

CONFERENCE “The Anthropology of Human Security”

On 29 and 30 August 2005 the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam organised the Conference “The Anthropology of Human Security”. It was organised ‘to take stock’: does the HS concept have the theoretical potential that we attribute to it? Does it help us achieve better, sharper and richer analyses and insights? Don’t we stretch the meaning and scope of HS too far, thus rendering it practically and analytically meaningless? How does our research go down with fellow anthropologists as well as with researchers on HS working from different disciplines? How can we achieve compelling scientific publications and at the same time ensure that our research is policy relevant? How can we establish contacts, collaboration and exchanges with HS research groups elsewhere?

At the conference, 27 papers were presented, including two papers from researchers from outside of our department, working on HS but in different disciplines. The papers were circulated and could be accessed from a special webpage in our Faculty website www.fsw.vu.nl, along with other relevant conference documents. We invited both Dutch and international discussants to reflect upon the papers.

In order to ensure that we could work in a concentrated manner and discuss all papers without splitting up the already small group, the *papers were not presented by the authors themselves*. Instead, the discussants were requested to play a bigger role than usual by summarizing the (four) papers that they discussed before offering their comments and linking them with the theme of the conference and the specific session. This procedure worked well in keeping the discussion lively, in managing time, in avoiding situations where authors spend too much time on details or read their papers verbatim, and in ensuring that the discussion revolves around what ties the papers together. Currently, we are preparing publications of the papers.

In more substantial terms, various –preliminary– conclusions can be drawn from the discussions during the conference: one of the elements highlighted was that human security is also an *enabling* aspect, in its shape as a *feeling* of security. It is not merely an ‘external condition’, nor a ‘precarious balance’ one should not put at risk. It makes possible and enhances human agency. This suggests an ‘emic’ accent in the application of human security. It brings along the need to focus upon the degree in which people perceive and express their predicaments in terms of (in)security, and in what way they *act* to obtain higher security.

Another conclusion was that at the level of theory we should not become obsessed with the ‘defensive’ idea that everything and everybody strives for safety and freedom from fear, and thus *reduce* our conceptual toolkit by presupposing that at a phenomenological level everybody first and foremost, and unshakably aims for security.

One illustration of the interdependencies of multifarious security-quests was the distinction between states and populations: state’s quests for security may well boil down to privileging the powerful, or to reducing the search for security to the state as an entity. It may thus threaten or jeopardize the security of specific sections of the populations. In such cases, we obviously do not deal with the *same basic idea* of security, yearned for by different entities and clashing because of the different interests of these entities. Rather, it seems as if we have here *completely distinct concepts* of security – and the only similarity is that we use the same word for categorically distinct contents and meanings. It raises the question whether we should differentiate between various modalities of security (human, cultural, national, regional, collective, state, etcetera) in much more careful ways.

On the whole, we concluded that using the concept as a suggestion that something like a ubiquitous inclination towards ‘ensuring’ one’s life, family, loved ones and direct environment exists, would lead to an empty, deadlocked affirmation. To state that people, in a transcendental, cross-cultural mode, always strive for security and always try to diminish the degree of insecurity, is as revealing as it is to state that people *always* try to fill their stomach or *always* long for affection. Being culturally empty affirmations, they tell us little about the meaning people attach to these pursuits, nor about the concrete shapes of threats, or the strategies to render these threats harmless. Moreover, such a proclamation tends to suggest that people always strive for calm and immovability. People might just as well opt for risks and ‘danger’. There is no steady, ubiquitous ‘tendency’ towards security in human action.

Additionally, the analysis suggests that insecurity comes in many different qualities and shapes. Structural collective insecurity with regard to livelihood, or with regard to political exclusion or slight, insecurity because of the globalisations’ impact on the authority of traditions, insecurity *taken upon oneself* in the case of risking one’s neck in protest engagement are only some of these shapes; insecurities about choosing the right job career, about choosing the right partner, about buying the right stocks, about the effects of gradually giving up cultural or religious routines and prescriptions, are only a few of the other innumerable examples of situations in which the apparent appropriateness of using the notion of (in)security crops up.

Indiscriminatingly using it for all these cases equals to turning it into a useless container-concept on the *condition humaine*. Likewise, it seems implausible to assume that, globally, peoples’ insecurity has intensified and the quest for security has become more desperate. Peoples’ perception of what constitutes (in)security, is too inter-subjective, contextualised and diverse for such an assertion. As it states in the CONSEC-document: “the process of constructing human security can by definition not assume the existence of a fixed set of terms – of resources for physical security and of meaning for existential security. On the contrary, the physical and existential insecurity will make the assumption of fixed resources and meanings a chimera, paradoxically requiring the mobilisation and use of changing repertoires of resources and meaning for the process of creating human security”.

One of the crucial moot points we have to address is to determine how we can epistemologically define the status of knowledge obtained when we ask for the ways in which people under different circumstances construe and construct security. Often, these people might not express these efforts and threats in terms of (in)security. Consequentially, the concept of human security becomes an *etic* term. As such, it allows for comparison and the search for regularities, but it does not necessarily express peoples’ perceptions of their life worlds or their aspirations. We need to find the balance between imposing an alien vocabulary upon the huge variety of these perceptions and aspirations, and the potential to detect and understand, through the lens of ‘human security’, the affinities between so many different peoples’ and groups’ vicissitudes, perceptions and actions in the continuum between security and (ad)venture.