In everyday narratives of being, security is and has always been a prominent feature. In the social sciences and humanities, it is the subject and object of curiosity, exploration, critique, and application. It is thus not surprising that it is once again the subject of “scientific” inquiry curated by Philippe Bourbeau in the well-researched Security: A Dialogue Across Disciplines.

Security: A Dialogue across Disciplines is an attempt to get different disciplinary narratives on security to speak to each other. Ultimately, the challenge is to get new and established scholars of security out of their silos so that they rethink the concept ontologically and epistemologically. A clear advocate for the idea of multidisciplinarity, in this book, Bourbeau as curator aims to convince the reader that this approach to the concept of security is important because it encourages “external correctives” to existing disciplinary (methodological) gaps (p. 3).

The presumption here despite protest to the contrary is that this is desirable. To be fair, the introductory chapter acknowledges that this way of “doing” social science might be read as disciplining scholars to become more than they are. Moreover, Bourbeau’s introduction presents disciplinary silos as rigid (p. 10). This is surprising given that international relations (IR), which is perhaps the most overt discipline when it comes to security as conceived here, has evolved so much as to be characterized by a diversity of ontological and epistemological assumptions. For instance, recent feminist interventions on what security means and who the referent of security is, are characterized by diversity and interconnectedness that draws on critical theory, critiques mainstream social science, and relies on adjacent disciplines of sociology and anthropology, among others. This is an important point to make because critical approaches like feminism are increasingly mainstream even though this book ignores or treats them as marginal. In this collection, only human security is presented as potentially transcending disciplinary boundaries.

Nevertheless, the book provides insight for scholars of core social science and humanities disciplines into how other disciplines understand and explain security, an essentially contested concept. The book is guided by three questions: What are the core research questions asked within each disciplinary context? What theoretical perspectives do these disciplines contribute to knowledge about what security means? What research methods tend to feature when security is the subject of study and what are strengths or limits of these methodologies?

As each of the disciplinary insights convey, security does lend itself to methodological pluralism, with disciplines often borrowing methods and methodologies that have been traditionally used by others. This does raise a question of ownership. By which I mean, what are the criteria for owning or claiming ownership to a particular methodological approach, and/or can methodologies be jointly owned? For instance, while ethnography may be accepted as an anthropological method, those who may not consider themselves anthropologists have used it extensively. In the same way, many political scientists now rely on computer experiments for their statistical modeling; we may argue that experiments are now fundamental to some political science, although with clear usage in psychology. Will certain methods always be inherent to certain disciplines, and does this outlook not challenge
the broader aim of “transdisciplinarity”? "Critical security studies" is a response to the dominant security scholarship that took its cue from the Hobbesian securitas. Security studies in international relations is really about referents (pp. 113-118). In other words, for IR scholars, understanding security is dependent on knowing what is to be secured. Hence, as an evolution of Hobbes, security in the early days of international relations had the state as its core referent. This "mainstream/traditional security" relied on realism as its foundational theory (p. 118). Bourbeau et al. take the reader through a genealogy of security studies which seems repetitive of the one already undertaken by Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen in Evolution of International Security Studies (2009). Where there is some fascinating reflection is on the “practice turn” in security studies that moves away from the traditional versus critical divide. However, this section of the chapter is concise and does not delve into the broader implications of the practice turn, which is now sixteen years old. While the methodologies of international relations sometimes map onto the traditional/critical divide, on the whole, the discipline promotes interdisciplinarity. It is thus less restrictive than the subject of chapter 7, psychology.
On the whole this rendering of psychology’s take on security is quite conservative. Psychology, as the authors of the chapter state, engages with security because it can predict and explain violent conflict or peaceful relations. In this sense, it too draws on the philosophical tradition of Hobbes, where security is about fear or safety. In psychology, unlike IR, the goal of prediction is overt. While the state is one referent, the individual is also important for psychologists. Methodologically, psychology also mirrors typical positivist strands of contemporary security studies from the IR perspective in its use of quantitative methodologies. Psychologists, however, are quite partial to the use experiments to understand perceptions of insecurity and consequently security. Furthermore, psychology is a field that has been quite explicit about affect or the implications of emotions for understanding security, a path usually eschewed by other social science disciplines. Indeed the link between emotions and security has only gained currency recently in international relations, for example with the radically innovative collection edited by Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory, Emotions, Politics and War (2015).

