

*An Analytical Survey of Critical Security Studies:  
Making the Case for a (Modified) Post-structuralist Approach*

(YCISS WORKING PAPER #53.)

Jennifer Mustapha  
Department of Political Science  
McMaster University

(April 2011)

Broadly stated, this essay is an analytical review of different approaches to theorizing security with an emphasis on the variety of approaches that can be loosely termed “critical.”<sup>1</sup> Importantly, I seek to highlight the relevance of ontological theorizations in debates about the meaning and definition of “security.” In doing so, I hope to call attention to the many nuances of the critical security studies literature and ultimately argue the benefits of employing a (modified) post-structuralist<sup>2</sup> approach to understanding security. This “modification” is necessary because there is an inclination within some critical post-structuralist approaches to conflate epistemological commitments with ontological ones. This can be observed in what is arguably an unsustainable leap of reasoning, where acknowledgement of the indeterminacy of competing truth claims turns into an unwillingness to make any claims at all. In other words, the subject of security risks becoming invisible in the wake of continuous contestations about the dangers of essentialism and about the meaning of security itself. This is problematic on several fronts, such as in the context of critical approaches that make emancipatory declarations on behalf of the individual. The good news is that this is not necessarily the logical end-point of post-structuralist critiques, nor is it an indictment against the overall benefit of employing them. Furthermore, this analysis is not meant to detract from the core intention of a post-structuralist ethic, which seeks to interrogate and deconstruct the very meaning of security and the ways in which it is talked about.

Nevertheless, I argue that deconstruction is only a first step, and as Baudrillard and Lotringer (1987) have observed, “discourse is discourse, but the operations, strategies, and schemes played out there are real.” I hope to demonstrate why this reflection is crucial to an intellectually genuine post-structuralist ethic and is an important corrective against the straw-figure postmodernist who

---

<sup>1</sup> These “critical” approaches include post-structuralist approaches that emphasize the importance of discourse, inter-subjectivity and non-traditional elements of analysis such as gender, and that pose a meta-theoretical challenge to realist ontology.

<sup>2</sup> As Fierke (2007) has suggested, labels can be problematic since they mean different things to different people. The term “post-structuralist” is often understood to be synonymous with anti-essentialist postmodernism or anti-foundationalism. Instead, it is used here in the broadest sense, and refers to those approaches that, as a point of departure from the mainstream, deconstruct and level meta-theoretical challenges to the presuppositions of realist and modernist-traditionalist ontology. In this way, “post-structuralism” refers to an umbrella category that can include a wide variety of approaches. Examples include, but are not limited to, anti-essentialist postmodernism, as well as some approaches that utilize feminist and post-colonial critique, and as will be demonstrated, those approaches that seek to re-construct foundations utilizing weak ontologies.

becomes an amoral nihilist trapped in discourse, unwilling to meaningfully engage the status quo on the basis of our allegedly inherent inability to make truth claims. While this straw-figure is often disingenuously and unfairly evoked in critiques of “postmodernism,” this does not absolve the proponents of critical post-structuralist security approaches from engaging with these concerns. That is part of what this essay seeks to do. Using Stephen K. White’s (2000) arguments for the viability of “weak ontologies,” I suggest that a critical post-structuralist approach does not need to be anathema to the making of claims, nor should it be seen as suffering from a paralytic disjuncture from the “real world”. Rather, maintaining critical commitments can mean being reflexive about the inter-subjectivity and indeterminacy of the claims that *are* ultimately made, and of being accountable to them. Notably, due to the emphasis on ontology, the “map” of critical security studies employed here looks different from the more common formulations of the field, such as those employed by Ken Booth (2005) and Krause and Williams (1996). The hope is that by breaking away from such familiar categorizations, my points about deconstruction/reconstruction and strong/weak ontology can be better explained.

### **I. Disciplinary Cleavages and the Question of Ontology**

At the outset, it is important to define what I mean by “mainstream” theoretical approaches to International Relations (IR) and Security Studies. While there are good arguments to be made against essentializing a mainstream approach and in doing so, constructing an overly simplistic dichotomy between the mainstream and the rest, it is a distinction worth (carefully) making in order to better illustrate the dominant approaches in IR, as well as the nuances of the many different ways to study IR and security. So, for our purposes, the “mainstream” here refers to traditional approaches that rely mostly on modernist and positivist underpinnings to make their arguments about how the world works, and whose “knowledge” is generally self-described as being objective. Importantly, these approaches overwhelmingly possess what White (2000) would call “strong ontologies,” in that their ontological commitments are framed unreflexively and there is little, if any, acknowledgment of their essentially contestable nature. White (2000: 6-7) characterizes as “strong” those ontologies

...that claim to show us ‘the way the world is,’ or how God’s being stands to human being, or what human nature is. It is by reference to this external ground that ethical and

political life gain their sense of what is right; moreover, this foundation's validity is unchanging and of universal reach... strong [ontologies] carry an underlying assumption of certainty that guides the whole problem of moving from the ontological level to the moral-political. But this very certainty... demands too much forgetfulness of contingency and indeterminacy.

White (2000: 6) points out that strong ontology is a feature of much of pre-modern and modern thought. The idea that there *is* a First Cause of what is moral and good which exists "out there," combined with the assumption that this First Cause can be *known*, is the lynchpin of ancient Greek philosophy, the philosophies of the Abrahamic faiths, and Enlightenment thinking. However, these unquestioned assumptions about what *is* and what can be *known* comprise a double-move that fails to problematize the limits to our knowledge and the confines of our discourse. What White (2000: 4) is interested in, is an "ontological turn" that is perceptible in what he calls "late-modern" thinking. This late-modern thinking can be observed in "a growing propensity to interrogate more carefully those 'entities' presupposed by our typical ways of seeing and doing in the modern world" (White 2000: 4). In other words, recognition of the contingency and indeterminacy of *what* is known and *how* it is known. This understanding of ontology is an important feature of my analysis of security studies. As I will demonstrate shortly, the movement from realist security studies to critical security studies, and the divisions *within* critical security studies can be better understood using this helpful distinction between the strong ontology of modernity and the late-modern "ontological turn," which brings to the fore the "strengths of *weak* ontology" (White 2000).

"Weak ontology" does not refer to the (lack of) persuasiveness of a theory's ontological commitments, so much as it refers to the process of arriving at those commitments and an acknowledgement of their contestability. Weak ontology sees that the costs of bracketing out contingency and indeterminacy, which a strong ontology must do, far outweigh the benefits of doing so. Furthermore, a weak ontology approach recognizes that rejecting *new* ontological commitments, as some postmodern and anti-essentialist views seek to do, is profoundly problematic. Importantly then, weak ontologies respond to two basic concerns:

First, there is the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other and world are contestable. Second, there is the sense that such conceptualizations are nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical and political life. *The latter insight demands from us an affirmative gesture of constructing foundations, the former prevents us from carrying out this task in a traditional fashion* (emphasis added, White 2000: 8).

This “affirmative gesture of constructing foundations” is crucial to debunking the simplistic reconstructive/deconstructive and modern/postmodern binaries as they are often evoked. Such labels can be limiting and are too often used in “disciplinary mud-slinging matches, which can close down discussion and inquiry before a close reading of specific arguments or consideration of the issues involved” (Fierke 2007: 3).

For some, post-structuralist commitments necessitate a permanent state of deconstruction; while for others these commitments are modes of inquiry and interrogation that do not necessarily foreclose acts of re-construction (Hay 2002). Importantly then, this ontological turn can be observed in a variety of forms, and White cautions against it being over-identified with anti-essentialist postmodernism in particular, as it often is. This is because postmodernism is only one manifestation of this late-modern ontological turn, and some postmodern thinkers have “failed to attend sufficiently to problems related to articulating and affirming the very reconceptualizations toward which they gesture” (White 2000: 5-6). White (2000: 6) argues that there appears to be an unconscious tendency on the part of some postmodern thinkers to

...reproduce in a new guise the problem of frictionless subjectivity within their own stance... the affirmed mode of individual agency becomes one of continuous critical motion, incessantly and disruptively unmasking the ways in which the modern subject engenders, marginalizes and disciplines the others of its background and foreground...the potential, ironic danger here is that the former image of subjectivity comes to look uncomfortably like the latter.

