The Human Security Paradox: How Nation States Grew to Love Cosmopolitan Ethics

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Abstract

The debate over human security approaches appears to have changed substantially since the 1990s. In the 1990s debate, the advocates of human security posed a radical challenge to the state-based frameworks of traditional security approaches. In the 2000s the radicals are on the other side, critiquing human security as the ideological tool of biopolitical, neo-liberal global governance. Both approaches counterpose human security to state-based frameworks, both posit the discourse as the project of new global agency: for liberal advocates, this is global civil society; and for radical post-structuralist and critical realists, this is US hegemony or neo-liberal empire. This paper argues that the paradox of human security is that there is no new transformative universal subject; it is leading Western states and state-based international institutions which have led the calls for human security approaches to be mainstreamed. Human security universal discourses result not from new universal subjects but from the weakening of state-based structures of political subjectivity, leaving Western elites without clear strategic policy frameworks and sensitive to threats, preferring to invest agency in other actors than to take political responsibility themselves.

Introduction

The history of the radical challenge of ‘human security’ is often written by its advocates - from its first usage, in the United Nations Development Programme’s 1994 Human Development Report, until today - in terms, which pose the centrality of the struggle between Realist, traditional, state-based, interest-based, approaches and new, Liberal cosmopolitan, de-territorialised, values-based approaches, which focus on individual human needs. For some authors, this struggle is at the heart of how we conceive of international relations and questions of security and one which, after 9/11 and with the ongoing disaster of Iraq, is more important than ever (see, for example,
This struggle for the heart and soul of global policy-making is often posed as one between two different ‘paradigms’, two entirely different outlooks on the world, one paradigm reproducing current power relations and inequalities and insecurities, the other paradigm challenging this view, recognising the interconnectedness, interdependence and mutual vulnerabilities of security threats and the need for collective, collaborative, human-centred responses.

However, the above approach tends to reflect the sensibilities of the 1990s rather than the 2000s. There can be little doubt that fourteen years after human security was first taken up by the United Nations, its integration into the policy-making and policy-practices of leading Western states and international institutions, has revealed that talk of two different ‘paradigms’ - the radical counter-position of ‘individual’ and ‘state-based’ approaches, or between ‘critical theory’ and ‘problem-solving’ frameworks – has been much exaggerated. The starting point for this paper is that the framework of human security as an approach which challenges power has now been comprehensively questioned and opposed by numerous counter-approaches which argue that human security cosmopolitan frameworks have now become the dominant discourses in which power is strengthened and reproduced (for example, Rogers 2002; Duffield 2007; Douzinas 2007; Jabri 2007).

Today the two competing paradigms in which ‘human security’ is increasingly understood, are shaped by authors’ views of and approaches to the dynamics and consequences of liberal cosmopolitan policy approaches. The advocates of human security approaches tend to focus on holistic approaches designed to prevent, manage and contain conflict; for example the 2007 report of the LSE-based Madrid Study Group (MSG 2007), an approach which seeks to reform and inform the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU on the basis of cosmopolitan and human rights principles. While the advocates of human security see themselves as representing cosmopolitan ethics and working closely with power, the critics argue that cosmopolitan ethics are merely a reflection of the needs and interests of power.

Today’s competing paradigms around human security lack some of the clear distinctions of the 1990s debates. Both the advocates and the critics of human security tend to agree that new frameworks are being developed of regulation and intervention
in the post-colonial South. While, for the advocates, these represent the ethical exercise of power and the taming of power by ethics, for the critics they represent the misuse of ethics to serve the needs and interests of power. Often it appears that the key difference between these two paradigms is the normative choice of whether agreed phenomena are good or bad, whether they empower the victims or the agencies concerned, and whether they are effective or not.

It is interesting that the bigger questions about the shift towards human security are ignored. How did Western states grow to love global ethics? If there is the rise of progressive global ethics, what is the agency of this shift and why has the human security agenda been taken on board so willingly and rapidly by leading Western states and international institutions? If the rise of global ethics reflects the interests of hegemonic power, or a new order of neo-liberal global governance, or Empire (Hardt and Negri 2001) a similar question arises: Why have the discourses of hegemony shifted so rapidly from state-based national interests to the global cosmopolitanism of human security?

