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Human Security II: Waiting for the Tail To Wag the Dog – A Rejoinder to Ambrosetti, Owen and Wibben

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IN MY ORIGINAL REVIEW ARTICLE 'Human Security: The Dog That Didn't Bark' (Chandler, 2008), I sought to highlight the dangers of idealism inherent in advocacy (by academics and policymakers) of human security frameworks, which were held to empower the vulnerable and marginalized. I posed the question of the need to consider why the frameworks of human security had been so rapidly mainstreamed into the policy and programmes of leading Western states and international organizations, and, in conclusion, suggested that this shift reflected the needs of policy elites and reinforced existing hierarchies of power.

The three respondents, agreeing to various extents with the points made, all nevertheless suggest that human security frameworks could play a more useful radical and critical role than I allow. None of the respondents address the question that the original review article posed: What is it about human security frameworks that explains why they shifted from marginal to mainstream during the 1990s? Instead, all three wished to investigate the potential of human security frameworks to critique and challenge power relations. In this rejoinder, I wish to explain why this is the wrong starting point for a critical appraisal of human security theorizing. In posing the questions of what human security can achieve, these critical advocates of human security argue that the tail of human security can wag the dog of international policy practice. They fall into the idealist trap of seeing allegedly critical speech acts and radical academic theories as having agency and doing the work of transforming the world.

Of all the respondents, Annick Wibben (2008) appears most in agreement with my original claims that human security frameworks have reinforced rather than challenged power relations. However, she argues that the reason for these failings is that many of the radical academic advocates, such as

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Anuradha Chenoy, fail to properly reflect on the ontological and epistemological assumptions at stake in security debates. Wibben argues that there is a tendency for radical theorists merely to seek to expand the concerns, adding more security threats and security referents, while accepting that security should be the aim and that these frameworks are empirically grounded and objectively manageable. Critical theorists need to 'open' the field by challenging these grounding assumptions. Interestingly, she does not explain how this challenge to dominant ontological and epistemological assumptions could be made while keeping the framework of 'human security' (for a critique of this possibility, see, for example, Reid, 2006; Jabri, 2007). On a secondary point, this task of 'opening' could be valuable, but would necessarily be separate from the discrete project of understanding the specificity of 'human security' framings of security.

David Ambrosetti (2008) argues, sympathetically, that while it is true that human security frameworks appear to serve the interests of power, we should not rush too quickly to deprecate the theoretical possibilities of human security. In his reading, human security discourse appears to take on an agency or life of its own, so that we need to empirically examine how human security potentially changes the content and practice of power relations. Human security is understood as a new 'resource' that, once it has appeared, has allegedly transformed the 'rules of the game', policy practices and actors' identities. He argues that only empirical measurement will demonstrate whether human security has served the needs of emancipation or the interests of power. This project appears to reify human security, objectifying ideational claims and conflating the measurement of, or an index of, policy statements or policy outcomes with the transformative power of a set of ideas.

Wibben wants to turn 'human security' into a critical framework capable of problematizing the ontological and epistemological groundings of security discourses, while Ambrosetti wants to objectively measure the impact of human security through its effects on policy outcomes. Both respondents may agree on the centrality of human security but clearly have entirely different projects. In this respect, Taylor Owen's (2008) response makes the valid point that there is not one singular human security project or discourse. He argues that my critique misses the mark because I fail to distinguish the difference between the project of those using human security to develop critical theoretical frameworks and that of those using human security as part of a developing policy discourse.

Owen starts from the basis that human security is a valuable concept which we need to defend. From this basis, he argues that if it is the case that powerful elites have co-opted the critical theory discourse, this could be valid grounds for rejecting the concept of human security altogether. Therefore, to avoid reaching the possible conclusion, that critical discourse serves the policy needs

of the powerful, it would be better to view the critical theory discourse as a separate domain, one that is 'simply incompatible' with the policy discourse. So, the exaggeration of threats and the focus on the post-colonial world is only bad when seen in terms of the 'securitization' of the policy discourse; in the critical theory discourse, HIV/AIDS and world poverty are reminders of and challenges to the inequities of power, capital and colonialism. For Owen, it appears that as long as human security approaches are bifurcated in this way, critical theory approaches can not only maintain the purity of their critique of the world as it exists, but can even do this while constructively engaging in holding policymakers to account for their failings.

