Re-materializing Security: A Historical Materialist Approach

Abstract

International Security Studies is divided between two edges. On the one end there is Realism’s positivist materialism which is mostly depended on the analysis of observable objects. Critical security studies, on the other end, aims to develop an alternative idealist/discursive view. However, this discursive/constructivist understanding, cuts the cords of security to its material aspects. Shortly, bringing a "nothing out of text" understanding to security reveal the deficiencies of Realism’s materialism yet cannot offer a holistic understanding. Thus, nor the shallow materialism of Realism neither the “floating” security of critical securitization approaches can fully put the meaning of security. A re-materialization of security studies is required. In this study that need of an alternative to both ends of ISS will be discussed. It will be claimed that a historical materialist security approach (for instance a critical realist historical materialism) without falling into the mistakes of economist versions of Marxism can achieve and overcome the fallacies of contemporary ISS approaches. Thus, the study will overview Realist and critical approaches with a historical materialist lens, then discuss how material and ideational factors of security can be linked. As a conclusion, study aims to open a way up to a historical materialist security studies.

Introduction

For, social inquiry so for ISS it is a necessity to constitute a research programme that can shed a light on questions such as what is power in international relations? Can it be reduced to military capacities of states? What is discourse of security? How and why its meaning is socially constructed in a particular way and not another? Certain theories in ISS have certain answers to these questions but these answers are either insufficient, exclusive, and sometimes biased or incapable of answering the why questions concerning the reasons of events. The aim of this study is to discuss the possible contributions of a structural historical materialist (HM) approach to International Security studies (ISS). The claim is that this is a necessity because
positivist schools of ISS has a narrow understanding of materialism that reduces the material to physical objects (the ideational exists and deliberately hidden in this materialist discourse) and their alternative; the critical schools propose a(n idealist) discursive/constructivist turn which denies the any objective material existence. These issues will be addressed in the first part of this study by discussing the contemporary mainstream and critical approaches in ISS. Then the study will introduce a structural HM that can offer a balanced methodology to analyse the material and ideational aspects of security. This second part of the study, then will focus on asserting an alternative view in parallel to the guidelines briefly stated above. Through this task the study will benefit from Bhaskar and his adherents and also from certain views in historical materialism such as Althusser and also from some practitioners of critical realism (CR) in International Relations (IR) Theory such as Jonathan Joseph, Colin Wight and Andreas Bieler.

Part I: The Critique

A. Positivist ISS

It can be argued that International Relations (IR) developed through debates. In order to understand contemporary approaches in IR we need to study these steps. In this context International Security Studies (ISS) and IR can be said to developed hand in hand. Adding to that, international security issues are the core of IR; its main focus point. Thus main stream IR and ISS approaches followed the same path since these disciplines are established. Philosophy constituted the basis of these theories and theorisation in IR and ISS. As Milja Kurki and Colin Wight (2007, 14) suggest “[t]he philosophy of social science has played an important role in the formation, development, and practice of IR as an academic discipline”.

Being a young discipline, the history of International Relations is now closing to a hundred years. In terms of its growth, the so-called Great Debates give us an idea of IR’s philosophical
evolution as well as general fragmentations among its scholars. There is no consensus regarding the exact number of the debates and how to label them. Nevertheless, in general terms four main debates, three focusing on methodological issues, can be identified within IR theory. These, in a chronological order, can be listed as the idealism/realism (or normativity/objectivity), traditionalism/behaviouralism (or traditionalism/scientism), neorealism/neoliberalism (or state-centrism/transnationalism or realism/pluralism), and positivism/post-positivism (or rationalism/reflexivity).

The first debate emerged as a result of Realists’ critiques against the Idealists because of their normativity, and mainly concerned “substantive questions of war and peace” (Jackson and Sorensen 2010, 278). Despite the fact that Realist scholars claimed for objectivity, they were also criticised for not being scientific (enough) by the second generation Realists who came into the picture with the ‘Behaviouralist revolution’ dawned in the US by the 1950’s and 1960’s. In this vein, in the behaviouralism/traditionalism debate the prevalent argument raised against the traditionalist (i.e. Classical Realism and Idealism) scholars was that the only scientific approach could be a positivist one, which corresponds to ‘the belief that IR scholarship is an inquiry that is concerned with uncovering verifiable facts or regularities of world politics and is based on valid scientific research techniques’ (Jackson and Sorensen 2010, 278-9). This was followed by the third debate (Neo/Neo, inter-paradigm debate), where the main question was an ontological one, that is, whether or not there are any actors and relations other than states and their military encounter in international affairs. However, as Smith states,