I wish to argue that both the advocates and the critics of human security frameworks seek to over-politicise the shift away from traditional national interest approaches. They tend either to see this as a radical progressive movement, reflecting the agency of global civil society against the traditional state-based order, or as a non-progressive emergence of neo-liberal global governance, which is in the process of dismantling the state-based UN Charter order of international law and sovereign equality. Both these approaches also pose the new human security era as one of increased intervention and international activism, as traditional barriers, to either ethics or hegemonic power, of state sovereignty are removed.

However, it would seem that the discourse has changed much more than the practice. Human security frameworks seem to have had little impact on the ground. Rather than a transformation of the global order it would appear that international institutions and practices are operating pretty much as before. The de-territorialising discourse of human security has not produced a new global order of ethics or of power. In fact, the paradox of human security, cosmopolitan ethics and deterritorialised politics is that it
is the discourse of states and international institutions that remain very much in tact and essentially unchallenged.

It will be argued below that in the post-Cold War world, post-national and deterritorialised human security approaches have been easily, and willingly, integrated into the foreign policy of national governments in the West because they reflect an historic lack of political contestation. The paradox of states taking up post-national discourses cannot be explained by the emergence of a radical global civic movement any more than by the emergence of a new Empire. While states still exist, they are becoming reduced to empty shells because they no longer frame and politically reflect any clashes of subjective interests. The international sphere is no longer filled with power politics because Western states lack a sense of themselves as interest-bearing subjects.

The emergence of discourses of Human Security therefore does not reflect a universalising subject, either from below (global civil society) or from above (Empire). The paradox of why states project their subjectivity in terms of global ethics rather than collective national interests rests in the weakness of Western elites and their lack of connection to their societies. In the final sections of this paper the fact that human security discourses reflect this sense of weakness and lack of capacity will be drawn out further.

**Liberal Approaches to Human Security**

Many human security advocates present their views as a radical challenge to the traditional discipline and practices of international relations. The view of two radically separate paradigms allows human security advocates to idealistically engage with both the theory and the practice of human security. On the one hand, there is often a tendency to conflate the aspirations of human security theorising with policy practices in reality, for example, Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Anuradha Chenoy state:

> With human security [the individual ‘qua person’, rather than ‘qua citizen’] becomes the ultimate actor taken into account. His/her security is the ultimate goal, to which all instruments and political actors are subordinated. Elevating
the person as the ultimate end is made possible by defining this new actor in terms of his/her vulnerabilities on the one hand, and his/her capacity to affect change on the other. (2007: 13)

Of course, as we know, in the real world, not every ‘speech act’ (or academic assertion) creates a security discourse (Buzan et al 1997). ‘Individuals qua persons’ clearly have different and differing security concerns making it impossible for them to be the ‘ultimate actor’ to which international institutions are subordinated. Even Amartya Sen recognises that the ‘human-centred’ approach, highlighted in his seminal book, Development as Freedom, still involves political processes of collective decision-making, choices and policy trade-offs (Sen 1999: 33-4). The assertion that ‘individuals qua persons’, i.e., outside a political process, can suborn power, makes little sense in theory, let alone practice (see Chandler 2003); nevertheless, this view highlights the liberal advocates’ radical understanding of the transformative potential of human security approaches.

On the other hand, when the reality of policy does not match the promise of the aspirations, the problem is always the vestiges of Realist thinking, ‘statist’ outlooks, material interests, or often the disruptive role of the US, described by Mary Kaldor as the ‘last nation state’ (2003). For more naïve advocates, it appears that all that holds back their brave new moral world is the self-interest of ‘powerful states, aspiring regional hegemons, and entrenched elites that are interested in retaining their power within the nation states structures’ (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy: 93).

