Introduction

In international politics and security studies, discussions about risk have emerged in close connection with the discipline’s focus on war and security. As practices of risk management have infused the conduct of war and responses to a wide range of insecurities, from human trafficking and crime to climate change, critical security scholars have explored the political implications of these transformations. In so doing, they have contributed to the understanding of ‘the diversity of ways in which risk becomes central to governmental assemblages at specific historical junctures, and to what effect’ (Zeiderman, 2012: 1572). The expanding concept of security – from human security to security of the environment – meant that a security-risk nexus was extended across social and political fields. In order to explore this nexus, critical scholars have drawn inspiration from the sociological analyses of Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens or Niklas Luhmann, Mary Douglas’ anthropological work, or Michel Foucault’s lectures on biopolitics. 1 Although these debates about various approaches to risk have been well rehearsed across social science disciplines (for example, Zinn, 2008; Lupton, 1999; Adam et al., 2000), this chapter focuses on the contributions that analyses of risk practices in security studies and international politics can bring to a broadly understood ‘risk studies’. I argue that there are three in particular: first, the relation between risk and (in)security and the role of transnational practices in shaping this nexus; second, the analysis of practices of governance ‘beyond risk’, and third, the political implications of the deployment and proliferation of rationalities and technologies of risk management. In outlining these three areas, I aim to draw attention to the particular contributions that the critical work in International Relations (IR) has made to the debates about risk.

Governing future dangers: security and risk

The analysis of the relation between risk and danger and its implications for the risk-security nexus has been at the heart of engagements with risk in international politics and critical security studies. The rise of risk in security governance is not a new or post-9/11 phenomenon. Ian Hacking associates the emergence of risk with the invention of mathematical probability at
the end of the seventeenth century and state practices of gathering information about populations, which saw their inception in the ‘statistical enthusiasm’ between the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 (Hacking, 1982, 1990). This entwinement between risk and the modern state has connected risk and security historically. As Hacking notes, ‘Disease, madness, and the state of the threatening underworld, les misérables, created a morbid and fearful fascination for numbers upon which the bureaucracies fed’ (1982: 287). Michel Foucault associated the emergence of ‘social defence’ with risk rationalities in criminology (2014). François Ewald’s work on the rise of insurance offers a widely cited history of the emergence of risk in the modern French welfare state. Ewald sees, however, a disconnection rather than an alignment between risk and danger: ‘the notion of risk goes together with those of chance, hazard, probability, eventuality or randomness, on the one hand, and those of loss or damage on the other’ (1991: 199). Unlike Ewald’s strict separation between risk and danger, Foucault’s analysis of the emergence of a biopolitical dispositif of security in the eighteenth century reconnects risk, danger and crisis: the ability to establish differential risk groups means that ‘one can thus identify what is dangerous’ (Foucault, 2007: 89).

The relation between danger and risk and the tensions in how the relation should be historically and conceptually understood does not seem to have attracted much attention in debates about risk governance in social sciences, which has focused more on the probabilistic versus non-probabilistic understandings of risk. For instance, Ulrich Beck’s shift from first modernity to the second modernity as ‘risk society’ is focused on the transformation of risk itself rather than the relation between risk and danger. Risk and danger are ultimately not so different for Beck because for him risks are always threatening events. As he notes in relation to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, these are the first wars fought against global risk (Beck, 2003). In so doing, Beck appears to ‘accentuate the novel features of contemporary terrorism and muddies the waters between the possible and the probable degree of threat’ (Mythen and Walklate, 2008: 232). Although the distinction between probability and possibility draws attention to another important distinction between risk and uncertainty, which appears to structure Beck’s work, it effaces the relation between risk and danger and therefore practices of risk and security governance. For Mary Douglas (1992), the distinction between risk and danger is collapsed altogether given her focus on vernacular language and the everyday uses of the language of risk to mean danger.

