



# 'Securitization' revisited: theory and cases

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## Abstract

Securitization theory seeks to explain the politics through which (1) the security character of public problems is 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. In the last decade, research on securitization has grown significantly. The aim of this article is to evaluate the achievements of securitization theory. First, its main concepts and premises are critically discussed. This article then proceeds to examine the empirical applications of securitization theory to a broad range of issues, as well as the theoretical implications of these studies. Finally, it discusses the main challenges faced by securitization scholars and puts forward strategies to overcome them. This article develops three inter-related arguments. First, notably thanks to empirical studies, securitization theory has significantly developed beyond its initial focus on the speech act. Second, as a result, the distinctiveness of securitization theory currently lies in its capacity to articulate a specific approach to security – influenced by the speech act – with an 'analytics of government', which emphasizes practices and processes. Third, securitization theory faces three types of challenges, related, respectively, to theory, method and methodology. The capacity of scholars to overcome those will strongly influence the extent to which securitization theory will be able to make significant contributions to the debates in Security Studies and International Relations in the years to come.

## Keywords

case studies, evolution, methods, securitization, theory, analytics of government

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## Introduction

From George W. Bush's success in bringing a majority of Americans to accept the view that Saddam Hussein possessed a stock of active and easily deployable weapons of mass destruction, through the attempts by some European governments to present migrants as a threat to national cohesion, culture and welfare systems, to the differentiated reactions to environmental degradation and global warming among states, there is ample evidence that security issues do not necessarily reflect the objective, material circumstances of the world. Often, security issues are the result of leaders' efforts to understand and shape the world, which depend on the ability of a community to reconfigure 'its just and good way of life'.<sup>1</sup> The aim of securitization theory is to understand why and how this happens, as well as the effects that this process has on the life and the politics of a community.<sup>2</sup>

By offering a critical and systematic reading of the literature on securitization, this article seeks to assess the contribution of securitization theory to our understanding of both traditional and contemporary puzzles of security. More precisely, it reflects upon the main insights of securitization theory, identifies the challenges that it faces and outlines the different directions that it might take in order to strengthen its theoretical core.

One of the most cited definitions of securitization is the following: 'when a securitizing actor uses a rhetoric of existential threat and thereby takes an issue out of what under those conditions is "normal politics," we have a case of securitization'.<sup>3</sup> Other approaches to securitization do not subscribe to the separation between 'normal' and 'exceptional' politics that underpins this definition. For instance, Balzacq<sup>4</sup> argues that securitization is:

an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilised by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) 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 customised policy must be immediately undertaken to block it.

In sum, the key idea underlying securitization is that an issue is given sufficient saliency to win the assent of the audience, which enables those who are authorized to handle the issue to use whatever means they deem most appropriate. In other words, securitization combines the politics of threat design with that of threat management.

Consequently, the core concepts of the theory are arguably the securitizing actor (i.e. the agent who presents an issue as a threat through a securitizing move), the referent subject (i.e. the entity that is threatening), the referent object (i.e. the entity that is threatened), the audience (the agreement of which is necessary to confer an intersubjective status to the threat), the context and the adoption of distinctive policies ('exceptional' or not). Building on the speech act literature, securitization theory is based on the premise that the word 'security' has a performative character – that is, it does not only describe the world but can also transform social reality. However, scholars disagree whether this performative power is intrinsic to the word 'security' and independent from the audience or whether security acquires its performativity when used by particular actors in specific contexts.<sup>5</sup>

The story of securitization theory is usually recounted in this way: the so-called Copenhagen School (CS) established the approach in the late 1980s, before others followed suit.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the use of the word 'securitization' in order to designate the linguistic construction of security issues has had a considerable impact on security studies is undisputable. However, this is only part of the story. In other countries or academic fields, various scholars, mostly historians, sociologists and philosophers, had been examining the same process – namely, how social issues are designed – albeit using different conceptual apparatuses and theories. For instance, in the 1970s, Foucault and Delumeau examined the construction of social categories (such as abnormality, delinquency and race, for Foucault; Jews, Blacks, Muslims and women, for Delumeau), as well as their practical consequences.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in the United Kingdom and the United States, an innovative strand of sociology produced a large body of scholarship on the 'construction of social problems', that is, the conditions regarded by a given community as 'undesirable'.<sup>8</sup> Finally, propaganda studies have to a large extent investigated the same questions, although they have drawn on different sets of sources, such as framing and 'symbolic politics'.<sup>9</sup> Of course, none of these approaches ever used the specific term 'securitization'. Yet, the processes examined by all of them are similar to those on which securitization theory focuses.

However, despite these similarities, a closer examination reveals that securitization has provided the field of Security Studies with a distinctive perspective on questions of security as they relate to politics.<sup>10</sup> Securitization theory addresses the following 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? Until recently, neo-utilitarian answers dominated this debate. To simplify, realism and neo-realism assume that insecurity derives from the objectively threatening complexion of certain issues – that those issues call for the use of force and that this renders states permanently suspicious of each other. Hence, Walt defines Security Studies as 'the study of the threat, use, and control of military force'.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, for securitization theory, the 'security-ness' of an entity does not depend on objective features, but rather stems from the interactions between a securitizing actor and its audience. For this reason, the possibility of designating something as a security issue exists in any sector of social life. Thus, the security domain does not solely comprise military issues. Nor are responses to insecurity confined to the use of force, although security is conditioned by this specific logic.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the domain of (in)security is not predefined. It results from a time- and context-specific intersubjective agreement that something poses a vital threat to a community.

Importantly, securitization theory has been influenced by various strands of scholarship. Concomitantly, various scholars studying securitization processes have positioned themselves differently in relation to each of those. First of all, securitization theory has a close affinity with social constructivism, in particular with the works that examine the role of language, the status of practice and the power of argument in world politics.<sup>13</sup> Securitization theory also intersects with speech act theory, Schmitt's political realism, Bourdieu's sociology and Foucault's theory of governmentality.<sup>14</sup> Especially in the last decade, Bourdieu and Foucault have exerted a steady influence on the evolution of securitization theory.<sup>15</sup> Scholars working explicitly with the framework developed by Foucault

argue that the literature on governmentality provides securitization theory with an ‘analytics of government’ – that is, ‘an analysis of the specific conditions under which particular entities emerge, exist and change’ – that enables scholars to uncover how security practices operate.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, it comprises four dimensions:

1. Characteristic forms of visibility, ways of seeing and perceiving;
2. Distinctive ways of thinking and questioning, relying on definite vocabularies and procedures for the production of truth (e.g. those derived from the social, human and behavioural sciences);
3. Specific ways of acting, intervening and directing, made up of particular types of practical rationality (‘expertise’ and ‘know-how’) and relying upon definite mechanisms, techniques and technologies;
4. Distinctive ways of forming subjects, selves, persons, actors or agents.<sup>17</sup>

Against this backdrop, this article argues that, rather than replacing the discursive approach to securitization, paying attention to the analytics of government ensures that securitization theory *also* considers the conditions under which regimes of practices emerge and are reformed or dismantled. Regimes of practices are constellations of discursive and non-discursive ways of knowing, which underpin a particular analytics of government. Thus, this article claims that securitization theory articulates a specific understanding of security (influenced by speech act theory) *with* a distinctive ‘analytics of government’.<sup>18</sup>

More precisely, this article contributes to the existing literature on securitization in three distinct, but inter-related, ways. First, various works on securitization have discussed what their authors consider to be the main aspects of the theory.<sup>19</sup> However, many have tended to focus on the initial formulation of securitization theory, without fully taking more recent literature into account. In contrast, this article considers a larger volume of the literature, in terms of both the empirical terrain covered and the theoretical lenses used. Second, some contributions have focused on suggesting new ways of categorizing securitization theories or strands of securitization theory. However, such attempts have been at risk of obscuring the various ways in which different strands of securitization have cross-fertilized over the years. For instance, in the recently published Forum on ‘What kind of theory – if any – is securitization?’, contributors have identified three different types of theorizing underpinning securitization (namely, philosophical, constitutive and empirical), but have not considered whether it is possible to weave these different types of theorizing together for the benefit of theoretical progress and empirical analysis.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the insights provided by the numerous empirical studies of securitization processes have not been sufficiently integrated into the development of securitization theory. This article addresses this shortcoming by systematically analysing the existing rich body of empirical studies of securitization and, more importantly, identifying their theoretical implications. This analysis is underpinned by the integrative character of the ‘analytics of government’ approach, which offers a robust basis for assessing the contributions of securitization theory to our understanding of international security.