However, despite the great play of difference made between the approach of human security and traditional security frameworks, the irony is that it is very difficult to consistently maintain the 1990s idea that there is a struggle between fundamentally differing approaches. Even Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy find themselves slipping into the argument that ‘securing people is not just an ethical imperative, it is the best strategy to secure the state and the international system’ (ibid.: 21). The radical challenge at some points appears to completely collapse: ‘thus human security transforms, rather than replaces the national security discourse and is not an alternative to state security’ (ibid.: 167; see also MSG 2007).
It would appear then that most human security advocates want to have their cake and to eat it too. They want to argue that, on the one hand, human security is a radical, emancipatory paradigm shift and, on the other, that it is less an ethical, normative challenge to realist calculations of self-interest than an adaptation of realist understandings to a more globalised and interdependent world. It is often not clear in human security advocacy - where the interdependence of threats and responses is crucial to the argument - whether the merging of ethical imperatives with security and self-interest is merely a tactical ploy or one based on the facts or just rhetorical wishful thinking. The openly admitted lack of clear causal understandings of these interconnections often serves to keep the question off the agenda (ibid.: 243). Nevertheless, the fact that human security advocates do not counterpose interests in a direct political challenge to power, but rather seek to conflate ethical and security prerogatives, would suggest that this approach could be easily co-opted by political elites.

The liberal advocates of human security discourses do not counterpose the interests of post-colonial peoples to those of Western elites. Rather, the argument is entirely couched in terms of Western state interests, and the need to shift from backward and unenlightened views of self-interest to a view of self-interest which is fits today’s interdependent, globalised, complex world. The nature of the advocacy discourse itself highlights the possibility that a debate about human security and the renegotiation of the meaning of self-interest has been generated from within Western elites rather than imposed by radical activism from outside.

**Realist and Post-Realist Critiques of Human Security**

Of course, away from the discussion groups of human security advocates, many analysts, especially those more engaged in the empirical examination of human security practices, have articulated much more critical approaches to understanding the attraction of human security for international actors.

Some authors have suggested that, on the ground, there appears to be little difference between traditional agendas of state-based security and radical human security approaches. In an interesting study, Robert Muggah and Keith Krause develop an
approach they state is informed by what they see as the weakness of ‘constructivist/critical International Relations’ - the tendency to ‘treat discourses as significant themselves, without examining the link to actual practices’ (Muggah and Krause 2006: 115, n.10). In an attempt to consider the relationship between discourse and practice, they seek to examine the differences between pre- and post-human security interventions, comparing and critically examining similar UN missions in Haiti - UNMIH (1993-1995) where there is no human security discursive framework and MINUSTAH (2003-2005) shaped by the human security agenda – and conclude that this shift in ‘paradigms’ ‘has not necessarily translated into radically new practical strategies, much less positive outcomes in situ’ (ibid.:122).

Rory Keane, in an excellent brief study of the European Union’s use of the human security approach with regard to intervention in Africa, makes the point that it is ‘difficult to ascertain whether the EU looks at sub-Saharan Africa through a realist post-colonial lens or a human security lens’ (Keane 2006: 42). He argues that ‘EU foreign policy-making appears as a cocktail of realist-driven assumptions, together with broader human security objectives’ (ibid.: 43). Referring to the work of Robert Cooper (policy advisor to British prime minister Tony Blair and to the EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana), particularly his arguments about ‘enlightened self-interest’ in Breaking of Nations (2003), Keane argues that the EU’s Security Strategy ‘can be endorsed by a realist practitioner or a human security practitioner, as the line between intervention based on peace and development versus intervention based on regime change becomes ever murkier’ (ibid.: 46). He also makes the point that it is difficult to say what motivations are selfish or self-interested; a realist would argue that it is selfish to pursue the Tony Blair approach of spouting human security rhetoric and a ‘feel-good’ human security doctrine about Africa before putting ‘hard choices and hard cash to protect and make safe EU citizens’ (ibid.: 46-7). What seems like human security, for example, the rhetoric about African ‘local ownership and capacity-building’ and ‘home-grown solutions’ might be realist self-interest about not over-committing and evading policy responsibilities (ibid.: 47-8).

