

THE CONTINUING APPEAL OF CRITICAL SECURITY STUDIES¹

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Twenty years have passed since the publication of Ken Booth's seminal essay 'Security and Emancipation' (1991). It has been 16 years since Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones offered the first post-graduate level course on 'Critical Security Studies (CSS)' at Aberystwyth University (1995/96).² Since then, the critical body of work produced by Booth, Wyn Jones, their close collaborators and (by now many) students has come to be known as the Aberystwyth School of CSS. Twenty years on CSS is going strong.³

Over the years, CSS has made important inroads into the study of security in Western Europe, North America and Australia⁴ – 'the West', for want of a better term.⁵ Considering the growing number of courses offered at universities, seminars organized and/or sponsored by think-tanks, conference papers, journal articles, books and book chapters, the rest of the world has not remained indifferent to the appeal of CSS either.⁶ This is in addition to a body of work produced by scholars located in 'the West' studying 'non-Western' insecurities from a CSS perspective.⁷ Needless to say, these two sets of literatures have not developed in isolation from each other; there is plenty of jointly produced work.⁸

The standing CSS has reached outside the Western context must have come as a surprise to those who have viewed the centrality of emancipation to be a factor diminishing its potential for being picked up by scholars elsewhere in the world. In particular, the critics have pointed to the ideational origins of CSS, which is unmistakably Western European, and argued that CSS is bound to have limited political impact.⁹ These two points have shaped the debates on two interrelated issues: the relevance of CSS for understanding insecurities in the non-West, and what it means for CSS (as with other security scholarship) to have political impact. What follows takes each issue in turn and seeks to address the points made by the critics in light of both CSS scholars' writings and their reception outside Western contexts.

It is argued, first, that understanding why CSS has been remarkably well received in the non-West call for: (a) questioning our unacknowledged assumptions as to how and why theories and concepts travel from one context to another; and (b) recognizing that geo-cultural differences in security thinking are not pre-given (or immutable) 'facts of life', but themselves products of global dynamics.¹⁰

The second and related argument is about the supposed Eurocentrism of CSS. Without wanting to make too much of the fact that the critics sometimes fail the Eurocentrism test they set for the others, it is significant to highlight how CSS is often received in the non-West as an antidote to Eurocentrism. This is because non-Western scholars appreciate the refusal of CSS to limit the security agenda to those issues identified as security problems, and the emphasis put on those insecurities that are left unproblematic by the supposedly problem-solving theories. The point being that the potential of Critical Security Studies for political impact should be considered not only in terms of whispering practicalities into the 'Prince's ear' but also as 'challenging the ideas that made us' (the title of Ken Booth's interview in this volume).

The relevance of CSS for understanding insecurities in the non-West

Mohammed Ayoub (1995; 1997) is one of the most vocal critics of CSS. Over the years he has maintained that, while CSS may constitute a step forward in so far as it has moved away from mainstream approaches' almost exclusive focus on external threats, CSS scholars have made a crucial mistake by letting ethnocentrism in through the back door by linking security with emancipation.

On closer inspection, however, Ayoub's reservations seem to have less to do with the Western European origins of ideas about emancipation and more to do with their suitability outside 'the West'.¹¹ Emancipation-oriented approaches to security are not suitable for non-Western contexts, argues Ayoub, because those parts of the world are still going through a phase comparable to Europe's violent past, and therefore cannot (and should not) aspire to emancipation. Ayoub (1997: 127) writes:

[T]o posit emancipation as synonym with security and the panacea for all the ills plaguing Third World states can be the height of naïveté. Emancipation, interpreted as the right of every ethnic group to self-determination, can turn out to be a recipe for grave disorder and anarchy as far as most Third World states are concerned.

It may be fine, Ayoub concludes, to consider emancipation as an aspect of security in the West, but 'it would be extremely far-fetched and intellectually disingenuous to do the same in the case of the Third World, where basic problems of state legitimacy, political order, and capital accumulation are far from being solved and may even be getting worse' (Ayoub 1995: 11).