White's critique is a fair one, and weak ontology is a useful concept for unpacking these tensions. This is because it is meant to "shift the intellectual burden... from a preoccupation with what is opposed and deconstructed, to an engagement with what must be articulated, cultivated and affirmed in its wake" (White 2000: 8).

As such, in (re)constructing foundations it is important to explicitly acknowledge the contestability and indeterminacy of those foundational claims and "involves the embodiment within them of some signaling of their own limits" (White 2000: 8). Importantly it is not enough to "simply declare their contestability, fallibility, or partiality at the start and then proceed pretty much as before" (White 2000: 8), since this can encourage a propensity towards naturalization and reification, which weak ontologies seek to avoid. What is crucial in a weak ontology, is that *such an acknowledgement of epistemological limitations necessarily changes the very nature of the assertions being made*. Therefore, unlike in a strong ontology where foundational claims are asserted unproblematically and unreflexively, in a weak ontology foundational claims need to be constantly affirmed, and the ethical function of theorizing resides in its goal of critically sustaining one's affirmations. As an important corrective to the modernist-traditionalist critiques of late-modern (and postmodern) thinking, "the affirmation of weak ontology should not be confused with a stance of continual indecisiveness" (White 2000: 14).

There are definite advantages to identifying disciplinary cleavages along the line of strong versus weak ontology. The strong/weak ontology distinction is useful because it illustrates a fundamental divergence in the ways of seeing and doing and in approaches to knowledge production, while simultaneously cautioning against conflating weak ontologies with anti-foundationalism. In many ways this division can be more useful than the reconstruction/deconstruction or modern/postmodern ones because there is so much overlap and interplay along these binaries, whereas the strong/weak ontology distinction can cross these aforementioned disciplinary labels. White (2000) demonstrates this when he shows how the liberal views of George Kateb, the communitarian views of Charles Taylor, the feminist views of Judith Butler, and the post-structuralist views William Connolly can all be said to display weak ontologies. With this in mind, the following looks at the move from strategic studies to critical security studies. The concept of weak ontology is used to help explain the diversity within the

critical approaches to security and to redress some of the problematic tendencies of a critical post-structuralist approach to security, which White's points on postmodernism allude to.

## **II. IR and Security Studies: From the "Mainstream" to the "Critical."**

At the outset of the last section, I introduced the concept of the "mainstream" in relation to White's strong/weak ontology formulation, referring to the approaches that rely mostly on modernist and positivist underpinnings to make their arguments about how the world works, and whose "knowledge" is generally self-described as being objective. In other words, those theories that employ strong ontology to make their claims. In IR, Realism exemplifies such a strong ontology-based theory building, and most of IR theory and security theory continues to be described in relation to Realism's vision of the world. Realism constructs an ontology that sees unitary opaque states operating rationally in an anarchic inter-state environment, where the primacy of military and strategic power define state interactions as a zero-sum game based on relative gains. While there are various permutations of this ontology, most mainstream approaches to IR and security studies tend to now situate themselves in and around a specifically Waltzian (1979) realist conception of world politics in one way or another. These include Gilpin's (1981) hegemonic stability theory, Keohane's (1984/1989) neoliberal institutionalism, and Wendt's (1992) social constructivism.

Importantly, and somewhat controversially, I also locate neo-Marxian IR theory and Gramscian historical materialism within this larger mainstream modernist tradition. While neo-Marxist approaches are in an important sense "critical," in many ways they are actually firmly entrenched within a distinctly modernist ontology. For example, while Gramscian historical materialism does emphasize the importance of ideas especially with regards to ideological hegemony and historic blocs (Cox and Sinclair, 1996), by definition, it continues to hinge upon the modernist presupposition that material interests are the most crucial factor in analysis. Further, historical materialism appeals to external grounds rooted in Habermasian and Marxian thinking to make its core claims, and is not "directly congruent with the intellectual sources that try to extend security towards new referent objects far from the traditional view of national security" (Dalby in Burke and McDonald 2007: 258). As such, it does not fit into the approaches that I would characterize as *ontologically* critical. In other words, the preceding IR approaches, can all be said to employ

what White calls “strong ontology,” and this is what overwhelmingly defines them as both “mainstream” and modernist.

In security studies in particular, the mainstream is best typified by the field of strategic studies. During the Cold War, the study of security was essentially synonymous with the field of strategic studies, and the overriding preoccupation within this field was nuclear deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union. As the realist underpinnings and strong ontology of deterrence theory would suggest, states were the sole subject and object of security and were presupposed to be unitary actors operating rationally. These same ontological principles have been clumsily applied to the strategic circumstances that have arisen in the United States’ militarized responses to terrorism under George W. Bush as well as for mainstream academic research regarding the so-called War on Terror.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, the referent object of mainstream security studies continues to be the state in a militarized context, despite the overwhelmingly non-state nature of the threat that is understood to emanate from groups such as Al Qaeda. Security in any other terms (such as in human terms) is largely absent from the mainstream discourses of strategic studies.

Defining the “mainstream” is one thing, but how can we define the “critical”? And what of the pitfalls involved in (re)producing an overly simplistic dichotomy between the two? Scholars have posited numerous ways to characterize the perceived disjuncture between the mainstream and critical factions of IR theory, and it is quite commonly seen as asymmetrically divided in two in terms of approaches to knowledge. For example, Hollis and Smith (1990) argue that two largely irreconcilable traditions can be identified within the study of international relations: the *scientific* (which has dominated) and the *hermeneutical*. In this formulation, the scientific tradition opines that explaining social processes in international relations theory can be achieved using scientific generalizations from an objectivist standpoint, while the hermeneutical tradition instead contemplates the inter-subjective meanings of social activity from a non-objective standpoint or from “within” (Hollis and Smith 1990; Walker 1993). In a similar move, distinctions are often drawn between *rationalistic* and *reflexivist* approaches to international relations theory (Keohane,

---

<sup>3</sup> It remains to be seen if this will change in any fundamental way under the Obama administration.



*Presidential Address to the ISA* 1989, Dunne 1998). This bifurcation of IR reflects a similar cleavage commonly understood to exist within the social sciences more generally. As mentioned however, these simplistic divisions are inherently problematic because, among other things, they have historically privileged questions of methodology from the perspective of the so-called scientific-rationalist traditions to the exclusion of the hermeneutic-reflexivist one.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the positioning of these two traditions as fundamentally irreconcilable is a considerable foreclosure against any conversation between them.

Other problems arise with a too-simple delineation between mainstream and critical theories. In security studies in particular there is a broad diversity of approaches critically engaging the mainstream. Also, different theorists mean different things when they use the term “critical.” For example, Gramscian historical materialism has long staked claim to the term “critical theory” owing largely to Robert Cox’s well-known distinction between *problem-solving* and *critical* theories. However, as I have argued, while the critical nature of historical materialism refers to its emancipatory claims it does not necessarily speak to the nature of its ontology, which rests upon fairly modernist foundations. In the context of security, Burke and McDonald (2007) evoke this Coxian distinction between problem-solving and critical theories but point out that there are very important divisions *within* critical security approaches (Burke and McDonald 2007: 4). Karin Fierke (2007) in turn, resists simple binaries altogether and argues for a conceptually-based understanding of competing critical approaches in order to avoid oversimplifying their complexities. Notably however, she does point out a key distinction between realist security studies and critical security studies, which relates to my earlier point about ontology. In particular, realism does not question the ontological underpinnings of what constitutes security. In realism, “security” refers quite simply to the safety of the state from existential harm due to

---

<sup>4</sup> Steve Smith (1995) looks at International Relations’s different self-images as a discipline, which tend to be framed in terms of divisions and competing approaches. The most prominent self-image of mainstream international relations theory’s genealogy, no thanks to the tyranny of the Introductory Textbook, is the so-called Great Debates (ibid. p. 13-17). The Great Debates self-image suggests that there has been a *progressive* succession of approaches from *idealism*, to *realism*, to *behaviouralism*. Critical, reflexivist traditions are either excluded from or clumsily tacked on to the end of these three successive debates. Due to the fact that the realism-behaviouralism portion of debate was largely methodological, the implication of this particular self-image of the discipline is that the only important debates are occurring in terms of the development of realism and how the ontology of realism can be made to be more scientific.

military and/or nuclear threats (and now, presumably, terrorist threats).

