Agonistic security: Transcending (de/re)constructive divides in critical security studies

Simone Tulumello

Universidade de Lisboa, Instituto de Ciências Sociais

Av. Prof. A. De Bettencourt, 9, 1600-189, Lisbon, Portugal

Email: simone.tulumello@ics.ulisboa.pt

Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6660-3432

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Biographical note

Simone Tulumello (simone.tulumello@ics.ulisboa.pt) is an associate research professor at the University of Lisbon, Institute of Social Sciences. His appointments include: Fulbright Research Scholar at the University of Memphis (2016); Policy Fellow at the B. Hook Institute for Social Change of the University of Memphis (2016-2017); Visiting Scholar at DIST, Polytechnic of Turin (2019); and Senior Expert Evaluator at the 2019 edition of the Regiostars Awards (DG-REGIO, European Commission; 2019). His research interests encompass: the critique of security; urban fear and planning; housing policy; crisis, austerity, and neoliberal urban policy; Southern European and Southern US cities. He is author of Fear, Space and Urban Planning (2017, Springer).

Abstract

This article is a contribution to transcending the dichotomy between deconstruction and reconstruction in critical security studies. In the first part, I review dominant (Western/liberal) logics of security and the main strands of critical security studies to argue for the need to: overcome the liberal framework of the balance among rights and freedom, with its inherent imbrication with the fantasy of absolute security; and, contra the ultimate conclusions of deconstructive critique, to take the desire for security seriously at the same time. By advocating for embracing the tensions that surface at this intersection, I then move to my reconstructive endeavor. I set out a meta-theory with both analytical and normative nature, agonistic security, inspired by the political theory developed by Mouffe and Laclau. Building on the opposition between antagonism and agonism, I argue that security belongs to the "political", and that it constitutes a field of struggle for politicization. I then argue for three conceptual shifts, which concretely define agonistic security: i) from an absolute/static to a relational/dynamic

understanding of security; ii) from universalism to pluralism at a world scale; and iii) from the dominance of individual rights in Western/liberal thinking toward security as a collective endeavor. In conclusion, I take a step back and discuss the implications of agonistic security for the role of critique in security studies.

Keywords: security logics; emancipation; vulnerability; agonism and antagonism; human rights; right to security.

Introduction: deconstructing, and reconstructing, security

Security, from the Latin *securitas* (from *securus*, *sine-cura*), refers to a condition of being *not in need of care*, or protection (Tulumello and Falanga, 2015; Harrington, 2017): It is about "ensuring that an event does not come to pass" (Anderson, 2010b: 228). During the last few decades, at the same time as security has become a dominant crux of the global public and political debate,[1] we have witnessed the success of a discourse centered on the etymological origin of security as the absence of threat. Extending Pavoni and Tulumello's reflections on urban violence (2020), dominant logics[2] are based on the projection of an ideal of a perfectly secured society, against which any disruption is considered abnormal, and hence to be eradicated. The present logics of security have been colonized by the fantasy[3] of *absolute* security.

In dominant (Western) logics,[4] the mechanism identified to move toward security is a game of trade-offs, the liberal "ethics of balance" (Ignatieff, 2003: 9): Security is understood as an individual right, which is incessantly traded with other rights. The trade-off, however, is a circular, if not paradoxical, argument: Rights are curtailed to ensure security because only through (absolute) security can rights be defended (cf.

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[1] See, for instance, Kaplan (2008/2009) on how security has supplanted freedom as central discursive engine in the US political discourse.

[2] With logic being "a coherent way in which intervention in the here and now on the basis of the future is legitimized, guided and enacted" (Anderson, 2010a: 788).

[3] In Lacanian psychoanalysis, fantasies render reality possible through a double movement: They project a desirable ideal of how society should be, at the same time as they include the explanation for their own (inevitable) failure (cf. Mandelbaum, 2020: 51-60).

[4] Though my ambition is thinking security globally, my experience is indeed placed in space and time, being inherently "Western" despite my attempts at thinking post-colonially. I therefore use the label "West" as a twofold reminder: of the dominance of certain ideas in global security logics; and of my positionality.

Kaplan, 2008/2009: 19). The fantasy of absolute security implies that the balance is always won by the security side.

At this intersection, security becomes "antagonistic" (The Undercommons, 2017), it works through the identification of dangerous others, the threats to the fantasy of security to be anticipated and neutralized. This is a security "created for some people by processes that work against the ability of others to access resources such as wealth and political power. For those on its receiving end, [security] often generates precarity, from barbed wire fences to predatory police patrols" (idem).

The project of critical security studies was born out of the acknowledgement of the antagonistic—and violent—nature of dominant security logics. In time, critical security studies have polarized among two broad fields, characterized by Nunes (2012) as a deconstructive and a reconstructive approach (see also Nyman, 2016). In this article, I take issues with the limits of both fields in engaging with dominant logics of security. On the one hand, I will argue that deconstructive efforts have targeted security as discourse (especially in constructivist and post-structuralist approaches), theory (especially in the critique of liberal understandings of security), and practice (especially in critiques of realism and actually-existing security policies). By doing so, critique has largely overlooked to engage with security *itself* (Burgess, 2019); in particular, it has neglected the "desire" for security (Harrington, 2017: 76). On the other hand, reconstructive efforts, and especially emancipation oriented theories, have not been able to depart from the myth of the balance and its imbrication with the fantasy of absolute security, therefore falling in the traps of depoliticizing, individualizing, and universalizing security.

