Olivier Memorial Peace Lecture 2016

Rethinking security

Celia McKeon

Celia began by explaining how she had come to be concerned about issues of peace and security. An encounter as a teenager with other young people from Croatia, who were then displaced by the war in Yugoslavia, had increased her awareness of the devastating impacts of conflict and insecurity.

Celia has worked for almost twenty years with people who are trying to build peace in contexts of violent conflict. These experiences have persuaded her that we need to urgently rethink our approach to security in general, and not just in countries affected by violent conflict. How we choose to think about what security means, and what we choose to believe about how we create it, has a profound bearing on the kind of society we live in, the kind of relationships we have with others in the world, and the kind of future we will create for the generations to come.

Her lecture covered three areas: a brief analysis of current global security trends and the factors that drive insecurity; the dominant responses to global insecurity and how these are falling short; and some ideas about what a different approach to security might look like and how it might work in practice.

Global security trends

The world is becoming more insecure for most of its people. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of armed conflicts fell from 49 to 31, but by 2015 this had once again increased to 50. There are now 65 million refugees worldwide, and 10 million stateless people.

We need to ask why this is happening. What is causing these trends and driving these terrible experiences of insecurity around the world?

Some of the key underlying drivers of global insecurity are as follows:

- Financial insecurity, and the widening inequalities created by our economic system
- Social and political marginalisation – and specifically control of the levers of power by a small and powerful elite who tend to be white, male and economically privileged
- Climate change, alongside competition for scarce resources and environmental degradation
- Patriarchy – systems of power which exclude or oppress women
- The use of militarized violence by both states and non-state actors to assert control, project power or resolve conflicts

These drivers of insecurity affect us all differently, and people living in the Global South are at the sharpest end of these phenomena. But it is also true that these trends are not contained by state boundaries. In our increasingly globalized world

they are also present in our own society. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, so our security and our insecurity become increasingly interwoven with the fates of other communities and nations, and with the fates of the ecological systems of our shared planet.

Dominant responses

In the UK context, the dominant, mainstream conversation about security frames the problem as follows: the UK is a benign nation state; it faces a complex of shifting threats; and it needs to protect itself by using coercive power abroad, and when necessary, with authoritarian approaches at home. This is the narrative that enjoys a general consensus across the defence establishment, and it is codified in the government's key policy document, the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review.

This document describes an essentially technocratic approach to security, which is concerned principally with deterring and defeating threats, which are neutralized through the deployment of a range of "capabilities". These capabilities are mostly hard power measures, and particularly offensive military capabilities.

Celia's own position is that this approach is ethically wrong, but she also pointed out that there are growing doubts about its effectiveness. She cited concerns raised by various government agencies and military think-tanks about some of the negative consequences of counter-terrorism policies both overseas and in the UK. She acknowledged the complexities facing those developing government policy, but suggested that it is precisely the complexity and severity of the challenges that require us to think critically about concepts of security and national security.

Celia highlighted the dominant cultural associations of the term 'security', arguing that these are heavily influenced by the dominant framing of the concept of security by the political and military establishment, as follows:

- It privileges UK national security as a supreme imperative, to which the needs of people in other countries may be subordinated
- It aims to advance 'national interests' as determined by the political establishment; it is disconnected from the needs of people in their communities
- It assumes a short-term outlook and focuses on immediate physical threats, largely overlooking the long-term drivers of insecurity;
- Responds by trying to dominate and control, primarily through offensive military capabilities, a super-power alliance, and restrictions on civil liberties
- It does not define 'security', but focuses on the actions and capabilities required to maintain 'business as usual'

She illustrated this with the example of the reasons given to justify the UK parliament's recent decision to continue to provide military support to Saudi Arabia, despite serious concerns about possible war crimes in Yemen.

How could it be different?

