

Human Security's Coming of Age⁽¹⁾

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I. Introduction

Early attempts to describe and define human security linked its emergence to the gradual shift in security studies⁽²⁾ that began in late 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, away from the narrow focus on military security and states and towards a broader conceptualization of security that incorporated non-traditional elements such as economic, environmental, or socio-cultural, and expanded participation to non-state actors.⁽³⁾ Similarities and differences between distinct conceptions of security from *common* to *comprehensive*, and from *cooperative* to *global* were drawn. In the field of development studies, human security was seen as the natural successor in a line of progressive approaches that evolved from *economic*, to *social*, and its

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 - (2) Buzan, B. (1991). *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf; Booth, K. (1991) Security and emancipation. *Review of International Studies*, 17(4), 313-26.
 - (3) Independent Commission on International Development Issues. (1980). *North-South: A Program for Survival*. London: Pan Books; Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues. (1982). *Common Security: A Blueprint for Survival*. New York: Simon and Schuster; World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our Common Future*. London: Oxford University Press.

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immediate predecessor of *sustainable* development.

Against the background of a growing list of neologisms describing different contexts, challenges and aims of security, the question naturally appeared of whether human security was truly a new way of understanding (in)security or whether it was just another catch-phrase that captured new (if, superficial) aspects but which would eventually fade away once its heyday had passed (Paris, 2001). This article engages with this question and seeks to provide a conclusive answer. After briefly tracing the main trends and arguments that have been put forward by both proponents and critics in the past two decades, it engages with the issues and aspects that have been left out of the debate, either or not intentionally. The argument is that at present, human security fails to represent a real shift in thinking about security and that, unless it broadens the scope of analysis and engagement to include fundamental ethical and practical questions (i.e., social progress through economic development and growth, the West as the yardstick for the Rest, the relationship between “humanity” and “security”), it faces the prospect of the dust-bin of history, without having made a meaningful theoretical or practical contribution to our world.

II. Two Decades of Debate: Three Main Angles

The past two decades have seen spirited debates about the content and nature of human security, and significant contributions have been made along all the three main “takes” on it. The first, emancipatory take, with its practice and policy-oriented focus, has largely sought to work within the frame and the confines of existent policies and politics in order to make a tangible change in the lives of those most affected by human insecurity. The second, critical reaction to the emancipatory take, has emphasized the ways in which the practice of human security within existing ideological and institutional framework contributes to the strengthening of those very structures and actors that are primarily responsible for human insecurity, in effect representing “a band-aid solution” to what increasingly looks like a hemorrhage. The third, post-structural take, emphasizes the need to stop trying to “fit” human security within

the current assumptions and parameters that define and delimit our understanding of security, and instead try to devise new ones that are not only better, but also uniquely suited to those completely new problems we face today.

The limited scope of this paper does not allow me to go into further details on any of these three understandings of human security, but I wish to add two further comments here: first, despite the fact that these interpretations (and the subdivisions they each contain) have tended to criticize one another sometimes to the point of mutual dismissal, it is my firm belief that they are all equally valuable, as they collectively stimulate us to continue thinking about what security should mean in the 21st century, and individually, in their own way, work towards making the world a better place. Second, so far these approaches have failed to create a true alternative to the way in which we think about and approach security, overall merely contributing to a “rebranding of security than a shift in the general thinking of what constitutes security and the ultimate referent of security”, as Hynek and Chandler (2011, pp. 4-5) rightly put it.

Conceptually what is required of a critical human security is to forge new assumptions and views of security that lay the foundations for a different *security culture*. Security became the main aim of government following a competition for resources. As this competition is set to intensify due to increasing global population and the pressures this places on natural resources, we need to forge not only a framework that ensures the sustainable management of these resources, but also a culture of sharing and cooperation among people that the current (competition/enemy-focused) security culture stifles.

Recently efforts have been undertaken to fundamentally and critically rethink human security in a way that breaks with or removes these old assumptions it has come to incorporate. Giorgio Shani (2014), Mustapha Kamal Pasha (2013), David Chandler (2011) and their collaborators have pointed us in the right direction. Overall, their most recent contributions seek to incorporate “difference” (identified in contexts such as the post-secular, the post-liberal, the trans-cultural, etc.) into the study of security and especially the IR field, in ways that move beyond the traditional (liberal) assumptions and established

conceptual binaries.