In international politics, the distinction between risk and danger cannot be so quickly collapsed, and critical IR scholars have attended both to the language and practices of risk in the representation and governance of (in)security globally. They have often drawn upon the sociological literature on risk in order to analyse the practices of the War on Terror (Aradau and van Munster, 2007; Amoore and de Goede, 2008; Heng and McDonagh, 2009), targeted killing (Kessler and Werner, 2008), biometric governance (Muller, 2009), health governance (Elbe, 2008), migration (Aradau, 2008; van Munster, 2009), climate change (Oels, 2013) or development (Duffield, 2008). However, one of the criticisms adduced to the IR literature has been that it borrows insights from sociological literature without fully developing a contribution that it offers to existing sociological analyses (Hutchinson, 2007). Overviews of the risk literature in international politics have reiterated the view that IR has been a ‘latecomer’ to these debates, and its engagement with the problematique of risk has drawn inspiration from the sociological debates (Lobo-Guerrero, 2010; Petersen, 2011). Although this lateness of IR engagement with risk is partly due to disciplinary differentiations between IR, political science and sociology, critical IR scholars do not simply extend or ‘apply’ conceptual tools developed in the sociological and anthropological literature, but ask different questions that focus not only on the proliferation of risk governance, its technologies and political effects, but also on how international and global dynamics constrain or foster risk governance.
This literature helps shed light on different dynamics and valuations that risk gains in its association with war and security. It problematizes the very relation between risk and danger and draws attention to the transnational dimensions of these discourses and practices. Several scholars have drawn attention to a shift in security discourses from threats and dangers to risks or proactive interventions that attempt to prevent their materialization (Rasmussen, 2006; Daase and Kessler, 2007; Heng and McDonagh, 2009). They trace the notion back to the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the language of risk in the discourses of organizations such as NATO, the UN and the EU. These interventions rely on a semantic and temporal distinction between dangers and risks: dangers are specific and orientated towards the present and immediacy of occurrence, whilst risks are fluid and anticipatory and are turned towards the future. The grammar of security is seen as that of urgency and immediate emergency measures on the model of war, whilst risk appears to rely on routine practices and probability calculations (Aradau and van Munster, 2007; Neal, 2009). Other scholars have shown how risk has made possible the reinvention of national and international security agencies, their agendas and remit of action in the post-Cold War world. Despite its anticipated demise in traditional realist theories of security, NATO, for example, has not only reinvented itself by adopting the language of risk, but ‘it has provided a Western forum for reinventing security’ (Rasmussen, 2001: 298). The distinction between risk and danger can therefore be understood as a form of symbolic capital that makes possible the reorganization of power relations nationally and transnationally.

The other element that the IR literature brings to the debates about risk concerns the blurring of boundaries between the internal and the external. Foucault’s (2004) discussion of the dispositif of security mobilized the language of social security (sécurité) rather than the language of national security (sûreté). Although the distinction between sécurité and sûreté is lost in the English translation, the literature on the blurring of boundaries between the internal and the external can allow us to revisit the security–risk nexus. After 9/11, Ulrich Beck, for instance, argued that ‘the difference between war and peace, the military and police, war and crime, and national and international security are, from within and with-out, completely annulled’ (Beck, 2003: 256). Beck is not alone in diagnosing the blurring of war and peace in risk society; however, the literature in critical IR has drawn attention to the particular dynamics that have made this blurring of boundaries possible.

Didier Bigo has shown how processes of de-differentiation between the military and police led to an extension of regimes of veridiction based on risk. When Beck argues that ‘risk society theory refers to catastrophes that are still to come and that we have to anticipate and forestall in the present’ (2013: 8), he is very close to the language of professionals of security and politics. For instance, the UK National Security Strategy (UK Government 2011) adopts the language of the ‘age of uncertainty’ and of ‘new and unforeseen threat’ that cannot be anticipated. Bigo, however, argues that we need to analyse the role of transnational networks of security professionals who promoted a doxa of global dangers and the technologies for responding to these dangers – particularly through the use of statistics and preventive governance. The connection between security and risk is therefore differentially articulated across security professions in a field of struggle over funding and technology (Bigo, 2006, 2008). What counts in this analysis is not so much the language of danger or risk, but the technologies of risk and security that are deployed for the purposes of differentiation between different categories of security professionals: military, police, intelligence, border officials and so on. In Bigo’s analysis of border security, the military/navy, the police/border guards and the database analysts do not only promote different narratives of danger, but they also rely on different technologies of risk and security (Bigo, 2014). The militarization of borders, which works with technologies of deterrence and discourse of enemies, is not universal or even dominant, but it comes into tension with practices and discourses that focus
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on managing populations and ‘filtering’ at the border or on using big data analytics to govern at a distance both spatially and temporally. Rather than the strict separation between risk, danger and uncertainty or their collapse, these analyses of practices draw attention to different rationalities and technologies that are mobilized in struggles between security professionals depending on their professional aptitudes, available technologies and funding. The relation between risk and danger is therefore differentially understood and enacted depending on particular fields of practices, struggles and competition between professionals in these fields.

