

Review – Security as Politics: Beyond the State of Exception

Written by Sasikumar S. Sundaram

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/08/24/review-security-as-politics-beyond-the-state-of-exception/>

SASIKUMAR S. SUNDARAM, AUG 24 2021

Security as Politics: Beyond the State of Exception

By Andrew W. Neal

Edinburgh University Press, 2019

Andrew Neal's thought-provoking book explicates the connection between security and politics by demonstrating that the changing pursuit and practice of security has become a distinct part of professional politics. It focuses on the recent transformation of security practices, offers a sophisticated diagnosis of the reigning view of security as 'anti-politics' as an outmoded conceptualization of a particular time and place (around mid-1990s), and then empirically examines the rules of the game in the new security politics of our times. The book is an important contribution to the critical security studies scholarship both in its theoretical innovation and empirical rigor. It succeeds in taking critical security studies to task, but the book is also a conversation-opener on new security governance. Despite some issues that moderate its revolutionary thrust, *Security as Politics* is a brilliant book.

Chapter Two focuses primarily on an appropriate research method for the analysis of new security governance. The method Neal offers is problematisation, which rests on four pillars: empiricism, historical inquiry, reflexivity, and critique. It is empiricist in the sense of asking us to focus on what actors say and do when they engage in security, and it is historical because distinct security problematisations are specific to time and place, which must be excavated rather than fixated through trans-historical definitions and logics. This historical empiricism focuses on detailed practices and *reasons* of interlocutors. However, it does not require us to turn into historians to only rethink the past. Instead, in the spirit of Foucault, we read the past to "put our present concerns in a new light" (p.57). Such a move also requires a reflective role of the analysts from their different "vantage points" (p.55) rather than through a strict reliance on the self-understanding of securitizing actors alone. The reflexive role of the analyst is an exciting ongoing conversation in the IR methodology debate (Sundaram and Thakur 2019). Finally, problematising is a critical engagement where an analyst is not a disinterested chronicler but amplifies political assumptions of the present. In offering this method, Neal departs from the worn-out governmentality approach and carefully takes us to Foucault's other interesting ideas on the political. This is an important chapter that every security studies student must read.

Chapter Three engages with the specialized literature on securitization and politicisation to conceptualize security as normal politics. This is important because the principled and normative focus on "the political" in critical security studies came with an air of disenchantment towards the practice of security at higher institutional locations such as the executive. Such a view is outdated in today's world as security practices has migrated from the black box of executive. Neal offers a conceptualization of "arena migration" to understand the movement of security issues between these different locations (p.103).

Clearly, Neal's conceptual architecture is innovative. Yet, there are two issues that run through Chapters One and Three. First, one wishes that Neal spent more time discussing how the contingency of professional parliamentary politics fits into this larger idea of normal politics. Neal foregrounds an important but less known Machiavellian idea that normal politics must be understood as contingent vicissitudes of *fortuna*. He creatively appropriates it for our times as politicians pursue such politics of *fortuna* to save their parliamentary seat/position (pp.19-23). Perhaps

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saving a parliamentary seat as normal politics might apply to Britain, where ministers score highly on integrity of public life (Thomas 2020). Although, in recent years, the professional political activities of British parliamentarians are not normal, to say the least (Taylor 2016). However, in many other parts of the world, professional parliamentary/congressional politics to save seats are vile and lethal. Such performances have transformed normal politics, if we consider “normal” to mean an ethic of responsibility and duty of answerability taking priority through giving and taking *reasons* among interlocutors on security issues. For example, some politicians engage in so-called normal politics to defend criminals (Patel 2019), others appropriate foreign and security issues using pork barrel projects (Heinrich and Peterson 2020) and senators engage in unruly and corrupt financial practices using national security discourse (Goldstein 2018). Neal does not undermine or ignore these problems in professional politics. It might have been nice to see some more discussions on the transformation of the political even when security can no longer be defined as anti-politics.

The second issue is whether one could avoid any normative position at all towards “normal politics.” Neal accepts many of the ongoing critiques of normal politics, yet he maintains an analytical versus normative distinction throughout the book (p.10). In the conclusion Neal could have articulated his principled critique either on the positive or negative effects of the politics of security; instead, we see a stoic view in the deployment of assessments such as “rightly or wrongly”, for “better or worse”, security is part of normal politics even if old security politics retain its hold. Surely such consistency is important to redress the problems of critical security studies. Yet, in recent years the political is not only about creative problem solving by professionals in the public sphere anymore, it is also about, as Bernard Harcourt puts it, “What am I to do?” (Harcourt 2020).

Chapters Four through Seven are excellent empirical studies on the political game of security. Given the large canvas, he focuses on the notorious UK case, which is a “cockpit of security innovation, exporting its models and methods globally” (p.29). Neal is right in arguing that the meaning and practice of security have expanded to new issues – energy, health, or cyber – that have also seen a greater involvement of professional British politicians in these arenas thereby challenging executive dominance as the unspoken “rules of the game”. Through Bourdieu’s inspired sociological focus on practices, Neal shows that parliamentarians themselves in the past had deferred to executive dominance on security as “institutionalized common sense” (p.135) but are now changing their habitus. This allows Neal to date institutionalized securitization in the UK to the arena of executive prerogative to the 1980s and show how the ‘rules of the game’ of British parliamentary security politics changed with greater involvement of these actors in security issues.

Taking the resignation of Conservative MP David Davis over the encroachment of civil liberties in the 2008 Counter-Terrorism bill as a foil, Chapter Five explains how individuals challenge the rules of the game. It has a pathbreaking discussion looking at Davis’ act through Foucault’s work on *parresia* – truth telling – and not as skilful rhetoric to merely persuade audiences. Neal’s focus on *parresia* shows how actors “problematise wider societal and political structures of inclusion, exclusion and power” (p.179). Such a brilliant systematization of Foucault’s emphasis on articulating courageous truth against congealed discursive structures should also put to rest the erroneous but popular view on Foucault’s role in post-truth culture (Andersen 2017). Chapter Six examines the increase in parliamentary committee activity on security and Chapter Seven examines UK governmental activity on security from the perspective of risk.

The book ends with an interesting discussion of whether more political activity makes us more or less secure. Neal’s discussion is nuanced, focusing on parliament as a site that is both for and against security. Consequently, the book rightly suggests that professional politicians’ active engagement with security does not mean we witness some progress (teleological or otherwise) or that normalisation of security is complete (p.281). At least in Western liberal democracies, we see that new security governance can function without securitization or exceptionalism. I believe it hints at a much more dangerous portent of security governance *within* the institutional rules of the game. It is a conversation opener for examining security practices in the non-Western world. In India, parliamentary politics is certainly important. It was central in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government “One Nation” project and paradoxically to increasing intolerance to diversity. So Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants a \$1.8 billion parliamentary building (Hollingsworth and Gupta 2021), categorises the project as an “essential service” despite lack of oxygen for Covid-19 patients, and enthusiastic Indian MPs – some of them with criminal records – cannot wait to

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debate geopolitics and security issues to redeem India's greatness (See Vaishnav 2017). Accordingly, when it comes to the non-Western world in recent years, security is politics yet professional politics on security is also meanspirited and extraordinarily dangerous. Neal's book is important to examine this interconnection in new ways.

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