

Memories of Security

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A review of Charlotte Heath Kelly's *Death and Security: Memory and Mortality at the Bombsite* (2017: Manchester University Press)

Critical Security Studies

Introduction

Security, one might think, concerns efforts to anticipate and prevent dangerous events from happening. It is the process of ensuring safety and predictability. It is the promise of managing to control the future.

In *Death and Security* (2017) Heath-Kelly encourages us to consider the ways in which memory is also being increasingly implicated in contemporary security practice. Bucking a recent trend in security studies that has focused on the relation between security, anticipation and futurity, Heath-Kelly's book shines a light on the ways in which security is also increasingly invested in the control and management of how *past* events are represented. Through an extensive study of memorials erected in the wake of bomb attacks, *Death and Security* investigates the evolution of the ontological relationship between death and security through deep empirical investigations of a selection of international cases, including the World Trade Centre in New York, the 7/7 bombings in London, the Norwegian sites targeted by Anders Breivik and the Bali bombsite. In drawing our attention to the ways in which collective memory has increasingly become a target of contemporary security policies, *Death and Security* compels us to rethink our assumptions about the discrete temporalities through which security operates today.

For Heath-Kelly the management of death anxiety is the end of sovereignty: its objective as well as its potential undoing. Drawing on a diverse selection of intellectual resources from the sociology of death, psychoanalysis and phenomenology, Heath-Kelly traces the historical evolution of this relationship. Death anxiety, it is argued, is an aporia driving the production of a wide range of social structures, including language, culture, religion and politics. These systems develop in an effort to cover up the foundational absence representing by mortality: sublimating death anxiety by providing a semblance of purpose, meaning and permanence. With the advent of Modernity, the modern State came to displace the Church as anxiety manager-in-chief. The co-evolution of rationalism and secular authority marked a profound transfiguration in the symbolic management of death. Security developed as a "a technique of mortality effacement" (176) that "function[ed] to displace, the anxiety of mortality – which would otherwise disrupt the performance of sovereignty" (1). Yet, whilst death provided the State with its *raison d'Etat*, the impossibility of achieving closure or resolution to this aporia ultimately served to unsettle and undermine the claims to authority. The inability of the State to ultimately provide total security, thus sealing the aporia of mortality, announced the limits of its power. The persistence of mortality disrupted the claims to omnipotence and permanence made by the State. Security, understood as much as an anticipatory disposition toward future 'threat' as it is a retrospective technique deployed to quell social anxieties surrounding death, is thus deployed to tame these destabilizing affects.

With the rise of resilience discourses, Heath-Kelly identifies a distinct shift in the sovereign relation between death and security. As has been well-established in biopolitical literatures, resilience strategies

secure life not by ensuring dangerous events are prevented from happening, but by enhancing our capacity to quickly adapt and recover from them. It is a security logic rooted in ideas of immunity rather than prophylaxis. Events happen (in fact, we are increasingly told they cannot be wholly predicted or prevented!), but their impact is ultimately mitigated by enhancing the adaptive capacity of resilient life to withstand, adapt to and bounce-back from crisis. In *Death and Security*, Heath-Kelly is positioned to ask a different, but related question: what happens to the management of death-anxiety with the advent of resilience? Her answer is that security continues to enact the sovereign effacement of death. Yet it does so in a more sophisticated fashion: by deploying life itself to 'defeat death and protect the performance of security' (23). So, rather than promising to prevent death, resilience instead provides assurances that life will continue as normal through the recovery-to-come. This is the 'disastrous genius' (27) contained and deployed by resilience: The inevitability of death, which formerly required all the powers of state security to efface insofar as it represented the limit point of rule, is now admitted. The State can finally unburden itself from the responsibility of preventing disasters while 'rearticulating security and the defeat of death in a more complex fashion' (177). Resilience, in this sense, represents a "post-modern strategy of death effacement", distinct from the prophylactic security logic underpinning the rationalist, modernist edifice of political sovereignty, yet ultimately still committed to the reproduction of sovereignty though death's effacement.