However, Fierke (2007: 33-5) makes the point that what makes much of critical security studies *critical*, is the recognition that security is an “essentially contested concept.” An essentially contested concept is “a concept that generates debates that cannot be resolved by reference to empirical evidence because the concept contains a clear ideological or moral element that defies precise, generally accepted definition” (Fierke 2007: 34. Also, see Buzan 1983/91; and Conolly 1993), and this raises the issue of ontology. It is in this area of ontology that it is perhaps most warranted to attempt to pull out the “critical” from the “mainstream.” But again, this distinction must be carefully made, and is at its most useful when it allows us to recognize that there are powerful critiques that can be leveled against traditional understandings of security.

### **III. Themes of Critique and New Theorizations of Security**

The proliferation of critical security studies in recent years appears to be related to an ever-growing awareness that traditional notions of security in mainstream IR- as exemplified by the field of strategic studies – are rapidly losing their salience in a post-Cold War and post-9/11 context. Consequently, security is increasingly being theorized in a variety of different ways that challenge the strategic studies orthodoxy. For example, there are efforts to redefine security by broadening the security agenda to include “new threats” into analysis, such as the environment and unchecked migration. This is only one form of critique however, and is not usually ontologically critical. However, the ontological underpinnings of the sub-field *are* being called into question in varying degrees from many different critical corners.

This section highlights a sampling of the range of ways that critics of strategic studies have leveled significant challenges against orthodox modes of understanding security, some of them even prior to the end of the Cold War. These novel ways of theorizing security serve to problematize and destabilize traditional understandings of security, as well as strategic formulations of concepts like “power” and “sovereignty” by critiquing the ethnocentric, gendered, and restrictive nature of orthodox discourses of security (Edkins et. al. 2004; Muppidi 2004; Walker 1993). Importantly, there are some common themes that emerge in these post-structuralist critiques, all of which reveal the weaknesses of realism’s “strong” ontology.

In strategic studies, the state in relation to its weaponry, is the referent object of security. Security in corporal/individual/human/philosophical terms is largely absent from the mainstream security discourse of the Cold War and beyond, and this omission can be linked directly to the positioning of the state in its strong ontology. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, critiques of this orthodox view began to emerge even from within the field. Ken Booth, a self-described “fallen-realist” who in 1979 could still be easily situated within strategic studies, brought up a critique that opened a door to his (and others’) more critical approaches later on. In *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (1979), he leveled the reflexive critique that strategic studies is inherently ethnocentric. Booth’s central observation is that “the strategic paradigm contains an in-built ethnocentric perspective arising out of the nature of its practical aspects and because of the assumptions and ideology which inform its analytical and theoretical approaches” (Booth 1979: 28). He defines ethnocentrism as the idea that “societies look at the world with their own group as the centre, they perceive and interpret other societies within their own frames of reference, *and they invariably judge them to be inferior*” (emphasis added, Booth 1979: 13). This relates to the compelling point that the creation of what he calls “enemy images” is intrinsic to the practice of military strategy. Enemy images are perpetuated because they serve psychological, sociological, and political functions. This in turn legitimates and necessitates the need for strategy to deal with these enemy images, and the cycle reproduces itself (Booth 1979: 25).

Such observations signal recognition of both contingency and indeterminacy in conceptualizations of security. Moreover, it raises the idea of the role that discourse plays in constructing ontology. As such, strategic studies is not only potentially defective due to ingrained ethnocentrism, but the actual activity of strategizing also creates ethnocentrism through the construction of enemies or the construction of enemy images. As Booth (1979: 24) puts it, “ethnocentric outlooks are significant in this respect because they exacerbate enemy images, whether these images are real or imaginary.” Booth’s observations here raise the question of objective versus subjective analysis, which further relates to the separation of (or inability to separate) subject and object. Hence, he introduces a fundamental *epistemological* problematique, whereby strategic analysts are inherently unable to divorce their ethnocentric self-perceptions

from their analysis of the adversary. This was a significant theme of critique that ushered in some important challenges against orthodox modes of understanding security.

Subsequently, critical voices from “outside” the field of strategic studies also began to emerge, such as feminist, post-colonial, and post-structuralist critiques, which all powerfully unhinge orthodox ontologies of security. Notable examples include V. Spike Peterson’s (1992: 31) post-positivist feminist challenge to strategic studies, which suggests that the conventional pursuit of security is actually “impeded by the privileging of state sovereignty and the configuration of authority and political identity it constitutes.” This is because “national security” is “particularly and profoundly contradictory for women... [W]omen’s insecurity is revealed as an internal as well as an external dimension of state systems” (Peterson 1992: 32). This challenges the ontology of realism, which presupposes and reifies the state as *the* locus of security, the corollary of which is that the state is the source of security for its citizens. Cynthia Enloe (1990) further suggests that norms of war, military culture, and diplomatic institutions feature profoundly gendered practices that women are routinely subject to. In other words, not only is the orthodox pursuit of security inherently flawed, but the state itself is also complicit in an array of exploitative and gendered power relations that are embedded within the very concepts of state sovereignty and security. This occurs because “the state is the main organizer of the power relations of gender” (Peterson 1992: 46) and because the state’s (sovereign) authority to “exercise and define legitimate violence” (Peterson 1992: 47) operates externally and internally.

Related to this, Partha Chatterjee (2005) suggests that there is an inextricable linking of violence to the project of the sovereign state vis-à-vis the wielding of the power of exception over the body and over life. He posits that in modern political life, violence is only the rightful purview of the state-sovereign. This Schmittian state of exception is the ultimate bio-political exercise in sovereign power whereby state violence is “legitimately” directed towards its own citizens, both literally (through corporal punishment in the justice system, for example) and structurally (i.e. through complicity in gendered domestic power relations) (Edkins 2004; Peterson 1992). As such, two strategies have been followed by the state to “bring reason and order to the facts of violence” (Chatterjee 2005: 97). The first strategy is the creation of a “transcendental umbrella of ethics” under which to shelter and domesticate its use. The second strategy is the creation of an

“economy” of violence whereby violence is understood and justified in the context of its utility and the “need” to employ it (Chatterjee 2005: 98). From this perspective, the orthodox understanding of security in strategic studies is part and parcel of the ways in which the strong ontologies of modernity deal only with the security/insecurity of Agamben’s *Zoe*, or bare-life (Agamben 1996).<sup>5</sup>

Carol Cohn (1987), in turn, undertakes a discursive feminist critique of Cold War strategic studies in “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals.” Cohn explains how language and language choices are manipulated and used (often unconsciously) in strategic studies. She suggests that the words employed in strategic discourse serve to distance, to dominate, to subvert, and to legitimate. This “expert” language becomes a tool to both exclude individuals who are non-experts, and to exclude ideas that cannot be spoken of in that same language (Cohn 1987: 708). The concern here is with the drawing of rigid parameters that circumscribe novel ways of thinking about security. Cohn’s failures to speak to the defence intellectuals without using their expert language caused her to learn and speak the language herself, and ultimately to think like a defence intellectual. In other words, she was required to adopt their strong ontology in order to be able to converse with them.

She also convincingly argues for the powerful impact of the use of this security jargon on the understanding and the perpetuation of key security concepts by those who are compelled to use it. The sterile imagery contained in this strategic expert language ultimately creates distance from the truly destructive aspects of “defence weaponry.” As such, “speaking the expert language not only offers distance, a feeling of control, and an alternative focus for one’s energies; it also offers escape- escape from thinking of oneself as a victim of nuclear war” (Cohn 1987: 706).<sup>6</sup> Cohn

---

<sup>5</sup> *Zoe* is bare life/naked life (savage/animal) and *Bios* is [no word missing here actually, but I’ll remove “form of life,” which is confusing a? the?] full life (humanity/civilization). Problems occur when the two forms of life are conflated and/or confused. The distinction between them is key to understanding notions of “full” rights and “full” humanity. “Full” rights and humanity cannot be understood as having been granted in situations where only the *Zoe* of an individual or of peoples have been addressed, such as in the refugee camps.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the defence intellectual speaks of “clean” bombs, damage “limitation,” and “surgical” strikes (Cohn, 690-5). This clean and sterile imagery offers a way to cope with and manage the reality of what these weapons will actually do to human flesh, if used.

further suggests that the phallic and sexually aggressive imagery in strategic discourse signifies the dominant, competitive, and inherently masculine aspects of strategy and the defence establishment. This further reveals the subjugation and dismissal of the feminine as irrational, inauthentic and irrelevant through the consistent use of imagery and terms related to virginity and motherhood (Cohn 1987: 696). Father-son and male creation imagery are also deployed to the exclusion of the feminine and the maternal. This includes the celebration and primacy of male birth and creation, the conflation of creation and destruction, as well as attempts to wrest, from women, the power of giving life (Cohn 1987: 699-702). In this sense the female and feminine, along with the adversary, becomes othered within the discourse, which lends credence to Peterson's earlier point about women's positioning and security as being fundamentally at odds with "national" security. It also further reveals the contingencies and subjectivities inherent in realism's strong ontology.

