *emancipation* of individuals and communities from structural constraints. Booth’s 1991 article ‘Security and emancipation’ was a landmark text which argued for ‘a holistic and non-statist’ approach to security that does not emphasise the use or threat of force, and that would involve:

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. War and the threat of war is one of those constraints, together with poverty, poor education, [and] political oppression.¹⁸

He links it with cosmopolitan ideals with an argument that ‘the concept of emancipation shapes strategies and tactics of resistance, offers a theory of progress for society, and gives a politics of hope for a common humanity’.¹⁹ Their arguments have strong affinities with J. Ann Tickner’s vision of a security based upon ‘the elimination of unjust social relations, including unequal gender relations’ and for a reformulation of international relations in terms of the ‘multiple insecurities’ represented by ecological destruction, poverty and (gendered) structural violence, rather than the abstract threats to the integrity of states, their interests and ‘core

¹⁷ See Ken Booth (ed.), *Critical security studies and world politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005); Richard Wyn Jones, *Security, strategy and critical theory* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Richard Wyn Jones (ed.), *Critical theory and world politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

¹⁸ Ken Booth, ‘Security as emancipation’, *Review of International Studies*, 17(4) 1991: 319.

¹⁹ Booth, *Critical security studies*, p. 181.

values'.²⁰ Together, they have stated inspirational normative goals that rightly guide many attempts to reformulate security in more positive ways.

Their arguments also have strong affinities with the idea of human security developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994.²¹ The referent object of security has shifted from the state to the human being, and in Booth's view requires that the state simply be a means not an end of security. It must facilitate the achievement of security, not be its object. But they are also arguing for something much more radical and important than is available in most understandings of human security: the insistence on understanding insecurity and achieving security as complex, holistic processes that require not merely the amelioration of particular needs, or the defence of humans against discrete threats contained by time and place, but ongoing structural transformations based on ideas of emancipation, social justice and human progress. Drawing on Ghandi, Booth states that security must be a means for emancipation, and Wyn Jones argues that 'even if a more emancipated order is brought into existence, the process of emancipation remains incomplete. There is always room for improvement ...'²² This conceptualisation is not merely intrinsically important; it offers a line of resistance to the all too common cooption of human security to statist agendas—such as those of Canada which have sought to use it to burnish its claims to national identity and good international citizenship—or its reduction to questions of intra-state conflict and liberal governance interventions. Hence if people are made insecure by a complex melange of threats, practices and processes—poor governance, political oppression, civil conflict, the global economy, corruption, human rights abuse, gender violence and discrimination, or environmental destruction—securing them requires work at all these levels

²⁰ J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in international relations: Feminist perspectives on achieving global security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 127–44, at pp. 127–8.

²¹ United Nations Development Programme, *Human development report, 1994* (New York: UNDP, 1995).

²² Booth, *Critical security studies*, p. 182.

including the most systemic and apparently immovable. In turn, security is merely a way-station to something grander and more inspiring.²³

Stated thus, the ambition of this project is certainly immense. However at this point Wyn Jones takes a surprisingly conservative turn, which I address elsewhere.²⁴ In his argument about ‘concrete utopias’ Wyn Jones states that proposals for political transformation must be based on an identification of ‘immanent possibilities’ for change in the present order:

descriptions of a more emancipated order must focus on *realizable* utopias ... If [critical theorists] succumb to the temptation of suggesting a blueprint for an emancipated order that is unrelated to the possibilities inherent in the present...[they] have no way of justifying their arguments epistemologically. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that a vision of an emancipated order that is not based on immanent potential will be politically efficacious.²⁵

Booth’s version of this is to make two moves: first, a movement of radical questioning and opening drawing on Horkheimer and Robert Cox, where the aim is to avoid the ‘negative consequences of problem-solving theories, particularly the legitimizing and replicating of the regressive aspects of prevailing situations’. This task ‘begins with critique: a radical rethinking of the theories and practices that have shaped political life is an essential foundation for the reinvention of human society’.²⁶ Second, however, he echoes Wyn Jones by stating that ‘in the strategic action undertaken to attempt to bring change about’ we must discover ‘latent potentials in situations on which to build political and social progress. This means building with one’s feet on the ground, not constructing castles in the air.’²⁷

Certainly it is helpful to try to identify such potentials, but what if such ‘latent’ potentials no longer exist, or are in the process of being actively extinguished? If so, such arguments are ultimately disabling and risk

²³ For a more extensive argument along these lines see Anthony Burke, ‘Caught between national and human security: Knowledge and power in post-crisis Asia’, *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*, 13(3) 2001: 215–39.