The goal of this article is contributing to transcending the dichotomy between reconstruction and deconstruction in critical security studies. Can we deconstruct the idea of trade-off in a way that allows us to reconstruct a security that is not antagonistic in nature? To engage with this question, this article is itself made up of a deconstructive and a reconstructive component. I start by reviewing dominant logics of security (section "Security, rights, and futures") and the main strands in critical security studies (section "From rejection to emancipation") to conclude that, if we are to transcend the deconstruction/reconstruction dichotomy, we need to take three steps: taking the desire for security seriously; overcoming the liberal framework of the balance—and the looming presence of the fantasy of absolute security within it; and embracing, rather than attempting at resolving, the tensions that surface at this intersection.

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I therefore move, in section "Toward agonistic security", to the reconstructive component, setting out a meta-theory for security, which has a double analytical and normative nature and is inspired by the political theory developed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, whose arguments for a radical, agonistic democracy have been surprisingly marginal to critical security studies.[5] Building on the opposition between antagonism and agonism (Mouffe, 2000), I argue for an understanding of security through the lenses of the "political", that is, the inevitable dimension of conflict that emerges through and in social relations; and discuss security's relations with politics as a struggle for politicization. I therefore move to arguing for three conceptual shifts that concretely define agonistic security: i) from an absolute/static to a relational/dynamic understanding of security; ii) from universalism to pluralism at a world scale; and iii) from the dominance of individual rights in Western/liberal thinking toward security as a collective endeavor. I consider agonistic security a "meta-theory" because what follows is a set of conceptual pre-conditions for theorizing security in an endeavor that should be as agonistic, relational/dynamic, pluralist, and collective as the security I am glimpsing to. In conclusion, I reflect on agonistic security—and my personal journey in developing it—to set out some considerations on the implications for recent debates about critique and/in security studies.[6] In short, I argue for the need to embrace the inherent (in)security (Burgess, 2019) and failure (Sjoberg, 2019) of critique; and therefore to transcend, rather then seek a middle ground for, the dichotomy between critique and normativity—or, that is, between deconstruction and reconstruction.

Security, rights, and futures: a "balanced utopia"?

Security is about the prevention of events yet-to-happen; hence future is—or rather possible *futures are*—the object of security practice. Preventing means acting here-and-now on a threat, which is then "the future cause of a change in the present" (Massumi,

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[5] Exceptions are the mobilization of Mouffe's agonism in conflict resolution studies (for an overview, see Rumelili and Çelik, 2017) or in alghoritmhic regulation and artificial legal intelligence (Hildebrandt, 2018).
[6] See, in particular, the two issues that have celebrated 50 years of *Security Dialogue* (volume 50, issues 1 and 4 supplement).

2005: 35). Securing is about anticipating (cf. Anderson, 2010a, b; Aradau and van Munster, 2012; Amoore, 2013) "a virtual cause, or quasicause" (Massumi, 2005: 35).[7]

Among the characteristic elements of modern society is, according to Ulrich Beck (1992[1986]), the emergence of "risk" and its management as a central governmental practice.[8] Risk is about the quantification of the future, and particularly of future dangers, in terms of probability (see Aradau and van Munster, 2012: 99-100). The "balance" between prevention/anticipation and other dimensions becomes central to security thinking at this juncture. A self-perceived risk society shifts the focus from the "event"—and reactions to it—to the management of potential threats, which need to be continuously assessed and anticipated. Practices based on risk management are about calculating the trade-off between probability and the impact of a certain event. In this framework, securitization is a cost/benefit curve: The more we invest, the more we increase security, at the same time curtailing other dimensions. At a certain point, increasing securitization becomes more expensive than the benefit (increased security); thence the balance is found. Economic thinking of this kind has permeated more and more fields of governance, from the "securitization of life" (Lobo-Guerrero, 2014) to conceptualizations of crime control (Foucault, 2007[2004]: 4-5; cf. Becker, 1974).

In line with the hegemonic standing of the individual in Western Enlightenment ideas (Panikkar, 1982; Mouffe, 2008; Mignolo, 2009), the analytical conceptualization of the balance is devised as one among competing individual rights. This is particularly evident in the way the United Nations (the quintessentially universalist institution) envisage security, more recently in the paradigm of human security (for an overview, see Smith, 2005: 51-55).

> We recognize that all individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom
> from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and
> fully develop their human potential. To this end, we commit ourselves to discussing and
> defining the notion of human security (UN, 2005: #143).

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[7] The field of pre-crime has made the connection between prevention and anticipation particularly evident, and problematic (see McCulloch and Pickering, 2010; Amoore, 2013).

[8] I agree with critiques of Beck's argument (e.g. Žižek, 1999; Rigakos and Hadden, 2001) that using risk as an explanatory concept implies loss of critical grasp and my reflection is rather focused on security logics in *self-perceived* risk societies.