Beyond risk? Preemption, precaution, preparedness

Given the heterogeneity and proliferation of different technologies of ‘taming’ the future, many scholars have explored the limits of risk technology, particularly those based on statistical, past data about populations and profiling. Genealogies of risk trace its emergence within maritime insurance practices in the sixteenth century and its extension into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although actuarial technologies are deployed in the governance of security and terrorism (Aradau and van Munster, 2008; Lobo-Guerrero, 2012), recent formulations of danger also evade the logic of risk management, with its emphasis on frequency calculations and reliance on past data to compute the future. Faced with the possibility of the ‘next terrorist attack’, the model of preventive calculation reaches its limit. As security professionals, intelligence agencies and the insurance industry continue to develop models to calculate or estimate the risk of a terrorist attack, they also recognize that today’s challenge comes from what former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, infamously referred to as ‘unknown unknowns’ – things we do not know we do not know. In the face of catastrophes-to-come, the technologies and rationalities of governance have been changing because they ‘favour instead the rendering of preemptive decisions that do not calculate probability on the basis of past evidence, but rather on the horizon of what may happen in the future (Amoore, 2008: 5). Scenario planning, foresight and forecasting methods, big data analytics, financial technologies or resilience, all purport to render the contingency of the future governable. The proliferation of these technologies problematizes the other important distinction in sociological analyses between risk and uncertainty.

Louise Amoore (2014) has noted a shift from probability to possibility in security practices. Others have drawn out similarities between financial speculation and speculative security (Cooper, 2008; de Goede, 2012), or new modes of reasoning that are ‘conjectural’ in their reliance on insignificant details (Aradau and van Munster, 2011). These forms of knowledge are not new – neither speculation nor conjecture comes to us simply through data deluge and big data – but they take on new valences through computational techniques of data mining and predictive analytics. These forms of knowledge have also been captured through three related logics of governance: precaution, preemption and preparedness. Ben Anderson (2010) and Pat O’Malley (2011) have suggested that there are important distinctions between the three logics, and yet the interrelations between these and what differences are at stake is still a matter of contestation.

Preparedness is perhaps the most straightforward of the three because it refers to ‘an especially salient approach to perceived threats when they reach the limits of a rationality of insurance’ (Lakoff, 2007: 247). It is generally taken to refer to a state of readiness to respond to unexpected and potentially catastrophic events. Because potential disasters appear as indeterminate, unpredictable and unexpected, preparedness exercises are placed at the heart of a mode of knowledge that challenges or replaces statistical calculability. In this sense, the future of unexpected events cannot be known or predicted, it can only be enacted. The ‘Prepare’ strand of the UK Counter-Terrorism Strategy covers the knowledge and actions to be taken when a danger irrupts, that is
where an attack cannot be stopped, to mitigate its impact’ (Home Office, 2009). Preparedness entails setting up capabilities to deal with a range of terrorist incidents, ensuring swift recovery, and training and equipping crisis management actors. The idea and knowledge of preparedness has emerged from the acceptance of the inevitability of nuclear attacks during the Cold War. From its area of application to nuclear preparedness, the concept has migrated to ‘all hazards’ in the 1970s and is now used as a strategy of readiness for all forms of incidents, events, crises, disasters or catastrophes.

