

Universal Security/Emancipation: A Critique of Ken Booth

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SERGEN BAHCECI, MAR 23 2015

“Security is Mortals’ cheefest Enemy” wrote Shakespeare in *Macbeth* (Shakespeare cited in, Der Derian 1998). A more encompassing proposition can be found in Oscar Wilde, who wrote; “People talk so much about the beauty of confidence. They seem to entirely ignore the much more subtle beauty of doubt... To be on the alert is to live; to be lulled into security is to die” (Wilde cited in, Redman 1959:66). These two eulogies to *insecurity* (assuming that Shakespeare and Wilde affirmed life) are in a stark contrast with Ken Booth’s conceptualisation of insecurity, which contends that an insecure life means “a determined life” (Booth 2007:101). For Booth, a “determined life”, in other words a life without freedom, means mere survival and therefore security is always “*survival plus...* the *plus* being some freedom from life-determining threats, and therefore space to make choices” (Booth 2007:102). He continues that if security means the absence of threats and if emancipation is the “freeing of the people from physical and human constraints”, “security and emancipation are two sides of the same coin” (Booth 1991:319).

In direct opposition to the existential gestures of Shakespeare and Wilde, Booth sees security as an instrumental value and he goes on to build a theory of world security/emancipation to argue for the case of a politics and community in which practicing security means promoting “emancipatory space” and vice versa (Booth 2007:115). His enthusiastic fusion of security and emancipation goes as far as claiming that universal emancipation, and hence security, is possible through a politics that aims at “a world security community of communities, where war is practically unthinkable, and in which global issues can be pursued as collectively as possible” (Booth 2007:427). This reconstruction of universal security/emancipation is deeply problematic for several reasons, and it is the purpose of this essay to criticize it. In the first section, it will elaborate on Booth’s argument in more detail through an analysis of his self-declared origins. In the following sections, it will deconstruct his fusion of security and emancipation by analyzing the *ontology* of the former and the *logic* of the latter. The essay argues that Booth subscribes to a very simplistic understanding of security and power, and the emancipation that he normatively defends contains the possibility of resurrecting the violence it seeks to eliminate.

Security/Emancipation and the “Politics of Inventing Humanity”

Booth’s re-conceptualization of security/emancipation has two intertwined points of emergence: one is his philosophical attempt to define the core meaning of the term security (and its relation to emancipation) and the other point of emergence is his empirical argument for the necessity of a politics of emancipation in which security is the means of achieving this end. His re-conceptualization of security has a practical purpose from the very beginning and emerges out of his criticism of the realist understandings that deal mostly with the states and the strategies that states have to pursue to achieve security; his criticism is an attempt to unsettle this application of security (Booth 1991:317-319). He criticises the theories of state-centric realists who focus on strategy as “ethnocentrism writ large” and argues that these approaches, despite dealing with war, which certainly is not unimportant, are neither appropriate for academics nor a “rational way to see the world community through the *interregnum*” (*emphasis added*, Booth 1991:318). For Booth, realism is an “unrealistic... ideology masquerading as a theory of knowledge” that lacks a theory of change and a sophisticated methodology (Booth 2007:35). More importantly, its agenda is narrow and its ethics are hostile to human interests as it “reproduces the cold monster of the state as the centre of politics”; therefore, Booth concludes, it is imperative to reduce Realism’s “hold on world politics” (Booth 2007:36).

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Indeed, Booth sees Barry Buzan's *People, States and Fear* (1983) as a failed attempt at doing that in the end "leaved things as they are" (Booth 2007:98). Buzan labels security as a highly political and an "essentially contested concept" while, according to Booth, refusing to provide his own, better definition (Buzan 1983:5-8; Booth 2007:98). For Booth, Buzan's timidity, combined with his realist-liberal assumptions, did nothing more than propagating this widespread myth that "security is an essentially contested concept" (Booth 2007:99). Booth completely disagrees with this claim as this will be explained in a moment. Yet, Booth's biggest concern is again practical. Booth rhetorically asks: "If we cannot name it (security), can we ever hope to achieve it" (Booth 1991:317)? This essay will deal with Booth's own programme for achieving security in a moment. Before that, it needs to analyze his supposedly exhaustive definition of security and its link with emancipation.