This article is divided into three main sections. The first presents the theoretical arguments of securitization theory, emphasizing the key issues around which securitization

debates have revolved in recent years – audience (and the question of speech act), context, power relations, and practices and instruments. In particular, it examines the strengths and weaknesses of different strands of securitization theory. Through the lens of the analytics of government, this section shows that, despite their varied inclinations, different approaches to securitization share basic characteristics, the intensity of which is modulated by power relations, context and agency. The second section presents the key contributions made to the literature through the application of securitization theory to empirical cases. It focuses on both the distinctiveness of the themes under scrutiny and the theoretical insights that can be gleaned from these investigations. It also aims to assess the extent to which empirical studies have built bridges between different approaches to securitization. The final section identifies and discusses three hitherto underdeveloped elements that are nonetheless crucial to understanding the transformative potential of securitization: theory, method and methodology. It identifies the challenges faced by securitization scholars with regard to each of those, as well as possible solutions to overcome them.

### **Conceptual dimensions of securitization**

The present section aims to discuss the main claims of securitization theory by examining its key components in turn. However, before doing so, it is necessary to acknowledge that disagreements persist over different approaches to the study of security, as well as the extent to which those are compatible or not. Some speak of ‘schools’ and distinguish between the ‘Aberystwyth School’, the ‘CS’ and the ‘Paris School’ of security studies.<sup>21</sup> This is somewhat confusing. First of all, these three ‘schools’ do not exhaust the variety of approaches to security in Europe. There remains an important group of scholars whose works on strategic studies and on other aspects of security do not fall under the umbrella of any of these three schools.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, while the Paris School cannot be subsumed under securitization theory, it is certainly part of the broader debates on what makes something a security problem, while also using concepts that are either identical or close to those of the CS (for instance, securitization and ‘insecuritization’). In contrast, the Aberystwyth School constitutes an alternative to securitization theory. Other categorizations have been put forward. Some, for instance, distinguish between a linguistic approach and a practice-based approach, whereas others identify a ‘philosophical’ approach and a ‘sociological’ approach to securitization.<sup>23</sup> However, in practice, very few scholars would fall neatly into one of these categories. Lene Hansen’s work provides a case in point. It would be simplistic to identify her work as belonging to the CS simply because she is based at the University of Copenhagen. Some of her work actually offers a powerful critique of the speech act approach developed by the CS. **Emphasizing the importance of practices such as honour killings, Hansen demonstrates the role of silencing, which can be more potent than words for maintaining gendered insecurity.**<sup>24</sup> **It would be similarly misleading to conclude that she conforms to a purely practice-based view, since she also proposes a very detailed strategy for unpacking linguistic utterances.**<sup>25</sup> A similar balancing act between practices and discourses is also evident in her most recent work on visual securitization and cyber-security.<sup>26</sup> Thus, as this example aptly illustrates, scholars do not necessarily conform to ideal-type ‘schools’. The reason is mainly that

‘there has been an increasing and sustained cross-fertilization among critical approaches’, which calls for a cautious use of the label of ‘school’.<sup>27</sup> Rather, differences are often formulated in terms of theoretical influences, as researchers tend to draw upon the works that they deem most useful to the specific case that they are examining.

The section is organized around the four key concepts that have structured most analyses of securitization processes, although they may not all be used simultaneously depending on a scholar’s theoretical inclination: the audience, the context, power relations, and practices and instruments. Many of the criticisms levelled at the CS’s original formulation of securitization theory also concern these four concepts. As will be shown, the changes proposed to tackle the perceived weaknesses of securitization theory have tended to be very diverse and sometimes incompatible.

## Audience

The concept of ‘audience’ is of crucial importance to securitization theory. This is because a key assumption of the theory is that securitization is an intersubjective process, which depends on audience assent. As a result, researchers have explored the following set of questions: What is the nature and criteria of audience acceptance? Which challenges does the possibility of multiple audiences raise for the theory? What are the functions and types of acceptance by the audience?

According to Buzan et al., ‘the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such’.<sup>28</sup> Surprisingly, however, the audience is one of the least developed concepts in the initial formulation of the theory. The CS gives the audience – presented as ‘those the securitizing act attempts to convince to accept exceptional procedures because of the specific security nature of some issues’ – only a minimal treatment.<sup>29</sup> Williams observes that the concept of audience has been left ‘radically underdeveloped’ by the CS.<sup>30</sup> This is also acknowledged by Wæver who argues that the term ‘audience’ requires ‘a better definition and probably differentiation’.<sup>31</sup>

Consequently, the question of what exactly constitutes audience acceptance has given rise to many discussions. Salter notes, for instance, that ‘the actual politics of the acceptance [by the audience] are left radically under-determined by [the CS]’.<sup>32</sup> His viewpoint is shared by McDonald who observes that ‘how we know when [securitization] happens [is] radically under-theorized’.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the criteria put forward by Buzan et al. are rather vague, as they merely suggest that ‘the existential threat has to be argued and just gain enough resonance for a platform to be made from which it is possible to legitimize emergency measures or other steps that would not have been possible [...]’.<sup>34</sup> However, it is not clear how the ‘resonance’ of the securitizing moves with the audience or the ‘signs of such acceptance’ can be assessed in practice. In an article on the trafficking of persons and narcotics in post-Soviet Central Asia, Jackson argues that a change in policy could be used as an indicator of securitization.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the possibility of different degrees in policy change complicates the adoption of such a yardstick. This means that, as long as the criteria of audience acceptance remain so unspecified, it will be difficult for researchers to establish the merits of one explanation over another. Thus, in the language of those with a more positivist inclination, empirical studies will produce particularistic results.

The complexity of determining the assent of the audience is further compounded by the fact that, in many instances, there is not one single audience but rather several possible audiences. Drawing upon Goffman's work, Salter argues in favour of re-conceptualizing the audience as comprising different audiences or 'settings', including the popular, elite, technocratic and scientific settings.<sup>36</sup> Each setting is characterized by a specific type of audience with particular expectations. Thus, Salter's approach highlights that each setting has distinctive features, which have an impact on the success of securitizing moves. However, it fails to explicitly connect the various settings, making it difficult to trace policy developments. To address this issue, Léonard and Kaunert suggest integrating insights from Kingdon's public policy 'three streams model' into securitization theory.<sup>37</sup> They argue that this enables analysts to distinguish among various audiences and their respective impact on securitizing moves while also considering how different audiences relate to one another and influence the development of a policy response to a threat. Yet, the important issue of the possible multiplicity of audiences should not prevent scholars from seeking to identify the 'enabling audience', that is, the audience which, ultimately, empowers the securitizing actor or any other appropriate authority to act.<sup>38</sup> Such an approach to analysing the role of the audience acknowledges that different audiences may still constitute important actors in securitization processes, but in a somewhat different way than originally conceptualized. For scholars studying securitization, the audience does more than merely sanctioning a securitizing move. The audience can actually fulfil two different functions, namely, providing moral support and supplying the securitizing actor with a formal mandate (such as a vote by the legislature), without which no policy to address the threat would be possible. Roe provides evidence for the different roles that moral support and formal support can play in securitization processes.<sup>39</sup> In the case of the decision of the British government to invade Iraq in 2003, Roe highlights how the then Prime Minister Tony Blair did not receive the moral support of one audience (i.e. public opinion) but nonetheless secured the formal agreement of another audience (i.e. the Parliament). This suggests that further reflection is needed on whether – and, if so, how – threats can become prevalent in society without the explicit assent of the audience.