²⁴ Anthony Burke, *Beyond security, ethics and violence: War against the other* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 21.

²⁵ Richard Wyn Jones, ‘On emancipation’, in Booth, *Critical security studies*, p. 230.

²⁶ Booth, *Critical security studies*, p. 263.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

denying the entire purpose of the critical project. It is precisely at times of the greatest pessimism, when new potentials are being shut down or normative change is distinctly negative—arguably true of the present time—that the critical project is most important. In the face of such obstacles the critical project must think and conceive the *unthought*, and its limiting test ought not to be realism but responsibility. I am continually haunted by George Orwell's *1984*, where the objective of the Party was to reduce the scope for human thought and action by removing concepts from the language until English disappeared in favour of 'Newspeak'. One of the questions I have long asked in my own work is whether the concept of 'security' itself has not become a form of 'Newspeak' whose hold on people's minds drives away other possibilities of conceiving and enabling human existence on this planet. This fear has underpinned my own efforts to generate a deeper line of critique—*of security as such*—that I will return to later.

There is a residual ontological realism at work in their thinking here that works against the constructivist basis of their theorising, and it runs the risk of being both disabling and disingenuous. It could be disabling because it risks forcing an emancipatory politics to choke off its effort of critique and imagination prematurely, to accept the boundaries of the given at some level. (For example, what would be a 'concrete utopia' for asylum seekers and refugees? Would it be found by tinkering with the concept of sovereignty or the international conventions on refugees, or by a more profoundly human-centred reformulation of sovereignty and international society at once?)

The Welsh School approach is disingenuous, perhaps unwittingly, because of the ways it understands agency and action even as it aims to create greater humanistic scope for them. For Booth, human agency is a concern of individuals who are constrained and repressed by power, who if secured properly might exercise their agency freely and be 'more fully human'.²⁸ Power prevents, and emancipation frees. I have two objections to this view. One is to address to it Foucauldian ideas of power as *productive* of selves, institutions, concepts and social relations, which does not preclude the fact that power can be repressive and take on the form of major dominations. However it insists on a more sobering understanding: in

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

modernity, our thoughts and desires are not entirely free or indeed our own. While it is important, *contra* Foucault, to retain a space for individual agency and resistance—and hence responsibility—the focus then shifts to the webs of discourse, concepts and institutional power that shape and constrain individuals, that enable their development, existence and thoughts. Security is such a web, and in this way it is much more than either an end *or* a means: it is a socio-political field within which life takes form. To this Foucauldian understanding I would add a more ironic one: that even as action and thought are limited by a pre-existing system of thought and power, action is, as Hannah Arendt recognised, also radically contingent and creative.²⁹ This obviously creates scope for positive political transformations but also adds an important note of caution. Arendt argues that ‘action has no end’ which lays upon us ‘a burden of irreversibility and unpredictability’. Given the vast powers of life and death mobilised in security policy, I would also argue that the burden it lays upon us is *responsibility*—not merely for actions in their immediacy and possible consequences, but for the entire political field that they derive from, resist and potentially transform. In this sense, to return to Booth, there is no solid ground beneath our feet; we make it as we go, out of air. Whether we then build castles or mazes is an open question. In short, the problem is less whether ‘immanent’ possibilities exist in the present, but the possibilities we create through thought and action under the power and sign of security. So my question has always been: what does security make possible, and in turn, inevitable?

THE COPENHAGEN SCHOOL: SECURITISATION AND DE-SECURITISATION

To ask what security makes possible prevents us from considering security as an end, and it also generates some critical distance from efforts to imagine it is a means to something else, however laudably. It steps away from the desire for security as such, to ask what is actually occurring when that desire is invoked.

The writings of Wæver, Jaap de Wilde and Barry Buzan make this important move. However, while they generate some very important insights in the process, I argue that their efforts nonetheless have some

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The human condition*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 231.

significant analytical and normative problems. My first concern is their understanding of security, and securitisation, in Schmittian terms as a response to existential threats to survival, the 'special nature' of which 'justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them'. As Wæver argues, 'traditionally, by saying "security", a state representative declares an emergency condition, thus claiming a right to use whatever means are necessary to block a threatening development'.³⁰ Now there is something to this, and security discourse and policy often does take on this character (consider, as one example, key features of the Bush administration's approach to the war on terror, such as the creation of special military tribunals and extra-territorial arrangements to interrogate and detain terrorist suspects).³¹ However I regard it as deeply problematic, not routine, and not something we should relativise as either legitimate or illegitimate according to one's perspective, identity or interests. This Wæver characterises as a decision to securitise or desecuritize particular issues.

