The 'Western-Centrism' of Security Studies: 'Blind Spot' or Constitutive Practice?

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Unlike some other staples of security studies that do not even register the issue, Buzan & Hansen's (2009) *The Evolution of International Security Studies* unambiguously identifies 'Western-centrism' as a problem. This article seeks to make the point, however, that treating heretofore-understudied insecurities (such as those experienced in the non-West) as a 'blind spot' of the discipline may prevent us from fully recognizing the ways in which such 'historical absences' have been constitutive of security both in theory and in practice. Put differently, the discipline's 'Western-centric' character is no mere challenge for students of security studies. The 'historical absence' from security studies of non-Western insecurities *and* approaches has been a 'constitutive practice' that has shaped (and continues to shape) both the discipline *and* subjects and objects of security in different parts of the world.

Keywords insecurity • security studies • Eurocentrism • postcolonial • Third World

THERE IS MUCH TO ADMIRE in *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). My brief remarks will focus not on what the book does so admirably, but on what it allows the reader to do – something that is bound to differ from reader to reader, as the various contributions to this special issue demonstrate. In what follows, I will engage with the book as regards the avowedly 'Western-centric' trajectory of security studies.[1]

[1] Throughout this article, I will use the terms 'developed/developing', 'West/non-West', 'Europe/non-Europe', 'First World/Third World', 'core/non-core' and 'South/North' interchangeably, not because I am not aware of the problems involved in so doing, but because I want to talk about a set of problems that are tied up with these binaries. The main binary that the article revolves around is Western/non-Western, not because 'ethnocentric construction of knowledge' is a 'western privilege', but because 'this particular privilege has been intrinsic to the deployment of global power' (Slater, 1998: 669) and the imperial is thus crucial for understanding global security dynamics in theory and in practice. Accordingly, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, I have made a choice for 'strategic essentialism' – that is, 'using a clear image of identity to fight a politics of opposition (which would not be possible if all the aspects of identity were to be incorporated)' (Sharp, 2009: 114).

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Unlike some other staples of security studies that do not register the issue, Buzan & Hansen have unambiguously identified Western-centrism as a problem,[2] while reminding the reader that there is no easy solution. Drawing their task as one of analysing 'the evolution of ISS as it has taken place, not as we wish that it *should* have gone', the co-authors register the 'Anglo-centric (and militaristic and patriarchal) bias' of international security studies as a 'blind spot', seeking to remedy it by '[granting] critical approaches more space than they have had quantitatively' (Buzan & Hansen, 2009: 19; emphasis in original).

The point I would like to make is that treating heretofore-understudied insecurities as a 'blind spot' of the discipline may prevent us from fully recognizing the ways in which the *historical absence* of non-Western insecurities has been *constitutive* both of the discipline and of subjects and objects of security in different parts of the world.

I borrow the term 'historical absence' from Ben Alexander (2006), who used it in a recent article that deals with the difficulties encountered by historians who want to uncover the constitutive role played by historical forces and dynamics that are not reflected in material records as found in archives. As an intellectual history of the study of security, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* grapples with a similar problem of historical absence. This is because historically only a very thin slice of security studies literature has looked at insecurity as experienced outside 'the West'. Is it possible to make the history of security studies less 'Western-centric' if there is little record of non-Western insecurities and approaches to be found in the figurative archives of the discipline?

Buzan & Hansen answer this question in the affirmative vis-à-vis women and gender by covering *both* those issues that are traditionally studied as 'security' in the literature *and* those others that have been highlighted as insecurities by its feminist critics. Gendered insecurities have traditionally been considered to be 'low politics' issues and therefore overlooked by mainstream security studies,[3] but they are made visible in *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. Accordingly, Buzan & Hansen's history is less gendered than security studies itself. Notwithstanding the subsidiary status of women's insecurities in respect of mainstream approaches to security, the co-authors have found a way of remedying such neglect and making their history less peripheral than it might otherwise have been.[4]

Could a similar approach have helped to address the issue of the Western-centrism of security studies? My answer is both yes and no.

[2] Another exception is Booth (2008).

[3] Consider Miller's (2010) article elsewhere in this issue, which views gender as worthy of analysis – just not security analysis.

[4] As Buzan & Hansen (2009: 1–20) acknowledge, their strategy is far from being uncontroversial vis-à-vis 'securitization'.

