

Neither International nor Global: Rethinking the Problematic Subject of Security¹

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This paper argues that the problematic of the international and the global has been a barrier to understanding the transformation of security discourse over the last decade. Academic treatments of security within the discipline of international relations have been structured by the traditional liberal binaries, which conceive of political communities capable of constituting securing subjects at either the level of the state or the global. Today's dominant framing of the security problematic seems to evade easy articulation within this structure and in some readings is seen to presage a transitory stage from the international to the global. An alternative reading is sketched out here, that of the post-liberal, which suggests that the apparent shift towards the global can not be captured from within the liberal problematic and highlights that rather than traditional disagreements over the nature of the subject of security – the constitution of the securing actor – we are witnessing the disappearance of securing agency itself.

Introduction

The history of the discipline of international relations has been one in which the anarchy of the international sphere of sovereign states has been placed in contradistinction to the possibility of a global community, held to be the solution to the permanent 'state of war' among states (Hobbes, 1978). This framing is based upon the grounding liberal assumption of the discipline, the 'domestic analogy', expounded by Hedley Bull, wherein states assume the status of the originatory subjects of the social contract in a Hobbesian state of nature (Bull, 1966). In the liberal problematic, the need for security establishes the sovereign and the state. International relations as a discipline has traditionally measured security in terms of this liberal problematic and is defined by the lack of a global

securing subject or sovereign. Since the end of the cold war, this traditional framing of international anarchy has been increasingly seen to be giving way to global frameworks of security alleged to be constituted by the growth of global civil society and global governance.

This article suggests that the liberal binaries of the discipline - the international and the global – have produced a tendency to frame recent changes as a shift or transition from the former to the latter. This has resulted in an aporetic understanding of security which has prevented the theorizing of the emergence of post-liberal framings of security, posited upon the removal of the securing subject. This is reflected in critiques of the hubris of liberal western approaches to peace and development and in frameworks of institutional capacity-building, empowerment and resilience, now universally offered as solutions to conflict, underdevelopment and state failure.

The first section re-reads current security discourses of the global in terms of the missing subject of security, the lack of a securing subject. The second section heuristically stakes out a genealogy of the subject of security within international relations, juxtapositioning the traditional liberal binaries against what I describe as a post-liberal paradigm. The third section will then expand upon the discourse of the resilient subject, as one which no longer acts with autonomous agency to secure but instead is under the external compulsion to constantly adapt to the external world as a way of managing permanent insecurity.

The Missing Subject of Security

For many academic commentators, it appears that there is a contestation at the level of both theorization and policy practice between framings of the international and the global. Authors clearly posing this contestation have worked across the traditional disciplinary divides, in fields as diverse as realism, the English School, normative, cosmopolitan, critical and poststructuralist theorizing (for example, Morgenthau, 1993; Carr, 2001; Waltz, 1979; Bull, 1995; Archibugi, 2000; Held, 1995; Linklater, 1998; Kaldor, 2003; Booth, 1991; Hardt and Negri, 2001; 2006).

In these liberal framings of security discourses, the key question at stake is less the referent object or the security threat, than the prior political claims, which seek to legitimize alternative understandings of the subject of security – the sovereign or securing actor. In international framings, the traditional understandings of security within the discipline of international relations, the legitimate securing actor is the state. The status and legitimacy of the nation state is challenged (either explicitly or implicitly) in global framings of security, which posit a higher political authority: that of the immanent global state. R.B.J. Walker is therefore correct to highlight that what is at stake in the contestation of the international and the global is ‘the form of political community’ itself

(1997, pp. 70-71). However, even Walker's critical engagement with security discourse remains trapped in the realm of liberal binaries which I argue have less and less purchase today.

While the discipline of international relations was always able to imagine the potential global state as an alternative to the anarchy of international relations, its existence as a discipline demonstrated the inability of this imaginary to become constituted in reality. In fact, Bull suggests that it is precisely the limit to the application of the 'domestic analogy' – the need for a global state to provide security – which needs to be grasped in order to understand the specificity of the discipline of international relations (1966, pp. 35-36). For Bull, the structuring of the international – on the basis of inequality rather than the originary equality of the liberal subject - appears to limit the demand for a global state or for the constitution of political community on the global level. No common interest could thereby be politically constituted so as to replicate the universal interests of equally vulnerable individuals in the state of nature, which was held to produce the possibility of the social contract.