Foregrounding the role of memory within resilience strategies is a novel and exciting line of inquiry that deserves further research. Yet, at the same time, I was left to wonder if the State is being afforded too much agency and coherence here—as something that explains security practice rather than an effect produced *though* the practice of security. Is the sovereign so aware of its historical purpose, so sensitive to its existential insecurity, so rational in its exercise of security? And who is this Sovereign anyway? These are important questions not least because this book expressly aims to place into question the omnipotence of the State by 'exposing the masquerade of security' (2). But for what purpose? What kind of change is required and what is to replace it?

The empirical chapters to follow provide a more detailed, and complex account of the tensions playing out across the multiple actors, logics, and narratives enrolled in memorialization practices. The evolving relation between death and security is analysed through detailed studies of a selection of empirical cases. Emergency response, memorialisation and the reconstruction of post-terrorist space are shown to act as retrospective security practices designed to establish meaning, and ultimately contain the disruptive impact of these events. The case studies are well-selected to foreground the significant political contestation over the meaning(s) ascribed to these memorials: controversies surrounding the 'ground-zero' mosque; efforts by the Norwegian state to muscle in on the memorials erected on Utøya; the confluence of cultural, religious and economic factors in the decision to place a memorial site in one of Bali's principle tourist areas. Yet, I wonder why the author chose memorials specifically erected in the wake of bomb sites for this analysis? Is there something unique or exceptional about the particular violence unleashed by a bombing that is especially revelatory of the contemporary relation between mortality and security?

The original analysis advanced within *Death and Security* provoked several questions for me that went well beyond the remit of the book. In my conclusion, I will limit myself to three. The first concerns the relation of retrospective security practices analysed in this book with the proliferation of anticipatory techniques and practices within the contemporary security paradigm. Studies of resilience, for example, have identified how resilience strategies have proliferated as they correlate to transformations in the

ways in which contingency is understood. Future events, we are often told, can no longer be wholly predicted or prevented. This has necessitated the development of risk-based forms of security to mitigate, rather than prevent, disruptive events. Resilience is, in other words, premised on a shift in security imaginaries concerning the future. Identifying a logic of resilience operating within contemporary memorialization practices lead me to wonder as to whether there was a relation between the proliferation of anticipatory techniques of security and the (contemporary) security logic of memorialization? Has political memory experienced a similar, perhaps related shift, to those identified above in our collective imaginary of the future? Can one identify something new in the status of political memory today?

My second line of questioning concerns the role of communities in contemporary memorialization practices. Notions of community reappear throughout this book in different functions: as a 'population' providing legitimacy to modern sovereignty (13); as a 'nation' invested with modernist dreams of immortality (12); as an antagonist to state narratives of trauma; and even as commissioners of memorials themselves. These various roles, to me, makes the figure of community somewhat difficult to place within the sovereign, death, security constellation. Is this, perhaps, due to a shift in the place of political communities in an era of resilience and neoliberalism? Does it tell us anything about evolving conceptions of (Western) political authority? On a related note, I wonder if memorials in an age of resilience express a novel, or at least different, understanding of political community than memorials of modernity? To state it in biopolitical terms: What kind of life is being protected and promoted through the narratives perpetuated by these memorials?

Finally, I wonder about the wider political economies shaping contemporary memorialization practices. One of the great strengths of this book was in centring security analysis on feelings of insecurity. Here I can't help but wonder about the contemporary confluence of the state, the media and market forces in amplifying feelings of anxiety through the sensationalization of terrorism, violence and death. How could we understand memorial practice within the circuits of such economies of insecurity? Is there not more at stake here than sovereignty? Going further one could ask whether memorial practices serve to efface the problem of death-anxiety for sovereignty, or promote it? In other words, are anxieties surrounding death ultimately a timeless aporia, or something manufactured by power within the contemporary security-entertainment nexus? And is the securitization attempted by memorials ever more precarious as a result?