

# Has Critical Security Studies Run Out of Steam?

Written by Miguel Olivares

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## Has Critical Security Studies Run Out of Steam?

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Critical Security Studies (CSS) has been quite successful in becoming a major theoretical angle of analysis in the post-Cold War period. This approach has offered a sophisticated critique of traditional views of security and it has had a certain impact in exposing the links between knowledge and power in the security realm by drawing on elements of Critical Theory from the Frankfurt School. Yet, some of CSS's main points, particularly its essential link to emancipatory discourses and universalism, have also been widely criticised and found to be highly problematic. Furthermore, recent proponents of CSS have begun to argue for a much lighter version of the project of emancipation which is, consequently, leading to a greater imprecision in the delineation of the boundaries of such approach. Could it be then that CSS has become exhausted or that it is running out of fashion?

In this essay, it will be argued that CSS has, to a certain extent, run out of steam. In order to put forward such argument in a logical manner, this essay will proceed as follows. First, a brief overview of CSS, with a particular focus on the version of the 'Aberystwyth School', will be provided. In a second section, it will be argued that the CSS project has been exhausted for three main reasons: its controversial emancipatory dimension; its continuous exclusionary character; and its gradual move away from its original use of Critical Theory as developed by the Frankfurt School and subsequent institutionalisation. Before concluding, this essay will also reflect on the possible future of CSS within contemporary debates of security studies by underlining the need to reflect on its own forms of critique and the use of deliberation.

### Critical Security Studies

Following the end of the Cold War, a range of distinctive approaches emerged which attempted to challenge traditional accounts of security and originate a move towards a deepening and widening of the definition of security. One of those approaches has precisely been the CSS project. While the term itself often encompasses a wide range of several unique methodologies (Bilgin, 2008: 96), this essay will mostly focus on the version developed by the so-called 'Aberystwyth School' and its leading member Ken Booth, as it is the most representative (and contested) of the field. In order to later analyse the reasons why such project is becoming exhausted, its main tenets will now be broadly analysed.

First, CSS is an approach which provides a fundamental criticism of realist analysis of security and particularly of its state-centric character. Drawing on elements from the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, CSS aims to offer a critique of the current status quo and expose the processes of knowledge construction inherent in it. In this sense, one could refer to Robert Cox's distinction between 'problem-solving' and 'critical' theories (Cox, 1981: 128-129). In this view, while realism represents a problem-solving theory which aims to assist in the smooth operation of the status quo and in maintaining the prevailing power relations, CSS is based on critical theory as it does not take any sort of relationships for granted but rather analyses the on-going processes and explores possibilities for change based on normative choices (1981: 130). CSS' scholars, therefore, reject the main assumptions of realism which have assisted in the creation of a particular type of knowledge surrounding only sovereign states and which is not only unsophisticated and static, due to its ahistorical position, but which also fails the test of practice (Booth, 2005: 6-7). Following these criticisms, and underlining that states can be a source of insecurity themselves, advocates of this approach have called for the emphasis to be placed on the individual and communities as the main referent objects of security (Booth, 1991: 319-320).

# Has Critical Security Studies Run Out of Steam?

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As seen from such critique, this approach understands security as a derivative concept and it aims to analyse the manner in which it is constructed and what it does politically (Booth, 2005: 13). Different conceptualisations of security derive from specific contexts and political understandings. Consequently, it is the purpose of CSS to reveal those political assumptions behind security thinking and reflect on the assumed legitimisation of particular actors and policies as well as of the construction of certain political communities (Browning and McDonald, 2011: 239). This can be seen as the major achievement of CSS, as it has pinpointed that the political and security realm cannot be analysed separately.