For any shift to the global to have meaning within the liberal framing of international relations it would have to reflect more than wishful thinking - or in Bull's words the displacement of 'description' with 'prescription' (1995, p. 266) – the construction of a global political community and global agency of security would need to be demonstrated. It is suggested here that, rather than reading current changes in security practices and discourses as reflecting a shift to a global political community, a global provider of security, or a global state, we need to engage in theoretical reflection of other political possibilities outside the liberal modeling of the 'domestic analogy'. Only the liberal subject seeks to secure itself through political community: through the construction of a securing sovereign agency. It is only a liberal teleological framing which leads its adherents to see the apparent decline in states as the bearers of the rights and duties of securing as the precursor to a global framing of security and the construction of a global subject of security.

I would like to suggest that the discursive construction of a shift from the international to the global can no longer be fully understood in terms of the liberal framing of politics: in the terms of the traditional framing within the discipline of international relations, which assumed that the shift to the global would necessarily presuppose a global political community capable of resolving or ameliorating the problems of security in the anarchical world of nation states. What we term as a shift to the global is misleading and its awkwardness is expressed clearly to us, though the dominance of the liberal paradigm makes us blind to its implications. Since the end of the 1990s, we have been much less likely to use the concept of 'global' with the liberal concept of 'security' than we have to express this shift as one towards 'global insecurity'. The shift to global insecurity reveals the hollowness of our conception of the global (see

further, Chandler 2009). The fact that the 'global' is insecure intimates that this shift does not involve the construction of a global state or securing actor, but rather the loss of legitimacy of the nation state as the securing subject at the heart of liberal theorizing.

Rather than the emergence of a new political subject of security, a new form of political community or a global state, the shift is away from a political subject of security per se. The discourse of security – for so long inseparable from the discursive framing of liberal modernity itself - has been cut loose from its liberal moorings. Rather than the new dawn of the emergence of a more expansive political subject of security, it seems possible that we are awakening to a post-liberal world where the understanding of political community is no longer the ontological basis for security discourse. While we still live in a world of states, security discourse appears to assume that states no longer constitute sovereign subjects of security: the liberal subject of security (produced by the social contract). Just as Louis Althusser theorized history as a 'process without a subject' (2008) today we perhaps need to understand the conditions of possibility for the disciplinary dominance of security discourses 'without a subject'.

When we talk about the shift from the international to the global, we are formulating the only way of understanding the shift away from state-centered discourses of security from within the liberal paradigm. In the post-liberal paradigm, proposed here, this shift could alternatively be understood as the removal or effacing of the subject of security. Discourses of global insecurity can be read as presupposing the absence of political community rather than the replacement of one form of political community (the nation state) with another (the global state). If there were no political community capable of constituting a sovereign or securing agency we would be condemned to a life of permanent insecurity. This is the 'global', as constituted by discourses of security today: a return to pre-social contract state of nature but with no possibility of transcending this. The global constitutes an unmediated relationship between the individual and the outside (the global). With no mediating political community there is merely an undifferentiated world of insecurity. Rather than collectively engaging to constitute a securing agent capable of rational instrumental action in the world, we would all live under the compulsion of becoming resilient: perpetually condemned to work on changing ourselves through adapting more efficiently to the innumerable and unknowable threats posed by our external environment.

Security without a subject capable of acting externally to know and transform its environment - without the capacity to secure – can only be expressed as insecurity. If we were to be consigned to a pre-political state of nature, we would not have the capacity to mediate our relationship to our external world and to provide meaning or to construct political communities. We would face a permanent situation of global insecurity and the most we could do would be to adapt to and manage insecurities through the practices of resilience. The discourse of resilience does not emerge from a liberal problematic of

security but a post-liberal one; one which moves beyond liberal binaries of the international and the global, effacing any distinction with regard to the constitution of the securing subject.

Paradigms of Security

This article is concerned with the shifting understanding of the subject of security within the discipline of international relations. In the heuristic terms of paradigm shifts, this section draws out three stages: firstly, the subject-based framing of security as a product of self-help in the anarchical sphere of the international, which dominated the traditional discipline of international relations; secondly, the shift towards a global discursive framework of intervention posed in terms of the weighing of competing concerns of human rights and sovereignty - reflected in debates on the 'right of intervention' and the alleged emergence of a 'global community' capable of authorizing such intervention - which was dominant in the 1990s; and thirdly, what I describe as the post-liberal paradigm, cohered in the 2000s, which moved beyond the liberal problematic, reformulating the political subject in relation to security in terms of resilience (the capacity to manage internal and external security threats) rather than autonomy (the capacity to strategically project interests). In this framework, international security is no longer concerned with the liberal problematic of constructing securing agency but with the problematic of the impossibility of securing agency: the management of insecurity in the absence of the subject of security.