Critical constructivist<sup>7</sup> critiques of realist strategic studies were also instrumental in the re-visioning of security theorizing. For example, Hugh Gusterson (1999) analyzed the discourse of strategic intellectuals in his ethnography of key articles in the journal *International Security*, written in the months leading up to end of the Cold War. In his analysis, Gusterson employs an ethnographic-discursive approach in order to uncover possible reasons why the end of the Cold War was not accurately predicted by the mainstream defence establishment. Like Cohn, Gusterson (1999: 341) delves into the "specialized discursive world of a group of security studies intellectuals," in order to reveal the weaknesses and dangers of this world. Ultimately, he successfully demonstrates that the strategic orthodoxy has some conspicuous blind spots, and its discourse is incapable of accounting for things (such as the impending end of the Cold War) that may appear increasingly obvious from other perspectives. He states, "the problem with the dominant discourse in security studies in the 1980s was not that its construction of the international system was wrong- it was in fact perfectly plausible- but that it so marginalized discussion of competing constructions" (Gusterson 1999: 324). He points out that the authors were only able to see the shifting calculus of military hardware, rather than the rapidly changing political environment, which was in their ontological "blind spot."

---

<sup>7</sup> Not to be confused with Wendtian Constructivism, with a capital C.

This sort of critique makes the useful observation that these types of expert discourses “inevitably draw boundaries around themselves by celebrating certain kinds of statements while excommunicating others, which then take on the status of ‘subjugated knowledges’” (Gusterson 1993: 326). Debates within the strategic studies community did occur, but they were ultimately channelled and contained so as not to challenge the larger context of the hegemonic Cold War narrative in which strategic discourse occurred. This is similar to the point that Cohn makes regarding the “sealing off of discourse,” and the exclusion of individuals and ideas that do not fit into the expert language of strategic studies. Gusterson concludes that, in line with Realism’s strong ontology, many strategic theorists at the time were presupposing the endurance of US-Soviet bipolarity to the point that they were simply unable to consider any of the scenarios where this could no longer be the case, short of mutual nuclear destruction.

These themes of critique all highlight the larger problem of theory *as* practice, i.e. of whether or not discourse on security plays a role in actually *constructing/ constituting* the security environment, rather than merely describing and managing it as strategic studies claims to do. The above interventions into strategic studies revealed that its discourse has constructive properties that simultaneously reinforce and re-create the presuppositions of the defence establishment. As David Campbell asserts in *Writing Security* (1998), state identity and perceived threats to that identity do not exist independently of the ways in which we “talk” about them. Campbell (1998: 31) reminds us that the “texts” of foreign policy are where threats are construed and located, and these texts are related to what he calls “the scripting of identity.” Furthermore, this scripting of identity suggests that theory and discourse are to be understood *as* practice (Campbell 1998: 17). As such, understanding discourse helps us to see foreign policy (and by extension, policy related to security) as “all those practices of differentiation implicated in the confrontation between self and other, and their modes of figuration (which is often negative)” (Campbell 1998: 88).

What, then, *is* security? If our understanding of security is a discursive construction, does that mean that there are no tangible threats to the state or to individual human life? Is this even a fair question? How can these tensions be reconciled with the fact that there are millions that face

dangers to their corporal survival every day, be it from disease, famine, environmental catastrophe, domestic violence or war? Since we have established that orthodox strategic studies does not adequately account for these questions, it is the challenge of novel critical approaches to address them and to move forward from simply deconstructing the orthodoxy toward *re*constructing more appropriate conceptions of security. This further highlights the importance of ontology in understanding security studies.

#### **IV. Unpacking Critical Security Studies: Debates Within and the Question of Ontology**

Critiques such as those outlined, raise interesting questions about how security is practiced, how security is studied, and what security *is*. Notably there are a wide variety of critical approaches. Critical security studies approaches have different ideas about what constitutes security; what the referent object of security is; and there is disagreement about what, if any, “alternative security futures” should look like (Burke and McDonald 2007). Furthermore, “critical” can refer to an emancipatory project, to epistemological interrogation, to ontological deconstruction, or to some combination of all three. As such

...we can talk about *a* critical security approach. All of [which] share a dissatisfaction with the analytical and normative implications of traditional security studies with its predominant focus on the territorial preservation of the nation-state from external military threat... critical security studies is indeed a broad church. And there is clearly a need for such a broad-based definition in order to open the door to the range of ways of conceptualizing, understanding and potentially redressing human suffering and insecurity (Burke and McDonald 2007: 5-6).

Hence, while not homogenous, most critical security approaches share overlapping concerns that in one way or another reflect dissatisfaction with mainstream security approaches. *How* the different approaches reject realism and what they seek to do with that refutation is vital to understanding them. There appear to be three successive modes of division within critical security studies (see Appendix). Notably, these divisions are not neat and they overlap considerably with one another.



First, there is a basic division between those approaches that seek to broaden the security agenda while maintaining an essentially realist understanding of the world (see Chalk 2000; Dupont 2001; Krause and Williams 1996) and those approaches that wish to deconstruct the ontological presuppositions of realism. Among the deconstructionists, there is a second distinction between those approaches that seek *only* to deconstruct orthodox security ontologies, and those that look towards *reconstructing* alternative security futures. For the former, the practice of deconstruction is an emancipatory project in and of itself, and reconstruction is a dangerous endeavor due to its alleged inevitability towards essentialism and reification (see Ashley 1989, 1996; DerDerian and Shapiro 1989; Walker 1993). For the latter, the practice of deconstruction is a means to establishing new criteria for reconstructing foundations. Finally, there is a third discernable division that exists among the reconstructivists, and that is between those approaches that seek to reconstruct novel foundations built upon strong ontologies, and those that wish to reconstruct novel “foundations” utilizing a weak ontology approach (White 2000).

I argue that the reconstructive approaches that utilize weak ontology are very promising, but are often ignored or misunderstood. This misunderstanding arises due to a prevalent tendency to see *all* reconstructive efforts only in the light of *strong* ontologies. As a result, reconstructivists that deploy *weak* ontology are critiqued from two directions. The strong ontology reconstructivists criticize them for being unwilling to affirm specific foundational claims, such as those about the individual and about human rights (see Booth 2005, 2007). The anti-essentialist deconstructivists/post-modernists criticize them for continuing to talk about the state and alternative security futures despite their acknowledgement of the importance of discursive construction, identity, and power-relations in the practice of security. Nevertheless, this essay advocates for a reconstructive approach that utilizes a weak ontology for the critical analysis of security (see Conolly 1989, 1993; Campbell 1998). It is a broadly post-structuralist approach, utilizing post-colonial and feminist analyses among others, but does not descend into what Conolly (1989: 336) calls the “post-ponism,” which “links the inability to establish secure ontological ground for a theory with the obligation to defer infinitely the construction of general theories of... politics.” The following takes us through these three modes of division within the critical security literature in more detail, with particular emphasis on the tensions between them.

