Security:

Dialogue across Disciplines

Edited by
Philippe Bourbeau
Security: Dialogue across Disciplines

Security is one of the most daunting subjects of the 21st century. This edited volume provides a comparative analysis of the ways in which the concept of security is theorised and studied across several disciplines. This book has two objectives: first, to explore the growing diversity of theories, paradigms and methods developed to study security; second, to initiate a multidisciplinary dialogue about the ontological, epistemological, paradigmatic, and normative aspects of security studies in social sciences. Drawing content from a wide range of international scholars, this volume examines the study and theorisation of security across several disciplines and issue areas. Readers from different fields are invited to reflect on their conceptualisations of security and to consider how an interdisciplinary dialogue can stimulate and enrich the understanding of security in our contemporary world.
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1 A Multidisciplinary Dialogue on Security

Philippe Bourbeau

Security is omnipresent in our daily lives. From apparent trivialities, such as locking the front door, wearing a helmet to cycle with the kids on a bright Sunday afternoon, or remembering an increasing number of passwords, to more significant issues like dealing with domestic violence, monitoring nuclear proliferation, and limiting ethnic conflicts, security, it seems, is everywhere.

Likewise, the ubiquity of security in almost all social sciences disciplines is undisputable. Groundbreaking work by prominent criminologists has placed the concept of security at the centre of criminological scholarship for many years to come (Loader and Walker 2007, Shearing and Wood 2007, Wood and Dupont 2006, Zedner 2009). In Anthropology, security is an emerging research area that has recently gained substantial traction (Goldstein 2010, 2012, Hamilton and Placas

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1 I would like to thank Keith Krause, Vincent Poulion, Richard Price, Juha Vuori, and colleagues in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge for input and discussion on issues presented in this introduction, as well as their helpful comments on previous drafts.
Geographers have been active in highlighting the ways in which biopolitics, territoriality and resources deeply influence security considerations and vice versa (Dalby 2009, Ingram and Dodds 2009, Le Billon 2012). Security has been one of the paramount research themes in International Relations scholarship for a long time, but only recently has this focus of this framework shifted, permitting previously marginalized perspectives to be increasingly embraced (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011, Adler and Pouliot 2011, Buzan and Hansen 2009). In sum, scholars from all manner of social sciences are turning their attention to the study of this complex concept.

Despite this demonstrated interest in security studies within a host of academic fields, scholars rarely communicate their findings across disciplines. Students of security do not approach the study of security from a shared paradigm, but from a variety of theoretical and conceptual viewpoints fragmented across disciplines. In some cases, these various theoretical viewpoints are seen as competing against each other; in most cases, however, these viewpoints are simply expressed and developed in near total disciplinary isolation. Within any given discipline, work done in the other social sciences on security is at best briefly mentioned, at worse, politely ignored.

This book attempts to bridge these disciplinary canyons. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive theory of security applicable across disciplines, cases, and areas. We do not intend to offer a unique paradigm within which to conduct research on security, nor do we want to propose a unified or orthodox view of the concept. Rather, in revisiting security from an interdisciplinary perspective, the book makes two critical contributions. First, it proposes to take seriously the prospect of a multidisciplinary approach to security. Such an approach is both propitious and timely. The rise in electronic surveillance, the prominence given to immigration as a security threat in Western countries, the concern over climate change and environmental degradation, the recent international interventions (or absence of intervention), and the tension between liberty and security arising from terrorist
attacks, have mobilised security scholars to analyse the role and the impact of security in our contemporary social world. These issues, and many others, transcend disciplinary boundaries and create the need for a multidisciplinary analysis of how, why, when, and by whom security is deployed, constructed, institutionalised, and structured. Likewise, studying the strategies and processes by which security is challenged and disputed also entails a multidisciplinary approach. To understand how individual, local, national, and international securitisation is produced, reproduced, and transformed, as well as how actors are differentially involved in these processes, requires a consideration of different disciplinary expressions of security. If this book gently shakes the relative disciplinary isolation of security scholars and starts to move the conversation in the direction of a multidisciplinary study of security, it will have achieved its objective.

