

Security as *ethos* and *episteme*

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The threat against Europe

It nearly goes without saying that the attacks of September 11, 2001 changed the way we understand and communicate 'security' and 'insecurity' in Europe. First in relation to the US-led 'War on Terror', then following the Madrid bombings of March 2004, and the London bombings of July 2005, Europe has embraced a new global discourse of security.

But despite common assumptions security has not always been a central concern for European politics. Security, which has quickly evolved to become the baseline discourse of our time, assuming an uncanny naturalness and self-evidence, is actually not a naturally occurring phenomenon. As in many other parts of the world, the idea of security has had a unique history in Europe. It is bound to a certain set of traditions, a distinct historical experience, and a repertoire of ideas, customs and values.

European values are widely evoked, in official EU documents, political debates and, not least, the discourse of security. But what are the values that apparently make security so central to the European project? How is it that European values have evolved to play such a central support role in the constitution of the European security landscape?

Is there something distinct in European history and culture with implications for how we confront security challenges? Is there a European particularity that makes the European experience of security and insecurity singular? What indeed is 'European security'? What does it mean to say that Europe is insecure? What does it mean to say that Europe is threatened? Is it the subways, bridges and railways, nuclear plants and other buildings that are under threat? Is it the ships and harbours, the sea-lanes from the oil-exporting Middle East that are in danger? Is it the oil and gas installations in the North Sea? Is it Europe's communications infrastructure that is exposed to attack? Is it Europe's 'borders' or its political leaders who are endangered? Or do the threats concern something else, something more fundamental?

The challenge in answering questions lies in our basic understanding of what threat is, what it means to predict it, what it means to react to it, and what special challenges are brought by the

new era of transnational terrorism. Security is fundamentally a question of knowing and of values. The 'new' security challenges faced by Europe are not merely technological challenges of the kind we associate with improved surveillance, reinforced border protection, and other kinds of fortress measures. Rather, the challenges emerge from the meeting between the human values that we think make European life what it is and the security technologies required to secure it.

What is security?

Few concepts encapsulate the depth and breadth of human experience like *security*.

It's a concept that tries simultaneously to embody what we most cherish and to mobilize the means and modes of thwarting its threatened loss. It claims to both feel and to know, to identify the thing we care about, to look ahead toward the danger that threatens it, and to engage, in the most scientific terms, in what action should be taken, what must be suffered in order to prevail, and what can be sacrificed in the name of averting the threat.

Security reflects our knowledge of the past and our aspirations for the future, draws upon our experience and the experience of others. It reflects what we know while simultaneously authorizing us to delve into the unknown, legitimating action based on a certain understanding of *future* life. It mediates, structures, and regulates forms of uncertainty that we consider increasingly inescapable, unavoidable, or inevitable in our lives.

In this presentation I want to discuss what I believe are the two core characteristics of our experience of threat and insecurity: first, security as a kind of knowledge; second, security as an arrangement of values.

Security as knowledge

Recently, a certain engagement of security studies with risk studies has become visible, itself drawing force from a scientific tradition growing out of the actuarial sciences. The reliance of security studies on science and technology, easily adapting to both the gadget fetishism of technological security management and to less material techniques of governance, is both odd and disquieting. For the epistemological lineage of the natural sciences is organized by a straight-forward logic of the *episteme*, the opposition between the unknown and the known. Science derives its rationality, but also its normative force and legitimacy, from the primacy of the *known*, or the immediately to-be-known. And yet, security is by definition *excluded* from this field. Security concerns precisely what we do *not* know. As soon as the unknown becomes known it ceases to be a question of security. Its entire rationality, politics, and normativity revolve around just this epistemological aberration: Security is by nature a relation to what is

unknowable. The moment the unknowable becomes known, it ceases to be a question of security.

Scientists, political scientists among them, are notoriously poor prophets. They deal in knowledge of the here and now, not with knowledge of the future, which is, obviously an entirely different matter. It is odd then, and symptomatic of the state of our scientific—and security—culture, that we turn in reflex to the means and methods of the sciences, preferably the natural sciences, to analyze security, to cast light upon what we not only actually do not know, as it happens, but more importantly upon what-we-do-not-know as such, upon the unknowable itself, upon necessary, structural, imminent unknowability, a field charged with meaning, consequences and, not least, politics. We are trained to appeal to science not only for answers about what we do not know, but also about the unknowable itself, not about that which, through proper analysis, will become knowable, but rather about what is *structurally unknowable*.

