

Securitisation Theory: An Introduction

Written by Clara Eroukhmanoff

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CLARA EROUKHMANOFF, JAN 14 2018

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Securitisation theory shows us that national security policy is not a natural given, but carefully designated by politicians and decision-makers. According to securitisation theory, political issues are constituted as extreme security issues to be dealt with urgently when they have been labelled as ‘dangerous’, ‘menacing’, ‘threatening’, ‘alarming’ and so on by a ‘securitising actor’ who has the social and institutional power to move the issue ‘beyond politics’. So, security issues are not simply ‘out there’ but rather must be articulated as problems by securitising actors. Calling immigration a ‘threat to national security’, for instance, shifts immigration from a low priority political concern to a high priority issue that requires action, such as securing borders. Securitisation theory challenges traditional approaches to security in IR and asserts that issues are not essentially threatening in themselves; rather, it is by referring to them as ‘security’ issues that they become security problems.

The basics of securitisation theory

The end of the Cold War sparked a debate over ideas of security in IR between ‘narrowers’ and ‘wideners’. The narrowers were concerned with the security of the state and often focused on analysing the military and political stability between the United States and the Soviet Union. Dissatisfied with this, wideners sought to include other types of threat that were not military in nature and that affected people rather than states. This expanded the security agenda by including concepts such as human security and regional security – together with ideas of culture and identity. Feminism had an important role in widening the agenda by challenging the idea that the sole provider of security was the state and that gender was irrelevant in the production of security. On the contrary, the state was often the cause of insecurities for women. Widening the agenda from a feminist perspective brought gender into focus by placing gender and women as the focus of security calculations and by demonstrating that gender, war and security were intertwined. It was an important development in the rise of a wider perspective on security. Whether one agrees with the wideners or the narrowers, the end of the Cold War indicated that security was an essentially contested concept – ‘a concept that generates debates that cannot be resolved by reference to empirical evidence because the concept contains a clear ideological or moral element and defies precise, generally accepted definition’ (Fierke 2015, 35). By pointing at the essentially contested nature of security, critical approaches to security argue that ‘security’ is not necessarily positive or universal, but context and subject dependent and even negative at times.

Because some administer security while others receive security, security produces uneven power relations between people. For example, in the context of the Global War on Terror, a person who looks Arab has been regarded with suspicion as a dangerous ‘other’ and there has been an increase in surveillance operations in Muslim communities on the presumption that because they fit a certain profile, they may be connected to terrorism. Viewed in this light, surveillance becomes a security apparatus of control and a source of insecurity. It is by questioning the essence of security in cases such as this that securitisation theory developed and widened the scope of security to include other referent objects beyond the state. A referent object, a central idea in securitisation, is the thing that is threatened and needs to be protected.

Securitisation theorists determined five sectors: the economic, the societal, the military, the political and the

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environmental sector. In each sector, a specific threat is articulated as threatening a referent object. For example, in the societal sector, the referent object is identity, while the referent objects in the environmental sector are the ecosystem and endangered species. It is only in the military sector that the referent object remains the state. By 'sectorialising' security, we understand that existential threats are not objective but instead relate to the different characteristics of each referent object. This technique also highlights the contextual nature of security and threats. Suicide bomb attacks, for example, are a greater source of anxiety for some people today than they are for others. Yet we often hear suicide terrorism framed as a 'global' threat. Securitisation shows that it is incorrect to talk about issues such as terrorism as if they concern everyone around the world equally. By talking about referent objects we can ask: Security for whom? Security from what? And security by whom?