I think that it is somewhat bizarre that the respondents should be more concerned with defending the potential of human security as a critical theoretical framework than with critiquing human security as a framework for policy practices. It is almost as though they are using abstract theorizing as an excuse for evading engagement with the changing nature of international policy practices and discourses. What I find most worrying is the attempt to portray the human security policy discourse as somehow marginal to the articulation of power and the frameworks of international regulation and intervention today.

This is done through a narrow empirical approach that fetishizes the words 'human security' in policy documents. First, it is asserted that the fact that less emphasis is placed on the phrase 'human security' means that the approach has become 'marginalized' in the UN, dropped from the report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change and the 2005 World Summit Outcome document (see Owen, 2008: 450), or displaced as a guide for Canadian foreign policy (Wibben, 2008: 455). Second, it is asserted that the academic and policy discourses are increasingly separate. We saw this in Owen's response, but Wibben also argues that 'human security' is increasingly used in policy frameworks to describe more narrow security approaches. For evidence to support this claim, see, for example, the report of the Madrid Study Group on Human Security (2007).

While it is certainly the case that the policy debate on human security has shifted and narrowed, I would argue that this is because the holistic frameworks of human security approaches have been mainstreamed. Any reader who thinks that human security has been 'marginalized' by the UN should take a look at the 72-page report published in September 2007 by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Human Security-Related Initiatives and Activities by UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes* (OCHA, 2007). Instead of marginalizing the policy implications of human security discourses on the grounds that the phrase 'human security' is not used enough or on the grounds that, when it is used, the narrow interests of power rather than the needs of emancipation tend to be projected, I would argue that human security is the dominant framework of international regulation today.

This assertion is unlikely to convince die-hard human security advocates. However, it would appear incontestable that the dominant discourses of international security have been transformed over the last fifteen years. This discursive shift is often posed as one from a broadly state-centred to a broadly human-centred approach. Strategic national interests appear to have been replaced, on the foreign policy agendas of states, by the collective needs of securing the human. My initial review article was intended to raise the question of why the international agenda could change so radically in its discursive articulation without radical changes at the level of institutional frameworks and power relations. Why is it that leading Western states and state-based international institutions, from the EU to the UN, feel more at home with a post-national, post-territorial, post-interest agenda of securing the 'human' rather than the traditional object of securing the nation-state? To answer this question is to investigate why the human security dog didn't bark.

For the advocates of human security, the question entails addressing the problematic issue of agency. If human security discourses are transforming the operation of power relations or opening up new spaces of critique and transformative possibility, where is the agency? The three respondents seek to evade the question of agency. Here, human security becomes reified, given an agency outside of existing power relations. The critical discourse of human security is expected to have radical effects because the idea of the 'human' is held to be progressive and radical in itself. The agency usually associated with this idealist framing of an immanent new global cosmopolitan progressive future, where the needs of the human come prior to those of states, has generally been seen as 'global civil society', which in liberal constructivist frameworks could transform the discursive international order, allowing ethics to tame power. If there is no emerging universal subject or collective agent, then it would seem that the human security discourse has emerged in response to the needs of state-based policy elites rather than as a challenge to them.

It is hardly rocket social science to suggest that, rather than giving ideas-in-themselves progressive meaning or power, we need to locate ideas within their social context. Many years ago, in a critique of German idealist philosophy that could be equally applied to the approach of human security advocates today, Karl Marx (1982: 47) argued that

in direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive . . . in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life processes we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. . . . In the first method of approach the starting point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness.

Marx argued that to imbue ideas with progressive content before locating them in real living people, in real social relations, would be to approach the question from the viewpoint of a moralist rather than that of a politically engaged critic. Rather than study the ideological appearances, in order to understand the changing practices of states or the transformation of the international system, Marx suggested studying the context and relations of the actors themselves.

