
The question of ontology, seen as the poor relation of philosophy and subordinate to epistemology and ethics until at least the mid twentieth century, has made a significant comeback in the arts and humanities during the last decade. Human geography has arguably been at the vanguard of this re-orientation of the question of being, typified through the growth of debate within and around non-/more-than-representational theories. International relations theory has traditionally viewed ontology as a secondary issue, even within its poststructuralist branches, with the notable exceptions of critical realist work and IR’s engagement with ontologies of the political (e.g. Dillon 1996). Recently though, the question of ontology is proving vital to cross-disciplinary engagements between the concerns of geographers and IR theorists. Nowhere is this clearer than in the literatures on risk, terrorism, and emergence, exploring where the spatial and institutional apparatuses of security are produced. Security, in this literature, is as much a question of performance, affectivity, and ontology as a rational delineation and analysis of objective threat(s). Human geography’s concern with the former and critical IR’s rejection of the latter has made the re-conceptualising of ideas around security a truly inter-disciplinary exercise, and one in which space takes a leading role.

Liberal Terror, then, should be seen as an attempt to read the post 9/11 security paradigm as a fundamentally one of ontology and space, in which re-categorisations of violent or ‘unsafe’ being occur at a global scale. Where geographers such as Peter Adey and Ben Anderson’s (2012a; 2012b) work investigates the micro-geographies of affect inherent to ‘emergence’ and ‘resilience’, Brad Evans’ background in IR theory enables Liberal Terror to give a much broader theoretical engagement with the ‘planetary’ nature of liberal security designs. This project is made clear in the early chapters, where Evans presents a reading of ‘terror’ as “radical uncertainty”:

1
“Terror poses a danger. Danger is the hidden potential or the unknowable in that which is knowable. It cannot be known, otherwise it would be a calculable problem that could be overcome - hence no danger. To say ‘we have a problem’ is not the same as saying ‘we are in danger’. For while danger is a problem, it does not follow that a problem with a solution is necessarily dangerous” (p. 27-28).

This speaks to the Copenhagen school of securitization studies of the late 1990s which, although little cited outside of IR departments, has done much to shape understandings of how the notions and discourses of security have become employed to deal with range of political issues from migration to food, water and the environment. Under its rubric, securitizing speech acts were not guaranteed to be successful and involved various struggles for discursive hegemony within the political sphere (Buzan et al. 1998). Evans posits that the security terrain of today has taken a far more insidious turn. Security itself has become ‘securitized’, assuming the status of onto-theology rather than a deeply political, contingent signifier.

Last year, during a publishing round-table session at a post-graduate workshop, I recall the editor of a major political geography journal bemoaning the stream of submissions he received which spoke, in almost entirely uncritical terms, of the various ‘states of exception’, read through Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben. Evans addresses similar concerns in relation to research in critical IR into the war on terror. Schmitt’s writings on sovereign contingency have, he argues, been adopted uncritically as “a heuristic device to affirm existing normative frameworks and pre-existing visions of the world” (p. 6). Furthermore, Evans argues, the consistent retreat to Schmitt by critical scholars works to reinforce, rather than critique, the claims to universal subjectivity made by western states during the prosecution of the war on terror.

Fleshing out the explicitly spatial concerns of the liberal security paradigm, Evans highlights the “catastrophic topographies of twenty-first century liberal rule”, most recently published through the World Economic Forum which lists up to 50 such threats “with geopolitics merely a nodal element…and accompanied by sophisticated digitalized mappings which highlight the interconnectedness of this global security terrain”(p. 36). Thus, he argues, one traditional grounding of security studies where “[w]ar is the continuation of politics by other
means” becomes inverted, and “politics becomes the continuance of war by other means” (p. 132).

The atmosphere created by *Liberal Terror* is oppressive to say the least and the dizzying array of theoretical junctures crossed often disorientating. In this respect, it is clearly indebted to the post-modernist sociology of Zygmunt Bauman—who is heavily cited—particularly in the illustration of the liberal security dispositif as one concerned with nothing less than “planetary life” as totality, a concern from which no life is permitted to absent itself. This problematic is forever bound up with the political theology of liberalism which, in conjunction with a relentless biopolitical calculus of risk, creates and administers divinely eliminable categories of surplus or “uninsurable” life which must be isolated, treated, and, if proved to be unassimilable, destroyed. As Evans puts it:

“Once the capacity for evil is placed within the operative daily fabric of all non-Western populations, the productive economy of life begins to assume divine earthly ascriptions in that the war to relieve insurgent populations from the scourge of underdevelopment also retains the task of removing evil from the world” (p. 132).

This neo-Kantian “problem of the environment” at the global scale is, for Evans, where security takes on the role of a divine, ontological structuring principle. This is of particular interest to critical geography because, as Evans states, it “entails thinking about life in a new spatial context so that space is effectively activated with life-like qualities...Space as such loses its natural objectivity, framing instead the entirely possible” (p. 63).

In a final chapter, which begins with an imaginative and unsettling description of the attacks on 9/11, Evans takes this further, returning to the ontological status of danger in the liberal imaginary at work in a further distinction between prevention and pre-emption. These concepts, he argues, are essential to the bio-political risk modelling which defines the imaginaries of *Liberal Terror*. For Evans, their distinction is grounded in pre-emption’s imperative to “create its own ontology”; beyond the “event horizon” of the attack-yet-to-come, all things are possible. Where prevention draws from a temporal horizon which faces backwards, drawing evidence from previous events and relations of cause and effect in order to
calculate more-or-less predictable models of what is to come, “pre-emption operates in the present on a future threat” (p.178). And, more chillingly,

“[s]ince pre-emptive power takes that which is yet to emerge to be its object, it is fully complicit in manufacturing its own destiny. The only way to deal with a virtual threat is to actually provoke it into action…The Allied powers reasoned that there was a [Al-Qaeda] presence in Iraq, even though there was no verifiable evidence. The intervention took place; Al-Qaeda appeared. This only went to prove that ‘the potential’ was there from the beginning” (p. 179).

Through this kind of engagement with the politics of the event, Liberal Terror adds an ontological dimension to what has been termed the ‘geography of security/security of geography’ (Philo 2012). Evans’ argument is compelling, that the liberal security paradox of producing insecurity: “so that certain productive ways of living become normalized to the point that they are not even questioned is a sure way of embedding secure practices”, and makes an important macro-theoretical contribution to the micro-level ethnographies of security conducted in geography by Anderson and Adey. In many ways Liberal Terror attempts to do too much, employing a frequently disorientating rhetorical style to hurtle from one theoretical juncture to the next. Ultimately, though, it is none the worse for this, and its chapters should also provide stimulating and provocative readings for graduate level courses in critical geography, particularly those concerned with biopolitics, risk, and terrorism.

References


Patrick Weir

Department of Geography

University of Exeter

pw277@exeter.ac.uk

May 2013