Focusing on the conceptualization of the role of the audience in securitization processes also reveals the existence of a tension between subjectivity and intersubjectivity in the CS's formulation of securitization theory. Securitization is conceptualized as being both a speech act event (i.e. subjective) and the result of a negotiated (i.e. intersubjective) enterprise between the securitizing actor and the relevant audience.<sup>40</sup> Most securitization scholars see this as one of the expressions of the performative power of language, but argue that this is significantly different from saying that securitization depends on a speech act event, that is, on a subjective decision. For instance, Stritzel claims that, actually, the decisionist 'performativity of security utterances as opposed to the social process of securitization, involving (pre-existing) actors, audience(s) and context(s) are so different that they form two rather autonomous centres of gravity' in securitization theory.<sup>41</sup> This viewpoint is shared by McDonald, who argues that, in securitization theory, there is:

a clear need [...] to draw the role of audiences into the framework more coherently, but in doing so the CS will almost certainly need to downplay either the performativity effects of the speech act or the inter-subjective nature of security.<sup>42</sup>

In a discipline where the security character of issues has been widely seen as inherent to their objective nature, convincingly arguing that security problems are established intersubjectively has been an important contribution by the CS. However, the CS's indecisiveness between speech act and intersubjectivity has led many to question the role and status of the audience within the theory. In a recent contribution on macro-securitization, Buzan and Wæver appear to head in a different direction by highlighting that the relevant audiences in securitization processes are very difficult, if not impossible, to identify.<sup>43</sup> This complicates, rather than simplifies, matters. First of all, it suggests that securitization is an intersubjective process, one side of which is virtually impossible to pin down. In addition, it fails to properly recognize the significance of the audience. This is problematic because refining the role and status of the audience also helps acknowledge the possibility of failed securitizing moves.<sup>44</sup> It is an important issue, which further demonstrates that the power relationship between the securitizing actor and the audience is not as one-sided as suggested by the initial formulation of securitization theory.

The problems raised by the theoretical status of the audience have drawn attention to other aspects of the study of securitization, including methodological concerns. In that sense, the discussions concerning the audience have been part of a larger debate over the conditions under which securitization is successful and whether securitization necessarily entails spoken discourse. These issues are examined below.

### *Power relations*

In their effort to establish how securitization works, many scholars have investigated the extent to which securitization and its outcomes are crucially influenced by and in turn have an impact on power relations among securitizing actors and the relevant audiences to whom they address their securitizing moves. According to Williams, the result of a securitizing move is conditioned 'by the different capacity of actors to make socially effective claims about threats'.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the fact that securitization has an impact on power relations helps explain the gradual shift from the question of what security *is* to what it *does*.

Initial securitization debates focused in large part on the issue of the power of the elites to successfully carry out securitizing moves. In this respect, considering power as capacity, securitization theory can capture – and, arguably, at times confuses – both the power of the elites to designate a specific issue as a security threat and the power to deal with this issue in a particular, decisive way. As Wæver puts it, 'by definition, something is a security problem when the elites declare it to be so' and 'power holders can always try to use the instrument of securitization of an issue to gain control over it'.<sup>46</sup> Securitizing an issue ultimately enables certain elites to increase their power as a consequence of being granted special privileges in dealing with a security issue or, in other words, breaking free from the procedures and rules that actors 'would otherwise be bound by'.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the issue of the increase in power of successful securitizing actors has received considerable attention in the securitization literature to date. This notably stems from the confirmation (or case-selection) bias of the literature, which is centred to a large extent on successful cases of securitization.<sup>48</sup>



However, securitization theory actually facilitates the study of a wider range of power relations, including the power of the audience to accept or reject a securitizing move. The relational dimension of power merits further investigation precisely because it can demonstrate, unlike the capacity dimension, the various ways in which pre-existing power relations enable or preclude specific processes of securitization. To begin with, researchers may focus on the power configurations that 'speaker and listener bring to the interaction'.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, in line with the analytics of government approach, it is also necessary to study the power relations as they shape distinctive ways of thinking, acting and the subject formation that precedes, accompanies and follows processes of securitization.

## Context

Another key aspect of securitizing moves is the context in which they occur. More precisely, it has been questioned whether differences in the outcomes of securitizing moves can be derived from and explained by differences in contextual features. This focus on the context has both ontological and epistemological motivations. The former is related to the question of what constitutes the context. The latter refers to whether the success of securitizing moves necessarily varies from one context to another. In this respect, it is important to emphasize that the explanatory role of the context is not primarily found in its substantial components but in its constraining and/or enabling effects – in brief, in its epistemological underpinnings.<sup>50</sup>

At the ontological level, arguments tend to focus on the various *layers* of the context. In Buzan et al.'s formulation, the context appears to take two forms.<sup>51</sup> On the one hand, it is synonymous with sectors (political, military, etc.); on the other hand, it refers to 'conditions historically associated with the threat'. In contrast, Balzacq builds upon Schegloff and Wetherell to explore different kinds of contexts and the specific patterns that they convey.<sup>52</sup> Schegloff distinguishes between a proximate context and a distal (or external) context. The proximate context 'includes the immediate features of the interaction', whereas the distal context comprises 'things like social class, the ethnic composition of the participants, the institutions or sites where discourse occurs, and the ecological, regional, and cultural settings'.<sup>53</sup> Applied to security, the former, which might also be called 'setting', concerns the 'sort of occasion or genre of interaction the participants take an episode to be (e.g., a meeting, an interview, a summit)', whereas the latter is far broader in that it refers to the macro-sociocultural inscription of securitizing practices.<sup>54</sup>

A similar, but more detailed, interpretation of the components of the context can be found in Wilkinson's discussion of 'experiences of security', as she problematizes the relationship between the proximate and distal contexts.<sup>55</sup> Drawing upon Emanuel Schegloff's work, she argues that some misunderstandings of security articulations are due to a process of 'editing' in the CS's theorization of securitization, which reproduces a universalist and state-centred meaning of the concept of 'security'.<sup>56</sup> This process, she claims, results in a problematic outcome, as it 'erases' the local interpretations, understanding and knowledge, which best account for the contrasts between Western and alternative experiences of security. Wilkinson actually echoes the criticism of the state-centric nature of securitization theory already made by Booth.<sup>57</sup> According to him, such a feature makes securitization theory a traditional approach to security, rather than a genuinely critical project. As a result, it is

unable to address what happens to 'real people in real places'.<sup>58</sup> Wilkinson's argument is also close to Bubandt's contextual analysis, which offers a 'vernacular' understanding of security practices. For Bubandt, the 'local political histories' of communities are decisive in grasping how securitization operates in a given context.<sup>59</sup> The way in which security is understood locally is a crucial factor for uncovering the concrete practices of security.