Security epistemology concerns knowledge that will never be knowledge properly speaking. For inadequate knowledge is not the *starting* point but the very theoretical *variable* of security. A negative epistemology orders and regulates what can be asserted or carried out in the name of security. It is not a matter of mobilizing the security discourse *in spite of the fact* that we do not know what is to come; it is far more a matter of mobilizing *because* we do not know. Once the danger or threat that is set out by security is known, it ceases to be a matter of security. It is transformed into knowledge of real existing danger, no longer merely likely or probable, but imminent, thereby transforming the foundation upon which any ethics of action is undertaken.

Certainty and subjectivity

Certainty is thus not the primary mode of security. On the contrary, it is uncertainty that enables, structures and regulates security. The notion of *uncertainty* occupies a remarkable position in our experience of security. It is remarkable because, even though we would most often associate it with *truth* or *facts*, it has a more complex relation to these than we might expect. Certainty is never just about the facts, never just about what is true about the world, what is in the world, etc. Certainty is an ideal. It is always somehow different than truth, something beyond us, held by others, in a different time, in a different place. As we know, it is possible to be entirely certain and at the same time entirely wrong. Therefore, as a first conclusion, we can say that certainty is not bound by the facts, by the world, or by the truth.

Why is it that security analysts and risk managers are so concerned with certainty, when it, in objective terms, is so undependable? According to the Cartesian tradition, the concept of certainty is closely connected to the absence of *doubt*. A perfectly certain state is one in which

doubt is absent. Doubt is in this respect the enemy of certainty, but it is always lurking, always close by. Moreover, as we all know, doubt takes us down another road all together. It links the analysis to emotion, confidence, even spirituality or religion. Certainty implies knowledge *about* the knowledge, meta-knowledge, a way of saying that, not only is what is true true, but that my knowledge of that knowledge is true. Finally, certainty involves a certain conception of *perfection* in knowledge. It carries with it some aspect of completeness or of wholeness. Certainty means without imperfection. Certainty is related not only to true knowledge, but to full or complete knowledge. It is knowledge that from one objective point of view or another is true, and it is not this truth or true-ness that lies at its core. Certainty has in this sense both an *outer* existence and an *inner* core.

Certainty is (most certainly) about truth, about getting it right, about knowing or saying what is true. But it is neither merely about the facts, about what or how the world is, nor about the 'subjective' experience of the world, about me and you who are interested in the facts. It hovers in a space in between these positions. Certainty is the position of embodying the *danger* of uncertainty in speaking, thinking, acting, etc. And yet this danger, this risk, is variable not only according to knowledge about the world, about the perils of the future, and about what can be objectively undertaken to objectively forestall harm, though it is about this too. It is also about what Aristotle would call 'moral substance' of political being.

Security is inseparable from uncertainty, yes, but of an awkwardly post-Cartesian, perhaps something more like Kantian certainty, an experience of the close proximity between a state of the world and a state of the mind, the soul, or the person. Whether or not we find it reassuring, security situates itself at the intersection of distinct logics. These logics, or discourses, vary in time and space and along multiple and variable axes, historically determined, culturally programmed, deployed and governed across fields of social networks and relations. This conception of security status and practice presupposes a subject that somehow precedes security, to which security is a meaningful but not non-essential predicate. I would even claim that the subject is in general always a subject of security. That by virtue of the logic of subjectivity itself, the subject, be it the subject of knowledge, of law, of morality, etc. is already involved in a logic of security and insecurity, a logic that, if it does not indeed precede the subject, will certainly share its finality.

Security ethics

What is the link between security and ethics? A long tradition in philosophical thinking insists on the difference between epistemology and ethics as a sub-set of the distinction between what is and what should be. The basic premise of this distinction is a metaphysical insistence on the

distinction between what is and what is not, even if what is not, actually exists in the form of a judgement about the future or the formulation of a normative claim. Security thinking in our time transcends this option. Security analysis, management and communication, today more than ever before, is confronted with a *future* that lives itself out fully and powerfully in the *present*. More than ever before, value judgements involved in security reasoning not only reflect our past and characterize our present, but reach into our future, link not to what we know as basis for what we should do, but rather to what we do not or cannot know.

I am here *not* referring to certainty *about* normative statements (for example, what is it that I should do if I in the future acquire knowledge that I should clean the barn). I am referring to the certainty or uncertainty of knowledge itself, which itself has normative effects, which itself mobilizes action. The force of *not* knowing something has itself enormous power, power of a kind that is *more* forceful than actually knowing something. As Nassim Taleb argues in *The Black Swan*, it is *not* the case, as our grandmothers taught us, that 'what we don't know can't hurt us'. On the contrary: what we don't know can indeed hurt us. It forces us to act, but without a complete picture of what we are going to (cf. Taleb 2007). The unknown in its essence, by virtue of being unknown, is the foundation of ethics.