The human security paradigm constructs a liberal individual as its subject (see Shepherd, 2008; Robinson, 2016) and, in stressing the interrelatedness of the "human elements of security, rights and development" (UNHSU, 2009: 6), it is concerned about "strik[ing] a balance among humanitarian, political, military, human rights and development strategies" (CHS, 2003: 28; see also Panikkar, 1982: 83). Another example of the balancing of rights, and its paradoxes, is the deployment of CCTV systems as preventative means, a field where most regulations are concerned with striking a balance of "proportionality" between the (alleged) increase of personal safety[9] and the loss of privacy.[10]

In short, mainstream logics of security, centered on Western conceptions of individual human rights, seek the correct balance among security and other rights. I stress the centrality of Enlightenment conceptions because the nature of contemporary security logics becomes evident at this juncture. Lacanian planning theory (e.g. Gunder, 2003; Allmendinger and Gunder, 2005) has discussed how modernist planning—which is rooted in Enlightenment ideas, and health and social order concerns—is permeated by a desire for security and certainty. It follows that the fantasy of security is central to modern Western thinking; as is a permanent state of unfullfillment:

> Much of what we perceive of as social reality is actually a culturally constructed set of fantasies that seek to provide a sense of completeness, or ontological wholeness, that we all desire, but is never actually achieved (Gunder, 2003: 293).

Anderson called "radical ambiguity of security" (2010b: 229) the coexistence of the fantasy of security with the impossibility to secure. Because "living bodies can never be completely protected" (Lorey, 2015[2012]: 20), securing is a never completed task. Since there is always another potential threat, another virtual cause of disruption, more security calls for more security, in an unstoppable circuit. In psychosocial terms, these logics are typical of relations of control, based on the assumption that the other is always inclined to transgression and should thus relentlessly prove their innocence (Carli and Paniccia, 2003: 212-225). The idea of "balancing" between an insatiable

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[9] Robust evidence of CCTV's capacity to deter crime is virtually inexistent.
[10] See, for instance, EU regulations: "The right to the protection of personal data is not an absolute right; it must be considered in relation to its function in society and be balanced against other fundamental rights, in accordance with the principle of proportionality" (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2016).

right, security, and other rights seems quite problematic: a "myth" (Neocleous, 2007) crucial to the construction of the liberal order. Security may never be achieved, but it is *always* worth trying harder, as long as endangered individuals exist, as summarized by two powerful statesmen:

> We will chase terrorists *everywhere*. If in an airport, then in the airport. So if we find them in the toilet, excuse me, we'll rub them out in the outhouse. And that's it, *case closed* (Vladimir Putin, 1999).

> I want to put all the nation's resources into protecting our citizens. […] We will *eradicate* terrorism because we are attached to *freedom* (François Hollande, 2015).[11]

For Putin and Hollande, security only makes sense as a good that institutions must pursue in its purest form: absolute security. These formulations may be hyperbolic, but their underlining logic is not structurally different from that at the core of mainstream Western/liberal understandings of security, for instance UN's Human Security—see also Christian Borch's discussion of the totalitarian biopolitical character of crime prevention (2015: 95-119). And though all these understandings of security have different ideas about the correct balance between security and rights, they are all concerned with striking it. Inevitably, freedom and security end up converging—with the latter trumping the former—as evident in this excerpt from an interview with Italian former center-left Minister of Internal Affairs:

> Security *is* freedom: It is evident that there cannot be an idea of security without guaranteeing individual freedom; and at the same time, there is no true freedom if everyday safety is not guaranteed (Marco Minniti, 2017).[12]

These contradictions are taking on an even more pronounced scale amid recent transformations of the way futures are conceptualized in security practice. More and more, so-called "low-probability, high-impact" events, and possibility in spite of

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[11] Emphases added. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/11588182/Fifteen-years-of-Vladimir-Putin-in-quotes.html and www.wsj.com/articles/frances-hollande-extends-state-of-emergency-for-three-months-1447690309 (accessed 28 May 2020).
[12] My translation, emphasis added. Available at www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/sicurezza-libert-lavoro-volontario-i-migranti-accolti-1380570.html (accessed 28 May 2020). See Gargiulo (2018) on Minniti's peculiar philosophy of security and order.

probability, have become central to security logics (Amoore, 2013; Anderson, 2010a, 2010b). Terrorism is possibly the most evident example of this trend: In the West, being victim of a terror attack is an event with extremely low probability;[13] and yet compare this with the amount of political discourse and governmental resources concerned with terrorism—is the late "risk society" concerned with actually measurable risks, after all?[14] While attention to low-probability, high-impact events increases, the focus shifts toward the management of *all* behaviors and bodies that are considered to be out of place (Aradau and van Munster, 2012; Borch, 2015). Critical thinkers have therefore argued that the logics of terrorism preparedness have become the central discursive engine in pushing toward the normalization of states of "emergency" and "exception" (Agamben, 2003, 2015; Adey et al., 2015). Needless to say, there are powerful interests behind the securitization in the name of terrorism and other threats—critical urban studies, for instance, have shown how terrorism is the central discursive engine in the attack late capitalism has launched against democracy (see, e.g., Rossi and Vanolo, 2012[2010]).

And yet, if large majorities—especially in the Western world, but increasingly so in the Global South—support the allocation of so much resources in, and to constrain their own rights in the name of, the fight against phenomena with such low actual "impact", this could also be due to the fact that the fantasy of security seems more real than it has ever been. After all, never in the history of mankind have there been safer societies than contemporary Western ones (Bauman, 2005). Of course, this is not valid for everyone. Security is distributed very unevenly *internally* within societies, among geographic, class, ethnic/racial, gender, and other divides; but most attention is devoted to fighting (allegedly, cf. Melossi, 2003) *external* threats.