In line with this view, some scholars studying securitization claim that the context-dependent character of security is a constitutive feature of its 'semantic repertoire', rather than something external to it. In particular, Balzacq argues that 'the semantic repertoire of security is a combination of textual meaning – knowledge of the concept acquired through language (written or spoken) – and cultural meaning – knowledge historically gained through previous interactions and current situations'.<sup>60</sup> In doing so, he reinforces Huysmans' earlier warning that 'a cultural-historical interpretation of the rhetorical structure [of securitization] would reduce a tendency to universalize a specific logic of security' because the meaning of security would be derived from a 'specific cultural and historical experience'.<sup>61</sup> Stritzel's treatment of securitization processes is also animated by the same concern of 'embedding' 'security articulations [in] their broader discursive contexts'.<sup>62</sup> In the same vein, featuring a novel understanding of 'security repertoires', Klüfers develops a sociopragmatist approach to securitization, wherein sociocultural settings modulate the grammar of security.<sup>63</sup>

Another ontological possibility is to conceive of the context as the political regime within which securitizing moves occur. After observing that securitization theory has been overwhelmingly applied to democratic contexts to date, Vuori argues that, in order to bolster the development of securitization theory, it would be useful to examine the operation of securitization in 'as many contexts as possible'.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, he then interestingly concludes that, even if the function of security varies from one context to another, security is tied up to the same fundamental preoccupation, namely, the necessity to safeguard legitimacy. In other words, despite contextual variations, securitization follows a unique logic. However, this claim has been disputed by some scholars, including Ciută and Wilkinson.<sup>65</sup> Both argue that there is no 'logic' of security per se but rather different articulations of security depending upon the context in which a security issue emerges. Thus, it remains to be determined whether different meanings of security necessarily entail different logics. According to Buzan et al., it is the same logic or grammar of security that underpins different contextual meanings.

This argument brings us to the second aspect of the discussion, namely, the epistemological aspects of the context. Those constitute a challenge, which is actually not specific to securitization theory, as it is notably reminiscent of the agent–structure debate in International Relations.<sup>66</sup> This challenge concerns the impact that the context can have on securitization processes. Buzan et al. view the context as a 'facilitating condition', that is, a condition which might influence the fate of a securitizing move.<sup>67</sup> In other words, the context is an intervening variable. However, some critics argue that Buzan et al.'s position is ambiguous or even contradictory, as they also claim that security has a 'logic' of its own that remains fundamentally unaltered, regardless of the context in which it is deployed, and that the performative nature of security utterances is sufficiently strong to produce security problems.<sup>68</sup>

In reaction, several scholars have attempted to further refine the role of the context in securitization processes. For instance, Balzacq contrasts the internalist and externalist views of the context.<sup>69</sup> The former is that of the CS, where the performative aspect of security changes, by itself, the configuration of a context. In contrast, the latter view considers that the context has an independent status, which allows it to influence security articulations in a distinctive way. According to the externalist approach, the meaning of security therefore depends on the context of its pronouncement. In other words, security is contextually shaped. The externalist view also holds that the context has a decisive effect not only on the reception of the securitizing moves, but also on the perception of those who utter them. Depending on the context, certain actors will be exceptionally well positioned to articulate a security discourse. In a nutshell, context 'empowers or disempowers security actors'.<sup>70</sup> In itself, the internalist view is not problematic since securitization scholars agree that a speech act 'reworks or produces a context by the performative success of the act'.<sup>71</sup> The problem rests with the neglect of the important possibility that a context can, in turn, 'rework' a discursive utterance. In this respect, Stritzel highlights the existence of an important contradiction at the heart of the CS's treatment of the context.<sup>72</sup> On the one hand, Wæver professes a 'radical skepticism toward contextual elements';<sup>73</sup> on the other hand, he acknowledges that 'certain arguments that are powerful in one period or at one place can sound non-sensible or absurd at others'.<sup>74</sup> Thus, Wæver and the CS are either undecided or have opened the door to more context-sensitive approaches to securitization.

Nowadays, few securitization scholars would ignore the (externalist) context in their analysis of securitizing moves. The development of a more sociological (or practice-oriented) variant of securitization has contributed to the consolidation of a contextual view of securitization, which highlights how differences in the way securitizing moves are presented and/or received depend on the wider social environment. The aim is to explore, with greater precision, how the context promotes, fosters or limits a specific outcome. However, most current accounts of contextual effects still focus more on categorizing the components of the context than offering a systematic exposition of which precise features account for variations across different contexts.<sup>75</sup>

### *Practices and instruments*

In a departure from the focus on the linguistic reading of the politics of insecurity, some scholars, sometimes labelled as the 'Paris School', have shifted the focus of securitization theory towards the techniques of government.<sup>76</sup> According to this perspective, security is not necessarily a rhetorical performance, but can also be designed through different technical or physical modalities. Such a practice-oriented approach to securitization has the advantage of overcoming the aforementioned challenges associated with the requirement of audience acceptance in the linguistic approach to securitization. It has been mainly inspired by Bourdieu and Foucault. From the former, securitization scholars have taken the concepts of 'field of practices' and '*habitus*',<sup>77</sup> while they have borrowed the ideas of 'governmentality' and '*dispositif*' from the latter.<sup>78</sup> Each of these concepts contributes distinctive insights to the understanding of securitization processes.

The concept of field has been widely used by scholars promoting a practice-centred analysis of securitization.<sup>79</sup> In a field, agents can be identified not only on the basis of their nature but also according to their position in relation to one another and their amount of 'capital', that is, the resources that grant them a certain type of power (e.g. cultural, economic, symbolic and bureaucratic). Members of the field coalesce around a shared set of interests, common distinctive ways of generating knowledge (about threats, in the case of security) and shared strategies to tackle problems.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, fields give rise to regimes of practices. In other words, practices, such as securitizing practices, owe their form and content to the power relations characterizing a field. As for the *dispositif*, according to Foucault, it refers to:

a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. The *dispositif* itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.<sup>81</sup>

There is a mutually constitutive relationship between the *dispositif* and the field through the operation of policy instruments.

The *habitus* refers to the system of enduring behaviours and discourses of the agents that populate a given field. It is therefore a clear signal that a focus on linguistic occurrences is not incompatible with a practice-oriented approach to securitization. The primary importance of the *habitus* lies in its ability to capture the difficulties inherent to changing the linguistic and non-linguistic routines that create or sustain an insecurity realm.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the field can be seen as providing the habitus with a context, but the relationship is actually mutually constitutive. 'On one side it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus. [...] On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as meaningful world'.<sup>83</sup>

Fields and regimes of practices share a colonizing impetus. Most of the works following the practice-based approach to securitization emphasize the tendency of certain fields, such as the field of insecurity, to conquer other fields and subsume them under their logic.<sup>84</sup> Bigo draws upon this idea to highlight two important consequences for the field that is populated by the 'insecurity professionals', such as police officers, border guards and intelligence officers.<sup>85</sup> On the one hand, the field of insecurity has challenged the traditionally rigid distinction between internal and external securities, as internal and external securities are constantly redefined by those involved in this field. On the other hand, the field of the insecurity professionals has brought under the same banner a variety of issues, such as migration, asylum, terrorism and drug trafficking. As a result, all these issues have been handled through the exclusive lens of security, at the expense of other possibilities, such as social inequality or global injustice. In other words, the field of insecurity has created a 'security continuum', as agents dealing with different problems have been brought together in the same social space. The precise point is not that such issues are not or should not be linked, but rather that such issue linkages are never neutral. They deserve analysis, as they can often obscure alternative understandings and causal chains. By clarifying the 'structural' linkages among different problems, this strand of the literature creates the space for thinking about how security features spread

across a broad range of issues, which results in the development of similar policies. In addition, as notably argued by Bigo and Huysmans, the field produces its domination and attraction through its capacity to convey the view that its participants possess a more accurate knowledge of what is at stake.<sup>86</sup> Members of the field draw their legitimacy from the accumulation or promotion of a distinctive capital. This explains why it is not uncommon for a field of insecurity to include academics, researchers and other types of experts. Their presence in the field is generally sufficient to confer scientific legitimacy to the knowledge produced. Moreover, fields are spaces of domination, and the opinions expressed by members within them do not all carry the same weight.