As mentioned, the first key division in critical security studies is that between the “broadeners” and the deconstructivists. This paper is not primarily concerned with the broadeners, but it is useful to explain how their critiques fit in to the larger picture of critical security studies. Notably, broadeners wish to expand the security agenda beyond the simple calculus of military threats, while maintaining the basic worldview of Realism. This agenda sees “new” sources of state insecurity from spheres like the environment, economic relations, disease pandemics, transnational crime, and unchecked migration. This particular type of broadening should not be confused with those approaches that also wish to look at issues like migration from a security perspective, but with non-state actors as the referent objects of security.<sup>8</sup>

The broadeners referred to here would include the RAND Corporation’s Peter Chalk (2000) and the Lowy Institute’s Alan Dupont (2001), for example, who have argued that “unregulated people movements” are of concern due to the challenges that they may pose to the integrity of sending and receiving states. Notably, the broadeners still see the state as a unitary actor and as the referent object of security. In this example, the concern related to these “unregulated people movements” is not for the people who are displaced, but on the impact that they will have on the “integrity” of the state and its security. This type of broadening agenda is essentially realist, but is tweaked to account for possible sources of insecurity that are not directly the result of military threats. While this approach is often cast into the critical security category, “to the extent that such thinking embodies critique, it has been a dangerously limited one” (Burke and McDonald 2007: 7). This is because it still presupposes much of realist ontology, and as a result forecloses discussion of concepts like human security.

In contrast to the above-mentioned “broadeners,” there are those approaches that seek primarily to deconstruct traditionally accepted notions of security. In one way or another, such approaches seek to destabilize the presuppositions of realism, and to question the very concept of “security”

---

<sup>8</sup> Buzan et al. 1998 and Fierke 2007 call them “expansionists.” A primary example of “expansionist” security studies is the school of thought most closely associated with Ken Booth, Richard Wynne-Jones, and the University of Aberystwyth (also known as the Welsh School), as outlined in Booth’s 2005 edited volume, *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner). My analysis places such an approach in the reconstructive *strong-alternative* ontology category, which will be outlined.

as an end and as a means. I choose to characterize such approaches as broadly post-structuralist, with a lower-case “p”. The term “post-structuralist” is often understood to be synonymous only with anti-essentialist postmodernism. Instead, it is used here in the broadest sense of referring to those approaches that, as a point of departure from the mainstream, seek to level meta-theoretical challenges to the structural presuppositions of realist and modernist-traditionalist ontology. In this way, “post-structuralism” refers to an umbrella category that covers a wide variety of approaches, which does include anti-essentialist postmodernism, but which includes reconstructive approaches as well. While I admit that this may be contentious, I self-consciously choose this formulation due to the fact that post-structuralism, rather than being seen as a theoretical end-point should instead be recognized as a process; as a valuable mode of inquiry due to its emphasis on deconstruction. In fact, many who reject post-structuralism’s “end-points” (or lack thereof in the case of some postmodern approaches) still basically utilize its approach to deconstruction (see Hay 2002).<sup>9</sup> Notably, the task of post-structuralist deconstruction is undertaken in response to the inherently problematic aspects of realist ontology and practice, for example those that use ethnocentric, gendered and unreflexive discourses that create paradoxical scenarios where *insecurity* occurs as a direct result of the state’s “security project.” As a result, such deconstruction also exposes the intrinsically political and ethical nature of security. This is another notable contribution of post-structuralist critique, since the ontology of realism subverts the ethico-political nature of security practices vis-à-vis its delineation of inside/outside, as well as through the suspension of “normal” politics that regularly occurs under the rubric of security.

The question then arises: Is deconstruction an end or a means to an end? This brings us to the second major division within critical security studies approaches, and that is the distinction between those approaches that seek *only* to deconstruct orthodox security ontologies, and those

---

<sup>9</sup> Expansionists of the Welsh School persuasion would probably argue that their mode of deconstruction occurs in the light of the Frankfurt School and have nothing to do with post-structuralism. Nevertheless, acts of deconstruction that occur under this persuasion are still, in my opinion, broadly post-structuralist in their central claim that all knowledge is a social process. When seen *as a mode of inquiry or as a questioning process*, the two approaches are very similar - where the Frankfurt School diverges from the broadly post-structuralist approach, is in its ideas about re-construction. In the former, a strong reconstructive ontology is created on the basis of specific Enlightenment-based claims about human emancipation and progress, reflecting the ideas of Habermas and Horkheimer (see Booth 2005, 2007). The post-structuralist approach either denies the act of re-construction altogether, or as will be argued, acknowledges novel contestable and flexible (*weak*) ontologies.

that look towards *reconstructing* alternative security futures.<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps the messiest division because there is so much disagreement about what constitutes “reconstruction,” as well as which modes of critique are engaged in perpetual deconstruction, and even what the different authors and different approaches in critical security say about themselves and about each other. For example, Burke (2007b), criticizes both the Welsh School’s Ken Booth, and the Copenhagen School’s<sup>11</sup> Ole Waever for not going “far enough” in terms of post-structuralist commitments. Booth of course, has never claimed membership in the post-structuralist camp, but as I have argued, his approach to deconstruction is in line with certain key post-structuralist commitments. Lene Hansen (1997), in defence of post-structuralism’s contributions to security studies, explicitly links ideas from the Copenhagen School to a decidedly post-structuralist ethic that on some accounts (such as Booth’s) would go “too far.” Jef Huysmans (1998), a self-identified post-structuralist, defines security in decidedly postmodern terms, that is as a “thick signifier concept,” but unproblematically places the contributions of Ole Waever (castigated by Burke for not being post-structuralist “enough,” and by Booth for being too conservative and not “critical” enough) alongside the works of the explicitly anti-essentialist Simon Dalby, James Der Derian, Michael Dillon, Rob Walker, and Michael Shapiro (Huysmans 1998: 228). Such discrepancies bring to light the complexities and contested nature of so many of the concepts and ideas in the critical security literature, particularly when post-structuralism is explicitly brought into the mix. Notably, some of these discrepancies arguably result from a lack of recognition among critical scholars of the differences between strong ontology and weak ontology in reconstructive projects.

But first, let us highlight the theoretical contributions of those critical security approaches that appear to be perpetually engaged in acts of deconstruction. Whereas deconstruction as a first step is a methodological and epistemological double-move for the purposes of destabilizing

---

<sup>10</sup> Worth noting here is that Burke and McDonald’s dichotomy of reconstructive vs. deconstructive is slightly different from my formulation, notably because it does not capture the idea that reconstruction can and does occur *following* post-structuralist deconstruction. In other words, I think Burke and McDonald’s distinction is useful but we have to be careful not to use it in an overly simplistic way. As they themselves acknowledge “there are tensions within the reconstructive approach (between the human security and emancipatory security discourses for example) about what precisely alternative security futures should look like” (Burke and McDonald 2007: 5). Furthermore, there are also tensions within the reconstructive approach about the nature of the reconstructed ontology, that is, whether it is strong or weak.

<sup>11</sup> Which will be elaborated on shortly.

modernist-traditionalist theories in order to “make strange” their presuppositions, there are post-structuralist approaches that take deconstruction even further. These approaches are often referred to, both by their proponents as well as their critics, as being postmodern (see for example, Ashley 1989, 1996; DerDerian and Shapiro 1989; Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004; Huysmans 1998; Walker 1993).<sup>12</sup> In critical security studies, this type of postmodern approach often goes beyond simply challenging the presuppositions of Realism via deconstruction, and further argues that *any* construction or affirmation of ontological foundations is itself problematic and undesirable, as is any re-visioning of alternative security futures. This is because the modernist trap of reification/essentialism is seen as intrinsic to *any* ontology, and therefore, ontological claims in and of themselves are to be avoided. Furthermore, any re-visioning of alternative security futures is understood to necessarily cause violences. Hence, while much of critical security studies is preoccupied with the construction of alternative security futures, the anti-essentialist postmodern approach tends to see that the appropriate role of theory resides solely in destabilizing the concepts of modernity.

“Security,” then, is seen less as something that must be sought out and more as a practice that must be interrogated. This is because it is the practice of security, ostensibly that of the state, which is understood to be the source of *insecurity*. Notably however, this postmodern approach also tends to avoid the term “insecurity” since it is too often deployed in its modernist incarnations. In fact, the idea of “insecurity” cast in a postmodern light is equated with uncertainty and contingency rather than corporal danger; as such it can be seen as part and parcel of the human condition, and is not necessarily something that can or should be avoided (Huysmans 1998). Instead, the focus in postmodern critical security is shifted towards the underlying structural violences and unequal power relations of modernity. This is a powerful contribution to security studies, as many other critical approaches are not equipped to engage with these questions on such a basic foundational level.

