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**From Homer to Hobbes and Beyond -  
Aspects of 'Security' in European Thought**

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Introduction

In his monography on the concept of security, the German sociologist Kaufmann observes that the word 'security', in its German version as 'Sicherheit', frequently is used as equivocation; as Kaufmann writes, the word seems to become more univocal, the more in fact it becomes multivocal. The emotional content of the word always is positive – a recent phenomenon in the history of the word - making “that the content of the notion seems to become wider and wider, and less definite ... that simply hearing or seeing the word is enough to cause a certain excitement, giving the word in the realm of man a comparable function as the trigger stimulus has for animal instincts”.

However, at the The Hague-conference of 2004, preparing the book to be presented to-night, I discovered the highly controversial character of the notion of 'security', especially with participants coming from Arabic-speaking countries. At that conference it became clear to me that my promised contribution to this book, an article on the history of the notion of 'security' in European thought, should be of great philological exactness, not to say: strictness.

It speaks to itself that an adequate study of the notion 'security' cannot be published within the 15 pages available in the book, let alone in my summary of to-night, in 15 minutes. And likewise that my contribution only for a modest part goes back to my own original work. I profited much from the work of others. I here mention three of them: the historian Conze, the philologist Schrimm-Heinz, and the sociologist Hoffmann, having different scientific approaches, but having in common their intellectual power and their scientific precision.

When studying the relevance of Hobbes for the renaissance of the notion 'security' since the seventeenth century, I was to my surprise confronted with the influence of the classical Greek historian Thucydides (fifth century B.C.) for Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' life and thought have a certain analogy to those of Thucydides: both suffered from a long-lasting civil war, and - as a consequence of that - from many years of exile (Thucydides never returned from exile), both had a cynical view of mankind, and a nihilistic anthropology, which in the case of Thucydides functions to explain and even justify Athenian democratic imperialism, and in the case of Hobbes explains the 'natural state of man' as *bellum omnium contra omnes*, and as deciding argument for the necessity of an omnipotent Leviathan-state guaranteeing general security.

More important however than these analogies was the fact that Hobbes' first publication, at the age of about 40 years, was the translation of the History of the Peloponnesian War, written by even this Thucydides. So as a professional classical philologist, when arriving at the study of seventeenth century Hobbes, I was challenged to return to the Greek pre-history of the originally Roman notion of 'securitas'. In other words, I found reasons for the hypothesis that in the work of Hobbes an ancient Roman notion with a retardation of some two thousand years was enriched by a

much older Greek notion, the roots of which even go back to the poet Homer, eighth century B.C. : the word *asphaleia* .

The English word ‘security’ – you will not be surprised to hear this – is derived from Latin ‘*securitas*’, itself composed from the elements ‘*se-*’ (meaning ‘without’) and ‘*cura*’ (meaning ‘care, carefulness, concern’). Translated carefully, ‘*securitas*’ means ‘freedom from care’. ‘Freedom from care’ however may or may not have a basis in ‘objective reality’; when that objective basis is given, ‘*securitas*’ already for the ancient Romans means ‘freedom from danger, safety, security’; if that basis fails, ‘*securitas*’ means ‘carelessness, heedlessness, negligence’. These possibilities make that since its Roman origin ‘*securitas*’ has in the European tradition been appreciated both positively and negatively.

With ‘*cura*’ / ‘care’ and ‘*securitas*’ / ‘freedom from care’ not just an arbitrary aspect of human life is mentioned; ‘*securitas*’ refers to a group of emotions and corresponding words to which also belong ‘fear’, ‘fear of death’, and their complements: ‘trust’, ‘confidence’ etc. Religion also is involved in this kind of emotions. That explains why already in the earliest phase of ‘*securitas*’ an intense connection with religion may be observed. The connection with religion and the semantic influence of religion on the development of the concept of ‘*securitas*’ are to be found also in later periods of European history, long after the Roman Empire. Because of this longstanding connection, the history of ‘security’ cannot be written without also considering its meaning in the context of Roman religion and Christian religion and theology.

### **The First Phase – From Romans to Middle Ages**

The substantive ‘*securitas*’ appears late in the history of Latin:<sup>1</sup> Cicero, first century BC, is the first to use it, and to use it as a philosophical term meaning “absence from grief / tranquillity of mind”. Cicero connects ‘*securitas*’ with ‘*vita beata*’ / “blissed life”, i.e. with the traditional Graeco-Roman philosophical ideal of *eudaimonia*.

