

Rational and Irrational Approaches to Human Security: A Reply to Ralph Pettman*

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I endorse many of the policy goals that have been pursued under the banner of human security, including the protection of civilians in armed conflicts, the creation of an international criminal court to hold individuals responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity, the campaign to outlaw land mines and curb the proliferation of small arms, as well as efforts to promote environmental sustainability and to increase the number of people in the world with access to clean water, food, and shelter.

When I wrote about the concept of human security in 2001, however, I made a point of distinguishing between the laudable objectives of the human security campaign and the problematic definition of the human security concept itself (Paris 2001, 87–102). My argument was that the concept had been so broadly and vaguely defined that it was difficult to know what, if anything, did *not* count as a threat to human security. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for example, human security included ‘safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression’ as well as ‘protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life—whether in homes, in jobs or in communities’ (UNDP 1994, 23). The scope of this definition was vast: virtually any kind of unexpected or irregular discomfort could conceivably constitute a threat to one’s human security.

This definitional expansiveness, I argued, posed a problem for researchers who might be interested in investigating the causes of human security (or insecurity) because it was not clear what exactly they should be examining. Further, because the concept encompassed both physical security and more general notions of social, economic, cultural and psychological well-being, it was impractical to talk about certain socioeconomic conditions ‘causing’ an increase or decline in human security, since these factors were themselves part of the definition of human security. To be sure, human security suggested that human welfare, not just the territorial defence of states, should be treated as a core element of security thinking. But beyond that, the concept cried out for a more precise and meaningful definition. Nevertheless, I maintained that human security—as a *general* approach to the study of threats to the well-being of

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societies, groups and individuals—deserved to be viewed as a legitimate and important branch of security studies, and not treated as a poor cousin of conventional realist approaches, which focus more narrowly on military threats to states.

Ralph Pettman views my analysis as symptomatic of the problems of ‘rationalism’, which he defines as the ‘the attempt to know by prioritising the human capacity for reason’ (Pettman 2005, 139). Rationalists, he tells us, are guilty of many misdeeds. They view human nature as essentially bad or calculating; they adopt instrumentalist and exploitative views of the natural environment; they ignore collectivist or communal aspirations; they are sexist and culturally hegemonic; and they view security in state-centric terms—hence, their tendency to disparage human security.

By lumping all of these horrible qualities together, Pettman creates a wonderfully large target to attack in his defence of human security. But this target is essentially a straw man. There is nothing in the epistemology of rationalism (‘the attempt to know by prioritising the human capacity to reason’) that leads inexorably to an exploitative approach to the natural environment (as thousands of scientists who research climate change can attest), or to an essentialist view of human nature (*cogito ergo sum* assumes nothing apart from cognition), or to a view of women as inferior to men (an irrational prejudice), or to disregard for collective or communal sentiments (is the study of nationalism not a central part of our discipline?), or to cultural hegemony (Noam Chomsky is an arch-rationalist and potent critic of hegemony) or to indifference to the security concerns of individuals and groups below the level of the state (including infectious disease, poverty, civil war, political oppression and other threats to human well-being).

Pettman creatively misreads my article on human security to make it fit this caricature of rationalism. I did not say that ‘the concept of human security distracts us from a proper understanding of strategic affairs’, or that human security should be viewed simply as ‘global development’, or that it should be treated as ‘secondary’ to the security of states, or that ‘the idea of a duty to protect [civilians] . . . is anathema’ or that human nature is ‘essentially bad’ (144). These are the inventions of a fertile mind, one whose suspicion of rationalism seems to include a certain carelessness with facts versus fiction.

In spite of these problems, I accept Pettman’s more general argument that human security may be viewed and defined differently, depending on the cultural context of the observer. Culturally rooted rhetoric and metaphors can convey many layers of meaning and deserve to be disentangled and deciphered by scholars, including in the field of security studies.¹ Where Pettman and I might disagree is on the implications of this observation for the study of human security. He seems to think that we should not try to define human security more precisely, because doing so would unduly objectify the concept and ‘make it harder to understand how human insecurity feels’ (140). Instead, he prefers to recast human security as a ‘general concept of global security’ that encompasses a multiplicity of perspectives on what constitutes ‘security’.

My own view is that the study of political science has ample room for diverse approaches including postmodernism and post-structuralism, and that Pettman can define human security however he chooses. That said, the fact of human

¹ See, for example, Paris (2002).

subjectivity (which, paradoxically, Pettman himself seems to treat as an objective fact) does not preclude our defining terms and concepts in ways that not everyone might agree with. Further, there are analytical disadvantages to overly broad and vague definitions. If a concept is formulated in a manner that potentially includes *anything*, then the concept itself becomes little more than a phrase, an empty container, a Rorschach ink blot, which makes certain kinds of analysis difficult if not impossible. Empirical analysis, in particular, requires at least a basic idea of the content of a phenomenon to be studied.

In the case of human security, Pettman seeks to broaden the definition beyond the already expansive UNDP formulation. Doing so would certainly increase the 'inclusiveness' of the concept, but at a cost: we would have an even vaguer idea of how to recognise human security (or insecurity) when we see it. To the extent that the UNDP definition offered any clarity on this issue, it was the proposition that human security referred to the well-being of individuals and groups, and not the military defence of states. But now Pettman would like human security to encompass state security as well, in effect leaving nothing outside the boundaries of the concept. That seems to be his point: there should be no definitional boundaries.

If human security refers to everything, it effectively refers to nothing. We cannot measure it; we cannot determine what factors cause an increase or decrease in human security; and we cannot articulate a specific policy agenda that flows from the concept. For these reasons, Pettman's recommended approach provides no clear basis for advancing an empirical research agenda on human security or for defining specific policy objectives that would increase human security in the world.

References

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