
SECURITY, STRATEGY, AND CRITICAL THEORY

R I C H A R D W Y N J O N E S

■ *Critical Security Studies*_____

Security, Strategy, and Critical Theory

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*My grandfather Emyr Wyn Jones
followed the writing of this book with enormous interest—
an interest occasioned in part by our familial bonds,
but also by his passionate, Quaker-inspired support
for the worldwide struggle for peace and justice.
Sadly, he died just as the final draft was being completed.
I dedicate the book to his memory.*

Preface

Despite its recent origins (discussed in the Introduction), the term “critical security studies” (CSS) has become relatively familiar to those interested in the study of international relations and, in particular, security. It has been the subject of books, journal articles, and numerous conference papers. Unsurprisingly, however, given the status of international relations as a divided discipline, there has been little agreement as to what “it” is.

For some, critical security studies is little more than a typological device—a useful label to apply to all those approaches to the study of security that are not based on the narrow metatheoretical assumptions that underpin so much of security studies, especially in the United States (Krause 1998). According to this view, CSS does not constitute a distinct approach in itself, but is rather a collection of disparate approaches whose central presumptions and concerns may well be mutually contradictory. In other words, critical security studies is defined by what it is not.

For others, however, critical security studies is a distinctive project in its own right: an ambitious attempt to combine the insights of previous alternative work in the field with a particular set of metatheoretical principles and precepts to develop a new, emancipation-oriented paradigm for the theory and practice of security (Bilgin, Booth, and Wyn Jones 1998). This work falls squarely into the latter camp. In the book I outline and argue for an approach to security studies based on the work of the Frankfurt School—the originators of critical theory as that term is usually understood. Put another way, I argue that the prenomial “critical” in critical security studies should be taken seriously; that critical security studies should be developed in the shadow—or, better perhaps, in the light—of Frankfurt School critical theory.

The arguments of the book are developed through a two-part structure. In Part I, I explore the origins of the “critical” in critical security studies by discussing the ways in which the key writings of the Frankfurt School treat

the themes of theory, technology, and emancipation. This discussion then informs Part 2, in which I argue for critical theory-based understandings of security, strategy, and the relationship between theory and practice in the field of security, thus laying the conceptual foundations for critical security studies.

Acknowledgments

One of the many joys afforded by the completion of this book is that it finally allows me the opportunity to acknowledge the support that I have received during its extended gestation.

First, I would like to thank my colleagues in the Department of International Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. I have benefited enormously from being part of such an intellectually stimulating environment. Steve Smith, head of the department, not only has been largely responsible for fostering a renaissance in this venerable department's fortunes but has also been very supportive on a personal level. He has my grateful thanks on both counts. I am also indebted to Mick Cox and Michael Williams, who have both been the source of constant, good-humored encouragement.

A number of discussion group organizers, panel conveners, and journal editors have allowed me to try out many of the arguments contained within the book in various public forums. In particular I would like to thank participants in the Cambrian Discussion Group in Aberystwyth, the organizers of various critical security studies panels at BISA and ISA annual conferences to which I have contributed papers, Alex Danchev at Keele, and Adran Athroniaeth, Urdd Graddedigion Prifysgol Cymru. In addition, those students who have taken the critical security studies master's option at Aberystwyth in recent years have made a major contribution, by both forcing me to clarify my own thinking and continually pushing CSS in new directions.

Some of the arguments in the book were first set out in previous articles and chapters. I am grateful for permission to draw upon material from "The Nuclear Revolution" in Alex Danchev (ed.), *Fin de Siècle: The Meaning of the Twentieth Century* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1995); "'Message in a Bottle'? Theory and Praxis in Critical Security Studies," *Contemporary Security Policy* Vol. 16, No. 3 (December 1995);

“Gwleidyddiaeth Ryddfreniol ar ôl Auschwitz: Athroniaeth Wleidyddol Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno,” *Efrydiau Athronyddol* Vol. 59 (1996); and “‘Travel Without Maps’: Thinking About Security After the Cold War,” in Jane Davis (ed.), *Security Issues in the Post-Cold War World* (Brookfield, Vt.: Edward Elgar, 1996).