It is helpful to identify and critique this process sociologically, but I am wary of accepting it as a general principle or definition of security. As Giorgio Agamben and many others have argued, Carl Schmitt's political ontology is a deeply anti-democratic one which reifies sovereignty as the supreme anchor in politics, conceives politics in terms of a stark ontological division between friend and enemy, and legitimates the suspension of the rule of law to facilitate what Schmitt calls the decision, a process in which the sovereign assumes 'unlimited authority' to meet 'a danger to the existence of the state'.³²

Even if threats are credible and existential, I do not believe that they warrant invoking the 'state of exception', which has in our time been more commonly enacted in the detention and rendition of terrorism suspects, immigration detention centres and the use of arbitrary arrest and deportation powers. The 'state of exception' also haunts much legal innovation in

³⁰ Ole Wæver, Jaap de Wilde and Barry Buzan, *Security: A new framework for analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), p. 21.

³¹ Burke, *Beyond security, ethics and violence*, pp. 4–9.

³² Carl Schmitt, *Political theology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 5.

counter-terrorism policy.³³ And, as Agamben, Judith Butler and Arendt have argued, such approaches have their roots in processes (namely colonialism and the Holocaust) that systematically dehumanised their victims producing lives that were ‘bare’, ‘ungrievable’, ‘unliveable’ and ‘superfluous’.³⁴ If nothing else, it ought to raise serious doubts as to how securitisation theory can be helpful in resignifying security as emancipation. It also precludes the ability to speak of human or environmental security in terms consistent with democratic political processes in a state of normalcy. The existential threat to human beings may be real enough, but it should generate a very different policy logic than outlined by the Copenhagen School. As Roxanne Lynn Doty and Karin Fierke have argued, the Copenhagen School’s conceptualisation blocks the path to human security.³⁵ This would seem to be implicit in the way Wæver, in his 1995 article, attempts to provide security with an ontological grounding. There he states that ‘as concepts, *neither individual nor international security exist*’:

National security, that is the security of a state, is the name of an ongoing debate, a tradition, an established set of practices ... there is no literature, no philosophy, no tradition of security in non-state terms ... the *concept* of security refers to the state.³⁶

This is a powerful act of analytical closure, which is not softened by his use of an hourglass figure, with a ‘conceptual focus on state sovereignty’ at its centre, to which international and individual level ‘dynamics’ refer. As he states, “‘security’ has to be read through the lens of national security’.³⁷ He in turn argues that it is

³³ See Suvendrini Perera, ‘What is a camp?’, *Borderlands e-journal*, 1(1) 2002; Jason Adams, ‘Redrawing the imaginary lines: Exceptional space in an exceptional time’, *Borderlands e-journal*, 5(2) 2006.

³⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Judith Butler, *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004); Margaret Canovan, ‘Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism: A reassessment’, in Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 27.

³⁵ Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Immigration and the politics of security’, *Security Studies*, 8(2/3) 1998–99: 80; Karin Fierke, *Critical approaches to international security* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 110.

³⁶ Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, pp. 48–9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

the survival of the unit as a basic political unit—the sovereign state—that is the key. Those issues with this undercutting potential must be addressed prior to all others because, if they are not, the state will cease to exist as a sovereign unit and all other questions will become irrelevant. This, then, provides us with a test point, and shows us what is lost if we ‘de-compose’ the state by individualising security ... even if the challenges can operate on the different components of the state they must still pass through one focus: Do the challenges determine whether the state is to be or not to be?³⁸

This formulation is consistent with the argument I make that security historically has taken ‘the form and promise of a metaphysical discourse: an overarching political goal and practice that guarantees existence itself, that makes the possibility of the world possible’.³⁹ What seems especially clear in Wæver’s work is that such a space of possibility is limited to the nation-state, precluding the emergence of alternative conceptualisations of political community and existence such as cosmopolitanism or what we might call ‘non-ontologies’ of primally interconnected being, such as can be found in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber.⁴⁰

Wæver’s claim here sets up a strange tension with his argument that security is a ‘speech act’ that ‘does not refer to something more real; the utterance is the act.’⁴¹ In turn he argues, after Jef Huysmans, that successful securitisation only occurs when an audience accepts it as such.⁴² In this formulation, security’s meaning is contingent, contested and subject to the play of power: ‘something is a security problem when elites declare it to be so’.⁴³ And, in a somewhat Foucauldian vein, he argues that ‘the way to study securitisation is to study discourse and political constellations. The relevant question is: When does an argument with this particular rhetorical and semiotic structure achieve a sufficient effect’?⁴⁴ This contradiction may explain Booth’s characterisation of the Copenhagen School as ‘a curious

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁹ Burke, *Beyond security, ethics and violence*, pp. 28–9.

