

# Securitization Theory

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## Reader's guide

This chapter introduces to Securitization Theory, situating its intellectual roots and tracing its emergence and evolution as a framework for analysis, spelling out its main concepts and dimensions, and presenting the main empirical cases to which the theory has been applied. The chapter also reports on the key criticisms and challenges that have been voiced against the theory.

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## Introduction

Securitization theory is a conceptual framework explaining the process through which certain issues come to be perceived and treated as security threats. As Balzacq, Léonard and Ruzicka (2016) summarize, securitization theory addresses three main questions: “what makes something a security issue? What kind of responses does this call for? What are the specific consequences of agreeing that something is a threat?”

Moving beyond the question of whether or not particular issues (e.g. migration, drugs, the rise of China) *objectively* constitute security threats, securitization theorists investigate why people *subjectively* perceive these issues as security problems or not, and unpacks the consequences of such perceptions. As such, securitization theory is a constructivist framework: it studies the social dynamics involved in the making of shared understandings of insecurity. The central concept of “securitization” refers to the shifting of public perceptions about a particular issue towards a belief that it constitutes an important security threat in need of urgent attention, away from an understanding that it is merely one political question among others. In short, securitization “lifts some issue above ordinary politics in order to assign it a special urgency and necessity” (Bagge Laustsen & Wæver 2000: 708).

Securitization theory bears the mark of its political and intellectual context. It was originally developed during the final years of the Cold War, as constructivist theories gained traction in International Relations, and as scholars in security studies debated the pertinence of broadening the scope of the discipline towards non-military problems (see Background 12.1). Securitization theory innovatively connected the two discussions, by detailing the social construction of security problems in non-military sectors.

The theory emphasizes language as the main mechanism driving securitization, explaining how powerful speeches and dominant discourses influence peoples’ perceptions of threats and their acceptance or rejection of extraordinary measures presented as necessary to

tackle them. Securitization has thus succinctly been defined as the “linguistic manufacture of threats” (Balzacq 2005).

Securitization theory is generally understood to be a *critical* social theory – that is, a theory which seeks not only to describe and explain social processes, but also to normatively evaluate them in terms of their contribution to positive freedom and emancipation. In this light, securitization is therefore widely seen as a negative development that damages democratic politics, hinders long-term multidimensional policies, and simplistically locates blame on particular categories of people deemed to be responsible for the new insecurity.

**Background 12.1: “Broadening” Security Studies at the End of the Cold War.**

The groundwork for Securitization Theory was set up as the Cold War came to a close, a time when security studies was torn between proponents of a “narrow” approach focusing on the use of military force (e.g. Walt 1991) and advocates of a “broadening” of the field to encompass non-traditional sources and spaces of insecurity (e.g. Matthews 1989; Baldwin 1995). The end of the Cold War indeed provoked increased scholarly and political interest in a range of phenomena traditionally overlooked by security studies but now presented as “new dimensions of human security” (UNDP 1994), such as poverty and underdevelopment, state failure, or migrations.

The second edition of Barry Buzan’s book *People, States and Fear*, published with the subtitle *An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post Cold War Era* (1991, first edition 1983), was a major milestone in this debate, providing a clear framework explaining how international tensions and competition generate specific but correlated forms of insecurity in different sectors (military, but also political, societal, economic and environmental). Ole Wæver, then a colleague of Buzan at Copenhagen’s Conflict and Peace Research Institute (COPRI), saw merit in this approach but warned that “widening along the referent object axis – that is, saying that ‘security is not only military defence of the state, it is also x and y and z’ – has the unfortunate effect of expanding the security realm endlessly, until it encompasses the whole social and political agenda” (Wæver 1995). In his view, what lacked was an explanation of how particular issues pertaining to these various sectors initially came to be perceived as security problems.

*Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan, Wæver & De Wilde 1998), Securitization Theory’s canonical text establishing the “Copenhagen School”, combines Buzan’s sectoral framework with Wæver’s critique. The book indeed unpacks the dynamics through which particular issues belonging to different sectors become viewed as security threats, emphasising the pivotal role of language in shifting these issues from the “political” to the “security”

realm. The opening pages of the volume explicitly situate the “new framework for analysis” against the backdrop of the “‘wide’ versus ‘narrow’ debate in security studies” (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998: 2).

## From Copenhagen to the World: The Evolution of Securitization Theory from the 1980s to the 2020s.

### 1. A “New Framework for Analysis”: The Copenhagen School

Securitization theory was first formulated by scholars working at the University of Copenhagen’s Conflict and Peace Research Institute (COPRI), which is why the initial framework is usually referred to as the “Copenhagen School”. In 1989, one of these scholars – Ole Waever – wrote a working paper titled *Security, The Speech Act. Analysing the Politics of a Word* with the “ambition to re-think the concept of security”. Specifically, Waever sought to “challenge two basic elements of ‘security’ as we usually talk of it”: first, the view that security threats are “a ‘reality’ prior to language [...]”, and second, the idea that “the more security, the better”.

