

## **HUMAN SECURITY AS POWER/KNOWLEDGE: THE BIOPOLITICS OF A DEFINITIONAL DEBATE**

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### **Abstract**

This article interrogates the parameters of the human security debate as a site of biopolitical rationality in order to gain an understanding of how it has been possible to shape the debate in certain ways and not others. Portraying human security as a site of power/knowledge, it will be shown how the concept produces substantial political effects that sabotage any attempts to transform the foundations of contemporary security theory and practice. The article concludes by provoking the field to raise difficult questions that could lead to a progressive critical transformation in global politics by engaging in an onto-political audit of both the theories and practices that fall under the banner of human security.

### **Introduction**

Similar to Michel Foucault's (1975) provocative exploration of how the parricides committed by Pierre Rivière in rural 19<sup>th</sup> century France were theorised, debates over defining the concept of human security have revealed power-relations within the field of security studies that speak to dynamics far bigger than the definitional quandary itself. By drawing upon archival evidence, Foucault was able to demonstrate how the discourses of medicine, criminology, law and religion coalesced into a novel discursive formation that constructed categorizations such as the 'criminal' and the 'medically insane'. These then clashed in interpreting the behaviour of Rivière and in representing him as a specific type of social problem. Human security has offered

evidence of its own entrenchment as a new discursive formation that brings together discourses of security, development, and humanism under a (biopolitical) concern with ‘the value or non-value of life as such’ based on its represented characteristics (Agamben 1998, 142). Yet, there continues to be disagreement over which factors should be prioritized and securitized, reflecting the ongoing contention over the proper ‘subjects’ of security. According to many analysts, the definitional flux represents a fatal flaw for the analytic and practical utility of the concept (Hatalay and Nossal, 2004; Krause 2004; Thomas and Tow 2002ab). As such, much work has focussed on concretizing *the* meaning of human security.<sup>1</sup>

In trying to conjure the concept into a tangible material object dedicated to specific types of policy formulation, the definitional project of human security has focussed on myriad indicators including human dignity, life, safety, well-being, vital cores, needs, capabilities, freedoms, and rights to argue that states should no longer be the primary referent objects of security policy (Alkire 2002; Bajpai 2003; UNDP 1995). Yet, despite heated rhetoric to the contrary, this article will argue that human security’s incitement to discourse betrays significant shared assumptions between contending positions. This is evidenced through the constant deployment of cosmological realism which facilitates the incorporation of human security as a variable central to governmental calculations of risk. In turn, failing to question the incitement to discourse misses the opportunity for an onto-political audit of the discipline of (human) security studies. Thus, as a site of power/knowledge, human security produces substantial political effects that sabotage any attempts to transform the foundations of contemporary security theory and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Acharya, 2004; Alkire, 2004; Axworthy, 2004; Bajpai, 2004; Evans, 2004; Hampson, 2002; Hampson, 2004; Hubert, 2004; Leaning 2004; Liotta, 2004; Macfarlane, 2004; Newman, 2004; Pettman, 2005; Suhrke, 2004; Thakur, 2004; Thomas, 2004; and Uvin, 2004. Perceptively, Winslow and Eriksen’s (2004) anthropological approach questions the equation of clarity with utility.

In undertaking this analysis, the goal is not to provide a case for why a particular definition of human security is better than any other and/or to judge the extent to which human security has catalysed effective security practices. The point is to interrogate the parameters of the human security debate as a site of biopolitical rationality in order to gain an understanding of how it has been possible to shape the debate in certain ways and not others. For example, what kinds of positions can be accepted and what others must be rejected outright? Therefore, the argument presented is not to be taken as an *ad homonym* attack on the concept—a critique for the sake of critique—which divests itself of any practical agenda. The broader catalyst for inquiry is the scant attention paid within the human security discursive formation to any consideration of the political consequences for individuals and populations who are defined as insecure.

In order to initiate a radical turn that is prepared to deconstruct the presuppositions that have placed human security as a *mot d'ordre* within contemporary structures of global governance, it will be demonstrated that the growing development of literature on the biopolitics of (human) security is an important opening step (Duffield and Waddell 2006; Dillon 2007b). Unlike the tome that self-identifies within the subject area of human security, biopolitical analyses raise difficult questions that could lead to a progressive critical transformation through the cultivation of undecidability in the theory/practice of (human) security. It is by giving some weight to the onto-political that the abandonment of the discursive and practical constraints imposed by the signifiers 'human' and 'security' might become possible.

## **Biopolitics, Governmentality, and Power/Knowledge**

Biopolitics is necessarily an intricate concept because it demands a fundamental rethinking of highly complex social, political, and economic networks that are generally considered to be unproblematic, if not a-political (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero forthcoming). At its most simple, biopolitics is about the identification, classification, and management of populations in order to ensure that the dimensions of life that are said to define them are amenable to specific forms of governance, systems of belief, and cultural propensities, or what one might want to call ‘ways of life’ (Johnson 2002). The biopolitical project is therefore primarily concerned with (governing) the ‘contingent or “aleatory” features that are displayed by populations’ in order to mitigate risks and control threats that may arise from these features (Dillon 2007a, 41). As a ‘*dispositif de sécurité*’, biopolitics ‘regulates, strategizes, and seeks to manipulate the circulation of species life’ (Dillon 2007, 9; Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero forthcoming). Therefore, circulatory phenomena ranging from cholera to computer viruses can become subject to the biopolitical gaze.

The identification, classification, and management of populations and their characteristics are localised within the practices of governmentality. According to Foucault, governmentality gains ascendancy in the eighteenth century in western Europe as the ultimate objective of government slowly began to transform from primarily viewing its means and ends as the (geopolitical) aggrandizement of the state into a concurrent imperative to deploy newly developed sciences to master population as an instrument (Foucault 2003b: 244). The end goal was to govern in an effective manner by seizing new advantages in populations that had to that point remained latent and by mitigating any risks and/or uncertainties that might become manifest and disrupt the dominant ‘ways of life’. Governmentality therefore required that a whole

novel series of security apparatuses and complexes of knowledge—particularly the statistical sciences—be utilised to improve the welfare, living conditions, health, wealth, and longevity of population.

