**The Paradox of Security Cosmopolitanism?**

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Does a poststructuralist concern with the power relations at the root of inequality in the international arena negate hope for a progressive vision for our activism today and the results it might produce in the future? If not, how can one navigate (in Stephen White’s [2000] words) a ‘politics of affirmation’ in a postmodern era? Having been defeated by this question either directly or indirectly for my entire academic career, I picked up Anthony Burke’s article on “Security Cosmopolitanism” (first as a reviewer and then as a responder) with a sort of magnetic attraction. Would it be an answer to those questions that finally made sense to me?

Many others have found their answers to this question in Critical Security Studies (CSS) – either in the little “c” sense of theorizing as critique or in the big “C” sense of viewing security as emancipation (e.g., Booth 2007). The former has always seemed to me a somewhat pessimistic project – the very rich theorizing of critical theory is exactly the philosophical roadblock to the sort of ‘politics of affirmation’ that I want to explore. Though White (2000, 15) proposes to have solved the ‘problem,’ his articulation of the paradox has always stuck with me more than his answer to it: “a strength born of an unwarranted rejection of contingency is its own kind of atrophy: a moral-intellectual couch-potatoism that stands in contrast to the active qualities” associated with progressivist theorizing. Instead, it seems to me that following such a road always leads me down a sort of intellectual rabbit hole, where, with Jean Baudrillard (1993), I very viscerally feel “in truth, there is nothing left to ground ourselves on. All that is left is theoretical violence. Speculation to death, whose only method is the radicalization of all hypotheses.” That is a rabbit hole that I always return to, but always hate – given that I feel a very visceral pull to progressivist activism.

On the other hand, progressivist CSS has always seemed to me both normatively insidious and conceptually incompatible with many of the insights of the work that I do in Feminist Security Studies (FSS). I have previously critiqued work that views security as emancipation for holding a misguided sense of the (liberal) individual as the subject of security, being inadequately equipped to deal with the real power differentials among actors in the international arena, assuming a universalistic notion of what it means to be emancipated, and for having ethically and operationally problematic praxis implications (see Sjoberg 2011). Essentially, I am concerned that Booth’s (2007) strand of CSS works hard to avoid the traps of liberal security theorizing only to manifest as liberal security theorizing itself, combining progressivism and universalism. Yet I cannot be a nihilist.

It is in the middle of this intellectual and political struggle that I find myself engaging with – and being seduced by – Burke’s security cosmopolitanism. True to his word, Burke “draws upon *and* contests elements of all of these critical approaches,” where security cosmopolitanism “challenges the reluctance of poststructuralist writers to advance normative claims” but at the same time “supplements broadly Kantian or Habermasian ethics” (p.3). Recognizing, with poststructuralists, “the problematic nature of existing concepts and frameworks,” Burke suggests cosmopolitanism as a solution to the problem, understanding that “security studies, whether critical or traditional, has never taken up cosmopolitanism as a significant theme or approach” (p.6).

Burke suggests that it is time to change that trend, and proposes that a security cosmopolitanism strikes the balance between poststructuralist criticism and liberal progressivism. It does so cognizant of increased global interconnection, normatively committed to the equal moral status of all humans, and interested in both moral and institutional cosmopolitanism – all intellectual and normative commitments that require “the (profound) reform of existing national and global structures of governance in the fields of security, development, human rights, the environment, and world economy” (p.8). In such a reform, “national borders lose their claim to define and enclose human existence,” taking away the power and dominance of traditional security narratives, which are bounded and temporal in nature (p.9). Instead, in Burke’s security cosmopolitanism, “insecurity does not arise before or external to a state that (in the classic narrative) acts as a double guarantee of both security and modernity, but *arises out of that very modernity* as a function of its histories, choice, powers, relations and systems.” Taking this view of how security *has come to be*, in Burke’s view, requires a proactive approach to making security *what it could be*, where “security cosmopolitanism is not going to arrive; it must be *imagined* and *created*” (p.14). Burke then outlines his vision for the “global ethics of security cosmopolitanism,” which includes bestowing security actors with a responsibility for create security for all human beings and the global ecosystem, giving those actors fundamental responsibilities to future generations, and providing a “global categorical imperative” that suggests that actors act as if their actions will become global (p.14-20). Urging “no automatic faith in any one institutional design,” Burke instead places stock in “structural and moral change” and processes of accountability (p.22, 23).

