Toward a Sociology of "Security"

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Security as a phenomenon has come to occupy increasing social energy and thus merits sociological attention. But the question of how to go about studying "security" is somewhat vexing, because the concept of "security" is both highly polysemous (Ranasinghe 2013) and one that can potentially be located within a wide spectrum of social sites, ranging from the feelings of individuals to the practices of states. I suggest that we must first clarify what we are talking about when we talk about "security." Here, I present several ideas for fully articulating the concept.

KEY WORDS: discourse; disorder; security; practice; safety; surveillance.

INTRODUCTION

Vida Bajc (2013) rightfully calls attention to "security" as a phenomenon that has come to occupy increasing social energy and thus merits sociological attention. But, as Bajc notes, the question of how to go about studying "security" is somewhat vexing, because the concept of "security" is both highly polysemous (Ranasinghe 2013) and one that can potentially be located within a wide spectrum of social sites, ranging from the feelings of individuals to the practices of states. I suggest that we must first clarify what we are talking about when we talk about "security." In order to do so, we should distinguish between, first, "security" as an explicit object of discourse and practice (as when politicians justify curtailing civil liberties in the name of "national security," or schools install metal detectors in the name of students' security) and second, "security" as a broader analytic category encompassing a variety of phenomena relating to cultural understandings of safety and disorder (incorporating such disparate phenomena as unemployment, crime, and disease, each of which may or may not be explicitly articulated in terms of "security" by local actors).

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ARTICULATING SECURITY

These two senses of "security" are clearly related, but precisely how is an empirical question. All of the various types of insecurities discussed by Bajc may, or may not, be incorporated into explicit discourses and practices of security at different times and places. My point here is that analyzing how sites of uncertainty (such as climate change or economic crisis)[2] may become incorporated into extant discourses and practices of "security" is one possible approach, while declaring that we as sociologists are prepared to declare that all phenomena pertaining to safety, disorder, and uncertainty comprise a larger phenomenon, which we label "security," is another. While Bajc, in her essay, seems to take the second approach, my research on the historical emergence of the discourse of "terrorism" and the field of terrorism expertise (Stampnitzky 2011, 2013) is situated within the first.

Bajc's essay suggests a number of possible avenues for fruitful discussion, but I will focus on the role of experts in the production of and dissemination of "security" (see also Berda 2013; Sáenz 2013). A key finding of my research is that it makes little sense to think of the production of discourses and practices around "terrorism" in terms of an ideal-typical notion of rationalization, in which designated experts collect information about a clearly delineated phenomenon, which in turn enables them to design and enact practices and procedures that result in greater predictability and control. Bajc paints a picture in which multiple realms of society are moving toward ever-increasing forms of domination through a variety of rational practices (among which she highlights surveillance in particular) in the name of "security." She writes of "professionals" whose "training and knowledge...endow them with authority and legitimacy," and who will eventually be able to "envision future behavior, to think out activity before it happens and to imagine how action will evolve in the future" (Bajc 2013: 619). Referencing the massive amounts of data being collected by governments and private organizations, she suggests that this information will be made available to professionals who will then analyze these data and convert them into actionable intelligence. And she references a notion of "exclusionary classification" which "allows the creators to divide the world into taxonomies in such a way that each person can be unambiguously positioned into a single category, information related to such category accumulated methodically, and specifications devised on how to act on this information" (Bajc 2013: 619).

Yet my research on (counter)terrorism expertise belies this vision of governance through rationalizing knowledge. Efforts to define, predict, and control the problem of "terrorism" through rational governance have repeatedly fallen short. It is often not even clear who is a legitimate terrorism expert at all, for this field of expertise (like many in the "security" realm) is one which lacks firm boundaries and credentials. Further, the very definition of "terrorism" is

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[2] The Department of Defense has produced reports calling for attention to both climate change and inequality as potential security threats.

endlessly debated, and experts generally lack the authority to settle this conflict. Individuals, organizations, and even states may be simultaneously categorized as (potential or actual) terrorists/sympathizers/sponsors by one arm of the state, and yet remain in the good graces of another. There has indeed been a massive effort of data collection through surveillance and other practices, but this has, in practice, led to a mountain of data that cannot be adequately processed. And this is not merely a technical problem; it is a problem of political classification and categorization. Experts' attempts to stabilize the definition of terrorism and to capture its workings within databases, laws, simulations, and other techniques of analysis, prediction, and control have continually escaped their grasp. Ambiguity pervades both the delineation of who is or is not an expert and who is or is not a terrorist (Stampnitzky 2013).

CONCLUSION

In sum, the practices and discourses of "security" in the contemporary United States cannot best be summarized as an arena in which control is produced through increasing rationalization. This does not mean that practices organized around and justified by "security" do not play an increasing role in the governance of American (and international) society. But it does mean that if we wish to understand how power operates in and through discourses practices of security, we cannot merely assume that these practices operate in a coherent manner. Rather, it suggests a need for further, detailed studies of specific security practices and discourses through which we can discover the contradictions and discontinuities through which they are enacted.

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