Again, it is difficult to lump together so many complex ideas under one banner, but there *are* shared themes that emerge in a “postmodern” reading of critical security, many of which are

---

<sup>12</sup> It goes without saying that it is foolhardy to speak of a unified post-structuralist or post-modern approach, but these shortcuts are self-consciously used for ease of explaining associated concepts.

laudable. Nevertheless, the postmodern approach I have outlined is not without its problems - most notably surrounding the question of ontology - which has ethical and political implications. In my introduction, I evoked the straw-figure postmodern “who becomes an amoral nihilist trapped in discourse, unable to meaningfully engage with the status quo.” I pointed out that this straw-figure is often unfairly evoked by those that wish to disingenuously deny the contributions of post-structuralist deconstruction and postmodern critique.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, while the amoral nihilist straw-figure is an over-represented caricature, the real question is whether or not it is actually a danger. I would argue that the answer is *yes*. There is relevance in these broader concerns. They cannot be simply brushed off as the folly of two ships passing in the night, where critiques of postmodernism are made on the basis of fundamentally different “external grounds,” and in response to such critiques, the postmodern theorist can easily demur any engagement with them.<sup>14</sup> This is deeply unsatisfying and is actually at odds with the larger post-structuralist ethic that recognizes contingency, subjectivity, and indeterminacy. It is arguable that the proponents of a postmodern or more broadly post-structuralist ethic must themselves engage with these concerns in order to remain intellectually genuine. In what follows, I attempt to do so.

As mentioned, the particular postmodern approach in question eschews the making of ontological claims on the basis that to do otherwise is to be inconsistent with the project of deconstruction. Furthermore, ontological claims are seen as inherently problematic because all knowledge is situated knowledge, and there is nothing that can be objectively known to be true. In other words, all constructed foundations are seen as being inherently modernist and *necessarily* invoking unreflexive claims about what “Is,” and this is seen as anathema to the postmodern project. Moreover, this perspective sees all post-structuralist critique as necessarily arriving at this

---

<sup>13</sup> For example, Booth (2005: 270) issues a thoroughly disingenuous critique of postmodernism/post-structuralism (he does not differentiate between them) that fails to acknowledge either its contributions or its intricacies.

<sup>14</sup> As evidenced, for example, by David Campbell’s assertion that ‘What is most interesting about the conventional critics of “postmodernism” is the unvarnished vehemence that adorns their attacks. Accused of “selfrighteousness,” lambasted as “evil,” castigated for being “bad IR” and “meta-babble,” and considered congenitally irrational, “postmodernists” are regarded as little better than unwelcome asylum seekers from a distant war zone. Of course, had the critics reached their conclusions via a considered reading of what is now a considerable literature in international relations, one would repay the thought with a careful engagement of their own arguments. Sadly there is not much thought to repay’ (Campbell 1998a: 210). See also Ashley (1989) as outlined below.

postmodern place. As Richard K. Ashley (1989: 278, emphasis added) argues, “post-structuralism *cannot* claim to offer an alternative position or perspective, because there is no alternative ground upon which it might be established.” He goes on to assert that “the task of post-structural social theory is not to impose a general interpretation, a paradigm of the sovereignty of man, as a guide to the transformation of life on a global scale... post-structuralism eschews grand designs, transcendental grounds, or universal projects of human-kind” (Ashley 1989: 284). Ashley is unabashed about his position that the “better course” (313) is to persistently ask questions of the “how” rather than the “what” (281-283), and that the “work of *thought*” (313, emphasis in original) is paramount.

This type of postmodern deconstruction then, becomes an end in and of itself, rather than a means to the end of reconstructing novel ontologies. As such, its epistemological and methodological commitments *become* its ontological commitments. The irony is that this position is paradoxical, since these assertions are actually quite essentialist, and bring to mind White’s (2000: 6) point about how some postmodernists end up “reproducing in a different guise the frictionless subjectivities” of modernity that they work so hard to critique. Furthermore, the sweeping resistance to activist projects of “universal” emancipation appears to be a considerable foreclosure against the possibilities for alternative security futures where violences are diminished and power relations are destabilized. In another paradox, such a position is simultaneously hyper-relativist and potentially conservative and static. What is going on here? How can we redress the problematique that arises when ontology is forcefully removed from the equation? Whereas a post-structuralist critique lays bare the constructive consequences of “acting *as if*” something exists (Fierke 2007) let me turn this idea on its head and point out that there are also consequences to “acting *as if not*”. What are the ethical and political implications of de-ontologizing to the point that theory becomes blind to the social constructions (both ideational and material) that play a role in the practice of security: that are sites of insecurity; that contribute to violences; that reinforce and reproduce hierarchies of power? What use is the “work of thought” if there are things that we are not allowed to think about or engage with under the guise of postmodern commitments? These questions are almost banal, and yet, the position outlined by Ashley (1993) is ill-equipped to grapple with them.

This is where *reconstruction* and the difference between strong and weak ontology come into the picture. “Reconstruction” has long been a problematic term in critical security. This is largely because, in my estimation, it is usually situated in a way that links all foundational claims to the affirmation of *strong* ontologies. As stated earlier, “ontology” refers to “the question of what entities are presupposed by our... theories” (White 2000: 3). When ontological commitments are framed unreflexively, in that there is no acknowledgement of their essentially contestable nature, they comprise what White calls a “strong ontology.” Hence, reconstruction with a strong ontology necessitates an affirmation of “the way the world is” by reference to “an external ground” whose “foundation’s validity is unchanging and of universal reach [with]... an underlying assumption of certainty” (White 2000: 6-7). The postmodern rejection of reconstruction in this guise thus becomes multi-layered: a rejection of certainty; a rejection of making claims about what *is*; as well as a rejection of the idea of an unchanging and universal external ground upon which to build foundations.

Hence, it is not surprising that the so-called Welsh School has had an acrimonious relationship with postmodern theorists of security. In critical security studies, the Welsh School is the quintessential example of a reconstructive approach that deploys *novel* strong ontologies.<sup>15</sup> Such strong-ontology reconstructivist approaches are explicitly critical of realist conceptualizations of security, and seek to reconstruct alternative security futures. These alternative security futures are based on new referent objects of security such as the individual or the environment. The delineation of inside/outside becomes relaxed. Factors like migration, economics and climate change as causes of insecurity are seen in human terms, rather than as threats to the state. There is an emphasis on non-state actors in seeking solutions, and the state as an entity is critiqued for its complicity in the *insecurity* of many. Many of these contributions to critical security are valuable. Notably however, these alternative security futures are also based on fairly rigid foundational claims. Through deconstruction based in the social theories of Habermas and Horkheimer, the Welsh School “offers both a powerful critique of the orthodoxy as well as a *clear alternative foundation for thinking about security*” (Smith 2005: 44, emphasis added). This alternative

---

<sup>15</sup> Other examples could be the United Nations Development Program’s initiatives on human security. The work of those like Anthony Burke (see 2007b) and Matt McDonald (2007) could also potentially be described this way.



foundation is explicitly grounded in a variety of Enlightenment ideals, touted as universal and unchanging, and which provide an *external* ground upon which these alternative security futures are built (Booth 2005, 2007).<sup>16</sup>

This appeal to external ground as the basis of new foundations is what makes the ontology of such critical security approaches “strong”. But it is also the main source of disagreement between them and postmodernism. This is because the “certainty” that is required to do so “demands too much forgetfulness of contingency and indeterminacy” (White 2000, 6-7), which is ethically and politically problematic. This is what leads to the postmodern rejection of the idea of a universal external ground upon which to build foundations. This postmodern position is consistent with what is understood to be the basic post-structuralist ethic: reflexivity. Certainly, this makes it untenable to make unproblematic claims about what *is*. But what about *tentative* claims about what *might be*? The postmodern position elucidated by Ashley would also reject this out of hand. But on what basis?

