

MARK MAGUIRE

## Global and EU security

When I look at social anthropology today, from the perspective of my own research on security, I see extraordinary potential. I see the intellectual richness of anthropology informing scholarship and activism, and I see the methodological and ethical challenges that we need to face in order to realise this potential. The 'bleeding edge' topic of security brings a lot into sharp focus. Today, security discourses and practices abound, provoking French philosopher Frédéric Gros to proclaim ours as the age of security. Indeed, the modern formulation of security long since slipped its moorings in international relations and travelled to previously foreign parts, colonising policing, counterterrorism and border control. Today, security apparatuses traverse nation-states, disrupting the institutional division of labour, absorbing scarce public resources, and all too often intruding violently into daily life. Alongside global spending on weapons and wars, the amorphous homeland security market will be worth approximately half a trillion Euros by 2020. Unsurprisingly, anthropological research shows that security is often the cause of insecurity.

Recently, a special issue of *Cultural Anthropology* illustrated the expansiveness of security with contributions on nuclear affect, migration control, humanitarian governance, environmental and bio-security threats. Concepts developed by US-based anthropologists, like 'securityscapes' and 'vital systems', grow in popularity, but most projects are still disconnected from one another. This isn't necessarily a sign of disciplinary weakness. Rather, anthropologists avoid the temptation that Frederic Jameson labels 'premature clarification'. Our dispersed efforts track the uneven (in)securitisation of asymmetrical landscapes already replete with dense configurations of space, power and knowledge. To paraphrase Didier Bigo – the close student of Michel Foucault who coined the processual term (in)securitisation – respect for contexts and details are the hallmarks of anthropology, but this concentration may marginalise us in international debates. That said, margins can be very productive places. European anthropologists now inform the critical anthropology of security from backgrounds in peace and conflict studies, migration research and urban ethnography. Critical insights will be derived from attention to experience, context and ethnographic detail. But we are also well placed to push beyond our frontiers. Anthropological research has much to say to the Copenhagen and Paris security studies schools and to surveillance studies scholars. Moreover, colonial histories, past conflicts and contemporary crises mean that the European security sector has significantly less swagger than its overseas counterparts. Interesting access routes and alternative discourses present themselves, but methodological and ethical challenges abound. Can anthropology offer more than that which is available in strategically situated ethnographies?

Forthcoming scholarship will doubtless attend to security spaces and scales; it will track ideas, expertise or techno-science across distinct domains; and it should include research programmes on themes such as security futures, evidence or the lack thereof. However, we must once and for all cease to negatively contrast ethnographic knowledge (the really real) with those more experimental (though nonetheless ethnographic) studies of dispersed apparatuses, analytics and new assemblages. Social anthropology will need to go beyond thick descriptions of lived experiences to explore expertise, analytics and styles of reasoning that are characterised by dispersal and a disturbing thinness. Anthropology must continue to tell context-rich stories for sure, but we also need new and critical conceptual work. We should also expect to be circumstantial activists. To study the EU's high-tech borders or multimodal biometrics in India or the Middle East means attending to the targeting of human life itself, to the countless lives wasted and to the lives lost in the name of security.

*Mark Maguire*  
*Department of Anthropology*  
*National University of Ireland Maynooth*  
*Co. Kildare, Ireland*  
[mark.h.maguire@nuim.ie](mailto:mark.h.maguire@nuim.ie)