A challenge faced by the practice approach to securitization has concerned the question of how to theorize security interactions without relying on discursive premises. A key proposal here has been to trace what security practices 'express', rather than what they 'represent'. Therefore, the proponents of the practice approach to securitization tend to focus on the instruments, or tools, that are used as part of securitization processes.<sup>87</sup> Instruments express a specific security relation. They embody the mindset of security agents and organise the interactions among members of the field of insecurity. As part of a *dispositif*, instruments are important in securitization processes essentially because their use can lead to a routinization of practices. Such an approach evidently has strong affinities with the analytics of government, given that the latter considers 'the characteristic techniques, instrumentalities and mechanisms through which [regimes of] practices operate'.<sup>88</sup>

Balzacq applies such a practice approach to argue that the functioning of the European Union (EU) information exchange systems on internal and external securities, including various databases, has led to the emergence of a specific field of insecurity.<sup>89</sup> He also observes that the interoperability of different databases has extended the reach of the field and contributed to the transformation of the professional identity of some agents into insecurity professionals. The real challenge facing researchers, then, is to 'connect the dots' between technocratic and technological processes.<sup>90</sup> As noted by Huysmans, 'the development and implementation of technological artefacts and knowledge, such as diagrams, computer networks, scientific data [...] often precede and pre-structure political framing in significant ways'.<sup>91</sup>

Basaran focuses on law as another important tool in securitization processes.<sup>92</sup> In particular, she challenges the distinction between liberal and illiberal forms of governing. In her view, what might be regarded as exceptional policies – such as the creation of waiting zones inside airports – are often established through the most banal and ordinary laws. She thereby confirms Bigo's argument that securitization circulates and produces effects through the daily routines of the insecurity professionals.<sup>93</sup> Her study also shows that exceptionalism cannot be treated as the yardstick for deciding whether securitization has occurred or not.

To summarize, securitization theory has considerably developed since its original formulation by the CS. Significant attention has been given to the role of the audience and the importance of the intersubjective aspect of the theory. Scholars have also further worked on ascertaining the effects that the context and the balance of power among actors have on securitization processes. In addition, while the 'majority of the theory [used to lean] in the direction of a more explicit verbal speech act', this section has shown that the

theory has progressively moved towards an investigation of practices in order to complement or sometimes transcend the initial emphasis on linguistic utterances.<sup>94</sup> This focus on practices has also established that emergency measures do not always characterize security situations. This means more broadly that the boundaries of security and politics are not fixed.

It is not clear yet whether this turn to practices is meant to become the 'norm' in studies of securitization. The next section, which critically surveys the empirical research on securitization, shows that many scholars have built bridges between the linguistic and practice approaches in order to best tackle specific empirical puzzles. What becomes apparent from this review of the literature is the existence of a distinctive regime of practices, the features of which are not issue specific. In addition, because these studies investigate how particular phenomena emerge, develop and change, they can be read through the lenses of an analytics of government.

## **Empirical studies of securitization and their theoretical implications**

The analytical purchase of securitization theory can be best evaluated through the questions that it claims to apprehend. In the last decade, empirical studies of securitization have grown in number and relevance. The areas that have received most attention are migration, the environment and health. Recently, other issues have risen on the agenda, partly as a consequence of international developments. For instance, many scholars have examined the securitization of energy after crises between Ukraine and Russia in 2008 and 2009. In contrast, issues such as religion, political dissent and critical infrastructures have not yet received as much attention, despite their growing salience. In addition, there is a commonly held view that the literature on securitization is characterized by a strong emphasis on Europe in terms of the location of both the security issues under investigation and the scholars involved in these studies. This was a largely accurate description a few years ago. However, three inter-related and significant changes have occurred since then. First, issues that used to be considered mainly European security issues, such as migration and climate change, have also been identified as such and prioritized by other states, such as Australia and the United States. Second, securitization has been identified as a fruitful approach to the study of a growing number of issues, including cybersecurity, terrorism and interstate rivalries, thereby broadening its empirical scope and increasing its relevance to a growing number of political contexts.<sup>95</sup> Third, against the backdrop of this increasing appeal of securitization theory for analysing a growing number of issues, an increasing number of scholars based outside Europe, in particular in Northern America and the Asia-Pacific region, have made significant contributions to studies of securitization.<sup>96</sup> As a result, the European dimension of the studies of securitization should not be overestimated nowadays.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this section is to synthesize the empirical research that has been conducted using securitization theory. In marked contrast to the view that empirical works are mere appendices to theory, we believe that empirical enquiries have played a decisive part in the development of studies of securitization. As we demonstrate in this section, empirical accounts of securitization are not merely limited to applying

existing concepts. Rather, most studies also use the empirical material to reflect upon one or several component(s) of securitization theory, generally with the aim of further refining existing formulations of the theory. Therefore, we devote a specific section to empirical studies of securitization for two main reasons. First, scholars researching a specific issue such as migration, cyber-security or the environment may want to precisely identify how securitization theory has shed light on their area of study and, conversely, how their research domain has influenced the development of securitization theory. Second, and more importantly, this section enables us to highlight the full contribution of empirical studies to securitization theory across its constitutive concepts.

Specifically, this survey of the empirical studies of securitization addresses the following questions: Which concepts or premises of securitization theory do these empirical studies emphasize, question or amend? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the research? Where do these studies take (and currently leave) securitization theory? The section is organized around the empirical issues that have attracted most interest and generated significant debates in the securitization literature, namely, identity and migration, the environment and energy, global health, religion and cyber-security.

### *Identity and migration*

Migration, particularly in Europe and the EU, is the issue to which securitization theory has been applied most frequently.<sup>97</sup> In early debates, migration was often considered in relation to the issue of identity.<sup>98</sup> This can be explained by the fact that migration originally entered the field of securitization through its association with the concept of 'societal security'. In *People, States and Fear*, Buzan observed that migration could be seen as a threat 'primarily on the societal level', that is, with respect to the survival of society.<sup>99</sup> Subsequently, the first major joint project by Wæver and Buzan was a book entitled *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*. On this occasion, Wæver defined societal security as 'the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats'.<sup>100</sup> Migration was highlighted as one of the main possible or actual threats to societal security, a theme further developed in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*.<sup>101</sup>

However, McSweeney argues that the CS's understanding of identity is not 'constructivist' because it suggests that identities are fixed.<sup>102</sup> He calls for a processual understanding of identity, which, in his view, would be more congruent with the concept of securitization. There are at least two ways of interpreting this disagreement. On the one hand, it tends to confirm that securitization theory largely endorses a constructivist, rather than poststructuralist, approach to identity.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, this discussion revolves around the question of whether one tries to understand the construction of identity or whether one is more concerned with establishing the effect of an 'analytically' given identity on thought and behaviour.

Following on from this early focus on the relations between identity and migration, various works on securitization have considered the issue of identity independently from that of migration and vice versa.<sup>104</sup> Various questions relating to identity in its broadest sense have been explored through the lenses of securitization theory. Roe and Jutila have had an interesting exchange about the securitization and desecuritization – that is, the

process through which issues come to lose their security-related character – of minority rights. A volume edited by Nyers explores multiple securitizations of citizenship,<sup>105</sup> while Huysmans and Guillaume examine how citizenship can actually empower subjugated people and enable them to produce cracks in securitization processes.<sup>106</sup> Hudson analyses the consequences of the attempts to securitize women's rights and gender equality in the United Nations.<sup>107</sup> MacKenzie investigates how, in post-conflict Sierra Leone, men and masculinity have been securitized, while women have been desecuritized, which has had an impact on the reintegration of these two groups into society through their differentiated access to funding programmes.<sup>108</sup> Her analysis shows that the choice to securitize or desecuritize can significantly contribute to reproducing gender inequalities. Finally, still with regard to the issue of gender, it is also important to note Hansen's early intervention in securitization debates, in which she precisely emphasizes the 'absence of gender' in the CS's framework.<sup>109</sup>

