How do you analyze the present situation of Securitization studies?

Securitization Studies is a vibrant and popular area (1). According to Mi Ha Williams (2), “it is difficult to think of any other perspective in security studies that could embrace (and virtually none that has embraced) the analysis of military, environment, gender….” Located at the intersection between traditional theories of international relations, securitization studies argue that security issues necessarily reflect the objective, material circumstances of the world. Often, issues are the results of leaders’ efforts to understand and shape the world. The task of securitization studies is to understand how and why this happens, and the kind of process has on both the community’s life and politics (3). In particular, securitization theory seeks to explicate the processes through which: (i) the character of public problems is established; (ii) the social commitments that emerge from the collective acceptance by a community that something is a menace, and (iii) the possibility of a particular policy is created. In this light, securitization offers a conceptual apparatus that is well equipped to examine, in its broadest sense, the life cycle of a security issue.

There is no “theory” of securitization in singular. In effect, securitization studies are currently informed, essentially, by two different theoretical perspectives: the philosophical and the other is sociological (4). The philosophical model covers a plethora of schools, known under the name of the Copenhagen School though some scholars with the Copenhagen School have developed a distinctive take on securitization. The sociological model...
Securitization was not developed in one site in particular. Rather, it brings together scholars of various walks of intellect (Belgium, Canada, France, UK, etc.) (1). From this view, there are three main differences between these two perspectives: first, the way each theory attributes to some important factors, such as the audience and context (6); second, the way each theory conceptualizes the relations between political security; third, the type of epistemology and explanatory mechanism that a given study is committed to. For instance, the philosophical view emphasizes language, while sociological theory complements language with practices and, sometimes, with material instruments (7).

Securitization theories have been extremely influential in examining issues as diverse as global pandemics, migration, cyber-security, religious violence, and transnational terrorism (8). However, it is important to note that empirical studies of securitization have taught us a great deal about both the strengths and weaknesses of securitization studies. Otherwise, it would be wrong to conceive of empirical studies as mere applications of existing conceptual schemes as they often develop original extensions of a given theory.

**In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?**

I have always found sloppy uses of the term securitization a tad disturbing. Of course, it is normal that students entertain different understandings and uses of the concept of “securitization”. For career, funding and publication matters, the concept seems to have a great “marketing appeal” on many scholars (9). However, if securitization is not to refer to any construction of threats, what then is left of its theoretical identity? Does it actually be legitimate, under those circumstances, to ask: does it have any analytic power? Moreover, if securitization scholars take this issue seriously, securitization theories would not have emptied of their distinctive contents. In other words, the primary challenge still facing securitization would have to settle is, to delineate, more rigorously, what the boundaries of securitization theories are. This would command, at least more than it’s been so far, a more resolute engagement with other theories of security.

Ken Booth (10), for instance, castigates the Copenhagen School for its lack of...
Ken Booth (10), for instance, castigates the Copenhagen School for its lack of ethos; on the other hand, despite its links with realism, some US scholars working in the field of security studies treat securitization with a courteous neglect, because the argument goes, framing or the literature on public problems can equally do the analytical job securitization is supposed to carry out (11).

This raises a serious objection, but it is set on a wobbly leg. For security is not a problem; it is the problem whose stakes are the highest for any human community whose design and effects often involve the constitutive fabrics of the society (political, economic, ecological). That is, while securitization theories interact with various theoretical frameworks, their conceptual core touches upon issues that underwrite the existence and life of a community (e.g., politics, agency, legitimacy). In sum, the evolution of securitization would depend on the extent to which it is able to engage other theories (head-on), not only in order to establish its value (which, in my view, has been done), but in order to foster and hone its theoretical premises. Seen from this angle, the terrain to cover remains incredibly vast and potentially rich.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

Securitization studies have gone through various twists and turns (12). It is tricky to offer a long-term perspective on the topic. Perhaps, the past offers a glimmer of what the future might bring. My hunch is that there are essentially three fertile areas for securitization studies. The way I list them below does not establish any hierarchy among them.

First, while the initial debates and discussions focused on the internal structure of securitization theories, their theoretical sources and main concepts, the recent years have witnessed a new wave of studies centered on issues of methods and methodology (13). These days, as I alluded to above, questions that relate to the theoretical and methodological aspects of securitization seem to become prominent. This is not really surprising; actual discussion is long overdue. In a fact, “the appropriate methods, the research
and the type of evidence accepted all derive to a great extent from the kind of scholars bequeath their faith” (14). So, this is the first axis around which I do more work being done, as it challenges students of securitization to clarify their theories, and the extent to which it relates to other forms of theorizing (non-empirical., etc.).

