

SECURITY, EMANCIPATION AND THE POLITICS OF HEALTH

A NEW THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

João Nunes

NEW SECURITY STUDIES



Security, Emancipation and the Politics of Health

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Security, Emancipation and the Politics of Health

This book develops a new theoretical framework for the study of security issues and applies this to the case of health.

Building on the work of the 'Welsh School' of Security Studies, and drawing on contributions from the wider critical security literature, the book provides an emancipatory perspective on the health–security nexus – one which simultaneously teases out its underlying political assumptions, assesses its political effects and identifies potential for transformation.

Security, Emancipation and the Politics of Health challenges conventional wisdom in the field of health and international politics by conceiving of health as a fundamentally political issue, and not merely as a medical problem demanding 'technical' solutions and arrangements. The book shows how political processes of representation underpin notions of health and disease through an examination of three key areas: the linkages between immigration and the fear of disease; colonial medicine; and the 'health as a bridge for peace' literature. In order to successfully carry out this political investigation of health, the book develops an innovative theoretical framework inspired by the idea of 'security as emancipation', which goes beyond the existing emancipatory literature in security studies.

This book will be of much interest to students of critical security studies, health politics, sociology and international relations in general.

João Nunes is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick, and has a PhD in International Politics from Aberystwyth University, Wales.

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A new theoretical perspective

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This book is dedicated to my Father, to my Mother, to Zé Miguel and to Raquel.

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Introduction

Health, security and politics

By making us appreciate what we lost or what we stand to lose, the experience of being ill has a way of telling us who we are. By confronting us with what we can and cannot do, being ill makes us reconsider our plans, what we want and how we live. The ill body, or the convalescent one, are always in the here and now – everything becomes their reflection.

Likewise, disease confronts societies with their limits. It is a collective phenomenon. Studies have now unravelled the role of diseases upon the fate of human societies (Watts, 1997; McNeill, 1998 [1977]; Cartwright and Biddiss, 2000). The idea that disease has an impact beyond the individual body is present in literature and popular culture. In Albert Camus' *The Plague*, for example, the city of Oran is depicted as a human and social space that is shaken and transformed by disease. In cinema, 'medical thrillers' like *Outbreak* or *Contagion* show societies spiralling out of control. In other movies of a post-apocalyptic tone (like *Children of Men* or *28 Days Later*), we are faced with societies already devastated by disease.

These narratives converge in one idea: when making sense of issues of health/disease, one should go beyond the immediate effects on individual bodies and the impact on mortality levels, life expectancy, productivity or GDP (gross domestic product). Rather, one needs to consider the impact of disease upon the ways in which communities and societies are organized. This includes the policies they elicit, the shared understandings they help to shape, and the shifts in social relations and in the way power is mobilized. These accounts remind us of the importance of broadening the scope of enquiry in order to analyse disease as a social and political phenomenon.

What might it mean to see health and disease as political? It seems obvious that the outbreak of disease leads to policy reactions – but how can one conceive disease as having a political impact beyond these 'technical' responses? We are familiarized with a particular narrative of how the outbreak of disease can lead to a chain of transformations in the 'business as usual' of politics. In particular, our imagination is filled with nightmare scenarios of devastation and political turmoil following from disease. The 'Black Death' in fourteenth-century Europe is part of this imaginary: the idea of the plague and its catastrophic consequences still holds considerable traction, being evoked, even if

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implicitly, whenever there are new disease occurrences (Cooke, 2009). The 1918 'Spanish Influenza' pandemic is another example. By forecasting widespread terror, emergency measures and chaos, our existing narratives of contagion and epidemics have contributed to the normalization of a particular view of the political impact of disease. The typical plot of a medical thriller has the virus emerging from a crowded slum in some exotic location; the rapid spread of the infection; the agonizing death of the infected; the arrival of people in protection suits; the crisis team meetings; the military imposing high-handed measures; the social upheaval. Disease is thus enveloped in fear: it is to be approached as a threat to the existence not only of individuals but also of society as a whole. In other words, health is political because it is a matter of security.

