

Securitization and the Construction of Security

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Those interested in the construction of security in contemporary international politics have increasingly turned to the conceptual framework of ‘securitization’. This article argues that while an important and innovative contribution, the securitization framework is problematically narrow in three senses. First, the *form* of act constructing security is defined narrowly, with the focus on the speech of dominant actors. Second, the *context* of the act is defined narrowly, with the focus only on the moment of intervention. Finally, the framework of securitization is narrow in the sense that the *nature* of the act is defined solely in terms of the designation of threats. In outlining this critique, the article points to possibilities for developing the framework further as well as for the need for those applying it to recognize both limits of their claims and the normative implications of their analysis. I conclude by pointing to how the framework might fit within a research agenda concerned with the broader construction of security.

KEY WORDS ♦ construction of security ♦ Copenhagen School ♦ meaning of security ♦ securitization

Those interested in the construction of security in contemporary international politics — the process through which ‘security’ and ‘security threats’ are brought into being in particular political contexts — have increasingly turned to the Copenhagen School approach to provide an analytical framework for their analyses. Most prominently, of course, has been the use of the central organizing concept of ‘securitization’ to point to the discursive construction of particular issues as security threats.¹ This conceptual framework has been variously applied to issues such as immigration, health, political dissidence and minority rights, particularly in the context of the post-2001 US-led ‘war on terror’.

This article argues that while an important and innovative contribution to our understanding of security and its construction, the securitization framework is problematically narrow in three basic senses. First, the *form* of act constructing security is defined narrowly, with the focus on the speech of dominant actors, usually political leaders. This excludes a focus on other forms of representation (images or material practices, for example), and also encourages a focus only on the discursive interventions of those voices deemed institutionally legitimate to speak on behalf of a particular collective, usually a state. Second, the *context* of the act is defined narrowly, with the focus on the moment of intervention only. The potential for security to be constructed over time through a range of incremental processes and representations is not addressed, and the question of why particular representations resonate with relevant constituencies is under-theorized in this framework.² Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, the framework of securitization is narrow in the sense that the *nature* of the act is defined solely in terms of the designation of threats to security. This focus ignores the central importance of the way in which security (as a normative goal or expression of core values) is understood in particular contexts. It also suggests that security acquires content only through representations of danger and threat. Such a framework encourages a conceptualization of security politics as inherently negative and reactionary.

A range of scholarship has highlighted a number of these problems in various forms.³ But outlining the narrow scope of the Copenhagen School's securitization framework here regarding the broader construction of security is important analytically and normatively. First, a range of issues or dynamics are mentioned but *underspecified* in the securitization framework, most prominently the context of the speech act. Here, I suggest that dynamics such as the role of 'facilitating conditions' and the 'audience' are so under-theorized as to ultimately remain outside the framework itself, and would benefit from being both brought in and drawn out. The point of outlining this form of narrowness is to suggest the need to better integrate (where possible) various dimensions of the construction of security recognized as important within the Copenhagen School literature so as to strengthen the framework itself.

Second, a range of important questions and dynamics are neglected within the framework, including most prominently the questions of why particular representations of threat resonate with particular communities, and how particular actors are either empowered or marginalized in 'speaking' security. The goal of noting this neglect is twofold. First and most importantly, it is to suggest that the securitization framework should not be viewed as shorthand for the broader construction of security. Second, it is to

raise questions about whether the framework itself captures the most important dynamics of that which it is trying to explain.

While the aforementioned analytical concerns are clearly important, perhaps more important is the third problematic dimension of narrowness: points where the narrow nature of the framework has problematic *normative implications*. Here, I focus on the role of the framework in reifying both dominant voices and traditional security discourses that fit most squarely within the Copenhagen School's logic of security. The goal here is to point to some of these implications and suggest that those working within this tradition need to be reflective about these implications and their potential contribution to leaving power 'where it is' in security terms.

I conclude the article by suggesting what a broader approach to the construction of security might look like and what role the securitization framework might play in this approach. Those interested in the construction of security, I would argue, would do well to focus on understanding the processes through which particular definitions or discourses of security come to constitute the lens through which specific issues are conceptualized and addressed by different political communities. Employing this focus necessarily entails a move beyond the depiction through speech of issues as existential threats to those communities, although there would still be an important role for this form of analysis. A broader approach to the construction of security also entails a focus on how political communities themselves are constituted (beyond the designation of threat); how particular articulations of security come to capture the way that community deals with those issues; and lends itself to a concern with locating and acknowledging alternative articulations of security, especially those outlined by marginalized voices.

Copenhagen and the Designation of Threat

The Copenhagen School has been particularly successful in developing a concept that has found a place in the lexicon of International Relations thought, evidenced by the number and scope of publications working with its central concept of 'securitization' or some variation of it. Securitization has been applied to analyses of state foreign policy behaviour (Abrahamsen, 2005), to the construction of transnational crime (Emmers, 2003) and HIV/AIDS as security threats (Elbe, 2006), to various dimensions of the 'war on terror' (Buzan, 2006), and to minority rights (Roe, 2004). Most prominently, there is now a vast array of analyses of the securitization of migration, particularly since 2001.⁴ Recent trends in post-structural analyses of security, meanwhile, associated with the notion of the 'exception', exhibit strong parallels with the Copenhagen conception of securitization as that process which takes an issue beyond or outside 'normal'

politics (Huysmans, 2004; Walker, 2006). And this is to say nothing of the myriad attempts to debate, clarify and amend the framework itself, of which this article obviously constitutes a part.⁵ That ‘securitization’ has entered the language of International Relations and security studies is therefore not up for question. Nor should such a development be viewed as a negative one, particularly given the capacity for such a conceptual framework to illuminate key elements of the ways in which security preferences and practices are constructed in international politics. What *is* problematic is that ‘securitization’ is often viewed as shorthand for the construction of security, and that the assumption of security politics as negative and exclusionary is rarely interrogated beyond the particular contexts in which the framework is applied (e.g. immigration in liberal democratic states post-2001).