For the last couple of years, Celia has been part of a collective of organisations called the Ammerdown Group, who have come together around a shared concern that these dominant responses to global security are making matters worse. The group has published a document, *Rethinking Security: a discussion paper* (available online at rethinkingsecurity.org.uk*).* The paper describes the goal of security as grounded in the wellbeing of people in their social and ecological context, rather than being the interests of a nation state as defined by its elite. It offers four guiding principles of a new narrative:

- Security is a **freedom**. It can be understood as a shared freedom from fear and want, and the freedom to live in dignity. It implies social and ecological health, rather than the absence of risk.
- Security is a **common right.** Security should not, and usually cannot, be gained for one group of people at others' expense. It rests on solidarity rather than dominance, in **standing with** others, not standing over them.
- Security is a **long-term practice**, underpinned by healthy, just relationships. It grows or withers according to how just and inclusive society is.
- Security is a **shared responsibility** – its challenges belong to all of us, not only to a small group of elite decision-makers.

Celia then spoke about how these guiding principles might turned into a strategy, arguing that it would have at least three dimensions. First, you would invest in building the positive conditions of security – both for people in the UK and globally. The UN has done some good work over the years to develop and promote the concept of 'human security', which describes seven different dimensions of security:

- Economic security – an assured basic income, usually from work
- Food security – physical and economic access to nutritious, sustainably-produced food.
- Health security – protection from and treatment of disease.
- Ecological security – protection from natural threats and care for natural ecology
- Physical security – protection from physical violence, from any source.
- Community security – healthy relationships within and between communities.
- Political security – guaranteed human rights, fundamental freedoms, political participation.

Second, the strategy would give priority to addressing the systemic drivers of insecurity: climate change, inequality, marginalisation, patriarchy and militarisation. Thirdly, it would invest in multilateralism - building equitable relationships and inclusive processes to address common challenges**.**

There would also need to be a shift away from elements of the current approach. In particular, it would be necessary to stop exporting arms to corrupt and oppressive regimes, stop subsidizing arms exports, end investment in the next generation of nuclear weapons, stop prioritizing authoritarian responses within the UK such as mass surveillance and the stigmatization of Muslim communities.

Celia acknowledged that some people would consider this approach to be naïve and unviable. However, she pointed out that it represents a direction of travel which has precedents elsewhere. She argued that the UK is an outlier in European terms.

Germany and Spain, for example, emphasise the globalized nature of current security challenges, and are more willing than the UK to accept the limitations of heavily militarized responses. The goals that Sweden specifies for its strategy are "life and health", and "the rule of law and human rights". Norway's foreign policy goals focus explicitly on promoting peace. These examples show that a range of other approaches are available, and remind us that this is a matter of choice.

Some would say that a different approach would not help us with the messy realities of the world as it is. They may agree with the need to do things differently in the long term, but also recognize the urgency of immediate crises. The situation in Syria is one example of this. Celia indicated that she is not an expert on Syria and does not have a satisfactory answer to that situation. However she argued that public and political debates need to get beyond the false choice of military intervention or nothing. She suggested that there are a few responses that have been applied to other conflict situations that could be given far greater weight in current policy-making: respect the complexity; prioritise a peace strategy; listen to a range of voices; support locally-led peacebuilding; curtail financial flows and arms exports; invest in diplomacy and risk-assess any proposed military intervention.

Celia suggested that one of the main reasons that these other approaches get so little attention is due to the power of the arms industry on government policy. The industry encourages the belief that a worthy nation is a militarily powerful one. But she wondered whether the worth of a nation should be measured by other factors – how humane its society, how well it looks after its most vulnerable members, or how it contributes to justice, peace and ecological responsibility.

She argued that there is an urgent need for a conversation about these questions. We need to ask each other what security means, and what factors create security and insecurity in our lives. We need to find out about the sources of insecurity for people in other countries, and what is needed to address these. She suggested that we are not doomed to endless war, but can harness our creativity, intellect and humanity to build a new kind of security for our world. Celia concluded that, in the end, our future is likely to depend on the kind of security we choose to believe in.