To a great extent, this reading of the politics of health through the lens of security has been left unexamined. How exactly is health being defined as a political problem? What assumptions and practices underpin existing representations? What interests are being served? Why does the portrayal of health as a security issue assume a pattern of response based on exceptional measures, that is, the bypassing of normal democratic procedure and the curtailing of freedom and other rights? Would it be possible to see health differently? Can health have a different impact upon the political realm?

These are some of the questions that motivate this book, which sets out to offer a thorough analysis of health as a political issue. In doing so, the book brings together different political dimensions of health: the politics of (re)production of health ideas and practices ('how health is made'); the political effects of health ('what it does'); the ethical dimension ('what health should be'); the political potential ('what can be done about health'); and the politics of change ('what health can do').

This analysis of the politics of health is pursued by taking the standpoint of security. In addition to being at the core of existing narratives of disease, security is one of the most important modalities for dealing with health issues today. However, this book takes issue with existing understandings of the health–security nexus in the literature (particularly in the field of international relations, IR), and thus advances a novel understanding of this nexus. In order to engage with the different political dimensions of health identified above, one needs a new theoretical framework for dealing with security issues. This book sets out to reframe our understanding of security in order to reconsider our understanding of health.

Health security and the elusiveness of politics

The intensification of flows of people, goods and information means that questions of health are increasingly present in the international arena. As is illustrated by recent high-profile cases, health issues impact upon the relations between states and other international actors. In 2007, the A/H5N1 ('avian flu') scare originated a clash between calls for international cooperation and

national claims for sovereignty over viral samples. Earlier, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 had demonstrated how a relatively small number of infected individuals can become a source of global alarm.

The academic literature has sought to respond to the challenge of globalized health issues. The linkages between health and globalization have been surveyed (Huynen *et al.*, 2005; Kawachi and Wamala, 2007; Cockerham and Cockerham, 2010). The IR literature in particular is emerging as a privileged forum for the analysis of global health. Contributions to this field have begun to reflect upon the relations between health, diplomacy and foreign policy (McInnes and Lee, 2006; Feldbaum *et al.*, 2010; Labonté and Gagnon, 2010). Importantly, a strong emphasis has been placed on the security aspect of global health. This is not surprising; after all, the insidious character of health issues has always elicited fear, as viruses and germs are seen as 'deadly companions' (Crawford, 2007) that permanently lurk in the background of human life. In the context of a post-Cold War interest in 'new' and 'emerging' threats, infectious diseases were potently framed as security threats by authors speaking of 'the coming plague' (Garrett, 1995), of 'secret agents' (Drexler, 2002) or 'the monster at our door' (Davis, 2005). The connection between health and security – and, in particular, the idea that health issues constitute threats to national security – has become a dominant trope in academic debates on the subject (Price-Smith, 2001; Peterson, 2002; Heymann, 2003; Youde, 2005). The literature has displayed a concern with the possible impact of health issues upon societal stability, state capacity (particularly in terms of the preparedness of armed forces) and regional dynamics. Infectious diseases, and HIV/AIDS specifically, have been fruitful grounds for analysis (Ostergard, 2002; Singer, 2002; Barnett and Prins, 2006; Feldbaum *et al.*, 2006). The same can be said of biological weapons (Tucker, 1996; Enemark, 2007: 79–133; Fidler and Gostin, 2008). The impact of health issues has also been discussed from the standpoint of human security (Chen and Narasimhan, 2003; Altman, 2008).

With its adoption by organizations like the World Health Organization (2007), the notion of 'health security' has become a household term. It may be argued that the health–security nexus is now a crucial feature of the academic literature and of international debates about health. This nexus increasingly shapes the ways in which academics and policymakers think and act. It thus provides a pertinent, and potentially very fertile, entry point for analysing the politics of health.