“[t]he so-called ‘great debates’ in the discipline’s history … have not involved questions of epistemology. The discipline has tended to accept implicitly a rather simple and, crucially, an uncontested set of positivist assumptions which have fundamentally stifled debate over both what the world is like and how we might explain
it. This is not true of those who worked either in the so-called ‘English school’ or at the interface between international relations and political theory, because these writers never bought into the positivist assumptions that dominated the discipline. But it has been the dominance of positivism that has accounted for both the character, and more importantly, the content of the central debates in international theory (1996, 11).

As epistemology was not the question, positivism, which both of the sides affirmed, announced its victory. Thus our aim after this point is to discuss Neorealism and positivism as they are the dominant approach and epistemology in ISS. It can be said that Neorealism during and also after the Cold War, is carved by two facts; one of which is methodological and the other is historical. Their sum leads to one motto:

- Behaviouralist revolution in Social Sciences (with a positivist epistemology)
- Cold War: Preventing a Nuclear War

‘Count on the countable’

Stephen Walt explain what ISS does as “(w)orks in security studies tend to employ concepts that are controllable by national leaders, such as military doctrine and strategy, the tools of statecraft (e.g., deterrence) or the size and character of armaments.” Therefore, Neorealism’s main concern is countable, statistically workable data. That data is not every data but data on military power.

Therefore, Neorealism limits itself with a narrow materialism which is limited to physical observable objects. In this vein, what we criticize here is a reductionism. Materialism as a philosophy if reduced to an ontology limited with physical objects will be inconsistent with
social sciences. Moreover, caging international relations in a limited space covers the real nature of international relations which is producing and reproducing the inequalities within the system. By inequalities we refer to relations between genders, classes, different kind of societies (such as the ones between majorities and minorities; elites and people and even the ones between different nations). Although, these issues seem to exist in national levels, it becomes more and more difficult to keep them within borders, say due to “globalisation”.

Shortly, Realism (especially Neorealism and all other variants including the new ones) is a paradigm with a tool set. In that set we have states as only actors, inside/outside distinction, balance of power politics where power is equalled to countable military power and so on. No matter how broad these concepts are defined or moral issues added to the tool set (e.g. Neoclassical Realism) Realism married to positivism seems incapable of explaining the reality out there in international relations. Thus, being a theory that presents itself as “problem-solving” it is too blind to see and comprehend them.

B. The Critical ISS

‘… [with the shift from the seventeenth-century Newtonian physics to twentieth-century quantum physics came along with the shift from a science based on observable things to a science based on the unobservable things’ (George 2008, 33). In this vein, with the Positivism/post-positivism debate, IR scholars returned to metatheoretical issues.

In parenthesis, we should note that the term post-positivism as used in IR theory is not a label adopted from philosophy of science. In IR, post-positivism refers to the critical (of positivism) theories. On the other hand, in philosophy, the label refers to renowned analytic school figures (whom positivist IR scholars will appreciate) such as Kuhn, Quine and Davidson as (Zammito 2004).
Furthermore, in Positivism/post-positivism debate, the artificial classification of post-positivism does not represent a camp comprised of theories that share common features. In other words, Conventional Constructivism, Marxism, Critical Constructivism, Post-structuralism and Postmodernism are all grouped under the umbrella of post-positivism, although some forms of the first two claim to be scientific whereas the latter ones reject an objectivist definition which they reject positivist scientificity as a necessary condition. As Burgess claims, “These interventions cover a wide range of concerns, but their uniting theme is a critique of Realist and Neorealist perspectives through a radical, linguistically based ‘constructivist turn’”.

All in all, as Jim George (2008, 34) notes, “[f]or the most part the debate over science and international relations has been carried out as a debate between positivism and its critics. This debate continues into the present with tensions within constructivist theory a particularly evident example of it”.