Booth starts by challenging the proposition about the essentially contested nature of security by claiming that security is contingently, and not essentially, contested (Booth 2007:100). What he means by this is that the notion of security has a "core element" that can be defined and that the uncertainty about the term is caused by its practical usage and the self-defeating "obsession with the present" (Ibid.). This essay has provided his definition of this "core element" in the very beginning but it is nonetheless fruitful to stress it again: security simply means the absence of threats which means "survival *plus*... some space to make choices" (Booth 2007:102). He convincingly specifies the practical implications of this definition; security and being secure is intelligible when there is a referent object that is to be secure from a threat by means of something (Booth 2007:101). These spaces are filled by political theory and practical concerns that underline different conceptions of "the character and the purpose of politics"; precisely because of this, security is a "derivative concept" (Booth 2007:109). His own re-conceptualization of "security/emancipation" starts from these premises.

Herein, this essay should start introducing his empirical observations about the "morbid symptoms" of our times as Booth himself derives his conceptualization of security/emancipation from *his own* political theory and political concerns (both of which are developed in the shadow of this time of "interregnum"). The phrases that Booth uses to define our times come from Antonio Gramsci, who famously defined his own time as an "interregnum" marked by "morbid symptoms" and within which the old was dying and the new was struggling to be born (Gramsci 2011:33). Booth sees in the post-Cold War era the same "morbid symptoms" of an "interregnum". His list for these symptoms includes phenomena such as consumerism, patriarchy, global inequality, religious extremism, and nationalism, and all of these make him believe that the 21st century is going to be a "long, hot one" (Booth 2005:1-2; Booth 2007:427). Both his disillusionment with realism and his re-conceptualization of security/emancipation are informed by these global problems that require a global "We" to solve them (Booth 2007:26).

As this essay has sufficiently analyzed the philosophical and practical context of Booth's fusion of security with emancipation, it is now able to see his complete argument. He boldly states that "emancipation has been an issue throughout the twentieth century and that there is no reason for it not to be so in the twenty-first" (Booth 1995:344). Building on his fixation of security as "the absence of threats" and definition of emancipation as the "freeing of people from physical and human constraints", he contends that "emancipation, not power and order, produces true security" (Booth 1991:319). A deeper analysis reveals a distinction between conditions of objective and a subjective security, meaning being secure and feeling secure respectively (Booth 2007:110). It is needless to say that for Booth, true security is "being and feeling safe" at the same time (Ibid.). This being said, the reciprocal relationship between security and emancipation occurs when a true emancipation produces the conditions of being and feeling safe for the parties concerned. Implicit in Booth's conceptualization of security is the people who are the referent objects that are to be secured from the encroachment of the "morbid symptoms" (Booth 1991:319).

Booth's understanding of security/emancipation is self-avowedly Kantian, for implicit in his fusion of security and emancipation is Kant's maxim that one should never treat others as means but only as ends in themselves (Ibid.) and that the liberty provided to the individual through emancipation must be "compatible with the freedoms of others" (Booth 2007:112). Moreover, his understanding of a true emancipation is one which that is "not timeless or static... not at the expense of others... not a cloak for the power of the West or any other entity claiming to have a monopoly on wisdom" (Booth 2007:113). The politics of security/emancipation then is the politics of inventing humanity and the politics of exploring "what it might be to be human" (Booth 2007:256). Booth claims not to be a naive utopian. Although he postulates this fusion as an "idea of the ideal" that *should* guide humanity in the "self-constitution of its

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future”, he nonetheless submits to Kant’s maxim that “*ought implies can*” (Booth 2007:114; Kant 1998:540). Indeed, Booth sees in security communities (such as the EU) the blueprint of what the world should look like in the future (Booth 2007:427). A “community of communities”, that is to say, a “global governance made up of emancipatory communities, including cosmopolitan states” can *transcend* the security dilemma that supposedly is the root of the conflicts among the peoples of the world (Booth 2007:148; Booth & Wheeler 2008:296). To summarize, for Booth, universal security can be achieved if we break down the “barriers we perpetuate between foreign and domestic policy” through a politics of emancipation that has the common humanity both as its subject and purpose (Booth 1991:322).