By placing the focus on the politics of security, CSS then develops a unique link between security and the notion of emancipation. For the purposes of this essay, emancipation can be defined as “the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them from carrying out what they would freely choose to do” (Booth, 1991: 319). However, this ‘freeing of people’ is not necessarily equated to state-oriented strategies. Essentially, the political power of security does not rest only upon states or elites but it can also be used to fulfil the emancipatory potential of oppressed and excluded individuals in the world or, in the words of Booth, “The concept of emancipation shapes strategies and tactics of resistance, offers a theory of progress for society, and gives a politics of hope for common humanity” (Booth, 2005: 181). This normative imperative of CSS, which also displays a clear commitment to progress and resistance from the oppressing structures of power, is essential for the conception of security as the pursuit of one inevitably promotes the other.

Consequently, scholars such as Booth and Linklater have underlined the importance of communicative action and dialogue to overcome security issues and identity differences (Fierke, 2015: 187). Based on Jürgen Habermas’ thought, Linklater argued that the promotion of dialogue on an international scale would ultimately lead to the creation of universal norms and pave the way to a more peaceful and cosmopolitan world community (2015: 187). The concept of emancipation and the focus on dialogue and deliberation shall be discussed in more detail during the analysis provided in the sections below.

## The Exhaustion of CSS

After the brief overview of the key ideas around CSS, this essay will now focus on the three main observable elements that have led to the exhaustion of this approach namely, the disputed notion of emancipation, the surprisingly exclusionary character of the approach itself towards other theories, and the growing institutionalisation and loss of its critical stance.

### *The Disputed Notion of Emancipation*

While central to the CSS project, the notion of emancipation is also the most controversial and contested of this approach and one of the main reasons why it has run out of steam. This occurrence does not only originate in the various criticisms posed to the idea but also in the lack of inter-theoretical dialogue and of self-reflectivity by CSS scholars. As shown through the issues below, the concept of emancipation is facing the risk of becoming powerless if it does not evolve from its ‘Boothian’ conception and if it continues to move away from some of its original key tenets developed by the Frankfurt School.

A major criticism of emancipation is that, ultimately, it is a Western concept based on a liberal set of values (Fierke, 2015: 182; Barkawi and Laffey, 2006: 350; Ayoob, 1997: 127). As discussed, emancipation is linked to a particular view of progress based on liberal ideas such as the emphasis on the individual and the construction of a tolerant and pluralistic society (Fierke, 2015: 183). Moreover, emancipation also displays a certain universal and egalitarian commitment. As Booth argued, “the implication of this is the belief that ‘I am not free until everyone is free’” (Booth, 1991: 322).

An obvious first contention is that such universal and egalitarian attempts are rather unconvincing and utopian due to the diverse set of values and security contexts in the world. A second and more dangerous note is that the concept of emancipation could easily be appropriated for neo-imperialistic purposes and the spread of Western power (Fierke, 2015: 183). After all, a central question to the notion of ‘freeing of people’ revolves around who the agents of

## Has Critical Security Studies Run Out of Steam?

Written by Miguel Olivares

emancipation are and whether the excluded can be powerful enough to overcome structural challenges or require external assistance. While not entirely addressing this issue, it is clear that for Booth, one of the most important agents is the critical theorist by exposing the social constructions of the current power/knowledge nexus (2015: 182). Yet, some critics have actually argued that the Eurocentric basis of emancipation in CSS noticeably shows that its agents are in fact from the West, be it liberal international institutions, such as the United Nations or the European Union, a Western-based global civil society or the so-called ethical foreign policies of Western states (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006: 350). In this logic, emancipation becomes thus a new form of imperialism as the West is required to rescue the peoples of the non-West from its precarious security situations by civilising its societies and achieving liberal progress through the 'liberation of the natives' (2006: 351). Examples of this dynamic could be the underlying logics of the humanitarian interventions in the 1990's and in the post-9/11 framework (particularly the interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya) and also the use of civilising mechanisms such as the European Neighbourhood Policy, to induce changes in non-Western states (Browning and McDonald, 2011: 249).