Unlike some of the other disciplines in the book, sociology and international political economy are not natural frames for security. Yet, for Lisa Stampnitzky and Greggor Mattson sociology is the discipline that most overtly makes the case for the importance of understanding security and insecurity as related but distinct. In addressing this, the authors of chapter 5 show how the multiple meanings and usage of security and insecurity makes it difficult to study and pin down the main sociological contributions to the debate. They argue, on the whole, that sociology by its nature tends to focus on different strands of insecurity; but to make innovative contributions innovations they urge sociologists to study security more. Here the benefit of the sociological lens is the ways in which it may address three issues: what is enacted in the name of security; what is included as security and what is excluded; and finally how practices of security move to and function in different social settings. This chapter is quite powerful then, because it presents a research agenda for future sociologists and encourages their interaction with other social scientists.

Although similar to sociology because it does not find security a natural fit, international political economy (IPE) is effectively ignorant of security despite the theoretical links it shares with IR on the whole. IPE’s situation within this book is uneasy. For example, IPE is given the same weight as IR even though it is as much of a subdiscipline as what is now called “security studies.” The logic for this is unclear. Moreover, compared to the others this contribution was mostly descriptive, without conceptual usefulness to the overarching narrative of the book.

In the final two chapters for this collection, on criminology and international law, the authors reflect on the historical evolution of both disciplines, and the move from the mainstream to the marginal and how security is important to both disciplines. With criminology taking its cue from the early philosophical conceptualizations of security, this traditional rendering led to a section on “The Emergence of a Crime-Centered Criminology” whose focus is much more on interpersonal safety and state control. However, those who want to reflect more on the security implications of criminology as a discipline call attention to how insecurities are manifested when state control is enacted for safety. Of course the discourse of security in criminology is also vulnerable to co-option as Jon Froestad et al. show. In using the example of the United States, the authors show how crimes like mass killings in a particular context (9/11) when “securitized,” justify new modes of governance and control that treat the crime and the subsequent mode of protection as exceptional, even at the expense of civil liberties.

In international law, security and its broader theoretical and methodological implications appear to be ignored or irrelevant. Yet Wouter Werner’s contribution is able to show that underneath the seemingly impenetrable façade of international law is a discipline driven by close connections to the other “international” disciplines. The author, however, acknowledges a fundamental shortcoming of this analysis; that it is too focused on the mainstream. Yet, there can be significant innovation in international law. The work of legal scholars like Gina Heathcote, whose The Law and the Use of Force: A feminist analysis (2011) links feminist methodologies and ethics to international law and international relations to the study of the United Nations, is a perfect example of the multidisciplinarity that Bourbeau and the other authors in this collection desire.

On the whole, this book is evidence of the values of interdisciplinarity. In calling attention to the ways in which different disciplines do research, this collection also makes a compelling case for methodological dialogue, not just pluralism. Its place, however, is not to convince us that a dialogue is needed; rather, it is to show that dialogues are already going on. The dialogues draw on linkages based on common disciplinary antecedents and overlapping methodological choices in certain instances.
Sometimes, the choice of focus appears uneven. While some chapters acknowledge the divide between “mainstream” and “critical” approaches to their respective disciplines and consequently how security is conceptualized and studied, others are not as focused. In this regard, it may have been useful then to have a concluding chapter that linked the common threads between the contributions’ application of their theories and methodologies.

Overall, this text successfully defends itself against those who fear that a broader understanding of security might lead not to plurality but rather to intellectual incoherence. It weaves together a new story for security that has the potential not to be dominated by international relations, but instead highlight important connections from the social sciences and humanities for a more reflexive consideration of security scholarship.

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