Taking these efforts as a promising step, below I elaborate on three issues that the human security debate has so far largely neglected and which require (further) investigation. Inquiring deeper into the nature of the relationship between human security and these three aspects is not only timely, but imperative, if the concept is to make a meaningful contribution in opening up the debate about and the search for alternative approaches to our current security problems.

1. Social Progress Through Economic Development and Growth

Despite the emergence of the human security concept within the UNDP context, there is still little inquiry into the degree to which human security inherits from the development approach its thinking and assumptions of *social progress* that is to be attained through *economic development and growth*. With few recent exceptions there has been little recognition of just how quickly human security incorporated the “givens” of the existent international political and economic institutions.

The foundation of current (neoclassical) economic policies both in the North and in the global South rest on the view that emancipation and empowerment (understood as the search for security) depend on and are equivalent to material betterment. Besides the difficulty of figuring out what exactly emancipation and empowerment mean in different parts of the world, as pointed out by Pasha (1996), what is extremely dangerous about this progressive view is the fact that it problematizes (in quite familiar ways) *economic underdevelopment*, thereby legitimizing the discourses of securitization against the South and justifying intervention through prescriptions for “remedy” by a “developed” West (either directly through bilateral economic aid and cooperation, or indirectly through international monetary and financial institutions).

This assumption of *economic growth as path to social progress* is one that has emerged in the Western context of modernization,⁽⁴⁾ and that was later gradually exported to the Rest through sophisticated and long term colonial

policies of development (Kothari, 2005). Post WWII, this assumption was first reinforced in the West through the European economic reconstruction and development, and later the economic integration projects. Economic growth has helped bring lasting peace to Europe, although this has not solved the politico-strategic dilemma that has haunted it for centuries.

The development field that emerged from the ashes of colonial policies (whether in its *social*, *sustainable* or *human* formulations) is built on this very assumption. Achieving social progress through economic development and growth might (arguably) have been successful in the European case, but this cannot be argued elsewhere. That is because post WWII international development has, more than anything else, exported the insecurities and tensions inherent in the Western model to the rest of the world, working to weaken and destabilize, rather than strengthen it.

Moreover, as Heloise Weber (2013) has recently argued, under the influence of narrow geo-strategic and economic interests of Western states, the political and social struggles in the Rest have been misrepresented as “reflect[ing] the need for development, rather than [that] such crises and insecurities are constituted through development processes” (p. 33). The global politics of poverty and development, the social construction of the *international* and the *global*, as well as the de-politicization of capitalism (portrayed as a simple economic project) have led to the opening up of spaces for intervention that “justify and legitimize the further entrenchment of neoliberal policies together with concerted efforts to transform subjectivities in accordance with liberal individualist - and reductionist- assumptions of the developmental subject”, that leave the “self and others’ lived experiences” out of the debate (p. 33).

One problem closely linked with this belief in economic growth that has

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- (4) Discursively portrayed as the movement for liberation from the “shackles of tradition and religion”, the political resistance against absolutist monarchy and its abuses was inextricably linked with the economic changes taking place, i.e., the rise of the entrepreneurial middle class and the “commodification of the commons (and the self)” proliferated through the capitalist system.

severe implications for human security is the threat of *nuclearism* in neoliberal times. I am not referring here to the danger posed by the misappropriation and use of nuclear weapons by terrorist groups; rather, I am referring to the link that has been made between nuclear technology and neoliberal economics. This progressive view argues that nuclear power, which is cheap and stable, is a vital condition for the continued growth of economies, and allows for the commercialization of nuclear technology for non-military use and thus, the proliferation of nuclear technology. The danger lies not only in the possibility of a return to super-power confrontational politics (in a fundamentally unchanged world of security concerns focused on identification of enemies to territorial and individualistic ownership), but also as the 3/11 triple disasters in Japan have shown, a very real possibility even in peaceful times. Consequently, it is extremely worrying that nuclear technology is portrayed as a desirable source of energy, cast as justifiable against the need to develop renewable sources of energy.