One of the strongest criticisms of human security frameworks is that they merely serve the interests of power in offering palliative treatment, merely token support, for the poor and marginalised. In the words of Paul Rogers, the concerns of human
security, eager to extend the security agenda to poverty reduction and social security, are merely ‘liddism’ – attempts to keep the lid on the resistance of the post-colonial world (Rogers 2002). Catherine Shittecatte, in an interesting study, highlights how, regardless of the normative debate on ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ understandings of the concept of human security, the areas which have gained more attention and resources and increasingly included leading roles for non-state actors, have been those which ‘reflect ongoing priorities of the most powerful members and organisations of the international community’ (2006: 130). Most progress has been made in the ‘freedom from fear’ area, with the revival of ideas of ‘Just War’ intervention, while there has been little interest in mainstreaming ‘freedom from want’ approaches that go beyond palliative measures to ‘challenge the philosophy of market liberalism’ (ibid.: 132).

A more critical approach to this question has developed, particularly since 9/11, provided by writers who tend to be associated with ‘post-realist’ (see Chandler 2007c) or post-structuralist frameworks, often drawing on theorists such as Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. International legal theorist Carl Schmitt’s work on the concept of the sovereign exception and the dangers of universalist ethical appeals to the ‘human’ (see Schmitt 1996; 2003) has been used to argue that human security approaches pose a fundamental challenge to the Cold War UN international order (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, new global governmental practices are highlighted which are legitimised 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 recent book Development, Security and Unending War (2007). 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-development, which merely reproduces subsistence
societies and institutionalises poverty and global inequalities.

Where the advocates of human security assert a challenge to vested interests, the
critics express a concern that traditional interests are being pursued and reproduced
precisely through the discourse of human security. We could end the paper here, with
the realist or ‘post-realist’ assertion of the relevance of interests and power relations,
revealed behind the universalist claims of human security. Yet, this does not solve the
question of what human security reflects and why it has been mainstreamed so
rapidly.

**The Human Security Paradox**

I wish to attempt to go beyond the liberal/ethics vs. realist/interests framework in
discussing human security. I want to suggest that the rapid mainstreaming of human
security reflects and codifies major changes in international relations since the end of
the Cold War. The mainstreaming of human security reflects a major transformation
in the discourse and practices of the international sphere, one in which the policy-
makers and practitioners have been ahead of and facilitated the radical academic
advocates of these approaches. To suggest that these changes can be dismissed as
merely the ‘same old same old’ - the new mechanisms and practices of hegemony and
power in pursuit of traditional interests - or to suggest, as the most radical post-
Foucauldian critics seem to, that merely revealing the power relations behind the
discourse is the same as a thorough critique, I think, would be a major
misunderstanding.

I want to suggest three dynamics behind the ease with which human security has been
integrated into mainstream security agendas, dynamics which attempt to go beyond
the liberal vs. realist framing of the discussion:

*Firstly, the exaggeration of new post-Cold War security threats.* It is clear that
political elites and radical advocates of human security approaches both share a
normative desire to exaggerate the existence of threats. It is here that human security
advocates come into their own, outdoing any ‘dodgy dossiers’ about Saddam Hussein’s Weapons of Mass Destruction with their assertions that in our globalised world, everything is interconnected and interdependent, and that therefore ‘dysfunctionality in one sphere is structurally and sequentially expressed in other sub-systems and leads to a vicious circle of causes and effects’ (Shaw et al 2006: 16-17). Allegedly, we are approaching a ‘tipping-point’ for Armageddon, where ‘drugs, disease, terrorism, pollution, poverty and environmental problems’ are ‘mutually reinforcing’ (ibid.: 17). In the absence of traditional enemies, human security approaches fill the gap with the securitisation of every issue from health, to the economy, to the environment.