CSS writings offer four sets of responses to such criticism. One is to say that Ayoob misjudges the CSS notion of emancipation. While emancipation eludes easy definition,¹² it is also ‘a concept that has been associated with some of the great progressive struggles in modern history’ (Wyn Jones 2005: 217). Depending on the context, self-determination may be one among many challenges encountered by individuals and social groups. As highlighted in the interview in this volume, Booth considers ‘bread, knowledge, and freedom’ as a comprehensive basis for thinking about emancipation worldwide.¹³ The second and related response is to highlight the difference in the CSS approach to the politics of security/identity. From a CSS perspective, identity does not exist ‘out there’ prior to interaction. Accordingly, it is not accessible to security scholars independent of the particular political, social and historical context. As Bill McSweeney (1999: 73) has underscored, ‘identity is not to be taken as an independent variable, *tout court*; it is often the outcome of a labelling process which reflects a conflict of interests at the political level’. Accordingly, insecurity need not be viewed as a product of identity differences; identity differences may well be products of insecurities (McSweeney 1999). Adopting a social constructivist and reflexive approach to security/identity dynamics as such allows CSS scholars to avoid the very risk that Ayoob has identified with linking security with emancipation – even if it were equated with self-determination.

The third response to Ayoob’s critique is to clarify what emancipation entails from a CSS perspective. Defined in suitably flexible terms as the ‘political-ethical direction’ of security scholarship (Wyn Jones 2005: 217), emancipation is shared by most critical theorists even as they unambiguously distance themselves from the project of Enlightenment.¹⁴ What is more, the very notion of emancipation adopted by Booth and Wyn Jones pushes the term beyond its Western European origins and conceptualizes it as ‘political convergences on needs, not agreement on foundations’, in Hayward Alker’s turn of phrase (2005: 201).¹⁵

Finally, regarding the issue of emancipation’s Western European origins, Booth has underscored that ‘what matters is not where ideas come from but how well they travel’ (Booth 2005a: 181). In his interview he elaborates on this point:

I do not see the values of the Enlightenment as ‘essentially’ European, nor do I believe that ‘we’ are emancipated and ‘they’ need catch up. As it happens, at this moment in Western countries there is much moving away from what I consider to be the road to emancipation.

(Booth, *this volume*, 68)

CSS scholars refuse to take ideas (such as emancipation) as products of a single geo-cultural setting. For that would amount to treating cultures as insulated containers of ideas and values. Indeed, CSS’s reception worldwide suggests that what we take to be geo-cultural differences are themselves products of global political dynamics. The fact that the four key authors interviewed for this book have all their origins in the margins of their own geo-cultural setting (Booth from a mining village in Yorkshire; Wyn Jones from Wales; Linklater from Scotland; and Cox from an

Anglophone part of Francophone Quebec) underscore that the decisive divide is centre-periphery dynamics as products (and producers) of relations between the Global South and the Global North.¹⁶

While CSS scholars understand the relationship between geo-cultures and concepts as mutually constitutive, they have so far not paid close attention to the social and historical contexts in which concepts and theories travel from one place to another. Consider the case of China, where ‘national security’ has remained paramount in theory. This is partly because state security prevails over human security in practice. It is also partly to do with how some Chinese scholars consider ‘national security’ to be the conceptual framework through which the United States makes sense of the world (as with International Relations in general).¹⁷

Be it for reasons of rivalry or envy, US concepts and theories are adopted in China. Against that background, the geo-cultural explanation Yongjin Zhang (2007: 180) offers in explaining the apparent absence of CSS in the Chinese context (that it ‘has no intellectual roots in China’) is not entirely convincing. This is because, as Simon Dalby (2007: 253) reminds us, adopting CSS would not require too much of a theoretical stretch beyond ‘reinventing their Marxist roots’. Contra Zhang, then, in China scholars seem to have made a choice for adopting a Western-originated body of concepts and theories for reasons less to do with job description of theory, or with the geo-cultural origins of ideas, but with the dynamics of global politics.¹⁸ It follows that CSS’s reception worldwide has less to do with geo-cultural origins of ideas and more with the (potential) practical implications of adopting one body of concepts and theories over another.

