**Locating Relevance in Security Studies**

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Michael Desch argues that the increasing sophistication of quantitative methodology deployed by those who study war and conflict in global politics (‘Security Studies’) trades off with the relevance of work in the subfield to the ‘real world’ (the Washington Beltway), which is normatively and substantively problematic. I generally agree with Desch that Security Studies has a relevance problem attributable to its current epistemological and methodological framings. However, I think Desch specifies both the target of relevance and the scope of Security Studies’ methodological issues in ways that obscure the degree to which his own analytical framework is actually part of the problem rather than an effective critique of it.

First, I see Desch’s interpretation of ‘relevance’ as overly narrow. Desch’s skewed understanding of relevance causes him to misdiagnose Security Studies’ relevance problem. His argument homologizes ‘relevance’ of Security Studies and its ability to gain an audience in the Washington Beltway in the United States as it considers US national security. Accordingly, Desch longs for a time when Security Studies had the ear of the Washington elite. I contend that attention from the Beltway is at best orthogonal to and quite possibly negatively correlated with the sort of relevance I find important, intellectually and normatively. Security Studies, both before and after the quantitative turn that Desch identifies, has generally been focused on interstate interaction (with a skew towards great power politics). It makes sense from that perspective, then, that its proponents would associate ‘relevance’ with heed from a great power government.

Even early research from a feminist perspective, however, suggested that secure states produce (gendered) insecure people at their margins, because the provision of national security operates on hierarchies of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and national identity (e.g., Tickner 1992; Peterson and Runyan 1992). Accordingly, feminist (and other critical) work that intervenes in the field of Security Studies takes a normative interest in the lives of those people at the margins of the international system, rejecting the assumption that great power dominance is normatively good (e.g., Tickner 1992; Wibben 2010; Sjoberg 2013). This research asks what makes people secure, and what makes people insecure – the referent of ‘security’ is the individual, the family, the community, and the local social network rather than the (great) state (Hudson 2005; Hoogenson and Rottem 2004). Often, empirical studies of peoples’ (in)securities suggest that ‘the Beltway’ is a *security threat* both to many Americans, and to many more people around the world – rather than the entity to which Security Studies should be making suggestions about increasing its own security (Young 2003; Sjoberg 2013). In this view, ‘security’ is as much about the availability of nutrition and clean water than about troop logistics; as much about freedom from domestic violence than about air maneuvers; and as much about the provision of medical care than nuclear deterrence.

This suggests that the Beltway’s military-focused strategic and tactical concerns are the wrong subject of security, and elite American policy-makers are the wrong audience for relevance. In an interpretation of Security Studies that *pays attention to* the margins of global politics, ‘relevance’ should be pinned to a number of other factors, including but not limited to accessibility and/or benefit to people at the margins of global politics, provision of locally sustainable security solutions, critiques of gendered and raced hierarchies in global social and political life, and/or transgressions against cycles of interstate violence and intrastate repression. In this interpretation of ‘relevance,’ there was not a time gone by when Security Studies *used to be* appropriately relevant – it never has been.

Still, even in this interpretation of relevance, Desch’s suggestion that there is a trade-off between relevance and the use of increasingly sophisticated quantitative methods to study security has some merit. While there are many knowledge-producing benefits to quantification (see discussion in Barkin and Sjoberg, forthcoming), and more benefits to quantification which does a better job of capturing the complexities of the lived realities of (in)security in global politics, there are also many limits – not only in accessibility, but also in the ability to capture a number of different phenomena relevant to that (in)security, such as structures of signification (e.g., Steans 2014); liminality, marginality, and invisibility (e.g., Sjoberg 2012), co-constitutive relationships (e.g., Begmand Rosamond 2013). These limits may well *net* a decrease in relevance coming from the increased use of quantitative methods in Security Studies.

However, I argue that whatever negative impact the increased use of quantitative methods might have on the relevance of Security Studies as an enterprise is a small subset of the irrelevance that results from a focus on an understanding that, quantitative or qualitative, Security Studies is appropriately understood as within the realm of (a narrow, neopositivist) interpretation of social science. Desch takes this assumption for granted, and talks about what sort of social science methods to use and how to frame social scientific research usefully to policy-makers. A narrow, neopositivist focus on social science is one among many possible for Security Studies. Feminist work, instead, has suggested that this sort of ‘objectivity’ is the universalization of the experiential knowledge of the elite, with the effect of silencing other voices (e.g., Harding 1998). In this view, the ‘scientific method’ approach to Security Studies research, quantitative or qualitative, could be seen as another axis of hierarchy and exclusion in the field. While I will not be able to do that argument justice in the short space that I have, I think it is important to point out the ways in which observability and objectivity, as much as quantification and regression, can be seen to narrow what is analyzed and understood as important in Security Studies.

This understanding suggests that while Desch is correct that Security Studies has a relevance problem rooted in disciplinary methodology, his argument’s problematically narrow interpretation of relevance and his contribution’s complicity in the discipline’s current (violent) epistemologies obscure the ways in which his piece (and its memories of Security Studies’ better days) is a source of Security Studies’ irrelevance rather than a critique thereof.

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