For the philosopher Seneca, two generations later, ‘*securitas*’ - as almost identical with *eudaimonia* - is thought to be ‘the characteristic good of the wise’, making the wise coming close to God, as only God has no need to be afraid of death. Considered that way, the ambition of philosophers to overcome the fear of death is tantamount to the attempt to become equal to God. Seneca’s associating ‘*securitas*’ with the divine might explain, why precisely during the reign of his pupil, the emperor Nero (54-68 A.D.), who unmistakably suffered from megalomania, ‘*securitas*’ for the first time appears on Roman coins with inscriptions alluding to the divinity of the Emperor: ‘*Securitas Augusti*’, ‘*Securitas Caesaris*’.

In addition to its initial positive meaning, ‘*securitas*’ also in the course of time gets a negative meaning: when ‘freedom from care’ is understood as “carelessness, recklessness”. E.g. in St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.), who warns of a *mortifera securitas*, a ‘lethal indifference’ about the question of one’s own salvation; within the Church of Rome this negative meaning will lead to the interpretation of ‘*securitas*’ as a ‘mortal sin’ (*akêdia*), reappearing with the German reformator Martin Luther (1483-1546); this negative meaning (‘indifference about the question of one’s salvation’) is a constant factor in Christian thought about ‘*securitas*’.

Additionally to these two ‘subject-centered’ meanings, ‘*securitas*’ was used, already in pre-Christian Rome, to refer to the world surrounding these ‘careless subjects’, as offering them ‘real, objective security’ and as the objective cause of subjective ‘freedom from care’. This meaning first appears in the first century A.D. ‘*Securitas*’ now denotes the ‘atmosphere of peace and tranquillity’ entering Rome during its first Emperor, Augustus (27 B.C.-14 A.D.). Some generations later

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<sup>1</sup> See Conze (1984), 832.

however, the historian Tacitus (c. 56-115 A.D.) refers to the *antagonism* – sounding familiar to modern ears - between the old republican ideal of freedom / *libertas* and the new caesarean value of *securitas*. For Romans at the end of the first century A.D., ‘securitas’ had become a key notion to designate the *Pax Romana*, the ‘Roman Peace’, understood as security of public and private life under the protection of the emperors.

In later Roman Antiquity, Christian authors like Tertullianus (160-240 A.D.) and St. Augustine use ‘securitas’ in the new meaning of “assurance of – the dogmatical contents of - faith”, as contrast to ‘dubitatio’ / “doubt”. This new meaning in the course of time however passes on to a new word created by Christian authors and emerging between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> century: ‘certitudo’, a “cognitive notion describing a state of knowledge”.<sup>2</sup> In matters of religion ‘certitudo’ now little by little substitutes ‘securitas’. The substitution of ‘securitas’ (henceforth understood as “assurance of faith”) by ‘certitudo’ becomes definitive with Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 A.D.) who makes ‘certitudo’ to a central concept of Christian theology .

In the Middle Ages, ‘securitas’ – in contrast e.g. to the first century A.D. – no longer is a central notion or a slogan. When peace is guaranteed, the word used to denote it, from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century is ‘Pax’. Since Christian Roman Antiquity ‘securitas’ increasingly is a ‘loser’. It is ‘certitudo’ – as ‘assurance of faith’- and not ‘securitas’ which ascends to a central notion of scholastic theology and philosophy.

## The Second Phase: Hobbes and After

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) made ‘security’ to the central notion of the modern state. Hobbes’ work of course has to be understood before the background of the confessional civil wars in the England of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However the influence also of Thucydides on Hobbes’ view of man, society and politics should be considered. After a ‘Grand Tour’, as educator of a young nobleman, Hobbes devoted himself to the study of classical Greek and Roman authors, considered by him as ‘source of true knowledge’; Thucydides became his favorite author. When 37 years old, still in the time before his Parisian exile, Hobbes published an English translation of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

This seems to me the right moment to devote some words to Thucydides and to the relevance of his work for the Hobbesian notion of ‘security’.

