

Defining Security in Late Liberalism

A Comment on Pedersen and Holbraad

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3 As is well known, in the latter part of his life, Michel Foucault (2007)
4 began thinking about security as an emergent mode of liberal governance
5 predicated on the equally emergent problematic of population. Can we
6 speak of a “society of security” in which security is a “way of making the
7 old armatures of law and discipline function”? To answer his own question
8 Foucault began by identifying the four major features of the *dispositifs*
9 of security: spaces of security, the treatment of uncertainty (aleatory), the
10 normalizations specific to security, and the correlation between the techni-
11 que of security and population. If we are to ask, as do the editors of this
12 volume, what is meant by security, for Foucault the answer does not come
13 from a better definition of the term security, but from understanding the
14 correlation between security and population in its historical emergence.
15 In other words, Foucault’s lectures on security, territory, and population
16 focused not on security in the abstract and not on defining the word ‘secu-
17 rity’ across multiple contexts, but rather on the inexorable linkage between
18 security and population. The apparatuses of security made no sense except
19 in relation to the population. Population came to be understood as a natu-
20 ral phenomenon, accessible to agents and techniques of transformation, but
21 only if these agents and techniques understood it as a form of utilitarian
22 desire—as not *le genre humaine* but *l’espèce humaine* (ibid., 70–71). They
23 were intended to manage the population newly conceived as distinct from
24 an aggregation of individuals ordered by individual or sovereign will.

25 Insofar as security and population emerged as the charge and goal of
26 liberal governance, it displaced and conditioned the freedom of the people.
27 Indeed, Foucault would argue in his 1982 College de France lectures, *Secu-
28 rity, Territory, Population*, that the people became the name of those who
29 threatened the population by putting freedom above security. The people,
30 and a system of governance based on the people, become the enemy of
31 the population and a mode of governance predicated on its security. “The
32 people comprise those who conduct themselves in relation to the manage-
33 ment of the population, at the level of population, as if they were not part
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of the population as a collective subject-object, as if they put themselves outside of it, and consequently the people are those who, refusing to be the population, disrupt the system” (2007, 43–44). In this new formation of liberal power, security commanded freedom, population the people. That we locate both of these arrangements of governance under the same label, ‘liberal democracy,’ should not blind us to the very different tactics and objects covered by this label. Governance operating on the spectre of the security of a population, Foucault insisted, is a far cry from governance imagined within the freedom of a people.¹ And the distance between these two modes of liberal governance measures the distance between the actuality of liberal forms of governance (the dynamic network of technique, force, and tactic) and political theories of liberalism.

But as the editors of this volume of essays note, in recent years the various schools that have arisen around security studies have significantly widened the term to include so many affective and social states—un/certainty, fear and dread, precariousness, et cetera—that the term’s analytic power has been lost. The editors seek two major interventions—one definitional, the other disciplinary. Can a historically understood anthropological approach to security offer a way of more precisely defining the conceptual scope of security studies? And, for my purposes, can it provide insight into the difference—and distance—between political theoretical approaches to (neo)liberalism and anthropographic accounts of late liberalism?

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In a nifty piece of disciplinary reinterpretation, Pedersen and Holbraad begin by noting the centrality of security in the foundational debates in social anthropology between Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Both saw security as an essential component of social worlds. But while Malinowski placed it within the table of basic needs, thus individualizing and generalising it at the same time, Radcliffe-Brown placed it at the level of social regulation and collectivization. As the editors note, security is “transposed from the angst-ridden existential subject, as with Malinowski, to [in Radcliffe-Brown’s writing] an order-obsessed social, cultural, and moral collective, or simply: society.” According to Pedersen and Holbraad, anthropology has vacillated between these two poles ever since—including the subfield of the anthropology of security. Studies focus either on the existential condition of social subjects, blurring in the process the existential conditions of fear, uncertainty, precariousness, and insecurity, or on the social structures of security as overarching forms of regulation, ordering, and control. How, Pedersen and Holbraad ask, can anthropology—and security studies more generally—examine security/securitization in a way that provides more precision in our analytic tools and theoretical presuppositions, while avoiding the dialectical trap of the individual versus

1 society? Their answer is to define security within a space that is “more than
2 individual but less than societal” and as “a set of discourses and practices
3 concerned with a given social collective’s reproduction over time.”

4 It is here that the Copenhagen School of Security Studies exerts its influence
5 on Pedersen and Holbraad. They argue that the Copenhagen School defined
6 security as a particular manner of “politicising issues.” On the one hand,
7 reading securitization as a manner of politicization corrects “the tendency in
8 recent anthropological writings to view insecurity as a matter of individual
9 subjects’ sense of existential uncertainty” and, on the other hand, it fore-
10 grounds “the role the very distinction between the social and the individual
11 (and cognate distinctions such as political/nonpolitical, sovereign/subject, and
12 rule/exception) plays in its articulation.” These two manoeuvres allow Peder-
13 sen and Holbraad to locate the specificity of in/security: “insecurity is uncer-
14 tainty elevated to an existential matter—not, however, in the ‘existentialist’
15 sense of a universal human predicament of individual angst, nor, equally
16 crucially, in the sociocentric sense of a societal bulwark against a nonsocial
17 state of nature.” Between these two refusals, insecurity becomes a “culturally,
18 socially, and historically variable political affect” in those cases in which col-
19 lectives experience “existential threats” of various orders and scales.

