

The Anomaly of Democracy: Why Securitization Theory Fails to Explain January 6th

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CAROLINE GRACE BARNETT, MAY 17 2024

This essay argues that a democratic state, when faced with internal threats, cannot always resort to extraordinary measures without triggering another existential threat to its democratic identity—thus highlighting an explanatory failure of securitization theory. I first define securitization theory, informed by scholars Buzan and Waever. Next, I prove that the events of the January 6th United States Capitol breach (“J6”)—which I use as a case study—satisfy the criteria for the securitization process. Third, I demonstrate that the response to J6 offers an example of a serious security threat met with “normal politics,” which contradicts the projected outcome according to securitization theory. Finally, I explain why the nature of democratic identity, paired with internal existential threats, renders securitization theory inadequate.

(Defining) Securitization Theory

The Copenhagen School, pioneered by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, conceptualized securitization theory beginning in the 1980s. According to Buzan and Waever, securitization is a theorized process of how phenomena transcend normal politics and become security issues. Buzan argues that the securitizing formula “is that such threats require exceptional measures and/or emergency action to deal with them” (Buzan, 1997:14). By raising an issue beyond “normal politics” and into the realm of “panic politics,” the process of securitization legitimizes extraordinary measures—some of which suspend the normal rule of law (Buzan, 1997:14).

Securitization theory maintains that the justification of extraordinary measures—the sign of successful securitization—relies on three criteria: the speech-act, the securitizing actor, and the referent object (Buzan, 1997:13). The speech-act is not merely the use of the word security, but rather the naming of an existential threat so great that the audience recognizes the need for extraordinary measures to address this threat (Buzan, 1997:15). However, because the audience must accept the threat as existential, a securitizing actor must emerge who employs the speech-act to argue that the existential threat justifies extraordinary measures to address it (Waever, 1995a:405; Svítek 2014:17). The need for a credible actor is why Waever defines something as a security issue “when the elites declare it to be so” (Waever, 1995b:54). Finally, the elite must have a referent object which must be protected, even at enormous cost, because securitization raises issues to such a zenith that an immediate, extraordinary response is warranted and unquestionable (Knudsen, 2001:359). These three interplaying mechanisms form the basis of securitization theory. When a securitizing actor uses a speech act regarding a referent object to set aside binding procedures or rules, the process of securitization has occurred (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, 1998:25).

It is important to note that referent objects vary depending on their sector. Each sector (military, economic, etc.) has their own range of referent objects that “justify” securitization; the social sector’s referent object “is large-scale collective identities that can function independently of the state, such as nations and religions” (Buzan, 1997:17). In the United States, for example, democracy functions as a collective identity. The peaceful transition of power between political parties requires its citizens to “willingly buy into” democratic ideals of government (Hayes, 2012:68), making them critical to American identity. Political elites frequently capitalize on the cruciality of democracy in framing existential threats, and they did so to great effect in the reaction to J6.

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J6 as an Existential Threat

The events of J6 followed widely spread claims from Donald Trump and other far-right politicians that fraudulent voting stole the presidency from Trump in the 2020 presidential election (Dale and Cohen, 2022). After attending a political rally themed “Stop the Steal,” hundreds of American civilians marched towards the Capitol building, pushed through security barriers, and illegally entered the premises (Holland, Mason, and Landay, 2021). The mob caused the Capitol building to be evacuated, delaying the official certification of Biden’s electoral victory (Rappeport, 2021). The events of J6 only halted the vote counting for around 12 hours (Lonsdorf et al., 2022), but they still managed to sufficiently disrupt (if only temporarily) the peaceful transition of power.

In the wake of J6, political elites immediately labeled the event as a major security issue. Unsurprisingly, Democratic politicians heavily denounced J6. Representative Cori Bush referred to the breach as a “domestic terror attack,” Senator Cory Booker compared the event to the 1814 British burning of the U.S. Capitol, and Representative Ilhan Omar called for Trump’s impeachment as “a matter of preserving our Republic” (Itkowitz and Firozi, 2021). More astonishing, however, was the reaction of Republican political elites. Representative Kevin McCarthy “called the destruction and chaos undemocratic,” then-Vice President Mike Pence condemned the J6 rioters, and countless other Republican senators and representatives denounced the breach as un-American (O’Donnell and Lin, 2022). Five months later, the Senate released a report detailing the findings of their investigations which “paint[ed] a freshly damning portrait of various intelligence failures by... agencies tasked with preventing domestic terrorism” (Jalonick, 2021). In short, J6 yielded enormous bipartisan denunciation from legislators and other political elites.

The civilian population readily accepted the framing of J6 as an existential threat. Many major media outlets defined the events of J6 as a major intelligence and security failure (Wamsley, 2021; Dilanian and Ansley, 2021), a perspective with which many American civilians agreed. Just months after J6, PBS reported that 2 out of 3 Americans believed that U.S. democracy was under threat, with many respondents’ concerns centering on the 2020 presidential election and the Capitol breach (Vinopal, 2021)^[1]. Over a year after J6, an ABC/Ipsos poll found that over 70% of Americans believed that those involved in the J6 breach were “threatening democracy” (Shepherd, 2022). The civilian population accepted the speech-acts of political elites in the aftermath of J6 and affirmed the threat to the referent object (the democratic identity of the U.S.). Thus, securitization theory would anticipate that J6, as a securitized issue (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde, 1998:25), would elicit an extraordinary response from political elites.