It might appear that all the liberal ‘human security’ lobbyists who are seeking to ‘securitize’ their campaign interests, from climate change to global poverty, are feeding an elitist fantasy that power can be directed, or ‘biopolitically’ articulated, in response to these multiple threats to human life. But rather than a blank cheque for imperial domination, the rise of a discourse of security reflects the disorientation of Western elites. Firstly, this exaggeration of threats indicates a search for a policy agenda rather than a strategic manipulation of one. Secondly, and related, the exaggeration of fears reflects a real existential crisis within Western elites which have lost their sense of purpose and social connection (see Furedi 2007). Post-realists, are wrong to read the human security agenda as a confident assertion of a new post-imperial ‘Empire’, rather it reflects a sense of weakness and lack of capacity.

Secondly, the task is a responsive one, locating agency in the threats rather than with Western elites. The problematisation of the non-Western states and societies, facilitated by the human security framework is as central to security discourses shaped by the unilateral ‘realist’ war on terror as it is by the multilateral ‘critical’ discourses of poverty-reduction, sustainable development and climate change adaptation. It seems that many ‘realists’ have no disagreement with the ‘human security’ argument that the world’s poorest countries now pose the biggest security threat to the West. The ‘post-realist’ approach challenges the discourse of failed states but agrees with the underlying identification of the problem of the post-colonial world and the ‘circulatory’ problems for global capital which it represents.
While this appears to offer the agenda of Western intervention and the return of imperial rule, this would be to read discourses of the past into the present. Human security framings pose little optimism about the West resolving the problems emanating from the post-colonial Other, or of the restoration of a new secure order. This is a discourse where agency is, in fact, relocated, by common consensus across the liberal/realist spectrum, in the Other. The West is seen as vulnerable and weak - high technology, consumerism, welfare, even liberal democracy – are seen negatively, as exposing us to threat. Rather than a security agenda of control, management and strategic intervention this is one of ad hoc reactions and damage limitation.

*Thirdly, the facilitation of short-term policy-making in the absence of clear strategic foreign policy visions.* In the absence of the geo-strategic Cold War order and the domestic framework of the politics of Left and Right, leading Western states and international institutions have found it difficult to draw-up long-term strategic visions of the future (see, for example Chandler and Heins 2007; Chandler 2007a). Human security approaches have assisted in the process of rationalising these difficulties and legitimating the lack of clear strategy. Human security advocates suggest that, firstly, the interdependence of threats means that ‘threats should not be prioritised’, secondly, that ‘policy-making is not a vertical process but a networked, flexible and horizontal coalition that needs a complex paradigm’, and thirdly, that the prioritisation of human security goals and outcomes ‘may be a futile exercise’, as the interdependence of threats means that work in one area may achieve little success if the intervention is not comprehensive and holistic enough to tackle all the relevant factors (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007: 17).

Human security approaches therefore enable governments and policy-makers to opt out of taking responsibility for foreign policy, encouraging a shift from strategic thinking to sound bites and *ad hoc* policy-making. What may appear to some critics of human security as a useless ‘shopping list of threats’ (Krause 2004) is, in fact, the mainstay of both national and international security agendas, where governments lack strategic priorities. Multilateralism and the integration of non-state actors in policy-making is also a reflection of governments’ increasing unwillingness to take accountability for policy-making and implementation (see further, Chandler 2006; 2007b). Furthermore, human security approaches argue that causal relationships are
impossible in an interconnected world (Paris 2004), making it much easier for governments to evade responsibility by seeking praise for their ‘good intentions’ rather than being held to account for the policy-consequences of their actions.

Conclusion

Rather than understanding the cosmopolitan human security agendas through the prism of two fundamentally different transformative paradigms - one based on a universal arising from below, the other from above – it may be better to see security policy, and foreign policy-making in general, as beset by a process of fragmentation, hollowing out the subjects of international relations and producing an absence of paradigms or clear frameworks of operation. The attraction of human security approaches would appear to be that they, on the one hand, reflect this confusion, portraying the external world as a complex and ever-more threatening environment, and, on the other hand, legitimise and institutionalise the lack of policy-making capacity, encouraging the shedding of policy responsibility and viewing the world as less open to strategic intervention.

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