International Relations

Securitisation theory

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Securitization theory has taken a quite radical departure from the way we usually talk about security. Because when we talk about security, we tend to assume that there must be things out there that are security threats. And that's why we have the word security.

And then we take this word security and we go around and see where it fits to those things. And we assume that the task of security analysts basically is to assess what are the biggest threats, how should we deal with what? And then tell the policy makers, these are really serious things. You better do so and so on.

The point of securitisation theory is to say, well, it's actually the other way around. There are no natural things out there that are security threats and others that aren't. It's more that we as communities, politically, choose sometimes to deal with things in a particular way. We name certain things security problems.

And when we do that, something happens to that issue, and to our interaction around it. The point here is that when you say, terrorism is a security threat, or you say, climate change is a security threat, you're saying, this is something existential that could be overriding normal issues.

It's not a normal issue we can leave to normal politics and say, maybe we deal with it-- maybe we don't. Maybe we do this-- maybe we do that. No-- it's a necessity. It's something that should not be allowed to happen.

There's an existential threat here. If we allow it to happen, everything else will be lost. It will be too late. It will be gone. We have to deal with it. And because it's a necessity, it is outside the normal bounds of political rules.

And we therefore can allow extraordinary measures-- like war, political violence, secrecy in the way we keep documents. We all know that for reasons of security, so and so is not public, and so on. We can have conscription-- other measures we usually wouldn't do. We can violate international treaties, and so on.

So the point here is that, instead of assuming that issues out there run around somehow being or not being security issues, and we should try to run after them and put labels on them, it's rather we try now to understand what is that particular thing we are doing when we are labelling something a security issue.

And more specifically, it's happening in a process where a securitising actor says, this is an existential threat, therefore we have to act upon it, therefore it is legitimate to do something we otherwise couldn't do. And the relevant audience say, yeah, we accept that. Thereby we grant you the right to use extraordinary measures.

Securitisation theory works with a relatively small number of core concepts that are closely linked to each other. And that's kind of the apparatus you take and use in a specific case. And they're all so closely tied, because you mention all of them when you tell the basic idea of securitisation.

So the fact that a securitisation is a situation where a referent object depicts an existential effect, and justifies to the relevant audience the use of extraordinary measures. It all goes in one sentence. But you also have to pick each of the key concepts out and say, what was it we said here?

We said that is a referent object. Something is depicted as existentially threatening. And that obviously has to be something we want to survive. It doesn't help to go out and say, some nasty bug is existentially threatened. Then people will say, great.

You can't justify extraordinary measures in that. It has to be the nation, or the state, or freedom, or our future welfare. Something that people say-- that has to survive-- that can't go. Therefore, you can justify extraordinary measures.

So the referent object is for some reason constructed in the move itself. That's the performativity of it. But it has to be one that you're able to get away with saying, it has to survive.

A key concept in the construction-- which has maybe gotten too little attention in the early versions of the theory, but I would today say is maybe the most important-- is the audience. Because it's not just a matter of threat speak. Anyone can stand up and say, this or that is a threat.

Something happens at the moment when audience accepts that, because of this alleged threat, they're willing to accept that we go to war, keep secrets, shut down this debate, make whatever extraordinary measures we otherwise wouldn't do. So the crucial decision is in some sense taken by the relevant audience.

A lot of people take, then, the audience to mean the democratic public, and say, therefore, the theory can only be used in the West or something like that. No, the relevant audience can be very different, depending on what kind of issue it is, what kind of political system it is. Maybe in a autocratic system, the ruler only has to convince an inner circle of 20 generals around a table. But if they usually would do this, and he suddenly said, now we have to do that-- if he would say, we've been doing so for until now, but now we should invade Kuwait,

then you would still have to make an argument that is beyond the usual-- justify something extraordinary, like invading the neighbouring country.

So there's always an audience you have to convince. And that is the crucial event. That's the difference that securitisation makes. That when you have got that, that issue has changed from being one kind of issue to another kind of issue. And it has new implications.

Then there is a securitising action-- doing this. In a lot of the traditional security theories, you wouldn't be very clear on whether the referent object or actor is the same. You talk about state security-- but is the state the actor or the referent object? And so on.