Consider Katrina Lee-Koo’s reflection on this issue:

It is not a revelation for critical feminists ... that political concepts designed ostensibly for a ‘universal good’ might be, for some, the source of oppression. Any political concept claiming universality is destined to silence the experiences, imaginings and goals of those who deviate from the mainstream construction of knowledge ... In this sense, emancipation is no different.

(Lee-Koo 2007: 242)

Lee-Koo offers a two-fold strategy in an attempt to hold on to a notion of emancipation in re-thinking non-Western women’s security. This strategy entails first, [deconstructing] the gendered (which often simultaneously means oppressive) nature of the concept and to reconstruct it towards a feminist ethic that challenges *all* forms of domination for *all* women’ (Lee-Koo 2007: 242). The second leg of Lee-Koo’s strategy involves theorizing emancipation in such a way that it ‘[includes] the insights of an array of non-Western and post-colonial critical feminists working on issues of insecurity’ (2007: 243). As such, Lee-Koo has identified a way of pushing emancipation beyond its geo-cultural origins, thereby avoiding the very dangers that the critics have warned against.

Haider Nizamani’s (2008) analysis of South Asian dynamics from a critical perspective reaffirms the appropriateness of Lee-Koo’s strategy. According to

Nizamani, adopting a critical perspective is a must because 'their' theories fail to account for 'our realities'. What is worth underscoring here is that Nizamani (2008: 91) considers 'their' theories to be those mainstream approaches that fail to account for (if not marginalize) South Asian 'realities'. At the same time, Nizamani embraces CSS 'as a more productive alternative to existing sterile Political Realism in various garbs'. He calls for 'synthesising Critical International Relations Theory and Subaltern Studies to analyse issues that are of concern to security analysts of South Asia' (Nizamani 2008: 106). In contrast to Zhang, then, Nizamani rejects categorizing theories in terms of geo-cultural origin but emphasizes their differences in terms their analytical and political appropriateness in the study of non-Western insecurities. Such a differentiation, in turn, corresponds to the problem-solving/critical theory distinction that CSS rests upon.

The potential of CSS for political impact

A second weakness the critics have pointed to is the limits of CSS in terms of political impact. Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey (2006) have located the roots of this problem in the Eurocentrism of Security Studies writ large. According to the authors, CSS is not immune from Eurocentrism as such and this limit defines the limits of its potential for political impact. Barkawi and Laffey characterize Security Studies as Eurocentric for two reasons. First, Security Studies has failed to grasp the full reality of global insecurity, partly due to its neglect of the Global South's experiences by virtue of security scholars adopting great power-centric lenses, and partly because of the limits of current categories of International Relations (IR), such as 'state', 'war' and 'terror'. Second, Security Studies has overlooked the linkages between 'the weak and the strong'; the 'Global South' and the 'Global North' and the constitutive relationship in between. Indeed, as they note, '[t]hat the weak play an integral part in shaping world politics is harder to deny when a Southern resistance movement strikes at the heart of Northern power' (Barkawi and Laffey 2006: 333).

The point that critical approaches are not immune from Eurocentrism was made previously.¹⁹ What is distinctive about Barkawi and Laffey's critique is the way they link it up to mainstream Security Studies' failure to account for current and historical security dynamics, and the potential implications of such a failure for security policies worldwide. That said, the authors' labelling of CSS as Eurocentric (and therefore limited in terms of political impact), even as they highlight Ayooob's argument as appropriately non-Eurocentric (and therefore having more potential for political impact) is somewhat confusing.