Aporias of Security/Emancipation and the Role of Violence in the Invention of Common Humanity

Testing the consistency of Booth’s political programme of security/emancipation is essentially a theoretical and philosophical task. The best method for doing this is to adopt the strategy of “immanent critique” that Booth himself did in relation to the theoretical canon on security and emancipation. We should analyze Booth’s re-conceptualization of security/emancipation to see whether if his politics of inventing humanity can practically fulfil the goals that it sets for itself. This task is not an easy one as Booth is a reflexive critical theorist who is fully aware of the soft spots of his own reconstruction. His work is full of attempts at dismissing potential criticisms of his case for security/emancipation (Booth 1999). Indeed, the difficulty of criticising any total construction (regardless of the extent of its reflexivity) is that any attempt of doing so can be refuted as arising from a misreading. Yet within Booth’s politics of security/emancipation, the aporias (gaps and riffs) are wide and, in fact, dangerous. This section will explain why by starting from his delimitation of the concept of security.

Is the core of security indeed the mere absence of threats as Booth, following Hobbes, suggests? Before answering this question, this section will look deeper into Booth’s relation to Hobbes, from which he extracts the core definition of security. James der Derian traces one of the origins of our modern ontotheology of security in the writings of Thomas Hobbes (der Derian 1998). In Hobbes, power is defined as the ability to exercise one’s will over others and as men’s desire for self-preservation is constantly threatened by other men, one desires for power after power until one dies (Hobbes cited in, der Derian 1998:24). As the conventional wisdom on Hobbes states, this “war of all against all” only stops when men agree to submit to the authority of a Sovereign that stands above all others. This move does not *negate* anarchy but merely *displaces* it to the international stage, making order, and the state and the territoriality that supposedly bring it into existence, *a priori* and independent truths and goods (der Derian 1998:25). Of course, as this essay showed previously, Booth is critical of the international Hobbesian “culture of anarchy” (as Alexander Wendt (1999) would put it) and the realist political theory that takes this as a given. However, knowing that realists appropriate Hobbes for their own purposes, is Booth’s uncritical appropriation of the core of security from this same figure a little bit *uncanny*, to say the least?

This essay’s argument is that through this appropriation, Booth inherited not only a definition of security but also a problematic methodological individualism and an accompanying, underdeveloped notion of power. Indeed, the former is the starting point of Booth when he claims that security can be known through the insecurity that individuals (as well as the groups that they are part of) face (Booth 2007:101). Moreover, in the words of his fellow traveller Richard Wyn Jones, politics of security/emancipation should be concerned with “real people in real places” (Wyn Jones 1996:214). However respectable their concerns might be, this methodological individualism is deeply problematic as accompanying it is an underdeveloped understanding of power. When power is understood in a Hobbesian sense, power as the exercise of one’s will over others, security/emancipation may mean the elimination of those forces that exist at the expense of others for the purpose of empowering those who were previously oppressed so that they can choose to be whatever they want to be (Booth 1991:319). This clear picture is disturbed if we understand power not as the arbitrary repression of individuals but their constitution as subjects of certain discourses and institutions (Foucault 2000; Dean 2010). Michel Foucault shows how the Sovereign’s Hobbesian power over life and death was replaced by the “bio-power” that is instead bent on “generating forces, making them grow... ordering them... making them submit or destroying them” (Foucault 2013:42). Within this more convincing framework, it is hard to claim that power and empowerment can work through the act of removing threats” as a politics of security/emancipation now becomes not the mere elimination of threats, but the production and promotion of new subjectivities through the alteration of power structures that were in place. This disturbs the link between security and

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emancipation as it is not clear from the outset whether if the elimination of previously existing threats (in other words, altering power structures) will make the subject more emancipated or enlightened.