I find this approach seductive in two senses. First, it is seductive in a very straightforward sense. If this approach delivers what it promises, it takes account of poststructuralist and feminist concerns with the structural nature of violence and oppression. It has the potential to do so taking account of the power dynamics inherent in that violence and oppression, but without being paralyzed by concerns about deconstruction, signification, and discursive violence. In theory, it allows both for poststructuralist critique and liberal activism. Such an approach would, to me, be ideal – it would cover my intellectual need for complicated analysis and my political need to *do something about it*.

Second, though, and ultimately conclusively, I find Burke’s security cosmopolitanism seductive in Baudrillard’s (1979) sense. The very appeal of the possibility of an answer to the paradox of the desire for liberal activism in the face of the critical position that such activism is not only useless but more often than not insidious is *so powerful* that it seems to make any answer’s suitability pre-determined and assumed. I found my interaction with Burke’s “Security Cosmopolitanism” to be best described by Baudrillard’s (1979) notion of “the primitive seduction of meaning” in which a story “absorbs meaning and empties itself of meaning in order to better fascinate others.” This “extracts meaning from discourse and detracts it from the truth,” moving from reflecting reality to not only masking/perverting reality, but masking/perverting their own unreflectiveness(Baudrillard 1979). In other words, not only does “Security Cosmopolitanism” represent a red herring qua answering the problem of affirmation in the practice of critique, it covers up its own untenability though a dual discourse of distinguishing itself from previous approaches and presuming its own effectiveness. While not suggesting that this double move of seduction is at all intentional on the part of the author (in Baudrillard’s [1979] terms, “no one can seduce if they have not been seduced themselves”), the remainder of my engagement with “security cosmopolitanism” suggests that it may be not only unhelpful in changing how we think about security but ultimately counterproductive to its own goals. It does so by suggesting that “security cosmopolitanism” is both problematic as a discursive performance of changing security and on its own terms. It concludes by thinking about how analysis of security cosmopolitanism might be framed in a way to understand it as productive.

***The Problems of Security Cosmopolitanism (?)***

Burke suggests his goal is to “critique and reform national and collective security policies and processes: to put better norms and ends to them, restructure their ontological foundations, and keep them under continual scrutiny” (p.2). This goal sounds radical, and is perhaps even more radical than it sounds – what could be more fundamental than restructuring the ontological foundations of policy practice? At the same time, there are a number of indicators throughout the text that the actual changes proposed are not as radical or subversive as the introductory statements suggest.

Particularly, Burke suggests that security cosmopolitanism “rejects a procedural faith in strongly post-Westphalian forms of government and democracy” (p.8) and reiterates that such an approach includes “no automatic faith in one institutional design” (p.22). This seems to move away from one of the prominent critiques of, in L.H.M. Ling and Anna Agathangelou’s (2009) words, the “neoliberal imperium,” as reliant on Western, liberal notions of governance to the detriment of those on whom such a form of government is imposed. Burke clearly problematizes this imposition, framing many of the serious problems in global politics as a result of “*choices* that create destructive dynamics and constraints” (p.5) at least in part *by* Western, liberal governments – characterizing modernity as culpable for insecurity. At the same time, the solution seems to be clearly situated within the discursive framework of the problem. Burke suggests that there should be a primary concern for “effectiveness, equality, fairness, and justice – not for states, per se, but for human beings, and the global biosphere” (p.22). Unless the *only* problem with modernity is the post-Westphalian structure of the state (which this approach does not eschew, but claims not to privilege), then this statement of values might entrench the problem. Many of the ideas of equality, fairness, and justice that come to mind with the (somewhat rehearsed) use of those words in progressive politics are inseparable from an ethos of Enlightenment modernity.