Previous drafts of the book were read by Chris Brown and Mike Sheehan. Their detailed, perceptive, and encouraging comments have proven to be invaluable. Although family and other friends may have escaped reading the text, their influence has helped shape it. In particular, I wish to thank Ella and Gareth Wyn Jones, Jerry Hunter, and Rhys Jones. Eli Stamnes deserves a special mention for having both read and commented on the manuscript and put up with its author. My thanks also to Paul Williams for his assistance in preparing the index.

I want to pay special tribute to Ken Booth, who has contributed to this book in so many ways. It was he who first suggested that I combine my dual interests in critical theory and security. He may well have lived to rue that day given that he has now read and carefully commented upon more drafts of both the parts and the whole than he may care to remember. Most important, as the following pages will reveal, many of my own ideas have developed through engagement with his. He, of course, should bear no responsibility for my interpretations or elaborations.

—R. W. J.

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Introduction

The relevance of critical theory to the academic study of international relations was first announced in 1981 when Robert W. Cox published his seminal essay “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory.” This essay, along with its companion, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method” (1983), set out the bare bones of an alternative approach to the study of world politics whose principles and precepts stood in stark contrast to those underpinning the various approaches that had been dominant until that point. Since then, a number of scholars have attempted to flesh out these bones by applying the central ideas to some of the concrete issues that animate international relations. This book represents a milestone in my own attempts to understand and apply the basic ideas of critical theory to some of the conceptual issues at the heart of one of the discipline’s most important subfields, namely, security studies. At its broadest and most ambitious, it may be viewed as an attempt to vindicate Mark Hoffman’s bold claim that critical theory should provide the basis for “the next stage in the development of International Relations Theory” (M. Hoffman 1987: 244). For if it can be demonstrated that a critical theory-based approach can generate a distinctive and superior understanding of security, then this may be seen as evidence of a broader utility.

In retrospect, the decision to attempt to think “critically” about security and strategy has proven to be a particularly fortuitous one. The collapse of the Soviet bloc was accompanied by the shattering of the Cold War verities that had ensured that, for forty years, most discussion of national security (in the United Kingdom and the United States as well as in Eastern Europe) approximated more a recitation of supposed timeless wisdom than genuine intellectual contention and debate. With the removal of these fetters, analysts of differing theoretical persuasions have entered the fray and subjected notions of security (in particular) to unprecedented scrutiny. The ensuing

debates have been among the most interesting, illuminating, and stimulating discussions in the field of international relations in recent times. Some of the major theoretical and metatheoretical disputes in the discipline have been played out in these debates—in a relatively confined intellectual space and around a concrete set of issues. Various realists, neorealists, neoliberal institutionalists, feminists, poststructuralists, and critical theorists have locked horns on the terrain of security. As a result, a consideration of these debates provides fascinating insights into the concrete analytical implications that arise from the different ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions embraced by these approaches.

I do not claim to provide a comprehensive account of these debates as such. Although the work of other authors is of course discussed—some in depth—this is done as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The aim of this book is rather to develop the conceptual foundations of a critical theory approach to the study of security—what I call critical security studies. This term originates from a conference held in Toronto in May 1994 (Booth 1997a: 108). Since then, panels have been held under the banner of “critical security studies” at various other international conferences, and the term has gained widespread currency in the discipline at large. In their preface to a book of contributions to the Toronto conference, the organizers, Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, specifically invoke Cox’s conceptualization of critical theory in order to explain the “appending of the term *critical to security studies*” (Krause and Williams 1997: x–xi; see also Klein 1997: 364). However, as Krause and Williams are aware, not all of those who contributed to their volume are committed to critical theory as understood by Cox (Krause and Williams 1997: x–xx). This book, however, seeks to take seriously the origins of the prenomial “critical” in critical security studies by outlining an understanding based firmly on the assumptions of critical theory.