The International Problematic

As touched upon above, the traditional discipline of international relations conceived its subject matter in terms of a world of nation state subjects existing or coexisting in a relationship of anarchy or a state of nature. Security was understood to be achieved in the international sphere purely through the process of self-help. The international sphere was one of strategic interaction in which security was achieved through the practice of autonomy: strategically deciding whether to act defensively or aggressively, to make or break alliances. The preservation of the autonomy of the subjects of security (the agents of security - nation states) was the goal of security, with the balance of power and the making or breaking of alliances given its organizational rationale by the need to prevent any one power becoming dominant over others. The freedom and autonomy of nation states was understood as the central means through which they could secure themselves and as the end or goal of security policy. In this framing, security and freedom were both reflections of the autonomy of the liberal subject.

In this paradigm, there were no collective interests beyond those that

reinforced the autonomy of the subjects of the international sphere. For this reason, the basis of international law or inter-state consensus was that of opposing the hierarchical use of power and aggression of powerful states against the less powerful. Freedom and security were understood to be synonymous on the basis of the sovereignty of nation states. The problem of equilibrium was therefore at the heart of the security problematic, exemplified by discussion of the 'security dilemma' (coined by John Hertz, 1951; see also Butterfield, 1951, p. 19; Wheeler and Booth, 1992, p. 29). Equilibrium was the guide to policy-making for the securing subject of international relations theory: if states armed themselves for reasons of defense or attack then other states would take similar precautions, similarly if a state became too powerful relative to others, then other states would make alliances against them. The doctrine of the balance of power reflected the traditional international relations understanding of the problematic of maintaining an equilibrium of forces.

It is important to note that the problem of equilibrium was one that was understood to be open to resolution or amelioration by nation states as active subjects of security. The problem of equilibrium was a geo-strategic one in which rational actions were presupposed on behalf of all actors. This enabled strategic balancing, negotiations, alliances, and the whole range of international diplomacy. While the equilibrium was one which was constantly shifting this was understood as a problematic that was open to statesmanship and rational calculation. Of course, there was always an important element of contingency and indeterminacy, but the discipline of international relations was based on the capacity to structure and model the contingent effects of the rational choices of state actors.

The Global Problematic

The traditional framing of the international sphere assumed that freedom and security were indivisible at the level of the securing subject – the nation state. This stood in stark contrast to global approaches in which the constitution of a global sovereign was held to imply that freedom and security were a matter of balancing the particular interests of states and the collective interests of the global political community. The relationship between freedom and security within the global paradigm of international relations replicated that of liberal political theory as it applied to the internal sovereign realm. The global liberal problematic is that of intervention: the discussion of when those acting as global sovereigns should intervene and act to limit the freedom and autonomy of sovereign states on the basis of norms which were held to have universal assent. In the 1990s, the reframing of the international sphere as a global one and one amenable to liberal discourses of intervention posited the emergence of a global sovereign capable of weighing a balance of security and freedom in terms of a liberal framing, in which the

rights of states – of sovereignty - were weighed against the collective interests of international society.

Michel Foucault usefully described the liberal paradigm of the discursive framing of freedom and security in terms of intervention as the ‘liberal economy of power’ sustained by the constant ‘interplay of freedom and security’ (2008, p. 65). For Foucault, the policy problematic of intervention depended upon the balancing of particular freedoms against the security of the community:

The principle of calculation is what is called security. That is to say, liberalism, the liberal art of government, is forced to determine the precise extent to which and up to what point individual interest, that is to say individual interests insofar as they are different and possibly opposed to each other, constitute a danger for the interest of all. (ibid., p. 65)

The global liberal paradigm of freedom and security is very different from that of the equilibrium of the international operating without a putative universal sovereign capable of weighing such a balance. In the 1990s, in the wake of the end of the cold war, discourses of intervention emerged in regard to international relations on the presupposition that the international sphere was now open to a global liberal appropriation, with the immanent emergence of an international or global consensus capable of generating the legitimacy for collective security in which an interventionist discourse was possible. This presupposed that interventionist states were capable of assuming the mantle of a global sovereign and that their actions, securing through a ‘right of intervention’, could be legitimized on the basis of their capacity to represent the common norms of a global community.

The Post-Liberal Problematic

The earlier liberal paradigms grasped the international political sphere in two distinct ways: firstly, as a sphere of international relations - of sovereign states without a government; in which case, the only mechanism of securing the subject was by autonomously determined equilibrium; secondly, as global – analogous to the domestic sphere of government, of sovereign rule, in which intervention could secure the collective norms of the global community. In both these frameworks, it is suggested that freedom and security are mutually reproducing: they are two sides of the same coin. It is not possible to have freedom without security or security without freedom. In fact, it is not possible to understand the meaning of either freedom or security without the liberal starting assumption of the pre-given or natural autonomous political subject. The paradigm of the international shared the same starting point as that of the global: that of

the autonomous political subject.

