

## **Assess the Strengths and Weaknesses of Securitising Poverty**

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KATIE SMITH, DEC 22 2007

The idea of poverty as a security issue has been fairly commonplace since the end of the Cold War. In 1993, the United Nations sought to redefine security with individuals as the referent object; a framework in which poverty is one of the principal security threats as it significantly reduces quality and quantity of life. At the same time, poverty was gaining importance in the security agendas of states. This is based on the idea that poverty is a threat to the rich as well as the poor and that an unequal world is an unstable one; a view that has become very powerful in the years since September, 2001. This essay will address the implications of this second type of securitisation – world poverty as a threat to the west.

I will use the Copenhagen School approach to show how poverty is being securitised by western leaders in the context of the “War on Terror.” I will then go on to demonstrate that, although the issue of poverty is likely to receive more attention as a result, the securitisation of poverty may also cause many problems. Firstly, aid may be redirected from the non-threatening poor (often those most in need) to those perceived to be dangerous. Secondly, the involvement of the securitising states in the creation of poverty can be hidden as the rich are presented as potential victims. Finally, securitisation necessarily presents the interests of the securitiser as more important than those who will be affected by its actions and therefore encourages an imperialistic approach.

Although the securitisation of poverty is directing some much needed attention to the problem, a humanitarian approach is a much more appropriate when considering the needs of the poor.

### **The Securitisation of Poverty**

The theory of ‘securitisation’ is the method by which the Copenhagen School approaches security studies; it is the process by which an issue comes to be perceived as a security threat by a group. An issue is securitised by the

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'speech act,' the point at which the relevant authorities are persuaded that the issue is a security threat and warrants emergency action (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998: 24-5). Thus the Copenhagen School deals with subjective security – the perception of threat. Abrahamsen makes an addition to this idea to include partial securitisations. She suggests that, instead of security threats being only existential threats, 'security issues can be seen to move on a continuum from normalcy to worrisome/troublesome to risk and to existential threat—and conversely, from threat to risk and back to normalcy.' (2005: 5) This is a scale which can include poverty as a security issue. While poverty has not been allocated a place near the 'existential threat' end of the spectrum by any Western government, recent rhetoric of world leaders (the 'speech act') has created a partial securitisation of poverty.

Poverty is increasingly mentioned by world leaders in the context of the "War on Terror," as a constituent part of this dominant security framework. (Buzan, 2006) In February 2002, US Secretary of State Colin Powell stated, "I fully believe that the root cause of terrorism does come from situations where there is poverty, where there is ignorance, where people see no hope in their lives." (in Berrebi, 2003: 5) Similarly, Tony Blair claimed in November, 2001, "The dragon's teeth [with regards to terrorism and terrorists] are planted in the fertile soil of . . . poverty and deprivation." (in Berrebi, 2003: 6). Furthermore, the World Trade Centre bombings have shown that "No-one in this world can feel comfortable, or safe, while so many are suffering and deprived" (Kofi Annan, BBC, 22/03/02) and that "It is no longer necessary to prove a direct link between a troubled faraway country and the order of our own societies." (Jack Straw, in Abrahamsen, 2005: 65)

The policy response to these ideas has been mixed. Between September 2001 and July 2002, US aid to countries bordering Afghanistan rose dramatically, including a 278% increase for Pakistan. (Looney, 2002) President Bush also promised a 50% increase in all US aid. (BBC, 22/03/02) However, in reality poverty relief has not topped many agendas; the EU, OEDC, Denmark, Australia, Japan and others have rewritten the rules of aid to allow counter-terrorism measures to become an acceptable target of development assistance, therefore militarizing much humanitarian aid. (Christian Aid, 2004) With or without an increase in aid for poverty under the security agenda, I will argue below that this securitisation is not a positive move from a humanitarian perspective.

## **The Non-Threatening Poor**

Although poverty and terrorism are presented as clearly linked in the quotes above, this is not generally accepted by terrorism experts. Berrebi is one of many who argue that there is, 'little reason to believe that materialistic or educational improvements would help reduce terrorism. If anything, the correlation I find is that those with higher education and higher living standards are more likely to participate in terrorist activity.' (2003: 2) Pipes argues that,

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“...suicide bombers who hurl themselves against foreign enemies offer their lives not to protest financial deprivation but to change the world.” (2002) Terrorism is therefore best understood as ‘a response to political conditions and long-standing feelings (either perceived or real) of indignity and frustration that have little to do with economics.” (Krueger and Maleckova, 2002: 1) A vast body of literature, some carried out by government bodies themselves, points to the perpetrators of terrorism as predominantly educated young men who perceive injustice and who feel that they have no option other than terrorism to address the problem. Importantly, it is widely recognised that terrorism is a product of middle income people in middle income countries. (Berrebi, 2003: 3)

Poverty may still be an important factor however, because other people’s poverty may be a motivation for terrorism. One Hamas leader identified the ‘poverty-stricken outskirts of Algiers or the refugee camps in Gaza’ as the principal motivations for Islamic and, more specifically, Palestinian terrorism. (in Pipes, 2002) What this suggests is that it is the combination of political grievance and poverty which may become dangerous by inspiring terrorism, not poverty *per se*.