The cross-disciplinary approach advocated in the present volume offers several advantages for students of security. It liberates scholars from pre-emptive rebuttal of their work as being only an importation of work done in another discipline. Scholars are sometimes held dismissively to be borrowers or importers, as if these scholars took the “easy road” by “simply” translating work done in another discipline and tailoring it to their own research theme. International Relations has been (and still is) particularly vulnerable in this regard. Take, for example, the constructivist approach in International Relations – an approach that stresses the social construction of world politics and that is the current dominant perspective among International Relations scholars (even in the US), according to a recent survey (Maliniak, Peterson et al. 2012). Not so long ago, most constructivists were regarded with contempt as merely translators of work done in sociology (in fact, some would argue that such an attitude still persists in certain sub-fields). Constructivists have gone to great lengths to justify the merits of their approach in its own right, without turning their backs on the fact that that approach has been deeply influenced by sociologists. Acknowledging a multidisciplinary perspective in the study of security invites scholars to move away
from the binary distinction of importers/exporters by legitimising and reinforcing cross-disciplinary dialogue. The approach also encourages the consideration of how the different disciplinary understandings of security interact and relate to one another. To be sure, some canyons might still seem too wide to be bridged. Yet, unless we begin the process of opening up cross-disciplinary dialogues on security, scholars might find themselves endlessly trapped in their narrow, discipline-specific fields of inquiry, reinventing the wheel again and again. A multidisciplinary approach encourages scholars to seek external correctives to their own literature gaps and go beyond in-field analytical stalemates.

This is not to suggest that anthropologists should become philosophers or that geographers should become psychologists. I do not wish to “discipline” scholars into embarking on interdisciplinary research projects. It is not the case that all research projects must – or should – be interdisciplinary. Nor do I want to suggest that interdisciplinarity is always, by essence, enlightening. It is not. Work done in an interdisciplinary space has both a dark and a bright side; it is not inherently beneficial. Interdisciplinarity can, for example, be instrumentalised as a disguise to justify a (often hidden) hierarchical understanding of the relationships between disciplines: that is, to produce a unidisciplinary study with “interdisciplinary sugar” on it. Translation problems can also arise, in which scholars import a partial and incomplete set of elements from a discipline to address a given issue, but leave aside the more nuanced understandings of this discipline that have been developed over the years in the literature. Although a parsimonious shortcut might thus be obtained, it is gained at the great expense of exactitude, richness, and complexity.

While acknowledging the importance of these issues, I argue that multidisciplinary studies can offer a unique and insightful approach to an issue, provided that they are structured in a way that allows different disciplines to actually engage in a meaningful debate around a set of mutual concerns. The contributors to this volume certainly demonstrate that a healthy dose of willingness to communicate across
disciplines can go a long way toward enhancing, deepening, and strengthening our understanding of the multifaceted expressions of security.

The second contribution of this book is that it offers a rich and unparalleled understanding of how security is understood, studied, and theorised within the social sciences. The contributions included in this volume bring together essays by leading scholars in Anthropology, Criminology, International Political Economy, Geography, Law, Philosophy, Political Science/International Relations, Psychology, and Sociology. Acknowledging that each discipline has its preferred way of framing a research question, of searching for hypotheses, and of conducting research, the contributors were asked to discuss and assess the following four points:

1. **Research questions**
   What are the fundamental questions orienting the research on security in your discipline? Is there a large consensus about the benefits of organising the scholarship around these central questions?

2. **Theoretical perspectives**
   Are there dominant theories of security in your discipline? Which perspectives are considered marginal? Is the primary objective of the research to propose nomothetic theory building or idiographic explanation?

3. **Research methods**
   How is the concept of security studied in your discipline? Is there a dominant research method? Do we observe a clear demarcation between qualitative and quantitative scholarship?

4. **Strengths and limits**
   What are the biggest strengths and limits of your discipline in the way security is studied and theorised? Would a more interdisciplinary approach to the concept of security help in reducing the identified limits of your discipline?

Although the discussion centres around these questions, the contributors were strongly invited to go beyond a traditional literature review to seize on the prime

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2 The limitation of the present discussion to scholars from these particular disciplines is not intended to imply that other disciplines have nothing meaningful to say about security. They do. Sadly, however, a selection had to be made for feasibility and length purposes.
opportunity to push other disciplines’ boundaries and encourage them to seriously evaluate the way they study and theorise security. The results are insightful, commanding, and challenging.

[End of preview]


Floyd, R. Security and Justice.