This brief overview of dominant (institutional and political) logics of security has shown the centrality of the balance of rights therein, and how this latter inevitably pushes toward the chimera of absolute security, which works as a "fantasy" (cf. Gunder, 2003; Mandelbaum, 2020): an ideal of a future that, despite being visible (especially to

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[13] In the USA, between 2001 and 2014, the victims of terrorism were 3,412, against 440,095 victims of guns (homicides, accidents and suicides) (Bower, 2017). This means that one individual was less likely to be victim of terrorism than of guns by a ratio of 129, or 973 excluding the exceptional 2001.

[14] Granted, I am not arguing that terrorism is not a concerning, even devastating, phenomenon—especially outside the West, it is. Rather, my goal is emphasizing the chasm existing between the way terrorism is represented as a "threat of inevitable apocalypse" (Lisle, 2016: 426) in mainstream security politics and the real threat of actually-existing-terrorism, especially in the West.

powerful individuals and groups), can never be achieved, but still works as that which justifies action, that is, the machine of securitization, in the present.

From rejection to emancipation: the limits of critique

The project of critical security studies was born out of the acknowledgement of the implicit and explicit violence stemming from the hegemony of security-cum-balance. In what follows, I will discuss the limits of both deconstructive and reconstructive approaches in their engagement with the dominant logics of security.

The deconstructive field includes a number of epistemological endeavors—including post-structuralist, constructivist, neo-Marxist, post- and de-colonial, feminist, and queer—to overcome traditional, realist views of security. This field has been quite successful—to the point of constituting a new mainstream in security studies[15]—in exposing the "dark side" of security, its role in impeding the realization of a democratic politics (see Neal, 2019), and more generally its crucial role in the maintenance of the capitalist order (with its violence!). The ultimate version of this critique is offered by Mark Neocleous, who, by exposing the roots of contemporary security, beyond Hobbes, in liberal and Enlightenment thinkers such as Mill, Rousseau, Smith, and Bentham, has challenged the "myth" of the balance at its roots: Security has always been the central goal of liberal thought and liberty is systematically infringed in security's name (2007, 2008). Security, Neocleous concluded, is the political technology of liberalism, it is a project of social order (2001), and must therefore be rejected (2000). The rejection of security remains at the core of other strands of deconstruction. For instance, among the central tenets of the Copenhagen school is the idea that securitization is at odds with politics: indeed, Ole Wæver even characterized security as a Schmittian concept (2011: endnote 2). Granted, I am not suggesting that deconstructive approaches are not interested in the "tangible security"[16] of individuals and communities, quite the opposite; but that they have explicitly or implicitly concluded that only by abandoning the concept of "security"—and, in some cases, replacing it with other concepts like care or humanism—can we strive for it.

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[15] See the critiques by Neocleous (2008: introduction) and Neal (2019: chapter 1).
[16] I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for the suggestion to make this specification and this astute expression.

I want to argue, then, that the critique of securitization, liberal balance, and the persistent chimera of absolute security do not imply that we need to reject security as a concept. In order to make this point, I will start by unpacking a corollary of the deconstructive argument, the idea that security is inherently antagonistic with rights (Goldstein, 2010: 499). This formulation, which is coherent with the deconstruction of the myth of balancing security with freedom, neglects to acknowledge that security *is a right too*, though not only at right.[17] Security—a certain degree of freedom from threats—is necessary to the flourishing of individuals (see Nussbaum, 2011) and to the empowerment of oppressed groups: see, for instance, bell hooks (1991: 47) on the importance of the home as a space of personal safety in the experience of Black and Brown women in the USA.

Once we take security-beyond-securitization seriously, the limits of deconstructive critique become evident. For one, by overly focusing on security as *discourse* and speech act, constructivist and post-structuralist approaches (e.g. Williams, 2003; Huysmans, 2011) have largely neglected to engage with insecurity and violence existing beyond securitization and the machine of state security. On their side, critiques brought to the core of security *theories* have demonstrated that actually-existing-security is inherently defined by the liberal/Western project of social order; but this does not exclude *per se* the possibility of finding different roots for security outside of that very order—security existed, for better or worse, before the liberal order was created, and there well may be theories of security outside of the hegemony of liberal/Western thought. By focusing on discourses, theories, and *practices* (Harrington, 2017), in short, critique has forgotten the ontological dimension, that is, "the *desire* for security— understood as certitude and trust—[which] is seemingly universal and timeless" (idem: 76; emphasis added).

The reconstructive side, which has been less successful in influencing the academic agenda (Nunes, 2012), has been centered on the concept of emancipation, developed originally at the Aberystwyth, or Welsh, school. Security-as-emancipation, in the words of one of its founders, Ken Booth, "seeks the securing of people from those oppressions that stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do, compatible with the freedom of others" (2007: 112). As this definition suggests, emancipation engages with

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[17] Security is a right as long as we remain within a (Western) grammar of (individual) rights—below and in the next section, I will argue for the need to overcome the exclusive reliance on this grammar.

security from an overly normative standpoint: emphasizing the insecurities affecting people (including those produced by the state machine of security) and seeking transformative politics (cf. Nunes, 2012). The blind spot of emancipation is the *theory of* security that supports emancipatory discourse/practice: What security is emancipation arguing for? Booth evaded the question by admitting that "the relationship between emancipation and security is more difficult to explain in theory than in practice" (2005: 182). A similar evasion can be observed in a more recent piece, by João Nunes (2012), which relaunched emancipation theory by advocating for a stronger attunement to issues of politicization and power. In absence of a conceptualization of security, understanding what is the difference between security-as-emancipation and the flourishing of (individual) human rights is quite hard. In short, emancipation remains within a liberal framework (cf. Shepherd, 2008: 69-71) and the game of the balance—and, therefore, the fantasy of absolute security looms over it. This conclusion has three corollaries, which I will further address in the next section: Emancipation theory risks depoliticizing security, is an essentially individualist approach, and falls in the trap of universalism.