Developing in the context of research on European security dynamics (Buzan et al., 1990; Wæver et al., 1993), the securitization concept first entered International Relations vernacular after being outlined by Ole Wæver (1995) in the mid-1990s, and received its fullest treatment in the 1998 book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan et al., 1998). In his initial articulations of the concept, Wæver defined security as a ‘speech act’, with securitization referring to that form of linguistic representation that positioned a particular issue as an existential threat. While this characterization was broadly echoed in the 1998 text, the authors here began to place increased emphasis on the role of constituencies or audiences in ‘backing up’ speech acts (Buzan et al., 1998: 26–33). Here, speech acts were defined as ‘securitizing moves’ that became securitizations through audience consent. The emphasis in the framework therefore arguably shifted from speech acts as *productive* of security to speech acts as one component of the inter-subjective *construction* of security, although this might also be viewed as a tension within the framework itself.⁶ I will return to this issue later in the article.

Another tension or development concerned the role of desecuritization. In Wæver’s initial statement on securitization, the normative imperative of desecuritization (removing issues from the security agenda) was positioned as a central concern, one reflected in the title of his 1995 chapter (‘Securitization and Desecuritization’). For Wæver (1995: 56–7), ‘security’ constituted the opposite of ‘politics’, the latter implying the possibility for more open engagement and dialogue.⁷ To be sure, the characterization of security and securitization as a failure of normal politics and as a (usually) normatively regressive development was not abandoned in later work (e.g. Buzan et al., 1998: 29; Wæver, 2000: 253; Wæver, 2004). This normative imperative was certainly downplayed, however, relative to the emphasis on the development of a conceptual and analytical framework for understanding or explaining security dynamics.

There have been, of course, a range of other attempts to develop the concept over time. These have included the attempt to apply earlier insights from analyses of European security dynamics (Buzan et al., 1990) and security generally (Buzan, 1983) to the developing literature on securitization, particularly evident in the attempt to locate different dynamics of securitization in different contexts or ‘sectors’ (Buzan et al., 1998). The attempt to develop the conceptual framework was also evident in efforts to define more precisely the conditions that might enable a securitizing move to be successful: its ‘facilitating conditions’. The focus here was on the form of the act, position of speaker and historical resonance of particular ‘threats’ (Wæver, 2000: 252–3). It is worth recognizing in all these cases that rather than constituting a monolithic approach to security, subtle differences in emphasis and scope of the conceptual framework are evident even among its chief architects — the ‘Copenhagen School’ — over time, in different contexts, and depending on the combination of authors involved.

Ultimately, and in spite of these subtle differences in emphasis and even content, securitization can be defined as the positioning through speech acts (usually by a political leader) of a particular issue as a threat to survival, which in turn (with the consent of the relevant constituency) enables emergency measures and the suspension of ‘normal politics’ in dealing with that issue.

The applicability of this concept to the most common case study noted — liberal democratic states’ approach to immigrants and asylum-seekers — is readily apparent. Since 2001 in particular there has been an increased incidence of representations of immigrants and asylum-seekers as threatening the sovereignty and identity of these nation-states. The relevance of the securitization framework is also apparent given that immigrants and asylum-seekers are generally outside the gaze of traditional security analysts, even while both the language used in characterizing these people and attempts to respond to the ‘threat’ they pose (through military deployment or the tightening of border controls) are characteristic of traditional security practices. Further, given that such states are often liberal democracies, and signatories to relevant international or regional agreements on population movements, the dichotomy between security and politics that the securitization framework suggests seems to work well. There is clearly a choice to characterize immigrants as threatening, one that is often communicated by political leaders to domestic constituents, and one that seems to justify emergency measures and the suspension of the normal rules of the game (whether defined in terms of domestic political debate or adherence to international rules and norms). Securitization illuminates these dynamics well, and it is no surprise that it has been seen as aiding our understanding of political responses to population movements in Europe, for example.⁸

Even here, however, the securitization framework has not been without its critics. Roxanne Lynn Doty (1998/9) has argued that immigration can be

and has been approached through alternative understandings or discourses of security that avoid positioning the immigrant as a security ‘threat’, and even prioritize the needs and concerns of immigrants. Such an argument is inconsistent with the ultimate focus in the securitization framework on the designation of threats. And there is a broader, more fundamental argument that while helpful, the securitization framework takes us only part of the way in understanding the dynamics through which immigrants and asylum-seekers come to be conceptualized and addressed as threatening. How do some articulations of security and threat come to resonate with particular constituencies, and how do we know when they do? Through what processes are some actors empowered to ‘speak’ security on behalf of particular communities? And to what extent are there alternative articulations of security, and how have these voices been silenced or delegitimized? The preceding questions hint at the central argument of this article: that the securitization framework (while useful) is narrow in ways that are both analytically and normatively problematic, providing a partial account of the construction of security and potentially reifying traditional security discourses and practices in the process. The following sections explore these points in more detail, suggesting the need to expand on important issues recognized but not integrated within the framework. And while the framework itself could be strengthened in particular ways, I suggest the need to move beyond it for a fuller understanding of security and a greater recognition of emancipatory potential *through* security.