Waever corrected the first of these two “elements” by importing speech-act theory from Philosophy (see Key ideas 12.1) and by simultaneously attuning to Wolfers’ (1962) distinction between security in an “objective sense” and in a “subjective sense”. The working paper observed that people’s subjective perceptions of threats don’t necessarily match their objective state of (in)security, and that this subjective understanding of what does or does not constitute a security problem is largely determined by what state leaders identify as threatening. Indeed Waever understood leaders’ speeches on security threats as “speech-acts”: even though they seem to simply describe a situation (“X is a security threat”), they actually create a political reality whereby their audience is both convinced that a threat objectively exists and encouraged to accept strong executive measures to be taken to address the problem. The concept of “securitization” was coined to characterize this shifting of an issue towards the realm of

security, and more broadly a state of politics whereby the security logic prevails in non-military sectors.

The second element – that more security is always good – was challenged by depicting securitization as a negative development, and by describing securitization’s reverse concept of “desecuritization” – defined as the “politization of security” – as a positive change. Desecuritization actually received more attention than securitization in Waever’s 1989 working paper, which evoked the necessity to disengage from the Cold War security logic and re-imagine a new “European security order” post-Berlin Wall.

**Key ideas 12.1: Security as a “speech act”.**

Securitization theory rests on a series of concepts developed by John L. Austin in his seminal conferences *How To Do Things with Words* (1955/1962). In this work, Austin examined what he called “performative utterances” (or, simply, “performatives”), that is, sentences that don’t *describe* a reality but rather *change* this reality; these statements are therefore not to be evaluated as true or false, but ought to be investigated in terms of their practical consequences. In Austin’s own words, the term “performative” (from “to perform”) “indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action”, as in “I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)” and “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother (as occurring in a will)” (Austin 1955/1962: 5): saying these words produces very real consequences. Analysing such “speech acts” – utterances where things are being done with words, to paraphrase the title of Austin’s book – therefore means to attune to their three main dimensions: “locutionary” (what is being said), “illocutionary” (what the words intend to do, such as issuing a warning, making a promise, etc.), and “perlocutionary” (what these words actually produce as “consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience” [Austin 1955/1962: 101], such as scaring, creating expectations, or setting up a contract).

Ole Waever, in his early work, directly draws on that framework, defining “security as a speech act” whereby “the utterance itself is the act. [...]. By uttering ‘security’ a state representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it” (Waever 1995: 55). In other words, Waever suggests that elite statements that an issue (e.g. migration, an epidemic) constitutes a security problem do not describe a reality, but rather change the political landscape when it comes to the public understanding of this issue and the policies taken to address it: by “defin(ing) the particular case as one belonging to a specific category (‘security’) where the state tends to use all available means to combat it”, elites both issue “a threat but also a kind of promise” (Waever 1989: 42).

Waever further developed these ideas a few years later in a chapter titled *Securitization and Desecuritization* (1995), which identically started by questioning the two “premises” that “security is a reality prior to language” and that “the more security, the better”. The chapter’s merit comes from its sharper focus on, and clearer conceptualization of, securitization. Rhetorically it asked “a simple question: what really makes something a security problem?”, Waever answered that “by definition, something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so” (p.54). He then detailed the negative nature of such process, arguing that “[i]n naming a certain development a security problem, the ‘state’ can claim a special right” to solve it, which allows elites to increase their grip on power and bypass normal democratic politics. “Power holders”, Waever suggested, “can always try to use the instrument of securitization of an issue to gain control over it” (p.54).

A full and coherent theory of securitization would only emerge in 1998, with the book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, authored by COPRI colleagues Ole Waever, Barry Buzan, and Jaap De Wilde. The book spelled out the social mechanisms involved in securitization, unpacked the various components of a typical sequence of securitization, and explored securitization dynamics in several non-military sectors (environment, economy, society, polity) as well as the military one. A range of concepts are articulated that constitute together the structure of the theory. Schematically, securitization proceeds as follows: through a “securitizing speech-act” voiced to a certain “audience”, a “securitizing actor” designates a certain issue (the “referent subject”) as fundamentally threatening to something (the “reference object”) and thus necessitating the urgent undertaking of extraordinary security measures. As Balzacq and Guzzini (2015: 98-99) explain, “one of the central implications” of securitization is that “once established, [it] enables policy makers to immediately adopt whatever means they deem appropriate to curb the threat”.

The pivotal moment in this sequence is therefore the “securitizing move”, understood as a speech act using the “rhetoric of existential threat” (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998: 24-25) to present a certain issue (e.g. foreigners, climate change) as endangering the integrity and survival of the designated referent object (e.g. the state, citizens, civilization) claimed to be “existentially threatened” (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998: 36). The securitizing actors – thus defined as the “actors who securitize issues by declaring something, a referent object, existentially threatened” (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998: 36) can be “political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists, and pressure groups” (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998: 40). The success of securitizing moves – the audience’s acceptance of both the threat description and the extraordinary measures – is not automatic: it depends on a series of facilitating conditions (sometimes called “felicity conditions” in the subsequent literature), including a favourable contextual setting or the legitimacy of the securitizing actor. The possibility therefore exists that securitizing moves fail.