The lesson from this is that whatever solution we might come up with today, it might not be the silver bullet that solves a certain inherent dilemma but just a way to overcome a stalemate, one that potentially creates new and different problems on its own while still leaving us with the dilemma unresolved. With her amazing power of foresight Arendt (1965) had argued that “[e]conomic growth may one day turn out to be a curse rather than a good, and under no conditions can it either lead to freedom or constitute a proof of its existence” (pp. 219-20).

Within the field of economics there is an ongoing (generational) debate about the limits of economic growth, with younger scholars acknowledging it against the reality of limited resources (while for the older generation this continues to represent a “cultural” challenge) and parallel efforts are undertaken to think beyond the *status-quo* and towards a post-growth (*décroissance*) world.⁽⁵⁾ On an optimistic note, today economics students are demanding they

(5) An entire academic field of “post-development studies” deals with this. See the work of some

are taught differently, by incorporating historical, broader and more inclusive study of economics theories, and recognizing that economics is a social science (Russell, 2014). Various student organizations⁽⁶⁾ throughout the world have joined in a common push for “a complete overhaul of curricula” at economics departments, in recognition of what heterodox economic theory proponent Steve Keen (2011) calls “extraordinarily bad thinking” for which economics departments are the source of. Rethinking human security needs to recognize, reflect on and incorporate these developments into its own debate.

2. Lack of Focus on “the West”

So far human security engagements with the West have only focused on the (neo) liberal state model as a collective or contractual enterprise through which free individual citizens pursue their security. Critical voices have questioned the Western obsession with building democratic institutions and the applicability of the liberal model in the non-Western world pointing to the fact that the liberal state model and approach to security is just *one* of many alternative models through which people have sought collective security. They have consequently made the case for a pluralization of structures and models rather than the current push for world-wide standardization and uniformization.

A fundamental problem that human security going forward needs to address is the basic assumption from which scholars have began their analyses until now: that the West has been successful in providing for the human security of its citizens. This is because the liberal democratic process, through which collective security is sought and the liberal contract with the state is renewed, has been thought to be enough to guarantee it (despite the presence of numerous pockets

of its most notable proponents: Arturo Escobar, Gustavo Estava, Gilbert Gist, Serge Latouche, Ivan Illich, Vandana Shiva, Wolfgang Sachs or Majid Rahnema. A useful reference is Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree (Eds.)(1997) *The Post-Development Reader*, London: Zed Books.

(6) See, for example, Rethinking Economics, PEPS-Économie (Pour un Enseignement Pluraliste dans le Supérieur en Économie), or Estudios Nueva Economía.

of insecurity in the West). However, we need to rethink this assumption. This need arises from two different angles.

First, is to do with the structural changes that have taken place over the past decades in the West -captured by concepts such as “risk”, “securitization”, “control”, and the more recent “discursive disappearance of the securing agency itself”, as Chandler (2011) put it. More generally, a shift has occurred from a *reactive* to a *proactive* (or *preventive*) security culture, that is, from securitizing against everything that is known about a clearly identified enemy and his harmful intentions, to securitizing against everything that is potentially dangerous in the absence of clear knowledge and irrefutable proof, but based on computed calculations, estimations and predictions. This proactive security culture of ours takes as foundational principle the notion of *risk* (cf. Beck, 1999) and the assumption of one’s ability to predict, assess and manage future developments, and effectively “bend history” in accordance with current plans and projections.

In the West, when future does not turn out to be quite as predicted and prepared for, blamed on “faulty” expert knowledge or insufficient preparedness, as in the US 9/11 terrorist attacks, that is when the link with the “state of exception” (cf. Agamben, 2005) is created, and the “culture of control” (cf. Garland, 2001) takes over, allowing for the political (re)construction of risk and the legitimization of illiberal means of governance (surveillance, regulatory procedures) presented as acceptable within the liberal model. Alarm signs have already been raised about the implications of such governing practices onto the liberal state, but this linkage could further benefit from a sustained analysis by human security scholars.

