

Theory Talks

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THEORY TALK #39

RITA ABRAHAMSEN AND MICHAEL WILLIAMS
ON PRIVATE SECURITY COMPANIES, GLOBAL
SECURITY ASSEMBLAGES, AND AFRICA

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

Citation: Schouten, P. (2011) 'Theory Talk #39: Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams on Private Security Companies, Global Security Assemblages, and Africa', *Theory Talks*, <http://www.theory-talks.org/2011/03/theory-talk-39.html> (07-03-2011)

RITA ABRAHAMSEN AND MICHAEL WILLIAMS ON PRIVATE SECURITY COMPANIES, GLOBAL SECURITY ASSEMBLAGES, AND AFRICA

Private security is by now a pervasive phenomenon across the globe. Within IR, the military side of this has received most attention. But the privatization of security looms larger than the ‘corporate warriors’ Peter Singer ([Theory Talk #29](#)) discusses. From Sweden to South Africa and from the U.S. to Afghanistan, security governance pervasively involves more everyday, commercial, and non-militarised forms of private security. In this *Talk*, Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams—whose work represents the forefront of thinking on this topic—amongst others lay bare some of the profoundly political questions that accompany this phenomenon; address some important misconceptions surrounding private security; and elegantly relate the way in which private security in Africa becomes constructed to questions on knowledge production and power in International Relations.

What is, according to you, the central challenge or principal debate in International Relations? And what is your position regarding this challenge/in this debate?

MW I think that whilst we have worked together a lot these past years, we still have different visions concerning some of these issues. What follows is therefore my own version.

For me, the biggest current challenge for International Relations would be to translate the theoretical developments that we have seen over the past 25 years into concrete engagements with practice. Fifteen to twenty years ago in the ‘game’ of IR what mattered, what gave fulfillment, was doing meta-theory and philosophy of science. And these were incredibly important and interesting debates during the whole positivist/post-positivist turn. It seems to me that that phase of discussions is... not over, but to some extent has run its course. And the really big challenge right now theoretically is for people to translate the insights and the openings that have come out of all these meta-theoretical transformations into engagements with practice.

To explain practices is a complicated thing. I don’t think anybody needs to reduce it down to policy engagement in a direct, old fashion, sense, although I think there are some interesting questions in trying to do that; I think it’s very interesting work to try to translate what we call post-positivist methodologies into real old-fashioned governmental policy advice. But then there is a whole broader question, once one opens up the question of theory and practice, of how we can reengage with practice without pretending in a straight-forward way that theory is practice,

which I think is both a naive and to some extent a self-serving way of thinking about the consequences of post-positivism. The big issues here are really tricky but I think they are incredibly important. That for me is the most exciting work and immediate challenge for the field.

I think this challenge plays out very clearly in the debate between rational choice people or rationalists on the one hand and those that engage in other forms of theorising. An example of the latter would be how constructivists try to think about security orders. Securitization theory is a very good example of how you can use an explicitly non-positivist analysis but do some very practical things in terms not only of how political situations are developing but also reflecting on real political, rhetorical practices of framing and cultural dynamics that may or may not lead to effective securitizations. Another example of non-positivist theorising is that which has been done on diplomacy. There is also interesting stuff going on in the domain traditionally occupied by strategic studies: how for example does one think about strategy in non-linear terms, or about new technologies? What does it mean to think about non-linear trajectories for scenario planning? Both these areas are intellectually incredibly challenging. These are I think great examples of work done that goes beyond simply constantly referring back into meta-theory or back into philosophical issues and rather attempts to take those philosophical and methodological openings and engage in important issues.

RA I agree with a lot of what he said, but as somebody who comes to International Relations from a very different background and has worked a long time in a field that has traditionally been engaged with more empirical issues, I have a slightly different take on the same debate. From my point of view, and from that of African studies in International Relations, the question of 'what are the main challenges' is very much an empirical question. I think the main challenge is something International Relations scholars have not traditionally been very good at speaking about, namely, inequality. At the same time, and this links to what Michael said, it has always been very important for me that whenever issues of inequality are spoken about, they are spoken of in a particular language that serves to reinforce the problems of inequality; it's a prescriptive language of knowing how we can fix these problems, good governance, let's democratise... In other words, the solution is always present and implicit, concealing the manner in which our scholarly representations are part of the power relationships and help re-inscribe these problems.