Biopolitics thereby became a means to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristics of living human beings constituted as a population and an ends that practices of governmentality sought to achieve, that is to provide of a compelling rationalization of the phenomena characteristics of populations (Rabinow and Rose 2003: xxix). Biopolitics identified specific phenomena that not just should, but more importantly could, be managed by the state (e.g., communicable disease, moral degeneracy) while fuelling the creation of specific ‘scientific’ classifications such as the homosexual, the criminal-addict, or the immigrant as sub-sets of the general population that needed to be directly managed. The aim was to reduce the prevalence and potential impacts of what were represented as their associated phenomena. There was—and continues to be—a governmental fascination with what are framed as deviations from the norms of acceptable ways of life and finding means to prevent these from occurring, or correcting them once they have become manifest.

Thus, biopolitics provided an answer to the question of ‘why must one govern’ with the triumph of economic and political liberalism in Western societies (Foucault 2003a: 204). The core of the answer was to promote the ‘right ways’ of living. Within this re-configuring of the ethos of government, one can see ‘in the rationality of biopolitics, [that] the new object is life and its regulation of its mechanisms’ (Rabinow and Rose 2003: xxix). This required that substandard—though potentially redeemable—ways of life be disciplined, punished, shaped, and transformed (Dillon 2007). In other circumstances, biopolitical rationalizations required that life deemed

unworthy of life be left to die, or even be exterminated through the apparatuses of the state (Agamben 1998). Whatever its forms (i.e., to foster life worth living or to let die) biopolitics is increasingly identified as the fundamental drive in the practices of contemporary global politics, marking a significant shift in the conceptualisation and practices of security, development, political economy, and law (Reid 2004, Dillon 1995; Dillon and Reid 2001, Duffield 2001; Dauphinee and Masters 2007).

With the proliferation of biopolitical rationalities in practice and their growing analytic recognition, it becomes very easy to read specific intentions into decisions based on calculations of risk and uncertainty which ultimately determine which types of life are worthy of letting live and those forms of life that are not. However, these processes should not be reduced to effects generated by a specific ideological cause. As Michael Dillon has noted:

in governmental terms, the contingent features that life and populations display are not an ideological disguise for the operation of some hidden interests and they are not part of a dialectical historical process. They are a function of truth-telling practices of the life sciences, uncertainty, and risk. These perform a whole variety of governmental as well as scientific functions, not least in telling different stories about different categories of living things and their governability, as well as what falls into the category of living thing as such (Dillon 2007a, 45).

Thus, the contours of biopolitics are intimately related to regimes of truth and power/knowledge which shape who is allowed to speak, the positions that can be acceptably articulated, the institutions that are able to serve as conduits of speech, and the institutions that store and distribute what is said (Foucault 1990: 11). More importantly, the institutional sites, authorities, bodies of knowledge, discourses, and

discursive formations help to establish specific relations of power with differing degrees of fluidity. In turn, power-relations produce forms of knowledge and institutional sites which are positioned as providers of an authoritative purchase on truth.

Breaking from the traditional understanding of the term, truth is not an unmediated substance to be discovered unadulterated through the application of appropriate techniques, nor should it be seen as a-political or power neutral (Foucault 1990: 11-12). Rather, as Foucault argued, ‘truth is not outside of power or lacking in power...truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power’ (Foucault 1977: 131). Therefore, in order to be able to establish what is true, each society has its regime of truth and its general politics of truth. There are types of discourse that are accepted as true and which are tailored to function as true. There are processes, methods, and technologies that enable one to distinguish true and false statements, rules by which each is given legitimacy, value, and sanction, and deference towards those who have the authority to determine what counts as true (Foucault 1977: 131). Therefore, truth is produced through power and power produces truth. But just as power-relations are dynamic and subject to flux, so too are the borders that demark *the* truth.

In the remainder of this article, how biopolitics has shaped the regime of truth that establishes the incitement to discourse within current debates over defining human security will be analysed. The argument being forwarded is that a new purchase on the definitional debate can be gained by reading it through the rationalities of biopolitics by emphasizing that the debate serves as a type of truth-telling performance which is part of the production of power/knowledge. Thus, the

conceptualisation of human (in)security can be identified as being inextricably intertwined within a far broader (bio)political project.

### **Cosmological Realism and Human Security**

As a starting point, security studies has been shaped by—and thus shown a distinct preference for—cosmological realism in the production and reproduction of ‘foundationalist’ knowledge (Krause and Williams 1996; Smith 2000a). The descriptor ‘cosmological’ emphasizes that the field as comprised by both analysts and policy-makers has traditionally drawn upon ontological and epistemological positions with a shared agreement ‘that there is a reality, which is differentiated, structured, and layered, and independent of mind’ and that ‘the purpose of analysis [is] to identify...self-evident things and material causes so that actors can accommodate themselves to the realm of necessity they engender’ (Patomaki and Wight 2000, 224; Campbell 1993, 7-8).<sup>2</sup> Thus, the practice of asserting that there is ‘secure grounds for judging knowledge claims’ and then adjudicating based on specific epistemological preferences—usually empiricism or rationalism—has been central to the production of knowledge in security studies (Smith 1996, 23). The entrenchment of cosmological realism has therefore disciplined what kinds of questions one can ask about the subjects, objects, and dynamics of security, the spectrum of research that is accepted as sound scholarship by the field, and the limits of our ‘ethical and practical horizons’ (Smith 1996, 13). To fall outside the constellation of cosmological realism is to fall outside what are constructed as the boundaries of proper academic inquiry and into the morass of ‘self-indulgent prolix’, relativism, and/or research that is not ‘policy relevant’ (Walt 1991; Wallace 1996).