The Copenhagen School’s conceptualization of securitization as an undesirable shift from the realm of normal politics to that of extraordinary security measures rests on the assumption that such a move necessarily narrows the space for political contestation (Huysmans [1998: 579] would later relate this shift to Carl Schmitt’s conceptualization of how a “radical break from the neutralization of the political sphere” can become a “founding practice for the political community”). Failure of securitization, as well as desecuritization – the “shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere” (Buzan et al. 1998: 4) –, are therefore presented as the preferable outcome to prevent the colonization of non-military sectors by the logic of exceptionality, and avoid the resulting narrowing of political contestation. Figure 12.1 visually represents a typical securitization sequence as theorized by the Copenhagen School, while Figure 12.2 schematizes

the three potential modes – non-politicized, politicized, and securitized – a particular issue can be situated in.

Figure 12.1: Typical sequence of securitization

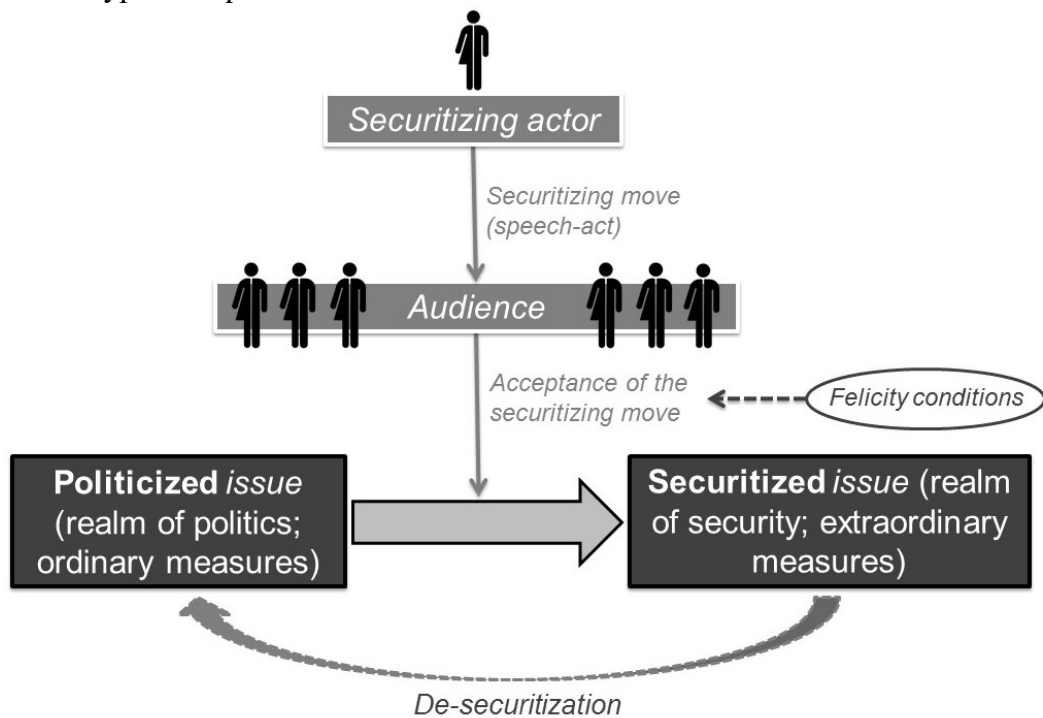
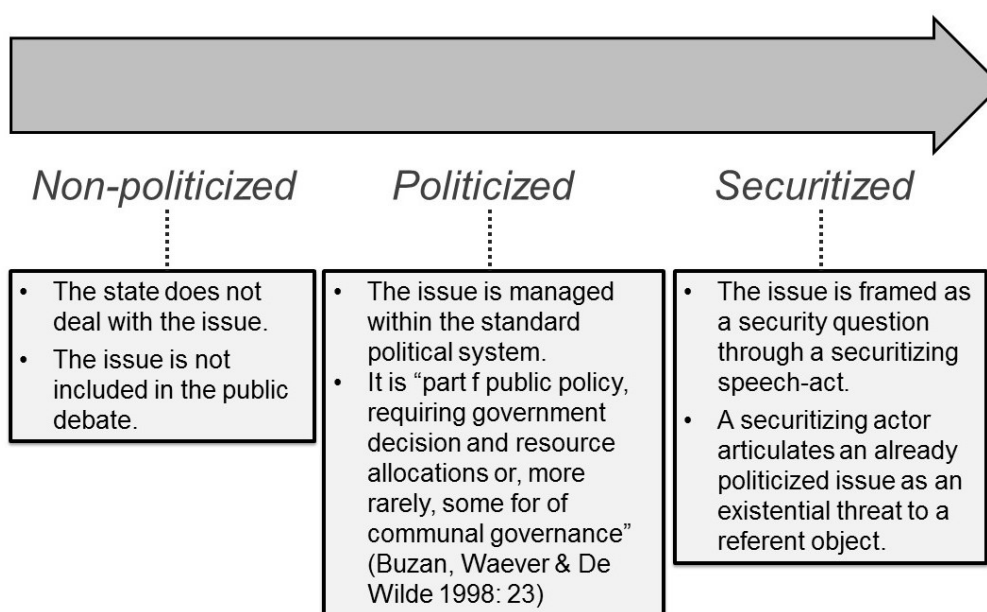