In the light of this debate in IR, critical ISS is concerned about the ‘subjective’, and aim not to explain but understand international relations/affairs. To analyse the subjective (or as most scholars put it, the ideational), critical ISS scholars chose a different path and held on to a motto “international politics is socially constructed.” In this vein, post-positivists question some inadequacies in positivist claims. For instance, Wendt rightly points the ideational factors implicit/hidden in Realist analysis and asserts that “500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the United States and the North Koreans are not.” As noted above, Criticals are effected by reflectivist turn in social sciences and ended up with the broadening and deepening the security agenda by adding idealism in their research.
To draw a comprehensive but brief view of these critical schools we can look how they problematize the referent object in ISS. Their broadening and deepening agenda focuses on the conception of State in positivist approaches. State, from the beginning, is recognized as the main actor of IR and referent object of ISS. It is theorized, designed and functioned as the only legitimate force to carry out international relations. Moreover, framers conceptualised its relations as rational. As a consequence, strategic studies conserving this legacy, acknowledge that the state is the only actor and its behaviour as rational. The undergoing changes in the environment of international relations like the end of bipolar system and technological achievements and globalisation and the parallel development of IR’s methodological and theoretical conduct of inquiry in response to this actual change led many scholars to question the state as a rational decision maker and its status as referent object. Some blamed anthropocentrism, some eurocentrism and some power/knowledge relations for such definitions. Yet, briefly the claim in general is twofold:

1. Especially after the Behaviouralist revolution the scope of ISS has got narrowed which is outdated for studying contemporary politics due to the emergence of new actors and issues like identity, poverty, endemic diseases, migration, globalisation and so on.

2. Many scholars claimed that positivist methodology (which is designed accordingly to empiricist understanding of science) is not the only way to do science (moreover, some of postmodernists question the necessity of a scientific approach but still this critique exists in their claims). Mathematical, statistical methods, formal models are incapable of understanding the changing concepts especially the ideational factors in contemporary IR.

As a matter of fact, some IR and ISS scholars introduced new issues, concepts, methodologies and theoretical frameworks. However, these reflectivist/post-positivist/critical theories are a vague structure. Under these headings, as we have stated above, post-structuralists, Marxists,
feminists, constructivists are counted, although they claim dissimilar propositions. What is common in their analysis is that they all challenge the privileged place attributed to state. In Security Studies where state’s central and determining role attributed by Strategic Studies is objected, the issue of what should be the referent object and meta-theory that will analyse the problem seem to be the main questions. Transformation of sovereignty, privatization of security, with the emergence of new threats such as terrorism and high-tech weapons to deal with them (i.e. drones) and their effects on strategies in doing war, along with other developments turned the focus on to different referent objects that are more suitable for understanding the current affairs.

Below two looming large “critical” schools and their sights on the referent object of ISS will be explained briefly. Although these central claims and the methodological positions shifted to a more discursive/reflectivist position, the point which we try to make below is embedded in the core of these schools and thus still has a value to understand their contemporary theoretical position.

1. Critical/Aberystwyth/Wales School of Security

A narrow, early grouping of Critical Security Studies (CSS) scholars (Booth, Wyn Jones and Bilgin) associates their views with Frankfurt School, Habermas and Gramsci. On the other hand, a broader regrouping will also include feminists, post-structuralists and constructivists (and in contemporary ISS, also the distinction between CSS and Copenhagen School seems to vanish as scholars began to use securitization as a research tool in a greater extend). The school, including almost all of its members, asserts that the researchers should avoid focusing on the nation state as referent object. The main purpose, according to the narrow group, should be to implement emancipatory policies to security studies. Booth (2002) argues that
“[a] scholar should define his/her scope larger than the states interactions. The referent object of security issues is no longer states but human beings. Their identities, discourses, ideologies and both domestic and international politics that construct these identities should be in the scope. Social interactions the constructed cultures are contemporary correlating variables in understanding the world politics.”

If this is the case, then the referent object should shift from nation state to human beings. Continuing the Frankfurt School’s ideas, they see the state as an institution that hinders humans from being free. Adding to that reduction of international relations to state relations (statism) is an ideological attempt and is for justifying the bourgeois nation state’s actions.