Beyond Speech

For the Copenhagen School, issues become security issues (or more accurately threats) through language. It is language that positions specific actors or issues as existentially threatening to a particular political community, thus enabling (or indeed constituting, depending on interpretation) securitization. Indeed, rather than simply being one ‘site’ of security construction, Wæver (1995) located securitization itself in language theory, and particularly Austin’s articulation of the ‘speech act’. In this framework, language itself *becomes* security in the sense that particular forms of language — spoken or written in a particular context — constitute security. As Wæver argued (1995: 55), ‘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 necessary to block it’.

This reliance on language as the exclusive form of ‘securitizing move’ is problematic for two reasons. First, language is only one (albeit the most central) means through which meaning is communicated (Möller, 2007: 180). A range of authors in this context have suggested the need to take account of the role of images as potential forms of securitization. Second, an exclusive

focus on language is problematic in the sense that it can exclude forms of bureaucratic practices or physical action that do not merely follow from securitizing ‘speech acts’ but are part of the process through which meanings of security are communicated and security itself constructed.

As noted, a range of authors have suggested that images or visual representations can be central to the construction of security generally or even securitization specifically. Michael Williams (2003) has suggested that television images of 11 September — and in particular those of the World Trade Center towers — were central to the development of dominant perceptions of security and threat in the American context. Frank Möller (2007) also discusses visual representations of the 11 September attacks — along with conflict in Iraq — in pointing to the ways in which photographic exhibitions are similarly able to communicate particular meanings of security and threat. Lene Hansen (2007), meanwhile, uses the example of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper in 2005 in pointing to the potentially central role of visual representations as forms of securitization.

Extending the securitization framework to include these forms of representation (as Williams suggests) would certainly be more reflective of the range of forms through which meaning — including about security and threat — can be communicated. But such inclusion may not be as simple as it appears. At a general level, the centrality of Austin’s theory of language to the broader framework suggests the need for developing or building on an alternative theory of the performative role of security representations. More specifically, the challenge for the Copenhagen School here may be that visual representations raise difficult questions about agency, intentionality and the importance of contestation over meaning.

While the classical application of the securitization framework has focused on the role of political leaders in the articulation and designation of threat, in the above examples of visual representation the key ‘securitizing actors’ are artists and the media. Incorporating visual representation into the securitization framework, therefore, may involve simultaneously rethinking the centrality that state political elite have in the framework itself. The role of intentionality is important in this context. Copenhagen School proponents portray a securitizing move as a highly intentional, strategic action. Buzan et al. (1998: 21) argue that the designation of ‘threats *justifies* the use of extraordinary measures to handle them’, further noting that the ‘invocation of security has been the key to *legitimizing* the use of force’ (my emphases). More directly, Wæver (1995: 63) has argued that ‘the logic around which the whole issue of security has been framed’ is ‘among strategic actors imbued with intentionality’. Such an image of strategic actors seeking to justify emergency responses arguably fits poorly with the communication of visual images, undertaken by actors (such as the media) less likely to be seeking to engage

in particular emergency measures or in a position to undertake them. And as Möller (2007: 185) and Hansen (2007) have argued, images are ambiguous in meaning, making it harder to control the meaning others take away from them. This renders the strategic use of images more difficult, while also pointing to the importance of contestation over meaning central to security politics.

An alternative argument concerning the ‘narrowness’ of the Copenhagen School’s exclusive focus on speech is advanced by Didier Bigo (2002) and the so-called ‘Paris School’.⁹ For these theorists, security is constructed and applied to different issues and areas through a range of often routinized practices rather than only through specific speech acts that enable emergency measures. Practices of surveillance and border controls, for example, particularly as undertaken by bureaucrats or ‘professional managers of unease’ (Bigo, 2002: 65), are a central part of securitization, and are not simply those actions enabled by preceding speech acts. For these theorists, ‘to attend to the study of securitization is to focus on the creation of networks of professionals of (in)security, the systems of meaning they generate and the productive power of their practices’ (Case Collective, 2006: 458). This stands in opposition to the conception of security in the securitization framework, in which security practices follow speech acts and in which security is the realm of dramatic emergency measures.

Recognizing the role of apparently mundane and everyday physical actions in the construction of security serves to question the speech-physical action sequence of the securitization framework and points to the multiple forms in which meaning can be communicated. The ‘everyday practices’ of the ‘managers of unease’, for example, would seem destined to be excluded from the securitization framework, reliant as it is on a conception of the politics–security relationship that emphasizes the extraordinary forms of action that *follow from* the construction of threats through speech. This maps on to criticisms raised by Hansen (2000: 300–1) and Wilkinson (2007) that the Copenhagen School framework problematically neglects physical action generally, action which can serve to communicate ideas about security in their own right.¹⁰ It is far more possible to envisage images and visual representation being drawn into the securitization framework as forms of ‘securitizing moves’, a project advocated and furthered by Williams (2003) and Hansen (2007) respectively.¹¹ But even here there are challenges, not least of all related to the questions of ambiguity, intentionality and the traditional centrality of speech and the speech act to the framework itself.

Beyond the Speech Act

Related to the above focus on the role of linguistic practices, it is also possible to argue that the securitization framework is problematically narrow in

its focus on the speech act relative to the social and political context in which the act itself occurs. Indeed, this is a problem acknowledged (but not fundamentally redressed) in Buzan et al. (1998).¹² Put simply, in developing a universal framework for the designation or construction of threat through speech acts the Copenhagen School ultimately downplays the importance of contextual factors — such as dominant narratives of identity — that condition both patterns of securitization and the broader construction of security. This is particularly curious given that Wæver has explored these contexts in detail elsewhere, linking security perspectives and actions to narratives of history and identity in European contexts (Wæver, 1996; Hansen and Wæver, 2001).