Part I of the book is essentially an exploration and exposition of critical theory and, in particular, of those themes developed in the literature that are particularly pertinent to the study of security. This broad-ranging survey is rendered necessary by the fact that none of the excellent general discussions of critical theory (for example, Jay 1973; Held 1980; Dubiel 1985; Benhabib 1986; Kellner 1989; Hohendahl 1991; Bronner 1994; Wiggershaus 1994; Calhoun 1995) focus systematically on those theoretical issues that are—or should be—of central concern to security studies. Moreover, the literature that specifically attempts to apply the ideas of critical theory to the study of international relations—an approach I call critical international theory—offers little by way of guidance. Although excellent material has emerged from these efforts (notably, R. Cox 1981, 1983, 1996; Linklater 1990a, 1990b, 1992, 1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1998b; M. Hoffman 1987, 1991; Neufeld 1995), the authors would not claim to provide more

than a partial treatment of some aspects of the critical theory literature relevant to their interests, and none are specifically concerned with security (M. Hoffman 1993 is a partial exception).

Indeed, one of the striking features of critical international theory is its rather curious, at times even tenuous, connection with what is usually regarded (in social theory circles at least) as critical theory, namely, the work of the Frankfurt School. Take, for example, the work of Robert Cox himself. Although his essays in the early 1980s heralded the arrival of critical theory in international relations, he has never cited the work of Frankfurt School critical theorists. Significantly, neither does he mention their work in a semiautobiographical essay in which he discusses the intellectual influences and personal experiences that have helped shape his work (R. Cox 1996: 19–31). Rather, the main influence on his thought seems to have been a form of Hegelian Marxism as refracted through the work of Antonio Gramsci. Though this intellectual heritage provides many interesting linkages to and parallels with Frankfurt School critical theory—indeed, as I argue later, it may provide a valuable corrective in some respects—there are clearly significant differences.

A similar pattern can be observed in the work of other prominent critical international theorists. Andrew Linklater, for example, utilizes the writings of Jürgen Habermas extensively but also draws heavily on the English School (for example, Linklater 1996a). Mark Neufeld also has certainly been influenced by the work of the Frankfurt School, and yet he may well be as indebted to the work of Charles Taylor as he is to that of Max Horkheimer or Habermas. Similarly, Mark Hoffman, also prominent in applying Habermas to international relations, makes use of the ideas of other thinkers who have emerged from quite different intellectual traditions: in his case, John Burton (M. Hoffman 1992). Although this eclecticism is not necessarily problematic in terms of the work of these particular theorists, it does mean that critical theory has been appropriated by international relations in a fairly unsystematic, even haphazard, manner (a point developed in more detail by Haacke 1996). All of this means that a discussion of some of the most relevant parts of the critical theory literature is a necessary foundation for the subsequent discussion of security and strategy.

Frankfurt School critical theory is not a unified body of thought. There is hardly a single issue beyond the most general in which can be identified *the* critical theory position. Rather, it is a tradition characterized by major differences both between various proponents and across time; in the latter case, significant differences have emerged even within the work of individual thinkers. This means that concepts cannot be simply appropriated from the critical theory literature and applied to issues in the security realm without reference to their origins. To do so would fly in the face of the critical method, which stresses the situatedness of knowledge. It would also ignore

the insights that may be derived from understanding the evolution of concepts across time as a result of various material and ideational developments. Thus, Part 1, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” is structured to provide an overview of the development of three key conceptual issues across three distinct historical stages in the development of critical theory. These key issues are all centrally relevant to the study of security.

- Theory: the understanding(s) of the social role of theory and theorists
- Technology: the understanding(s) of the social role and the impact of technology
- Emancipation: the understanding(s) of the prospects for and possible contours of a more emancipated order

Specifically, in Chapter 1, “Promise: Toward a Critical Theory of Society,” I outline how the three key concepts were understood as part of the earliest formulation of critical theory developed by members of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, and in particular by the then dominant figure Max Horkheimer. I do so largely through an examination and evaluation of the arguments propounded by Horkheimer in his famous programmatic essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory.”

In Chapter 2, “Impasse: Emancipatory Politics After Auschwitz,” I discuss the alternative, extremely bleak version of critical theory subsequently developed by key members of the Frankfurt School in response to the rise of fascism in central and southern Europe and the Stalinization of the Bolshevik experiment in the East. I also consider some of the main lines of argument in the now classic study *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written by Horkheimer and his colleague Theodor Adorno and first published in 1947.