As a result of such understanding, CSS disregards the fact that in the non-Western world, the results of emancipation can be quite different from those it upholds both in political and security terms. Kennedy-Pipe, for instance, as shown the darker side of emancipation with the case of Soviet policies towards the liberation for women which were, in reality, aimed at constructing a more secular and unified State rather than enhancing women's security (Kennedy-Pipe, 2004: 91). In a different context, Worrall's analysis of the emancipatory agency of Hizbollah in Lebanon is another example that disproves the universality of the concept of emancipation by showing it has deviated from universal human rights discourses (Worrall, 2013: 250). Essentially, what is being pointed out is that it has been widely shown that emancipation, as defined by CSS, is inapt to be theoretically applied to other societies outside of the West and it can even, as Mohammed Ayoob argued, "turn out to be a recipe for grave disorder and anarchy as far as most Third World states are concerned" (Ayoob, 1997: 127). In other words, Third World societies already struggling with issues of state legitimacy, social cohesion, and economic degradation could turn into communities of absolute insecurity if emancipation was to be instigated. One needs only to look at the results of the 2011 intervention in Libya for example where the emancipation of the people against an oppressive regime has resulted in a much less secure space (Marcus, 2016).

One other enigma of the conception of emancipation, which originates in the particular view of progress it exhibits, lies in the manner in which CSS deals with the question of violence and resistance. As seen from the definition above, CSS emphasises the need to be emancipated from violence, both physical and systemic. However, it has remained relatively silent on the subject of the use of violence to achieve emancipatory goals (Peoples, 2011: 1124). In regards to this issue, Booth has underlined that for emancipation to occur truthfully, it must avoid violent or immoral means and thus the subsequent calls for dialogue and deliberation through communities (Booth, 2005: 183).

While normatively appealing, one should reflect on the fact that if emancipation is equated to the empowering of the oppressed and excluded, it becomes complicated to envisage struggles of resistance against hegemonic structures merely through community deliberation. In fact, People's analysis of the views of the Frankfurt School-associated scholar Herbert Marcuse showed that violence was not completely side-lined in early conceptions of emancipation and led him to argue that, if CSS remains only committed to non-violent modes of change it will end up perpetuating a violence-inherent system (Peoples, 2011: 1127). Therefore, rather than continuing its universal non-violent project, CSS must accept the need for violence in particular contexts and adapt its notion of emancipation.

What is important to retake from the discussion provided is that the overall architecture of CSS, centred on emancipation as security, is highly problematic. Despite providing a unique and appealing basis for security theorising, the concept in question has been challenged by many approaches within the landscape of theories of international security which have, to a certain extent, revealed its inconsistencies and highlighted its dangers (Browning and McDonald, 2011: 247). The failure of CSS scholars to accept such criticisms and reflect on their own approach is thus one of the explanations of its exhaustion and disuse. Unable to successfully address the integral complexities within discourses of emancipation and by offering only ambiguous responses towards the role of violence, CSS fails to provide "a sophisticated moral compass for making sense of and evaluating contemporary security dynamics in world politics" (2011: 247).

# Has Critical Security Studies Run Out of Steam?

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## *Theoretical Exclusions*

CSS was born out of a critique of realism and to its various implications to security and world politics. In order to offer a distinctive and innovative approach, CSS strongly upheld its commitment to the need of theoretical pluralism and to be open to criticisms and questions raised by opposing approaches (Booth, 2005: 272). Not only on a theoretical level but empirically, CSS has always been concerned with the political effects of security in the development of excluded individuals. For CSS, it is imperative to reveal the exclusions reproduced by the current status quo and dominant theories (Mutimer, 2009: 9). Surprisingly, and in stark contrast to such all-inclusive ideal, the history of CSS actually reveals a set of theoretical and empirical exclusions.

Such concern has been present since Booth's attempt to delineate a critical theory of security on his book *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*. In the concluding chapter, Booth devises his theory based on whatever aspects he believes to be useful, taking some elements from other contending theories such as feminism (2005: 270-271). This process is repeated in *Theory of World Security* where he uses Hannah Arendt's approach of 'pearl-fishing' to combine a diverse set of theoretical angles into a single bloc (Booth, 2007: 38-40). However what he actually develops is a general approach which does not provide a logical and coherent account to understand contemporary security dynamics (Mutimer, 2008). The lack of self-reflectivity of Booth is here represented by the fact that he dismisses important approaches in a very simplistic way, even if they actually have much in common with his own.