## Hobbes and Thucydides

The Athenian empire, which came into existence in the years between 480-430 BC, in Thucydides’ opinion perished from inner causes, as Athens was afflicted by civil war. Thucydides characterizes the imperialist – and democratic ! - Athenians as men who – when confronted with the threat of revenge coming from their subjects - do everything required to avert that Athenian thalassocracy will be ‘tripped up’ / ‘overthrown’ by a lack of ships needed to defend Athens against its subjects. In the final phase of Athenian imperialism, *asphaleia* / ‘not being tripped up / not being overthrown’ / *security* is the central goal of Athenian politics. Greek ‘*asphaleia*’ in the prestigious Lexicon of Liddell & Scott is translated as ‘security against stumbling or falling’, as ‘the capacity to prevent that one will be overthrown’ (*sphallein*), a term originating from wrestling.

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<sup>2</sup> *Certitudo* is derived from *cernere* (“to distinguish by the senses”); see L&Sh., s.v.; cf. SH I, 141-145.

Remarkable is that Greek *'asphaleia'* lacks the tension, the ambivalence ('objective security' *versus* 'subjective illusion of security') which until Hobbes had remained characteristic of Latin 'securitas'.

Thucydides not only described the agony of Athenian imperialism, but also the moral degeneration of the Athenians caused by civil war and pestilence, and their 'cynical', post-religious, 'modern' view of man, state and world. Thucydides' description gave to Hobbes the basis for his own anthropology and political philosophy; Hobbes probably perceived contemporary civil wars by the conceptual 'filter' offered by Thucydides.

The concept of 'security' / *'asphaleia'* applied in Thucydides to the external relations between Greek city-states was, so to say, adapted by Hobbes to the internal relations of a state: 'Interpret the wars between sovereign Greek mini-states as one and the same conflict *involving all Hellenes*, and you witness a civil war between Hellenes bound to go on and on, until finally an omnipotent sovereign appears: Philip of Macedon'. In the work of Thucydides one finds a 'cynical' view of reality which, when reappearing twenty centuries later in the work of Hobbes, is welcomed by those less familiar with Greek Antiquity as the 'starting point of modernity'. In fact Hobbes' intellectual attitude might with more right be understood as renaissance of the Greek 'Enlightenment' of the fifth century BC.

### Hobbes and Lucretius

Concerning Hobbes, I am of course not going to repeat what most of you certainly know as well as I do, and some probably know better. I just will mention a few more points of interest for the history of the notion of security.

In 1634, 46-years old Hobbes during his Parisian exile was admitted to the intellectual circle of Mersenne to which – next to Descartes – Gassendi also belonged; with Gassendi, Hobbes' closest intellectual friend for many years, started the renaissance not only of the study of the ancient Roman poet Lucretius, but also of atomism. For Lucretius, the fear of death – in Hobbes' own words his 'lifelong twinbrother' - plays a paramount role in human culture, causing the genesis of religion; Democritean and Epicurean atomism in Lucretius' opinion offers a philosophical possibility to escape from fear of death, and so from the power of the clergy.

For Hobbes however, the opposite of *securitas* is not just – as in Lucretius – *metus mortis* / 'fear of death' in general, but – more precisely - fear of a *violent* death: *metus mortis violentae*. Here in Hobbes Lucretius and Thucydides seem to be combined: that difference has to do with Hobbes' 'Thucydidean' view of man: Men are evil by nature, causing the *bellum omnium contra omnes* / "war of all against all", i.e. the 'state of nature' previous to and leading to the genesis of a state. If during this *bellum omnium contra omnes* passingly a period without violence should occur, that period should not be considered as 'peace', but only as a pause in a permanent war, as Hobbes writes in a passage inspired by Thucydides (III, 82-83): "neither if they cease from fighting, is it therefore to be called Peace, but rather a breathing time, in which one enemy observing the motion and countenance of the other, values his security not according to the Pacts, but to the forces and counsels of his adversary" (*De Cive*, XIII 7).

Only the threat by a state powerful enough to execute punishments in case of transgression of the law, makes people willing to obey the law, and so to make an end to this 'war of all against all'. *Securitas* is not produced by agreements, but by *punishments* for not keeping agreements (*De Cive*, VI 4). For the execution of sanctions / punishments, a sovereign is required; for the genesis of a sovereign, a 'treaty of subjection' (*subiectio*) is required simultaneously with a 'treaty of consent' (*consensio*).

