

compartmentalising death: retrospective security and the modern state

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Book reviewed:

Death and Security: Memory and Mortality at the Bombsite

Charlotte Heath-Kelly (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016), 208 pp., ISBN: 978-1784993139

Against the backdrop of invasive security measures justified by the global threat of terrorism, what drives the incessant pursuit of security? In *Death and Security: Memory and Mortality at the Bombsite*, Charlotte Heath-Kelly argues that security functions to efface mortality. The very “knowledge of inevitable impermanence” threatens state sovereignty, which depends on the state’s ability to protect its citizens (2). Death reveals that the state is no God that has everything under its control, disrupting the illusion of the state power.

The book substantiates its philosophical insight with a deep comparative study of the memorialisation of post-terrorist bombsites: the World Trade Centre, the London bombings, the Bali bombing and the Norwegian sites attacked by Anders Breivik. If security is a technique of mitigating mortality, why do states commission colossal and costly representations of death and suffering within the polity? Heath-Kelly argues that memorialisation functions as a retrospective “security practice that identifies danger as emerging from the past”, re-narrating the event and locating it in memory (153). The extensive interviews with stakeholders at the memorial sites help unmask the state’s pressure to endow memorials with the meaning of resilience rather than absence and loss.

Death and Security is a welcome contribution to Critical Security Studies,

challenging the field's widespread representation of the state as an omnipotent security actor. As such, the more security there is, the more desperate the state is to maintain its political authority. The power of the state is not equivalent to the strength of its control. Albeit not directly addressing securitisation theory, the book sheds new light on securitisation processes. It demonstrates that the motivations behind securitisation are not merely affirmative—that is, the desire of state elites to further their interests by turning issues into matters of national security.

Securitisation can also be reactionary, functioning to erase the imprints of mortality by compartmentalising it into threat-objects and then exorcising it through security action (20). The empirical fieldwork on the sites screaming about the fatal failure to secure reinvents the state as a scared child trying to cover up its mess. In the post-Snowden era, unclocking security as a masquerade that conceals the state's powerlessness against death is a push towards more resolute societal resistance to coercive security practices.

Nonetheless, without scrutinising its notion of mortality, the book's move to fix it as the foundation of security is inherently problematic. The author finds that “nothing significant has changed since previous eras of security. Security still effaces the prospect of mortality” (32). Yet, the meaning of mortality is prone to change. The book itself does not discuss just any instances of death, but rather premediated killings on “Western” sites. Its “mortality” is innately selective, for not everything threatens state authority that involves dead bodies. Death anxiety depends not on the fact that humans eventually die, but rather on whether the state perceives death to be a threat.

Without appreciating the extent to which the notion of mortality is socially constructed, *Death and Security* assumes that security must have some existential driving force. Whereas dangers are “constructed threats that serve the project of statecraft”, mortality itself seems to exist in an unmediated vacuum (10). Consequently, security action in relation to practically any case of death can be interpreted as the “organic” behaviour of the state in modernity. Instead, it can be argued that the intertwinement of *Death and Security* means that both are mutually constitutive. Where we find the performance of mortality as a threat to state sovereignty, there is already likely to be security.

The problem originates from viewing the performance of security as a prerogative of the state. Security seems not to exist before the state enters the scene. The simplistic

narrative that the emergence of rationalism and secularism “accidentally unleashed mortality” presents the latter as an objective fact of life, the sudden discovery of which caused the state to “invent” security (176). Hence, mortality as a threat to sovereignty cannot be constructed before the state invents security. Heath-Kelly inadvertently privileges the state by conceptualising security from its standpoint. A genealogy of “mortality” could uncover other security actors involved in the multi-layered process that has enacted death anxiety possibly as a mechanism for manipulating the state. Ultimately, conceptualising security from the perspective of other actors may dismantle the ontological relationship between *Death and Security*. Despite these shortcomings, *Death and Security* establishes new paths by which critical-minded scholars of International Relations can understand the logic of state security.

About the Author

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