Figure 12.2: Non-politicized, politicized, and securitized issues





## 2. Evolutions of Securitization Theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The Copenhagen School's "new framework for analysis" offered exactly that: a novel and coherent conceptual package for the constructivist study of security problems and policies. That contribution filled an important gap in the literature on threat construction and was potentially very fruitful empirically; for these reasons, it quickly grew in popularity – less in the US, where the theory never really took off, than elsewhere. With this popularity came attempts to correct perceived shortcomings and blind spots of the framework. Typologies exist to categorize the different elaborations of the theory that emerged from these efforts, such as the distinction between the "philosophical" and the "sociological" approaches, or the enumeration of various "schools" after the Copenhagen one, like the "Paris school" or the "Welsh/Aberystwyth School". However, with none of these typologies being fully satisfactory (Balzacq, Leonard & Ruzicka 2016: 498), it is more productive here to spell out the four main lines of theoretical developments that paved the way towards what Stritzel (2007: 359) called "a more comprehensive theory of securitization".

First, a range of scholars criticized what they perceived to be a simplistic, mechanistic account of how securitizing speech-acts realize securitization. *On the one hand*, some attempts were made to further unpack what exactly a securitizing speech-act is, what it semantically and lexically looks like, and how it actually works – questions left rather surprisingly unanswered in the initial framework. Klüfers, for example, conceptualized the "security repertoires" involved in securitization as "systematically related sets of terms", usually "organized around one or more central metaphors" (Klüfers 2014: 278, 282). *On the other hand*, scholars such as Balzacq (2005) called for, and provided, "correctives" to the original theory that provided the audience with a more active role in the success/failure of securitization, elaborated the different ways in which the context of the securitizing move matters, and stressed the importance of

power relations involved in the securitizing move. Rather than a top-down process with no real social context, securitization was conceptualized as a “situated interactive activity” (Balzacq 2005: 179) whose different steps and levels (Roe 2008) depend on a range of sociological factors. This stance on the theory paved the way for contributions detailing the typical sequences of securitizing moves and counter-moves and the tensions between securitizing and counter-securitizing speech-acts (e.g. Stritzel & Chang 2015).

Second, calls were made to broaden the initial framework’s conceptualization of language, locked on speech-acts alone, towards other linguistic forces understood to play an important role in securitization dynamics. The Copenhagen School’s focus on top-down, easily-identifiable, one-shot speech-acts as core drivers of securitization was criticized as too narrow and missing the importance of broader linguistic constructs such as language-games, meta-narratives, or discursive environments (Wilhelmsen 2017). Poststructuralist understandings of language drawing on Foucault or Derrida were grafted onto Securitization Theory, shedding light on more diffuse and long-term social dynamics, and thus considerably enlarging both the theoretical remit and the empirical reach of the initial framework.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, scholars have argued that non-linguistic factors participate in securitization, sometimes more significantly than language. Two main components have received most attention. *On the one hand*, researchers have built on the so-called “visual turn” in IR and the social sciences more generally to investigate the way visual imagery shapes securitization processes. Williams’ contention that “the Copenhagen School’s narrow focus on speech-acts as the key form of communicative action in security practices must confront the fact that contemporary political communication is increasingly embedded within televisual images” (Williams 2003: 512), was followed by a range of studies demonstrating and theorizing the importance of pictures, drawings and videos in securitizing sequences (e.g. Hansen 2011). As a result, a fine understanding of what kind of images of referent subjects

(e.g. refugees, epidemics, climate change) shape securitization outcomes, as well as the way they are disseminated or instrumentalized to support securitizing moves, has emerged. *On the other hand*, scholars have emphasised the importance of more or less visible “security practices” (Balzacq, Basaran, Bigo, Guittet & Olsson 2018) such as the erection of visible fences and walls at borders, the cross-fertilization of transnational security-related databases with non-security related ones, the practical settings of professional meetings, or the creation and development of specialist institutions (e.g. Balzacq 2008; Neal 2009). Acknowledging such practices, which both directly implement security measures without relying on a securitizing move *per se*, and surreptitiously create a public understanding of issues such as migration as a security threat, unlocked a less rigid account of how securitization works.

Fourth and most recent, efforts have been made to specify the affective and emotional processes at play in securitization. Indeed neither the Copenhagen School’s initial framework nor its multiple modifications have moved beyond one-dimensional references to fear, failing to offer granular examinations of the complex emotional dynamics triggering, driving, and resulting from the construction of issues as security threats. Building on a growing research agenda on emotions in international relations and security communities, Van Rythoven (2015) addressed this important shortcoming, characterizing securitization as a “visceral, emotional process” whose ever-specific implementations and chances of success/failure rest on emotions-determined appraisals of issues and situations.

In sum, securitization has developed to broaden its initial framework, deemed “problematically narrow” by many (McDonald 2008), towards a host of relevant factors, processes, and dimensions originally overlooked by the Copenhagen school. This evolution is reflected in the evolution of the definitions of securitization found in the literature from 1998 to 2016, captured in Key Quotes 12.1, see, in particular, Balzacq’s 2011 definition.

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| <p><b>Key quotes 12.1: Definitions of securitization</b></p> |
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**Waever (1995):** “We can regard ‘security’ as a speech act. [...] By uttering ‘security’, a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it.”

**Buzan, Waever & De Wilde (1998):** “An issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure. [...] A discourse that takes the form of presenting something as an existential threat to a reference object [...] is a securitizing move.”

