
Reviewed by Simon Mackenzie

This is a text which wears its colours on its sleeve. In fact, it has put them up front, in the “declaration” covering the first few pages – a manifesto against “security” which is said to have been agreed by the contributors to the volume, who were among the attendees at a two day meeting in 2010 at Carleton University, Ottawa. The perspective is Marxist, and the volume throws up some useful implications of that framework for thinking about the concept of security in all its complexions as a form of governance. It is quite repetitive, however, and rather than using the force of multiple complementary papers to build a sustained critique of security, after the first few chapters the reader hits something of a plateau and new insights are less apparent and powerful.

The editors’ perspective is rather intellectually isolated in many senses. It doesn’t even have friends in “the most critical of critical studies”, since even these have “tended to succumb to the idea that security is a fundamental human need…[and] the state must therefore tend to this need”, all of which is only “serving to reinforce the security policies of the managerial state” (p. 8). Most readers thus duly put in their place, the attack continues: “if it is the case that as the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas – and if any notion can now lay claim to be the ruling idea it is surely ‘security’ – then the implications are clear…” (p. 8).

But is security “the ruling idea”? Personally, I doubt it. Several others seem to doubt it too – sociologists of risk, consumption, community, wealth, empire, individualism, and more, would appear to disagree. That is not to say security is not an important idea in contemporary society – clearly it is – but this is one of many examples where the bold and in-your-face phrasing of the book seems to detract from the force of its quite sensible and acutely-observed central arguments by going just a little too far in the direction of polemic rather than balanced and plausible critique. Elsewhere in the declaration, security is labelled “the supreme concept of bourgeois society”. Really? The source reference here is Marx, who did indeed label security the “supreme social concept of civil society”, but in a context in which “the whole society exists only to guarantee to each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property” (Marx 1844: 17). In that sense, the links between consumption, individualism, accumulation, and so on, become much clearer, and security as part of that complex of governmentalities may well be a significant part of the supreme ruling ideas of our era. But despite the Marxist orientation of the book, the editors’ presentation of security as the target concept tends to isolate it somewhat from this neoliberal economic context, to the
extent that the reader is left with a strong feeling that if what is being secured is generally/always in the interests of bourgeois capital, surely the ideology supporting that capital accumulation would be “the” ruling idea rather than the associated security ideology which runs alongside it and protects it.

The proposition that seems to best tie the early contributions in the book together is that security is “pacification” – in the words of the editors’ declaration, “universal pacification carried out in the name of capital” (p. 17); in the definition of Neocleous, “it is through this politics of security that the constant revolutionizing of production and uninterrupted disturbance of capitalist order is fabricated, structured and administered. This, I suggest, is the process of pacification” (p. 24). It is a loaded term which, as Rigakos the other editor says in his chapter, deliberately disturbs the presumption of security as a good: “while we may want to be secure, do we really want to be pacified?” (p. 62). Pacification as a “police project” (i.e. a governmentality) also provides the licence to reconceptualize domestic policing as internal low level warfare, and to link this to other wars in which the goal of the pacification of resistant populations has been pursued – often explicitly as a desired outcome in military manuals and guidelines. And this has all been in the service of capital: “the entire premise of security is based first and foremost on the security, extension and imposition of property relations” (p. 64).

The ties here to what we might see as more conventional criminological concerns are unsettling, or at least purposefully unsettled. Core normative ideas like “order” and “peace” are no longer able to be thought of even as generally good things, given that they are now to be interpreted through a framework of understanding that not only overlays them with the net of social control, but with the even more troubling-sounding pacification agenda.

Capitalism is conceived of as insecure by nature and therefore the concept of security that the current wave of state repression is structured and legitimated demonstrating first and foremost the dominant concern of securing the insecurity that results from capitalist accumulation and political power” (p. 194). Or, to put it more bluntly, “Civilisation is code for enforcing capitalist relations” (p. 17).

The “democratic anchoring” sometimes thought to be needed in the case of private security, via regulation and the retention of a core of activities within the public police, is thought to be pointless. “This is because both public and private policing have common historical origins, and, more deeply, are linked to the same political economy: both sets of modern security agencies work in common towards the pacification of populations in service of the growth of markets” (p. 86).

What is the answer? “It lies in finding and supporting the spread of a social solidarity that is different in substance from contemporary capitalist security” (p. 86). This sounds appropriately grand in its ambitions, and vague in its protocols, to
fit the usual bill of a transformative programme under which we are given no solid
guidelines on how to progress, let alone how to achieve. This, in fact, is an issue that
affects all of the contributions in some measure, and is particularly apparent in the
high rhetoric of the initial “declaration”. Such is the strong orientation of this book
towards radical leftist lambasting of contemporary security politics that it is highly
unlikely to find a readership among the denizens of the corridors of world power.
It is impossible to imagine a policy aide putting this in the briefcase of the Home
Secretary with a note saying “read this”. So the audience for this work is likely
to be more or less sympathetic academic types whose grasp on the brakes of the
neoliberal juggernaut has not so far proven to be particularly fast. The philosophers
in this volume have interpreted the world but seem unlikely to change it.

Some of the chapters are less vested in this strong Marxist orientation and
pacification discourse. Those by Heroux and Seri bring to mind, in varying degrees,
the old adage of the poor as “police property” and simply, but effectively, add
to that line of enquiry without apparently seeking the wholesale re-thinking or
rejection of the concept of security that the editors espouse and that is evident
in some of the other chapters. In this respect these contributions are valuable but
questionable inclusions in respect of their fit with the stated aim of the book to
challenge conventional thinking about security and policing, and the chapter by
Kobzar on payday lending is particularly hard to reconcile with the rest of the book.

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