Central to securitisation theory is showing the rhetorical structure of decision-makers when framing an issue and attempting to convince an audience to lift the issue above politics. This is what we call a speech act – 'by saying the words, something is done, like betting, giving a promise, naming a ship' (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, 26). Conceptualising securitisation as a speech act is important as it shows that words do not merely describe reality, but constitute reality, which in turn triggers certain responses. In the process of describing the reality we see, we also interact with that world and perform an action that will greatly contribute to seeing that reality in a different way. For example, referring to an immigration camp in Calais as 'the Jungle' is not simply describing what the camp really is, but portraying it as a lawless and dangerous place. Hence, threats are not just threats by nature, but are constructed as threats through language. In order to convince an audience to take extraordinary measures, the securitising actor must draw attention and often exaggerate the urgency and level of the threat, communicate a point of no return, i.e. 'if we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant', and offer a possible way out (lifting the issue above politics) – which is often framed in military terms. In so doing, the securitising actor makes some actions more intelligible than others and enables a regime of truth about the nature of the threat and about the referent object's nature.

An issue becomes securitised when an audience collectively agrees on the nature of the threat and supports taking extraordinary measures. If the audience rejects the securitising actor's speech act, it only represents a securitising move and the securitisation has failed. In this respect, the focus on the audience and on process requires considerably more than simply 'saying security'. This has generated criticism from some scholars, who recommend understanding securitisation as a long process of ongoing social constructions and negotiation between various audiences and speakers. Any security issue can be presented on a spectrum ranging from non-politicised (the issue has not reached public debate) to politicised (the issue has raised public concerns and is on the agenda) to securitised (the issue has been framed as an existential threat). When an issue is securitised, actions are often legitimised under the language of 'urgency' and 'existential threats' and are measures that may be deemed undemocratic in normal situations. Security measures in the War on Terror, such as the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, the use of torture, the increased surveillance of citizens, extraordinary renditions and secretive drone strikes, illustrate the logic of exceptionality. Had the War on Terror not been framed in a context in which a suspension of normal politics was permissible and necessary, these security measures would probably not have existed – nor would they have endured to the present day.

A successful securitisation places 'security' as an exceptional realm, investing securitising actors (nominally states) with the power to decide when the democratic framework should be suspended and with the power to manipulate populations. For Wæver (2015 and 2000), securitisation theory was built to protect politics against the disproportionate power of the state by placing the success and failure of securitisation in the hands of the audience, rather than in the securitising actor. Wæver also voiced his preference for 'desecuritisation' – a return to normal politics. After all, audiences are not complete dupes at the mercy of the securitising actor, and by making the process more transparent, securitisation theory endows the audience with agency and responsibility. In this context, the role of the security analyst moves from objectively analysing the threat to studying the processes by which securitising actors construct a shared understanding of what is collectively recognised as a threat. Securitisation theory is thus not so much involved with answering 'why' an issue has been securitised. It is more important that we be concerned with the conditions that have made the securitisation possible by asking 'how' questions: how has a specific language enabled the actor to convince the audience of the threat?

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Securitisation theory and the Islamic State group in Europe

Following attacks in a range of European cities, the Islamic State group (also known as Daesh, ISIS or ISIL) became a high priority on security agendas from 2015 onwards. The group has been presented as a threat to the security of the state, to the security of individuals in Western Europe and more broadly as a threat to the Western way of life. This means that the securitisation of the Islamic State group affects at least three sectors: the societal, the military and the political. Securitisation theory observes that sometimes in a democracy the government must justify the suspension of normal politics to the public. Hence, if the Islamic State group is securitised in European states, which are regarded as democratic, we should be seeing securitising moves from government officials – a rhetorical justification of why intervention, for instance, is the only way to remove the threat of the Islamic State.

It is important to note that securitising actors are not limited to politicians. Security professionals like the police, intelligence services, customs, immigration services, border guards and the military all play an important role in defining the security landscape. They operate within a field of security characterised by competition over the 'right' knowledge over the threat and other risks associated, as well as competition over the 'right' solution. Although disagreements and confrontation occur between security professionals, Bigo, Bonditti and Olsson (2010, 75–78) argue that they are still guided by a set of common beliefs and practices. Securitising actors take security threats objectively and seek to solve them by undertaking various missions. In addition, there are also functional actors who can influence the dynamic of the field of security but who do not have the power to move an issue above politics. Functional actors are paramount since they help frame storylines about the existentially threatening nature of the issue, often creating divides between 'us' and 'them' – and often implicated in 'othering' processes. Examples of functional actors can be the media, academia, non- governmental agencies and think tanks. It can also include individuals themselves, by telling and sharing stories between friends, families and colleagues. For example, extreme claims made in tabloid newspapers across Europe create a narrative in which the Islamic State group is infiltrating society and working to bring on the demise of the democratic state.