When I first started working on African politics, it was still called 'area studies' and the idea was that to do areas studies, theory was of absolutely no significance because Africa was not about theory and theory was not perceived as important for solving Africa's challenges. Yet for me it has always been central to realize that the way we study Africa is in itself important. So even if area studies claimed to be devoid of theory when studying a particular region, theory was always present, even if only in selecting which aspects of such a vast region as Africa one was to study. What determines which questions are asked, and which aren't? So in my perspective, one needs to be self-reflective about the kind of theory that one utilises. That means not simply retreating to a kind of discourse analysis and meta-theory of the study of Africa, but rather being critical about the activities you are engaged in and, depending on what slice of social world you are studying, bring that critical awareness with it.

MW To give Rita's answer a different twist: if one accepts the broadly Bourdieuan position that one is looking at fields of practice and attempts to engage with specific fields of practice and positions of given actors in it, then the most difficult thing (and this is something that Bourdieu argues) is that academics have almost a systematic interest in denying their own particular positionality within either a field of practice that they are trying to study, or the field of practice in which they are located in their everyday lives—i.e. the academic field—and the relationship between those two fields. In other words, a scholar is never just a scholar embedded in a scholarly field of practice, but is at the same time also engaging with a set of practices that are the object of analysis. As such, a scholar of the social sciences is also a player in the very field he is studying. It's a very interesting set of relations, depending on the particular location you are at a given time, including for instance the relationship between producing theory for an academic field of practice, and producing theory that is oriented towards a particular field of 'practice-practice'. There are real tensions here and I do not think one can understand either the peculiarities of the academic field or the very formal relationship between academic theory and theories of practice without actually thinking about that tension. The difficulty is of course is that we do have almost a pre-disposition (an interest, as Bourdieu would put it) as academics to deny that gap, to deny it either in saying: 'pure theory is good in and of itself, because pure theory is plain good'; or saying: 'actually, pure theory is the same as practice. It is just that nobody recognises or believes it.' And this ambivalence is not just an academic ambivalence; it has to do with structural conditions under which academic knowledge is being produced as opposed to other kinds of knowledge and the claim to 'dis'-interested knowledge that is a key structural component of academic practice and its location in the wider social field. And that is, I think, something which we are often too reluctant to think about. And the more you try to engage with concrete practices and to some extent with concrete policy debates, inevitably you are going to run across trying to mediate between those two.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about IR?

RA As indicated, I arrived at IR through African and postcolonial studies. What struck me most, was that in IR, Africa is just out there—the only task we as scholars have, is to simply go there and write down whatever it is we see, judging it by IR standards of course. This mainstream approach displays either a complete dismissal or a full-fledged unawareness of not only (postcolonial) theory but also, and quite simply, history. Reading someone like [Frantz Fanon](#) painfully reveals both: first, that contemporary Africa is literally conditioned by its colonial past, which implicates that 'we'—and with 'we' I refer not only to the 'West' but also more specifically to IR—are part and parcel of Africa and the way it has become what it is. Second, it reveals the disfigurement constituted by popular media, policy makers, and scholars alike, which tend to regard Africa as 'just' Africa instead of recognizing it as firmly embedded in global relations of power.

Now part of the problem is that for IR, Africa is just visible in terms of its formal, international politics. Studying the rest of 'Africa' was relegated to separate disciplines such as area studies or comparative politics. Acknowledging that what is of importance are first and foremost the global

relations of power shaping Africa, this bifurcation makes no sense at all—the question then becomes: how to study Africa and these interconnections despite disciplinary boundaries. Postcolonial theory takes the question of what binds all this together, the interconnectedness between what IR considers mainly as disconnected geographical units, as its starting point.