However, if the IR literature has succeeded in revealing health as a matter of *international* politics and security, it has so far fallen short of showing in detail how health can be an international *political* issue. There have been several engagements with specific instances of the politics of health, but no systematic study has been provided. To begin with, as mentioned above, authors have looked at the impact of particular health issues upon domestic and foreign policymaking – thus providing an investigation of the most

immediate political effects of health. Contributions to the literature have also traced the development of international health regulations and mapped the institutional architecture of global health governance (Zacher and Keefe, 2008; Harman, 2011; Youde, 2012). By abstracting from empirical cases, these works offer an important glimpse into the political dynamics that surround health issues. Nonetheless, the introductory nature of most of these works means that their tone is still markedly descriptive. A detailed analysis of the politics of health is not among their objectives.

Some authors have taken up the task of reflecting at length about the politics of health. Andrew Price-Smith (2009: 3) begins with the assumption that disease should be approached as an 'independent variable' that, either directly or through the mediation of society, can 'compromise the prosperity, the legitimacy, the structural cohesion, and in certain cases the security of sovereign states'. Price-Smith's framework is particularly geared towards investigating the potential role of infectious diseases. At the same time, his main focus is national security – the 'dependent variable' he seeks to explain. This framework is limited, not only by its state-centric focus – which underplays the importance of non-state actors and their security concerns – but also by the fact that it takes its variables as self-contained. Although he recognizes that the two can interact, Price-Smith separates material and contextual factors (pathogens and society, respectively) into 'independent' and 'intervening' variables, without due regard for the social interactions that shape representations of disease, and for the impact that ideas of disease may have upon social relations. Put differently, Price-Smith's framework overlooks complex relations of mutual constitution. His analysis of the politics of health does not consider the political moves that go into the framing of health issues, as well as the impact of health issues in structuring the social and political realm.

Sara Davies (2010) addresses one of the shortcomings of Price-Smith's framework by broadening the scope of enquiry to include perspectives beyond the state. She surveys the connections between the local and the global level, with the aim of showing that the health of individuals is dependent upon decisions and dynamics at other levels. Davies provides a timely framing contribution – albeit one that remains at an unspecified level when it comes to tackling the question of how health can be seen as a political phenomenon. In fact, after arguing persuasively that the essence of the global politics of health is not located at a specific level but rather in the interconnections between different levels, Davies (2010: 190) admits that:

we still do not fully understand the relationship between politics and health. Much more work is needed to understand how relationships between the growing number of political actors affect health outcomes and to identify the areas of health that should be considered as causal or intervening factor in relations within states, between states and between states and non-state actors.

Stefan Elbe's work seeks to address this gap. Unlike Davies (2010: 9), who doubts the usefulness of a security framing, Elbe brings us back to security as a privileged entry point into the political dimensions of health. He discusses how health issues – namely HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases – have been the target of securitization efforts (Elbe, 2009, 2010a). Drawing on insights from securitization theory (Wæver, 1995; Buzan *et al.*, 1998), Elbe assumes that framing an issue as a threat involves a transformation of political procedure. Instead of an objective reality, 'security' is a political modality that usually entails moving issues beyond the normal political process. Elbe is thus able to assess the impact of disease, not only upon specific policies, but also upon the political sphere more broadly.

The securitization of health problems is now becoming an important theme in the literature (Davies, 2008; McInnes and Rushton, 2010; Curley and Herington, 2011). Importantly, Elbe takes the analysis further and presents a new take on the health–security nexus: besides looking at the effects of security vocabularies upon health policies, he investigates how ideas of health 'also begin subtly to reshape our understandings of security and insecurity in international relations' (2010b: 14). He thus observes in the international political arena the growth of medicalization, through which insecurity is represented as a medical problem. By addressing both the securitization of health and the medicalization of security, Elbe provides what is perhaps the most sustained engagement with the politics of health in the IR literature.

Nonetheless, this engagement still needs to be pushed forward. To begin with, Elbe has not provided a framework that takes into account these two iterations of the health–security nexus *simultaneously*, that is, a framework that combines a study of the constitution of health security with an assessment of its political impact. At the same time, there are important dimensions to the politics of health that Elbe does not explore. His work has been effective in showing how health can be securitized (that is, 'how the health–security nexus is made'). It has also explored some of the ways in which health can impact upon foreign and security policy ('what health security does'). He has even touched upon the normative dimension of the nexus ('how health security should be') (Elbe, 2006). What is lacking – in addition to conjoining these dimensions into one framework – is an engagement with the ways in which ideas and practices of health can be challenged and transformed. In connection with this, one also needs to consider how ideas and practices of health can potentially be mobilized to promote broader political transformation. This is another important dimension of the politics of health that has not been considered by Elbe.