Yes, it is conceivable that a similar approach would have helped – were it not for the present limitations of what is written on security in/by the 'non-West'. Over the years, there has developed a body of work that looks at women's insecurities. It is possible to find records of these works perhaps not in the top but in the bottom drawers of the figurative archives of security studies (see Enloe, 1990; Tickner, 1992). It is thus somewhat easier to remedy the discipline's gender bias while remaining within the limits imposed by the co-authors' reliance on material evidence in intellectual history-writing, whereas the problem of historical absence is graver in the case of non-Western insecurities.

While there is a body of work that looks at security in the South/Third/developing world, it offers relatively little insight into non-Western insecurities. Writing in 1986, Baghat Korany observed that security studies literature tended to slot non-Western actors into one of two available roles. Either they were a part of the 'established paradigm, and assigned the role of junior-partners in the power game' or they were labelled as '"trouble-makers", thriving on "nuisance power", fit for the exercise of techniques of "counter-insurgency"' (Korany, 1986: 549). This was because these writings view the developing world as an object of security, not a subject – something that needs to be secured to serve the purposes of outsiders (and their local allies), but not necessarily local peoples and social groups. Put differently, non-Western insecurities are more difficult to capture in intellectual history-writing owing to the meagre records found in the top or bottom drawers of security studies archives. What is on offer views insecurity in the non-West from an avowedly Western-centric perspective.[5]

That said, my answer to the question above is also negative (no, a similar approach would not have been enough of a solution), because the Western-centric character of security studies is no mere deficiency that could be remedied through granting the non-West a disproportionately large place in intellectual history-writing. This is because, as with women and gender, in the case of Western-centrism there is also a need for going beyond adding and stirring. In the case of women and gender, Buzan & Hansen do not only point to women's insecurities but also highlight the gendered character of security in theory and practice, thus underscoring the need for uncovering how the very mechanisms through which security knowledge is generated and put into use are gendered *and* produce gendered insecurities (see Cohn, 1987; Elshtain, 1987). The point is thus that seeking to remedy Western-centrism by way of allocating such literature more room in intellectual history-writing would have been helpful but not sufficient, for it would not have allowed for fully acknowledging the magnitude or consequences of the problem of

[5] As will be seen below, this may be true for the literature originating both from the core and from the non-core; see also Bilgin (forthcoming).

the historical absence of the non-West from security studies.[6] Such historical absence has had an enduring presence through its constitutive effects.

In offering to read the Western-centrism of security studies as a 'constitutive practice' (Walker, 1993), I follow Cynthia Enloe's (1996) advice to inquire into the silences of disciplines. Inquiries into the phenomenology of silence have shown that silence may mean different things – including suppressed resistance, lack of consciousness, mere complicity or an 'adaptive response to domination' (Sheriff, 2000).[7] The limits of security studies vis-à-vis the South need problematizing if we are to identify the factors and actors that shape security agendas (practice) and bestow/withdraw 'linguistic legitimacy' (Sheriff, 2000: 118) in the writing of security (theory), and inquire into the mutually constitutive relationship between theory and practice. The task is to uncover how security studies' peripheral insight into non-Western insecurities has been constitutive of security in theory *and* in practice. There are two interrelated lines of reasoning here.

First, the historical absence of non-Western insecurities from security studies has shaped not only practices but also the theory of security in non-Western settings. In practice, many non-Western elites have embraced the 'standard' notion of security and utilized it in building national security states. What security studies had on offer (a state-focused approach to world politics and 'national security' as the language of state action) also served the interests of non-Western elites busy with state-building. This is not to suggest that non-Western elites needed a security studies warrant. Nor is it to forget that throughout the Cold War there were policies in effect that actively encouraged the building of national security states. Yet, there is nevertheless a point to be made about the need for taking a reflexive look at the dynamics behind the persistence of mainstream security studies outside the 'West' notwithstanding the discipline's Western-centred 'blind spot',[8] for policymakers or scholars in non-core settings were no mere vessels but also merchants of the increasing production and consumption of 'standard' notions of security (Bilgin, forthcoming).

In theory, those who embraced security studies as a way of understanding world politics inherited its weaknesses alongside its strengths. Doing international relations and security studies in the 'Western' way emerged as a way of signalling a break with the (ostensibly 'non-rational') past and an embrace of post-Enlightenment/modern ('rational') ways. The post-World War II emergence of the USA as the 'dominant producer of both ideas and things' (Bell, 1991: 97) coincided with and provided a basis for the modernization and/or Westernization projects of elites in various parts of the world. The

[6] See also Shah's (2010) article elsewhere in this issue, in which the author calls for a genealogy and not a history of security studies.