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<sup>2</sup> For a far richer treatment of cosmology than is provided here, please see Beier (2004).

This is not to say that the mainstreamers of (human) security studies form a completely unified front. There has been considerable disagreement over the proper method(s) to achieve the shared aims of accumulating a pure knowledge of security and its subjects/objects/dynamics free of subjective mediation; one thinks of the traditionalist vs. behavioural debates or more recent conflagrations between positivists and social constructivists of the Wendtian persuasion as examples.<sup>3</sup> All is certainly not harmonious as there are strident accusations about a lack of rigour and vehement arguments over the proper methods to employ in the production of knowledge. Yet, despite the identification of clear demarcations by those who fall within the orbit of cosmological realism, ontologically and epistemologically the differences from afar look rather slight.

As a specific discursive formation, human security has drawn upon the power/knowledge of security, medicine, psychology, economics, sociology, ethics, criminology, diplomacy, environmentalism, international relations, actuary science, and even humanist ethical modalities in order to incite discussion and to invite the production of knowledge of ‘the human’ and of ‘security’ which are necessary to engage in biopolitical management. Thus human security has developed its own contours, great debates, and contested concepts that are constituted by the interplay of these broader discourses. Yet despite the seeming diversity of its discursive catalysts and disciplinary influences, the human security literature remains imbricated within the patterns of thought made possible by cosmological realism. There are understated,

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<sup>3</sup> This reading of the ‘great debates’ is somewhat different than is traditionally understood, especially in terms of the representation of Wendtian constructivism as cosmologically ‘realist’. A strong case can be made that Wendt’s constructivism is betrayed by a strand of philosophical realism that actually nullifies any meaningful role for ideas and discourse in international politics by naturalising objects and subjects as being immune to subjective interpretation. This leads to later arguments that certain material conditions necessarily require a set of responses regardless of social context. At the levels of ontology and epistemology, this is certainly not a radical departure from neorealist or liberal institutionalist understandings of the relationship between the world, our thoughts about it, and prudential action. See Wendt (1999); Smith (2000b); and Doty (2000).

yet politically significant, assumptions that are shared within the literature. As such, they demand critical engagement. Of utmost importance is the ongoing obsession with providing a (universal) definition of human (in)security, the attempts at measuring/quantifying human (in)security, and the debates over the necessity of human security as a regulatory theory/practice based on social, political, and economic conditions that are claimed to be indisputably ‘out there’ in the material world.

### **Defining Human Security**

All fields of knowledge and their associated discourses are defined and redefined by internal debates. However, the actual space for debate may be far more limited than is commonly understood at first appearances. Discourses construct both the boundaries of conversation and the resulting accounts of reality by stealth; it is the actual incitement to discourse (i.e., the grounds for dispute) that channels disagreements into certain frameworks within which the ‘disagreement’ hides the shared allegiance to deeper structures of thought that contain their disagreements (Gusterson 1999: 326-327). The human security discourse has been an example *par excellence* at how to manage the incitement to discourse in such a way that otherwise progressive debates become subsumed within an allegiance that ultimately does little to challenge the power-relations constitutive of contemporary biopolitical regulation.

Within the constraints imposed by the contemporary regime of truth, commentators on human security have been conditioned to propose definitions of human security that claim to be objectively verifiable. Much effort has been exerted in demonstrating the utility of particular conceptualizations over others to reflect/preserve the logics of cosmological realism. The definitional quandary has been motivated by two inter-related imperatives. The first is to establish a concrete—

and preferably universal—definition of human security in order to build statistical models that establish causal relationships and/or correlations between its prerequisite conditions and other objectively verifiable material factors. As such, it is thought that a clear and concise definition of human security is required in order to isolate variables and to hypothesize on the links between human (in)security in global populations and political, social, economic, and/or cultural conditions (King and Murray 2001-02; Lonergan et al 2000). In order to achieve the goal of an accurate topology of threat and the probability of manifestation requires tightly constructed concepts and clearly demarcated borders between relevance and irrelevance. Any ‘definitional expansiveness’ as Roland Paris has remarked ‘pose[s] a problem for researchers who might be interested in investigating the causes of human security (or insecurity) because it [is] not clear exactly what they should be examining’ (Paris 2005, 479).

The second imperative is the desire to be able to suggest an unambiguous set of policy prescriptions that are engendered by precise accounts of human security. Given the bounded continuum of potential epistemological positions found within cosmological realism, the shared belief—despite disagreements over competing definitions—is that only those conceptualisations that can provide some (probable) account of the causal relationships between phenomena have any merit. To this end, Andrew Mack has argued:

‘broad’ conceptions of human security draw our attention to the fact that a lot of bad things—war, poverty, bad governance, etc.—are interconnected. This is both true and unhelpful. It is unhelpful because if one wishes to examine the interconnections between war, poverty, and governance, then each must be treated separately for the purposes of the analysis. Any definition that

conflates dependent and independent variables renders causal analysis virtually impossible. A concept that aspires to explain almost everything in reality explains nothing (Mack 2005, 367).

From this perspective, the inability (or unwillingness) of a definition to demonstrate causality leads to an immediate discounting; as discussed above, if one cannot use a definition of human security to explain the absolute causes of human (in)security, then it is not worth considering. As such, the implicit disciplinary politics of the research put forward is that rigorous scholarship must establish causal relationships that can be translated into clear policy prescriptions and be deployed by key actors.

The desire to be slotted within (existing) policy frameworks becomes very apparent in Gary King and Christopher Murray's lament that:

virtually every person we spoke with [in informal off-the-record interviews] was concerned that there existed no widely accepted or coherent definition of human security and that there were considerable conceptual problems in relating human security, human development, and the development focus on poverty together in the articulation of foreign policy (King and Murray 2001-02, 592).