**Williams (2003):** With “securitizing speech-acts”, “threats become represented and recognized. Issues become ‘securitized’, treated as security issues, through these speech-acts which do not simply describe an existing security situation, but bring it into being as a security situation by successfully representing it as such”.

**Balzacq (2011a):** In securitization, “an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and institutions) about the critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitizing actor’s reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development”.

**Balzacq, Léonard & Ruzicka (2016):** “Securitization theory seeks to explain the politics through which (1) the security character of public problems becomes established, (2) the social commitments resulting from the collective acceptance that a phenomenon is a threat are fixed, and (3) the possibility of a particular policy is created”.

### Key Points

- While the Copenhagen School’s theory of securitization quickly proved popular, especially outside US academia, many scholars nonetheless found the original framework too narrow.
- Securitization theory has gradually been broadened, integrating linguistic processes beyond speech-acts as well as non-linguistic factors (such as images and practices) and emotional dynamics.
- Attempts have been made to group these efforts to develop securitization theory beyond its initial framework into “schools” or “approaches”, yet none of these typologies is adequate.

## Main Empirical Cases in Securitization Research

These theoretical developments were fuelled by, and in return contributed to, the growth of a rich empirical research agenda, centred on four major empirical cases: *migration*, *religion* (particularly Islam), *the environment and climate change*, and *health*. Although other issues have been studied through the lenses of securitization theory, these four areas have garnered most attention.

Migration is one of the most politically contentious issues of our times, with widely diverging views competing on how to appraise and address it. The longstanding increase in global migration flows, together with particular events gaining high visibility in the media (e.g. the dismantling of the Calais “jungle” in France, the “breaking point” posters during the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom, or the worldwide circulation of the picture of Aylan Kurdi in 2015), and immigration becoming a major element of right-wing and far-right parties’ programmes, have unsurprisingly triggered a significant research agenda on the securitization of migration, immigrants, and/or refugees. As soon as 1995, Huysmans (1995) used the concept of securitization to evaluate the dangers of portraying “migrants as a security problem”, an intervention that opened up an entire field of analysis where most authors point to the existence of a multifaceted securitization process at play in Europe and the US. In 2000, Huysmans argued that European integration led to “the securitization of immigrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees in the EU” (2000: 753), a claim that built on Bigo’s (1998) earlier argument that EU institutions appraised immigration as a security threat and acted accordingly. Observing a range of evolutions – such as the transformation of EU’s external borders into sophisticated systems of impenetrable fences, the constitution and growth of FRONTEX, or the increasing visibility

of anti-migrant sentiments – many authors have backed up this assertion (e.g. Karyotis 2007), sometimes even assimilating the securitization of migration to a “racial discourse” (e.g. Ibrahim 2005). A series of studies have zoomed in on particular states or regions, with the aim of tracing the local trajectories of securitizing moves (e.g. Bourbeau 2011 on France and Canada). This has not prevented some scholars from contesting the diagnosis that migration has indeed been securitized; they have claimed that securitization has not been as successful as alternative frames (Boswell 2007), argued that the securitization theory is too narrow to account for the phenomenon (Neal 2009 favours the concept of “risk management”), or showed that the securitization of migrants is not accepted by large strands of the population because threat framing is conditional upon the audience’s ideology (Lahav & Courtemanche 2012).

These debates on migration have been closely connected to investigations of the securitization of religion, and in particular Islam. Pointing to the attempts by many Western political leaders to depict Muslims as both dangerous and foreign, some authors have suggested that Islam and migration have been co-securitized (Kaya 2009), with European Muslims sometimes rhetorically assimilated to terrorists in the post-9/11 environment (Ajala 2014). What is claimed to be under threat (the referent object) from Islam is either a certain practice of faith perceived to be original and defining individuals’ sense of self (Bagge Laustsen & Wæver 2000) or a national identity understood in exclusionary terms (Croft 2012 on Islam versus “Britishness”). In line with these studies, the securitization of Islam has been linked to increased levels of anti-Muslim discrimination in Western democracies. Another important, but smaller strand of research on religion and securitization has focused on the role of religious leaders as securitizing actors presenting other religions or social groups as fundamentally threatening. Karyotis and Patrikios (2010), for example, found that the rhetoric adopted by the Greek Orthodox Church played a significant role in the securitization of migration in the country.

A third major area of empirical investigation for securitization scholars is the environment and climate change – indeed the presentation of environmental degradation as a security problem was already identified as “increasingly common” in Waever’s 1995 chapter (where he reflected on a series of speeches and reports by US officials naming environmental change as threats and coining the idea of “environmental security”) as well as in Buzan, Waever and De Wilder’s 1998 volume (which dedicates an entire chapter to it). Moves to securitize climate change have multiplied ever since, in a context marked by the acceleration of climate change, the multiplication of international forums and agreements aiming at curbing it down, and the strengthening of social movements voicing increasingly alarmist claims on the future of the planet. While some scholars have traced the evolution of the securitization of climate change in particular regional or national contexts, others have shown that securitizing moves in that domain have taken many different forms because of the involvement of a plurality of non-state actors, resulting in different and at times contrasting policies being called for (Trombetta 2008). A key, underlying debate crossing all these contributions has been that of the desirability of securitizing climate change: arguments in favour of such a move insist on the need for extraordinary measures to mitigate what has become an overwhelming threat, yet opponents of a securitization of climate change highlight the inadequacy of security-oriented measures traditionally adopted when securitization occur, which tend to be short-term and exclusionary, and to impede international cooperation. Attempts have therefore been made to imagine and promote securitizing yet “progressive discourses of climate security [...] underpinned by defensible ethical assumptions and encouraging effective responses to climate change” (McDonald 2018: 153).