Noticeable examples of securitising moves in the United Kingdom can be found during the House of Commons debate on the motion for British military action in Syria on 2 December 2015. British Prime Minister David Cameron argued that 'we face a fundamental threat to our security' from the threat of the Islamic State group, who 'attack us because of who we are, and not because of what we do' (this was the presentation of the nature of the threat and establishment of a regime of truth). He then said that 'we should not wait any longer' to reduce the threat (this was the point of no return). Finally, he pointed out that it is 'not about whether we want to fight terrorism but about how best we do that' (this was the solution provided).

It is more evident in France, when, after the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015, President Francois Hollande declared that 'France is at war' against an army of jihadists that 'has attacked France because France is a country of liberty' (again, focus on 'what and who we are'). In this framing, the French people are 'a people that is fierce, valiant and courageous' and are victims of such attacks for simply 'being alive'. At the other end of the spectrum is 'them', 'an army of jihadists', of 'coward murderers' who constitute an 'abomination' and 'vile attack' that can only be characterised by 'horror'. A point of no return is invoked when Hollande claims that the Islamic State group is an organisation that 'threatens the whole world' and that this 'is the reason why the destruction of Daesh is a *necessity* for the international community'. Finally, the solution, lifting the issue 'above politics' is offered: 'immediate border controls and a state of emergency have been commanded' (Hollande 2015).

The grammar of the security speech act is discernible. The speech points to the existentially threatening nature of the Islamic State group, a point of no return and a solution which breaks free of the normal democratic processes. In the months after the Paris attacks, Hollande increased French military strikes in Syria and ordered a state of emergency that gave French security forces controversial domestic powers. Hence, we have a case of successful securitisation. It is important to note that when arguing that the Islamic State group is securitised, securitisation theorists do not challenge the existence of the group, or that the group has indeed coordinated attacks in Europe.

Instead, securitisation questions the processes by which this group has come to be viewed as a threat and argues that by naming the group a threat, leaders of European states such as France and the United Kingdom are also

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implicated in the making of war. In that sense, securitisation highlights how Hollande's securitising speech act does not merely describe a state of affairs 'out there', but constitutes the attacks as an act of war and by doing so, brings war into being. Describing the threat of the Islamic State group is thus not impartial or objective, rather it is in an action in and of itself, and one that should be viewed as a political act.

Using securitisation theory shows that the politics of terrorism and counterterrorism is about threat magnification and that the symbolic violence caused by attacks is out of proportion to the number of deaths it is responsible for. For example, the number of victims in Western Europe was higher in the 1970s and 1980s as a result of groups such as the IRA than the number that can be attributed to Islamic terrorists in recent times. Yet leaders of European countries claim that the world has never faced such 'barbarity', 'horror' and 'atrocities'. This threat magnification demonstrates the exceptionality of the threat, which, in turn, requires urgent and extraordinary responses. Thinking of terrorism in this way is not only detrimental to the deliberative process but also limits our understanding of terrorism more generally.

Conclusion

Securitisation is a useful tool for students in IR as it contests traditional approaches to security that are overly focused on the security of the state, rather than on other referent objects. Adopting a securitisation framework entails challenging hegemonic and taken-for-granted ideas about the universality and objectivity of security and emphasises the ways in which knowledge is not merely 'out there' but is driven by interests. Securitisation theory reminds us that securitisation is not a neutral act but a political one. From that starting point we are able to dig deeper and investigate the various insecurities that are found in international relations.

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