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# The question of value added: A response to Burke

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## *Abstract*

In this response I argue that while Burke is to be commended for rejecting moral relativism in favour of wanting to change the world for the better, his “security cosmopolitanism” is – in its current form - so sweeping that it raises the familiar question: what is the added value? In particular I argue that Burke’s theory suffers from viewing all interactions that impinge on security (here in a sense of someone/something being or feeling secure) as security action. Similarly, it is analytically weak to consider all actors whose actions affect the security of others as security actors. I suggest that Burke’s theory would benefit from operating with a much narrower understanding of security action, whereby the concept is tantamount to the use of exceptional measures. Cosmopolitan thinking, including on the importance of human rights, could then be brought to bear on the questions of when such action is morally required, by whom and to what end.

Keywords: just securitization theory, security, morally required, morally permissible, human rights

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Anthony Burke is to be applauded for probing the subject of ethics and security which has received far too little attention in security studies. The lack of attention to this area of enquiry is a function of the fact that traditionally inclined security scholars believe that security threats and emergencies override ethical concerns. Most non-traditional security scholars<sup>2</sup>, in turn, see only the dangers associated with security action, including the marginalization or “othering” of minorities, while a belief in moral relativism does not allow them to identify one set of values over another, whose preservation – even with recourse to securitization<sup>3</sup> - is deemed justified from an agent-neutral standpoint. In my personal view Burke is to be applauded even more for his courageous move to leave his established research behind and display openness to entirely different and even opposing ideas. And while his turn towards Critical Theory and away from postmodernism may not be explainable by looking at what each body of theory holds, what matters is that it is explainable from a human point of view, thus in Burke we have a scholar who wants to offer more than simply a perpetual critique of the status quo, and instead with “security cosmopolitanism” point the way to how the world could become a better place.

There is plenty I agree with in Burke’s article especially to do with the interconnectedness between humans and the natural environment, and between humans even in far flung places; I also agree with the retention of the state as an important actor in matters of security. After all we still live in what Barry Buzan refers to as international society where states are the dominant actors, and we have not yet moved to world society where none of these three types of units - states, transnational actors and people - is dominant over the other two (Buzan: 2004, xvii-i). I do, however, have a number of problems with Burke’s article. Like earlier respondents to this piece it is not entirely clear to me how we will arrive at

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<sup>2</sup> Note I agree here with Nik Hynek and David Chandler (2013) that the term critical security studies should ideally be reserved for scholars driven by an emancipatory purpose. Though, for a different view, see Vuori, while some scholars actually straddle the line between relativism and emancipation (most notably Aradau, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> I use security action and securitization interchangeably in this paper. As such securitization does not necessarily refer to the Copenhagen school’s idea of that concept.

security cosmopolitanism; the implied focus on the magnanimity of state actors seems implausible, even to the point of wishful thinking (see Cooper and Turner, 2013: 38). Moreover, and this is the point I want to focus on in the remainder of this response I am concerned about the value added of describing the world's problems in terms of security/insecurity as well as those policies designed to deal with them as security action. These concerns are implicit in some of the earlier responses when all three pieces probe the question whether what Burke is talking about is not simply human security (Cooper and Turner 2013; 39; Sjoberg 2013, 32; Kaldor 2013, 42). Thus one of the fundamental problems with the idea of human security has been its slippery conceptualization whereby it seems to encompass everything under one label. 'If human security means almost anything [Roland Paris once powerfully argued] then it effectively means nothing' (Paris 2001, 93). The question of value added was also posed by many scholars at the beginning of the widening/deepening debate. Ole Wæver, for example, argued that if security is about individual security and 'the concept of security becomes all-inclusive and is thereby emptied of content' (1995, 48). Similarly RBJ Walker suggested that 'claims about security increasingly have an air of slovenly imprecision. A word once uttered in hard cadences to convey brutal certainties has become embarrassingly limp and overextended [...]. Notions about national security, most notoriously, have invoked realities and necessities that everyone is supposed to acknowledge, but also vague generalities about everything and nothing [...]. Demands for broader accounts of security risk epistemological overload' (Walker 1997, 63). The issue of permissive interpretations of security running the risk of being unable to explain anything is still plaguing non-traditional security theory today. In recent years it has had a recurrence in response to many scholars pointing out that in practice security does not follow the logic of the exception, whereby (perceived) threats are addressed using extraordinary measures, but quite often result in the use of either routine procedures (Bigo, 2000) or simply

political solutions (Ciută, 2009; Trombetta, 2011). Some scholars hold against this, that we cannot know security action from mere politics unless we identify it as a particular kind of practice, i.e. one tied up with the breaking of established rules and the use of exceptional means (Wæver 2011,473).

