

Human Security at Twenty: Civilizing Process or Civilizing Mission?

Written by Giorgio Shani

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GIORGIO SHANI, JUN 19 2014

The twentieth anniversary of the publication of the United Nations Development Program Human Development Report *New Dimensions of Human Security*, which introduced the concept of 'human security' to an international audience of policy-makers and researchers, provides an opportune moment to reflect on its relevance to a world increasingly assailed by a variety of different challenges and crises. When the term was introduced in 1994 against the backdrop of the collapse of the Soviet Union, environmental crisis and genocidal ethnic conflict in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, it was indicative of an attempt to posit an alternative vision of international relations to that of George Bush Sr.'s 'New World Order' of unipolarity and free markets, one more in keeping with the spirit of the UN charter. 'For too long,' the authors of the Report stated, 'the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states' (UNDP 1994:3). In contrast with conventional understandings of security informed by the 'national security paradigm' which equated security with external threats to state boundaries, human security signified safety from 'the constant threats of hunger, disease, crime and repression' (UNDP 1994:3). It, furthermore, connoted 'protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of our everyday lives – whether in our homes, in our jobs, in our communities, and in our environment' (UNDP 1994:3). This appeared to place the concept of human security in opposition to the prevailing economic wisdom at the time which saw 'shock therapy' as the only viable way for newly emerging economies to integrate themselves into a global economy run on capitalist lines.

Despite its recent adoption by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2012 (UN General Assembly 2012) and its institutionalization through the United Nations system through the Trust Fund for Human Security, human security has, however, failed to contest both the hegemony of the 'national security paradigm' within the theory and practice of international relations and neo-liberal globalization within the world economy. Widely discredited following its inability to provide security from the existential threats caused by hunger, poverty, disease, repression, environmental disasters, and terrorism, the 'national security paradigm' continues to provide the dominant framework for ascertaining and dealing with security threats. Human security, on the other hand, remains ensconced in a liberal straightjacket that reduces the human to 'bare life' (Agamben 1998); a 'poor, bare, forked animal' (King Lear Act III, Scene IV) to be protected and empowered from a range of existential threats – from physical violence to hunger, disease, and illiteracy – by the state and the 'international community' of territorialized states. In its present instantiation, it lends itself to co-option and incorporation into, on the one hand, the 'national security paradigm' which divides humanity into self-contained units with different interests and capabilities, and a world capitalist economy which has intensified disparities in income on a global scale, on the other, thus naturalizing war, poverty, and conflict (Shani and Pasha 2007).

Where human security has made considerable inroads in contesting the 'national security paradigm' and qualifying state sovereignty has been in the formerly colonized world, particularly in post-conflict societies or transitional democracies, where fragile state structures, deep social cleavages, ethno-religious militancy, and pervasive socio-economic problems stemming from underdevelopment have posed challenges to the state's very survival. In some cases, such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Southern Sudan, the Central African Republic, parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and, most infamously, Rwanda, state structures have collapsed entirely, leaving vulnerable populations at the mercy of external assistance. The proclivity of state elites to use violence against their own populations with impunity when faced with challenges to their own authority, such as in the former Federal Republic

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of Yugoslavia, Libya, and Syria, has furthermore outraged conceptions of 'civilized behaviour' leading to demands for intervention. Human security, as a key concept associated with liberal peace-building, has facilitated the intervention of the 'international community' in the internal affairs of 'post-conflict societies' and governance of many areas of the 'developing world.' For some, this development is to be welcomed as part of a 'civilizing process' which seeks to minimize violent harm and the unnecessary suffering of others. The 'civilizing process' refers to the process whereby modern Europeans came to regard themselves as more 'civilized' than their ancestors, and more 'developed' than other peoples (Elias 2000; Linklater 2011). Standards of 'civilization' (Gong 1984) were a pre-condition for entry into 'international society' in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, and the 'expansion of international society' (Bull and Watson 1984) after the Second World War was predicated on the acceptance of 'Western' notions of state sovereignty, rights, and civilized behaviour as universal standards of civilization. Viewed from the perspective of many of those in the Global South, therefore, human security appears as merely the latest instalment of the 'civilizing missions' of the nineteenth century which served as a pretext for their (re)colonization. The 'project' of human security entails not only the protection, but also the construction, of rational, autonomous, and self-interested individuals out of the great culturally differentiated mass of humanity. As such, there are unmistakable continuities with the 'civilizing mission' of nineteenth century Imperialism which sought to actively impose a 'cultural conversion of non-Western states to a Western civilizational standard' (Hobson 2012: 27-emphasis in the original). The agents of the contemporary 'civilizing mission', however, are no longer European empires, private companies such as the East India Company, or missionaries, but an 'international community' centred on the United Nations system dominated by powerful Western states (most of which were colonial Empires) working in tandem with multinational corporations and selected international non-governmental organizations to institutionalize liberal peace-building in 'fragile' post-colonial states.

However, the ideal of human security – the right of people to live in 'freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair' (United Nations General Assembly 2012) – remains a relevant, yet distant, aspiration, particularly in the light of the global financial and unfolding environmental crises. The problem for human security, in short, is that it continues to be articulated in terms unintelligible to the majority of the subjects in whose name it speaks: humanity. Humanity, it is argued, cannot be assumed a priori, but must be understood from *within* different cultural traditions. Therefore, human security needs to take cultural *difference* seriously. Culture is understood not in essentialist terms as 'primordial attachments' (Shils 1957, Geertz), but refers 'to the construction, maintenance, and transformation of meaningful and purposeful schemes of existence' (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004:16). Culture, in other words, is what permits the individual to have a *bios*: to enjoy a life endowed with meaning and dignity. It is here that the role of religion and identity plays an important role in permitting the articulation of different conceptions of human security in *vernacular* terms. For human security to aspire to universality, it needs to be *post-secular*.

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