So when I wrote about ‘[disciplining democracy](#)’, what I wanted to find out, in part, was how the external—the global—is inside African democracy and how that form of power is embedded both historically, in knowledge, and in all forms of policy prescriptions. That same interconnectedness which was important here, also led us to considering private security as a similar set of issues of power, or rather, as social shifts and transformations in forms of power. How are the global and the local interconnected? How do certain actors get certain forms of power? We’ve proceeded to explore these questions, in some cases for Africa, in some cases for the global arena. That is pretty much how I would reconstruct a journey of 15 years.

Along this journey, some books in particular stand out. The first time I read work by Michel Foucault was very influential for my understanding of certain forms of power in relation to knowledge production and Africa Edward Said’s *Orientalism* was a big eyeopener as well and despite its shortcomings continues to be an important book in terms of how I see what I do. But closer to IR, Jean-François Bayart’s *The State in Africa: Politics of the Belly* was really important, as to me it is one of the first books that starts to unpack the African state, untangling it vis-à-vis the dominant assumptions in IR.

MW My trajectory is a little different as it started off very much from within IR during the second Cold War. I was an undergraduate student in the early 1980s, and actively and politically interested in the possibilities of nuclear war; questions of Euro-missiles were pretty central to anybody’s interest at that time. This led me almost immediately to an engagement with the kinds of claims that were being made about the necessity of policies and the kinds of logics within which they worked. If you were discontented with the remarkably sealed and almost circular debates and dialogues of nuclear strategy, you were prompted to study how security had come to be conceived within such relatively static and almost immovable forms of understandings. That therefore naturally led to a sort of concern with critical theory. As an undergraduate student I worked with Rob Walker, and my post-graduate studies were all influenced by Robert Cox ([Theory Talk #37](#)). The whole question therefore was about the key intellectual conditions that have made this dramatically sealed, structure of knowledge claims possible, and subsequently, how one might try to think those differently. And that involved a sort of dual movement; on the one hand going backwards, much further back into history and political feuds, to try to examine the structures and kinds of genealogies that these came from. And on the other hand forward, in terms of trying to look at what alternative kinds of analysis and practices might actually be possible. This is very much the story of broadening the content of security studies from the narrow understanding (‘strategic studies’) it had in the mid 1980s to a broader field of concerns.

In order to make this political opening possible, you had to engage in some sort of deconstructive move; but in order to keep it interesting and engaged, you had to make a reconstructive move. Staying on the outside of security studies and scrutinizing it from there,

simply leaves you at a place where there is not much to gain. The principle of immanent critique still has a lot to recommend it.

As an undergraduate the most influential book that I read was E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, and the thing I liked was that it contained all these kinds of different ambivalences. Why I subsequently liked Robert Cox's work, was because it picked up on the question of power that Carr raised, and took what had to me seemed a nasty realist tradition in quite a different direction than everyone else seemed to want to go. And in fact, when later on I re-read some of the classical realist work in light of Carr and Cox, I found that most of the interesting problems and discussions in Realism actually were articulated in the 1890-1950 period; in the subsequent period, Realism turned parsimonious, scientific, and basically focussed on a very narrow set of concerns that left out some of the richness of previous realist thought. I held the same prejudices against Realism that most people still hold until I decided to embark upon the adventure of examining these parts of Realism four years after my PhD.

Underpinning this is a broader issue: the way that classical scholars and their works get appropriated and distorted by subsequent thinkers to fit the arguments they're trying to make within their own tradition. Hobbes, Rousseau, and Marx, have been represented very parsimoniously by mainstream scholars during the Cold War; it's really a caricature that you were presented with. Only when the structure of world politics became less parsimonious itself, did IR theorists start to re-interpret or revisit the classics—that is, a big part of them. Marx is one of the classics that did not get so substantially revived in IR after the Cold War (though this is less true in historical sociology); in fact, I think that this is a great absence in contemporary IR theory debates.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?