⁴⁰ See *Ibid.*, chapter 3, for an account of these ways of rethinking the relation between security and existence.

⁴¹ Wæver, ‘Securitization and desecuritization’, p. 55.

⁴² Wæver, de Wilde and Buzan, *Security: A new framework for analysis*, p. 25.

⁴³ Wæver, ‘Securitization and desecuritization’, p. 55.

⁴⁴ Wæver, de Wilde and Buzan, *Security: A new framework for analysis*, p. 25.

combination of liberal, post-structural and neorealist approaches' which 'pile[s] up ... a bundle of conceptual problems and political issues'.⁴⁵

My own hunch is that Wæver and his colleagues baulk at the implications of their de-ontologising move: rather than pursuing its implications and trying to direct that into the service of a normatively better (if still discursively situated) understanding of security, they offer a choice of whether to securitise some issues, but, once that occurs, anchor the process in a deeply essentialist and problematic Schmittian matrix where security is about existential threat, abnormal politics, elite decision, and legal and normative rule-breaking. The nation-state remains the ultimate referent and ontological ground for security, even if there is a caution about the dangers involved in securitising some issues.⁴⁶

Related to this problem is the way in which, by creating a new referent of *societal security* (potentially threatened by immigration, intra-state cultural competition, and projects of national or regional integration), the Copenhagen School reify claims to collective identity as legitimately securitisable. They do grant that minorities may feel such threats also, but, given their overarching statist ontology, this ultimately reinforces a 'broadening' agenda in which migration and identity issues become read as threats to national security and dealt with coercively. From here it is a brief step to the Schmittian universe lived by too many asylum seekers: of mandatory detention camps, temporary protection visas, and extra-legal decisions on deportation and refoulément. As Bill McSweeney perceptively argues, Wæver et. al. offer 'no basis or criteria on which to adjudicate between competing identity claims' which he argues should involve 'moral judgement[s] to arbitrate between the competing moral decisions which underlie all claims to collective identity and all security policies which flow from them'.⁴⁷ Michael Williams also recognises the ethical danger inherent in the somewhat amoral idea of securitisation as 'an objective process and possibility' rather than 'a normative question', but in my view somewhat

⁴⁵ Booth, *Critical security studies*, p. 271.

⁴⁶ A reading that defends the Copenhagen School as inherently suspicious of practices of securitisation is Michael C. Williams, 'Words, images, enemies: Securitization and international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 47(4) 2003: 511–31.

⁴⁷ Bill McSweeney, *Security, identity and interests: A sociology of international relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 75.

wishfully hopes that casting security as a speech act enables us to see it as more than ‘a tool of social explanation’, placing ‘that act within a framework of communicative action and legitimation that links it to a discursive ethics that seeks to avoid the excesses of a decisionist [Schmittian] account of securitization’.⁴⁸ Williams’s ethical argument is important, but I do not share his faith that the Copenhagen School’s work offers such possibilities for moving beyond a Schmittian account. The danger is that they in fact preclude them.

DEEPENING THE CRITIQUE: SECURITY AFTER SECURITY

The Copenhagen School’s analyses open a door, however briefly, to an important insight. Security is contingent and not universal. However they fail to push beyond that into an analysis that could put the deeper ontological claims and construction of security into question, that could reveal its wider sociological function and power, and most importantly, that could be put into the service of a normatively progressive politics (whether that takes the name of security or not).⁴⁹ Put briefly, this is the critical project which has motivated my own research over the last decade.