Therefore, the intended audience figures prominently as a referent object in the foreground of the discourse.

It is the prominent aspiration to power/knowledge within the discursive formation at play—that is the need to be policy relevant without upsetting the foundations of contemporary global power-relations—which produces an incitement to discourse which concurrently locates, classifies, and categorizes any definitional statement of human security within one of two camps. While the actual classificatory labels may differ depending on the context—sometimes as freedom from want vs.

freedom from fear, development vs. violence, or broad vs. narrow as seen above— they are usually represented as a binary opposition.

For example, the United Nations' has taken an inclusive view by conceptualising human security as seven inter-related components: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, communal security, and political security (UNDP 1995). The argument is that without security in these areas, populations are not free to exercise the full range of choices offered by human development (UNDP 1995, 230). Moreover, by representing these risk areas as being trans-national in cause and effect, the UN has attempted to shift away from a narrow 'territorial security to a much greater stress on people's security' with the hope of being able to establish global safeguards against these risks (UNDP 1995, 230). In contrast, the *Human Security Report* defines human security as 'the complex of inter-related threats associated with civil war, genocide and the displacement of populations' based on the justification that 'if the term "insecurity" embraces almost all forms of harm to individuals...it loses any real descriptive power' (Human Security Report 2005, viii; Mack 2004, 367).<sup>4</sup>

As such, the relationship between expressions has often been constructed by those engaged in the human security discourse as being inherently incompatible, and in conflict, with individual analysts erecting preferential hierarchies based on his/her own predispositions. Within competing accounts, the value of specific international initiatives are judged based on which definitional camp one sees the actions falling within. The incitement to discourse brought about by contested definitions has also extended into foreign policy analysis where the classifications—'freedom from fear'

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Mack was the lead researcher of the Human Security Report.

and ‘freedom from want’—became analytic shorthand for describing the security and diplomatic practices of states such as Canada, Japan, and Norway.

However, the definitional dilemma has also provided the discursive space for a *via media*, a middle ground that has been seized by some analysts as a means of reconciling what are represented as two contending camps. For example, David Roberts (2006) has argued that in focussing on defining human security, analysts have conceptualised the phenomena the wrong way around. He advocates for the focus to move to notions of human insecurity as defined by

avoidable civilian deaths, global in reach, that are caused by changeable human-built social, political, economic, cultural, or belief structures, created, inhabited and operated by other civilians whose work or conduct, indirectly and/or directly, unintentionally, unnecessarily and avoidably causes *needless* mortality around the world (emphasis added) (Roberts 2006: 258).

The attraction for Roberts is that his conceptual move is able to marry the precision of narrow violence-based accounts of human security with the intuitive appeal of broader narratives that bring in aspects associated with underdevelopment and poverty.

Similarly, Taylor Owen has presented a ‘threshold’ based definition for human security which he claims ‘requires sacrifice on the part of both broad and narrow opponents’ (Owen 2004, 382). His rationale is that the concept needs some definitional flexibility based on the ‘actual severity’ posed by all threats; only those that surpassed a threshold (as decided by the international community) would be considered human security issues (Owen 2004, 384).<sup>5</sup> However, Owen notes a potential limitation is that his definition would likely set a relatively high threshold level, thus ‘only including harms that require military pressure’ (Owen 2004, 384).

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<sup>5</sup> It bears noting that Owen’s identification of a political element to the categorization of issues as human security threats bears close resemblance to an argument that will be presented below about the relationship between politics and (human) security theory/practice.

From a perspective interested in what these discussions reveal about the discursive formation as opposed to the linguistic meaning of specific terms deployed within it, what is of most interest here is that the ontological and epistemological justifications for rapprochement remain tied within the ideational orbit of cosmological realism. As Roberts notes with respect to his definition of human insecurity ‘this notion, then, accepts that there is justification for a more maximalist perspective of human security, but also seeks to energize the debate with a *positivist and empirical* approach to defining limits’ (emphasis added) (Roberts 2006, 260). Similarly, Owen holds steadfast to the opinion that ‘a definition must be able to separate and categorize all possible threats for *meaningful* analytic study’ (Owen 2004, 383).

### **Measuring Human Security**

In addition to cosmological realism’s disciplining move of equating definitional clarity and utility to causal analysis within the human security discourse, it has also greatly influenced a desire to be able to quantify the concept through the adoption of universal categories of measurement in order to determine its presence and/or absence within specifically defined territorial spaces and the populations who are said to live within them. The statistical models that have been deployed within the human security discourse reveals the privileged position of a technological rationality necessary for effective biopolitical management at the heart of many human security analyses (King and Murray 2000-01; Lonergan 2000; Bogardi 2004). It is the embracement of extremely rigid positions with respect to the faith of quantitative measure to accurately capture ‘reality’—and the assumption that such measures are necessary to talk of human security—that narrows the discursive space for onto-political reflection.

Although the *Human Security Report* argues that ‘it is not possible at present—and may not even be desirable—to produce a reliable human security index’ it still argues that quantifying human (in)security can be undertaken scientifically because ‘it is possible to determine which countries are most threatened by political violence, human rights abuse and instability’ (Human Security Report 2006, 90). As such, the report makes use of available data-sets including the *Uppsala/Human Security Report* data-set, the University of North Carolina’s (Ashville) *Political Terror Index*, the United Nation’s *Global Report on Crime and Justice*, and the World Bank’s *Political Instability and Absence of Violence Index* to present snapshots of the levels of inter/intra state conflict, political violence, human rights abuses, homicide, sexual assault, and other forms of physical coercion/force around the world. The contributors to the report admit that data reliability tends to be strongest at the macro level in terms of categories like the outbreak of inter-state warfare, as data can be easily collected, and independently verified, as opposed to the micro-level where data collection—particularly under-reporting— and the lack of third party confirmation provide less rigorous results (Human Security Report 2005, 91). Yet, the report articulates a strong belief that the narrow (or violence based) definition of human security can be accurately quantified. However, it bears noting that given the data limits identified by the authors of the report itself, the territorial state as a unit—a proxy for the general population of bounded political territory—as opposed to the individual or communities, must become the referent object for study. Thus, geopolitical logics can operate hand in hand with biopolitical surveillance to produce key directives about potential sites of (non)intervention.