This may be problematic on a number of levels. First, it may fail to interrupt the series of choices that Burke suggests produce a cycle of insecurity. Second, it may fold back onto itself in the recommendations that security cosmopolitanism produces. This especially concerned me in Burke’s discussion of how to end “dangerous processes,” where he places “greater faith in the ethical, normative, and legal suppression of dangerous processes and actions than in formalistic or procedural solutions” (p.23). It seems to me that there is a good argument that “suppression” is itself a “dangerous process,” yet Burke’s framework does not really include a mechanism for internal critique.

Another problem that seems to confound security cosmopolitanism is evaluating the relationships between power, governance, and governmentality. There are certainly several ways in which Burke uses a notion of the state that distinguishes security cosmopolitanism from the mainstream neoliberal literature. For example, he characterizes the “state as an entity whose national survival depends on its global participation, obligations, and dependencies,” (p.5, citing Burke 2013). This view of the state sees it as not only survival-seeking (in the neo-neo synthesis sense) but dependent on its positive interactions with other states for survival. Burke’s approach to government/governance initially appears to be global rather than state-based, another potentially transformative move. For example, he sees the job of security cosmopolitanism as to “theorize and defend norms for responsible conduct and conceptualization of global security governance” (p.16). At the same time, later in the article, Burke suggests entrenching the current structure of the state. His practical approach of looking for the “solidarity of the governing with the governed” seems to simultaneously interrogate current power structures and reify them. Burke says:

Such a ‘solidarity of the governed’ that engages in ‘practical interrogation of power’ ought to be a significant feature of security cosmopolitanism. At the same time, however, security cosmopolitanism must be concerned with improving the global governance of security by elites and experts. (p.16)

This attachment to the improvement of existing structures of governance seems to be at the heart of what I see as the failure of the radical potential in the idea of security cosmopolitanism. When discussing how the power dynamics between the elite and the subordinated might change, Burke suggests that “voluntary renunciation of the privileges and powers of both state and corporate sovereignty will no doubt be a necessary feature of such an order” (p.23). Relying on the voluntary renunciation of power by the powerful seems both unrealistic and not particularly theoretically innovative.

This seems to be at the center of a paradox inherent in security cosmopolitanism: Faith in the Western liberal state is insidious, but the Western liberal state does not have to be. Modernity causes insecurity, but need not be discarded fully. Some universalizations are dangerous, others are benign. Dangerous processes must be stopped, even if by dangerous processes. Moral entrepreneurship is key, but there is no clear foundation for what counts as moral. The security cosmopolitanism critique is inspired by consequentialism, but lacks deontological foundations despite deontological implications. Burke calls for (and indeed demands) to “*take responsibility for it*”(p.21) in terms of “both formal and moral accountability” (p.22). In so doing, he endorses (Booth’s vision of) “*moral* progress” (p.24), despite understanding the insidious deployment of various notions of moral progress by others.

Security cosmopolitianism, then, is a proclamation for radical change that is initially stalled by its internal contradictions and further handicapped by its lack of capacity to enact the very sort of radical change Burke sees as fundamental to righting the wrongs he sees in the world. The result seems to be the (potential) reification of existing governments/governmentality through what essentially appears to be a non-anthropocentric “human security” which cannot be clearly distinguished from current notions of human security (p.17). It appears to remain top-down and without clear moral foundation while claiming significant improvement over existing approaches. This appearance/seduction of improvement without real promise for change might be more insidious than the nihilism of which many post-structuralists are accused, as it seductively appears to solve a problem it does not solve.