The literature on health in IR has provided a great wealth of empirical investigations, institutional mappings, and even some forays into the analysis of the international political dimensions of health. However, none of the contributions has tackled head-on the question of what makes health a political phenomenon. No analytical framework has been designed with this in mind. As a result, no synergies have been created between the political

dimensions already identified, while other dimensions have simply been overlooked. The elusiveness of the politics of health has prevented a detailed understanding of crucial issues: what makes health such a sensitive topic in international politics; how health and disease came to be seen as they are; how health has impacted upon the way we understand ourselves; how health practices can decisively shape and even transform in radical ways our communities and societies.

The present book sets out to address the absence of a framework for analysing the politics of health. It builds upon the existing IR literature on health but sets out to considerably broaden its scope. It does so by adopting a security perspective that is markedly different from existing contributions. While security offers what is potentially the most fruitful lens for exploring the politics of health, existing understandings of security are insufficient. The study of the politics of health must thus begin with a re-examination of the way security is understood.

The politics of security

Understanding the politics of health from a security perspective requires, first, that we consider existing tools for approaching security issues. In particular, what makes security issues political? For most of the twentieth century, thinking about the politics of security was not a priority because security ideas and practices were seen as mere reactions to changing political concerns. The events and pressures of the 'real world' of policymaking determined what security was seen to be. Some scholars (Neocleous, 2008; Buzan and Hansen, 2009: 66–100) have traced the development of the notion of 'national security' in post-Second World War US policy circles, as a response to concerns about external enemies (the strategic rivalry with the Soviet Union) and internal enemies (the fear of subversion from within).

The preponderance of strategic considerations in the study of security meant that this concept was, to a large extent, left unquestioned. This situation would begin to change during the 1980s, when scholars began a discussion about the 'redefinition' of the concept of security outside of the traditional strategic studies framework (Ullman, 1983; Mathews, 1989). For some (Booth, 1991; Tickner, 1995), this meant questioning what had been taken for granted in the literature – particularly the state-centric, Western-centric, militaristic and masculinist frame of mind. Calls were made for focusing on the security concerns of individuals and groups, as well as on issues beyond interstate war.

In addition to the emergence of other issues and referents, another shift occurred in the security literature in this period: some authors began to scrutinize not only the theoretical underpinnings of security but also the context in which ideas about security came about. Research gradually became aware, not only of the political origins of its concepts, but also of its own connection to political arrangements. Barry Buzan, one of the pioneers of this

shift, saw the concept of security as 'intensely political' (1991: 12). Politics began to be seen as deeply ingrained in security – not only in the theories and ideologies that gave rise to the way security was conceptualized, but also in the decisions and policies that security justified or made possible. As a result, the study of security could no longer be regarded as merely reactive to political pressures, or simply as a source of expert advice for policymakers. The floor was open for a more fundamental questioning of the political nature and effects of security – in other words, a 'politicization of security' (Fierke, 2007: 33).

The idea that security should be seen as political gained further momentum with the rise of critical security studies (Krause and Williams, 1997a). The 'critical turn' in security studies consolidated a shift in the field's relation to its subject matter: it constituted the corollary of a tendency to see security research as a political process in which claims are produced and practices are imagined and legitimized. A reconsideration of the concepts and methodologies hitherto used in security studies (Krause and Williams, 1996) was supplemented by an analysis of the politics behind the construction of security knowledge. Ideas of security were deemed political insofar as they stem from particular interpretations, as well as from contestation and even struggle.