Response to J6 Threat

Contrary to appearances, securitization theory cannot explain the response to J6. According to the Copenhagen School, successful securitization unswervingly produces extraordinary measures to address the justified existential threat, but the response to J6 saw no such suspension of the rule of law. There are partisan squabbles on the treatment of J6 defendants (MacFarlane, 2023; Billeaud, Richer, and Kunzelman, 2021), but such contestation exists within “normal politics” of the polarized American political system. Overall, the government has recognized and respected American citizens involved in J6 as entitled to due process of law. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s geofencing warrants face heavy challenges to prove compliance with the Fourth Amendment (Harris, 2022). The U.S. justice system has also recognized the Sixth Amendment right of J6 defendants to legal representation, including the right to represent themselves (Dreisbach, 2021). And if their civil rights are violated at any time by the Department of Corrections, J6 defendants can appeal to the judiciary for just treatment, as in the case of Proud Boys member Christopher Worrell (Lynch, 2021).

The normalcy of politics in response to J6 is striking in comparison with other declared existential threats to U.S. democracy. In his speech immediately following the September 11 attacks, President Bush framed the terrorist act as a threat on American values, stating that “our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts” (2001).^[2] This process of securitization goaded U.S. military and law enforcement into a frenzy of human rights abuses, especially against Muslims in the Middle East and the U.S. The Watson Institute at Brown University published the *Costs of War* project which found that “the post 9/11 wars have involved major human rights and civil liberties violations, including detention without trial, torture, expanded U.S.

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government surveillance and racial profiling” (2023). The aftermath of 9/11 involved an enormous suspension of “business as usual,” and frequently employed extraordinary (and abusive) measures to address the posed threat. In comparison to similarly framed existential threats, the response to the Capitol breach cannot be described as anything but normal politics.

Failure of Securitization Theory

Securitizing actors successfully used speech-acts to convince the American public of an existential threat to the referent object of democracy, but the Capitol breach was not addressed with the suspension of the rule of law. This reveals a flaw in securitization theory: by failing to consider the self-defeating effect of extraordinary measures on internal threats to a democratic state, securitization theory cannot explain the logic of “normal politics” in response to J6.

The crucial difference between J6 and previous events that political elites have identified as existential threats to democracy is its perpetrators. Securitization theory adequately explains the reaction to 9/11 regarding the suspension of normal politics because the U.S. could address external threats with extreme force (Hayes, 2012:67). The “War on Terror” targeted non-Americans (or those deemed as such)^[3]. Guantánamo Bay in Cuba offered a shroud of convenient constitutional ambiguity, allowing the U.S. military to detain hundreds of foreign nationals with minimum accountability for ensuring due process of law (Tayler and Epstein, 2022). Law enforcement unlawfully detained immigrants in New York and New Jersey, and racially biased surveillance on Muslim communities increased nationwide (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2023). Because the perpetrators (and suspected collaborators) were not American citizens (by legal fact or by discriminatory perception), the U.S.’ brutal retaliation did not generate a crisis of democracy in the minds of its people.

Because democracy is predicated on the principle of citizens’ equality before the law, the U.S. could not coherently suspend the civil rights of citizens involved in J6. The U.S. Constitution—a foundational piece of American identity—guarantees certain rights to all U.S. citizens. By subverting these rights, the U.S. would corrode its identity, and “if a state loses its identity, it has not survived as itself” (Waever, 1995a:405). The paradox of democracy is this: a democratic state cannot respond to an internal threat with extraordinary measures because suspending civil liberties to protect democracy replaces one existential threat with another. Securitization theory’s explanatory power is inadequate to resolve this paradox.

Conclusion

This essay used the response to J6 to illustrate the shortcomings of securitization theory in its inability to grapple with the paradox of democracy. In reacting to an internal existential threat posed by its own citizens, a democratic state would create an even greater threat to its identity by suspending civil liberties and the rule of law. Therefore, the reaction to J6 demanded normal legal and political proceedings to preserve the democratic identity of the United States.

The scope of this essay did not allow for further examination of securitization theory, but supplementary research could focus on the instigation of J6 and how Trump and other Republican politicians (political elites) utilized “Stop the Steal” rhetoric (speech-act) to argue for the preservation of the same collective democratic identity (referent object). Additionally, as evidenced by Muslim-Americans post-9/11, the definitions of “internal” and “external” actors are up for debate. An examination into the framing of us-them politics that led to J6 may yield a more nuanced understanding of how elites manipulate these definitions, and whether the proffered threat frameworks facilitate or prohibit the use of extraordinary measures.

Notes

[1] It is only fair to note that many Republican respondents believed that democracy was threatened by a stolen election rather than J6. However, both partisan groups agreed that democracy was threatened. The disagreement on what ought to be done serves to underscore the fickle nature of democracy as the referent object.

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^[2] Although 9/11 involved exponentially more civilian deaths, I argue it as an appropriate comparative event because both were framed as a sensational threat to the United States' democratic identity.

^[3] Although many "threats" were, in fact, innocent American citizens from a particular religious or ethnic background and entitled to constitutional rights, the flurry of fear so thoroughly marked Muslim Americans as outsiders that the American population did not perceive their suspension of rights to be a degradation of democracy (Bayoumi, 2021).

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