It took something like Hurricane Katrina in the US and more recently the triple (earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear explosions) disasters of 3/11 in Japan for scholars (Sygna, O’Brien & Wolf, 2013; Bacon & Hobson, 2014; Bacon, Hobson & Cameron, 2014) to seriously start thinking about the applicability of human security lenses to the analysis of Western domestic contexts; yet this development is far from being accepted orthodoxy. To what

extent are human security scholars correct in assuming that the industrialized liberal *states* in the “West” (continue to) provide for the human security of their citizens? What is/should be the role of non-state actors in that provision? The lack of accountability of the main stakeholders in the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Yamauchi, 2014) and the reluctance of the Japanese government to recognize and learn from the mistakes it made in the management of the man-made disaster at Fukushima is a worrying sign regarding the ability of Western states to do so- even one as advanced and supposedly disaster sensitive and prepared one as that of Japan (Kingston, 2014; Hobson, 2014).

Second, and related to the first, is to do with the changes that have taken place in the debate *about* human security and the recent attempts to de-centralize the Western, liberal, secular, developed, etc., foundations on which human security has been premised. This is inextricably linked with the fact that today’s cacophony of visions, actors and interests *vis-à-vis* security in the West is in many ways the result of an intensification of the security dilemmas and tensions inherent in the liberal model. The incipient “discursive disappearance of the security agency itself” under way in post-industrial Western societies, Chandler (2011) argues, runs parallel with a recasting of the state role regarding security and the means (both liberal and illiberal) through which it is to facilitate the individual ability and responsibility in providing for their own security, which is also echoed in the questioning of the centrality of the Western styled state and security thinking.

Human security scholars need to pay attention to the implications of the post-liberal developments, through which the re-imagining of the liberal individual as an activated and responsible individual charged with the provision of his/her own security is undertaken. What does this do for people who *are not* or *can not* be activated and are *unable* to provide for their own security? How is this transformation relevant for the human security of individuals in the post-liberal Western context? In more concrete terms, for example, what is the relationship between an aging post-industrial society’s reliance on immigrant labor, and the discourse of activating and responsabilizing of the individual for

the provision of his/her own security? How does this affect the assumption that Western liberal states are successfully providing the human security of their citizens?

The (European) state's focus on *security* as the *ultimate aim of government* emerged in the context of the competition for material resources. This has been inextricably linked with a territorialization and centralization of state power that coincided with the commodification of the commons and the self (beginning with the early phases of the industrial revolution in Europe). The context of the 21st century (global environmental and demographic pressures) does not sustain anymore the monopolistic/ individualistic ownership of resources, but instead requires a collective management and ownership of those resources.

On an optimistic note, the younger generation seems to place a higher premium on *access* rather than *ownership* (which might be in part due to the technology of Internet and virtual world), that is why a reconsideration of our approach to security and its nature might not only be imperative, but also possible. This change is important as it can potentially become a platform from which a new interpretation of collective security as “collaborative commons” (cf. Rifkin, 2014) could emerge. However, the Internet presents us not only with new opportunities, but also with new challenges that directly affect the security of Western states- much more than the Rest- because of the their degree of dependence on it. Can we really talk about human security today without thinking about the security of the cyber space, when increasingly more aspects of our daily lives (water and sewage systems, health system, communications, etc.) become dependent on it (Von Solms, 2014)?

Where critical human security can make its mark is towards forging a new understanding of security based on a spirit of shared responsibility for our common future not only within and among the Western states, but more importantly, by acknowledging and allowing non-Western world an equal say in this global partnership. Many of the problems emanate from the superiority complex and the attitude of the West to dictate to the Rest, requiring the latter follows in its footsteps. This brings me to the third issue: the relationship

between *humanity* and *security*.

3. Relationship Between Humanity and Security

Human security analyses have until very recently taken the meaning of both “human” and “security” as “givens”, failing to recognize the particular modern Western and liberal understandings that underpin their claims to universality and positing a uniformity where in reality there is a complexity of social-cultural contexts and associated interpretations (Davies, 2013).