In Chapter 3, “Redemption: Renewing the Critical Project,” I examine the routes by which the succeeding generations of critical theorists have sought to redeem the promise of early critical theory from the impasse represented by *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In contrast to the preceding chapters, my argument is not developed through a focus on a specific text but is advanced through a broader consideration of how certain key thinkers—namely, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Ulrich Beck, and Andrew Feenberg—have conceptualized the three key concepts central to the development of critical security studies.

In Part 2, “Traditional and Critical Security Studies,” I apply insights gleaned from the discussion of critical theory in Part 1 to some of the central conceptual questions underpinning security studies. Detailed consideration is given to

- Security: the conceptualization of security
- Strategy: the conceptualization of strategy
- Practice: the referent(s) of and for security specialists

My aim is not only to criticize the prevailing orthodoxy in security studies—what I term traditional security studies—but also to outline an alternative approach for a critical security studies.

Specifically, in Chapter 4, “Theory: Reconceptualizing Security,” I intervene in the contemporary debates around the conceptualization of security and in particular those centered on the broadening, deepening, and extending of the concept. In this chapter I criticize well-established positions in these debates as well as some alternative positions developed by writers influenced by poststructuralist ideas. I also argue that a more theoretically and practically helpful conceptualization of security is one that

- Eschews statism
- Recognizes that military threats are far from the only phenomena with major security implications and, therefore, that other issues have a place on the security agenda
- Anchors the theory and practice of security in a broader concern with human emancipation

Such an understanding of security forms the basis for an alternative critical security studies.

In Chapter 5, “Technology: Reconceptualizing Strategy,” I reconceptualize strategy in a way that is consistent with assumptions and precepts of critical security studies. I argue that, despite its own professed intentions, the traditional approach to the study of the military dimension in world politics—that is, strategy—tends to ignore ends and to concentrate almost exclusively on means. I also charge that although the traditional approach to strategy has tended to fetishize military hardware, it has actually revealed a naive understanding of technology and particularly the relationship between military technology and strategic culture. In place of the traditional approach I argue for an alternative conceptualization of strategy that embraces ends, regarding normative issues as intrinsic to the study, and is based on a dialectical understanding of technology.

In the sixth and final chapter, “Emancipation: Reconceptualizing Practice,” I focus on the possible audiences for and purposes of critical security studies. I reject the ways in which traditional security studies has conceptualized the relationship between the theory and practice of security. But because of the deficiencies in the Frankfurt School’s account of the theory-practice nexus, which are identified in Part 1, I develop an alterna-

tive understanding based instead on the ideas of Gramsci. I argue that proponents of critical security studies should eschew the temptations of seeking the ears of soldiers and statesmen and should instead seek to aid in the development of counterhegemonic positions linked to the struggles of emancipatory social movements.

In the Epilogue I summarize the main lines of arguments developed in Part 2.

I do not claim to reveal new knowledge as such in this book; instead, I aim to make a contribution in terms of method and critical evaluation. This book is an attempt to rethink, reevaluate, and reorient. The result is the elaboration and clarification of what may be best considered as a kind of conceptual tool kit. Ultimately, the validity of this tool kit—indeed, of the whole critical security studies enterprise—depends on its ability to shed new light on real-world problems. In particular, as I argue at length, critical theory stands or falls by its ability to illuminate the possibilities for emancipatory transformation—however faint—extant in a given situation. And although the development of the tool kit has certainly been informed by practice, the challenge remains to apply it far more systematically: It is on this application that I intend to focus in the future.

The process of applying the tool kit is, of course, a process that will inevitably lead to the dialectical transformation of the concepts themselves. To think critically is to embark on an open-ended journey in which ideas are continually challenged, refined, rejected, and renewed in the light of changing perceptions and changing practices. Inevitably, therefore, even if the ideas contained in this book are deeply felt and strongly expressed, they remain, in this all-important sense, preliminary and tentative. It is in this spirit that I now enter them into the public sphere.

PART 1

Traditional and
Critical Theory