Critical security authors also set out to explore the connection between security theory and the wider political order, by showing that the way we conceptualize security cannot be separated from our ideas about how politics works or should work. For Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams (1997b: xi, emphasis in the original), the stepping stone for rethinking security should be 'making the definition of the *political* a question rather than an assumption'. In this context, scholars also began to draw attention to the impact of understandings and practices of security upon social relations and, more broadly, upon the constitution of the political order.

In sum, one can witness in the security literature a growing concern with the political dimensions of security: the assumptions and struggles that underlie ideas and practices; the context in which these are located; the processes through which they are framed and reproduced; and their political implications. An increasing number of scholars now accepts that we should consider how security emerges politically (how it is 'made') and how security is in itself a form of politics (by doing things in a certain way).

Security as emancipation

As has been argued elsewhere (Nunes, 2012), the politicization of security currently faces a crucial challenge. The two preferred avenues of politicization – the study of how security is made and of what security does – have become sites of vibrant debate. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the fact that an important corollary of the project of politicization has been neglected: while the literature has been successful in contesting predominant security arrangements, its achievements when it comes to providing a normative

agenda and informing political change are arguably more modest. The absence of an explicit commitment to the normative judgement and political transformation of security has resulted in an imbalanced politicization, which shapes how particular security issues are being engaged with. Specifically, this tendency in politicization has resulted in a markedly pessimistic outlook: there is now a profound distrust towards security, voiced by authors for whom practices of security entail an undesirable logic characterized by closure, exclusion and even violence (Dillon, 1996; Bigo, 2008; Neocleous, 2011). Security is no longer a good to be promoted; it is something to be contested, resisted and 'unmade' (Aradau, 2004; Huysmans, 2006; Bigo, 2007).

Not all security scholars would agree with this view. Some would argue that the politicization of security must be more ambitious. It is not enough to identify the dangerous consequences of predominant security arrangements; the purpose of politicization should be to contribute to transforming these arrangements if they are deemed undesirable. The study of security should not just be about pointing out what is wrong – it should be about making things better. More security need not necessarily mean more draconian measures as some scholars argue; instead, more security means the alleviation of the insecurities that are experienced by individuals and groups every day around the world.

This approach to politicization has been put forward by those who connect security with emancipation. The idea of 'security as emancipation' has been developed most explicitly by Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones, two authors commonly identified with the 'Welsh School' (Smith, 2005) or 'Aberystwyth School' (Wæver, 2004a) of security studies.¹ Booth has conceived security as the removal (or at least alleviation) of constraints upon the lives of individuals and groups. He argues that emancipation encompasses 'lifting people as individuals and groups out of structural and contingent oppressions' that 'stop them from carrying out what they would freely choose to do, compatible with the freedom of others' (Booth, 2007: 110, 112). 'Oppressions', or threats, can range from 'direct bodily violence from other humans (war), through structural political and economic forms of oppression (slavery), into more existential threats to identity (cultural imperialism)' (Booth, 1999a: 49).

Security as emancipation is predicated upon the desire to engage in a comprehensive way with the 'reality' of security, that is, with the conditions of existence of 'real people in real places' (Wyn Jones, 1996: 214). For security as emancipation, the meaning of security is not based on a universal, *a priori* notion of what being secure is, but rather stems from actual experiences of insecurity as a 'life-determining condition' (Booth, 2007: 101). This also means that, for the authors working with this approach, security is more than a label that is attached to issues or an instrument to justify draconian measures; rather, the meaning of security is ultimately tied to the experience of being insecure.

Notwithstanding this engagement with 'reality', for security as emancipation the concept of security is underpinned by political and ethical

assumptions. It is a 'derivative concept' insofar as 'security outcomes (policies, situations, etc.) *derive* from different underlying understandings of the character and purpose of politics' (Booth, 2007: 109, emphasis in the original). At the same time, understandings of security have important implications for politics. Reality is supported – or can alternatively be challenged – by existing versions of it. The condition of insecurity can be transformed not only by social struggles, but also by ideas that shape these struggles. Theories draw the boundaries of political imagination and possibility; they are appropriated by actors and help to constitute their self-perception and behaviour. By helping to shape reality, security theory is ultimately a form of politics.