Some critics (Pasha, 2011; Richmond, 2011) have already argued that behind the universal “human” there is in fact the assumption of a particular meaning of the modern, liberal, secular and active individual possessing rights and responsibilities that originated in the Western context and that is not to be assumed throughout the world. Taking this argument a step further Shani (2013) has argued for a de-secularization of the “human” which is not to be understood in the Habermasian senses of “post-secularity which privilege the universality of (post) secular reason”, but as a recognition of the “multiple religio-cultural contexts in which human dignity is embedded” (p. 65). The problem lies, in his view, not only in the domination of a Western secular view of the human, but also in the way in which it forbids the “articulation of plural claims from a multiplicity of different religio-cultural traditions”, and de-legitimizes their respective political and cultural dimensions (which he exemplifies in the Islamic or Sikh traditions).

As Pasha and his collaborators (2013) have argued recently, critical human security studies have yet to unsettle the hegemonic thinking that identifies *difference* as a problem, despite the discourse of the universality of human needs and concerns. “Although this emphasis on the equal dignity of mankind is shared by other religio-cultural traditions and is not specific to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the universalistic and *secular* language used to articulate the concept occludes its specifically religious origins. In short, the substantive concept of human dignity cannot be assumed *a priori* from the abstract notion of the ‘human’ but must be historically and *culturally* understood.

Reconceptualizing Human Security can therefore only be achieved through an engagement with the various conceptions of human dignity which exist in other religious and cultural traditions which are no less ‘universal’ than that of the West” (Emphasis in original) (pp. 74-5).

It is indisputable that all societies and cultures have notions of human rights, but the way in which these are conceptualized and protected varies extensively. If dignity and humanity are the ultimate goals of human security do we need to also call the concept as such? And if humanity is the aim, what is the relationship between humanity and security? What do we mean by security in the 21st century? Should security in the negative meaning of countering enemy threat and/or potential risk be the way in which we approach our problems in the 21st century? Should territorialization and individual ownership (through the commodification of the commons and the self) be the (only) fundamentals underpinning our understanding of security?

Over the twentieth century we have witnessed different reconceptualizations of security. While there has been a change in the culture of security of Western states from one of *re-action* to one of *pro-action*, the current securitization practices and policies continue to be premised on the existence of an existential threat/enemy (to that territory and individual ownership). Moreover, more and more the solutions to the various security threats/challenges we face are cast in terms of finding new technological devices, improving our “hardware”, while the “software” side of it is by and large neglected. Recognizing that there is no 100% risk-free technology and that we can never be fully prepared is imperative, a condition *sine-qua-non* to changing our perspective on security, but we also need to pay more attention and care to the human element, the “software”, underpinning the corporate cultures and *modus operandi* behind the sophisticated installations and technological protective “walls” we “fortify” our societies with.

“Reconceptualizing security as emancipation (...) risks leading to greater securitization” (Shani, 2013, p. 74) (understood as an “extreme form of politicization”) because the basic foundations remain unchanged. Moreover, as

past experiences stand to testify, in practice security has a way of linking seemingly unrelated ideas of social progress with the most unexpected tools, discourses and interests that often lead to the opposite outcomes than those they were initially designated for. For example, the eugenic ideas of the late 19th century found unexpected resonance in the events of the 1930s and initially unrelated medical and technical innovations such as the asylum institution, criminal science and sterilization techniques, were linked with the Nazi discourse of Arian supremacy and national security in ways that justified and led to de-humanizing practices and unspeakable horrors.

Although the current situation cannot possibly be compared to the Nazi situation, as Mythen and Walklate (2006) argue, there are nevertheless continuities in the discourse and practice of *risk*, where “insecurity and intolerance [offer] the mechanisms whereby the notions of belonging, who is one of us and who is not, have the potential not only to exclude the stranger, ‘the Other’, but also to demonize them”, in a context where the “‘culture of fear’ constantly constructs and reconstructs those to be feared, those we avoid, those who are risky.” That is particularly why, they add, in this contemporary risk culture of ours, we need to move beyond seeking “biographical solutions to what are clearly systemic problems” and find ways to prevent people’s minds from becoming “factories of fear” (pp. 234-5).