MW It requires for me at least two things: the first is obvious and I will cite Hegel, who once said: “nothing great was ever achieved without passion”. The second is the combination between a willingness to think broadly and to question fundamental categories, but to do so in a focused way, and that demands a degree of rigour rather than simply moving from point to point to point. This is why I think classical theory is incredibly useful: if you are forced to engage with the logic of Leviathan or with Hegel's Phenomenology or with Kant's Critique of Pure Reason or perhaps with Marx's Capital, there is both an incredible intellectual journey there and a set of political questions, and lastly, there is also a commitment to a rigour of argument that I find incredibly compelling. If you're able to operate at both levels, you come close to what I see as true creativity. And this creativity is opposed for me to simply having read, and engaging with, the latest fashion in the field.

RA I think Michael's first point about passion is absolutely crucial. In a figure of speech, you need to have an issue which makes you angry and still does so the next morning, before you decide to do your PhD on it. Another point I want to make, is not to be afraid to play with academic boundaries. Academic studies are organized along clear disciplinary boundaries, that,

once established, become policed through journals, admission committees, and other gatekeepers, to the extent that the such ‘guardians of truth’ can actually inhibit the development of sensible ways of understanding acute problems. So I would encourage, and even deem necessary, thinking across the boundaries of IR to understand contemporary global politics, combining, say, politics and anthropology, or IR and sociology. At the same time, it has to be kept in mind that this can be dangerous advice, as inter-disciplinarity is both hard work and it may not necessarily endear you to journals and hiring committees. Nevertheless, I think some of the most interesting questions in contemporary global politics require thinking across conventional disciplinary boundaries.

Your recently published book, *Security Beyond the State*, is subtitled *Private Security in international politics*. I can imagine that a realist would say: ‘private security and IR? *Contradictio in terminis!*’

RA Private security actors have been there for a long time. And actually, they have been recognized by the social sciences for an equally long time— think about criminology—but just not in IR. IR is only now coming to terms with the fact that one of its most important assumptions, the state’s monopoly on violence, needs to be unraveled analytically, because empirically it doesn’t make sense in most of the places most of the times. We hope to contribute to this process of ‘creative destruction’ by asking, well, what does this category of actors mean for our understanding of international relations? What are the implications, for security, for political stability, for equality, and for how we understand the state and the relationship between states?

MW The role and authority of private actors in international relations has not only been expanding but has also generally become recognized as expanding: private legal authority—for instance through corporate settlements—private economic authority—the increasing size and impact of corporations—and NGOs and international organizations are just some examples. But for the international organization of security, the role of private actors has generally not been acknowledged, or it has focused largely on the private military or so-called neo-mercenaries. In *Security Beyond the State* we look instead at the more everyday, commercial, and non-militarised forms of private security. At one level, the absence of these type of security actors from IR is strange, because the extent of the privatization of security is visible everywhere—I mean, Group4Securicor, the world’s largest private security company, now claims to be the second biggest private sector employer in the world! If this is not significant, please tell me what is! On another level, its absence from IR is perhaps not so strange, because all of the analytic categories that structure understanding in that field—national/global; public/private; formal/informal; criminology/security—have to be rethought in order to make sense of the implications of private security actors.

RA I think in sum, international security studies has only seen the ‘outside’ of the privatization of security; only that layer of transformation represented by private military companies, but it has often failed to see the structural transformation on the inside of the global. It is not just the allocation of last-resort violence that is privatized, it is the whole machine: decision-making,

assessment, and implementation of security are all privatized. This means that social power globally is transforming and requires new thinking. So, yes, to answer your question directly, private security actors do matter for the relationships between states.

You introduce the notion of ‘security assemblages’ to describe the complex mixes of actors involved in security governance. Does this mean a departure from the status quo of assuming that states are always in the center of security governance?

RA We introduced the notion of ‘security assemblages’ to denote something which one can find in most settings, namely, a pluralization of the nature of security actors involved. Yet the specific mix of actors, their relationships, or how the field is assembled is not something one can predict or theorise a priori, but rather an empirical question that requires investigation. The more traditional approach meant, because of its Weberian heritage, that one always starts out assuming that security involves only or mostly the army or police, i.e. public actors with a monopoly of the use of force. Instead, we start out by saying that most of the time, security governance involves other actors in addition to the state, to ask, well, which actors are they, what is their relationship to public actors, and what are the implications.