Eurocentrism in IR could be defined as the practice of putting Europe at the centre of one's thinking about the past, present and future of world politics. Eurocentrism need not be reduced to conscious acts of putting Europe (and/or 'the West') and its interests first. One can be Eurocentric in an unthinking manner, by way of taking European experiences as the norm when considering international phenomena. What is characteristic to the latter form is a particular understanding

of Europe and its experiences as unique and self-contained. It is this second form of Eurocentrism that Ayooob's analysis exhibits along with some other forms of critical IR. In contrast, from its earliest origins in Booth's book *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (1979), CSS has sought to distance itself from Eurocentrism.²⁰

To start with Ayooob, his criticism regarding mainstream approaches to security and their global relevance is that their notion of state does not fit the Third World where states 'happen to be at a stage of state making at which most industrial democracies were in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries' (Ayooob 1997: 122). Formulated as such, Ayooob offers a crucial corrective to mainstream approaches that are built upon assumptions of states as uniform entities. However, Ayooob does not push his critique to its logical conclusion, stopping short of offering an assessment of mainstream conceptualizations of the state. What he offers instead is a critique of states in the Third World and how they do not fit Security Studies notions. Whereas, as debates surrounding 'state failure' have lain bare, the problem at hand is not only with the 'nature' of some states but also with prevalent notions of 'the state'.²¹

What is more, by way of buying into the 'stages of development' assumptions on which modernization theories are built, Ayooob exhibits a form of Eurocentric ethnocentrism that he otherwise wishes to do away with. This is because he adopts a certain understanding of Western European history as the norm and sketches a trajectory for the rest – his only reservation being that critical approaches should not impose contemporary 'Western' standards onto the rest of the world. However, it is historically inaccurate to argue, as Ayooob does, that '[t]erritorial satiation, societal cohesion, and political stability – all part of a successful state making – have determined the generally pacific nature of industrial democracies' relations with each other' (Ayooob 1997: 136). On the contrary, as Barkawi and Laffey (1999) have argued elsewhere, the 'pacific nature of industrial democracies' is an historical product of (often neglected) constitutive relations between the periphery and the core, including the role that the deployment and constitution of force elsewhere around the world has played in allowing 'peace' among democracies. Furthermore, as Sandra Halperin has shown, the Western European model against which the Third World is measured is 'more fiction than fact' and 'the pattern displayed in contemporary Third World development is analogous to the pattern of development in pre-1945 Europe' (Halperin 1997: viii–ix) – but not the sixteenth or nineteenth centuries as Ayooob argues. Then, contra Ayooob, who joins mainstream approaches in conceiving an insurmountable gap between the development trajectories of states in Western Europe and the Third World, Historical Sociology and Critical Theory accounts underscore synchronic *and* diachronic links between the two.²² Further, they identify the mainstream notion of state as a product of this very relationship.

On closer inspection, then, Ayooob's notion of the state emerges to be problematic by virtue of its Eurocentrism that overlooks historical relationships of state formation and consolidation. These relationships are not merely those between the colonizers and the colonized, some which have survived de-colonization. Rather, these are relationships that result in the social production of insecurity in a variety of ways, involving the constitution of categories including state, democracy, success/failure,

developed/developing. If it is the construction of a 'Western' identity as distinct from (if not superior to) the rest that has helped to obscure the 'Eastern origins of Western civilisation' (Hobson 2004) and 'Europe's colonial past' (Halperin 1997), the very categories through which we make sense of security dynamics in a synchronic manner are complicit in the (re)production of insecurities worldwide, including the Global South. Understanding insecurities as by-products of our own categories, in turn, demand both diachronic *and* synchronic scrutiny. Following Coxian Critical Theory, CSS offers both.