Finally, a fourth major field of empirical research where securitization theory has been applied is health. In particular, research has followed the rhythm of major epidemics, starting with a series of investigations on the speeches and discourses securitizing HIV/AIDS. Rushton

(2010) for example identified securitization as one among several “prominent frames” used by political leaders when presenting the epidemic, while McInnes and Rushton (2013) stressed that the securitization of HIV/AIDS has historically been a multi-level and contested process with ambiguous results. Just like for the environment, people have questioned the extent to which securitizing HIV/AIDS (and other epidemics/pandemics) is a productive strategy in terms of effectively tackling the disease. Elbe’s work (2005; 2006; 2008; and Chapter 26) provides a range of useful thinking points when it comes to understanding the logics of health securitization and foreseeing its consequences. While securitizing epidemics can put the issue high on the agenda, raise awareness, unlock resources, and bolster political initiatives, it also has two major problematic effects: it “brings into play a ‘threat-defense’ logic” that favours national responses at the expense of international cooperation, and it “pushes responses to the disease away from civil society toward military and intelligence organizations with the power to override the civil liberties of persons living with HIV/AIDS” (Elbe 2006). These dynamics, problems, and dilemmas have reappeared with subsequent epidemics and pandemics, such as the Avian Flu outbreaks of the 2000s (e.g. Youde 2008; Curley & Herington 2011), Brazil’s 2015-2017 Zika virus crisis (Wenham & Farias 2019), or the Ebola epidemic of 2013-2016 (Enemark 2017). In the latter case, Barack Obama’s “Remarks by the President on the Ebola Outbreak” on the 16 September 2014 constitute a clear case of presenting a disease as an urgent and fundamental security threat and taking militaristic extraordinary policies to tackle it. See Key Quotes 12.2. The 2019-2021 outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has followed a similar pattern, albeit in a much more dramatic fashion; a literature has quickly emerged (Al Sharafat 2020; Sears 2020; Baele 2020) that built on the abovementioned interventions to analyse the many speeches made by political leaders who presented the pandemic as a security threat akin to “war” and consequently adopted unprecedented extraordinary measures. See Case Study 12.1.



**Key Quote 12.2: Barack Obama and the Securitization of Ebola:  
“Remarks by the President on the Ebola Outbreak”, 16 September 2014**

*“This is an epidemic that is not just a threat to regional security – it’s a potential threat to global security if these countries break down, if their economies break down, if people panic. That has profound effects on all of us, even if we are not directly contracting the disease. [...]*

*And that’s why, two months ago, I directed my team to make this a national security priority. We’re working this across our entire government, which is why today I’m joined by leaders throughout my administration, including from my national security team. [...]*

*We’re going to establish a military command center in Liberia to support civilian efforts across the region – similar to our response after the Haiti earthquake. It’s going to be commanded by Major General Darryl Williams, commander of our Army forces in Africa. He just arrived today and is now on the ground in Liberia. And our forces are going to bring their expertise in command and control, in logistics, in engineering. And our Department of Defense is better at that, our Armed Services are better at that than any organization on Earth.”*

**Case Study 12.1: The securitization of Covid-19**

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic appears to be a textbook case of securitization, with a range of truly extraordinary measures being implemented across the globe in the tail of powerful leaders’ speeches tapping on the “war” metaphor to present the virus as a fundamental security threat.

In March 2020, Emmanuel Macron for example proclaimed France to be “at war”, stressing the unprecedented nature of his “decisions in time of peace” and arguing that “all these measures are necessary for our security [...] to protect our fellow citizens and the Nation’s cohesion”. The very same week, Boris Johnson announced the “national fight back” against a virus “so dangerous and so infectious” that “drastic action” and “extreme measures [...] unprecedented since World War 2” were warranted. “We’re going to win, we’re going to beat it”, he added, as “we have the resolve and the resources to win the fight”. Similar rhetoric securitizing the virus was voiced by the likes of Benjamin Netanyahu (announcing Israel to be “at war with an invisible enemy, the virus”), Abdullah II of Jordan (wearing his military uniform to claim that each Jordanian “is a soldier” in the battle against the epidemic), or Donald Trump (who declared the US to be “at war with an invisible enemy”, evoking Pearl Harbour and calling for a mobilization of “the full power of the American nation – economic, scientific, medical, and military – to vanquish the virus”).

Securitization Theory would view these solemn communiqués (“securitizing speech-acts”) as attempts (“securitizing moves”) made by state leaders (“securitizing actors”) to convince their citizens (the “audience”) that the virus (“referent subject”) threatens the very existence of the Nation, the welfare state, and individuals themselves (“referent objects”), allowing them to executively implement extraordinary measures such as curfews, lockdowns, or direct government involvement in the economic production of certain

goods (such as Donald Trump' executive order placing, on 2 April 2020, the production of medical supplies under the coordination of the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Homeland Security).

