Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Critical Studies on Security

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcss20

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To cite this article: Luise Bendfeldt & Victoria M. Basham (15 Oct 2024): Beyond the state: reimagining protection as constellations of care, Critical Studies on Security, DOI: 10.1080/21624887.2024.2413751

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2024.2413751

Published online: 15 Oct 2024.

CRITICAL STUDIES ON SECURITY
https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2024.2413751

Beyond the state: reimagining protection as constellations of care

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ABSTRACT

Protection is traditionally conceptualised in relation to the state. Not only does the state provide protection externally, i.e. vis-à-vis other states in an assumed anarchical system, but also internally through various instruments of care. Such protection however relies on the social contract and is thus inherently transactional. Protection, and associated care, then becomes something earned, something one is entitled to by virtue of certain, past, actions and behaviours, rather than something that is compassionately provided. How can we rethink protection away from the state? How to transform glimmers of hope of alternatives to the transactional model into sustained and sustainable change and care? We want to think through and offer alternative ways of care/ing: those more (inter-) personal, more community-focused, centred around intergenerational promises and responsibilities to ensure both a liveable present and future, ultimately disrupting imposed (state) boundaries that rely on and foster difference.

KEYWORDS

Protection; intercommunalism; care; non-human security; solidarity

How can we rethink protection away from the state? The very existence of states and the global state-system depends on protection. States derive their legitimacy through protecting their citizens from both internal and external disorder, and with that they protect and perpetuate themselves and the global state-system. State protection takes many forms, from military defence to social security. Yet state protection is always contractual and conditional; it relies on and demands citizens to perform a specific type of citizenship. In liberal democracies for example, this is regulated through the social contract wherein citizens are expected to cede some of their rights to the collective in return for state protection. That collective however, is imbued with power relations that favour the cis-heteronormative, white, patriarchal, seemingly classless, citizen. This idealised citizen is expected to enact some degree of self-sufficiency and economic participation. However, such expectations intrinsically exclude those who are structurally marginalised and oppressed, such as the disabled and infirm, the young and the elderly, racialised minorities and the socio-economically disadvantaged. This liberal emphasis on self-sufficiency and capitalist accumulation also inherently excludes any consideration of, and simultaneously exploits, the non-human and ecological. States therefore marginalise, oppress, and endanger as much as they protect (Young 2003).

Moreover, feminist and postcolonial scholars have particularly highlighted that in a global state system shaped by imperialist, patriarchal, racial capitalist, and militaristic power relations, protection remains elusive for most of the world's inhabitants (Chowdhry and Nair 2013). Drawing on these understandings of the state as a failed protector, we seek to explore protection beyond the state. In the remainder of this piece we provide an overview of how forms of non-state protection

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have been conceptualised, arguing that some of these alternatives offer better, more emancipatory, outcomes than others.

Supplementing state protection

The unevenness of protection on a global scale has led some to seek to rectify and supplement state protection. One example are the interlinked processes of providing charity, aid, and relief that are normally enacted by non-governmental organisations, bodies, and individuals outside of the state apparatus. Here, those capable of giving do so to help those deemed 'less fortunate'. However, the category of 'less fortunate' is also imbued with hierarchical assumptions about who is most in need of protection, and deserving of it. Even when it is possible to clearly identify those 'in need', charity, aid, and relief are rarely freely given. Instead, through the guise of empowerment, charity, aid, and relief often act as a means of containing the 'less fortunate' - expecting them to be self-reliant and resilient in exchange for help, rather than tackling the conditions that render some 'less fortunate' in the first place. This reifies the existing state system rather than challenging it, by containing parts of the world understood to be 'underdeveloped' (Duffield 2007).

For some, the problem with charity, aid, and relief is not its failure to change global conditions but its inefficiency. This has led to calls for 'effective altruism' which relies on data to determine the most effective ways to maximise the benefits of giving (Gabriel 2017). This commitment to making the most effective use of donations means that money and resources are often directed towards the most impoverished. Though this is laudable, it turns attention away from the structural causes of these inequalities (Pearlman 2023). Furthermore, effective altruism's emphasis on being data-driven and maximising philanthropic investments, decentres empathy and human connectivity. The moral obligation at the heart of effective altruism is not to people but to efficiency.

In contrast, hospitality provides a more human-centred approach to protection. Hospitality can be described as 'a welcoming of the other and regardless of who that other is, regardless of the potential dangers and risks involved' (GermannMolz and Gibson 2007, 5). The double-bind and contradiction at the centre of hospitality, however, is that the host must simultaneously be open to the strange, potentially dangerous, Other while exercising sovereignty over their house (Derrida 2000; Koefoed, Simonsen, and Førde 2021). Hospitality thus relies on property and monopoly; in order to grant shelter, food, and hospitality, those offering it must be in possession of it in the first place – in turn granting power to decide who is (worthy of) receiving it (Vigouroux 2019).