While offering a non-Eurocentric account does not immediately translate into political impact, the insight CSS provides into the historical (re)production of insecurities worldwide is testimony to its potential as such. For, as highlighted above, one reason why CSS is received well in non-Western contexts has to do with its focus on insecurities experienced in the Global South. While mainstream critics identify the origins of CSS in Critical Theory to be a major weakness, that critical edge transpires to be a source of strength in the eyes of non-Western scholars. In Booth's formulation, the job definition of CSS as a 'theory of world security' (Booth 2007) is different from that of mainstream approaches: not one of seeking to advise 'the Prince' but 'to stand outside the contemporary situation as far as possible and hold up a mirror – to try to show people what the world is like and what it will continue to be like if behaviour remains dominated by the traditional ideas that made us' (Booth, this volume, 76). This definition fits right into Cox's distinction between problem solving and critical theory. At the same time, it turns on their heads everyday understandings of what it means to 'solve problems' versus being 'critical'. In the interviews, Cox clarified the difference between problem solving and critical theories as follows: 'critical thinking is directed more toward historical change, whereas problem solving means thinking within the existing historical structure about how to overcome the difficulties that might arise' (this volume, 20).

While the distinction that Cox makes does not leave much room for confusion, it is often the case that everyday understandings of being critical (engaging in navel-gazing) versus problem solving (being useful) are imposed upon Coxian terminology. Hence Booth's clarification of the distinction between critical versus problem-solving theories of security. CSS, he writes, offers 'a security studies that goes beyond problem-solving *within* the status quo and, and instead seeks to help engage through critical theory with the problems *of* the status quo' (Booth 2007: 48).

To recap, Ayoob suffers from a form of Eurocentrism that Barkawi and Laffey would like to do away with. As such, the political and policy relevance of Ayoob's account is bound to be as limited as mainstream Security Studies. In turn, by virtue of the diachronic and synchronic analysis it offers, CSS does not fit the authors' definition of Eurocentrism. Furthermore, its focus on producing critiques of the structures that produce problems (as opposed to solving those problems defined in the narrow terms of mainstream approaches) need not hinder the potential of CSS for political impact. For, political impact need not be reduced to advising the policy-maker alone. CSS seeks to make an impact by refusing to engage with 'the world as it is, because we have to live in it' (Waltz quoted in Booth, this volume, 81),

and instead calling for a discussion ‘[f]ocusing on the meaning of “the world as it is” and whether trying to “live in it” under contemporary conditions with traditional ideas is a recipe for disaster’ (Booth, this volume, 75).

Conclusion

From 1991 to 2011, CSS has developed into a wide-ranging subfield of Security Studies with many students. Significant steps have been taken in terms of elaborating on certain key concepts and a lot remains to be done on some others. The appeal of CSS beyond the West has clearly surpassed the presumptions of the critics. It could be surmised that it is because CSS constitutes an instance of post-Eurocentric Security Studies that it is so well received in non-Western contexts. While few CSS scholars explicitly draw upon Post-Colonial Studies,²³ Booth’s individual and joint work with Peter Vale on Southern Africa (1995) and Eli Stamnes’ studies on peacekeeping (2004) offer insight into the dynamic relationships between the weak and the strong, including notions and practices of security in the Global South (Thomas and Wilkin 1999 and Whitworth 2004).

The critics of CSS often suggest that while it may be fine to try and change the world, this is the world that we have to live in. We should seek to address problems first, they argue, and perhaps later we can try and change the world! Or, as Booth has neatly summarized, ‘Hobbes today, Kant tomorrow’ (1991: 321). One response to such caricaturized representations of critical versus problem-solving theory is to highlight the relationship between short-term (1–12 months), medium-term (2–3 years) and long-term (3–15 years) policy-making and the need to avoid ‘short-termism (the preference for approaching security issues within the time-frame of the next election, not the next generation)’ (Booth 1999a: 4). For Hobbesian practices of today may make it impossible to follow Kantian policies tomorrow due to the potentially counter-productive implications of short-termist policies (as witnessed in US policy-making toward Afghanistan during the 1970s, 1980s and in the post-9/11 era) (Bilgin and Morton 2004).

