World Security in the 21st Century: Re-evaluating Booth's Approach to Critical Security Studies

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In 2007, the distinguished figure in critical security studies Ken Booth published *Theory of World Security,* a challenge to the orthodoxies of traditional Realist theory within the subject of International Relations (IR) generally and security studies more specifically. In that book, Booth identified an impending "crisis" (along the lines of E.H. Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939)*, where the looming threats of nuclear holocaust, environmental chaos, global inequality, and a revival of great power conflict would not only make the world unliveable for those who already find the world unliveable, but also threaten the privileged minority of the developed world.

While the logic of national and state orthodoxies encourages policy-makers to see security as something that must be accomplished against others, Booth made the case that the problems of the 21st century can only be solved through collective action. For this reason, a new kind of security needs to be formed that includes the idea of emancipation of individuals and is inculcated in cosmopolitan communities. For Booth, the key concepts of security, emancipation, and community must replace the old logics of Realism in IR: statism, strategy, and the status quo.

Since the publication of the book, both the quantity and quality of global crises have changed. In addition to the continuing global threats of climate change and nuclear holocaust identified by Booth, the world has seen the onset of populist rage, an epidemic of post-truth falsehoods, and a global pandemic. Instead of a revolt of the global poor, what has instead happened is a revolt of groups within purported healthy democracies (the United States, the Philippines, Hungary, and the UK) that have pushed these countries away from democracy toward authoritarianism. Movements in these countries and others have been driven by a mixture of grievances regarding cultural liberalism, lost privileges, and relative economic losses to globalization. Perhaps these causes can best be described as the "terrors of globalization" (see Haas, 2021, September 14). In addition, scholars such as the popular historian Yuval Noah Harari (2018) predict that advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology are poised to disrupt economies and societies even further. At the time of this writing, it seems that the most likely outcome of these many problems is not the rise of a transnational cosmopolitan community, but rather the age-old responses of nationalism, xenophobia, and political violence (especially toward immigrants).

In the spirit of Booth's original work, this essay will engage in *perlenfischerei,* or pearl fishing, to examine what useful wisdom can be gleaned from Booth's book. I will examine Booth's work, looking for assumptions to test, lingering issues to explore, and new provocations for reflection. This article returns to the subject of world security by examining several crucial questions:

- What are emancipatory realism and critical security studies? (Answering this question will be foundational for readers unfamiliar with these topics.)
- In what ways has the tyranny of the local complicated Booth's reach toward cosmopolitan forms of security?
- Should approaches to world security (and critical security studies) borrow from the practices of startup companies?

Through these questions, I hope to make some small progress in advancing the conversation in a way that helps the idea of world security survive in a fragile and frequently turbulent world.

Revisiting Critical Security Studies and Emancipatory Realism

In order to make this article more accessible to readers outside of the discipline of International Relations and security studies, I will start with an interrogation of some of the nuances of critical security studies and emancipatory realism, with a special emphasis on issues and questions I will discuss later.

Critical security studies (CSS) often refers to a body of research first developed by scholars from Aberystwyth University in the United Kingdom that expands both the substantive and theoretical boundaries of security studies. This research field is pluralistic, often drawing from traditions as diverse as peace studies and the Frankfurt School of Marxist theory. Unlike traditional Realism within IR theory, which often prioritizes states as the central actor and is concerned with competition between states (often referred to simply as "strategy"), critical security studies examines referents both above and below the state. Referents of security below the state include vulnerable ethnic groups and minorities, migrant groups, captive populations of dictators, and the victims of political persecution. Referents of security above the state include the environment and the human species.

For the purpose of this essay, it is important to remember several key points about critical security studies. One, theory is seen not only as descriptive but also constitutive. Academic scholarship and theory shape our understanding of security and what ought to be protected. Theory, like art, helps us to construct the intersubjective reality of security. Two, though "security" is an intersubjective construct developed through discourse, much critical security studies scholarship recognizes objective threats that exist independent of this discourse. Reality is not just discourse all the way down, but rather works in dialogue with objective threats. Three, though critical security studies in general and Booth in particular have cosmopolitan aspirations, critical security studies (the "Welsh School") has identifiable roots in Aberystwyth University. This is a point I will return to later.