So an ISS should be normative. It should focus on what ought to be. As a result of the philosophical backgrounds ‘what ought to be’ is determined by the assumptions of Critical Theory where Habermas’s argument; “emancipatory potential of communication” is in charge. As Booth states, “World security refers to the structures and processes within human society, locally and globally, that work towards the reduction of the threats and risks that determine individual and group lives. The greater the level of security enjoyed, the more individuals and groups (including human society as a whole) can have an existence beyond the instinctual animal struggle merely to survive. The idea of world security is synonymous with the freedom of individuals and groups compatible with the reasonable freedom of others, and universal moral equality compatible with justifiable pragmatic inequalities.” The discursive/constructivist idealism in this line of thinking is as Booth adds, “Emancipation is Changing the Discourse: “Central to the project of a critical theory of security is the overthrowing of regressive discourses sustaining business-as-usual, and then inventing emancipatory alternatives.” And goes on with “There is no Reality out there but there are realities of “us”: [o]ntological assumptions are political battlefields as different theorists seek to privilege their own referent in the struggle to win the prize of defining reality.”
Therefore, the subject of ISS is set as world politics defined as a struggle for emancipation not an objective inquiry of international relations. However, today, CSS broadened and changed its scope. Although, preserving this new border for the research, CSS went on a more reflexive understanding of world politics. Like Laclau & Mouffe’s definition of social relations as, “Many social antagonisms, many issues which are crucial to the understanding of contemporary societies, belong to fields of discursivity which are external to Marxism, and cannot be reconceptualised in terms of Marxist categories given, especially, that their very presence is what puts Marxism as a closed theoretical system into question, and leads to the postulation of new starting points for social analysis”, in a similar vein CSS today draws an ‘intertextual’ picture of world politics.

2. Copenhagen School of Security

At the beginning Copenhagen School’s determined three fields of inquiry (Waever, 2004: 7-8):

a. Securitization: It is related with the speech act theory. A theory argued by J. L. Austin and John R. Searle. Shortly any subject becomes a security issue if practitioners give that much importance to that subject for achieving their political aims. Securitization: “’Security’ is thus a self-referential practice, because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue-not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat”

b. Security Sectors (Buzan, Waever and Jaap de Wilde, 1998): different forms of security (e.g. political, economic, environmental securities).

c. Regional Security Complexes (Buzan and Waever, 2003: 40-93): the concept refers to the analysis of regional security systems, the commonalities that bound the operating actors within those systems and the conditions that create those systems.
Ever since defining the borders of ISS as above, securitization loomed large compared to other two. To us it is also the one worth mentioning more. According to the school members, security can be about any issue that is securitised by practitioners. Therefore, state cannot be the only referent object. Depending on the securitised issue, it can be society, individuals or another subject as well as the state. The analysis is therefore, widened and deepened. The security defined as a multilayer concept and containing many issues ranging from politics to economics, environment to food or health. Contemporary securitization scholars however, make a slightly different definition of securitization due to utilizing a different philosophical origin. By shifting from analytical to continental origins a great extent of securitization scholars embraces post-structuralism and critical constructivism. This shift, on the one hand, closes the gap between CSS and Copenhagen Schools on the other, leads critical schools to a more idealist position.

Contemporary critical schools utilizing ‘securitization’ as a methodological tool whose content determined by a some variant of ‘post’, cuts the cords of security which links it to its material dimensions. The concept of security cannot be imagined within the limits of Strategic Studies. Yet there are limits too. And what this study claims are that these limits either to broaden and to deepen or to exclude is material. As Jonathan Joseph states “Not just anything can be articulated as a nuclear weapon; it has to have certain material properties. Social construction might help explain why a missile regarded as something that provides security (as opposed to being a weapon of mass destruction), but physical properties of something, far from being meaningless outside discursive articulation, are the very things that make social construction possible. Social construction might make certain meanings possible but material conditions make social construction possible”
Part II: The Assertion

From now on the study will continue from the point Joseph stated above. That point is asserting a balanced methodology including and defining the material and ideational factors that concern security. We suppose a Critical Realist (for producing the epistemological necessities) Historical Materialist (for producing ontological necessities) approach can provide such a critical methodology. This CR HM approach we propose stands on four pillars.

1. A realist ontology referring to a layered reality composed of first what we observe (the empirical), secondly whole set of events that happens whether we observe or not (the actual) and thirdly of the structure that generate these events (structure/structurata/generative mechanisms).

2. An epistemology that tries to achieve explanation through defining a structural causality. In comparison with classical empiricism (of Hume for instance) this means explanation cannot be achieved by looking at random events to find constant conjunctions in order to achieve formulations such as when each time event A happens then event B so a is the cause of B. The claim of this study is that in social sciences as well as in natural sciences what is observed can give us only a starting point for explanation. Main aim of a research should be to search for tendencies (laws like Boyle Mariotte) which are the real mechanisms that generate (generative mechanisms) events or if we have a certain understanding on these mechanisms the research can be to explain how an actual event occurred due to these mechanisms. Thus, establishing a further step in research is necessary to find the cause of both A and B and also what makes B to follow A.