Hansen's observation actually constitutes a key criticism of the CS's framework because it highlights the importance of considering whether actors actually possess the power to speak security. Hansen argues that, in some situations, a security speech act – and hence securitization – is simply impossible for those who are in danger and therefore choose to remain silent. She claims that, consequently, the securitization framework is unable to account for security issues that are not uttered through speech acts, such as in her example of honour killings in Pakistan.<sup>110</sup> This criticism is echoed by Booth, who notes that 'if security is always a speech act, insecurity is frequently a zipped lip'.<sup>111</sup> In his view, the CS's 'fixed conception of speech act' makes securitization theory 'static' and thereby unable to offer a genuinely critical alternative.<sup>112</sup> For Wilkinson, this 'silent security dilemma' also reveals a Western-centric bias in securitization theory, which implicitly postulates the universal acceptance of the necessary conditions for free speech.<sup>113</sup> According to Neumann, a possible solution to this problem is the introduction of the concept of 'violisation' into securitization theory, which emphasizes physical constraints, rather than speech acts.<sup>114</sup>

The issue of migration has also attracted much attention in studies of securitization. There have been various comparative studies of the securitization of migration, including the book by Curley and Wong on the Asian region, Watson's on Canada and Australia and Bourbeau's on France and Canada.<sup>115</sup> In addition, there have been intense debates on the securitization of asylum and migration in Europe, including the role of the EU in this process. Most scholars have argued that asylum and migration have been successfully securitized in the EU. They have followed two main – and non-exclusive – lines of investigation.

The first has seen some scholars focus on the modalities of securitization by examining the actors and the processes through which asylum and migration have been constructed as threats in Europe. Huysmans concludes that migration has been constructed as a cultural threat, a socio-economic threat, and a more traditional, internal security threat.<sup>116</sup> This view is shared by Ceyhan and Tsoukala, who also note that there are strong similarities between the discourses that securitize migration, regardless of whether they are uttered by politicians, security agencies or the media.<sup>117</sup> They argue that such discourses are usually articulated around four axes (socio-economic, 'securitarian', 'identitarian' and political). An important contribution to the debates on the modalities of the



securitization of migration has been made by Bigo, who criticizes what he sees as the CS's overemphasis on the discursive dimension of securitization at the expense of non-discursive practices of securitization.<sup>118</sup> According to Bigo, although speech acts are important, the securitization of migration:

comes also from a range of administrative practices such as population profiling, risk assessment [...], and what may be termed a specific *habitus* of the 'security professional' with its ethos of secrecy and concern for the management of fear or unease.<sup>119</sup>

These practices that securitize migration have been further explored in the case of the EU by Balzacq in his study of data exchange instruments and Léonard in an article on the main activities of Frontex, the European external borders agency.<sup>120</sup> Bigo's thinking has also inspired Huysmans, who has examined how discursive mechanisms become progressively embedded in professional and technological processes in the securitization of migration while also considering the concepts of the political that are inscribed in these specific security practices.<sup>121</sup> Finally, it is worth pointing out the particularly innovative approach developed by Karyotis and Patrikios using quantitative data from the European Social Survey to analyse the actors involved and the dynamics at play in the securitization of migration in Greece.<sup>122</sup>

The second main line of investigation has been followed by scholars who denounce the social consequences of the securitization of asylum and migration in the EU and beyond.<sup>123</sup> Huysmans, for instance, explores the consequences of constructing migrants as a security problem and warns against the increased risk of violence between different national communities.<sup>124</sup> Van Munster argues that the management of migration as a risk has led to the 'abjection' of migrants in the EU, that is, the removal of their status as political subjects and calls for resistance to these security frames.<sup>125</sup> Squire's analysis of the securitization of asylum in the EU, with a particular focus on the UK, also highlights the resulting abjection of the 'asylum-seekers-cum-illegal migrants', which leads her to plead for a more 'inclusionary' approach to asylum in the EU.<sup>126</sup>

Nevertheless, not all scholars agree with the idea that asylum and migration have been securitized in the EU. Boswell claims that it is rather the 'absence of securitization' that has characterized migration controls after 9/11.<sup>127</sup> She argues that, in Europe, there have actually been very few attempts to link migration and terrorism in the public discourse, while the more frequent linkages between terrorism and migration control in the realm of policy practices have mainly consisted of using migration controls for counter-terrorist purposes (rather than using counter-terrorism techniques for controlling migration). In the same vein, Neal claims that the creation of the European external borders agency Frontex was not the product of successful securitizing moves as it is often believed, but rather of a 'risk approach' to security issues.<sup>128</sup> The existence of such diverging interpretations of the same empirical material is due to the different roles ascribed, respectively, to discourse and practice by various securitization scholars. Yet, Huysmans' work, for instance, demonstrates that these two perspectives are certainly not incompatible.

Thus, the study of the securitization of identity and migration issues has highlighted the impact of adopting a specific approach to securitization (i.e. linguistic or practice based) on the results of the analysis. It has also led some scholars, such as Huysmans, to

examine how to combine both approaches. Another important contribution of this specific strand of the securitization literature to the broader theoretical debates has been to emphasize the importance of also considering the normative (i.e. legal and moral) consequences of securitization.

### *Energy and the environment*

Although attempts to securitize environmental degradation and climate change began to take place later than in other policy areas, they have generated such growing interest that the environment has now become an important domain of study for securitization scholars. In contrast, while there is a vast literature on energy security, there has not been any systematic analysis of energy security through the lenses of securitization theory, which partly reflects the 'remarkably little conceptual attention' that energy security has received to date.<sup>129</sup>

One of the main reasons for the popularity of the case of the environment in the securitization literature is that it challenges securitization theory in a number of respects. This was already implicitly acknowledged by Buzan et al. when they noted several ways in which securitization in the environmental sector differs from securitization in other sectors.<sup>130</sup> Two specific points are of particular interest. First, while securitizing actors may often attempt to securitize a threat in order to ensure the survival of a referent object, the environmental sector is characterized by a paradox. This is because 'in order to secure civilization from environmental threats, much of civilization has to be reformed drastically or even be pulled down'.<sup>131</sup> The second remarkable aspect of securitization processes in the environmental sector is that attempts to securitize the environment 'primarily [result] in politicization only' because 'most of the threats are too distant to lead to securitization'.<sup>132</sup> Wæver and his colleagues have also noted that 'it is difficult to label' the measures adopted to tackle environmental problems, such as the development of international regimes, 'as securitization'.<sup>133</sup> Delving into the case of climate change, Corry addresses some of these issues in the context of a broader discussion on securitization and risk.<sup>134</sup> He argues that securitization and risk can be differentiated along three axes, namely, the nature of causality, the 'locus of security action' and the effects. He views risk as operating under 'conditional causality', where policies 'govern' the conditions of possibility underlying a potential harmful occurrence, and politics is premised upon the precautionary principle, which legitimates anticipatory measures of various kinds. In contrast, securitization is described as depending on the direct causality of an existential threat, which policies aim to curb under the politics of exceptionalism. Building notably upon Corry's work and also focusing on the case of climate change, von Lucke, Wellmann and Diez distinguish between risk-based securitization and security-based securitization, as well as three levels of the referent object (the territory, the individual and the planet). This leads them to identify six different climate security discourses.<sup>135</sup>

Such ideas resonate to a significant extent with the works of other scholars, such as Ciută and Trombetta, who have also criticized what they perceive as the CS's overemphasis on exceptional measures.<sup>136</sup> More precisely, Trombetta takes issue with the fixity of security practices underpinning the CS's framework. She argues that the securitization of a non-traditional security issue such as the environment can transform existing security

practices. In her view, when some actors attempt to securitize the environment, their intent is to prioritize this issue, not necessarily mobilise the exceptional and emergency measures that the CS claims are inherent to security. Rather, 'many appeals to environmental security have been made [...] with [the intent] of transforming the logic of security and the practices associated with it'.<sup>137</sup> However, the CS's framework is, in her view, unable to account for such developments, as it is based on a fixed and antagonistic understanding of security. Trombetta argues that it is important to also account for a different logic of security that is prominent in the environmental sector, which is actually based on prevention and risk management. Importantly, this idea of transformative practices is shared by several scholars working on empirical issues other than the environment. Peoples argues that the securitization of outer space does not necessarily entail military threats and responses, but can also be configured around a non-traditional understanding of security.<sup>138</sup> Ciută claims that the integration of energy – another 'non-traditional' security issue – into the security domain has the power to affect both security practices and how security is conceptualized in general.<sup>139</sup>

