

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MARK NEOCLEOUS, *Critique of Security*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008, vi + 248 p, index.

What is security and how it is attained and maintained have been among the central queries guiding the transformations in the study and practice of post-Cold War international affairs. Their most recent wave of articulation occurred in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In this respect, the different responses to those questions have underpinned the development of distinct analytical approaches to world politics and formulations of appropriate international order. Security, thereby, has been presented as one of the most contested concepts in the observation of global life, which has subjected it to seemingly incessant redefinition and reconceptualisation. Unlike commentators from this tradition, Mark Neocleous engages with the history, logic, and politics underpinning the prevailing narratives of the need to seek safety and avoid harm, and the choices informed by such beliefs. In the process, he not only uncovers the idea (and ideal) of security that frames political, commercial, and intellectual practices, but also constructs one of the most discerning accounts to date of security thinking and the patterns of relations informed by its logic.

Neocleous' main assertion is that security practices are deeply embedded in and implicated by the ideology of liberalism. His contention is that the central postulate of liberalism is not liberty but security. Thus, the modern story of security begins with a conjectured Hobbesian state of nature, which is then taken by Locke to "inaugurate less a tradition of 'liberty' and much more a liberal discourse on the priority of security" (14). In evincing the genealogy and context which conditioned this logic of security, Neocleous indicates that the exceptional measures required by a "state of emergency" legitimate the "manipulation of law" – "internationally by the ruling states, domestically by the ruling class" – to justify violent (re)actions "on the grounds of necessity and in the name of security" (71). As a result (and in contrast to the suggestion of some critical security studies scholars that "security" and "emancipation" are mirror-images of the same process of freeing individuals from human and physical constraints), Neocleous demonstrates that in practice it is "security and oppression [that] are the two sides of the same coin" (5). In this respect, his efforts not only illuminate the multiple sites, patterns, and practices of security, but they also demand the radical alteration of the dominant frameworks within which debates on security and its production tend to be positioned.

As the volume demonstrates, the liberal paradigm of security has excluded key aspects of the understanding and history of security discourses – more specifically, the concern with social security – in order to emphasize the centrality of national security. In this regard, the prevalent logic of security

reifies the state as the central subject of its practices and the actor whose existence requires protection. Consequently, the issue of security underscores the ability to preserve the national sovereignty of states – i.e., their survival. Within this cognitive model, one state’s gain is perceived as another’s (if not all the others’) loss. International politics, thereby, is assumed to be marked by “security dilemmas,” which arise from the situation in which one state’s attempt to increase its own security makes another feel less secure and urges it to take reciprocal measures. In this setting, the “balance of power,” “balance of threats,” “balance of interests,” etc. are ascertained as the dominant strategies for maintaining the security of states. According to Neocleous, this emphasis on the correct balance between “liberty” and “security” acts as “a substitute for real argument” (12), which facilitates the commodification of security as “the fetish of our times” (9).

Statist discourses, thereby, capture the imagination through the prioritization of “security as a political end,” which in itself “constitutes a rejection of politics in any meaningful sense of the term” (185). Instead, political deliberation is substituted by the demand for loyalty which serves as “a key political technology” of the liberal state for “simultaneously gauging identity and reaffirming security” (108). Consequently, the liberal discourses of security proceed to construe a threat to and/or an attack on national security as a crisis of national identity. In other words, the interconnection between identity and security has much broader and deeper political implications – i.e., “the fabrication of national security goes hand in hand with the fabrication of national identity, and vice versa” (107). In contrast, Neocleous infers that political life necessitates a much less homogenizing and a much more transformative, open, and reflexive notion of community than the one implicated in the history and practices of the liberal national security state. Such unmasking of the repressive ideology underpinning the current system of security calls for different knowledge/power constellations for ethical and responsible political action. At the same time, it also aims at “provoking and intriguing others to think politics without security” (10).

In this respect, Neocleous has produced a rare gem of a book. His *Critique of Security* is indeed a genuine (as well as a much-needed) work of critique – one that uncovers, engages with, and challenges the politics of the norms, values, and ideological constellations underpinning the rules, standards, and practices that underwrite the strategies for the production of security. In fact, Neocleous’ book might be destined to become one of the most authoritative accounts on the logic of security. The volume should be read as one of the most ambitious and provocative considerations of the post-Cold War practices of security. It is expected that the scope and depth of Neocleous’ comprehensive analysis will benefit both the seasoned scholar as well as the inexperienced student of political science, international relations, security studies, international political economy, political theory, and sociology.

Emilian Kavalski University of Alberta.