The most significant— and perhaps most (in)famous—quantitative measure of human security is the ‘generalized poverty’ model put forward by King and Murray

(2001-02). Basing measurement on the ‘number of years of future life spent outside a state of generalized poverty’, they then go on to present a mathematical formula that is said to capture the entire experience of human security:

$$YIHS_i = \int_0^{\infty} [1 - P_i(t|\tau)]S_i(t)\delta^t dt$$

where  $P(t | \blacksquare)$  is the probability of individual  $i$  being in a state of generalized poverty at time  $t$  given a vector of thresholds  $\blacksquare$  that define generalized poverty in critical domains of well-being, conditional on being alive, and  $S(t)$  is the probability that the individual is alive at time  $t$  (the so-called survivorship function) (King and Murray 2001-02, 609).

Much like the biopolitical rationalities that drive the insurance industry, their central justification is that this model best fits with the demands of ‘risk assessment, prevention, protection, and compensation’ necessary for the provision of human security (King and Murray 2001-02, 586). Thus, for King and Murray, human security and its measurement become a type of actuary science that analyses ‘those domains of well-being that have been important enough for human beings to fight over or to put their property at risk’ (King and Murray 2001-02, 593). What becomes important is what can be accurately measured; no consideration is given to what (in)securities cannot be articulated by quantitative models or the political consequences of a risk-based matrix for those who become subject to measurement.

With the concern over taming uncertainty and mitigating risk, human security becomes a ‘principle of political rationality preoccupied with the promotion of species existence and the exercise of power over life through governmental practice’ requiring that various ways of life be ‘differentiated, corrected, punished, and if necessary eliminated’ (Dillon 2007, 42; 43). Paradoxically, death becomes a tactic in the production of life worth living. In other words, (managed) death on varying scales is

attached to the provision of human security from the reservations of North America to the cityscapes of Iraq. Therefore, within the calculations of prudential policy action, Roberts' (2006) 'needless' mortality threshold becomes too important a question to be left simply to 'scientific' analysis; the biopolitical decisions and rationales behind 'needed' mortality and those measures instituted to prevent 'needless' mortality must be open to political contestation and resistance by affected populations and analysts.

### **Epistemological Realism and Human Security**

Within the incitement to discourse fostered by the concept of human security, it is sometimes argued that even in the absence of clear universal definitions and quantitative measurements—or the causal analysis which these make possible—the adoption of more inclusive and less rigid approaches can provide a meaningful account of human (in)security (Bubandt 2005; Hudson 2005; Newman 2001). Thus strict deductive accounts of human security that aim for universalism are discounted as sacrificing analytic depth within specific contexts in return for analytic breadth in terms of contextual applicability to a broader biopolitical environment. Yet, even within the universal/particular debate, cosmological realism looms large on both sides of the argument. For example, in a critique of Roland Paris' (2000-01) provocative dismissal of human security as a concept without any analytic value, Ralph Pettman has argued that providing a rich account:

requires casting human security first of all in the politico-cultural terms that are dominant in our day, namely, the terms set by Rationalism...it means articulating human security set by the analytical languages that Rationalism provides, and in the terms set by the ways of being and knowing that Rationalism does not provide...[this] is a mind move that leads to radically competing accounts of human security, as well as to articulations of human

security from the perspectives of the margins that Rationalism makes (Pettman 2005, 139).

The call for context specific accounts of security has been echoed by other researchers, with variations being determined by categories such as time, space, territory, and identities (Booth 1991; Buzan et al 1998). Pettman advocates a reinvigorated empiricism which is able to transcend any limits imposed by the meta-narrative of Rationalism. He argues that ‘we can have precise and meaningful purchase upon human security as a concept by couching it in the context of a concise, comprehensive and systematic account of world affairs’ (Pettman 2005, 139).

As such, in ‘inviting a more extensive empirical purview of more diverse issues’, Pettman asserts that human security draws attention to insecurities generated by HIV/AIDS, gender inequality, marginalised religious ontologies, and environmental degradation whose ‘transnational challenges are difficult to meet in a world built around the expectation of state-centric competition’ (Pettman 2005, 139; 143). Human security and the conditions that generate human insecurity—material, ideological, and discursive—can be discovered, identified, classified and transformed into unmediated knowledge within appropriate contexts and made amenable to global governmentality. The universal pretension is dropped, but Pettman does not seem comfortable in taking the next step by drawing out the politics of interpretation that is central to the identification of (human) security threats. Thus, within his configuration, as critical as it may be of the marginalising moves of Rationalism, human security remains to be treated as a material object that can be ascertained, become known in an unmediated form, and then serve as the basis for a proficient and effective biopolitics. There continues to be a reliance on being able to deploy (interpretative) authority in order to make the argument that such and such an issue is

clearly a matter of human security and that human security threats exist independently of our thoughts about them. These are all claims that are worthy of significant attention for their widespread acceptance makes possible a particular kind of security politics at odds with the progressive claims of human security adherents.

As a key nodal point, the spectre of cosmological realism is inextricably intertwined into the contours of the incitement to discourse within human security. At the same time, the definitional politics of human security are themselves inextricably intertwined within a highly constricted political realm where not all relations of power are open to questioning in the calculation of risk.<sup>6</sup> It is only those relations defined within contemporary political discourses as pathological such as civil wars, failed states, or genocide that are to be assessed while capitalism, liberal democracy, and Western hegemony are beyond reproach. Thus, with the embracement of technical rationality, the last vestiges of the ‘political’ in contemporary life must struggle to survive. How has this become possible? Given the outline above, what is it about human security’s incitement to discourse that encourages the entrenchment of cosmological realism and the accompanying structural limits on debate?