***The Problem of Security Cosmopolitanism***

Perhaps, though, holding security cosmopolitanism to the standard that it must solve the problem of a ‘politics of affirmation’ after the post-structuralist critique while simultaneously meeting Baudrillard’s requirements of representational discourse is too demanding. Some might suggest that it is important to judge security cosmopolitanism on its own terms, as a proposed paradigmatic alternative to contemporary ways of thinking about security. In such an evaluation, it would be important to ask whether this was a significant improvement on what other theorizing does, rather than comparing it to an ideal-typical solution and/or dealing with the implications of naming new theories.

Even on these terms, though, I am concerned about the promise of the idea of security cosmopolitanism. My concerns are grounded in Vivienne Jabri’s (2011, 640) critique of security cosmopolitianism as a practice of government that can be implicated in “modes of dispossession, variously of history, territory, the right of access to the international and political subjectivity itself, the right to politics.” Burke, in fact, recounts Jabri’s critique, remembering that“in a powerful recent article Vivienne Jabri argues – in effect – that joining cosmopolitanism with security is normatively dangerous and politically disabling for the populations of conflict-ridden states subject to intervention” (p.15), marking it is “contradictory and aporetic” (p.15). Burke suggests that his version of security cosmopolitanism abandons the tendency to “identify security, governmentality, and violence” and instead “aims to drive the ethos of human solidarity, dignity, and agency” into the theory and practice of security (p.15). In this response, though, Burke has missed (my reading of) the force of Jabri’s critique: that the very act of depoliticizing identities, norms, and forms of government that seems foundational to Burke’s idea of security cosmopolitanism is actually itself a political act of *taking the politics away from* those whose insecurity is the greatest in the current political order.

In other words, if insecurity is a function of histories, choices, powers, relations, and systems of modernity that have created it (Burke, p.12), then the move to security cosmopolitanism could be (and likely will be) another one of those histories and choices that reifies and creates insecurity – if of a different type. One of the major lessons of feminist work in security studies is that it is important to study insecurity, and it is important to look first with a political commitment to understanding the insecurity at the margins of global politics (e.g., Tickner 1992). Doing so with a gaze towards security cosmopolitanism *as functional in politics* reveals two significant problems: the potential to reify existing power structures (as discussed above) and the potential to silence or erase the history of injustice imprinted on those at the margins. In being “forward-looking” (p.18), committing to a cosmopolitan notion of human security (p.18), being guided by a liberal politics of the inclusion of the excluded (p.18), and looking to “enable humans universally” (p.19), Burke at once erases histories of oppression and subordination, differences, and identities that perhaps justify past-looking, difference-parsing, critical approaches to the politics of in/security. The very act of looking for a cosmopolitan approach to security itself silences the ripples in cosmopolitanism, making, in Burke’s terms, a government by the governing in solidarity with the governed, effectively impossible. Instead, it risks erasing histories, taking away territory, and destroying subjectivity by obscuring difference, much like the theories Burke simultaneously critiques and builds on to produce this approach. To me, this makes security cosmopolitan problematic on its own terms, and potentially paradoxical.

***Conclusion***

Perhaps security cosmopolitanism remains problematic both as a discursive performance and a theoretical/practical approach because it is not *the* theory to cross the liberal-poststructuralist divide and provide a path to a ‘politics of affirmation.’ This seems difficult to conclude for me, though, especially given all the things that I like about this articulation as compared to many others that aspired to similar goals. The alternative, it appears to me, is that there is not *a theory* to cross this divide because the problem of how to work affirmatively in the face of massive inequality and related radical deconstruction is unsolvable. In this view, asking security cosmopolitanism (or any other theory) to solve it in any terms may not only be too much but asking the wrong question. Instead, perhaps, seeing this work as a *political* act signifying the *political* commitment to bridge the gap (rather than a strict solution to the puzzle) might both be fairer to the work and provide a way to see a potentially ‘progressive’ contribution in Burke’s article.

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