Foucault and security studies: Beyond biopolitics?

Claudia Aradau
King’s College London, UK

Andrew W Neal
University of Edinburgh, UK

A surprising decade

Foucault is synonymous with critical research in security studies, where a working knowledge of his ideas has become common currency. Yet, Foucault’s concepts and methods continue to mean such different things to different scholars. It is perhaps because of this flexibility and fecundity that Foucault’s work has become such a productive site of conversation and shared purpose in the field of critical security studies. It is with these thoughts in mind that we decided to curate this virtual special issue on ‘Foucault and Security Studies’. Although no journal has a monopoly on interpretations and deployments of Foucault’s toolboxes, Security Dialogue has been one of the most important outlets for critical scholars working on questions of (in)security and war.

On delving into the Security Dialogue archives (in a digitally-mediated Foucauldian fashion), we discovered that it has been nearly ten years since the journal published its first substantive intervention that deployed Foucauldian concepts: a special issue on *Theorizing the security-liberty relation* (Walker, 2006), and one of its articles in particular: Andrew Neal’s ‘Foucault in Guantanamo: Towards an archaeology of the exception’ (2006). Although by 2006 Foucault was well established in the collective consciousness of critical approaches to international relations and security, Security Dialogue subsequently fostered a decade of engagements and re-articulations of Foucauldian concepts, methods and critiques.
Virtual Collection Introduction

It is well known that Foucault encouraged the idea that he offered a ‘toolbox’ for others to use. This has certainly been put into practice in Security Dialogue, where found many rich, creative and deft uses of Foucault’s tools. Presented with so many engagements with Foucault in the journal, we inevitably had to choose a limited number of articles. We hope that those in our selection represent exemplary and substantive Foucauldian interventions on ‘security’ and its diverse problematizations, as distinct from the many fluent applications of Foucault’s critical tools and concepts. We have structured this virtual collection in three sections corresponding to key sites of encounter with Foucault’s work: first, conceptual problematization and analysis centered on biopolitics and governmentality; second, methodological exploration; and third, critical interrogation of Foucault’s contribution and new departures for scholarship. Within the sections we have ordered the articles chronologically.

Biopolitics, governmentality, (in)security

Foucauldian critical research on security has perhaps been most daring and prolific through its reformulations of security as a technique of government. At is most provocative this is understood as a technique that takes hold of the life of populations and manages abnormalities in the attempt to prevent ‘all the possible forms of the irruption of danger’ (Castel, 1991: 288). While there are many articles in Security Dialogue that explore these notions (Evans, 2010; Lobo-Guerrero, 2007; Zanotti, 2008), following our criterion of ‘exemplary and substantive interventions’ in our archival search produced some surprises. We found paths not taken and standalone pieces that have not necessarily had a continuing consequence in security studies debates, but nevertheless represent important developments of Foucauldian ideas. One such example is Michael Merlingen’s article: ‘Everything is dangerous: A critique of “Normative Power Europe”’ (2007). This is an early example of a Foucauldian intervention that challenged the terms of an existing debate. Its Foucault-inspired discussion of the micro-level practices that often constitute administrative power calls into question the large-scale institutionalist and ideational focus of literature on the European integration project. These governmental practices often reconfigured power relations, rather than transcending them in favour of something more ‘ideal’ as the normative literature would have it. Hence Merlingen’s title invokes Foucault’s general
point that it is not a question of judging whether certain policies or practices are ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but appreciating that in the inevitable and uncertain reconfigurations of power they bring about, ‘everything is dangerous’.

Also in the first section, Michael Dillon’s ‘Underwriting Security’ (2008) has had a more profound relationship with the field of security studies. Although it would not be accurate (or particularly Foucauldian) to identify it as the point of origin for debates on risk and biopolitics, Dillon’s themes have been influential and are still playing out in current debates. The connections he makes between life, risk, circulation, contingency, complexity draw inspiration from Foucault’s late-1970s and early-1980s Collège de France lectures, but speak directly to our present world of financialization, fungibility, and algorithmic risk management. Such themes are further explored in practice in our next article by Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, Thierry Godefroy and Pierre Lascoumes (2011), who analyse the configuration of sovereignty and governmentality in the private sector through the interactions between banking and law enforcement professionals.

Alison Howell adds a different dimension to the rearticulation of security by showing how ‘psychiatry is harnessed as technology of security’ (Howell, 2010: 349). She draws attention to forms of ‘psy’ expertise that circulate transnationally, and to the differential rearticulations of sovereignty, discipline and liberal governmentality. Miguel De Larrinaga and Marc Doucet (2008) take similar themes to a global level, by linking Giorgio Agamben’s theorized relationship between sovereign exceptionalism and bare life to Foucault’s governmentality and biopolitical species management. The concept of ‘global governmentality’ has provoked debate in security studies, with critical ripostes offered by David Chandler in this journal (2009) and Jonathan Joseph elsewhere (2010).