Toward agonistic security

The discussion in the previous sections suggests that three steps are necessary in order to re-theorize security in a way capable of transcending the dichotomy between deconstruction and reconstruction: taking the desire for security seriously; overcoming the liberal framework of the balance—and the looming presence of absolute security within it; and embracing, rather than attempt at resolving, the tensions that surface at this intersection.

My proposal for this endeavor, agonistic security, takes steps from Laclau and Mouffe's critique (2001[1985]) of the deliberative conception of democracy, whose logics are quintessential to the idea of the balance (see, e.g., Ignatieff, 2003: 8-9). From this perspective, the main way through which the capitalist system has consolidated its hegemony has been the production of a discursive order that aims to represent the society as a "totality", thence foreclosing its (class, gendered, racialized…) structural cleavages (idem: 95-96). The construction of this totality implies that differences and conflict are either obfuscated or labelled as problematic and deviant. "Advanced" societies' increasing complexity is not so much inherent to their nature, but rather a byproduct of their constitution around a "fundamental asymmetry" (idem: 96), that

between structural differences and inequalities on the one hand, and the difficulties met by a discourse trying to mediate among these differences on the other. The "democratic paradox" (Mouffe, 2000) is the contrast between attempts at constraining democratic conflict within the logic of the capitalist order and the fact that the structural contradictions of the latter cannot be ultimately neutralized. Deliberative democracy, the attempt at transcending power and conflict by means of rational debate, is therefore destined to failure (Mouffe, 1999), pushing conflict to take the form of antagonism, "which takes place between enemies, that is, persons who have no common symbolic space" (Mouffe, 2000: 13).

A truly radical democracy embraces, contra the understanding of the society as a totality, the "openness" of the social order (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001[1985]: 95) and the "political" (Mouffe, 1999, 2000), the inevitable dimension of conflict that emerges through and in social relations—being due to the fact that every decision implies some form of closure. For Mouffe, conflict and antagonism should not be expunged from the political arena, but rather framed through the lenses of agonism.

> "Agonism" […] is a different mode of manifestation of antagonism because it involves a relation not between enemies but between "adversaries", adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as "friendly enemies", that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way (Mouffe, 2000: 13).

We have seen that the balance among security and other rights, underpinned by a logic of deliberative democracy, works precisely as the discursive construction of a totality—the fantasy of absolute security—that produces and excludes deviant others, thereby making security antagonistic. A meta-theory of agonistic security embraces security's participation to the political, that is, its quintessentially conflictual nature and imbrication with (unequal) relations of power.

Mouffe further distinguishes between the political, the inevitable dimension of antagonism (see above), and politics, the "practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order" (2000: 101). So, once security participates of the former, what should be the relationship with the latter? This is an unresolved relationship in existing critique. Deconstructive approaches have basically argued that security and politics are incompatible—more explicitly, in Copenhagen school's

formulation of securitization as the expungement of certain issues from normal politics. On their side, emancipation theories, despite their normative critique of security arrangements (cf. Nunes, 2012: 350-357), have, by relying their understanding of security on the flourishing of human rights, depoliticized the concept of security : "As an instrumental value, security is politically neutral. Security and insecurity are ways of describing *the conditions of existence*" (Booth, 2007: 105; emphasis added). The struggle for extracting security dimensions from politics is also evident in Burke's humanist argument (2011: 109): "We need to normatively […] separate an essential kernel of human life from politics, even as we recognise that, empirically, it is quickly caught up within the political".

We know that, in the real world, security is a field for struggle over politicization—for some, it is the argument of depoliticization par excellence (but see Neal, 2019, for an account of security-as-politics). Honig's proposal for agonistic feminism fits here: "Not everything *is* political on this […] account; it is simply the case that nothing is ontologically protected from politicization, that nothing is necessarily or naturally or ontologically *not* political" (Honig, 1992: 225; emphases in the original). My understanding of security is a translation of this idea: Since there is always a potential threat to be mobilized for securitization, security is not necessarily or naturally or ontologically protected from depoliticization—that is, it does not necessarily or naturally or ontologically belong to politics. Agonistic security, then, is the normative struggle to make security a field for politics and radical democracy: In other words, I conceptualize the belonging of human life within the political—and normatively, but not ontologically, with politics—to be inherent and together productive.

