Construction and reconstruction of the link between health and safety

For a critical and emancipatory perspective[1]

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The idea that there is a clear and unequivocal link between health and safety issues is now beyond dispute. The Covid-19 pandemic is part of a long list of epidemic outbreaks at national, regional or global level whose political, social and economic implications have become increasingly evident. In this sense, episodes such as the epidemics of SARS and MERS or the Ebola outbreaks have contributed to reinforce this idea. This is not, however, a recent process. It was only in the past few decades that researchers have begun to look more systematically into the different aspects that make up the link between health and safety, whether in their global, international, regional, national, or even societal and human dimensions[2]. It is precisely in the scope of this literature that João Nunes' book falls under, published by Routledge in 2014: *Security, Emancipation and the Politics of Health: A New Theoretical Perspective*. Composed of six chapters and organized into two distinct parts, it offers one of the most sophisticated and important contributions to the study of the relationship between security and health, providing a new understanding of this topic and opening new lines of research for the future.

The first part of the book puts forward a new theoretical perspective for the study of security and the second applies this perspective to three important themes of global health: the construction of health

as a political problem, the effects of this process on the reconfiguration of society, institutions, practices and subjectivities, and, finally, the inherent potential of an emancipatory reading of the relationship between health and security. Given its theoretical depth and the current relevance of health issues to the global security agenda, its argument deserves an analysis guided by the three major debates to which it contributes: critical security studies, theory of security as emancipation, and global health.

FOR AN INTEGRATED VIEW
OF CRITICAL SECURITY STUDIES

Three major axes guide the main argument of this book and position its contribution to literature. The first has to do with the purpose underlying the emergence and consolidation of Critical Security Studies. Over the past three decades, the agenda of this discipline has been shared by two distinct readings[3]. The first conceptualizes the critical perspective of security in a broadly negative sense, that is, its core objective is to deconstruct the authorization of new objects, referents, logics and security practices and to highlight its historical, social, economic and political impact. In contrast, the second reading offers us a more positive or reconstructive meaning for this agenda, focusing on locating and promoting alternative security practices and discourses, which may contribute to reducing systemic inequalities and promoting the thriving of humankind, both locally and globally. However, as the author points out, the result of this division has been the reification of a negative

view of security within Critical Security Studies, where this concept has become systematically associated with a logic of violence and exclusion, suspension of democracy and denial of the values and rights underlying it. Thus, the preponderance of a negative interpretation of security not only contributed to cut short the dialogue between different critical perspectives, but also significantly limited the potential contribution of this project, reifying the two agendas as opposed and irreconcilable.

For João Nunes, resolving this impasse implies reconsidering the motivation underpinning Critical Security Studies. In his view, this commitment does not lie in mere opposition to positivism or in an aversion to realistic approaches to security. Instead, the cross-cutting feature of the critical project is a shared interest in scrutinizing the different political dimensions of security, from its assumptions to its operationalization, effects, limits and possibilities. The emergence of the critical project thus materializes a rupture with the traditional paradigm, but only in the sense that security studies cease to take on a reactive character and develop instead an essentially reflective posture. In other words, the critical turning point signals a growing trend within Security Studies by rejecting pre-defined ideas about security risks and threats. Within the critical debate, security studies scholars are no longer merely interested in redefining the notion of security or discussing who should be protected, how, by whom and why. Instead, they want to answer a far broader and also more sophisticated set of ques-

tions: how security is constituted and with what effects, but also how security should be practiced and what possibilities are there for its transformation[4]. The critical project therefore involves an analytical, normative and transformative commitment. The first central contribution of the book is to demonstrate that to expand the potential of this project it is necessary to adopt an integrated and cumulative reading of these three dimensions and that this can only be achieved through closer interaction between deconstructive and reconstructive efforts, articulated around their common purpose: the politicization of security.

FOR A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF INSECURITY

It is in the wake of this argument that the second contribution falls into place. For João Nunes, while the deconstructive agenda has been systematically developed over the last decades, the reconstructive dimension still lacks the same level of detail and attention, something that not only hampers the reach of Critical Security Studies, but also calls into question the project as a whole.[5] As an answer, the book offers a reinterpretation of the theory of security as emancipation, an approach according to which the function of critique must permeate the inquiry into existing power asymmetries and contribute, through immanent critique, to its transformation[6]. By reconsidering the individual as the only legitimate referent of security and insecurity as a starting point for the critique, this approach is in a particularly advantageous position to recon-

cile deconstructive and reconstructive agendas. However, as the author points out, in its current configuration, the theory of security does not yet possess the necessary tools to translate this ambition from theory into practice. This is one of the core goals of this work, to offer an approach that corrects some limitations of security as emancipation and that reflects on the opportunities already in place to overcome them. The book performs this exercise in three distinct movements.