Precaution would also appear quite clear given its origin in the precautionary principle and similarly responding to the limits of insurantial risk. However, Anderson and O’Malley offer different interpretations of precaution, and both differ from Ewald’s (1996) discussion of the philosophy of precaution. Does precaution need the identification of a threat or just the imagination of irreversibility and irreparability around current developments? Does it entail action or inaction? Does it assume that prevention is still possible? Answers to these questions vary in the risk literature. Although precaution has often been invoked in order to stop or delay action until more knowledge becomes available, it has also been read as an injunction to act before possible dangers in the future can materialize with catastrophic consequences (Aradau and van Munster, 2007; de Goede and Randalls, 2009). What precautionary technologies seem to share is a reliance on worst-case scenarios and scientific uncertainty.

Finally, preemption is perhaps the most widely used concept to render dominant strategies that surpass the rationalities and technologies of risk. Although preemption is seen to capture responses to unpredictable and unforeseeable dangers, I would argue that preempting the materialization of a threat in the future implies a certain specificity and imminence of threat. The difference from precaution is subtle because both technologies act upon uncertainty. Preemption appears to act in the interval between the identification of threat and its emergence as determinate. It is thus working upon an emergent or potential threat (Massumi, 2007; Anderson, 2010), and yet the indeterminate potentiality of threat does not mean that threats are problematized as ‘unknown unknowns’. As Lawrence Freedman (2003: 106) notes about the longer history of preemptive wars, preemption takes place in the interval between the perception of an attack and the attack being effectively launched. Hence the connection between preemption and imminent threat – the etymology of ‘imminent’ from the Latin ‘mons’ (mount or mountain) is suggestive here of a mode of knowledge where threats emerge to the surface and therefore become visible.

Despite the apparent tensions between these technologies and modes of knowledge, they also have the capacity to coexist in security governance. The particular contours that their imbrication takes in attending to concrete problematisations of terrorism, disaster, climate change, migration or development show remarkable variation. For instance, in the UK the government’s counter-terrorism strategy appears to seamlessly mobilise prevention, protection and preparedness (Home Office, 2009). At the same time, particular institutions often favour some of these technologies. As Elke Krahmann (2011: 369) has noted, preemptive practices are not favoured by businesses, partly due to historical development of legal and moral interdiction for individuals and businesses to take preemptive measures. Erik Dahl (2013: 182) discounts the relevance of preparedness with its motto of ‘expect the unexpected’ for intelligence officials whose job is to ‘foresee and prevent such surprises’. More recently, the emergence of resilience within practices of global and transnational governance has raised questions about the relations between resilience and prevention, resilience and preparedness, and resilience and security (for a discussion, see Aradau, 2014). What difference does resilience make today? This question requires renewed analytical attention to the heterogeneous vocabularies that have emerged in relation to future dangers, the technologies deployed to act upon the future and their relations.
Politics of risk

Governing social and political problems through risk technologies and articulating those in the language of risk has important political consequences for the kinds of political engagements that become possible. In particular, critical security scholars have focused on the depoliticizing effects of risk vocabularies and technologies in various transnational fields. Depoliticization is understood here in Wendy Brown’s sense of ‘removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its historical emergence and from a recognition of the powers that produce and contour it’ (2006: 14). If security language and practice enacted exceptional measures, limited democratic action and constituted communities by excluding dangerous ‘others’, the risk–security nexus both extended and intensified these dynamics. In order to address the depoliticizing effects of this nexus, critical IR scholars have placed history, emergence and power at the heart of their analyses.