In terms of emancipatory realism, Booth writes:

Security means the absence of threats. Emancipation is the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do. War and the threat of war is one those constraints, together with poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on. Security and emancipation are two sides of the same coin. Emancipation, not power or order, produces true security (Booth, 1991, p. 319).

In the passage, we can see how the focus on emancipation opens up the field of security to many issues outside of "strategy" (the competition between states). War is only one of many possible forces that inhibits a person's freedom. Thus, an approach that focuses on human emancipation widens security to other fields and opens up the discourse of security to other types of voices and professionals. The "realism" aspect of emancipatory realism is the pressing, urgent, and "real" nature of the threats to human freedom, of which war is only one.

At this point, several key ideas must be kept in mind. One, in widening the field of security, critical security studies is attempting to be realistic – not in the sense that it is paying homage to the traditional Realist (capital R) theory of IR – but rather in recognizing the entangled nature of contemporary threats. The environmental impacts of climate change should be a concern for security scholars because they will likely be a latent cause for violent conflict in terms of both civil strife and interstate conflict. Conversely, the persistence of interstate competition threatens the environment by redirecting resources that could be used to combat climate change into narrowly focused military technologies. The multifaceted nature of threats can be seen by dissecting the causes of Covid-19 deaths. While the primary cause is the virus itself, a critical approach to the issue helps us understand facilitating causes such as the rise of populism, a lack of faith in government institutions, problems with public education, and the persistence of state-based solutions to problems of global public goods (such as the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines).

The Tyranny of the Local: From Threat to Resource?

Throughout his book, Booth makes the case for a progression toward cosmopolitan democracy and cosmopolitan states. Yet, since the publication of his book world events have demonstrated a central paradox: in a world where

information is abundant and humans are more interconnected than ever, people have rallied around local flags, local identities, and local truths (sometimes in direct contravention of what used to be known as "facts"). The growing trends of authoritarian nationalism, populism, and post-truth politics point to a serious problem for Booth's cosmopolitan aspirations. Enlightenment projects – whether the spread of liberal democracy, the progress of human rights, or even Booth's move toward world security – frequently arouse their opposites: tribal allegiances, magical thinking, and awe of hierarchy. These manifestations of anti-enlightenment have frequently proven to be more robust during times of trouble such as wars and social and economic turmoil (see Friedman, 2008, May 26).

Throughout Booth's *World Security*, cosmopolitan solidarity is a key resource in the fight for security referents both above and below the state. Cosmopolitanism allows organizations and activists to direct resources away from state competition toward the protection of the global environment and vulnerable populations, such as internally displaced people, refugees, and the vast population suffering from absolute poverty. For emancipatory realists, greater global awareness and empathy are tools to fight the world's most dire problems. To use a crude analogy: what next-generation drones and anti-ballistic missile technology are to traditional security planners, greater compassion and awareness are to practitioners of world security. Yet, like the development of advanced weaponry, these resources are easier to plan in theory than to bring forth in practice. The potential advocates of world security are frequently distracted by the realities of a busy work schedule, endless social media distractions, on-demand entertainment, and household commitments, to name just a few. These realities mean that the development of cosmopolitan solidarity needed to bring about world security is frequently behind schedule.

Just as people are born with roots – an attachment to family, a home, and a particular place – so too some of the most robust humanitarian projects have been rooted in particular places and histories. The anti-nuclear organization Mayors for Peace, which connects over 8,000 cities in more than 160 countries, had its early roots in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. The organization Oxfam (the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief) now has offices worldwide but began as a local effort to bring relief to the starving citizens of occupied Greece. *Médecins Sans Frontières* (known in English as Doctors Without Borders) was founded by French doctors and journalists who, disillusioned by their experiences during the Biafran famine, sought to change the existing system of humanitarian aid. The organization now has branches throughout the world. Each of these organizations started in a particular location responding to specific crises before burgeoning into global movements with branches in other locations. Each had to establish solid foundations before expanding into other locations around the world.