Securitizing moves go rarely unchallenged: these measures have been criticized by a range of political actors calling for greater parliamentary scrutiny, more proportionality, or less infringement on individual freedoms. Some states, like Sweden, have notably resisted the use of securitizing language, favouring softer norms borne out of a language of individual responsibility.

### Key Points

- Securitization theory has been empirically applied to a broad range of important social and political issues.
- Empirical studies of securitization have chiefly focused on four main issues: migration, religion (primarily Islam), the environment and climate change, and health (specifically pandemics).
- These empirical studies have been enabled by, and have further fuelled, new conceptual developments in the theory.

## Challenges and Critiques facing Securitization Theory

Securitization Theory has faced – and continues to be confronted by – a series of challenges and criticisms that arose as it gained traction and was empirically applied. Some have been levelled at its *theoretical coherence*, other ones have focused on its *methodology*, and yet a third category questioned its *normative and critical status*.

First, the development of the framework away from its narrow focus on securitizing speech-acts towards a broader and multifaceted concept of securitization has led to concerns about a loss of theoretical coherence. With poststructuralist approaches cohabitating with ordinary language ones, with studies of images or practices complementing analyses of

language, complaints have been voiced that securitization morphed from a parsimonious theory to a broad approach, or that securitization became a catch-all concept. For Balzacq (2015: 103), there are now “various theories of securitization, each of which is committed to distinctive ontologies and epistemologies”, a situation that can be either appreciated as a testimony to the usefulness and productivity of the Copenhagen conceptualization, or lamented as the fading of a once coherent theory. This situation has led some scholars to more profoundly question whether or not Securitization Theory is actually needed as a stand-alone theory, especially in the context of the greater popularity – mostly in Anglo-Saxon academia – of other theories dealing with similar issues. Chiefly, securitization theory has been described as a repeat or subclass of framing theory (e.g. Eriksson 2001; Watson 2012), and the securitization phenomenon as one particular frame among others (e.g. Vultee 2011); a range of empirical studies have mixed the two approaches (e.g. Dunn-Cavelty 2008 on the “threat framing” of cybersecurity).

A second critique levelled against securitization research – not against the theory per se – concerns the methods used by its scholars, or rather their neglect of methodological considerations. While important voices in the field have recognized the need to move beyond theoretical debates to systematize and widen the available methodological options (e.g. Balzacq 2011b), empirical studies on securitization are nonetheless rarely clear about the specific method(s) they use and almost never transparent about the choices they rest on (for example when it comes to speeches selection, or sampling strategies). As a result, some scholars have gone as far as claiming that methods are “the Achilles’ heel of securitisation studies, casting doubt on their conclusions” (Baele & Sterck 2015: 1122). This discontent, which concerns the whole field of critical security studies beyond securitization research, is unlikely to easily settle as it is representative of the much broader tensions that exist between quantitative and qualitative approaches in the social sciences: the type of empirical work favoured by most

securitization scholars does not square with the guidelines one can find in “traditional” methods handbooks. Only a handful of projects have employed quantitative methods to study securitizing moves and their effects even though nothing fundamentally prevents it. This state of affairs also reflects the divide between the “American” and “European” traditions in International Relations and Security Studies, with securitization theory proving to be very popular in European universities and scholarly journals but almost absent from US programmes and outlets. For example, whilst the European journal *Security Dialogue* has published over seventy articles focusing on securitization since 1995, the US-based *Security Studies* and *International Security* published respectively three and none over the same period.

A third and final challenge has come from disagreements on the normative and ethical dimension of securitization studies, in other words their status as a “critical theory” – that is, an intellectual framework whose aim is not only to provide descriptions and explanations of social problems but also simultaneously to lay bare the normative bases for solving these problems towards more freedom and emancipation (Bohman 2005). Originally, the Copenhagen School did not neatly situate its theory within critical security studies, but rather located their approach somewhere between traditional and critical stances (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998: 34-35): while they clearly opposed securitization and favour desecuritization as the “optimal long range option” (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998: 29), they nonetheless adopted a more analytical position that rejected “wholesale refutation of current power wielders” in favour of a careful examination of the dynamics of security in view of “manoeuvring” them and ultimately “avoid” securitization (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998: 34-35). In a later paper, Waever reiterated that “the ideal of the securitization approach is – *ceteris paribus* – de-securitization”, because of both securitization’s “anti-democratic effects” and its tendency to stimulate “conflict, security dilemmas, and escalation” (Bagge Laustsen & Wæver 2000: 709). The development of the theory beyond the Copenhagen School, and its

application to some of the hottest political issues, led to discussions about this stance and an open debate about the theory's true normative nature. While some scholars found even more reasons to denounce securitizing moves (e.g. Grayson 2003; Aradau 2004), others argued that the negative nature and impact of securitization had been exaggerated (e.g. Roe 2012), with claims being made that securitization might be needed when facing genuine emergency or even bring about positive change in particular cases. Building on reviews of that debate, attempts have been made to bring in moral philosophy to settle it. Floyd, for example, advanced a "just securitization theory" that specified the "criteria that – if fulfilled at the same time – would render a securitization morally right" (Floyd 2011: 427). More recently, Securitization Theory's critical credentials have undergone a more radical attack: researchers working within either the postcolonial tradition or area studies have not only argued that the theory is Eurocentric and thus blind to the most important systems of oppression, but also that some of its axioms and premises contribute to the dominant narrative claiming the West's superiority. See Think Point 12.1. This debate echoes some of the criticisms voiced earlier about the theory's lack of consideration for gender (Hansen 2000).