It is hardly surprising that, especially in the wake of 9/11, more critical approaches have developed in relation to the problematic of human security. Unfortunately, these approaches are just as idealistic, critiquing human security frameworks on the basis of the universal claims of policymakers, rather than analysing the contingent practices of power underlying them. Where liberal advocates of human security see the human-centred claims as a challenge to power, the radical critics of liberalism see human security approaches as a transformative tool of power, reflecting the interests of hegemonic power, or a new order of neoliberal global governance, or *Empire* (Hardt & Negri, 2001). In a direct challenge to the advocates of human security, these approaches have been constructed within post-structuralist frameworks, drawing on theorists such as Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, suggesting that a new universal subject may be emerging, not from below, but from above.

Carl Schmitt's (1996, 2003) work on the concept of the sovereign exception and the dangers of universal ethical appeals to the 'human' has been used to argue that human security approaches pose a fundamental challenge to the Cold War UN international order (see, for example, Zolo, 2002). In the recent work of Vivienne Jabri (2007) and Costas Douzinas (2007), this framework is melded with post-Foucauldian readings of human security as an exercise of biopower. In this framework, what are highlighted are new global governmental practices that are legitimized through the privileging of human development and human security over and above the formal rights framework of sovereignty and non-intervention.

This framework is posed particularly sharply in the 'biopolitical' emphasis of Mark Duffield's (2007) recent book *Development, Security and Unending War*. Duffield argues that human security frameworks attempt to secure the rich consumerist West by containing the 'circulatory' problems of world market inequalities and exclusions within the post-colonial South. He argues that human security's merging of development and security reflects the subordination of the human security agenda to the concerns of post-imperial control and 'counter-insurgency' practices – in the process flagging up the limited nature of human security solutions to insecurity in the non-Western world and highlighting the limited impact of human-centred, gender-centred, sustainable, community-based development, which merely reproduces subsistence societies and institutionalizes poverty and global inequalities.

Here, the idealism of human security advocates is 'stood on its head' to argue that it is the universalizing interests of power rather than the cosmopolitan ethics of empowerment that drive the discourse of human security. At the level of discursive analysis, the choice between these two approaches, to my mind, is a purely normative one. Neither satisfactorily grounds the existence of a new universal subject that is the agent of human security as a universalizing discourse. Both approaches suggest that human security has been transformative of international relations, yet neglect to investigate why the discourse has been mainstreamed by leading Western states and state-based international institutions or to explain why there should be so little contestation over such an allegedly radical reshaping of power relations.

Rather than assessing the discourse or the 'ideological reflexes and echoes' of changing international relations on their own terms, I suggest a much more mediated and contingent approach to understanding the appeal of human security frameworks (see, further, Chandler 2007a,b). It is precisely the lack of political contestation over the international security agenda that drives the human security framework. There is no structuring clash of collective political subjects, either in terms of left and right or in terms of great-power or inter-imperialist rivalries. In fact, the international sphere, so long the realm of *realpolitik* and strategic interaction, has been transformed and hollowed out with the attenuation of traditional frameworks of political contestation.

The security agenda is expanding, but this cannot be explained in terms of a radical challenge, either from above or from below. Rather than an opportunity to put the most vulnerable at the top of the security agenda or, alternatively, a blank cheque for imperial domination, the rise of the discourse of security reflects a lack of strategic contestation and the disorientation of Western elites. First, this exaggeration and proliferation of potential threats indicates a search for a policy agenda rather than any strategic manipulation of one. Second, the tendency to exaggerate fears reflects the sensibilities of Western elites, which have lost their sense of purpose and social connection (see Furedi, 2007). Radical advocates and critics of human security would appear to be overpoliticizing an agenda that, rather than reflecting radical transformation, highlights a sense of elite weakness and lack of capacity for strategic agency.

This analysis would indicate that, in today's world, discourses of power are pale imitations of the universals of the past. In which case, the relationship between discourse or ideological reflection and underlying power relations and interests may be much more mediated and contingent than when there was a world of clearly articulated subjects. It is vital, therefore, that our understanding of the changing dynamics and practices of the international sphere starts from the real relations through which power and policy operate and then works through to an understanding of the discourses and ideologi-

cal reflections. As long as we take the opposite approach, that of descending from heaven to earth, those working in the field of human security theory will never need to stray from their comfort zone of critical, theoretical or ethical purity, and will always be happiest when talking past one another.

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