Another response to the critics would be to remind them that what renders CSS attractive in the non-West is not the promise of Kantian ‘Perpetual Peace’ as is often presumed, but the fact that non-Western insecurities cannot be reduced to Hobbesian fear alone. CSS presents a theory of security that better explains *and* offers a way out of insecurities encountered in/by the Global South. From a non-Western perspective, critical theory of security as offered by CSS *is* a more promising framework for solving problems in so far as it problematizes, seeks to understand and tries to address those issues that are left unproblematized and unaccounted for by mainstream Security Studies.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Ali Bilgiç, Paul D. Williams and the Editors for feedback.
- 2 Nicholas J. Wheeler had joined Booth and Wyn Jones on the teaching team during the 1995/96 academic year. I was among the five students taking the course.

- 3 Critical Security Studies (CSS) refers to the Aberystwyth School approach whereas critical security studies (css) is the umbrella term inclusive of a variety of approaches critical of mainstream Security Studies.
- 4 See Alker (2005), Booth (1997; 1999a; 1999b; 2004; 2005b and 2007), Booth and Wheeler (2007), Burke (2001 and 2007), McSweeney (1999), Neufeld (2004), Wyn Jones (1999 and 2005).
- 5 Throughout the chapter, I will use the terms 'developed/developing', 'West/non-West', 'Europe/non-Europe', 'First World/Third World', 'core/non-core', 'South/North' interchangeably not because I am not aware of the problems involved, but because I want to talk about a set of problems that are tied up with these binaries. Following Spivak, I have made a choice for 'strategic essentialism', that is 'using a clear image of identity to sight a politics of opposition (which would not be possible if all the aspects of identity were to be incorporated)' (cited in Sharp 2008: 114).
- 6 See Behera (2004), Bilgin (2010), Bilgin (2002; 2004; 2005 and 2007), Burke and McDonald (2007), Messari (2002), Nizamani (2008), Swatuk and Vale (1999), Vale (2003).
- 7 See Davies (2004), Kennedy-Pipe (2004), Parnwell (1998), Stamnes (2004 and 2009), Stamnes and Wyn Jones (2000), Thomas and Wilkin (1999), Williams (2000 and 2007), Williams and Bellamy (2005).
- 8 In this respect see Bilgin and Morton (2002 and 2004), Booth and Vale (1995), Burke and McDonald (2007).
- 9 See, for example, Ayooob (1995) and Barkawi and Laffey (2006).
- 10 See Bilgin (2009a), cf. Vaughan-Williams and Peoples (2009).
- 11 After all, Ayooob (2002) favours an English School perspective in understanding international relations of the Third World and beyond.
- 12 As with others, such as power, security and culture. Also note that in the interviews, Cox (this volume, 23) starts out with a narrow definition ('emancipation from slavery') but then goes on to argue that 'the idea of being critical is bound with the concept of emancipation, since, after all, you are criticizing the established way of thinking. The established way of thinking is usually something that works to the benefit of an established power or social structure, so that if you are writing critically you are writing with the implication of some kind of change that can be made to the social structure' (Cox, this volume, 24).
- 13 See Booth (this volume, 70; 2008: 110–11).
- 14 See Cox (this volume, 25) and Linklater (this volume, 54–5).
- 15 See also Booth (2007: 60–61).
- 16 I would like to thank the Editors for highlighting this dimension.
- 17 See Wang (2009).
- 18 See also Bilgin (2009a and 2010).
- 19 See, for example, Halperin (2003 and 2006) and Hobson (2004 and 2007).
- 20 See Booth (this volume, 69; 1997).
- 21 See Milliken and Krause (2002), Bilgin and Morton (2002 and 2004).
- 22 Cox distinguishes between synchronic and diachronic analysis in terms of their usefulness for problem solving and critical theory, respectively. He makes an argument for their combined use in analysing world politics (Cox, interview: 12).
- 23 But see Bilgin (2008a; 2008b; 2008c and 2009b) and Bilgin and Morton (2002).

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