The second axis, which I think might constitute a new domain of enquiry, is the relationship between securitization and normativity. Rita Floyd (15) has put it in terms of just/unjust securitizations. I propose to put it in terms of collective agency. Of course, there have been discussions on the responsibility of speaking or writing (16). I wish to displace the question, and hopefully change its nature. My interest is understanding the extent to which securitization establishes a collective agency. Does this mean in term of collective responsibility if things go wrong? Who is addressing the issue of agency in securitization studies could be a path that would lead us from risk/precaution to desecuritization, through cooperation, genocide and war.

The third and related axis might be around the long-term effects of securitization. People’s life and the society’s texture, including rules of law, trust, and identity are close to the issue of whether securitization has a “logic” and what does that mean? The other side of this axis would be to better understand the mechanisms through which the “logic of security”, which is said to underpin securitization, is contained, rolled back or dismantled. For a critical researcher, the issue is because it is difficult to study security policies and practices without dealing with the matter. For instance, with the following questions: what should people do in face of a security move that they deem inappropriate? How should they act when an issue is securitized? What strategies should they deploy when they live within a securitized site? Are the strategies of equal strength, merit and ethical status? (18)

Notes:

(1) For most recent discussions of different versions of securitization, see Thierry Balzacq, ed., Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve.


(5) For instance, Jef Huysmans, Philippe Bourbeau, and Mark Salter. Some might add Didier Bigo, but I am unsure whether he would accept being brought under securitization studies. Thought his work on (in)security professionals clearly overlaps with some of securitization studies, Bigo has a distinctive research agenda, one which cannot be described as directly falling within securitization studies. See, for instance, Bigo, Didier F. (2002) Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Migration. Alternatives 27: 63-92.


(8) It is impossible, given the space restrictions, to give a full account of the extensive scholarship on securitization theory. For a more comprehensive overview, see Balzacq, Thierry. (2011b) Securitization: A Paradigm for International Relations? London: Routledge.
theoretical work carried out by securitization scholars. Here’s a (non-representative)
Securitization Theory and the Role of Non-State Actors. London: Routledge; Ceyhan
and Anastassia Tsoukala. (2002) The Securitization of Migration in Western S
Ambivalent Discourses and Policies. Alternatives 27: 21-39; Curley, Melissa, and
Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis. European Journal of Intern
Relations 17: 51-74; Bourbeau, Philippe. (2011) The Securitization of Migration: A
Movement and Order. London: Routledge.

(9) This is a perceptive comment made by Xavier Guillaume at an IR Seminar
University of Edinburgh, in 2013.


(11) For a notable exception, see Hayes, Jarrod. (2009) Identity and Securitization
Democratic Peace: The United States and the Divergence of Response to India an
Nuclear Programs. International Studies Quarterly 53: 977-999.

(12) See, inter alia, McDonald, Matt. (2008) Securitization and the Construction of
European Journal of International Relations 14: 563-587; Vuori, Juha A
Illocutionary Logics and Strands of Securitization: Applying the Theory of Security the Study of Non-Democratic Political Orders. European Journal of International

(13) See Balzacq, Thierry. (2011b) Enquiries into Methods: A New Framework of
Securitization Analysis. In Securitization Theory, edited by Thierry Balzacq.
Routledge.

(14) See the forthcoming forum on “What Kind of Theory (if any) is Securitization
International Relations. Contributors include: Thierry Balzacq, Stefano Guzzini,
Patomäki, Ole Wæver, and Michael C. Williams.

(16) This is sometimes described as a fundamental paradox. In particular, see Huysmans (2006) *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU*. Routledge.

(17) Desecuritization is perhaps the other face of securitization theories that has received less attention. I think it could be a dynamic field of debate provided that the insights obtained there are no alien to concerns that are dealt with in traditional areas, such as political reconstruction, mediation, reconciliation and forgiveness, etc. On a recent desecuritization, see Hansen, Lene. (2011b) Reconstructing Desecuritization: The Normative-... International Studies 38: 525-546.


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**Thierry Balzacq** is Tocqueville Professor of International Relations at the University of Namur, in Belgium. He is author/editor of over 10 books, including the Traité de relations internationales, co-ed. with F. Ramel (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2013). His most well-known article is “The ‘Essence’ of Securitization: Theory, Ideal Type, and a Sociological Science of Security”, International Relations (forthcoming).