To the extent that there is engagement with the *context* of the speech act in the Copenhagen School, it has come in three central forms. The first is to suggest that we can see dynamics of securitization playing out in different ‘sectors’. For these theorists, the designation of threat looks different in the context of military concerns than environmental ones, for example. Perhaps most prominent in these distinctions is that between societal and state sectors (Wæver et al., 1993), the former defined in terms of the preservation of preferred identities and the latter in terms of the preservation of sovereignty (usually defined as non-intervention). This draws an important analytical distinction between often conflated referents of nation and state. However, the division between sectors does not go far enough in recognizing context, focusing only on different dynamics of securitization across different issue areas rather than on the processes through which these security referents are themselves given meaning. And as Roxanne Lynn Doty argues (1998/9), drawing meaningful analytical distinctions between these sectors is sometimes difficult and often unhelpful. Political leaders can and do simultaneously invoke sovereignty and identity as that in need of preservation, and attempting to compartmentalize security dynamics can obscure broader forms of discursive continuity in approaches to issues as disparate as immigration, environmental change and traditional military practices in particular historical or social contexts.¹³

The second form of engagement with contextual factors concerns the role of so-called ‘facilitating conditions’, referring to those dynamics, developments and institutional contexts that enable ‘securitizing moves’ to become successful. Here, Ole Wæver (2000: 252–3), echoing the discussion in Buzan et al. (1998: 31–3), has identified the importance of the form of the speech act; the role of the securitizing actor; and the ‘conditions historically associated with that threat’. The recognition of the latter two of these conditions — most prominently the third — certainly moves towards addressing the role of context. The problem here is more simply that this potentially important insight — which takes us beyond a set of strict criteria to be met in terms of the act of securitizing — is not incorporated within the securitization

framework itself, which focuses overwhelmingly on the performative role of the speech act rather than the conditions in which securitization itself becomes possible (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 72). It is not a coincidence that this dimension of the securitization framework remains under-theorized: examining historical ‘experiences’ with threat designation calls for a looser and highly interpretative approach to analysis which potentially conflicts with the development of a neat and coherent set of ‘requirements’ to be met for securitization.

Finally, the securitization framework engages with contextual factors in acknowledging the role of audiences and the importance of security pronouncements being ‘backed up’. This recognition would seem to be central to the broader recognition of the importance of context in the designation of security and threat, but there are two limitations here. The first is that, quite simply, what being ‘backed up’ means, how we know when it happens and what the implications are when it does not are radically under-theorized in the Copenhagen School. While recognizing that security is inter-subjectively constructed, the focus on the speech act as *performing* security arguably paints security less as a site of negotiation than one of articulation.

Thierry Balzacq (2005) has suggested that the role of audiences is under-specified because of Wæver’s reliance on Austin’s theorization of language. Here, the work is done by the articulation itself rather than the result of a negotiation between the articulator and the audience at whom the articulation is directed. More specifically, the power of the speech act would appear to be undermined by the full incorporation of the idea that the act itself is only one part of the securitizing process: that it relies upon the acquiescence, consent or support of particular constituencies.

There are certainly opportunities here for counter-readings on this point. While retaining an emphasis on the productive nature of speech, Judith Butler (1997), for example, has suggested that Austin’s conception of the speech act implies the possibility that they can be either ‘perlocutionary’ (necessary for enabling particular actions) or ‘illocutionary’ (performing a function at the moment of speech). Allowing the possibility that speech acts are perlocutionary potentially enables greater attention to audiences who might either consent to particular actions suggested through speech or engage in contesting the terms of the speech act or the actions suggested in response to it (Butler, 1997: 15). An alternative interpretation of the speech act might be that it serves to construct or *produce* the audience itself.¹⁴ Further, it might be suggested that the role audiences play is in helping to constitute speech communities in which particular forms of representation are intelligible and legitimate and others unintelligible and illegitimate (e.g. Fierke, 1997). These are all particular readings of the ‘speech act’ that at some level constitute attempts to come to terms with the production–construction distinction,

what Holger Stritzel (2007) has defined as an ‘internalist–externalist’ distinction. The challenge for the securitization framework in this sense is that the above are quite different in their conception of what speech acts are and how they relate to audiences. There is a clear need to clarify the position on the above points to draw the role of audiences into the framework more coherently, but in doing so the Copenhagen School will almost certainly need to downplay *either* the performative effects of the speech act or the inter-subjective nature of security.¹⁵

Ultimately, those interested in the construction of security *must* pay attention to the social, political and historical contexts in which particular discourses of security (even those defined narrowly in terms of the designation and articulation of threat) become possible. Why are some political communities more likely to view certain actors and dynamics as threatening? What role do narratives of history, culture and identity have in underpinning or legitimating particular forms of securitization? To what extent is political possibility defined by the target audience of speech acts? How are some voices empowered or marginalized to define security and threat? These highly contextual factors, I would suggest, are central to understanding how security works in different contexts, but are ultimately given short shrift in the securitization framework. The appeal of universalism in the development of a conceptual framework goes some way towards explaining the neglect of contextual factors, but the failure also to draw out the ways in which securitizing actors and audiences interact beyond the broad and amorphous recognition of ‘facilitating conditions’ and being ‘backed up’ by relevant audiences is unsatisfying.

Beyond Dominant Voices

To date I have focused on the ‘narrowness’ of the securitization framework in analytical terms, suggesting the possibility for strengthening the framework by drawing out important elements of context and different forms of representation, for example, while also pointing to the limits and tensions within the framework that might make this difficult. I have also suggested in these contexts that it is important to avoid viewing the framework as shorthand for the broader construction of security.

