**Complementary, critical and collaborative**

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The impetus behind critical approaches to security has been at once methodological and political. By demanding that critical political questions be posed of security and its actors, these approaches drawn from a range of disciplines have called for attention to the sociological, discursive and ethical qualities of security. This has fostered methodological openness to the constitutive effects of interactions, acts, texts, contexts and objects, and broadened the lens through which security discourses and practices are observed. The broad aim of critical approaches to security has therefore been to provide *a fuller picture* of what ‘security’ is and how it is enacted, through a multiplicity of analytic methods, in order to critique ongoing policy and sedimented assumptions about the politics of security. Although critical approaches to security share a common worldview, the nature of the field itself and its shifting objects of study make aspirations to commensurability and cumulative knowledge tenuous. As recent work devoted to vulgarizing critical methods and methodologies has shown (see Salter and Mutlu 2012; Shepherd 2013; Aradau, Huysmans and Neal 2014), scholars in this field are trained in and draw from a wide range of methods and theories from diverse disciplines. The ‘field’ of critical approaches to security is in no way coherent or singular. Similarly, the object of study—security—is also impossible to pin down. Is it a speech act? A professional practice? A mode of liberal governance? Wherever we side, we can agree that it is a contested concept. Given the nature of the field and the object of study, we should seek complementarity, criticality and collaboration.

Commensurability has positive connotations: it suggests communication, understanding, translation, and intelligibility. However, trying to make theories and methodologies founded on radically different bases commensurable can be a ham-fisted exercise. Rather than try to synthesize or flatten different theoretical and methodological approaches, we should work with points of overlap between approaches in a *complementary* way. Adopting a problem-driven, rather than method-driven research approach (as suggested by Sil and Katzenstein 2010) can help to pursue the ‘fuller picture’ of security mentioned earlier. Problem-driven research is not necessarily the problem-*solving* approach Robert Cox (1989) warned about, but it does demand that theoretical and methodological resources be selected as a function of a problem in question. This suggests, or even demands, an eclecticism fostered by the identification of compatible theoretical emphases and methodological commitments. Such theoretical conundrums as the incommensurability of two otherwise useful approaches should not push us to retreat to the safety of orthodox applications of theory. There are complementary ways to exploit the synergies between social theories to great effect. For instance, Bigo (2011) uses Foucault’s work on governmentality to supplement a Bourdieu-inspired emphasis on security professionals to describe the mode of government of borders without mixing incompatible ontological assumptions. In my own research on border security in Mauritania (Frowd 2014 forthcoming), identifying the transmission of border security knowledge meant interviewing security actors and identifying their social structure, but also identifying the material objects that incarnated approaches to border control. I described the social space as a ‘field’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) but drew on the concept of ‘actant’ from actor-network theory (Latour 2005) to account for the socio-technical nature of knowledge transmission. The research problem—accounting for the most important factors that make the border what it is—demanded an eclectic solution that used theoretical resources in a *complementary* rather than commensurate way, to avoid fusing incompatible ontological assumptions that lie deep in each approach. The key to complementarity is to use theory carefully as a tool with which to better expose the research problem, rather than make the empirical material prove an impossible theoretical *mélange*.

Cumulative knowledge is possible in critical approaches to security, within limits. We are making claims to cumulative knowledge when we position our work as providing something new or novel or as building on existing work in a particular area. Cumulative knowledge, in the rigorous sense, requires a coherent field with a clear object of study, but critical approaches to security do not fit the bill. This is actually an asset to critical approaches once we adopt a more open view of cumulative knowledge that does not seek to provide more or closer access to some ‘essence’ of security. Providing a fuller picture does not mean lapsing into a positivist view of quantifiable advance, which tends to animate research assessment exercises and journal impact factors. Rather, to speak of critical research on security being cumulative should draw our attention to the importance of originality and the cumulative efforts involved in collaboration.

A non-positivist view of cumulative knowledge is possible when originality drives scholarship, often in the service of *critique*. For instance, critical work on borders can be considered cumulative as there exists some degree of “basic knowledge” (Calhoun 2007) in the form of a consensus about the inability of ‘the border’ and ‘the territorial line’ to fully match (see Walters 2002 and Rumford 2006, among others). Work that builds on such basic knowledge is cumulative by providing original and plausible research backed up by new empirical material, but is not cumulative in a positivist way as we never get closer to the ‘essence’ of borders. Building on such base knowledge helps—paraphrasing Foucault—to ‘make the visible visible’ not in the service of accumulation of knowledge but of critiquing current social practice. Knowledge generated by critical approaches to security is often intended precisely to intervene in, or shape the direction of, contemporary politics. Take, for instance, work on ‘no border’ movements (Walters 2006) and non-status people (Nyers 2009) which, although it draws on the base knowledge of critical border studies, explicitly contributes to reshaping public debate about the exclusionary effects of borders. This work is cumulative in its academic field, but its strength draws from its social immediacy.

One of the most effective and occasionally radical forms of non-positivist cumulative knowledge has been group *collaboration*, a form of work that can serve to overcome some of the individualizing tendencies of contemporary academic work. The 25-member CASE[[1]](#footnote-1) Collective, which published its ‘manifesto’ on critical approaches to security in 2006, provides the most important examples of how collaboration avoids traditional cumulative work and sidesteps the question of commensurability. The collective’s members describe themselves as “a network of scholars who do not agree on everything yet share a common perspective” (CASE Collective 2006, 444). This common perspective describes not only a critical worldview but also a commitment to collective intellectual work. With the writing process roughly equally divided and multiple drafts of the same document floating between the contributors, each person provided vastly different sections of varying lengths. Although co-publishing is nothing particularly radical, this form of ‘collective’ author successfully undermined one of the bastions of positivist cumulative knowledge—the citation system—by adding one peer-reviewed publication onto 25 different CVs. In similar vein, ‘laboratory’ models of collective thinking such as the International Collaboratory on Research Methods in Critical Security Studies (ICCM) based at the Open University and organized around five methods ‘clusters’, serves to provide tools and ‘basic knowledge’ of methods with which to provide a *fuller picture* around security issues by avoiding synthesis between methods. It is precisely from avoiding commensurability and cumulative knowledge that critical approaches to security draw strength.

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1. “Critical Approaches to Security in Europe” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)