



The politics of protection: Sites of insecurity and political agency

Jeff Huysmans, Andrew Dobson and Raia Prokhovnik (eds.)
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For theorists, the concepts of security and protection serve as important lenses through which to examine contemporary political transformations. Security and protection, after all, are traditionally thought to be the primary mandate of the modern state and the legitimating bases of the modern inter-state system. Today, however, powerful states increasingly attempt to fulfill this mandate by intervening beyond their own borders, while international organizations and private corporations increasingly provide security and protection within state boundaries. In this context, critical attention to concrete practices of security and protection can provide focus to frequently abstract questions regarding state sovereignty, neoliberal globalization and international political agency.

Such focus is the unifying virtue of the essays collected in *The Politics of Protection*. The anthology aims to reorient debates in security studies by emphasizing the ability of political actors to redefine in/security and identify who should be protected by whom. This emphasis on the contestability of security and protection invites profound questions regarding the state's sovereign prerogative to discriminate between protected and unprotected subjects, as well as protectable and unprotectable forms of life. The anthology's contributors pose such questions by analyzing recent political developments that challenge state-centric understandings of security and protection. Three general themes emerge out of their diverse analyses.

The first is the difference between security and protection. Huysmans, Bigo and R.B.J. Walker note that discourses of security generally rely on dichotomies between external defense and internal policing, each of which guards against exceptional threats to survival or freedom. Such discourses frequently focus on states, insofar as states are powerful enough to be both the origins of, and defenders against, exceptional threats (pp. 13–16, 93–94, 194–197).

As alternatives to statist discourses of *security*, the authors advocate discourses of *protection* that acknowledge the interconnection of defense and policing, and analyze everyday forms of violence and insecurity alongside



exceptional threats (pp. 14, 94, 198). These discourses recognize a diversity of non-state protective agents, as well as an array of protectable subjects, including non-citizens, non-human animals and natural environments. Moreover, such discourses can admit that important decisions related to protection – including the identification of threats and threatened subjects – are always open to contestation. Thus, discourses of protection emphasize the *politics* of protection in ways that traditional security discourses do not (pp. 11–16, 84–89, 195–198).

A second theme concerns the political strategies available to subjects whose agency is adversely affected by protective practices. In separate essays, Gheciu and Jabri argue that protected groups are often objectified as passive victims that lack, as Jabri puts it, ‘not just a capacity for *self*-protection, but the ability to reflect upon the credibility of threat and danger’ (p. 138). This objectification, however, can be contested by even the most marginalized subjects, as Nyers and Puggioni show by analyzing the political agency of non-status refugees and undocumented migrants. Nyers concludes that by effectively challenging ‘the prerogative of sovereignty to determine insiders and outsiders,’ these outsiders ‘question the monopoly the state has over matters of protection’ and ‘the monopoly citizenship has over matters of political identity and agency’ (p. 49). Similar challenges may also originate within the state apparatus itself, which, as Jabri reminds us, is never a monolithic unity (pp. 143–150).

The third theme concerns the future of state sovereignty. While sovereignty has traditionally been associated with the state’s protective authority and its monopoly on legitimate violence, private corporations have taken over some elements of the state’s protective function. Arguing that private military companies exert considerable influence over the protective practices of state governments, Leander concludes that a ‘considerable shift of authority from public to private’ is reorienting the politics of protection (p. 19). This shift, however, should not be understood as a simple erosion of state sovereignty. Rather, as Abrahamsen and Williams argue, the privatization of protection entails ‘the emergence of new structures of security in which the authority of the state and forces in civil society is rearticulated through new technologies of governance, coercion, and control’ (p. 34). Such transformations suggest new configurations of authority, protection and political community, and hence the transformation, rather than eclipse, of sovereignty.

This possibility is explored by Neil Walker, who argues that avenues of international conflict resolution are obstructed by the state-centered ‘sovereignty frame’ of international law (p. 154). According to Walker, effective conflict resolution requires a new ‘understanding of security which is capable of moving beyond a state-centered and state-aggregative register to provide a focus for common values and common identity formation beyond the state’ (p. 169). A conception of transnational security could, he argues, provide a



legitimizing basis for the collective action necessary to resolve international conflicts. This solution would preserve sovereignty ‘as a portable metaphor for authoritative collective decision and action at whatever and however many levels of political authority,’ while freeing protective agency from its traditional, statist frame (p. 172).

More or less directly, all of the essays engage these three themes, which are helpfully contextualized by Huysmans’s overview of security studies in the initial chapter. The quality of the essays, however, varies. While most of them suggest intriguing avenues of inquiry, a few attempt more than can be satisfactorily accomplished in an essay-length project. Conversely, some of the essays could be productively pushed further, and a few authors fail to seriously consider any competing interpretations of their analyses. That said, the analyses by Leander, Abrahamsen and Williams and Gheciu are compellingly interpreted and very revealing, and Neil Walker’s deconstruction of sovereignty will be helpful to theorists working on related topics. Nyers’s essay on non-status refugees is especially noteworthy for its effective and productive combination of sociological analysis, political theory and responsible normative criticism.

Overall, the editors of the book are to be credited for introducing an agency-focused approach to security studies, and for bringing together essays that present this approach as a viable and rich avenue of analysis. *The Politics of Protection* will be of interest to theorists working on issues of security, sovereignty or transnational agency. At its best, it connects empirical analysis to theoretical perspectives in a way that enriches both, and, whatever its limitations, that is an admirable contribution to political theory.

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