The most apparent of Booth's exclusions is towards poststructuralist and postmodern methodologies (Mutimer, 2009: 12). For Booth, those approaches provide no basis for politics and represent one other set of static theories which actually celebrate insecurity rather than providing a foundation for change (Booth, 2005: 270). While some of Booth's criticisms are valid, the point being made here is that for all of its inclusivity, CSS is avoiding to dialogue with approaches which are gaining ever more attention and is, in fact, reproducing the very exclusions it intends to expose. Therefore, it could be useful for these scholars to revisit Cox's claim that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" (Cox, 1981: 128) for this means that even CSS is also for someone, which intrinsically produces an excluded subject. If these theoretical exclusions are unavoidable it is a matter of discussion (Mutimer, 2009: 20), but CSS should have acknowledged those from the beginning for it has now become one of its central issues.

## *The 'Critical' in CSS*

A final criticism relates to the role of CSS-oriented scholars on international policy-making procedures and to the apparent institutionalisation of critique. In 2013, Hynek and Chandler put forward the interesting argument that the CSS project should remove its 'critical' appendix for it has become too established and unable of producing emancipatory alternatives (Hynek and Chandler, 2013: 46). In their view, the success of CSS during its inception led to a movement of institutionalisation of the approach through textbook guides, journals, university courses, among others. It even developed numerous links with policy-making circles underlining Booth's claim that CSS was concerned with "real people in real places" (Booth, 2005: 272).

While it can be seen as an achievement at first sight, such development is problematic for the approach and leads it into a paradox. When a theory that offers a discourse on the endless possibilities for change from the current status quo and the achievement of security becomes part of the 'mainstream', how can it actually represent an alternative? CSS has undoubtedly provided one of the most compelling critiques of traditional approaches within the field of security studies which placed too much focus on the role of states. However, since 1990, those approaches have already been fading away which results, to a certain extent, to a loss of relevance of CSS (Mireanu, 2010). This has been so because, from the very beginning, CSS appeared to be more of an 'anti-realist project' rather than a critical project per se. This demonstrates, once again, the lack of the very self-reflectivity that this approach promotes, for it is unable to adapt to different situations and dynamic forces. In Hynek and Chandler's perspective, this is at the core of the problem of CSS since it was more interested in challenging the oppressing security discourses rather than analysing them critically, displaying, therefore, a point of departure from earlier Critical Theory (Hynek and Chandler, 2013: 51).

The decay of emancipatory discourses is of interest for this discussion. The excitement around humanitarian

# Has Critical Security Studies Run Out of Steam?

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interventions in the 1990s and the rise of concepts such 'human security' and the 'responsibility to protect' is nowadays rarely seen in proponents of the approach (2013: 55-56). In fact, some scholars did recognise the perils of the institutionalisation of such concepts particularly human security which has been appropriated by liberal Western states to hide its real interests in interventions (Booth, 2007: 324). Nonetheless, today, there is very little of support for any sort of emancipatory discourses which explains how the approach has run out of steam.

In a sense, if the emancipatory discourse of Booth had as a central issue the question of agency, the current state of affairs of CSS exhibits a much lesser support for emancipatory aims overall. Post-emancipatory scholars, by attempting to overcome the issue of agency placed in Western institutions, have framed emancipatory potential in much broader and unclear terms by highlighting cultural relativism and placing the focus on the significance of native peoples and local knowledge (2013: 56). Two important points should be discussed. On the one hand, it shows a relative departure from Booth's universal notion of emancipation which could offer the basis for a less problematic theory.