First, the future orientation of risk and of the strategies of prevention, preemption, precaution and preparedness challenged the temporalities of law, evidence, rights claims and democracy. Placing these technologies and modes of knowledge within historical contexts sheds light on the transformations that are set in place in slightly different ways from securitization. As Anna Leander formulates it, ‘Future orientation makes action taken on the basis of risk thinking difficult to contest and debate’ (2011: 2256). Thus, analyses of risk add different perspectives to existing debates about the urgency and acceleration of democratic procedures engendered by exceptional security measures (Huysmans, 2004; Scheuerman, 2004). Susanne Krasmann (2012) has argued that law is particularly susceptible to change given its reliance on other forms of knowledge – such as scientific knowledge – and particularly security knowledge. Similarly, Amoore has pointed out that exceptional measures such as preventive detention ‘operate in place of, and in advance of the legal thresholds of evidence and decision’ (2008: 850). In a further explanation of security practices, she argues that ‘the contemporary security derivative is not centred on who we are, nor even on what our data say about us, but on what can be imagined and inferred about who we might be – on our very proclivities and potentials’ (Amoore, 2011: 24). The future orientation of this data – devoid from attention to real people and places – is in stark contrast to the past orientation of law. In the case of blacklisting, de Goede also reaches a similar conclusion that ‘preemption fosters security action on the basis of lower standards of evidence, doubt and suspicion because the risks of inaction are considered to be great’ (2011: 509).

This is not to say that statistical modes of knowledge production are preferable to other anticipatory modes of knowledge such as scenario planning or blacklisting. All these modes of knowledge have their own histories and the point of these analyses is to understand power formations and how heterogeneous knowledges and technologies come to work together. Although risk and probability calculations are one way in which uncertainty is managed, future dangers and uncertainty can be tamed through other technologies, for instance scenario planning creates a parallel world where plausible scenarios can be developed in order to make action in the future possible.

Second, the literature in IR has approached risk and post-risk technologies through an analytics of power. Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of power, critical IR scholars have inquired into the political effects of domination and subjectivation that these technologies bring about. A vigilant but also neurotic citizen is fostered through the risk technologies (Isin, 2004; O’Malley, 2011). This is the neoliberal citizen who is both summoned to take charge of their security and is enrolled into governmental programmes of vigilance. Discourses and technologies are depoliticizing in that they minimize or eschew public debates about what constitutes a
security threat or risk. Risk registers in the UK, for instance, appear to ‘suggest that they are not complicit in the deeply political creation of security subjects’ (Hagmann and Cavelty, 2012: 90). Cast as a matter of technique, risks do not trigger public debate or at least become more difficult to question. The risk–security nexus also reformulates traditional questions about power and accountability. On the one hand, the anticipatory orientation of these technologies relaxes the accountability of actors for decision making and the effects of their decisions. On the other, the commodification of risk and practices of commercialization mean that private military markets, for instance, appear as a ‘technical necessity’ in response to risk scenarios and the strategies of risk professionals thereby remaining largely unaccountable (Leander, 2011).

Conclusion

The literature in international politics and security studies has offered analyses of risk knowledge and practice in close connection with the discipline’s focus on war and security. Although vocabularies and technologies of risk are not new to security professionals, the configuration of a risk–security nexus has important consequences for how transnational problems are governed today. These concern law, democracy and subjectivity as well as traditional political questions of accountability. They also draw attention to the question of international practices and their effects upon national spheres: transnational fields of security professionals play an important role in the proliferation of vocabularies of risk and technologies of preemption, precaution, preparedness or resilience. The blurring of boundaries between the internal and external needs to be seen through these various fields and heterogeneous practices rather than as a global logic.

The analyses also raise questions about the periodization of changes in risk and security governance. The security–risk nexus in international politics does not quite fit with either Foucault’s emergence of biopolitics or Beck’s second modernity. Rather, in translational fields of security, Cold War and post-Cold War developments have (re)constituted the nexus in particular ways: whether shifting from probabilistic risk calculations to preemptive action or by deploying technologies of forecasting, scenario planning or exercise preparedness. Thus, Foucault’s question about the difference that today introduces with respect to yesterday remains perhaps a central question for risk analyses. How do transformations in different fields of practice influence each other and how do transnational fields of security shape national and subnational dynamics and risk practices? To answer these questions, risk studies would need to transcend the disciplinary effects of any one discipline.

Notes

1 Although political risk is an important field of practice, critical scholars have engaged less with these practices, particularly given their non-theoretical thrust. For a discussion of political risk within an emerging field of risk studies, see Karen Lund Petersen (2011).
2 On the political effects of securitization, see, for example, Huysmans (2014), Aradau (2008), or Neocleous (2008).

References

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Claudia Aradau