Even the seemingly omnipotent Leviathan-state for Hobbes is an instrument, having to legitimate itself by exercising its *raison d'être*: the production of *security*. This is why Hobbes in

one case recognizes the right of subjects to rebellion against their state: subjects do not have the duty of obedience to a state impotent to provide its subjects with *securitas* (SH II, 187).

## After Hobbes

After Hobbes, one of his critics deserves special mention: the German-Swedish Samuel baron von Pufendorf (1632-1694). Pufendorf starts from an anthropology presupposing not only Hobbes' 'instinct of self-preservation' and 'self-love' but also the fact that man is too weak not to occasionally need help from others (*imbecillitas*) and therefore needs companions (*socialitas*). Pufendorf thereby seems to anticipate the emergence of 'social security' in the twentieth century.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Social Security

The 20th century brought the triumph both of 'social security' and of '(political) security', henceforth increasingly understood globally. Considered historically, the success of the notion 'social security' served as 'launching site' for the global success of '(political) security'. The triumph of 'social security' began under US-president F.D. Roosevelt. The success of 'social security' is connected with the global economic crisis of 1929. The concept then got its historical form in Roosevelt's Social Security Act (1935).

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Global Security

The years 1945 and 1949 have been landmarks in US foreign policy: The years 1945 (victory in W.W. II) and 1949 (genesis of the 'Cold War') caused two – connected - models of US 'security policy', having global consequences : a) in 1945 the " 'model of collective security', which according to US postwar policy should cover the whole world ", and b) in 1949 " 'the system of mutual security' of the states allied with the US, after the crystallization of the contrast with the Soviet Union"; the element connecting both concepts was the paramount character of US hegemony, which however should not be enforced by military instruments but should be implemented under the conditions of cooperation with - and not subjection of - other states. Said in terms of the Hobbes-Pufendorf controversy, the aim of US policy was to persuade to *consensio* in order to make *subiectio* superfluous. Here reappears the relevance of ancient Thucydides, especially when Czempiel observes – rendered here in translation - : "Only in the case of small states security is identical with being protected against possible and actual attacks. Simultaneously with the size of a country the range of fields increases where its security may be at stake indirectly ... In 1945 it was generally recognized that the range of US security comprised the whole world".

In my present role of historian of the concept 'security' I remark that this also was the core of the problem in Thucydides' fifth century BC dialogue between Athenians and Melians: if the Athenians allow neutrality to the Melians, that means a security risk to the Athenians, as this suggests to their 'allies': 'There is a possibility to escape from Athenian imperialism !'. The parallel between ancient Athenian and modern US policy and between the Thucydidean-Athenian and the Hobbesian-American approach both trying to avoid crude *subiectio* by making *consensio* attractive is remarkable.

Schrimm-Heins characterized the intellectual process leading to Descartes' emancipation of philosophy from theology as *secularisation of certitudo*. The other way round however, we might since Hobbes speak of the *sacralisation of security* : The Hobbesian *Extra civitatem nulla securitas*

(‘Outside of the State there is no Security’) appears as a paganistic competitor to Roman-Catholic *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“Outside of the Church there is no Salvation”).

Schrimm-Heins accordingly concluded her study with the words:

“Security, the goddess of the Romans, has survived the Roman Empire” (SH II, 204).

Indeed, religious connotations accompany ‘*securitas*’ since the poem of Lucretius, and *a fortiori* since an allegorized ‘*Securitas*’ appeared on coins from the Roman Empire. This millennia-old connection of ‘*securitas* / security’ with religion makes it probable that in a globalizing world, with its religious and post-religious diversity, ‘security’ will remain a controversial concept.

A last concluding remark

Aristotle against Plato pointed out that virtue is a good to be found in the middle between two vices, as - e.g. - courage is to be found in the middle between cowardice and rashness. If we apply Aristotle’s analysis of virtue to the complex *chimaera* of ‘security’, we become aware that ‘security’ - in order to be a ‘good’ at all - should not be seen as a Platonic ‘idea’, as an absolute ‘good’ to be approximated absolutely, but rather as an Aristotelian ‘middle’ between two evils: between the evil of absolute fear and the evil of absolute security which, to vary Immanuel Kant when speaking on Eternal Peace is to be found only at the cemetery.