This project requires walking a tricky path between what Matthew McDonald has called the ‘reconstructive’ and ‘deconstructive’ agendas in security studies.⁵⁰ Many writers argue that they simply cannot be reconciled. From the reconstructive end, Booth has been sharply critical of some poststructuralist work on security which he thinks fails to acknowledge, or create space for, an agenda which resignifies security in terms of social justice or emancipation. He comments that:

the poststructuralist approach seems to assume that security cannot be common or positive-sum but must always be zero-sum, with somebody’s security always being at the cost of the insecurity of others. [Hence] security itself is questioned as desirable goal ... They also tend to celebrate insecurity, which I regard as a middle-class affront to the truly insecure.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Williams, ‘Words, images, enemies’, pp. 521–2.

⁴⁹ Wæver, de Wilde and Buzan, *Security: A new framework for analysis*, p. 35. They specifically ‘abstain from attempts to talk about what “real” security would be for people ... to be able to talk about such issues, one has to make basically different ontological choices than ours and define some emancipatory ideal.’

⁵⁰ Burke and McDonald, ‘Introduction’, pp. 4–5.

⁵¹ Booth, *Critical security studies*, p. 270.

In some ways this critique—which cites writings by Michael Dillon and James Der Derian as examples—is appropriate. He might also have included in this list an article published in 2000 by Costas Constantinou.⁵² While in some ways he misunderstands what they are searching for (a route out of generalised politics of alienation and fear, which make them as critical of realism as he is) it is important to remind ourselves of the legitimate and almost universal concern of individuals and communities for secure and stable lives. It is for this reason that in my own work I have often endorsed the normative arguments of the Welsh School, Tickner, the Secure Australia Project or the UNDP's 1994 *Human development report*. It might be possible to read Booth's comments as a critique of my argument in the introduction to *In fear of security*, which challenges realist policy discourses for generating Orwellian practices of security that sacrifice the security of others. I, however, am implicitly working with a contrasting human security ideal. This, manifestly, is not a celebration of insecurity. The power of statist ontologies of security nevertheless led me to wonder if it might be better to speak of the human needs and priorities named by security in their specificity: conflict prevention and resolution, human rights, land and women's rights, the right to control one's own economic destiny, etc. My concern was, and remains, that security's 'perversion' into a 'metaphysical canopy for the worst manifestations of liberal modernity' has been too final and damaging.⁵³ We live in a world where security will continue to remain one of the most powerful signifiers in politics, and we cannot opt out of the game of its naming and use. It must be defined and practiced in normatively better ways, and kept under continual scrutiny.

This is where a deeper line of critique is not merely an alternative critical idiom, but an essential part of the project. There are two moves to be made in this process. The first move is to question security as a political ontology. This is because efforts to think security holistically run the risk of foundering on a deeper set of obstacles posed by the way in which we conceive of and represent sovereignty and identity—those basic forms and containers for life that apparently pre-exist and require security. Creating space for holistic visions of security thus requires a challenge to the continuing power of political ontologies that connect security, sovereignty,

⁵² Costas M. Constantinou, 'Poetics of security', *Alternatives*, 25(3) 2000: 287–306.

⁵³ Burke, *In fear of security*, pp. 308–9.

belonging, otherness and violence in ways that for many appear like enduring political facts. Conflict, violence and alienation then arise not merely from individual or collective acts whose conditions might be understood and policed; *they condition politics as such*.

I trace the general model for such political ontologies, which we know of as the ‘social contract’, elsewhere.⁵⁴ In the work of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, security is the precondition for, and most basic desire of, political society, which is built on a suffocating ontology of political subjectivity and community in which all the bodies of the citizenry merge with that of the sovereign, with whom they form a ‘body-politic’ or ‘general will’. Such an image of political community does more than set out a group that wishes to be self-governing and create the conditions for political order; it constitutes an overarching technology of identity and subjectivity that presupposes sameness and is intrinsically hostile to difference. This image seems clear in Hobbes’s analogy of the body with society, in which the sovereignty is an artificial soul, concord is health, sedition is sickness, and civil war, death.⁵⁵ It becomes particularly dangerous as modern nationalisms develop and the Westphalian nation-state becomes constituted as a homogeneous combination of culture, people, territory and state into an organic unity. As the image of conflict is seemingly eliminated from the inside of the sovereign body, it is reconstituted as its essential and threatening *outside*, its very condition of possibility and thus its interior. While they did not theorise the state among states, their ontology provides a basis for the later Schmittian vision of ‘collectivities’ of friends and enemies engaged in an existential struggle for survival in the international realm. When Schmitt also argues that the political is only authentic ‘when a fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity’,⁵⁶ building on Georg Hegel and Carl von Clausewitz’s views that nations can be strongest ‘if national character and familiarity with war fortify each other by continual interaction’, we find ourselves in a

⁵⁴ Burke, *Beyond security ethics and violence*, chapter 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–41.