The question of which actors’ representations are viewed as significant within this framework, however, entails important normative commitments and has important normative implications. Put simply, the securitization framework focuses on articulations capable of leading to change in practice, with the default position being a focus on the ‘securitizations’ of political leaders who are able to achieve a wide audience in their statements and interventions, and who are able to marshal the resources of the state to respond

to the existential threat. As Wæver (1995: 57) argues, 'security is articulated only from a specific place, in an institutional voice, by elites'. Such a focus serves to marginalize the experiences and articulations of the powerless in global politics, presenting them at best as part of an audience that can collectively consent to or contest securitizing moves, and at worst as passive recipients of elite discourses.

In perhaps the clearest statement of this limitation, Lene Hansen (2000) has discussed the ways in which the focus on speech acts means contributing to the silencing of women, whose suffering and engagement with security discourses is neglected in a framework that focuses on the articulations of the powerful: of those whose voices can be heard and of those whose successful attempts at securitization can result in the enactment of emergency measures. Such a framework clearly has little to say about the plight of the most vulnerable in global politics and their experiences of — and engagement with — security and threat. Indeed for Hansen, the Copenhagen School does not simply neglect the experiences of women but in fact serves to further marginalize them. 'If security is a speech act', Hansen (2000: 306) suggests, 'then it is simultaneously deeply implicated in the production of silence'.

In many ways this focus on dominant voices in the construction of security is not a problem for the Copenhagen School alone. Traditional security proponents and some post-structuralists limit the number of actors deemed important in security terms in focusing on either state policy or dominant discourses. While Copenhagen School proponents allow the possibility for security actors and 'securitizers' other than state political leaders (Buzan et al., 1998: 31–3), this move is ultimately closed off by the dual suggestions that security is ultimately about states (e.g. Wæver, 1989: 314; Wæver, 1995: 47–9) and that security is articulated from a position of institutional power (Wæver, 1995: 57; Buzan et al., 1998: 32–3). The default position here is therefore a focus on the political leaders of states and their designations of threat. The methodological focus on speech acts might also be seen as relevant to this bias. As Jennifer Milliken (1999: 243–5) has argued, the tendency to ignore subjugated knowledge or voices is a general inclination within discourse analytical approaches to international relations.

In short, the focus only on dominant voices and their designation of security and threat is normatively problematic, contributing to the silencing of marginal voices and ignoring the ways in which such actors have attempted precisely to contest these security constructions. But it also has problematic implications analytically. First, and echoing criticisms noted above, it pays insufficient attention to the means through which particular articulations of security and threat become possible: how, for example, are marginal actors and their articulations of security silenced or marginalized? Focusing on these marginalized or subjugated actors could point to some of the ways in

which ‘securitization’ becomes possible, expanding the emphasis on ‘contexts’ noted in the previous section.

Second, it arguably *encourages* the particular logic of security which the Copenhagen School embraces. A range of (often marginal) actors contest dominant logics or discourses of security and threat through articulating alternative (even emancipatory) discourses of security and threat rather than simply arguing for ‘desecuritization’. Amnesty International’s campaign on human rights violations against Kurdish populations in Turkey in the 1990s, for example, particularly questioned the justification of these violations on the grounds of ‘security’. This was reflected in the title of its publication, *Turkey: No Security Without Human Rights*. For such actors, security (defined in non-statist, non-exclusionary and non-militaristic ways) can be a means for — or site of — emancipatory change. For the so-called Welsh School of critical security studies, focusing on the marginalized and ‘voiceless’ (Wyn Jones, 1999: 159) points to the ways in which potentially exclusionary, statist and militaristic security discourses can be challenged and replaced without simply giving up on security as a political category. Here, it could be argued that the *choice* within the Copenhagen School to ultimately limit attention to powerful actors and voices blinds its proponents to the role of security as a site of competing discourses or images of politics, and even potentially as a site for emancipation. Narrowness in this context has important normative implications that those using the framework would do well to reflect upon.

Beyond the ‘Moment’

In the securitization framework, issues become security issues at a particular moment. When this moment is may be up for question and based on particular readings of the Copenhagen School literature itself: it may be at the point when an issue is defined as a security issue (the speech act), at the point where an audience ‘backs up’ or acquiesces to that designation of threat, or at the point at which extraordinary measures are implemented. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair’s securitization of Saddam Hussein’s ‘WMD programme’ for the British public in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion is a useful case study here. Depending on our reading of the Copenhagen School, the ‘securitization’ of Saddam and his ‘WMD programme’ may have occurred exclusively through public representations depicting the regime and its WMD programme as imminently threatening, through the vote in Parliament legitimizing Blair’s deployment of troops, or even at the point of invasion itself. While the latter might seem the least likely reading, in *Regions and Powers* Buzan and Wæver (2003: 73) look for examples of securitization in the execution of emergency measures themselves rather than in the discursive

construction of threat or societal acquiescence to these speech acts. The potential tensions between a focus on speech, acceptance or emergency measures maps on to an earlier point about the problematic relationship between speaker, audience and action. The important point to note here, however, is that the moment of securitization is relatively specifically defined: issues become security threats at particular instances.

Such an explicit or 'decisionistic' (Williams, 2003: 521) approach to the point at which threats are designated is not without its appeal. At times, radical changes in articulations of security and threat occur in global politics, as responses to perceived moments of political crisis for example.¹⁶ Yet focusing on the moment at which an issue becomes a security issue is analytically problematic for at least three reasons. First, issues can come to be viewed as security issues or threats over an extended period of time. As Didier Bigo (2002) has argued, issues can become institutionalized as security issues or threats without dramatic moments of intervention. Using the example of the construction of immigrants as a security threat, Bigo suggests that the incorporation of issues relating to immigration within the jurisdiction of security professionals such as the police and the military should be viewed as central to the construction of this issue as a security threat. Jef Huysmans (2006) makes a similar point in his argument concerning the institutionalization of immigration as a security threat in the European context. Such potentially long-term processes and practices fit uneasily within the securitization framework with its focus on 'moments' of intervention and the suspension of normal politics.