Though Booth was right to point out the threat of "authoritarian localism" (2007, p. 259), he missed an opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of "local cosmopolitanism" (at least when a world security project is in the incubation stage). The writing on entrepreneurship (which I will discuss more in the next section) often highlights the benefits of cultivating tribes as a means of survival in the early stages. When we think of the many small-scale world security projects that exist – from local advocacy campaigns to the budding interest of university students determined to do good – we can think of them first as vulnerable startups in need of local support and resources to survive their lean early years.

Praxis or Entrepreneurship?

In his book, Booth discusses "praxis," a concept that was used heavily by the Frankfurt School of Marxism and implies the unity of theory and practice (2007, p. 198). But while this term has mostly found currency within certain academic subdisciplines, the similar market-oriented concepts of entrepreneurship and skin-in-the-game have a more mainstream audience. Both capitalism and Marxism, the language of praxis and entrepreneurship, are concepts born from the Enlightenment. However, at the moment the language of entrepreneurship is the language most in circulation, not only in high-flying (and often overhyped) startup companies, but also in the world of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and nonprofits.

Often it seems as if there really is no reason to choose between one or the other. In its simplest form, praxis means simply the marriage of theory and practice (and this term has a rich philosophical existence beyond Marxism). Entrepreneurship in its simplest terms means taking on risk in hopes of gaining profit. Yet, in current discourse the profit aspect of entrepreneurship has often been minimized and the concept stretched into other disciplines, as for

example when we talk about "social entrepreneurship" or "policy entrepreneurship." Whereas praxis discusses "immanent critique" (finding contradictions in rules and systems), entrepreneurship talks of "disrupting markets" (exploiting sclerotic systems). In both cases, we see agents of change analyzing a system to look for ways to affect significant impacts. To hair-splitting theorists the difference between praxis and entrepreneurship might seem substantial. However, to a practitioner desperate to make a positive impact, a positive change to the world by any other name would smell as sweet. In both praxis and entrepreneurship, we see a push for action beyond the mere written word – neither armchair theorizing nor empty business plans simply to attract (sucker) investors.

Entrepreneurship, and especially the concept of "skin in the game" (see Taleb, 2020), also emphasizes the virtue of prudent risk-taking and shared stakes. Having one's own money invested in a company or enterprise hones the mind and makes sure that imprudent risk-takers pay some penalty for their foolishness. It also makes sure that successful participants continue to play the game. A lack of "skin in the game" has been identified as one of the reasons why some NGOs undertake imprudent projects, engage in naive interventions, or fail to follow up with early successes (for an honest admission of this problem, see Damberger, 2011, April). As has often been noted (for example, see Terry, 2002), NGOs are responsive to the donors who fund their projects but less so to the beneficiaries their projects are supposed to help. NGOs might do better when they pay some penalty for their failures to beneficiaries.

The debate over how NGOs can be more responsive to their beneficiaries – also known as "downward accountability" – has generated some useful ideas (for relevant examples, see Bartecchi, 2021, August 27). These ideas include the use of toll-free hotlines, as well as greater transparency and monitoring of the satisfaction of beneficiaries by third parties and the communication of this information to donors. Other ideas include encouraging NGO employees to live in the community for a fixed period of time, involving beneficiaries in different stages of planning, or having foreign NGOs hand over their projects to local NGOs and businesses gradually (see Bartecchi, 2021, August 27). More libertarian-minded economists and scholars might suggest eliminating the altruistic but naive outsider (aid bureaucrats and professional non-profiteers) altogether by making aid and charitable giving more broadly distributive. This is an ongoing debate that should be at the heart of making world security more practicable.

Rather than see a human rights NGO like Amnesty International and a company like TESLA as opposites, we should see them as two sides of a single coin. One seeks to end human rights abuses, the other promotes the agenda of an entrepreneur (Elon Musk) who wishes to decarbonize the world economy. Both are the product of immense hard work and long-term visionary goals. Should one be considered more "world security-ish" than the other?

Conclusion: From "World Security" to world securities?