In almost any setting across the globe, one will now find the army, the police, military police, customs, national and transnational private security companies, secret services, risk consultancy firms... This means we need to re-open the question of the state, of how it is being re-articulated, partially dis-assembled and re-assembled, in negotiation with private security actors. What forms of power do the different actors in such a global assemblage have? That varies, as does the role and strength of the state across different settings. You could—as we did in Africa in the book—find a whole range of different actors, different public actors, different private actors, and some actors quite surprisingly with forms of power you would not necessarily expect to find or wouldn’t even see in the traditional approach to security studies. To capture these forms of power, we work with Bourdieuan concepts of [forms of capital](#). There is an empirical question here; we want to hold on to the idea that the state still matters and the notion of the public itself has continued relevance as a form of Bourdieuan capital in the assemblage. The security field itself, we argue, is structured by this ‘obsession’ with the public and the private, so the state doesn’t disappear—even if the state is very weak in terms of the capacity to do things, public and private actors still invoke the capital of the notion of the public to be able to do what they do and to be able in some cases restrain what other actors can do.

Last question: What are the biggest misconceptions about the subject that you are studying?

RA There are so many misconceptions about private security in Africa but at the same time private security is a big field. I think the biggest misconception is this idea that all forms of private security are more or less the same. It is the ‘Executive Outcomes’ reading of private

security which constitutes one of the biggest misconceptions. This view holds that there are mercenaries running around like crazy in Africa, and other continents. Obviously, the idea of big men with big weapons still holds some truth, and this form of private security hasn't ceased to exist but the fact is, that a most of the private security actors in Africa (and globally) are not armed and they are certainly not engaged in military or quasi-military activities. In fact, private security guards in Africa, and elsewhere too, are among the poorest paid employees you would find. Their power and impact on the security field come not so much from the barrel of the gun, but from the embeddedness of private security within broader structures of social power, both locally and globally. That is an important point that we try to demonstrate in *Security Beyond the State*.

MW Then there is the frequent association between increased privatisation and decreased state legitimacy, like it's a zero-sum game. This is a very tight conceptual link, which underpins a lot of the literature on private security in IR. This whole way of thinking about politics is not always entirely wrong, but recognising the pervasiveness of private security in Sweden, Denmark, and the UK helps a great deal in getting rid of the conceptual idea that because it is private, it must by necessity and automatically mean delegitimation of the state. In fact, our research indicates that it isn't that simple anywhere in the world. Rather than the association 'increased private security-decreased state legitimacy', we should pose questions about the nature of the relationship between security, the state, and other agents—and we can see that the relationship is more complicated than most of our inherent categories allows us to hang on to. In the global security assemblages that we investigate in the book, the relationships between the private and the public, the global and the local, are negotiated and complex, but nowhere can the private be said to represent a straight-forward erosion of state authority or legitimacy. Whether in resource extraction in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, or in urban security in South African and Kenya (the four empirical cases in the book), we are witnessing a reconfiguration of the public and the private, the global and the local, so that instead of a simple retreat of the state we are witnessing its re-articulation and the emergence of new geographies of power.

Related links

- [Faculty Profile Rita Abrahamsen at U-Ottawa](#)
- [Faculty Profile Michael Williams at U-Ottawa](#)
- Read an excerpt of the introduction to their 2011 book *Security Beyond the State: Private Security in International Politics* (Cambridge) [here](#) (html/pdf)
- Read Abrahamsen & Williams' *Privatising Africa's Everyday Security* (Open Democracy 2010) [here](#) (html)
- Read Abrahamsen & Williams' *Security Beyond the State: Global Security Assemblages in International Politics* (International Political Sociology, 2009(3)) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read their *Beyond the Privatized Military* (Human Security Bulletin, 2008) [here](#) (html/pdf)