In contrast, Floyd offers a moral evaluation of securitization and desecuritization in the environmental sector in the light of consequentialist ethics.<sup>140</sup> For this purpose, she applies a revised version of the CS's framework to environmental security in the United States under the Clinton and Bush administrations. She introduces a major distinction between 'desecuritization as politicization' and 'desecuritization as depoliticization', which she views as necessary to capture some of the dynamics that characterize the environmental sector. Finally, in contrast to Trombetta and Floyd, Scott argues that, at the international level, there has recently been a move away from attempts to securitize climate change because of the reluctance of some states to see an increase in competences and powers for the United Nations Security Council.<sup>141</sup> In doing so, she emphasizes the importance of considering the legal and institutional ramifications of securitizing moves, as they can have a significant bearing upon their success. Thus, overall, one of the main contributions of the empirical studies on the environment and energy to securitization theory has been to highlight the importance and urgency of further exploring and specifying the relations between securitization and risk.

### *Global health*

Health issues have also received growing attention, notably as a result of the dramatic increase in the volume and density of global forms of mobility, which have affected global pandemics.<sup>142</sup> Scholars have mainly focused on the normative and methodological dimensions of the securitization of health issues. The normative question has taken the following form: should health problems be securitized? The methodology-related enquiries have questioned what accounts for the success of securitizing moves concerning health issues. The answers provided to these questions have also had broader implications for securitization theory.

Elbe highlights, for instance, the normative dilemma inherent to the securitization of HIV/AIDS.<sup>143</sup> On the one hand, securitization has the benefits of raising awareness, which enables a wider recognition of the deleterious effects of the issue and a more resolute commitment of resources in order to curb the pandemic. On the other hand, securitization also

carries costs. One is that the securitization of HIV/AIDS could lead to a massive state involvement obscuring the role of other actors. For example, responses to the disease could be 'pushed away from civil society toward military and intelligence organizations with the power to override the civil liberties of persons with HIV/AIDS'.<sup>144</sup> Another negative feature of the securitization of HIV/AIDS is the activation of a 'threat-defence logic'. Particularly in developing countries, armed forces would receive high priority for medical treatment. It can therefore be concluded that securitizing an issue should not be the *a priori* preferred option. Thus, one of the strengths of securitization theory is that it highlights the 'normative choices that are always involved in framing issues as security issues and [...] warns] of potential dangers inherent in doing so'.<sup>145</sup>

In addition, Youde argues that the disadvantages of securitizing health issues, in general, and the avian flu, in particular, 'strongly outweigh the positives'.<sup>146</sup> He builds his argument upon detailed empirical analysis of official statements and identifies three main costs of the securitization of avian flu. First, the securitization of avian flu can mobilize inappropriate responses, as it leads to health issues being addressed with traditional security means, such as armed forces. Second, securitization can prompt governments to devote a disproportionate amount of resources to counter a specific threat at the expense of tackling other issues.<sup>147</sup> An extreme focus on a single disease can actually render a state particularly vulnerable to other threats, as its bureaucratic structures and human and financial assets all become focused on an 'absolute priority'. Third, Youde argues that the securitization of avian flu has worsened the gap between Western states and the rest of the world. By often blaming the South for spreading the disease, Western states have imposed their anxieties, perception of the problem and specific management mechanisms upon the Third World.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to predict with certainty the effects of securitizing moves by Western states upon non-Western countries. Sometimes, states resist or subvert the framings that are produced by international organizations or other states.<sup>148</sup> Sjöstedt shows how Russian decision-makers initially refused to adhere to the HIV/AIDS threat narrative because they thought that it was a purely Western construction.<sup>149</sup> She also draws upon Finnemore and Sikkink's account of 'norm cascade' to explain the process by which Russia finally adopted the view that HIV/AIDS was a concern to national security.<sup>150</sup> By amending Russia's identity, HIV/AIDS operated as an 'international norm' that prescribes certain types of behaviour.<sup>151</sup> The same norm produced similar effects in the United States. Thus, Sjöstedt highlights how security issues travel from one level to another and how they become pervasive in different political and cultural contexts.<sup>152</sup>

The reception and the possible translation of infectious diseases as security issues from one context to another have also been investigated by Curley and Herington.<sup>153</sup> They assess the extent to which the domestic context influences the process of constructing an issue as a threat.<sup>154</sup> Using avian flu as a case study, they compare the treatment of the disease in Vietnam and Indonesia. They conclude that avian flu was successfully securitized in Vietnam, primarily thanks to the centralized organization of the state, which enabled the message of the central authorities to influence domestic opinion with little resistance. In contrast, in Indonesia, administrative decentralization consistently frustrated the securitizing moves undertaken by Jakarta's elites. The incentives to securitize also differed in both countries. Vietnam was eager to safeguard its prestige internationally and to defend its 'performance legitimacy' internally, whereas Indonesia pursued a two-pronged strategy

tailored to different audiences.<sup>155</sup> In order to undermine resistance inside and win support outside, Indonesia presented the avian flu problem in postcolonial terms, arguing that the pandemic would wreck the efforts to consolidate global health if the North did not grant the South fairer access to vaccines and antivirals. By opening up the domestic contexts, Curley and Herington are therefore able to determine the conditions under which a threat is received or translated in different spaces.

Taken together, the cases highlight that the situated-ness of the audience conditions the kind of referent object that matters. The successful securitization of the same issue in different contexts depends to a significant extent on the possibility of invoking different referent objects (e.g. economy in Vietnam and postcolonial injustice in Indonesia). These applications of securitization theory to health issues also emphasize that the acceptance by the audience depends upon the context, as theoretically argued in the previous section.<sup>156</sup> In addition, scholars working in this field of enquiry tend to see securitization as the result of a normative choice between competing political options. This generates controversies over the definition and operationalization of securitization, in particular when criteria for deciding whether it is right to securitize an issue are defined.<sup>157</sup>

## Religion

Given that religion can inspire feelings of loyalty just as strong, if not stronger, as the state or the nation, it is somewhat surprising that there have been relatively few studies examining the relationship between religion and securitization. Buzan et al. initially noted that religion could also constitute a referent object of security, but did not go beyond this observation.<sup>158</sup> The question of whether a process of securitization would be different in such a case therefore remained unanswered at the time. This shortcoming was later partially addressed in an article by Laustsen and Wæver, in which they ask 'how [...] [the] securitization of religiously constituted referent objects happen[s]'.<sup>159</sup> They argue that, as a referent object, religion produces its own dynamics of securitization, which are particularly strong. They also claim that 'the religious referent object loses some religious characteristics' in the securitization process, which leads them to identify a connection between religion and political ideologies. In addition, and in line with the sectoral approach to security underpinning securitization theory, they suggest recognizing religion as another security sector.

Religion and religious activities may also provide the basis for claims leading to successful processes of securitization with different referent objects. Vuori shows how this has been done by the Chinese Communist Party leadership with regard to those practising *Falun Gong* and its quasi-religious system of *qigong*.<sup>160</sup> He not only identifies the ways in which the Communist Party leaders present *Falun Gong* as a threat to their particular vision of the Chinese state and society, but also uses this example to further develop securitization theory. In particular, this case study enables him to illustrate what he calls 'strands' of securitization and how those can operate and serve various functions, even in non-democratic political contexts.