3. A historical analysis of conjunctures (certain episodes in history in which relatively stable social structures that generate social relations are realized) that focuses on the
transformations dynamic relations of the society as a whole. It will be claimed that these
structures that shape the society are the economic, the political and the ideological.

4. Materialism which is briefly defined as anything that has an effect (in this study the
effect on social relations) is material whether they have physical existence or are mental
constructions; observable or unobservable to our senses.

When defined this way, a layered reality (composed of the empirical, the actual and the
structure) and materiality of social relations means that events, ideas, policies, institutions
and social structures exist. All these elements that occupy a place in society/social relations
may have been (socially) constructed through our mental activities like beliefs and ideas.
Yet this does not change the fact that the product of these social constructions (their
existence) is independent of our mind. Moreover, their existence is established in a
particular way (although the empirical may vary but actual is one) due to the power exerted
on them by the “structurata” (a particular formation, a mixture composed of economic,
political and ideological structures and the generative mechanisms they produce in a given
historical conjuncture that is relatively stable and fixed compared to the agents and these
agents’ actions that produce and reproduce the structurata). The below table briefly how
theory can be built on these two pillars. Left side of the table summarizes the main tenets
of Cr and the right side how HM fills into this general framework that CR provides.
So, the aim is here to provide a view that can both reveal the material and ideational factors. Security, as a concept, is defined differently in different conjunctures. Where a conjuncture can be defined as unique pieces of history specific to a particular time and space due to the different forms created by economic, political and ideological structures and their generated mechanisms. These structures are intransitive; real; exist independent of our minds. Through the transitive objects which are the products of human labour and dependent to our thinking processes we acquire the knowledge of them. Turning back to our case, security meant something to us before the World Wars, a different one in Cold War and it can be argued that its meaning to us altered to something else in Post-Cold War period. This means two things, first all these periods are different conjunctures how we understand or give meaning to events differ. This brings us to the question of layered existence of reality. In order to understand or reveal the meaning of security, and the problems attached to it the approach we propose here suggests to look at the generative mechanisms produced by the economic, political and
ideological structures which can also be said to form a whole because of their ability to determine each other through the mechanisms like overdetermination (defined by Althusser borrowed from Freud) which Bhaskar and Andrew Collier calls as “structurata”. This way we can go beyond the empirical even if we do not have the knowledge of the actual. All around the world people experience many problems related to security. A scientist (someone who studies security) can only access to a limited part of them. This point is where historical materialism is involved as it provides a certain knowledge on how the societies in a given conjuncture is established. Marx, and his followers (in this study we preferred Althusser due to his view’s compatibility with CR) made available theoretical and empirical data to understand the transformation of social relations. This delivers a certain outlook.

However, the aim is not to achieve an objective politics because of that outlook. The referent object is not state but society. Thus the aim is to criticize policies that produce inequalities of all sort. This includes the discrimination of social groups such as women, children, social classes and different identities. The main difference of this approach from other critical ones is its ability to provide a coherent way of analysing the “real” mechanisms that created these problems and does not see them as only discourse within discourse (texts in texts in texts). Labelling these mechanisms as real is crucial at this point because the intertextual analysis cannot provide an ethical analysis as they assert that any ethical claim carries a risk of changing the power/knowledge structure to create new hegemonies. So instead they focus on analysis of discursive processes. However, discourses are epiphenomena. They are the surface and only carriers/appearances of power/knowledge relations among many other appearances. Up to some extent critical ISS scholars’ claims are true but this also means that it is not possible to produce mechanisms that can alter the world. Being aware of that risk, and seeing the quest of politics as a never ending process, a CRHM approach that we assert here offers a research
programme within that risk. Shortly, a CRHM approach will also ask the question of why among the questions of how and what.

Turning back to conjuncture and security, the view provided here assumes that Post-Cold War politics is constituted upon a stage of capitalism guided and directed through neoliberal policies. The ideology, economics and politics which are built on these promises and the generative mechanisms create new struggles which are closely related to the inequalities that are the products of this new conjuncture.

Nevertheless, as a last word and self-critique this study is just a sketch of the theoretical work required. More should be achieved theoretically but more importantly empirical analysis which will in turn develop and support the claims asserted here is a necessary condition.