To see this, this essay needs to look at Booth's normative case for emancipation. In addition to what this essay has already said, emancipation also plays a three-fold function for Ken Booth; it is a *philosophical anchorage for knowledge*, a theory *for the progress of society* and a practice of *resistance against oppression* (Booth 2007:112). If the assumption is the very last point as already refuted by our criticism of power, the other remaining points provide the material to test Booth's normative concerns. By emancipation as a "philosophical anchorage of knowledge", he tries to fix emancipatory potential of a particular claim to knowledge as the criterion for its truth or whether if it should be taken seriously (ibid.). This function of emancipation is largely intertwined with its function as a theory of progress. He defines progress as the *idea that things (such as technology, the standards of living, society and even morality) can improve... over time* and sets for "security/emancipation" the task of achieving this (Booth 2007:118). Implicit in his standard for judging improvement is again the Kantian idea that progress (which may also be understood as Enlightenment) occurs when we dare to make increasing use of our own reason (Booth 2007:87; Kant 1968:54). Again in the spirit of Kant, Booth sees in international law and declarations such the 1948 Declaration of Universal Human Rights the signs of such improvement and the seeds of a potential universal world community rather scattered than particularisms (Booth 1999:60-65). As this essay stated before, Booth is all too aware of the criticisms his pro-Enlightenment universalism can attract and he spends a significant amount of space to refute the claims that he is holding a Eurocentric position (Booth 1999:52-55). He attempts to show that he is not arguing for sameness but simply the elimination of those oppressive particularisms through a politics of security/emancipation (Booth 1999:55). Is Universality something that we can have a healthy 'dosage'?

This essay agrees with Ernesto Laclau, who traces a paradox within the heart of universalism: "universal is incommensurable with the particular, but cannot, however, exist without the latter" (Laclau 1996:35). Moreover, we know that each universalism is in fact a particularism that tries to hegemonize the scene by striving towards its own fullness (Laclau 1996:59). We can guess the particularisms that Booth's universal security/emancipation may try to hegemonize by referring back to our discussion of power and Foucault. Reflecting on Kant's famous essay "What is Enlightenment?," Foucault writes that the "growth of capabilities and the growth of autonomy" was not as simple as the eighteenth century believed for this growth in autonomy was accompanied by an "intensification of power relations" (Foucault 1991:48). "Particularisms" such as madness began to be defined in medical rather than mystical terms and the patients were submitted to asylums and disciplining practices for the sake of their of own freedom (Foucault 1998).

Using a real world case study, we can try to see if Booth is willing to sanction violence against certain particularisms that may be at the odds with his universal common humanity. We can use the case of female genital mutilation that Booth himself once refers to. In order to avoid a potential misunderstanding, the essay should state now that it finds this practice completely appalling just as Ken Booth does:

"I have no doubt at all that this practice is entirely incompatible with freedom, as it is inflicted on girls before they are in any way able to 'freely choose'... the fact that some compliant older women encourage the practice does not alter this verdict, because there is no reason to suppose they themselves possess the capacity to use their *own* understanding, coming as they do from highly traditionalist cultures" (Booth 2007:112).