Security as emancipation thus sees itself as a form of praxis committed to political change – specifically, the transformation of arrangements that are implicated in the production of insecurities. This approach sets out to impact upon political actors' perceptions and actions; in order to reach this goal, it draws on a method called immanent critique. According to Matt McDonald (2012: 60), the immanent method 'engages with the core commitments of particular discourses, ideologies or institutional arrangements on their own terms, in the process locating possibilities for radical change within a particular existing order'. The internal contradictions of predominant security arrangements constitute fault lines where alternative visions of security can be deployed. Immanent critique also entails the identification of transformative possibilities in the form of ideas and actors that have the potential to contribute to change in particular contexts. The study of security is tied closely to practical transformative politics.

This book is inspired by the idea of security as emancipation. It subscribes to the purpose of emancipation for both analytical and normative reasons. Analytically, by providing what is arguably the most encompassing take on politicization, security as emancipation holds the potential to be an ideal starting point for a multidimensional analysis of the politics of security issues. Starting with such a perspective, it becomes possible to undertake an analysis that conjoins: the (re)production of ideas and practices of security ('how security is made'); the political effects ('what security does'); the normative purposes underlying analysis (ideas about 'what security should be'); the search for transformative potential (strategies regarding 'what can be done about security'); and the politics of change ('what security can do'). Such is the analysis that this book sets out to undertake, focusing on the case of health.

This book also subscribes to the normative purpose of emancipation. It concurs that the study of security should tell us how things are and why they are so. But it also believes that studying security should enable us to think about whether a particular state of affairs is desirable, and whether it can be changed. The purpose of emancipation looks towards opening up spaces in people's lives – spaces that might allow for decisions to be taken and courses of action to be pursued. Security, as a form of emancipation, means the process of guaranteeing and safeguarding those spaces. This book seeks to provide an emancipatory understanding of health security that, while taking on

board the different political dimensions of security issues, is able to identify and redress health insecurities. As will be argued, this notion of health security is based on the existence of mechanisms that can adequately address health inequalities, vulnerabilities and harm.

The fact that this book starts from this normative commitment does not mean that current versions of security as emancipation are simply applied in an uncritical way. In fact, there are important limitations in existing formulations of security as emancipation that need to be addressed if this approach is to constitute a viable resource for the study of security issues. This book addresses the current shortcomings – which are ultimately linked to an insufficient theorization of the concepts of reality, subjectivity and power – in order to advance a new, emancipation-inspired framework.

The structure of this book

This book is based on three core assumptions. The first is that the politics of health has received insufficient attention in the literature, being only addressed in a tangential and piecemeal way. The next assumption is that security has been at the heart of policy and academic debates on health, so that it provides a privileged entry point for a political investigation of the latter. Finally, the idea of security as emancipation is here seen as the most promising take on the political study of security issues; its normative commitment to addressing insecurities is also endorsed.

On the basis of these assumptions, this argument sets out to unlock the analytical and normative potential of security as emancipation, with a view to mobilizing this approach in the first systematic study of the politics of health. This two-pronged goal is reflected in the structure of the book.

Part I develops a new emancipatory framework for the study of security. Each of the chapters in this part deals with one theme in the security-as-emancipation approach that has been insufficiently theorized by existing formulations. Chapter 1 discusses the way in which security and the ‘condition of insecurity’ are being conceptualized as something real. It shows that there is an uneasy balance between the material and political dimensions of the reality of security, which reflects itself in the way in which security as emancipation is able to deal with ‘insecure bodies’ and ‘bodies in pain’. The chapter makes the case for a reconsideration of the reality of security along political lines. Rather than taking the materiality of security for granted, it shifts the focus to processes of materialization of insecurities.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of the subject of security – the subject that is seen as insecure and that is to be secured. It argues that while claims of insecurity need to be taken seriously, relying on the experience of the ‘victims of insecurity’ is problematic. Instead, the argument shows that an emancipatory approach to security has much to gain, both analytically and normatively, from recognizing the mutually constitutive relationship between security and subjectivity.