The problem with each of these supplementary approaches is that they do very little to challenge the status quo and the inequalities of the state system. None undoes the conditions that make protection necessary, and the protection that they provide is thus partial. Each provides the semblance of doing 'something' without challenging the privilege and primacy of those in a position to give.

Beyond state protection

To move beyond state protection and the traps of partial supplements to it, we need to radically re-imagine how to mitigate harm by embracing mutual aid and solidarity. Mutual aid and solidarity entail different forms of political participation. Here, people take shared responsibility for caring for each other and for challenging and changing existing political conditions. This is done in pursuit of building new social relations that realise a more survivable and liveable world for all (Spade 2020). Importantly, mutual aid and solidarity are always self-organised, always collective, and always 'freely gifted' (Milstein 2024, 8). In short, they are neither reliant on the state nor beset by its contractual arrangements.

To radically re-imagine how to best care for one another, to best protect one another, and provide protection for all, we need to dismantle those hierarchical structures that rely on and perpetuate inequalities. This requires seeing and recognising the intrinsic value of all living things,

whether human or non-human. Value here is not determined by what a person or ecosystem can contribute, but by its very existence. Hence, every living thing is always, already worthy of protection. When no one is seen to be disposable, unproductive, or lacking in something to give, value can be found in diversity, making hierarchy obsolete. Without hierarchy, genuine empathy and relationality becomes possible. Practically however, this is something that requires constant work and vigilance. Without this, even within movements committed to challenging oppressive structures, everyday patriarchal and racial forms of domination can creep back in (Eschle and Maiguashca 2010). However, these failures should 'be recognised as fresh opportunities for learning and resistance, wherein the depth of our imbrications are revealed' (Rossdale 2015, 383).

Through relating to and protecting one another, we can identify and build common causes, and 'define and seek a world in which we can all flourish' (Lorde [1979] 2017, 91). Protection, in this imagining, is conceptualised as something realised by communities, not through the state's monopoly on violence. This monopoly has created institutional and historical arrangements that confine protection to a contract between individuals and the state. Other forms of protection have become seemingly unimaginable. Yet, communities can 'provide spaces of hope in precarious times' (Hobart and Kneese 2020, 1). Particularly, though not exclusively, in moments where the state appears to have abandoned us, this hope sustains communities, expands collective well-being, and provides protection.

Relationality between communities is just as vital as the relationality within them. Revolutionary intercommunalism, as advocated by Huey P. Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, conceptualises solidarity, resistance, and protection as something to be realised through new forms of community. Through practices of solidarity and mutual aid, direct connections can be forged between different communities whose experiences are similarly shaped by global power relations (Manchanda and Rossdale 2021). Newton's intercommunalism stands in direct opposition to the state system in two key ways. Firstly, it undermines the narrative that protection is provided to all citizens of a state under the social contract. It does this by exposing state violence, and how it thrives through pitting communities against each other; intercommunalism instead builds cross-community relations. Secondly, revolutionary intercommunalism defies the very foundations of the state system, by overcoming the imposed artifice of state-bounded communities and by calling into question the presumed hierarchies between these. It thereby creates 'the conditions and social consciousness necessary for revolution and the overthrow of the colonial system' (Manchanda and Rossdale 2021, 479).

Intra and intercommunal solidarity and mutual aid is also necessary across and between generations, particularly in relation to climate collapse where protection for human and non-human alike is an urgent task. This urgency extends to protecting future generations, to ensure a liveable planet. However, this attention to the future must not come at the expense of the past nor the present. The global struggles of the past that have shaped our present have created both the conditions threatening the earth and have undermined the ability of some communities to deal with the impact of those threats. Moreover, the promotion and assumption of solidarity between all those living now and those yet to come may be implausible for many people focused on their survival. What is needed therefore are forms of solidarity and mutual aid that protect all living things in the here and now *and* a liveable future while being attentive to past injustices and their ongoing effects.

Towards 'constellations of care'

Confronted with the inadequacies of the protection offered by the state and the global state-system, in this piece we have explored alternatives and advocated for forms of protection based on community, solidarity, and mutual aid. Following (Milstein 2024, 8) we envision constellations of care where 'we have one another's backs and know that others have ours'. These constellations of care must be intercommunal, intergenerational, and ecological. They must rely on the assumption that everyone and everything has intrinsic value, thereby challenging hierarchical structures and relations. What we seek are forms of protection in which 'each and every one of our still-beating hearts, in concert, rebelliously speaks louder

than words, forming unmistakable patterns of different cosmologies, different worlds' (Milstein 2024, 4).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Luise Bendfeldt wrote her PhD on male supremacy, misogyny and misogynistic incel violence at Uppsala University. She is particularly interested in stories told about violence and processes of securitisation. Luise also thinks and writes about theories on protection, sexualities within international politics, and critical military studies.

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