What I describe as the post-liberal paradigm of international relations departs from this shared starting point of the securing capacity of the autonomous political subject. This has fundamental implications, as without the rationalist assumptions of originary autonomy, the connection between freedom and security is broken and both terms lose their traditional liberal meaning. Without the centrality of autonomy both freedom and security become problematic illusions. In this paradigm, there is a return to the traditional international problematic of international relations – that of equilibrium – but it is a problematic constructed as global but without rational agency or rational subjects which are the subjects capable of constituting securing subjects. Equilibrium refers to the problematic of ‘global security’ or of collective security threats. These threats are understood to derive independently of conscious or rational human agency. Whether the threats are understood in terms of environmental warming, global economic downturn, resource depletion, refugees, crime, poverty, conflict or terrorism, they are understood to elude the capacity of any securing subject, either collectively or individually.

The security threats of the post-liberal global problematic are not open to traditional strategic engagement as they lack rational agency: it is believed that terrorists cannot be negotiated with any more than carbon emissions and also that these global security threats cannot be overcome: the war on terror cannot be ‘won’ anymore than the war on global warming or poverty. Security becomes a process of management, in which the free play of autonomy, necessary for the construction of the liberal subject of security, becomes seen as problematic. The fact that these threats cannot be secured against successfully means that the problem is not just that states acting individually cannot resolve the security threats, but that states acting collectively cannot resolve them, through policy intervention. The governmental rationale of achieving this post-liberal security equilibrium is that of attempting to manage risk and to act preventively, upon the self, seeking to adapt to threats – whether from terrorists or the environment. This framework lacks a liberal securing subject or agency. The task of security is an ongoing one of relationship management and of adaptation to external forces or threats, which cannot be precisely known or secured against.

In the post-liberal discourse of global insecurity, the problematic of adaptation and equilibrium is one of resilience: of the capacity to adapt to and balance external pressures. In this discursive framing, the weak link in the development of collective mechanisms of balance and equilibrium are those states which are unable or unwilling to develop the practices of adaptation and resilience: the self-limitation of good governance. This is the reason why, in the post-liberal security paradigm, weak or failing states are considered to be the most important security threat. This is not because they themselves are literally a threat – in the way that ‘rogue states’ were in the past – but rather because

they can become the unwitting vehicles of these threats. This is well described by leading policy analysts Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart:

A number of contemporary global crises have their roots in forty to sixty fragile countries. As these states have experienced prolonged conflict or misrule, networks of criminality, violence, and terror have solidified, providing an ever expanding platform that threatens the entire globe. (2008, p. 23)

Weak or failing states are understood to undermine the security of international society as a whole in that they are held to provide 'an ever expanding platform' for global security threats to gain a foothold, develop and then expand at the risk of 'the entire globe'.

Dealing with the problem of weak or failing states in the post-liberal paradigm of international relations does not rely on a liberal discourse of intervention, as there is no rationalist assumption of a securing subject. Failing states are held to lack the capacity to secure themselves or to prevent themselves from becoming security threats to others. At the same time, there is no assumption that external agency, acting as constituted global sovereigns, can secure failing states. The post-liberal discourse asserts the solution of preventive self-management – this is the return of self-help but globalised in the sense that external intervention is orientated around assisting others to help themselves. Intervention does not take the liberal form of post-hoc securing, developing or democratizing but the post-liberal form of the preventive inculcation of capacity- or capability-building in order to strengthen adaptive efficiency.

Resilience: Subjects without Security

In what is described here as the post-liberal paradigm of international relations, the most important conceptual shift from that of a classic liberal framework is the lack of a securing subject or a subject of security. This lack of a subject, which is able to secure, is intimately bound up with the transformation in the meaning of the core concept in international relations: that of sovereignty. Today's security discourses are based on a quite distinct approach from the liberal framings which sharply distinguished between the existence of a sovereign order - making progress, justice and ethics possible - and the inter-sovereign order of the international in which security involved self-help mechanisms of the balance of power. The solution to the lack of sovereign order in the international sphere is not that of constituting a global sovereign – the nation state writ large – but of restricting sovereign autonomy at the level of the state. While, discursively, it may be concerned with strengthening states, it conceives of this as a process of limiting or regulating their autonomy.