I argue that the rejection of any and all foundational claims becomes less tenable when a *weak* ontology is utilized, and we can see examples of this in the critical security studies literature. As such, an overly simplistic modern/postmodern or reconstruction/deconstruction division does not satisfactorily account for examples of weak ontology in reconstruction. For post-structuralist theorists that employ a weak ontology, deconstruction occurs first: discourse and identity are recognized as intrinsic to the practice, construction and study of security; and security/insecurity is understood as imagined and constructed, but is also experienced. Such theorizing challenges the basic presuppositions of Realism and understands “security” to be a practice that must be interrogated and destabilized, but this is undertaken largely for the purposes of revealing sources of insecurity. Re-visioning alternative security futures is thus necessary in order to engage with the status-quo (which is desirable), but this endeavour is profoundly difficult. This is because these weak-ontology approaches take seriously the post-structuralist assertion that reification and essentialism are endemic to the making of ontological claims. For this reason, any ontological

---

<sup>16</sup> In the most explicitly made link to date, Booth’s new volume strongly and unapologetically links his critical security studies approach to modern, Western, Enlightenment values. See K. Booth (2007) *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

claims that are made should not be static and are always open to interrogation. In other words, weak ontology theorizing allows the theorist to make claims, though not unreflexively. These are tentative claims about what *might be*, as opposed to unreflexive claims about what *is*. These are the weak ontologies, which “demand from us an affirmative gesture of constructing foundations,” but which prevent us “from carrying out this task in a traditional fashion” (White 2000: 8).

An illustrative example of a weak ontology approach in critical security studies can be found in the Copenhagen School’s ideas about “securitization,” as articulated by Ole Waever (2005). Notable about this approach is its reliance on post-structuralist modes of deconstruction: its focus on security politics rather than the *end* of security; its critical understanding of threat construction; and its seemingly paradoxical willingness to talk about the state as an entity. Waever’s main idea is that “security” is a “speech act” and the act of “securitizing” something is profoundly political due to the suspension of “normal politics” that results. What is particularly interesting about this theory is that it reveals how there are political and ethical implications of something being placed on the security agenda (Buzan et al. 1998). How and why something is placed on the security agenda depends on the authority and legitimacy of those committing the securitizing speech act, and securitizing has successfully occurred only when the receiving audiences of the securitizing message accept it as such. Since the security agenda is largely determined by state leaders, the state remains central in this formulation but as a “sedimented” social fact, rather than as a normative reality (Buzan et al 1998.). What seems to raise the hackles of many about this approach is that it brings elite discourses and the state back into a picture of security that is profoundly reliant on post-structuralist deconstruction. As such, this approach is difficult to “locate” on conventional maps of security studies. This approach is alternately derided for being too “realist” and not “critical enough”; for allegedly seeing the state and society as “objective realities, out there to be discovered and analyzed” (see McSweeney 1996; Burke and McDonald 2007; Fierke 2007); and for being “state-centric, discourse-dominated, and conservative” because it is “a curious combination of liberal, post-structural, and neorealist approaches” (Booth 2005: 271).

I would argue that these are not particularly fair characterizations of the securitization aspect of the approach in particular, and are a direct result of the lack of understanding of the place of weak

ontology in its formulation. In response to McSweeney's critiques (1996) for example, Buzan and Waever(1997) argue that their treatment of the state is meant to be "pragmatic" rather than objectivist. In other words, they tentatively make claims about the state in order to elaborate upon their concept of securitization, which as many have pointed out, has become particularly salient after 9/11 (see Smith 2005). It is also interesting that the two theorists mainly responsible for the securitization thesis hold quite different theoretical commitments. Buzan is identified as being more realist, whereas Waever associates himself with post-structuralism (Smith 2005). Their collaboration would not be possible if disciplinary silos had prematurely sealed off the conversation between them. Nevertheless, I will concede that Waever's contribution of the securitization concept is the notable one, and is much stronger than the other components of the approach outlined in his, Buzan's and DeWilde's *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (1998). The main weakness of the work is Buzan's "sectoral" approach, which leaves out too much (gender, for example), in trying to capture everything. Also, there is some merit to the argument that their concept of "sedimentation" can be taken too far, and the enduring conceptualization of the realist state as a "pragmatic" sedimented fact *can* risk becoming a strong ontology. But here again we can see the utility in using weak/strong ontology in teasing out the nuances of this approach.

Weak ontology in critical security eschews disciplinary foreclosures and allows us to talk about anything, as long as it is done with the corrective that all conceptualizations of self, other, and world are contestable. This allows us to "make claims" when it is necessary, but to do so in ways that are fundamentally different from how claims are made in modernist-traditionalist strong ontologies. David Campbell, a post-structuralist, recognized this in *Writing Security* (1998) when his exploration of American foreign policy meant that he would have to engage with the idea of "the state". Not surprisingly, he has faced criticism for continuing to talk about states and their existence as entities or agents. As such, a postmodern critique would accuse him of not going "far enough," but such a critique is unwarranted when weak ontology is recognized. As mentioned, the state is often the producer of security discourses and (one of) the sites of security politics. To ignore this fact in a discussion of threat construction in American foreign policy would be to miss many opportunities for understanding, and arguably, emancipation. But continued attention to the state should not be confused with continued attention to the state *in the same way that the state is*

*understood in traditional realism.* This holds true for what the state *is* and for how the state is *seen*. This is what Campbell (1998) meant when he said that his

... is a very different sort of international relations book. Instead of asking how US foreign policy serves the national interest, it examines how... US foreign policy helps produce and reproduce... political identity... In place of the usual analysis of the “external” dangers said to threaten “domestic” society, this book offers a nonessentialist account of danger that highlights how the very domains of inside/outside, self/other, and domestic/foreign are constituted through the writing of threat. (preface)

What is key then, is a complete “re-visioning” of the state or of any factor in security studies through the epistemological commitments of a post-structuralist ethic, without making the mistake of creating new blind-spots in analysis by acting “*as if not.*”

### **Conclusions: Beyond “Post-Ponism” and The Strengths of Weak Ontology**

I have argued for the benefits of employing a generally post-structuralist approach and ethic, which emphasizes the need to remain reflexive and mindful of intersubjectivity and intertextuality in approaching security. In emphasizing these points, this approach allows for a shifting of the referent object/subject of security and also allows for security to be understood in broader ways than merely that of the state or of *zoe* to the exclusion of *bios*. Hence, broader questions such as those pertaining to gender and race are not excluded by this approach. Perhaps most importantly, I have argued for the strength of utilizing Stephen K. White’s idea of weak ontology in *reconstructing* foundations, in order to engage with the status-quo. The inclination of post-structuralism, and particularly postmodernism, to eschew this engagement is deeply problematic for those that wish to avoid the ethical and political dangers of “acting *as if not.*” Fortunately, there are voices within postmodernism that recognize this. William Conolly, who incidentally is one of the theorists that White casts as a weak ontologist, levels a serious critique of this postmodern hazard. In his critique of Ashley’s position outlined above, Conolly (1989: 336) identifies a tendency within the postmodern formulation of issuing