In making sense of the politics of definitional questions within the human security discourse, Kyle Grayson has noted that:

it is imperative that the “aspiration to power” that is inherent in any definitional claim be exposed and debated in terms of both what is positively affirmed as comprising human security and what is concurrently disqualified;

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<sup>6</sup> Jenny Edkins has demonstrated that what is generally considered to comprise the field of politics: ‘elections, political parties, the doings of government and parliaments, the state apparatus... treaties, international agreements, diplomacy, wars, and the actions of statespersons’ is a product of ideological contestation within the realm of the political. Therefore the political ‘has to do with the establishment of that very social order which sets out a particular, historically specific account of what counts as politics and defines other areas of social life as *not* politics’ (Edkins 1999, 2). The realm of politics thus takes the foundations and the relationships fostered for granted (and in fact is reliant on these foundations/relationships in order to function) whereas there is the possibility for meaningful challenges to these foundations/relationships within the expanses of the political.

there must be analytic sensitivity given to the people places and things that are marginalized when an “expert” claims to be providing a precise/scientific/workable definition of human security that is of practical use (Foucault 2003, 10 quoted in Grayson 2004, 357).

The ultimate target for analysis should therefore remain focussed on the ‘power that is constitutive of the power/knowledge of human security’ (Grayson 2004, 357). As such, human security’s incitement to discourse is infused with a set of power-relations predisposed towards the ontological, epistemological, and analytic status quo that are conducive the continued operation of contemporary biopolitical rationalities. In part, the amenability of human security to the rationalities of biopolitical regulation is made possible by a cultural context within which it is believed that an unmediated truth can be grasped following these methods and, more importantly, that there is a duty to grasp truth in this way in order to govern in a responsible manner and/or provide guidance to others who should be encouraged to do so.

As has been shown above, the human security discourse has embraced traditional (social) science as a means by which to determine the truth claims of contending positions about what human (in)security entails. The shedding of ethical concerns as unwieldy and imprecise based on the standards of cosmological realism serve to limit what can be accepted as open to debate within the discourse. To this end, both Asuncion St. Clair (2004) and Des Gasper (2005) have labelled human security as a boundary object that in bridging across several areas of knowledge must maintain a restricted amount of malleability in order to ‘keep sufficient shared meaning across the range of users’ (Gasper 2005, 235). In potentially promoting a level of communicative coherence across domains, cosmological realism functions as a gatekeeper, preventing the intrusion of anything that might unsettle shared norms

about what can count as knowledge. As such, the human security discourse harbours an inherent analytic conservatism.

But this conservatism goes beyond the realm of analysis and reveals the acceptance of specific cultural norms about what it means to be a ‘good’ analyst. As has been demonstrated above, the obsession with an unmediated precision directly relates to a far-reaching fetish within (human) security studies with respect to a vulgar understanding of ‘policy-relevance’.<sup>7</sup> The intended audience for research remains the policy community, primarily defined by those in positions of authority within state, inter-state structures, and/or the civil society institutions that have been acculturated within them. Like security studies, the field of human security has been shaped by the perceived need of the intended audience. As such, contending definitions of human security, whether wide, narrow, or *via media* have been disciplined by this desire to integrate—if not ingratiate—themselves into the power-relations that constitute the dominant structures of biopolitical order in global politics such as the state, international law including the principle of sovereignty, multilateralism, capitalism, liberal democracy, and even (just) war.

The revelation at play is that human security is conceived as a compliment to existing power structures, mitigating some of their most abhorrent effects without actually attempting to problematise their constitutive relations, or what makes these possible. Thus, the definitional debate is able to reveal that:

by discursively discounting critical definitions of human security that seek to transform rather than problem solve as ‘unworkable’, we...see the retention of

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<sup>7</sup> It also bears noting that for analysts so concerned with policy-relevance, there seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding of the importance of concrete definitions for the policy process. After all, the latest reconfiguration in biopolitical regulation has been catalysed by the contingencies said to seed from the phenomena of terrorism. Yet what constitutes terrorism remains a highly contested issue even within Western governments. Moreover, from a practical standpoint, definitional malleability has great political utility for it easier to justify the expansion or narrowing of policy agendas from first principles when one can change how s/he is defining a concept with relative ease.

the impulse to unreflexively meet knowledge needs expressed by the policy community, needs that are themselves attempts to disengage politically by commandeering the academic enterprise towards the reinforcement of analytic frameworks that are amenable to the status quo (Grayson 2003, 342).

Global human (in)security is therefore positioned as external to the Western hegemonic block arising either through the untameable forces of globalisation or resulting directly from the bad governance of identifiable rogues in the global south. Not all potential instances of civil wars, failed states, genocides, et cetera are interpreted in the same way. Both analysis and action are constituted by representational practices that frame some issues as those to be defined under the human security moniker (e.g., Kosovo) while others are not (e.g., New Orleans).

Within this *mis en scène* made possible by dominant representations of the worthiness of the self and the turpitude of the other, global biopolitics becomes an issue of the West managing the ‘ways of living’ of the Rest. The impact of the policy community on the human security discourse is either seen as beneficial or, at worst, as a necessary element for a fully functional human security agenda that makes an impact on the everyday lives of the globally insecure (Axworthy 1997; Axworthy 2001; Hubert and McRae 2003; Hubert 2004; Thomas and Tow 2002ab). However, it is vital not to lose track of the power-relations that are constitutive of this dynamic.