In my view security cosmopolitanism suffers the same fate as being about everything and consequently nothing for the following interrelated reasons. For Burke insecurity arises out of modernity and accordingly is omnipresent (2013: 19), indeed he uses the label insecurity to describe a large number of world ills, including: inequality, underdevelopment, poverty, environmental degradation and climate change, whereas security is defined as the absence of ‘serious threats to human survival [and] flourishing’, and the presence of ‘peace at the global level’ (2013:13). Moreover he holds that security actors are those persons ‘whose decisions and operations will affect security of others’ (2013: 26 FN2), yet if security as a valuable state of being is conceived in the way he does, it follows that practically every action is a security action and every actor a security actor. In short, and to paraphrase a well-worn phrase: there is nothing outside security. But what is the added value of conceptualizing the world in this way? In my view it runs the risk of oversimplifying very complex relationships and dynamics. It is not clear, for example, how this argument compares to that of well-established cosmopolitan thinkers who do not evoke the terms security and/or security action and who have produced highly distinct accounts on how to address, among other things, global poverty (Pogge 2008), just emissions (Caney 2005, 2006, 2010), inequality (Brock 2009; Caney 2005) and rights (Beitz 2009) from a broadly cosmopolitan perspective. If everything is a matter of security and for security action, moreover, it will be very difficult to settle which of these ills should be prioritized.<sup>4</sup> But then Burke does not really mean or envisage security action when he uses this term, instead he means any kind of

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Jonathan Floyd for this point

political, economic or developmental policies that would enhance ‘security as a state of being’ (see Herington 2012 for these distinctions). While it is not impossible that security action is non-exceptional in nature and thus simply takes the form of ordinary politics, however, that kind of action would still require that security practitioners conceive of their actions as security actions, as opposed to scholars telling us that this is what they are (see Floyd, 2015a). In other words, it confuses our understanding to refer to all those policies we as scholars perceive as making the world a safer or more secure place as security actions.

It is also the case that moral theories of security action are most helpful only, when one works with a well-defined and fairly limited idea of what security action actually is. While it is not wrong to say that every action affects security as a state of being; what is unique, specific and morally/ethically troubling about security action is that it legitimizes the breaking of rules and the use of exceptional means to deal with a threat (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998; 26). Indeed this is the reason why we as security scholars ought to talk about ethics and security action more systematically than we have hitherto done. Security scholars interested in cosmopolitanism can help with this insofar as they could consider what a cosmopolitan theory of just security action (in its exceptional guise) would look like. Thus, similar to Cécile Fabre’s attempt to develop a cosmopolitan just war theory, it makes sense to look at what principles of just security action ought to look like from a cosmopolitan point of view, including just resort to securitization and justice during securitization. Fabre bases a lot of her theory on the preservation of human rights, and a comparable cosmopolitan theory of just securitization could<sup>5</sup> place great emphasis on the rights of individuals and the duties of states and the international community to meet these rights. For example, rights thinking could inform, what constitutes a just cause for securitization, by arguing that objective

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that cosmopolitanism is limited to rights-based arguments, only that this might be the route Burke would want to take considering that he in a recent co-edited book (with Matt McDonald and Katrina Lee-Koo) on security cosmopolitanism talks of an equal *right to security* by every person, every community, and every state (Burke et al, 2014:131).

existential threats constitute a just cause for securitization and that people are existentially threatened not merely when their life and limbs are in danger, but also when human rights are systematically undermined (cf. Fabre 2012: 283). Importantly, because rights place obligations on people, states and other security actors, they can be used for more than simply prescribing when security action is morally permissible, indeed rights-based thinking could play a crucial role in determining when securitization is morally required. This ability is especially relevant for Critical Theorists like Burke, because they do not observe what the Copenhagen school has called the functional distinction between security scholars and security actors<sup>6</sup>; instead by identifying real threats in need of securitization they themselves utter securitizing speech acts. As such it seems to me that the most appropriate focus of a cosmopolitan just securitization theory is perhaps one that theorizes when security action is morally required as opposed to morally permissible. One important difference between the two is that the latter is largely an exercise in attempting to constrain the occurrence and destructiveness of securitization (see Floyd 2015b), while the former takes an interest in select forms of securitization actually occurring, with the explicit aim to achieve greater overall security as a state of being for all. Thinking and theorizing in the terms here suggested would thus allow cosmopolitan scholars to identify world ills as objective existential threats and it would also allow them to identify who is obliged to act on these ills, all the while retaining the all-important distinction between security action and security as a state of being. Unlike “security cosmopolitanism” such a theory does not run the risk of being impracticable in the same way. This is because regardless of whether those in power chose to act in the way

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<sup>6</sup> Functional distinction refers to the idea that security actors and scholars occupy distinct roles in the securitization process. Specifically for the Copenhagen school ‘the designation of what constitutes a security issue comes from political actors, not analysts, but analysts interpret political actor’s actions and sort out when these actions fulfil the security criteria. It is, further, the analyst who judges whether the actor is effective in mobilizing support around this security reference (Buzan et al, 1998: 33-34)

prospective cosmopolitan just securitization theorists would like them to, the theory<sup>7</sup> serves to nudge those with power into a specific direction.

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<sup>7</sup> Though I use the singular here, it should be clear that in principle competing versions of cosmopolitan just securitization theory are possible in the same way as there are countless interpretations of the just war, some of which are cosmopolitan.



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