Second, and again echoing an earlier point, focusing on the moment of intervention does not help us understand how or why that particular intervention became possible at that moment. Why then, and in that context, did a particular actor represent an issue as an existential threat, and more importantly why was that actor supported in that securitization by a particular constituency?¹⁷ Lipschutz (1995: 8), for example, defines discourses of security and threat as 'the products of historical structures and processes, of struggles for power within states, of conflicts between the societal groupings that inhabit states and the interests that besiege them'. By contrast, for the Copenhagen School we can apply and understand a particular instance of securitization without exploring fundamentally the contexts within which these interventions were possible in the first place. This would seem inconsistent with a broader understanding of the (inter-subjective) processes through which security is constructed in different contexts.

Finally, a focus on the 'moment' at which an issue becomes a security issue and enters the realm of 'panic politics' is problematic because of the dichotomies it represents between security and politics. As Rita Abrahamsen (2005: 59) has argued, focusing on a moment at which an issue ceases to be

a political issue and becomes a security one suggests an either/or approach to politics in which there are no gradations or continuums of issue/problem/threat. Issues may be viewed as risks, for example, before being depicted as threats. Such a conceptualization suggests a particular way of approaching that issue,¹⁸ but for the securitization framework the only fundamental difference is between an issue that is a political issue and one that is a security threat. A focus on the ‘moment’ here contributes to this narrow vision of political prioritization and a problematic dichotomy between politics and security. This dichotomy might look even more problematic if taken outside the realm of liberal democratic Western states, which has provided the site for the development of the framework and is the overwhelming focus of its application.¹⁹

The example of the Australian government’s approach to asylum-seekers arriving by boat in 2001 provides a useful example of the limitations of the focus on the moment of discursive intervention. The dramatic naval blockade of a cargo ship — the *Tampa* — which had rescued over 400 asylum-seekers attempting to reach Australia by boat in August 2001 captured international headlines and seemed a clear example of securitization. The blockade — entailing the deployment of the military and the rejection of elements of international refugee law — was accompanied by language from the highest levels of government depicting asylum-seekers as an immediate threat to security. Yet while we seem to have securitizing moves, audience consent, and extraordinary measures in a relatively limited period of time (August–September 2001), the focus on this moment obscures or ignores crucial elements of the construction of security. Asylum-seekers in Australia had arguably been positioned as a security threat since at least the mid-1990s, evidenced in the anti-immigration rhetoric of the right-wing nationalist Pauline Hanson and manifested in the establishment of detention centres for the incarceration of asylum-seekers. At best for the securitization framework, these developments created a context in which the conservative government’s ‘securitization’ of asylum in 2001 became possible. At worst, asylum-seekers had been positioned as security threats incrementally, a process beginning well before the dramatic events and ‘securitizing’ language of August–September 2001.²⁰ At this level, it might be suggested that the securitization framework does not provide us with the tools for understanding some of the most important dynamics of that which it proposes to explain.

Beyond Threats?

In the securitization framework, the study of security is ultimately the study of the designation of threat. In this framework, an issue is a security issue if

positioned as a threat to a particular political community. This commitment to the study of ‘threats’ is based on a commitment to the idea that security is constituted in oppositional terms: by designating that which it is not or that from which it needs preservation or protection (Wæver, 1995: 56). Such a commitment is consistent also with the oppositional conception of identity in the securitization framework, wherein who we are is determined by the designation of (threatening) others.²¹ In short, we can learn all we need to know about the construction of security through studying the issues that are represented as existential threats.

As Michael Williams (2003) has suggested, this oppositional view of the politics of security is related to the Copenhagen School’s indebtedness to the political theory of Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt, politics in general is characterized by enmity and exclusion, with the sovereign’s designation of threatening ‘others’ central to political life and allowing the ‘exception’: the suspension of the normal rules of politics. For the securitization framework, such a vision of politics is particularly applicable to the realm of security, which is characterized by the articulation of threat and ‘emergency measures’ enabled by that articulation. The Copenhagen School suggests that this political dynamic captures something timeless about the logic of security itself, with the realm of security an arena of exclusion and ‘panic politics’ (Buzan et al., 1998: 34). This view of the logic of security has been central to their call for desecuritization, a point I will return to in a moment.

Representations of threat — pivotal to Schmittian security politics — can of course be viewed as constitutive of security and identity. As Simon Dalby has argued, the designation of that from which we need to be protected is crucial in telling us ‘who we are, what we value and what we are prepared to countenance to protect our self-preferred identities’ (Dalby, 2002: xxx). But is this the only way in which security is constructed, and what do we miss through focusing only on the designation of threat? I suggest here that while central, a focus on the designation of threat alone risks missing much about the construction of security, especially through privileging the ‘content’ of security over its meaning in particular contexts.