He then employs the Kantian distinction between the "noumenal" and the "phenomenal" selves and argues that we are free when our noumenal selves control our phenomenal selves, or in other words, when "our actions are not the result of error or passion, but are fully voluntary, founded on understanding and reason" (Booth 2007:113). The kernel of Booth's autonomy is the *freedom to do what we ought to do*. The question is what if real people in real places refuse to do what Ken Booth thinks that they ought to do? For most of us living in the West, female genital mutilation is an issue which causes sincere feelings of sympathy with the victims which are most of the time very young girls. The question is what if the communities of these young girls insistently cling onto their false practices in a world ruled by Ken Booth's cosmopolitan "security community of common humanity"? Should this universal, cosmopolitan community impose its own truth on this particularistic and backward community and persecute the parents and the grandparents of the victims? According to Ken Booth, it should:

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“When gross abuse is taking place, and people are shouting for help, urgent choices have to be made, and sometimes the force of the better argument has to be replaced by the *argument of the better force*” (emphasis added, Booth 1999:60).

Turning Habermas on his head, Booth invents a flowery slogan for the military actions of his common humanity. It is not without a reason that several others accused Booth of Eurocentrism and of justifying military campaigns (Barkawi & Laffey 2006:333; Chandler 2006). Yet, Booth seems to be unbothered by such accusations: “As a Westerner, I believe that the risk of being thought to be an imperialist in some circumstances is justified in the face of local fascism” (Booth 1999:56). His own either/or thinking seems to me to be *the* disciplinary gesture that he accuses the realist scholars of doing. However, it is not surprising to see disciplinary actions in international scene going hand in hand with disciplinary actions in the academic scene.

Conclusion: The ‘Organic Intellectual’ as a ‘Securitizing Actor’

We should have no illusions about Ken Booth’s attempt at achieving universal security through a conceptual fusion of security with emancipation; his theoretical construction of the common humanity would require the same violence that any other universality (Communism, Fascism, or any other eschatological religion) would require in order to be realized. As this essay has discussed earlier, his Hobbesian understanding of security and Kantian understanding of emancipation makes his reconstruction extremely unstable and, in the end, his normative agenda seems a little more than an eclectic reformulation of liberal cosmopolitanisms that we are familiar with. In the end, it seems that the old wisdom about one man’s security being another man’s threat is verified. If we were to attempt at inventing Booth’s common humanity, we would have to engage in new forms of violence directed at those occupying the outside of our common humanity. And just like any other universality, Booth’s universality implicitly distinguishes between illegitimate violence (as listed in his “morbid symptoms”) and legitimate violence and forgets the latter for the sake of eliminating the former. When these are brought to light, this essay believes that Booth’s construction fails to achieve the goals it set for itself and can be dismissed as “false emancipation” in its own terms (Booth 2007:113). Universal security would indeed be possible if were to ignore those outside of Booth’s common humanity.

Nonetheless, this essay would argue that Booth’s case is interesting as a securitizing move as conceptualized by the theorists in the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al. 1998). In the usual scenario, the political elites are the ones who act as “securitizing agents” that represent objects as existential threats and move them into a state of exception so that they can be dealt through exceptional measures (Waever 1998). Can we not interpret Ken Booth’s reconstruction of security/emancipation and common humanity as such a securitizing move? Of course, Booth himself says that this is not what he is doing and in fact is very critical of Copenhagen School’s approach (Booth 2007:166). This essay acknowledges that his over-enthusiasm for being an ‘organic intellectual’ (in the Gramscian sense of the term, an intellectual representing the interests of the “underdog”) (Brown 2010:7) and his “fatalism” about the present state of the world, and the way that he thinks it is heading, combines with his occasional “militaristic humanism” to make possible such an interpretation. His reconstruction can be interpreted as an attempt at securitizing the “morbid symptoms” of our time which he represents as existential threats to the common humanity that needs defending. Of course, it is not within his power to take the exceptional measures that he may think as necessary. Besides, the audience which he tries to impress, the students and scholars of security, seem to be unimpressed. This essay certainly shows that it is not impressed for it does not share his fatalism about our present and is rather skeptical about the abstract idea which he wishes to burn the world for. The reason is such dangerous constructions certainly fail to do this and are nothing more than ways of feeling ourselves and our times special. It is more fruitful to see our time just “like any other, or rather, a time which is never quite like any other” (Foucault 1994:126).

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