So which types of poverty are dangerous to those afraid of terrorism? Firstly, the poverty linked to clear political injustice. This is the poverty found alongside prosperity where educated, mostly middle class people engage in terrorism on behalf of politically and economically marginalised communities. And secondly, the poverty that angers young men – the most likely group to participate in terrorist activities. This is the poverty linked to masculine humiliation.

While both these types of poverty clearly need to be addressed, looking at poverty from a security point of view can overlook much poverty that is not seen to be threatening. For example, very poor countries tend to be less susceptible to terrorism; people must focus on survival and have little time for politics. (Lazarsfeld and Zeisal in Gurr, 1970: 34) Under a security agenda, the poverty of these people would not need to be addressed. The UK Department for International Development notes that a disproportionately large amount of the world’s bilateral aid already goes to the middle income countries where terrorism is most likely. (2005: 15) Further, in 2003, the UK gave a disproportionate amount of its allocated aid for poor communities in middle income countries to Iraq, showing a further politicisation of aid. (Christian Aid, 2004: 2) Similarly, the poverty of women will not be seen as important through the security lens since it is men that are the primary terrorist threat. In contrast both very poor countries and women are particular targets of non-securitised development aid. (UN, 1997) Thus a securitisation of poverty could easily overlook the ‘non-dangerous poor’ on behalf of the ‘dangerous’.

The finite pool of resources allocated to poverty reduction is unlikely to ever be able to address all forms of poverty.

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More money is, and may further be allocated to those NGO's and governments that stress the security aspect of their development work than those who work for purely humanitarian concerns. (Christian Aid, 2004: 2-3) Duffield argues that escaping the logic of this security regime is already very difficult, emphasising 'the increasingly overt and accepted politicisation of aid.' (2001: 16) 'Aid, in other words, is being co-opted to serve in the global 'War on Terror'.' (Christian Aid, 2004: 1) What may be at stake is the allocation of resources away from the most needy on the behalf of those perceived to be most dangerous.

## Externalising Poverty

Some theorists suggest that securitised issues always carry with them a logic of 'us' against 'them'. A threat to our existence is something that we must be protected *from*, those threatening us are external 'others' whose aims are incompatible with ours. This is clear in the rhetoric surrounding terrorism and, increasingly, in the securitisation of poverty. This can have serious implications for the attitude that is taken towards these issues; in a study of the securitisation of the African continent, Abrahamsen identifies an important process of shifting attitudes from a cooperative humanitarian approach to an 'us against them' approach which accompanies securitisations; 'otherness' is becoming something to fear and policies are increasingly driven by this. (2005: 60, 65)

The 'us against them' logic that is so central to ideas of security involves a necessary privileging of 'our' interests over 'theirs'. This is accepted logic in relation to perceived existential threats but becomes more problematic when attached to partial securitisations and non-traditional threats. That 'our' security is considered to be important when dealing with poverty is already clear; the UK's foreign office minister for Africa argued that there are "sound practical reasons why we cannot afford to ignore the state of Africa. The most immediate of these is terrorism." (in Abrahamsen, 2005: 67) What are not clear are the extents that western governments are prepared to go to ensure this security. Recent ideas of global policing and 'voluntary imperialism' that have emerged from the British government suggest that, in theory at least, the UK is prepared to take extensive measures. (Cooper, 2002)

The combination of privileging our interests over the interests of impoverished others and a potential 'voluntary imperialism' is perhaps the central problem of securitising poverty. If western society is to be the referent object in addressing poverty, the needs and wishes of those on the receiving end are necessarily subordinate to the requirements of the west. The further the west is prepared to intervene in poor countries to protect its own security with little consideration for the people on the receiving end, the further the choice, democracy and diversity of those people will be eroded. While poverty and related problems need to be addressed, it is important, for the sake of the people receiving aid, that problems are addressed on their terms and not on the terms of others.

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## Conclusion

The securitisation of poverty is a trend that the western world has seen in the years since the World Trade Centre bombings. That poverty is a threat to 'us' is increasingly emphasised in political rhetoric particularly in relation to terrorism, of which it is seen to be a cause. More detailed examinations of the subject see a subjective understanding of inequality as the root cause of terrorism and so, while poverty may be a part of this, necessarily some types of poverty (those linked to conflict and political discrimination on the national or global scale) are more likely to be a threat than others. The securitisation of poverty can lead to various problems. Firstly, aid may be redirected from the non-threatening poor (often those most in need) to those perceived to be a threat. Secondly, the involvement of the securitising states in the creation of poverty can be hidden as the threat is increasingly presented in external terms. Finally, securitisation necessarily presents the interests of the securitiser as more important than those who will be affected by its actions. Recent ideas of 'voluntary imperialism', if carried through, could potentially be very damaging to those under their control.

The securitisation of poverty is a trend that we can see in the political rhetoric of today but it is as yet only a partial securitisation. What we can see is possibly the beginnings of a new, securitised approach to poverty or possibly just a passing phase. The UK Department for International Development remains careful to distance itself from UK security issues as do many other organisations giving bilateral aid. However, securitisation can be seen as a sliding scale; the problems addressed in this essay are emerging issues that may or may not become very problematic. Some, such as the distribution of aid, are already more pronounced than others. In light of these potential problems and despite the increased attention that poverty can get as a result of being presented as a security threat, humanitarian approaches to the issue are preferable.

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