Once autonomy is problematized, the concept of sovereignty or of self-

government or self-determination is no longer equated with the subject capacity to secure. Sovereignty or self-government apply to a range of capacities for self-limitation rather than to self-direction or the establishment of autonomous political goals or aspirations. The capacity of states to act as political communities - as sovereign, i.e. self-governing, actors - is seen as necessitating limitation. Autonomy becomes not the goal of security practices but rather their precondition. The liberal subject of security – the sovereign actor - in this sense is the problem rather than the solution. In this framing, the problem of failed and failing states is precisely that they are too autonomous and lack the capacity for self-limitation. It is their autonomy that is understood to be cutting them off from developmental opportunities, preventing sustainable solutions to conflict, facilitating environmental degradation, and so forth. From Nobel prize-winning development theorists, such as Amartya Sen and Douglass North, to leading security theorists, such as Paul Collier, the problem of insecurity is understood to be one of problematic ‘choices’ made by autonomous subjects (Sen, 1990; North, 1990, 2005; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner, 2006).

The problematization of autonomy is given the status of commonsense in current security discourses as there is an assumption that autonomy is no longer a positive attribute even for advanced western states. Autonomy is increasingly seen as a potential threat that needs to be limited, particularly through international policy networks of good governance. The EU, for example, is explicitly understood to be an institutional mechanism for the limiting of the autonomy of its member states. To attempt to assert or defend autonomy against the discursive dynamic of global insecurity is, in itself, considered to be a problematic sign. It is the discussion of autonomy, in the context of globalisation, which perhaps most clearly highlights the incommensurability between the liberal paradigm and the post-liberal one.

According to leading social theorists, such as Anthony Giddens, David Held and Ulrich Beck, globalisation undermines the previous rationale of sovereign autonomy: claims of control and direction over society - the ability to act instrumentally or as a securing agent. In this way, globalisation has been held to make the sovereignty claims, so essential to liberal modernity, meaningless. This lack of instrumental capacity is conceived of as invalidating claims to sovereign status – claims to the constitution of securing subjects - both domestically and in the international arena. In fact, globalisation is held to undermine the notion of a division between these two spheres of activity. For Ulrich Beck, national sovereignty is undermined by the fact that globalisation disrupts the links between territory and authority, making the distinction between territories, and the framework of legitimacy for government power, increasingly problematic (Beck, 1997; 2005). Taken to its extreme, Giddens refers to the work of business guru Keniche Ohmae that: ‘we live now in a borderless world, in which the nation state has become a “fiction” and where politicians have lost all effective power’ (Giddens, 1998, p. 29; Ohmae, 1990;

1995).

Globalisation, here acts as a shorthand explanation for why it appears that state autonomy can no longer be the central way of conceiving the legitimacy of governmental power or of rationalizing security policy practices, either domestically or internationally. The importance of the globalisation thesis lays less in its explanatory claims for this shift than in its widespread acceptance as a marker for the transformed nature of our understanding of both security and autonomy. In a complex, global, interconnected, and increasingly insecure and uncertain world it appears that policy-making autonomy is a problem rather than a framework for resolving problems of policy-making. Globalisation poses the question that if autonomy is potentially dangerous and destabilizing, how should governments govern, or secure themselves? The answer to this question can be seen in the rationalities for governance developed in the discourses of international security, in which the limiting of sovereignty is essential for the management of insecurity.

Conclusion

In the post-liberal framing sketched here, the discursive blurring of liberal conceptions of the international and the global can be understood as the result of the removal of the subject of security. Security discourse can no longer be captured by the binary framings of the liberal problematic. The security rationale of the global is post-liberal: it combines both the equilibrium of the international and the intervention of the global but under a completely different conception of the security problematic, one which inverts and transforms the conceptual framing of the liberal ontology which presupposes the autonomous rational subject. In this paradigm, freedom and security are both problematized as ends in themselves and as means to an end. Freedom is externally constrained by the lack of capacity to secure and security is constrained by the problematic of freedom or autonomy. It is the post-liberal conception of the human condition which produces insecurity rather than security, in that we cannot know the consequences of our actions (North, 2005; Coker, 2008; Beck, 2004; Bauman, 2009; see also Arendt, 1998; Althusser, 2008; Chandler, 2010).

In a world held to be rapidly changing and where globalised threats are not easy to recognize and respond to, security is no longer the goal of state policy, but rather resilience: the capacity to respond and adapt to new threats and to manage a world of complexity and uncertainty. In this paradigm, autonomy is no longer understood with reference to the capacity to generate policy-direction and goals internally. Security is addressed through the development of resilience: through the realization that we cannot understand the complex balance of threats and needs generated through global interdependencies and therefore need to look internally to our capacities to adapt to the exigencies of an unknown and constantly threatening world.

Note

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