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Stepping into the haunted house? Two challenges when slowing down critique

Posted March 11, 2019 by [Jonathan L Austin](#), [Rocco Bellanova](#) and [Mareile Kaufmann](#) & filed under [Author's Blog](#)

A world without the need for critique is unthinkable. And yet, Critical Security Studies (CSS) have learned that critique is a difficult and far from self-evident exercise. The *Security Dialogue 50th anniversary* issue builds on this legacy and addresses, once again, the specter of critique. It is an attempt to give words to the messy states of affairs that we explore with our research.

"if critique is a specter that scholars are to address, our world looks like a haunted house"

Doing and mediating critique implies that there is always a multitude of actors who engage in critique. Scientific experts, NGOs, concerned citizens, state authorities, journalists, militias, and more, are all at times 'critical' of one thing or another. In other words, if critique is a specter that scholars are to address, our world looks like a haunted house. Hence, we sought to explore the matters of critique as well as how to make our critique matter. By unpacking different ways of 'doing and mediating critique', the special issue's contributions show the diversity of what can be considered a critical intervention, the theoretical and practical challenges of scholarly critique, and its role and its limitations in the world we inhabit. While **reflexive and often self-critical**, the **articles resist the urge to dispel or dismiss the**

specter. Equally, they resist reducing critique to a monster, the reaction to whom would be to unmask it or fall prey to panic. There is, in many contributions, an experimental effort to find new ways of **making critique matter**, e.g. **thinking with photos** or **working in security research consortia**.



Haunted house. Source: pixabay.com

Our own contribution is an invitation to step into the haunted house. If CSS are to address the specter of critique, we suggest practicing companionship. As we put it in the article, companionship “involves engaging with the possibilities for critical renewal that everyday companions might suggest”. While this position resonates with pragmatist approaches within the so-called ‘practice turn’, our key scholarly companions have been two philosophers of science and technology – Donna Haraway and Isabelle Stengers. When we put Haraway’s notion of **companionship** to work, we came to realize that companionship is not always easy. Thus, we want to use this blog post to reflect about two major challenges we encountered and continue to struggle with.

First, to address the specter of critique via companionship does not simply imply getting along with kindred spirits. It requires an engagement with matters that can be difficult and troubling, sometimes with practices and actors that we find disturbing. As one colleague put it: would we accept a fascist politician as a companion of critique? This is a legitimate question. It obliges us to clarify that companions are not to be allies or friends, but the people, things, and ideas that we decide to work with and whose impact on the world we

seek to understand. As such, they are staying with us; they accompany us and our research over a long period of time. In fact, we need their company in order to understand them in depth. These companions of critique, willingly or not, provide us the means to advance an account of how socio-political phenomena emerge and are consolidated. The challenge is rather to observe these companions patiently, to resist merely undoing them, while still allowing ourselves to define our stance towards this companion. In research practice, this means asking ourselves, again and again, what kind of world-view we enact with our critical interventions and what the consequences of our critique could be.

The second challenge is how to make our critique matter. Generally speaking, researchers publish their critical interventions in scholarly articles. CSS scholars are no exception and the success of a journal like Security Dialogue shows how critical approaches can make a difference in the somewhat conservative discipline of IR. Yet, this model of mediation is not without problems. It is not only a question of the scope and audience of the mediation – who will read these critical articles? – but also of the way in which we can do critique. A trend that glaringly shapes the production and publication of critique is the act of measuring whether it is critically important. Critique has to be made count – whether that is expressed in journal metrics, number of citations or other impact criteria. Academic careers are increasingly built on the monetary sums of secured grants, the number of academic tasks successfully realized, and not least the amount of journal articles, possibly solo-authored – all of which facilitate the tasks of hiring and grant committees. As Stengers notes, this knowledge economy thrives on research that quickly disengages with its research objects, states of affair and respondents. Engaging at length with companions bears the risk of slowing researchers down. Ironically, being relatively junior scholars ourselves, we had to balance the challenges of dedicated commitment and making critique count in the knowledge economy within this very special issue project (as with most projects we undertake).

Security Dialogue is a living proof of how companionship matters for CSS. We are thankful to its current and previous teams for having created an excellent academic outlet for critique through the course of the past 50 years. And we are thankful for providing us with this unique opportunity to make 'doing and mediating critique' the topic of its anniversary celebration. This is also why we want to take this opportunity to emphasize that what we need to make our critique matter beyond impact factors is slow, dedicated, and patient critique based on companionship; a form of critique that gives us the means

to live inside the haunted house and learn, everyday anew, to address our specters.



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