As noted, Roxanne Lynn Doty (1998/9) has suggested that radically different approaches to immigration can be understood in the context of different *discourses* of security. For Doty, changing approaches to the treatment of Haitian refugees by the US government in the 1990s can primarily — and contra the Copenhagen School — be understood as a change in the way security itself was understood. And I have suggested elsewhere (McDonald, 2003) that significant change in the Brazilian government’s approach to Amazonian deforestation in the late 1980s — from conceptualizing the intact rainforest as a threat to Brazil to positioning it as that in need of being protected as part of Brazil — can be better understood as a change in perceptions

or discourses of security rather than as an instance of ‘de-securitization’. Here, articulations of the values in need of being protected were more prominent — and I would suggest more politically significant — than articulations of ‘from what or whom we need protection’. The focus on the designation of threat alone therefore tells a partial story of how security is given meaning, marginalizing inclusive and non-statist definitions of ‘our values’ that tell us how security is understood in particular contexts.²² More problematically, the Copenhagen School image of security as acquiring meaning (or more accurately content) through the articulation of threat arguably works only to the extent that security is fixed in a Schmittian logic based on exclusion and exception.²³

The ‘fixedness’ of the Copenhagen School’s logic of security has been taken up by ‘Welsh School’ critical security theorists, for whom the study of security should be geared towards recognizing and advancing opportunities for emancipation of the most vulnerable. Ken Booth (2005: 207) and Paul Williams (2004: 144), for example, have suggested that the securitization framework is parasitic upon traditional (Realist) discourses of security that are taken as indicative of a universal and timeless logic of security. This is evident, for these theorists, in the Copenhagen School’s commitment to strict boundaries of inclusion and exclusion; to the state and state political leaders’ centrality in defining (usually external) threats and responses to them; and to the association of security means and tools with the most significant of ‘emergency measures’: military action. This constitutes an important normative problem, arguably serving to reify and normalize these traditional statist, exclusionary and militaristic approaches to security. Indeed, the idea that the Copenhagen School’s logic of security is both relatively fixed and politically conservative is a feature of even sympathetic readings of the securitization framework (Huysmans, 1998: 500–1; Hansen, 2000: 286).

In this context, key proponents of the Copenhagen School (Wæver, 1995; 2000: 253; 2004; Buzan et al., 1998: 204–9) have argued in favour of de-securitization: the removal of issues from the security agenda. While recognizing the possibility for securitization to be progressive (eg Wæver, 2000: 285), the general suggestion is that ‘it is better . . . to aim for desecuritization’ (Buzan and Wæver, 1998: 4). Here, the Schmittian logic of security can be avoided and issues returned to the open and deliberative realm of normal politics. Important issues surface again here about what constitutes normal politics and about the relatively simplistic distinction between ‘security’ and ‘politics’. Analytically, it is certainly possible to suggest that rather than constituting the opposite realm to that of politics, debates around what constitutes security and how ‘we’ should act to achieve or preserve it are particularly politically intense, even a form of ‘hyper-politics’. The logic of security upon which the securitization framework is based might be contested again here,

most prominently the suggestion that security ‘speech acts’ can themselves take issues outside the political realm.

But the suggestion that we should aim for ‘desecuritization’ is also normatively problematic. It depicts security as a failure of ‘normal politics’ rather than recognizing security as a site of contestation and therefore for (even emancipatory) change. This is especially important if security is still that most powerful of political categories — defining political priority, a community’s identity and its core values. The focus only on the negative designation of threat serves the interests of those who benefit from dominant negative and exclusionary articulations of threat in contemporary international politics, further silencing voices articulating alternative visions for what security means and how it might be realized.

The Construction of Security beyond Copenhagen

At one level, it is profoundly unfair to define ‘key questions’ for the study of a particular phenomenon and then suggest that approaches which do something different — something more narrow and specific — fail to engage with such questions. But it is also important to point to the limits and silences of those approaches. In the case of the securitization framework, one compelling reason for pointing to these limits and silences is precisely because ‘securitization’ is often presented as shorthand for the construction of security. This tendency is more characteristic of applications of the framework than conceptual elaborations of it by key proponents, but is furthered or reinforced by the central role these theorists have played in ‘widening’ security debates. In this context, this article has sought to point to important distinctions between the construction of security and the narrower concern with the discursive positioning of threats. The latter, I have suggested here, neglects the historical and social contexts in which designations of security and threat become possible, and the question of how particular voices within political communities are empowered or marginalized in *speaking* security.

At another level, it is unfair to suggest that theories include all things relevant to a particular issue or dynamic, particularly given the apparently infinite ways in which the construction of security is influenced in any given context. And yet if in their narrowness theories fail to identify or provide the basis for explaining/understanding some of the most significant dimensions of that which they seek to focus on, this would seem worthy of drawing out. In this article, I have suggested that the implications of defining an issue as a security issue, for example, are dependent less on the designation of threat in itself than of the way in which security is understood in particular contexts. Taking this point seriously means questioning the Schmittian logic of security upon which the securitization framework is based.

Finally, we could certainly expect that issues or dynamics recognized as important to the process being examined (such as the role of ‘audiences’ or ‘normal politics’ in securitization) might be incorporated within the framework itself. I have suggested here that the failure to elaborate on the context of the speech act, in particular the role of audiences, ultimately leaves such questions outside the framework itself. This is problematic for an approach that both recognizes the importance of this dynamic and suggests an inter-subjective approach to the designation of threat. Here, I have suggested the possibility of strengthening the framework through elaborating on and incorporating these dimensions, even while pointing to some of the prior assumptions that might make this more difficult than it at first appears.

Beyond the analytical rationale for exploring the narrowness of the securitization framework, we certainly need to be acutely aware of the normative implications of narrowness. Building on existing critiques, I have pointed to some of the problematic normative implications of the framework, particularly in terms of reifying dominant voices in speaking security and reifying traditional security discourses. While some degree of narrowness is necessary for a theory, the choice of issues to include and exclude may have important normative implications that those seeking to apply it must reflect upon.