⁵⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The concept of the political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 26–33, at p. 28.

very dangerous space.⁵⁷ Security dilemmas, then, are no mere accidents of military competition; they are coded into our very being.⁵⁸

The second move is to shift from seeing security as an end, or a metaphysical promise, and conceive it as a set of practices and techniques. This is why I describe security as a ‘political technology’ which combines two linked modes of power: *totalising* power that works at the level of states and populations, where discourses of national identity and purpose, and systems of macroeconomic management, join with foreign and strategic policy; and *individualising* power which works on people’s bodies and minds. Appeals to patriotism, national identity and fear of others are effective at both levels, and can be deployed cynically or simply because people cannot think outside such structures of meaning. This analysis enables us to identify what has come to be called ‘security politics’ or the ‘politics of fear’, which has not only become an everyday feature of the war on terror, but was also present during the Cold War as McCarthyism. Within the overarching ontology of the social contract, claims about security become a potent political weapon. It enables us to understand why asylum seekers were so easily demonised in the wake of 11 September, and requires an understanding of security not merely as a policy matter but as a sociological phenomenon. However it also generates important insights for policy, showing how threats can be misconstrued or exaggerated, complex conflicts reduced to simplistic oppositions of identity and values, and violence construed as an essential element of existence. A critical approach instead puts the political economy in which visions of identity and otherness are mobilised under scrutiny, searching them for their political and ethical consequences. I often think of the comment made by the Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery after a reserve soldier, while on brigade-sized manoeuvres in the Golan Heights early IN 2007, was quoted as saying: ‘we are ready for the next war’. In ‘Israeli public discourse’, Avnery remarked, ‘the next war is seen as a natural phenomenon, like tomorrow’s sunrise.’⁵⁹

⁵⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), §324, p. 210; Azar Gat, *A history of military thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 245.

⁵⁸ See Anthony Burke, ‘Ontologies of war: Violence, existence and reason’, *Theory & Event*, 2007, forthcoming.

⁵⁹ Uri Avnery, ‘You and I and the next war’, Gush Shalom weekly commentary, 24 February 2007.

THE CHALLENGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Let me conclude by returning to the example I began with, climate change and security. I am not an expert on environmental security and cannot hope to match the insights that writers like Lorraine Elliott and Simon Dalby have brought to the field.⁶⁰ But it strikes me how state-centric the Congress, and the group of generals who wrote the CNA Corporation report, are in their narrow concern for US national security.⁶¹ This is consistent with the political ontology of the national security state we have inherited from Hobbes and Clausewitz. Certainly the US government does have to consider the likely impacts on the US and the demands climate change may make on their military, but the moral and political challenge is so much greater than that. It may be that a holistic, human-centred approach would be more appropriate, but even that could be too anthropocentric in its concerns. The global climatic system transcends nation-states and has no respect for borders, and it will produce impacts not merely on human societies but ecosystems we share with other species and organisms. If phenomena such as refugees, economic crisis and transnational terrorism remind us of our mutual vulnerability and dependence on other humans, climate change reminds us even more radically of our dependence on a borderless earth. Climate change cannot be assimilated to realist security paradigms based on the social contract, and we can imagine a nightmarish future in which not only are mitigation efforts stillborn but states become garrisons against the unpredictable. In this light, deconstructive critical approaches to security need to take cosmopolitan discourses and institutions more seriously, while reconstructive approaches must grapple with the unequal but shared burden of responsibility for the planet that ideas of emancipation—with their modernist overtones—fail to capture. In this way, climate change presents a profound challenge to both traditional and critical security studies.

⁶⁰ Dalby, *Environmental security*; Simon Dalby, 'Ecology, security, and change in the Anthropocene', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 13(2) 2007; Lorraine Elliott, 'Harm and emancipation: Making environmental security "critical" in the Asia-Pacific', in Burke and McDonald (eds), *Critical security in the Asia-Pacific*, pp. 136–51.

⁶¹ The CNA Corporation report states that 'The specific questions addressed in this report are: 1. What conditions are climate changes likely to produce around the world that would represent security risks to the United States? 2. What are the ways in which these conditions may affect America's national security interests? 3. What actions should the nation take to address the national security consequences of climate change?' CNA Corporation, *National security and the threat of climate change*, p. 6.