But simply claiming that security should belong to the political/politics is just a first step toward a theorization of security beyond the liberal balance. I see three conceptual shifts to be crucial to the concrete definition of agonistic security politics: i) from an absolute/static to a relational/dynamic understanding of security; ii) from universalism to pluralism at a world scale; and iii) from the dominance of individual rights in Western/liberal thinking toward security as a collective endeavor. Paraphrasing Mouffe's conception of agonistic democracy (1999) as the constitution of forms of power that are compatible with justice and democratic values; agonistic security means constituting forms of security that are compatible with a relational, dynamic, pluralist, and collective politics. These three steps also constitute a concrete guide to the engagement with existing ideas in the field of critical security studies and beyond it: My

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argument is indebted with many such ideas and, at the same time, proceeds by further highlighting their limitations.

Beyond sine cura: relational/dynamic security

The first shift is moving away from the illusion of eradicating dangers and threats, that is, from the fantasy of security as a static condition of being *sine cura*. As we have seen (see also Pavoni and Tulumello, 2020), the persistent fantasy of absolute security justifies securitization—and its relentless production and exclusion of "dangerous" others—by projecting a normative ideal against which any disruption is seen as an anomaly in need to be expunged. Giving up absolute security means understanding security as a historicized, socio-politically, and geographically determined relation (cf. Burke, 2011: 110; Nunes, 2012: 351, 2016; Bigo, 2014: 199). In analytical terms, I conceptualize this as a double reminder to critical scholarship. First, the need to give up absolute measurements of conditions/feelings of (in)security, and rather focus on unravelling system of relations among different security conditions. And, second, the importance of focusing, through a post-colonial lens, on multi-scalar determinants of security policies and arrangements (Tulumello, 2018), in the sense of keeping in mind that the historically high safety of some polities, groups, and places is produced by, and reproduces in turn, the uneven distribution of security at multiple scales, from the global to the local, including within societies that are very safe overall.

In normative terms, this shift implies a step further, that is, moving away from an idea of security as a good to be delivered to everybody and in every place, and toward addressing multi-scalar cleavages of security: Security becomes a dynamic endeavor, which resonates with Connolly's "politics of becoming" (Connolly, 2005), and particularly its capacity to embrace "a paradoxical politics" (idem: 121) where transformation emerges from "old energies, injuries, and differences" (1996: 261). An implication of this shift is the necessity to reconceptualize our engagement with the future. Against the obsession, typical of dominant logics of security, with anticipating (probable and/or possible) threats, the point is understanding how can the inevitability of insecurity—that is, the fact that the future is inherently uncertain—become productive.

In concrete terms, a security politics of becoming takes steps from, and transcends, the feminist politics of care, which have long struggled to work for forms of protection

at the same time as embracing loss and failure. Some of the most productive feminist theorizations move from a tension that mirrors the one between the struggle for security and the impossibility to secure: the conflict between the struggle for liberation from sexual subordination—that is, from sexual and patriarchal violence—and the risk of embracing the state apparatus of crime control, the securitization of gender relations, and the violence that they entail (Duff, 2018; Roque, 2018). The grammar that best fits a dynamic conception of security is the idea that "vulnerability" (Butler, 2003) is the central element for the construction of a political community: This grammar embraces the tensions between the impossibility of securing and the normative aspirations to bodily integrity and freedom from violence; and between the claim for autonomy crucial to feminist struggles and the relationality embedded in the sharing of vulnerability.[18]

Beyond universalism: plural security

Giving up absolute security and embracing vulnerability does not imply abandoning the challenge of scaling up security, ultimately, globally: The second shift toward agonistic security is also an answer to the risk of falling into the trap of realism, cynicism, and disenchantment. When critical security studies have taken issue with this challenge, they have often fallen into the trap of universalism, as especially evident in the case of security as emancipation (Sjoberg, 2019: 82).[19] Another example is Burke's "security cosmopolitanism".

> Security cosmopolitanism […] aim[s] to create space for more radical projects in which people and communities can build peace and security from below. It bears these aims in the service of a distinctive understanding of *global security as a universal good*: one in which the security of all states and all human beings is of equal weight, in which causal chains and processes spread widely across space and through time (2013: 14; emphasis added).

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[18] Feminist and radical politics of climate change are beginning to adopt this grammar: Harrington (2017), argues that, in an age dominated by apocalyptic visions of climatic catastrophe, security *can* be caring and careful if it is able to embrace loss and failure; Bendell (2018) advocates "deep adaptation", by calling the readers to accept the inevitability of a near-term societal collapse due to climate change and explore its implications in terms of embracing sorrow and reframing concepts about adaptation, resilience, and mitigation.

[19] As a paradigmatic example, take Booth's embrace of universality, defined as the "escape" from the "tyranny" of relativism (1999: 32), in a same text where he admitted the risk of falling into the trap of Westernization (idem: 42).

Since the centrality of human rights for cosmopolitanization goes somehow without saying (see, e.g., Beck and Levy, 2013: 13), (security) cosmopolitanism, by being grounded on a concept that has historically proceeded by way of universalizing Western and European knowledge and values (Panikkar, 1982; Mignolo, 2009: 175), cannot itself escape the trap of universalization (see Robinson, 2016).[20] Similar arguments have been made in empirical critiques of the application of security-as-human rights in the Global South (Hönke and Muller, 2012).