When you move into all the new threats, it's quite clear you have to make this distinction. Because you can maybe say, the state wants to securitise for the state to survive. But when you start to talk about the survival of the nation as an identity community, it becomes very dubious if you should say, the nation acts. That's kind of mysterious.

You can say, this right wing group stands up and claims that it speaks on behalf of the nation. And therefore, we should stop immigrants, because it's a security threat. Or you go to the environment-- the whales have to survive, because otherwise, we will no longer be able to be in the world we want to be in.

But it's not the whales who are saying that. It's Greenpeace who says the whales have to survive. So the referent object and the securitising actor are two key concepts.

Implied in this threat is also, then, that it's an existential threat. You have to say, it's not something that just go in the normal weighing of issues-- maybe this, maybe that. It's something that has to be solved. It's unacceptable that we don't deal with it. So it has to take priority-- therefore, urgency-- therefore, extraordinary measures.

[…] in the '80s a lot of critical actors-- peace movement and all that sort-- it's a great idea to have more kinds of security. It's, in a sense, a way to keep the military down. You're not the only ones doing security.

The environmental movements are dealing with security as well. Health is a security issue as well. It was a way to relativise the importance of the military. And then, I was a little worried that people took it so lightheartedly and said, oh, we can call this security, we can call that security-- as if it had no price to do that.

So the whole argument of securitisation theory is to say that you pay a very high price if you want to deal with something in a security role. It's always a trade-off. You gain something by calling something a security issue. Typically, you gain urgency, priority, focus, ability to act, and so on.

But you pay a price in terms of freezing it mentally as something given by de-democratizing You're saying, this is a necessity. This is something we can't discuss. By creating a kind of us/them construction where the problem is out there, we are the solution, and so on.

For instance, in relation to the environment, that is maybe problematic, because in some sense we are the problem and we are the solution. But by securitising, we are moving the problem out somewhere.

So in that sense, the idea of securitisation theory is to answer that discussion about widening, and say, hm, let's be a little more careful about just thinking, the more security, the better. Security is at best a necessary evil. At best you might say, we don't really believe we can handle this problem with normal measures. We might have to use extraordinary measures. That is a kind of failure.

Securitisation theory is not an IR theory, in the sense that it is being a general theory about international relations, as such. It's a security theory. So it's taking its clue from the area of security-- developing a theory, and you can go out and use that theory on lots of areas-- some of them even-- to some extent-- beyond what was traditionally seen as security.

The theory has then been used in different ways. A lot of people have used it on specific case studies, and saying, let's see what happened in the escalation of this conflict-- how actors on one side started to depict an existential threat from the other side, justifying extraordinary measures.

Maybe you even study the whole conflict constellation-- look at the other side, see how they build up a security construction that justifies extraordinary measures. You might even go on, then, to try to see, what do you do about this conflict? Can you de-securitize it, as you would say in the language of the theory-- take it out of the security framing, and thereby maybe get it one notch down?

But also, a lot of people have used the theory on specifically the new security issues, of saying what is happening now when we take in an issue that previously was not considered security-- like religion or climate change? What happens when issues that are very unlike the old security issues suddenly get into the security framing?

Does it kind of shade that issue in unfortunate ways, that it suddenly has this security labelling? Does it enable new form of actions-- problematic actions, or useful actions, et cetera? So a lot of the literature has been about this-- what happens when something transforms from being not security to being security?

Where the theory has most often not been seen as the most attractive is when you get very close to classical issues-- things that everyone take to be security issues.

Classical military issues. Classical great power issues, where everyone will say, sure. That's a security issue. We don't want to discuss how it got there. We know it's there, because it's there, because it has to be there. And where the question-- could it also have been a non-security issue-- is maybe not the most relevant.

I naturally think securitisation theory has something to contribute. And I would say, we can then study how different securitising actors want to make different referent objects the centre of attention, focus on different threats, different extraordinary measures.

So the variation-- the struggle going on within something that is generally accepted as a security issue-- is still a powerful tool to understand.