First, the author shows how this theory still preserves an unsophisticated view of the reality of insecurity. His suggestion is to reassess the insecurity that afflicts the most vulnerable groups as the result of a political process and, in this sense, to engage more systematically with the set of processes through which they materialize and are made intelligible, the ideas and practices through which they are represented and problematized, as well as the way that the answers given to this problem are authorized as being necessary and legitimate[7]. Next, the book questions the trend of security as emancipation to define insecurity, its analytical starting point, based on the experience of the victims. Without calling into question the added value of this strategy, João Nunes suggests that it should be integrated into a broader analysis encompassing the processes through which narratives about security replicate certain subjectivities as desirable to the detriment of others. Finally, the author reexamines the notion of power in the theory of security as emancipation, offering a theoretical synthesis articulating three different interpretations of this concept

to develop a multidimensional perspective of power as domination. Instead of advancing a preconception of power and its effects, this approach explores the different articulations and manifestations of power in specific contexts and, with this starting point, discloses the processes through which it materializes in relations of domination and subordination, thus contributing to placing certain groups and individuals in a position of vulnerability and systemic disadvantage.

This new conception of power allows this theory to expand its capacity to identify the structures and processes that naturalize insecurity, to define the specific meaning of emancipation in different contexts and, therefore, to identify the actors best positioned to promote it. In addition to the analytical and normative benefits, each chapter also explores the opportunities that result from these reevaluations, underlining the importance of including in a more systematic way practices of resistance, contestation and subversion in the agenda of security as emancipation.

FOR AN EMANCIPATORY ANALYSIS OF HEALTH

Despite the growing importance of the relationship between health and security in the global agenda, both its specific meaning and its practices are not something rigid and predetermined, but rather the product of certain discourses and social and political practices. In other words, the global health or public health approaches that are implemented today derive from a historical process through which different interpretations of health and security have been articulated and challenged, certain actors and ideas have been authorized or marginalized, and certain social and political institutions have been reconfigured. The way health problems are constituted as security issues circumscribes the type of policies and practices that can be adopted, defines the values and individuals that must be safeguarded, and establishes who has the responsibility and authority to protect them. But as the author argues throughout the second part, the construction of health as a security problem is also a political process and, for this reason, open to challenge and modification. The logic of security has an undeniable impact on this process, but there is nothing to prevent health security practices or global public health from contributing to reduce relations of domination and insecurity, contrary to what much of the literature on the subject suggests. What this book adds is the possibility of analyzing each of the dimensions of this process in an integrated and cumulative way, showing how the very idea of security and the theory of security as emancipation offer a advantageous starting point to examine the construction and reconstruction of global health[8]. This is the argument that guides the second part of the book, in which three central dimensions of health are explored. At first, João Nunes uses the perspective previously developed to question the social and political construction of health, demonstrating how the notion of global health has historically been linked to a logic of security based on an imaginary of fear and conveyed by a specific vocabulary articu-

lated through notions such as contagion and infection which, in turn, contribute to propagate a generalized sense of anxiety, dread and insecurity in society. In few situations this is as clearly patent as in the illustration used by the author, focusing on the role of medical discourse in the construction of immigration policies and in the sedimentation of prejudices towards immigrants, often categorized as potential risks to society.

Secondly, the author addresses the effects of the constitution of health as a problem, showing how its association with an imaginary of insecurity contributes to reproduce and transform certain social relationships and subjectivities and, in that manner, redefine the limits of the political community. In addition to discussing the historical function of medical knowledge in the reconfiguration of the State and society, this chapter also illustrates the social and political effects of tropical medicine, which has played a decisive role in the establishment of colonial practices and relations and, concomitantly, in the reification of native peoples as potential hotspots of contagion and insecurity.