[7] Hansen (2000) addressed the difficulties involved in the study of women's security through discourse analysis.

[8] See also Acharya & Buzan (2009).

limits of mainstream security studies in explaining insecurities tied up with post-colonial statehood, for instance, resulted in scepticism toward disciplinary approaches to security and an embrace of exceptionalist explanations – as found in geopolitics at best and conspiracy theories at worst.[9]

Second, mainstream security studies' failure to take notice of non-Western insecurities has been constitutive of present-day security studies. In particular, the discipline's Western-centric character has rendered security studies knowledge both parochial and peripheral. Security studies knowledge is parochial because it mistakes 'Western' experiences for the universal, thus failing to take note of different insecurities and responses in other locales. Security studies knowledge is also peripheral because the literature's high-handed dismissal of 'low politics' issues has resulted in the emergence of a warped notion of national/state security while neglecting other potential referents.

Indeed, one of the main points raised by non-Western critics of security studies has been that 'standard' concepts do not work outside the core because there is a 'software' as well as a 'hardware' side to security (Azar & Moon, 1988) and the internal and the external dimensions are interlinked (Al-Mashat, 1985; Korany, 1986). Failure to take note of such criticism has allowed the proliferation of a literature on, for instance, 'state failure' that finds fault with some states (or their leaders/regimes) but not with the global political-economic structure that allows them to 'fail' (Bilgin & Morton, 2002). Equally problematic are those notions of 'state' (Milliken & Krause, 2002) and 'development' (Muppidi, 2004) that impress 'certain ways of knowing' that, in turn, produce literature written from within the parameters of 'the established paradigm', taking for granted existing notions of 'statehood', 'development' and 'security'. Security studies' oversight of insecurities as produced by the imposition/adoption of a particular notion of the state but not the different forms states have historically taken in different parts of the world, or the factors behind and implications of such differentiation, has contributed to the persistence of quixotic notions of statehood, along with the practices of intervention and state-building they sanction.

This is not to overlook a body of work that does take into account different forms of the state (see Buzan, 1991) and the insecurities that follow (e.g. Ayoob, 1995). Yet, by way of failing to inquire into the circumstances that have shaped the imposition/adoption of such 'standard' notions (as with the fall of some empires and the rise of others), such analyses neglect knowledge/power dynamics in the production of security studies knowledge and the practices it shapes. In particular, they overlook how the non-Western is almost always 'caught in translation' (to use Spivak's phrase) and is thus compelled to express insecurities within the vocabulary given to him/her 'in

[9] Not entirely unlike the consequences of a mutual ambivalence between disciplinary social sciences and area studies; see Anderson (2003).

order to be taken seriously – to be seen as having knowledge and not opinion or folklore' (Sharp, 2009: 111). It is only recently that the security implications of the dominance (and persistence) of certain ways of knowing (as with Orientalism) have begun to be explicitly drawn out by students of security studies.[10]

I make this second point as a corollary to post-colonial critics who have argued that Euro-centrism in history-writing has not only resulted in the production of a certain way of understanding non-Europe, but has also been constitutive of Europe (Halperin, 1997; Hobson, 2004). Going beyond mere pointing to different worlds existing out there, their works show how such difference has been partly constituted by the West/non-West encounter that is inclusive of but not limited to the colonial encounter; how it is shaped by insecurities generated by unequal power distribution; and how such encounters have shaped both sides (Ling, 2002; Barkawi, 2005). To complement this argument, I would like to underscore the constitutive effects of the West/non-West relationship not only in terms of the production of a particular set of security relations in the West and between the West and the non-West but also in terms of the study of security.

Overall, I have argued that Western-centrism is no mere 'blind spot' but has been constitutive of security studies. The end result is security knowledge that is not only parochial but also peripheral. What is needed is further insight into insecurities as experienced by people and social groups in different parts of the world, writings that treat them as subjects and not mere objects of security, and exercises in reflexive intellectual history-writing that seek to uncover the ways in which the production and employment of security knowledge has rendered peoples and social groups less secure. The limits of material evidence (in top or bottom drawers of the archives) need not stall efforts; such absence may itself serve as a starting point.

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[10] See, for example, Bilgin (2005); Barkawi & Laffey (2006).

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