So how to embrace the global struggle for security without falling in the trap of universalism? Agonistic security means accepting another tension/conflict, that among different visions of the matter of guaranteeing human dignity (Panikkar, 1982), and hence security; and pluralism is therefore crucial to overcome the trap of the liberal balance. It follows from the previous argument on the democratic paradox that the type of liberalism I am advocating for is not the one argued for by liberalism, which, after all, does not leave any open space to forms of state other than liberal democracy, and excludes the possibility of forms of deliberation not based on "rational" arguments (see Crowder, 1994; Deneen, 2018: ch. 3). Rather, agonistic security is consistent with a radical pluralism, which makes room not only to a diversity of cultures and political views, but also of political regimes (Mouffe, 2008), that is, both forms of democracy and understandings of human rights (see next section)—and thence embraces "the positive cultivation of inevitable dissonances and dislocations", among and within societies (Howarth, 2008: 176; see also Honig 2008 [2006]; Connolly 2005).

Another aspect of pluralism is crucial for the reconceptualization of future in agonistic security. For Honig, "an agonistic cosmopolitics locates itself squarely in the paradox of founding, that irresolvable and productive paradox in which a future is claimed on behalf of peoples and rights that are not yet and may never be" (2008[2006]: 117). Against logics of security concerned with the prevention of future threats impending over present beings, agonistic security is concerned with the impacts of the

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[20] The discussion on cosmopolitanism is too vast to be engaged in detail. Suffice to say that I align with Honig's argument that cosmopolitanism is inherently subsumptive and normative (2008[2006]: 117). Honig's argument is a response to Benhabib's proposal for an "another cosmopolitanism" (2008[2006]). Benhabib's discussion (2008[2006]) of the paradox between the territorial nature of democratic sovereignty and the transcendent value of human rights is important for an internal deconstruction of the problem of the liberal/Western nation state. However, the argument about the transcendent nature of human rights (itself based on European classical philosophy, and especially Kant) cannot be accepted from a post- and decolonial standpoint.

present practice of security over future peoples and emerging instances—something particularly relevant in an age of looming climate catastrophe.

Beyond individual human rights: collective security

We have seen how, in mainstream logics of security, the human is conceptualized as an individual holder of rights, in line with dominant (Western/liberal) logics. In the perspective here adopted, individualization is a crucial component of the Western biopolitical project (Lorey (2015[2012]: 26) because it works as a sublimation of structural (class, gendered, racialized…) cleavages in the search for the totality of the social order (see above). Indeed, the incapacity to depart from, or redefine, a grammar of human rights is the core reason why emancipation-oriented critical security has been criticized as an essentially individualist approach: See Sjoberg's skepticism (2011) of the possibility to integrate feminist concerns into emancipation; but also Booth's claim that individuals should be the "ultimate" referent for thinking security (2007: 225-228).

Granted, "human rights are open to interpretation and redefinition", but only to the extent that the "conception of the human in whom rights are vested" is open too (Manzo, 1999: 156). The last step for agonistic security is, then, to rework the concept of the human crucial toward a pluralistic conception.

> I am not saying that we should eliminate the point of view of individual rights, but we should definitely work—this is again the good old Marxist point of view—for the elaboration of notions of "right" which are both collective and reciprocal, mutual, and not only defined in terms of who is entitled to do or receive what (Étienne Balibar in Garelli et al., 2017: 761).

How can we re-elaborate the notion of security-as-right and right to security? On the one hand, by dialoguing with more-than-human perspectives (cf. Burke, 2011, 2015; Harrington, 2017).[21] On the other, by overcoming the centrality of the individual for security thinking: Security needs to be understood as a collective good—shaped among and crisscrossed by cleavages and divides—and this brings us back to the relational understanding of security sketched above. But, more than that, "human rights" should

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[21] In this regard, I see a clear contradiction in Burke (2011, 2015) between the opening to the idea of humanity as relation and to post-human considerations on the one hand, and the persistent adoption of a grammar of human rights on the other.

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be put in dialogue with homeomorphic equivalents to them, that is, those concepts and values that play the same role as human rights in Western cultures (Panikkar, 1982). A pinch of reflexivity reminds me that I am not in the best position to give concrete examples of how could non-Western values and cultures play out here—see, for instance, Chacko's argument (2016) for a decolonial ethic of self-securing. On the one hand, this means that agonistic security only makes sense if it is capable of becoming a collective and pluralist theoretical endeavor itself—here is the principal reason why agonistic security should remain a meta-theory at this stage.

On the other, I am better positioned to build on some ideas that have reworked the concept of human rights from within Western thought—in particular, in urban security and urban studies, the field that I have more experience of. One such example is the right to the city as defined by Lefebvre (1968) and reworked by Harvey (2003), and finally used by Atkinson and Millington (2019: 160-164) to envision a right to protection.

> The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire. […] The right to remake ourselves by creating a qualitatively different kind of urban sociality is one of the most precious of all human rights (idem: 939).

Not only does the right to the city encompass the fair and evenly distributed access to goods, services, and values; the right to the city is a bottom-up process of self-management and self-determination (*auto-gestion*, for Lefebvre): The right to the city is the right to the collective production of the city itself. The relevance of the right to the city for the project of agonistic security is twofold. On the one hand, it widens rights from goods to be delivered to individuals toward a collective process. On the other hand, it gives insights on possible paths to build those institutions necessary for ensuring protection in times of late capitalism and looming ecological catastrophe. This is exactly where Atkinson and Millington take steps to envision a right to protection, which aims to complement the paradigm of care with an institutional dimension: It stresses the role of the state (and of the machine of security) in producing exclusions; and argues for new institutions to concretely reverse "decades of irresponsible and uncaring neglect" (idem: 164) necessary to the neoliberal modes of accumulation.