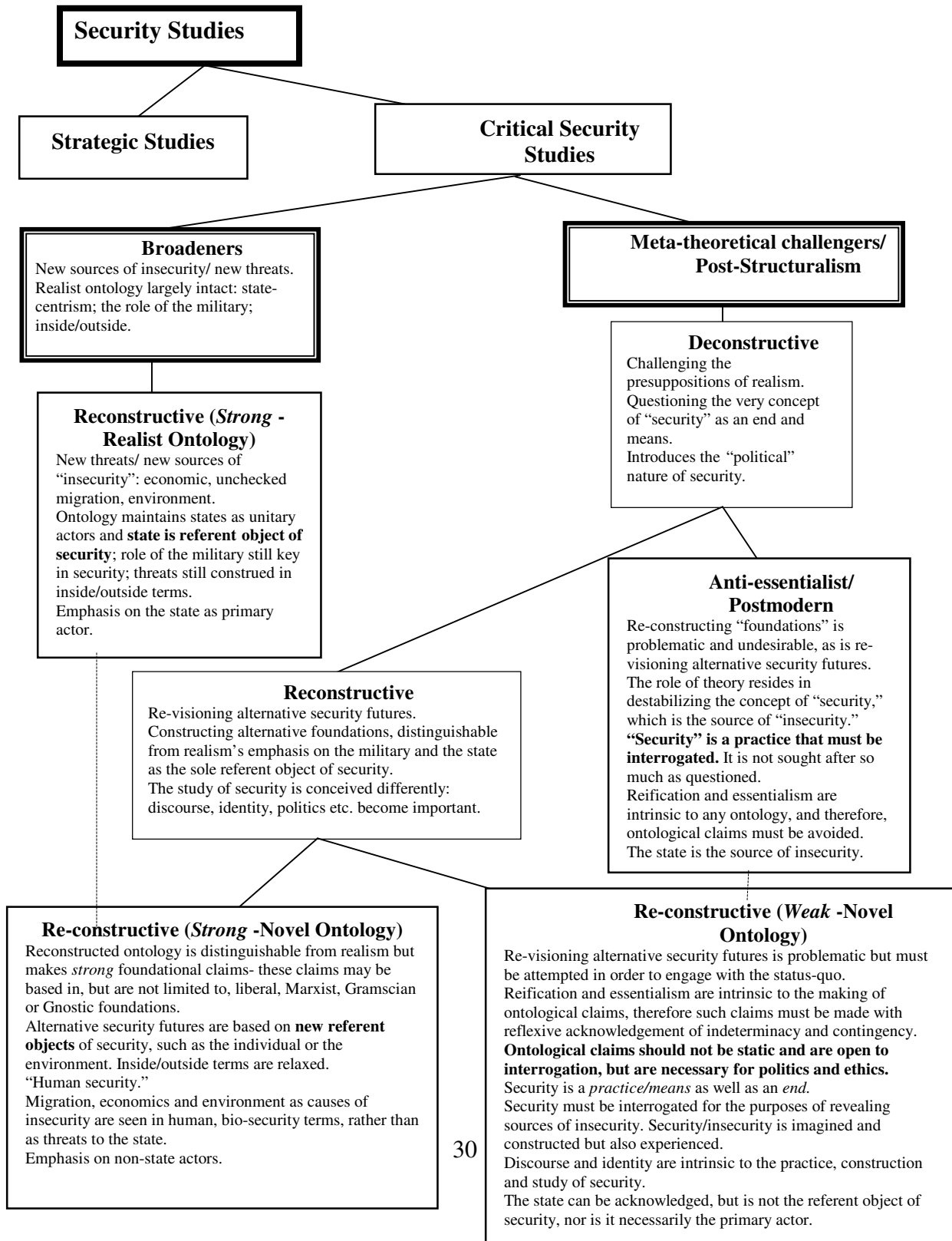
...an interwoven set of self-restrictions [that reduce] 'post-structuralism' to one perpetual assignment to 'invert hierarchies' maintained in other theories. One might call this recipe for theoretical self-restriction 'post-ponism.' It links the inability to establish secure ontological ground for a theory with the obligation to defer infinitely the construction of general theories of global politics.

Conolly goes on to assert that he prefers to resist simple binary oppositions suggested by such a recipe for self-restriction. Rather, he seeks "not only to invert hierarchies in other theories but to construct alternative hierarchies that do not demand the same relation to truth to enter into the field of contestation" (Conolly 1989: 336). Finally, he points out that Foucault himself, despite engaging in deconstruction refused the label "deconstructionist," and that "there is nothing in the structural imperatives of a 'post-structuralist' or 'postmodern' problematic requiring perpetual 'post-ponism' at the level of theory construction and contestation" (Conolly 1989: 337).

Conolly's critique, coming from within a post-structuralist perspective brings to light two important and interwoven points that my analysis has attempted to introduce. First, that acts of reconstruction can be critical in the most fundamental ontological sense, and they do not always have to look like the "strong ontologies" of either modernist-traditionalist theories, or the alternative critical security theories that appeal unproblematically to external grounds to make their claims. Second, and perhaps most important of all, that acts of reconstruction *can* emanate directly from post-structuralist commitments, where deconstruction is seen as both a first step and as an ethic to bring to engagement with the status-quo. This engagement is necessary if we are serious about avoiding a paralytic disjuncture from the "real world," where millions face corporal insecurity every day (at the levels of both *zoe* and *bios*). Rather, maintaining critical commitments can mean being reflexive about the inter-subjectivity and indeterminacy of the claims that *are* ultimately made, and of being accountable to them.



APPENDIX: Mapping Critical Security Studies (J. Mustapha)



## Bibliography

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Can There be a Feminist Ethnography?" *Women and Performance* 5:1, 1990. 7-27
- Agamben, Giorgio. "Form-of-Life." *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 152-184
- Ashley, Richard K. "Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War." Eds. James Der Deridan and Michael J. Shapiro *International/ Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*. Massachusetts: Lexington Books 1989. 259-321
- Ashley, Richard K. "The Achievements of Poststructuralism." *International Theory: Positivism & Beyond*. Eds. Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 240-253
- Baudrillard, J. and S. Lotringer. *Forget Foucault and Forget Baudrillard*. Trans. H. Beitchman et al. Paris: Semiotexte[e], 1987.
- Booth, Ken. *Strategy and Ethnocentrism*. London: Croom Helm, 1979.
- Booth, Ken ed. *Critical Security Studies and World Politics*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2005.
- Booth, Ken. *Theory of World Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Burke, Anthony and Matt McDonald eds. *Critical Security in the Asia-Pacific*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007
- Burke, Anthony (2007b) "What security makes possible: Some thoughts on critical security studies." *Department of International Relations, Australian National University Working Paper 2007/1* <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/ir>
- Buzan, B. *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1983/91
- Buzan B. and Ole Waever (1997) "Slippery? contradictory? sociologically untenable? The Copenhagen school replies," *Review of International Studies*, 23: 241-250
- Buzan, B., Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998.



- Campbell, David. *Writing Security: US Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Sovereign Violence and the Domain of the Political." *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*. Eds. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 82-100
- Chalk, Peter. *Non-military Security and Global Order*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000
- Cohn, Carol. "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 12:4, 1987. 687-718
- Conolly, William. "Identity and Difference in Global Politics." *International/ Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*. Eds. James Der Deridan and Michael J. Shapiro. Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1989. 323-342
- Conolly, William. *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Conolly, William. *The Terms of Political Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
- Cox, Robert W., Timothy J. Sinclair. *Approaches to World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Der Deridan J. and Michael J. Shapiro eds. *International/ Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*. Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1989.
- Dunne, Tim. *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School*. Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1998.
- Dupont, Alan. *East Asia Imperilled: Transnational Challenges to Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Edkins, Jenny, Véronique Pin-Fat. "Introduction: Life, Power, Resistance." *Sovereign Lives: Power in Global Politics*. Eds. Jenny Edkins, Véronique Pin-Fat, and Michael J. Shapiro. New York: Routledge, 2004. 1-19
- Enloe, Cynthia. *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Fierke, Karin. M. *Critical Approaches to International Security*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007

- Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Gusterson, Hugh. "Missing the End of the Cold War in International Security." *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger*. Eds. Jutta Weldes et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 319-345.
- Hansen, Lene. "A case for seduction? Evaluating the Poststructuralist Conception of Security." *Cooperation and Conflict* Vol. 32(4), 1997. 369-397
- Hay, Colin. *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Hollis, Martin and Steve Smith. *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Huysmans, Jef. "Security! What do you mean?: From concept to thick signifier." *European Journal of International Relations* Vol. 4 (2), 1998. 226- 255
- Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 1984.
- Keohane, Robert O. (1989) *International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Krause, Keith and Williams, Michael C. "Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies: Politics and Methods." *Mershon International Studies Review*. 40 Supplement 2 October, 1996.
- McSweeney, Bill. "Identity and Security: Buzan and the Copenhagen School." *Review of International Studies* 22, 1996. 81-93
- Muppidi, Himadeep. *The Politics of the Global*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Peterson, V. Spike, ed. *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory*. Boulder: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1992.
- Smith, Steve ed. *International Relations Theory Today*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.
- Smith, Steve. "Positivism and beyond." *International Theory: Positivism & Beyond*. Eds. Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 11-46
- Smith, Steve. "Wendt's world." *Review of International Studies* 26, 2000. 151-163

- Smith, Steve (2005) "The Contested Concept of Security," in Ken Booth, ed. *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner)
- Waever, Ole. "Securitization and Desecuritization." *On Security*. Ed. Ronnie Lipschutz. NY: Columbia University Press, 1995. 46-86.
- Walker, R.B.J. *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Waltz, Kenneth, *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1979
- Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics." *International Organization* 46(2), 1992. 391-425
- White, Steven K. *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Williams, Phil. "Nuclear Deterrence. *Contemporary Strategy I*. Eds." John Bayliss et al. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1987.