**Think point 12.1: Is securitization a Eurocentric concept?**

With the Copenhagen School's initial concerns directed to European security and with most empirical research focusing on the "West", critics have naturally questioned the theory's relevance to the "rest". The distinction between ordinary and extraordinary politics, and the importance of the audience in the success/failure of the securitizing move, are perhaps the most evidently problematic components of the theory when it comes to applying it to regions where liberal democracy does not prevail.

Using Kyrgyzstan as a case-study, Wilkinson (2007) for example argued that the theory suffers from a "Westphalian straitjacket", that is, a "presumption that European understandings of society and the state are universal". Focusing on China, Vuori (2008) nonetheless argued that Securitization Theory can be applied to non-democratic settings, albeit with adapted conceptions of audience and extraordinary politics. Mabon and Capur's edited volume *Securitisations in the Non-West* (2020) systematically unpacks these and other related questions.

More recently, in the context of a broader push to "decolonize" security studies (e.g. Adamson 2020), this question has morphed into deeper concerns about the theory's blindness to (at best) or duplicity in (at worst) postcolonial

regimes of oppression. Bertrand (2018) for instance argued that securitization theory is no less than “complicit with securitizations ‘for’ that marginalise and silence globally, not just locally outside ‘the West’” (a claim disputed by Aradau [2018]), while Waever and Buzan themselves (2020) forcefully rejected allegations that the theory’s axioms and concepts had racist underpinnings.

Question 1: To what extent can Securitization Theory explain the politics of security in non-liberal democratic regimes?

Question 2: Does the concept of securitization enable us to better understand ethnic and racial divisions and oppression, or does it prevent us from adequately address these issues?

### Key Points

- Securitization theory has been challenged on three main levels: the theory has been said to lack coherence, the methods used to empirically use the securitization researchers have been claimed to lack rigor, and the normative and critical status of the framework has been debated.
- These challenges and criticisms have gradually emerged with both the broadening of the theory beyond the Copenhagen School’s initial framework, and the empirical application of the concept of securitization to a variety of cases.

### Conclusion

Securitization theory is a framework that helps us understand the process through which an issue is deemed a security threat –and subsequently treated as an urgent matter to be deal with outside normal political parameters. It has traditionally focused on the “speech act”, through which political elites change citizens’ perceptions, but recent work is incorporating the role of images as well as affective and emotional processes. Key issues that can be understood under this framework include the politization of migration, religion (particularly Islam), the environmental ‘climate emergency’ and health issues such as COVID-19. Recent work in the area has begun to address persistent critiques, mainly a lack of theoretical coherence,

researchers not fully specifying the methods they employ, and the normative implication that securitization of an issue is an inherently negative outcome.

## Questions

1. Is the Copenhagen School right in claiming that security ought to be understood as a speech act? Justify your answer.
2. Has the evolution of Securitization Theory beyond the Copenhagen School framework been done at the expense of theoretical coherence and parsimony? Justify your answer.
3. The securitization of Covid-19 was warranted and necessary. Critically discuss this statement.
4. Can non-state actors securitise issues as effectively as national governments? Will certain audiences pay more attention than others?
5. Can non-elites begin a securitization process? If so, must elites participate in some stage of the process?
6. To what extent is securitization an undesirable socio-political process?
7. Securitization theory is Eurocentric. Critically discuss this statement.
8. Is the securitization of the environment and climate change desirable? If so, what are the implications for the status of securitization theory as a critical social theory?

## Further Reading

1. Buzan B., Waever O., De Wilde J. (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner. The Copenhagen School's seminal book articulates a theory of securitization and applies it to a series of different sectors.
2. Balzacq T., Léonard S., Ruzicka J. (2016) "Securitization Revisited: Theory and Cases", *International Relations* 30(4): 494-531. A general overview of the state of securitization theory, including analyses of its main theoretical concepts, challenges the framework faces, and proposed solutions.
3. Bertrand S. (2018) "Can the Subaltern Securitise? Postcolonial Perspectives on Securitization Theory and its Critics", *European Journal of International Security* 3(3): 281-299. This article takes a closer look at who can securitize, concluding that the subaltern cannot securitize because they are structurally excluded from the concept of security.

4. Elbe S. (2006) “Should HIV/AIDS Be Securitized? The Ethical Dilemmas of Linking HIV/AIDS and Security”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 50(1), 2006 119-144. In-depth analysis of the moral implications of securitizing the AIDS pandemic. While doing so could raise awareness and resources, it could also undermine efforts to tackle the issue at a global scale.
5. Hansen L. (2011) “Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis”, *European Journal of International Relations* 17(1): 51-74. The links between specific images and spoken and written discourse are analysed to provide a well-rounded understanding of the role of images in securitization.

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