On the other hand, however, by speaking of emancipation in such terms, how would these approaches be any different from the growing wave of analysis based on the concepts of resilience and management of insecurity rather than preventing it (Chandler, 2012: 217; Aradau, 2014: 73)? Perhaps Hynek and Chandler may be right to argue that "It appears that the world cannot be transformed after all" (Hynek and Chandler, 2013: 57). By acknowledging the difficulty of promoting change through security discourses of emancipation recent CSS-oriented analysis (Mac Ginty, 2012: 293; Turner et al., 2010: 93) have fallen into a trap of their own making for they are accepting the dominant status quo and removing a possible ethics of security based on possibilities for change in international security.

## Future of CSS

Does the discussion above naturally preclude the end of CSS? This essay has shown that most of the foundational concepts of the approach have been systematically criticised and, to a certain extent, exhausted. However, it would be unsophisticated to proclaim its conclusion. In fact, there might still be an exciting future for CSS which will be determined by its ability to adapt.

In line with the main arguments put forward in this essay, Browning and McDonald had already provided an analytical basis for possible improvements within the framework of CSS (Browning and McDonald, 2011: 235). According to the authors, the future of this approach would depend on the manner in which scholars can recognise the limitations of the current methodologies and "take up the challenge of moving beyond first principles or universalised assumptions about security to engage in nuanced, reflexive and context-specific analyses of the politics and ethics of security" (2011: 248). In other words, CSS should discard its universal commitments of security and engage with real-world practices while acknowledging context specificity and its subsequent diversified security implications.

In order to achieve these broad requirements set out by the authors, it is imperative that CSS reflects upon its own form of critique and the role of the critical theorist. The idea that the critical theorist might be superior to problem-solving theorists appears to be misguided as they both perform a particular role in theoretical analysis, be it by merely ensuring the dominance of current international orders or by standing with those who are unheard. Critical theorists should therefore understand that even they are excluding an important element for security analysis and should perhaps take a more humble methodology which takes into account the dynamics flowing between the two. This is the essence of CSS but, in practice, more emphasis has been put on advocating normative preferences rather than analytically examining the implications of the alternative conception of security it advocates (2011: 251). As a consequence, the line between academics and activists has become blurred and intellectually confusing (Rengger and Thirkell-White, 2007: 23). A balance must be found between the two options.

Finally, this essay claims that a more developed argument surrounding the role of deliberation could perhaps offer CSS a more solid basis. Following the argument above, CSS should not promote full and open modes of dialogue in such broad terms to overcome situations of insecurity but rather analyse the implications for communities and individuals of the use of such concepts according to different contexts (Browning and McDonald, 2011: 250). Of course that such encouragement is vital for the approach but its imprecision makes it controversial. There is potential

# Has Critical Security Studies Run Out of Steam?

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in using dialogue as a normative commitment but it will remain labelled as a utopic idea if not coupled with the necessity of violence in certain contexts of resistance, as it has been explored before.

## Concluding Remarks

This essay has put forward the proposition that CSS has, to a certain extent, run out of steam. To make sense of such claim, this essay started by providing an overview of the approach through an analysis of Ken Booth's version of CSS and it emphasised the role of the concept of emancipation. However, as it was shown, the distinctive focus on a normative theory of security has resulted in theoretical inaccuracies and a wide range of criticisms from several angles not only due to its apparent liberal view of progress but also because of its ambiguous nature on how to practice it and achieve it. Furthermore, this essay has also pointed out the lack of self-reflectivity by CSS scholars and their constant theoretical exclusions as important factors that have led to its decay. Finally, the move to the 'mainstream' and the subsequent loss of a true critical nature could be said to be making the approach almost obsolete.

Yet, this essay has also pinpointed immanent possibilities for change. If a true critical project of security studies is to be continued it must free itself from the limitations which have been exposed and move towards a more adaptable theory which takes into account context specificity. Fundamentally, CSS should reflect on the original principles of its main influence, the Frankfurt School, and develop an account of contemporary practices of and constructions security which is neither universal nor exclusive. These intellectual and philosophical endeavours may seem challenging but the approach has to address them if it wants to live up to its critical orientation.

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## Has Critical Security Studies Run Out of Steam?

Written by Miguel Olivares

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