Gaspar notes that boundary objects like human security require boundary organizations that ‘regulate the trade in ambiguous meanings [if any]...control the influence of politics on approval of knowledge claims...[and] regulate the influence of knowledge claims on politics in order to prevent technocratic rule by values that are undeclared and not democratically considered’ (Gaspar 2005, 235). To this end, St. Clair argues that a boundary organization works best when the boundary object is

infused with ethical meanings (St. Clair, 2004). But within the human security discourse, the boundary object itself (i.e., cosmological realism) denies the efficacy of further ethical consideration apart from an initial biopolitical imperative to undertake a ‘responsibility to protect’ and/or to allow for people to exercise safely and freely a specific set of choices which fall under liberal governance structures (UNDP 1995, 230). This falls well short of Gasper’s (2005) ideal. Thus, the discursive space for the engagement of assorted ethical modalities is absent in discussions of human (in)security, for once the initial buy-in to the original ethical imperative is made to foster life that can exercise certain choices (i.e., a life worth living), the discourse transforms into a narrow technical evaluation of how to best fulfil that specific biopolitical imperative. In other words, there is an absence of recognition that serious ethical considerations do not evaporate once one decides to act according to some professed ethical standard. These dilemmas are ongoing, often beyond sufficient decision, and thus in need of constant scrutiny and/or critique.

Moreover, while there is not a firmly established boundary organization per se in the sense conceptualised by Gasper (2005), the mainstreamers of the (human) security studies community and policy communities are certainly the self-appointed arbitrators of the boundaries of ‘truth’ within the discourse of human security. And of the course, the crux of the problem is that both are completely incapable of recognizing how the assumptions of cosmological realism are themselves ‘values’ that make possible a particular kind of human security politics that focuses on promoting one kind of life over others.

As mentioned above, the definitional debate produces a desire for quantifiable models of human security that are argued to be of great utility to both academics and policy-makers. Within the human security discourse, it is indices, statistics, and other

indicators that are believed to give the global community a scientific purchase on the state of human (in)security within populations and the potential causal linkages between variables. Again though, the practices of quantification attempt to constrict the human security discourse to those elements that can be ‘measured’, a move that even proponents argue severely limits what can be discussed and/or analysed (Human Security Report 2005, 91).

More importantly, there is a failure to recognize that these measurements are not as close to unmediated truth as one can possibly get in the absence of more comprehensive and reliable data; rather, the human security statistics bear no relevance or purchase on knowledge outside of the analytic framework that produced them. This is certainly not ‘truth’ in the sense proposed by cosmological realism, as in the end, it can be revealed as an interpretation produced by a common-sense which is derivative of existing power-relations (Murphy and Tooze 1991; Smith 1997). Thus, it can and should be subject to questions that extend beyond the methodological. All interpretations brought forward in the human security discourse beg for a political interrogation of the interpretative and representational frameworks that made them possible. Yet, the influential discussions of the mainstreamers remain in constant revolution around the nodal points of cosmological realism and policy relevance that form essential aspects of the broader biopolitical project.

Once again, it is important not to overlook how the impulse to quantify changes our perceptions of that which—or in this case who—we want to analyse. In measuring human security in quantitative terms, the secure as much as the insecure too often transform from subjects with political agency into political objects to be used as indicators of the inferiority—or superiority—of ‘ways of life’ (Johnson 2002, 211). In other words, human security also allows for the rationalisation of biopolitics,

in addition to serving as avenue for biopolitical rationalities to be operationalised. At best it means that the insecure are to be treated as patients in need of Western help and support. While this need not necessarily be considered troubling, problems exponentially multiply when the patient is denied opportunities of voice. And without voice, without an imperative to listen, to begin to hear of alternative life ways and bodies of knowledge that derive outside of cosmological realism, there is the ever present danger of capriciously producing precarious life in the quest to make a human being 'secure' (Butler 2004). Moreover, when the political object is categorised as a risk and thus conceptualised as a probable threat to 'species life' at some point in the not-so distant future, the ability for such a voice to be heard is greatly circumscribed (Dillon 2007, 8)

Therefore, from a perspective interested in the human security discourse, how it incites a particular kinds of debate as opposed to another, and the political consequences that are made possible, the most important limitation is the field's inability to admit that however we choose to define security, how we define threats, and how we respond bears no unproblematic relationship to the materialism of the 'real' world. The definition of human security, what are posed as human security threats, and the policies administered at local, national, regional, and global levels to manage them are based on interpretations and speculations about the importance of factors—and factors of importance— as opposed to objectively grounded knowledge. This is not to claim that there are no dynamics that pose dangers to human beings. The point is a fine one; human security 'threats' only become defined as threats and gain political importance based on the interpretative framework deployed to analyse the world. In turn, rather than being a product of objective scientific inquiry, these interpretative frameworks (i.e., contending definitions of human security) are based

on particular *cultural* dispositions such as the desire for policy-relevance, the appearance of scientific neutrality, and the claimed abilities to mitigate risks, manage uncertainty, and eliminate threats.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the knowledge of human security is not unmediated and cannot be unmediated; it is power/knowledge and becomes an integral part of the actions and inactions of the current global biopolitical order.

As a discursive formation, human security has defined itself as representing a progressive break with the crude power-politics and security thinking of the past. Yet, as has been shown above, ontologically, epistemologically, and even methodological, the human security discourse has held steadfast to the foundations of the *ancien regime*. The admission of subjective interpretation and the rejection of epistemological realism which are growing staples of gender and critical IR/security studies literature have been completely by-passed (Nuruzzaman, 2006). For example, Pettman (2005) in his critique of Paris (2001) does have it partly right; Rationalism is unable to account for contextual (in)securities and thus marginalizes religion, gender, and the environment amongst other factors in its conceptualisations (human) security. However, Pettman's response is to fall into epistemological realism's game by declaring that recent events unequivocally demonstrate the necessity of adding issues like HIV/AIDS to human security agendas because of the clear and present dangers that these pose to the global community. It is an argument that in making an appeal to factual content relies on the audience to accept that the facts themselves are beyond any alternative forms of production and/or interpretation. Moreover, Pettman's interjection assumes that being identified as a population at risk and subject to

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<sup>8</sup> This does not necessary arise directly from ideological presuppositions or from mercenary calculations of self-interest as might be forwarded by neo-Marxian critiques—though, in fairness, (in)actions may be enabled at key junctures by these concerns. Rather, as a cultural product, (in)actions are made possible by the discursive formations and associated representation frameworks which currently fall outside contemporary political debate, but within which phenomena are processed, analysed, and ultimately acted upon.

biopolitical interventions to eliminate these risks is necessarily a positive turn of events; there is no consideration of the consequences of placing political subjects into the (human) security discourse.