It's the space where ethics 'happens': between necessity and randomness. Ethics, from a certain point of view, is nothing other than making decisions in the absence of certainty: *precisely the constellation of security*. If there were certainty about our actions, if we actually knew without doubt what to do, then this could be called many things, but it would not be called ethics (cf. Derrida 1987). Ethics is meaningful in the world of *inadequate* knowledge and randomness. *This* is also the home of security studies. Yet we are not suggesting that the study of security would be served by incorporating ethics into security analysis. The study and procurement of security *is* an ethics, from start to finish. If we define ethics as the disquieting task of making decisions under conditions of inadequate knowledge, decisions where it is the incalculable, the unforeseeable, the passionate, zealous or perhaps even apathetic, that counts, the mobile, instable, or fragmented stuff of our humanness, then an ethics of uncertainty, like the epistemology of the unknown, will have to serve as its basic science.

To one, atypical example among others. The still expanding insurance industry butters its bread by being a security provider. Yet when insurance providers carry out assessments based on statistical profiles, likelihoods and probably backgrounds, they are not increasing security but rather eliminating the demand for it, not because the car will not crash, the chain-smoker won't contract emphysema, but rather because the negative *value* of the danger, should it exist, is henceforth reduced to zero. In the sense of determining the way it will affect human lives, the consequences will have already taken place through the calculation of an adequate

compensation. In the logic of insurance the accident has already happened, (human) value assessments have already been made, actions already taken.

Yet a certain portion of security is *not* assimilatable to the value calculus of security analysis. It is the part that actually *counts* in our lives, precisely because it *doesn't count* in the scientific calculus. It is the part that cannot be reduced to zero through analysis and planning. It cannot be pulverized. This indestructible part of insecurity is important precisely *because* it is unforeseeable and *because* it is this 'eventuality' that forms the only available basis for judging how we should lead our lives in the face of threat. This sense of security is therefore the site of a *decision* about what we value in human terms, and therefore it is a decision about our own identity, about who we are and what we want, what is dispensable for us and what is indispensable.

The security of values

Security is in this sense about values. A threat to security is implicitly linked to what has value for us. It is linked to the possibility that what we hold as valuable could disappear, be removed or destroyed. Objects of no value cannot be threatened in the same sense as those that do have value. The key to understanding threat therefore lies in understanding the systems which link human values and things. A threat is not simply a completely unknown danger lying in wait, ready to be launched upon us in some completely unknown way at some unspecified time. Threat is not incidental or accidental, or at least not entirely so. Nor is the effect of a threat independent of those targeted by it. Threat is not determined by others alone. It is co-determined by those who are under threat. It would be impossible to threaten us if we were not already projecting the catastrophe itself, and with it the dread fear, into the imminent future, by valuing what we value, and fearing its loss through the very logic of valuing it.

Yet terrorism, as we know, goes well beyond targeting what has value. It aims in addition to produce a signal effect of meanings from the very insecurities we already possess, insecurities that lie deep within the psyche of our societies. These insecurities often have their origins from other contexts, from other historical moments. They breed and mature in the collective imaginary of our culture. They have their roots in both past events, current vulnerabilities and future fears.

How are value, threat and fear linked? The ideal terrorist act would seek to find the fit between what we value, the fear of its loss implicit in that value, and the political interests sought by those who carry out the act, though this link is never perfect or ideal. While infrastructure experts, for example, know and understand technical weaknesses in infrastructures, threat analysis must also take into account the human dimensions of loss associated with these

infrastructures. This naturally includes the consideration of how our lives would be practically changed by the death of citizens or the destruction of institutions, buildings or infrastructure. Threat assessment however should also include consideration of how our lives would be changed from a moral perspective by the fear and insecurity created by such events, and how such fear asserts control on our lives and implants insecurity into our relation to both other potential targets and other aspects of our daily existence.

In other words, it is not the disrupted train service, or oil production, not even the poisoning of a local water supply in themselves that has significance for the 'terrorist'. Rather, it is the *loss of confidence* in rail service, oil production, water supply and in infrastructural services in general. It is not the reality of a computer virus in itself that we have to fear and which a terrorist might use as a tool, but rather the *fear* of the release of a virus, the presence of a kind symbolic virus, the contagion of insecurity, which disseminates distrust and fear, both in the world of private commercial services around which society is organized, but also in terms of international trust and faith in a globalized market system. Thus in social terms it is not the *materiality* of threat that determines the value of something to society and thus to terrorism, it is rather the socially, culturally determined *ideas* of value that count.

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