Finally, the book addresses the contextual and contingent nature of health practices and their transformative potential. Here, the author uses the idea of "health as a bridge to peace" to illustrate how health ideas and practices can, in certain contexts and circumstances, contribute to the reduction of violence and insecurity. In addition, he elaborates a series of criteria and questions that allow us to understand in which specific cases and conditions health practices can contribute to an emancipatory logic, also indicating the importance of social health movements, strongly focused on democratizing access to health and on articulating alternative, more inclusive and participative views of health problems and of the most appropriate answers to these questions.

In sum, João Nunes' book represents one of the most important, sophisticated and original contributions of a Portuguese researcher for International Relations. His argument not only offers an innovative reading of Critical Security Studies, but also places the theory of security as emancipation at the center of the debate on the health-security nexus. No less relevant, this work advances a critical and emancipatory reading of this theme that offers us a number of observations crucial to the current conjuncture. In a context in which health issues are increasingly global issues, it is essential to consider the extent to which the practices and discourses through which this process is authorized contribute to reifying the stigma on foreign groups and individuals, historically placed in a position of greater vulnerability, thereby expanding their insecurity and exclusion. On the other hand, by highlighting the historical role of tropical medicine as an instrument of power and domination, this book also alerts us to the lingering preponderance of these assumptions over ideas and practices that are now mobilized in the name of global health[9]. Finally, it illustrates in a sophisticated and accessible way the possibilities already at hand to develop an emancipatory practice of health security, emphasizing the central role of social movements and the contribu-

tion that Security Studies can make to this process. In an environment in which so many experts rush to say that microbes do not respect borders, the present book brings a truly innovative argument: it shows how health practices often play a central role in their constitution. It also challenges us to reflect on health beyond the themes that are already consolidated in the security agenda, to study the conditions in which the sedimentation of the health-security nexus might contribute to reducing global and local inequalities and, not least, to study the actors, ideas and institutions that are best positioned to promote this process. R:I

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■■■■ ENDNOTES

1 A Portuguese version of this book review was first published in *Relações Internacionais,* No. 65, 2020.

2 Some of the most salient contributions to this debate include McINNES, Colin; LEE, Kelley – *Global Health and International Relations*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012; ELBE, Stefan – *Security and Global Health*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010; DAVIES, Sara E. – *Global Politics of Health*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012; RUSHTON, Simon – *Security and Public Health*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019. For an analysis of the main trends of this debate until 2012 ver DAVIES, Sara E. – «The healthy trends of International Relations research». In *International Political Sociology*. Vol. 6, No. 3, 2012, pp. 316-320. For the latest analysis of the main themes and topics of this debate, we also suggest McINNES, Colin; LEE, Kelley; YOUDE, Jeremy – *The Oxford Handbook of Global Health Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

3 This was the interpretation of the critical project advanced in the first edited volume on the theme: KRAUSE, Keith; WILLIAMS, Michael C. - *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. London: UCL Press, 1997.

4 Este argumento é elaborado com detalhe em NUNES, João – «Reclaiming the political: emancipation and critique in Security Studies». In *Security Dialogue*. Vol. 43, No. 4, 2012, pp. 345-361.

5 The need to develop more systematically the ethical and normative dimension of safety studies has since been a central topic for the most recent debates. Nyman, Jonna; BURKE, Anthony – *Ethical Security Studies: A New Research Agenda.* London: Routledge, 2016.

6 Two reference works for this approach are: BOOTH, Ken – *Theory of World Security.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Wyn JONES, Richard – *Security, Strategy, and Critical Theory.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. A more condensed and updated view of this perspective is offered in BASU, Soumita; NUNES, John – "Security as emancipation". *In* SHEPHERD, Laura J., ed. – *Critical Approaches to Security: An Introduction to Theories and Methods*. London: Routledge, pp. 63-76.

7 Esta temática é problematizada e expandida em NUNES, João – «Emancipation and the reality of security: a reconstructive agenda». *In* BALZACQ, Thierry – *Contesting Security: Strategies and Logics*. Nova York; Londres: Routledge, 2015, pp. 141-153.

8 An excellent example of how the idea of power as domination can be applied to health issues is offered in NUNES, John – "Questioning health security: insecurity and domination in world politics". In *Review of International Studies*. Vol. 40, No. 5, 2014, pp. 939-960.

9 O autor debruça-se sobre alguns aspetos desta temática em NUNES, João – «Ebola and the production of neglect in global health». In *Third World Quarterly*. Vol. 37, No. 3, 2016, pp. 542-556.

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