At this juncture, it might appear that a contradiction is being forwarded. On the one hand it has been argued that cosmological realism unnecessarily limits the scope of what can be considered within the discourse of human security. On the other hand, it has just been argued that expanded agendas that might incorporate more progressive elements into their views of human security are also problematic because of the same reliance for justification within the orbit of cosmological realism. The point being made is that there are no good reasons for placing anything within *any* security framework independent of the criteria, preferences, and values expressed from within that security framework. Genocide, nuclear weapons, illicit drugs, or terrorism need not necessarily be defined as security threats, nor need they necessarily be defined as requiring any kind of action to intervene against what are considered to be their direct and indirect risks/dangers. As such, to gain a new political purchase on contemporary (human) security, to extricate ourselves beyond the limits of the human security's incitement to discourse, to begin to question and analyse the practices that are constituted and made possible by the discourse itself, requires a new analytic tack. In the remaining section, it is proposed that an onto-political sensitivity about the deployment of security frameworks raised in part by the literature on biopolitics has a considerable contribution to offer.

### **The Dilemma of Undecidability in the Biopolitical Age**

While the argument thus far has been critical of the biopolitics of human security, it does bear noting that the myriad forms of human misery and suffering to which human security ostensibly wishes to respond do demand forms of action and

engagement. However, responses should not be conceptualised from positions that deny the power-relations that make them possible; to do so is the very epitome of irresponsibility. Conversely, to completely disengage from practical action will accomplish very little to reduce levels of suffering. Inaction, a political stasis of paralysis in which we should refuse to act in order to disconnect from the biopolitical matrix can also be unacceptable. The invocation of a binary distinction to guide resistance does nothing to address the power-relations constitutive of the current political situation; letting die is, after all, a form of biopolitical management. Rather, the key ethical problematique to which biopolitics cogently speaks is that the question is not necessarily one of action or inaction, but rather how to remain cognizant of how forms of action and/or inaction advocated by human security definitions produce and maintain a system of global governmentality aimed at maximizing economies of biopower?

It is this ethical problematique which finds a resonance in William Connolly's investigation of the politics of suffering and the responsibility to (re)act. He argues that

the most difficult cases require not an ethics of help for the helpless but a political *ethos of critical engagement* between interdependent, contending constituencies implicated in asymmetrical structures of power. Indeed, some ways of acting upon obligations to the deserving poor or victims of natural disaster provide moral cover for the refusal to cultivate an ethics of engagement with constituencies in more ambiguous, disturbing, *competitive* positions (Connolly 1999, 129)

What this speaks to is the disciplinary power of 'clear' policy prescriptions engendered by the human security debate to foreclose the possibility of assistance in

instances where to do so makes us feel uncomfortable or threatens what is perceived as *the* correct way of living. Thus, Connolly's argument provides a new purchase on how it becomes possible ignore suffering or even institutionalise it as a part of broader biopolitical strategy.

Moreover, it is also essential to keep cognizant of how the inherently subjective forms of interpretation within the human security debate are presented as being beyond their own subjectivity. Rather, under the cloak of cosmological realism, they are presented as objective methods of ascertaining truth, a truth that may be universal or particular—depending on the definition being advanced—yet always unmediated. However, as David Campbell (2005) has argued, positions which appeal to realisms are themselves 'onto-political'. Thus, the broad, narrow, and *via media* accounts of human security that vie for exalted status of *the* best understanding of the concept contain 'fundamental presumptions that establish the possibilities within which...[an] assessment of actuality is presented (Campbell 2005, 128). It is the certainty that can be achieved in avoiding onto-political consideration that becomes so attractive within the human security debate. Avoiding onto-politics makes it possible for a definition to prove its worth through a careful analysis of facts backed by the legitimizing function of its method. The goal is of course to produce clear policy prescriptions which are taken on board by the policy community. Within this formulation of (bio)politics, there is no need to reconsider, no need to agonize over decisions, no need to be held accountable for the power-knowledge that is produced, and no need to question the regime of truth that legitimizes them; 'facts' simply cannot be denied. Tragically, the absolute absence of critical thinking demanded by the abdication of onto-political reflection produces the conditions within which gross irresponsibility and unaccountability can flourish.

Unless we reject the imperative of producing decidable decisions, Campbell notes via Derrida that we become the co-authors of an emaciated spectrum of policy possibility that is devoid of ethics, the political, and responsibility; the replacement is ‘a program, a technology, and its irresponsible application’ (Campbell 2005, 132). Therefore, the fiction that a decision can be sufficient, that a decision can definitively resolve the potentially irresolvable while remaining outside of onto-politics, is the most significant political act that is both constitutive of, and produced by, the biopolitical rationalities at the heart of the human security debate (Campbell 2005, 131).

For human security to represent a marked transformation in how security is conceptualised and a sign of progress in the field of security studies, the discursive formation that sets its limits and the incitement to discourse which shapes its debates must acknowledge that ‘no decision is sufficient, so we will have to make many and...see a constant oscillation and mobility between different positions’ (Campbell 2005, 131). The imposition of modes of being and becoming in the form of biopolitical rationalities that are pervasive within the human security discourse—including both ‘human’ and ‘security’—must be subject to critique (Connolly 1999). Given the conceptual, professional, and cultural obstacles faced by security analysts in extricating themselves from these modes of thinking, the call is not a simple one.

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