This is where human security needs to make its contribution: in de-centralizing the negative approach to security that is associated with territorialization and individual ownership. The sort of change that is required is also profoundly linked to and dependent on strong humanities (including religious and philosophical) studies, which however have been reduced to a marginal position in academia during the neoliberal age. Part of this rethinking of our approach to the fundamentals of our society that critical human security undertakes needs to also reevaluate the role of humanities and the business-like approach to higher education (that mainstreams and marginalizes disciplines based on a market logic). Critical human security scholars therefore, also need (indeed, have a responsibility) to engage with “teaching *for* human security”,

with the current status and organization of academic disciplines, and work towards allowing for alternative thinking to be fostered.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has argued that if the concept is to make a meaningful contribution to our world it urgently needs to engage deeper with the aspects and issues that have been, either or not intentionally, left out of the debate: the “unshakable” belief in the ability of economic development and growth to deliver social progress, the identification of the global South as the source of global human insecurity and the lack of focus on *the West*, and finally, the relationship between “humanity” and “security”.

In doing so we have to work towards bringing it out of the confines of traditional disciplines and their basic assumptions. We need to stop trying to “fit” human security within the current conceptual binaries and frameworks as we have been doing for the past two decades and start a different kind of theorizing and thinking about security that recognizes the multiplicity of meanings and contexts, that does not seek to replace one with another, but makes plurality its foundational principle accepting that people adapt and adopt different priorities and approaches to security depending on their particular contexts.

Only in this way will it be able to address the issues it claims to address and make possible a fundamental change in the practice of security. We find ourselves in one of those rare moments when history opens up an “opportunity to think collectively about our global future”, when, as ul Haq (1980) reminded us, we need “to examine critically the premises on which [the current institutions] were built in the past, and to negotiate new premises wherever the old assumptions have been eroded with the passage of time or new assumptions are required to serve the mutual interests of all nations” (p. 414).

Before I conclude, another reference to Arendt (1958) is in order. One fundamental characteristic of the “human condition” that Arendt described is the ability of human beings to begin new things. But she also emphasized that this ability to put new things/ideas in motion is not accompanied by the ability to

control or foresee where they ultimately lead. That is why it is so important, she argued, to assume the responsibility that comes with this sort of ability. In critically engaging with human security we need to recognize the opportunity it offers, but also assume the responsibility of starting new things when we lack the power to control the final destination. That is particularly because, as the story of development stands to prove, the “noblest causes have often had dramatic consequences” (Rist, 2008, p. vii).

There are two meanings of critique we need to distinguish from: one, is the sense of *unfavourable judgement*, the other, is the Kantian sense of *public examination* and engagement with the issue at hand. The first meaning merely presents us with the window of opportunity for change; the change, however, *comes neither naturally nor automatically*, but rather requires engagement and sustained effort: that alone will allow for the fruitful valorization of the opportunity presented by the first meaning. In the absence of a public examination of the fundamental problems we are faced with, the window of opportunity for change we are presented with will simply be hijacked by the same old actors cast in a new act of the same old script, in a recurring pattern of critique and crisis.

The role and responsibility of the academia is (in the absence of philosopher-politicians) to act as a collective social conscience that thinks about the greater good, and advises towards its achievement. If it is not “daring to disagree” in a collective engagement and debate about the fundamental dilemmas of social life, academia is itself becoming part of the problem, rather than the solution. This is where, in my view, critical human security scholarship has *slowly* began to make its contribution.

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Human Security's Coming of Age

<Summary>

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Ever since it emerged in the context of UNDP two decades ago, *human security* has been hailed as a new approach to security, capable of challenging the narrow focus and the established assumptions of the traditional concepts of security. The body of cross-disciplinary research and policy practice that has emerged since then has struggled with the challenge of making the concept policy relevant in a way that can lead to real change in the lives of those it seeks to empower. In the process however, by incorporating some of the main assumptions that it was claiming to challenge, human security has lost its “transformative ethos” and has become a tool of hegemonic forces seeking to incorporate challengers and their tools into the structures that justify and facilitate their domination. In criticizing the unidirectionality of the theoretical and practical debate so far, this article argues that, if it is to make a truly meaningful contribution, human security needs to engage with the assumptions it has taken for granted and consequently left out of the debate: the belief that economic development and growth lead to social progress, the lack of focus on *the West*⁽⁷⁾, and the relationship between “humanity” and “security” in the neoliberal age.

(7) Here, “the West” also refers to those highly industrialized countries that have adopted principles and institutions originated in Western Europe and the US, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.