**Foucault’s methods**

Foucault’s influence on the critical study of (in)security has often been via concepts, albeit with empirical applications. In contrast, research that addresses the role of methods in critical inquiry has been scarce, even though one of the key early contributions to a critique of security was explicitly formulated in genealogical terms (Der Derian, 1993). This limited attention to methods is surprising given that Foucault’s perennial remarks on method were a way for him to
continuously rearticulate and reconfigure his intellectual project. Thus this second section groups together articles that develop methodological aspects of Foucault’s work for security studies.

Neal’s contribution explores the critical power of methods, deploying Foucault’s ‘archaeology’ to critique dominant renditions of exceptionalism and securitization post-9/11 (2006). Going against the grain of approaches that read a move from archaeology to genealogy in Foucault’s methods, his article reclaims archaeological methods to attend to the conditions of possibility and discursive terrain within which political claims can be made.

More recently, Security Dialogue has published renewed substantive critical reflections on Foucault’s methods and their implications for critical research on security. These have not necessarily been archaeologies or genealogies in any strict Foucauldian sense, but can be read as experimentations with Foucault’s concepts in empirical sites related to security. Christophe Wasinski extends Foucault’s methodological approach from Discipline and Punish to further understand war and the army through a ‘discursive disciplinary and ontopolitical process’, as expressed in ‘mundane’ military books and regulations (Wasinski, 2011: 58). In this way, Wasinski makes the rules of visual perspective central to the genealogy of strategic thought and soldiering in the West.

Continuing the military theme, Seantel Anaïs’s article traces the emergence of non-lethality in the governance of security through the critical orientation of Foucault’s genealogical methods (Anaïs, 2011). Mobilizing Foucault’s insights on ‘eventalization’, her focus is on the emergence of non-lethal weapons in international conflict in response to the ethical crises of war. And, as Eva Herschinger’s article shows, the ‘dispositif’ also holds considerable methodological promise for understanding ambivalent objects of (in)security such as drugs (2015).

The methodological interrogations in these articles take us beyond the distinct lines often traced by engagements with Foucault in security studies: discourse versus practice, subjects versus objects, programmes versus implementations, territory versus population and so on. Each turns to ‘questions of method’ in order to raise broader questions about security practices and their transformation.
Foucauldian intersections, new agendas

The third section, which includes three recently published articles, is both a concluding section and an opening-up in debates about security. The articles included here work with and beyond Foucault. They emerge out of existing encounters with Foucault in critical work on security, but also suggest the limits and limitations of current discussions. Our interpretation is not that they reject Foucault, but rather that they build on some of the basic empirical and methodological orientations of Foucault while implicitly resetting the terms of some of the Foucauldian security studies literature. For example, they are united in rejecting global articulations of ‘power’. Their common strategy is to turn to other theorists – each intellectually related to Foucault in direct and indirect ways – in order to develop new critical directions that are freed from the burden of any kind of Foucaultian scholasticism.

Doert the Rosenow challenges epistemic analyses of neoliberal governmental practices by re-reading the role of complexity theory in global governmental regimes. She stages a critical encounter in which complexity theory is not simply subsumed to power, but is mobilized in sites of resistance to GMOs through ‘strategies of multiplication and pluralization of knowledge about life’ (Rosenow, 2012: 544). Rosenow’s move, inspired by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers’s articulations of complexity theory, resonates with recent arguments for attending to heterogeneity and ‘mess’ in security practices. Peer Schouten mobilizes the actor network-theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour and others such as John Law to argue that security needs to be approached through controversies that bring to light how heterogeneous elements are translated and enrolled in more or less stable assemblages (Schouten, 2014). Despite the shift to ANT in Schouten’s article, this is a rearticulation of a very Foucauldian idea. Xavier Plasse-Couture (2013) analyses the violence of neoliberal governmentality and its technologies of abandonment and containment in the Occupied Territories. In drawing attention to multiplicity in the arrangement of forces in the context of Israel-Palestine he makes another important theoretical shift by engaging with postcolonial readings of necropower by Achille Mbembe and economies of abandonment by Elizabeth Povinelli among others.

The articles in this section can be read as a series of critical encounters with Foucault, but also as openings for research agendas beyond Foucault. They caution against the making of a
Foucault orthodoxy in security studies. Thus we have entitled this section ‘intersections’ to capture a constant curiosity that does not aim to replace one theoretical orthodoxy with another, but remains attuned to heterogeneous practices across transnational sites and retains a critical orientation that continues to inform Foucault-inspired research in security studies.

Notes

1 A key earlier discussion of ‘global governmentality’ had been Wendy Larner and William Walters (2004).

References