In conclusion: critique and/as (in)security

Absurdity is different from critical dispositions that seek to reveal "the truth" behind false consciousness, or advocate emancipation as a universal and incontestable good. Instead, absurdity enables us to fully acknowledge our desire for things like freedom and equality while simultaneously recognizing that the costs of fulfilling such desires are never distributed equally and are seldom borne by those who benefit most (Lisle, 2016: 424).

Critical security studies is a privileged case of how critique occults or even represses its own insecurity (Burgess 2019: 97).

Critique […] is always and already failed (Sjoberg 2019: 77).

This article has taken its steps from a perception that the critique of security is at a crossroad. I have argued that critical security studies have ben successful in uncovering the problems of dominant (Western/liberal) logics of security, but less so in offering alternatives. Deconstructive endeavors have exposed the "myth" of the balance among security and rights, and its imbrication with the fantasy of absolute security; but have neglected to consider the ontological desire for security. Reconstructive endeavors, on their side, have not departed from the myth of the balance, therefore failing in the traps of depoliticization, universalism, and individualism; and remaining haunted by the specter of absolute security. To mend the dichotomy between deconstruction and reconstruction, I argued, we need to embrace, rather than attempt at resolving, the tensions that surface at the intersection between the desire for security and the impossibility for a balanced path toward it—and offered agonistic security as a meta-theory for this endeavor.

In these conclusions, I want to take a step back and reflect on the implications of an approach such agonistic security—and of a personal path toward one such (meta-)theory—for the discussion on security and/in critique, which has been a marking argument in this journal. The discussion in the first issue of the 50th anniversary of Security Dialogue has been precisely on the tension between critique and normativity, between the perception that only by a ruthless critique of everything existing—with Marx's classical formulation (1978[1844])—can we lay bare the horrors of the world; and the will to offer normative takeaways. Critique has often sought a "middle ground",

often found in and through practice—doing ethics in practice and thinking reflexively on one's academic/consultancy work (e.g. Austin et al. 2019; Leese et al. 2019). Debbie Lisle (2016) has compellingly argued that the search for a middle ground inevitably produces a number of "absurdities", a concept that she borrows from Beckett (see the quotation above): the acknowledgement of "our" role in producing the very conditions we criticize and the inevitability that any security solution will produce other forms of violence, which we may not even had imagined at the onset.

Absurdity is an excellent concept to think back to the process that brought me from the first ideas on the critique of absolute security, to the first draft of the article on agonistic security, to this final version—and let me take advantage of this discussion to acknowledge, right in the main text, the patience and support by this journal's editorial board and several reviewers.[22] During much of this process, that is, until I gave it up for the third version of this manuscript, a large part of this article was made up of a long exercise of scenario thinking, which I considered necessary to argue against absolute security: I was at the same time so convinced of the necessity of such a critique and scared of advocating for accepting some degrees of violence that only through the futures could I see the possibility to make one such argument. I was struggling for the freedom of doing a work of "pure critique" (cf. Neocleous, 2008: 6)—and enjoying the power of argumentation that critique allows; at the same time not willing to stop there, fearing that this would result in a piece of work that could be used to justify the inevitability of actually-existing-violence;[23] and breaking out of this conundrum by deferring to the future consequences of present security logics.

To overcome my impasse, I had, to borrow from J Peter Burgess' words (2019), to move from criticizing security to embracing critique as (in)security. Burgess reminded us that the finality of critique is instability, that is, insecurity, and concluded that the process of exposing the violence of security (i.e., critique) cannot ultimately help understanding the "foundational insecurity of our world" (idem: 107). Thence agonistic security is ultimately founded on the idea that certain core tensions cannot be overcome

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[22] Suffice to say that I sketched the first ideas on the critique of absolute security in 2015, that this is the fourth version submitted to Security Dialogue, and that the second one was in fact made up of two articles comprising, respectively, the deconstructive and reconstructive part.

[23] Another piece of reflexivity fits here, since my journey from critique to theorization was also inspired by a real journey, allowed by a visiting fellowship, from Southern Europe, where I have always lived, one of the places on earth where criminal violence is less concerning, to Memphis, in the South of USA, where the struggle against criminal violence is crucial to the self-empowerment of Black communities.

and need to be embraced—the argument underlying my review of critical security studies, it should be obvious at this point, is precisely that this embrace has been largely missing so far.

This journey can be partially described as an attempt at learning, with Donna Haraway's words, to "stay with the trouble" (2016); but with a crucial difference, that is, the refusal to "severing the relation" to the "times called the future" (idem: 1). A political tension to changing the future is precisely the root of the "absurdities" of this article—above all, the fact that I advocate for a theory that, in fact, is still not there, and rather needs to be built and rebuilt. And this is why, in conclusion, I have to concur with Laura Sjoberg's argument (2019) on the inevitable failure of any research of a middle ground between a pure critique and one that works: My positionality is that we both need to accept the ultimate consequences of the critique of security—and, in abolitionist spirit, affirm that some concepts and institutions must go away—and make our critique work on the grounds of those consequences. In other words, we shall not seek a middle ground, rather change perspective, that is, *transcend* the dichotomy, a journey that is always in the making.

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