Securitization Theory: 20 years in *Security Dialogue*

Virtual Special Issue

Edited and introduced by Mark B Salter

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Introduction

It is hard to underestimate the impact of security theory over the past twenty years in mainstream, new, and critical security studies (Buzan and Hansen, 2009; Burgess, 2010). An analytically-powerful model that explained how new issues might be connected to existential threat and thus be constructed as an object of security-thinking, security theory provided a parsimonious schematic: actors make a securitizing move, identifying an existential threat that requires extraordinary action; an audience either accepts or rejects that move; securitization occurs if that issue is accepted as a security issue (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). The theory, described by its critics as 'the Copenhagen School', saw its primary and clearest expression in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, although precursors can be intuited from Buzan's *People, States and Fear* (1993) and Wæver's 'Securitization and Desecuritization' (1995). What followed was a quick and productive skirmish on the question of identity, causal mechanisms, and the role of security analysts (McSweeney, 1996; Eriksson, 1999; Huysmans, 1998). A parallel debate developed on the ethical substrata of security theory: was it biased towards desecuritization, and what was the difference between desecuritization and politicization (Aradau, 2004; Roe, 2004)? Subsequently, more fundamental critiques were launched regarding gender and power dynamics (Hansen, 2000), the political theory of securitization (Williams, 2003), Eurocentrism and the applicability of security theory outside of the West (Wilkinson, 2007; Bilgin 2011), and linguistic *vs.* sociological explanations (Balzacq, 2011; Bigo, 2014). Since, the cottage industry of security theory has flourished, and a thousand flowers bloom on the question of the audience (Coté, 2016), the act (Huysmans, 2011), the practices (Robinson, 2017), the discourse (Berling, 2011; Stritzel 2012), the applicability, and the ethics of security (Gad and Lund Petersen, 2011). The objects of securitization research have included immigration, migration, borders, refugee crises, crime, policing and surveillance, terrorism and counter-terror programs, ethnic and visible minorities, technologies and

policies, environmental crises, climate change, epidemiological threats and public health, finance and banking, public spaces, emergency management, and resiliency, as well as the normal fare of international politics, alliances, threats, peacekeeping and military action. We can characterize a number of dominant strands in the debate: a linguistic focus on the illocutionary acts of securitization and their discursive context; a sociological or institutional focus on the fields and practices of those experts or policy-makers that compete for security capital; and a more theoretical focus on the relationship between sovereignty, decisions, exception and security.

On this 20th anniversary of the publication of *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, we want to draw attention to some of the interesting, provocative and innovative pieces that might merit greater attention published in *Security Dialogue* on security theory – not to put *Security Dialogue* at the centre of the debate, but rather to use this anniversary as an opportunity for reflection and reconsideration. The c.a.s.e manifesto was important in bringing some sociology to the formation of the Copenhagen School and its relation to 'the Paris School', which branches out into international political sociology (2006). Of course, *Security Dialogue* has featured a mainline special issue on 'The politics of securitization' in 2011, edited by Ulrik Pram Gad and Karen Lund Petersen, which we will reference below. However, this virtual issue illuminates some less recognized pieces to make a different point: Each of these articles show the socio-political assumptions that make the security theory schematic work or rather not work. Wilkinson's (2007) careful analysis of the 2005 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan demonstrates the embedded Eurocentricsm of security theory, and in particular sets out how non-state actors were able to construe the state itself as a security threat, despite a radically constricted sphere of public discourse. Vaughn makes a similar analytical point, that non-state humanitarian actors can engage in securitizing moves in relation to vulnerable aid-workers, organizations, or populations, and do so with regard to multiple audiences (2009). Hanrieder and Kreuder-Sonnen draw a similar conclusion in their analysis of the World Health Organization about the symbolic and material capital available for those who securitize and also the internal, institutional dynamics of claiming the capacity to respond (2014). Van Rythoven goes further into the qualities of those securitizing moves and the social dynamics between actors and audience to highlight the degree to which emotional dynamics and fragile constructions of identity and fear constrain the process (2015). Greaves conducts an empirical comparison between structurally similar securitizing moves by Sami and Inuit groups to suggest that the success of these different groups relates to the degree to which the state itself is understood to be a partner or a threat (2016). Jarvis and Legrand slow down their analysis and populate the securitizing move with all of the parliamentary questions, debates, and speeches that are required in order to 'make' that executive decision of proscription (2017).

The core argument that is pushed forward in all of these articles is that the schematic explanatory framework of security theory is not a bug of the theory, but a feature. A parsimonious model that is contradicted by each and every empirical case serves a greater purpose: the consistent failure of the security theory to point us to the complex and complicated social and political processes involved in connecting an issue with the value-category of security. The implication I take from this, and I argue the optimal path forward for security theory scholars, is to set aside the conceit that we are master-builders. As editor, I have never seen a theoretical innovation to security theory tested on another empirical case to prove or disprove its analytical potential. Thus, we can dispense with the baroque tendency to add more flourishes to the definition of audience or a more precise definition of illocutionary. Security theory is best when it serves as a purposively simple entry point into a rich empirical field, illuminating complexity through the inevitable surplus of relations, practices, materials that exceed the explanatory capacity of the original formulation. Each of the articles selected here highlight creative destruction, artful invention and powerful analysis.

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