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Is Security a Conversation Stopper?

Jonathan C. Herington

Security is a politically powerful concept. When it is invoked, it immediately conjures images of violent threats to our lives, our communities and the nation. In this respect, labelling a problem as a security issue seems to place it beyond discussion, 'normal' politics and the realm of reasonable disagreement. I argue, however, that treating the invocation of 'security' as the end of deliberation is a mistake.

Invocations of security should not end a dialogue because the meaning of 'security' is not fixed or easy to understand. Consider the different meanings of 'security' that are invoked in the phrases "national security", "social security", and "secure relationships." Each of these uses of the word invokes radically different values. In the parlance of philosophers, this makes security an *essentially contested concept*: we will never agree on a single definition of 'security' because each definition incorporates a unique set of value judgements. Thus, when politicians, policymakers and community members invoke security, we must ask them to clarify precisely what they mean. To do so, we ought to ask them three questions.

First, the security of what? Security, at its most basic, denotes a kind of robustness of something. But we must specify what that thing is, since we may take radically different approaches to the robustness of income, healthcare, the environment and freedom from violence. By asking speakers to precisely define what goods they wish to keep secure, we can identify common ground and genuine disagreements over core values.

Second, security for whom? Often we treat the security of the state as unproblematically valuable for each citizen. Yet security policy often makes some citizen's very insecure in order to make other people more secure. The East German state was very secure, even as its citizens lacked security over privacy, freedom of expression and their basic needs. Thus, we must ask speakers to clarify how they think security ought to be distributed, and to think seriously about whether they have an obligation to share risks with their fellow citizens.

Third, is the feeling of insecurity supported by the evidence? Often our beliefs about the security of a good are wildly at odds with the actual risk to that good. Consider that many people feel greatly insecure with respect to terrorist violence, even though the risk of death in an automobile accident *vastly* exceeds the risk of death from terrorism. To be sure, insecurity is bad partially because it generates fear and anxiety – regardless of whether that anxiety is justified. Yet, if an individual's beliefs about their security are not supported by the evidence, then the remedy should not be to act as if their beliefs are justified. It should be to inform them of the real magnitude of the risks they face.

Invocations of security should not, therefore, be treated as the end of deliberation, but an invitation to expand the discussion to new and complex areas.