20 While in agreement with the broad terms of this move, I wonder how
21 this definition of security—security studies—helps make sense of the dis-
22 tance between political theoretical approaches to (neo)liberalism, neo-
23 Foucauldian accounts of the apparatuses of security, and anthropographic
24 accounts of late liberalism? Given the factual existence of numerous forms
25 of the otherwise within the worlds of late liberalism, why do discourses of
26 security/securitization remain a key technique of governmental legitimacy
27 and justification? Does this account of security allow an understanding
28 of the movement from discourses of freedom and people to security and
29 population? And how do specific techniques of securitization continually
30 canalize the “culturally, socially, and historically variable” forms of politi-
31 cal affect into late liberal forms of political affect?

34 3.

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36 To grasp the global nature of late liberalism it has seemed to me necessary to
37 approach it with two countertending operations. On the one hand, what is lib-
38 eralism now? What is the nature of the form of liberal governance that we have
39 been making and living within since the late 1960s, and that seems to have
40 reached a certain crisis in the wake of 9/11 and the financial crisis of 2008?
41 On the other hand, how is this thing that passes under a singular name not a
42 singular phenomenon but a set of spatially dispersed tactics for the accumula-
43 tion of values? In other words, what is ‘liberalism’ as that which appears under
44 a consistent name and yet has a history of dramatic internal transformation?

45 The very phrase ‘late liberalism’ attempts to capture these two coun-
46 terpunctual moments. By late liberalism I mean to indicate a formation of

power—the twined formations of neoliberalism and liberal cultural recognition—that emerged in the late 1960s as a method of solving the crisis of liberal economic and social legitimacy in the wake of economic stagflation and colonial and social revolutions. Late liberalism solved these legitimacy crises by arguing that the *population* of the nation-state would be secured against harm if it were opened to the precarious character of life as difference. In other words, late liberalism marks a period in which the population would be secured by a new reading of society and individual, a reading that ignored people and their freedoms as a kind of truth-speaking (*dire vrai, parrhesia*), and focused instead on the care of economic and cultural aptitudes and attitudes that enhanced the life of the population but only in so far as it maintained the flows of economic and cultural values from subordinate to dominant groups.

The classic debates that Pedersen and Holbraad examine are critical here. Neoliberalism and liberal multiculturalism drew on, as they refigured, the spectres of the free individual and constraining social order, what I have elsewhere called the discourses of the autological subject and genealogical society, and the temporal orders that subtend them. The foundational debates in anthropology were not so much analyses of society and the individual, as symptomatic discourses, elements of which become critical to the late liberal imaginary. Radcliffe-Brown’s statement, “In such a primitive society as that of the Andamans one of the most powerful means of maintaining the cohesion of the society and of enforcing that conformity to custom and tradition without which social life is impossible, is the recognition by the individual that for his security and well-being he depends entirely upon the society” was put to use by neoliberals and liberal multiculturalists (Pedersen and Holbraad, this volume, citing Radcliffe-Brown; see also Povinelli 2006). In late liberalism, the population was secured—and, vis-à-vis this security, the flow of economic and cultural values regulated—by making every element within it conform to a specific division between the autological subject and the genealogical society and their corresponding social tenses of the future anterior and the past perfect. Those parts of the population that refused to be a part of this division are seen as an existential threat to the population and treated as such, either let to die or killed.

And yet I think Pedersen and Holbraad are correct to note that there are many forms of ‘security’ if security is defined as an experience of an existential threat to the collective. These forms are within late liberalism in two senses. Late liberalism is late in the sense of belated insofar as it never catches up with or gains a hold of itself. It is always internally disturbed by the history of its spatiotemporal dispersion and thus also by the otherwise it finds and produces in this dispersion. The factual spatiotemporal unevenness of the historical and social unfolding of liberalism meant that all spaces drew from a different array of elements at hand. Australian liberalism was never US liberalism, which was never European liberalism, and none of these constitute exactly the same form of late liberalism. As a result, when various ‘people’ (or as anthropologists like to say, cultures and societies)

1 refuse to be governed as a part of the multicultural and neoliberal popula-
 2 tion they also draw on the diversity of tactics that define and continually
 3 disperse late liberalism. These spatiotemporal dispersions mean that even
 4 without the anthropological attachment to social and cultural difference as
 5 something like a set of billiard balls, the otherwise (the people) was always
 6 within late liberal worlds, pushing and shaping not merely what security is,
 7 but the imaginary of the subject and object of security.

8 It is right here that I begin to worry about solving the problem of security
 9 studies by defining security/securitization. It is not that I disagree with how
 10 Pedersen and Holbraad define security. But I worry that this definition of
 11 security may obscure the very thing it was meant to illuminate, at least in
 12 some quarters of security studies—namely, a specific historical modality of
 13 governance. Does this definitional approach help us understand how and why
 14 the liberal discourses of legitimacy and governance shifted from people and
 15 freedom to security and population? Or why, given the proliferation of oth-
 16 erwise within the worlds of late liberalism, security/securitization remains
 17 a key discourse and technique of late liberal control? Or how the variety
 18 of securitizations—to remain within Pedersen and Holbraad’s innovative
 19 approach—is canalized into a dominant form of late liberal securitization?
 20 How is the multiplicity of times of security articulated to the dominant social
 21 tenses of liberal securitization? How do we close the gap between the insta-
 22 bility and potentiality of local modes of security and the seeming stability
 23 and regulatory nature of late liberal securitization? Though perhaps helped
 24 by honing our definitions, this problem can be answered only by honing our
 25 historically and ethnographically informed analytic skills.

26 NOTES

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 30 1. Many scholars in the burgeoning field of risk studies (security studies, secu-
 31 ritization studies) have argued that the recent post-9/11 wars make this dis-
 32 tinction perfectly clear. See, for instance, Masco (2010).

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