In several ways, I see *World Security* as an unfinished book and world security as an unfinished project. One of the key points made by Booth is that theory is not just descriptive but also constitutive. Theory has the potential to make reality. "Powerful theories, like great art, shape how people see reality; and how one sees reality affects how one decides to act" (Booth, 2007, p. 247). Perhaps one of the failings of critical security scholars is that they are much better critics than they are artists. They are programmed to see the flaws and blemishes of a work, even their own. Ironically, the self-criticism of critical security scholars (as constitutive practice) may explain some of the pessimism regarding the progress of their own scholarly tradition.

Commenting on the incompleteness of his own work, Booth wrote, "I want to emphasize world politics as process, not blueprint or end-point" (Booth, 2007, p. 251). "No perfect society has yet been made, nor will ever be, but choices exist at all levels to construct the conditions for better possibilities" (Booth, 2007, p. 253). Thus, Booth left it to other popular writers, authors such as Steven Pinker (2012, 2019) in his books *Better Angels of Our Nature* and *Enlightenment Now!* and Rosling et al (2020) in their book *Factfulness* to point to the progress that humanity has made in reducing violence, alleviating poverty, and making humans healthier and more empowered. A key point in each of these works is that the benefits of the Enlightenment project have been undersold.

Despite both theoretical and practical strides, world security remains a work in progress – a good painting with good ideas, that leaves open the possibility for greater ideas yet to come. Is there a role for world security at our present

moment? The steps I have outlined in this essay may at first blush seem like a step backwards. In short, I have argued that approaches to world security should consider localizing andadopting the language and concepts of market-oriented entrepreneurs. Instead of a retreat, I view these suggestions as a step forward in terms of conducting a special kind of science called *entrepreneurship.*

My contention is simple: "World Security," at least at its current moment, works best when it remains plural (a community of lowercase "world securities"), fails ambitiously and continuously, collaborates, and learns. Like the best start-up companies, this community of world securities should share information, redistribute its human resources when projects fail, and embrace an iterative process that builds on past failures.

Apparently, I am not the only one who has concluded that failing aggressively is the path forward. In a wide-ranging article about failure and critical security studies, Laura Sjoberg writes: "I want to suggest that embracing failure is actually a path to hope. A critical security studies that is deeply flawed, fundamentally incoherent, and at cross purposes but that accepts those failures is one that can rise above coherence exercises, disciplinary performances of success, and any need for internal competition" (2019, p. 88). Throughout the article, Sjoberg makes a connection between the frequency of failure in critical security studies and the scope of its ambitions. What is most striking about this passage and the rest of her article is how often Sjoberg sounds similar to entrepreneurs talking about the experience of creating startup companies.

Sjoberg is correct to point to the centrality of failure. Of course not all failures are alike. The quality of each failure is important. The smaller in scale these failures are the better. They should work under the Hippocratic Oath of "do no harm" or at the very least minimize harm as they learn. In addition, each failure should generate lessons not just for the failing organization or person, but for the larger community of world securities.

It is important to remember this with regards to scale: dystopian forms of "World Security" (capitalized) have existed in fiction and the minds of dictators. These ideas of "World Security" include universal empire, the totalitarian state, "final solutions," and post-human societies (see, for example, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*) where eliminating war is a simple matter of bioengineering. These imposed forms of World Security were effective in ways that stripped humanity of freedom, joy, and even basic humanness.

I believe that many forms of world security, in their everyday frustrations to make progress, overlook their most outstanding benefit. Their willingness to be small, overlooked, limited, and to exist in the plural. Like good (social) venture capitalists, world security scholars/activists must be willing to fund many ideas, acknowledging with humility that we cannot know which will be the most impactful in the end. They must also understand that when opening pathways for something new and beautiful they must create an ecosystem that allows for true diversity. Rather than a World Security writ large, a community of world securities writ small speaks to the character and virtue of critical security scholarship and perhaps a new kind of realism.

What can be accomplished when a pluralistic community of world security scholars/activists dare to begin small, fail aggressively, survive locally, communicate actively, and innovate without end? We might find that the problems of the 21st century would still multiply and adapt, but that solutions would multiply and adapt faster.

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