Of course, a theory or conceptual framework cannot do everything. It is therefore inappropriate to ask whether a particular theory does *everything*. There are, however, still important questions to ask about theory: Does it do what it says it is going to do? Does it provide a framework for addressing the most important elements of the phenomena it is trying to explain? And what are the implications of the choices made to focus on some things and not others? In a small way this article has attempted to ask these questions of the securitization framework. While all of the answers provided here can and should be contested, some of them have suggested the possibility for the further development of the theory, others have suggested the need to reflect upon the normative commitments and implications of the framework, and others have pointed to the need for those applying the framework to recognize the limits of the framework itself. Taken together, these suggestions might develop further an important and innovative framework for understanding the ways in which issues are constructed as security threats in contemporary world politics.

The above of course raises the question of what future research on the construction of security might look like, and what role within the research the Copenhagen School might play. As noted, the securitization framework is, particularly useful in capturing the importance of discursive interventions in positioning issues as security threats, particularly in the post-11 September 2001 context and the designation of threat by political leaders in Western liberal democracies (upon whose institutions and dynamics its conception of ‘normal politics’ arguably relies). As noted, however, it is ultimately more

limited in allowing us to understand why these interventions would be successful (here we need a broader sense of the context of these interventions in particular), and in assuming that contemporary states' security practices capture something inevitable and timeless about the logic of security. Analytically we need to recognize and explore the range of ways in which political communities and their values are positioned by different actors, and explore the contexts in which particular security visions 'win out' over others. We should also focus more on the understanding or discourse of security underpinning particular representations and practices rather than the act of 'securitizing' or 'desecuritizing'. Such a research agenda is clearly less elegant and more unwieldy than the Copenhagen School's securitization framework, whose attraction will always in part be the desire to simply apply a set of universal and ready-made tools to different social, historical and political contexts. But resisting this attraction means recognizing the breadth and complexity of the construction of security in global politics.

A broader framework would therefore have analytical value, but would also have potentially progressive normative implications. In understanding how particular visions of security and the voices promoting them come to prominence, we can better understand how alternative security discourses (that reject militarism, statism and exclusion, for example) can replace them. Such a praxeological or normative concern with acknowledging possibilities for emancipatory change would work well if combined with that which the Copenhagen School is able to contribute: a sociological concern with pointing to important elements of the construction of the present.

Notes

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- 1 Wæver (2004) identifies 'securitization' as one of three central concepts for the Copenhagen School — with 'sectors' and 'regional security complexes' as the others. However, the latter are ultimately deemed significant for the broader theory as sites for securitization dynamics and practices.
- 2 This is given brief expression in Wæver (2000: 252–3); and Buzan et al. (1998: 31–3) in discussion of the conditions of a felicitous speech act (described as 'facilitating conditions'), to be discussed later in this article.

- 3 See, for example, McSweeney (1999); Knudsen (2001); Hansen (2000); Balzacq (2005); Aradau (2004); Williams (2003); Doty (1998/9); Booth (2005); Ciuta (forthcoming).
- 4 See, for example, Bigo and Walker (2002); Guild (2003); Sasse (2005); and Huysmans (2006).
- 5 Of a now significant body of literature, see Knudsen (2001); McSweeney (1996); Huysmans (1998); Williams (1998); Balzacq (2005); and Stritzel (2007); and Vuori (2008).
- 6 On this point, see Stritzel (2007).
- 7 For an alternative view on the extent to which desecuritization can be viewed as an essentially normative argument, see Rita Taureck (2006). It should be noted here that even in his earlier work Wæver (1995) did not reject outright the utility or benefit of securitizing particular issues, although an overarching normative preference for desecuritization has been consistently advanced, while the view of securitization as a negative development is implicit in articulations of the dichotomy between security and politics.
- 8 See, for example, Huysmans (2006); Ceyhan and Tsoukala (2002); and Sasse (2005).
- 9 For an account of the 'Paris School' approach to security, see Case (2006: 457–9); Wæver (2004).
- 10 On the role of physical action in the construction of security generally, see also Weldes et al. (1999: 16–17).
- 11 Möller (2007) implies that images are most usefully viewed as enabling or encouraging subsequent securitizing speech acts.
- 12 Here, Buzan et al. (1998: 41) acknowledge that 'one danger of the phrases *securitization* and *speech act* is that too much focus can be placed on the acting side, thus privileging the powerful while marginalizing those who are the audience and judge of the act' (emphasis in original). On this point, see also Hughes (2007), Stritzel (2007) and Vuori (2008).
- 13 See, for example, McDonald (2005).
- 14 Such a reading of the relationship between speech and audiences is evident in Althusser's notion of interpellation, in which individuals are hailed into particular subject positions through speech. On its application to the discursive construction of security, see Jutta Weldes (1996).
- 15 I am indebted to the anonymous referees on several of the points in this section.
- 16 Stuart Croft (2006), for example, discusses the ways in which the (albeit constructed) crisis of 11 September 2001 allowed for a significant change in articulations of security and threat in the United States.
- 17 On this point, see for example Fierke (1997); Hansen (2000: 300); Hughes (2007); Stritzel (2007).
- 18 See for example Beck (1999) and Aradau and van Munster (2007).
- 19 See, for example, Wilkinson (2007); and Vuori (2008).
- 20 For a more detailed account of the positioning of asylum-seekers as a security threat in the Australian context, see McMaster (2002) or McDonald (2005).
- 21 On the role of the discursive production of danger in giving meaning to security and constituting identity, see for example Klein (1990); Dalby (1990); Campbell (1992); Weldes et al. (1999); Fierke (2007: ch. 5).

- 22 On this point, see for example McSweeney (1999) and Ciuta (forthcoming).
23 On this point, see also Huysmans (2004) and Aradau (2004).

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