Moreover, in a study of anti-immigration attitudes in Greece, Karyotis and Patrikios demonstrate how religious actors may trump the agency of political actors when it comes to securitization and desecuritization.<sup>161</sup> Even when political actors softened their securitizing rhetoric towards immigrants, this had little effect on those who self-identified as religious

and were more exposed to the anti-immigrant sentiments of the Orthodox Church. This leads the authors to postulate that religiosity may be an important predictor of receptiveness to the discourse of 'immigration threat'. Their contribution is also noteworthy for its broader insight into the potential dynamics of desecuritization, as their findings suggest that it 'may not depend on a rhetorical deconstruction of existing threat perceptions by those actors that constructed the security discourse in the first place'.<sup>162</sup> Thus, this empirical case study involving religion is also used to advance the theoretical understanding of agency in securitization theory.

Similarly, religion and agency stand at the centre of Croft's work on the securitization of Islam and Muslims in Britain.<sup>163</sup> Using the concept of ontological security, he examines how the everyday life of British Muslims has been transformed by the construction of Britishness in relation to the securitization of the Muslim other. In a setting with conflicting collective identities, 'the ontological security of some has necessitated the ontological insecurity of others'.<sup>164</sup> Key agency in this process belongs not only to political elites, but also to actors in the media, Church and other cultural fields. While Croft focuses on the period following the terrorist attacks of 2001, he notes that tensions between Britishness and Islam have deep historical roots. Mavelli develops the point about the historical origins of such tensions fully in his case study of the headscarf controversy in France.<sup>165</sup> He emphasizes how the securitization of Islam is part of a long, historical process of the formation of secular modes of subjectivity in the West. A process of discursive sedimentation, not just individual speech acts, is a crucial element in the securitization of Islam. Mavelli's methodology and argument shift the attention away from the exceptional measures towards the incremental and the routine, which develop over extended periods of time.

Thus, it can be concluded that the empirical studies focusing on securitization and religion have produced remarkable methodological variation and innovation. They indicate the utility of vastly divergent inquiries be they based on a quantitative–qualitative synthesis or a historico-sociological approach. Several of the studies also show how it might be productive to think about securitization across specific issue areas, linking, for example, the securitization of migration with the securitization of religion.

### *Cyber-security*

Early contributions on securitization did not recognize the importance of cyber-space. Buzan et al. even implied its relatively low significance when discussing computer hackers.<sup>166</sup> However, since then, there have been important studies on cyber-security and securitization, which have also led to broader theoretical developments. The number of studies applying securitization theory to the cyber-space has been growing steadily, and further expansion of this theme is likely. The significance of this area stems from two inter-related trends. First, states, societies, businesses and individuals increasingly rely on data, systems and technologies based in cyber-space. This offers a fertile ground for a range of actors to develop new securitizing moves identifying a variety of threats. Second, the preoccupation with cyber-space fits well with the search for new threats and risks that has been on-going among security professionals and bureaucracies since the end of the Cold War.

Eriksson examines why information technologies (IT) were only securitized in the late 1990s when the vulnerability of computers had been known since their inception.<sup>167</sup> In order to understand how IT became part of the security agenda, he uses the concept of 'framing' and loosens the criterion for successful securitization, equating it to the mere placement of an issue on the political agenda. In addition, he argues that 'the framing of IT as a security problem simultaneously emerged from separate policy realms' reaching beyond traditional security professionals.<sup>168</sup> While his study is limited to the case of Sweden, he is able to develop a larger argument about international policy diffusion by imitation because the threat frames relevant to IT originated in the United States.

More recent studies of the securitization of cyber-space explore its development in the United States. Bendrath, Eriksson and Giacomello seek to go beyond securitization theory by incorporating into their analysis three factors, namely, frame characteristics, framing actors and contextual conditions.<sup>169</sup> They observe that, despite numerous securitizing moves during the 1990s, there were very few calls for extraordinary measures until the arrival of the Bush administration in 2001. However, during this period, connections were established between cyber-security and infrastructures. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 then served as a 'focusing event', which reinforced the framing of cyber-threats 'in terms of cyberterrorism rather than in terms of interstate cyberconflict'.<sup>170</sup> Irrespective of this increased profile, exceptional measures taken to counter cyber-threats have remained rare. This has given rise to criticisms of the focus of securitization theory on exceptional measures and, concomitantly, to calls for the further development of a 'threat politics approach' instead.

Dunn Cavelti also examines the US cyber-threat debate by combining securitization theory with the framing approach. She focuses on explaining the discrepancy between the growing rhetorical importance of cyber-threats on the security agenda and the lack of events that would justify this elevated status.<sup>171</sup> She argues that the absence of exceptional measures accompanying cyber-threats should be viewed as an example of failed securitization because 'the actual countermeasures in place rely on risk analysis and risk management'.<sup>172</sup> In her view, this is because of the role played by private actors in protecting critical infrastructures. On this basis, she builds a larger argument about a new logic of security where 'two formerly different notions of security merge as technical security, and safety and national security become one'.<sup>173</sup>

This idea of two notions of security – namely, technical and national – related to cyber-space is also supported by Nissenbaum.<sup>174</sup> The distinct political implications carried by each of the notions lead her to emphasize the normative choices inherent to the decisions over how cyber-threats should be addressed. While Nissenbaum advocates technical computer security solutions, her more recent joint article with Hansen suggests that political debates are shifting more and more towards the national security understanding and the specific solutions that such an understanding of security promotes.<sup>175</sup> Hansen and Nissenbaum also propose to conceptualize cyber-security as a separate sector alongside those already identified by Buzan and his colleagues. In their view, the cyber sector is characterized by 'a complex constellation of public-private responsibility and governmental authority' and three specific security modalities: hypersecuritization ('the extreme reliance on the future and the enormity of threats'), everyday security practices (individual 'compliance in protecting network security' and familiar experiences of

threats) and technification (the fact that technical experts possess a privileged role and authority).<sup>176</sup> What distinguishes the cyber-security sector from others is the ‘manner in which the referent objects of “the network” and “the individual” are linked to national and regime/state security’.<sup>177</sup> The emphasis on this link raises the question of whether or not cyber-space should be viewed as part of a larger theme of critical infrastructure security. While some scholars note the importance that concerns about infrastructures have played in the rise of cyber-threats, others, such as Aradau, argue that critical infrastructures should be considered a distinct object of protection.<sup>178</sup>

To summarize, the literature on securitization theory and cyber-space has produced several promising theoretical leads. Their refinement is incumbent upon future applications to other substantive areas. In turn, the study of the relationship between securitization theory and cyber-space should draw not only upon the examination of critical infrastructures but also upon research in other areas, such as health and the environment.

## Challenges and possible directions for future development

Securitization theory specifies how, and under which conditions, the security-ness of an issue is fixed. It is usually agreed that there are two broad approaches to securitization: securitization through speech act and securitization through practice. This article has shown that, taken individually, neither of these approaches can help us fully understand the contents of and variations among securitization processes. The case studies have demonstrated that it is more productive to integrate them into a coherent framework through the use of the different features of an ‘analytics of government’. Given its component parts, the analytics of government is able to underpin a theory of securitization that accommodates both spoken words and non-discursive practices.

A particularly interesting feature of this approach is its focus on regimes of practices. Thus, its application enables researchers

to identify the emergence of that regime, examine the multiple sources (verbal and non-verbal) of the elements that constitute it, and follow the diverse processes and relations by which these elements are assembled into relatively stable forms of organization and [policies].<sup>179</sup>

This article has shown that adopting such an approach for studying securitization processes enables scholars to overcome some of the criticisms directed at securitization theory, in addition to opening up possibilities for building bridges between different approaches to securitization. Applying the concept of regime of practices makes it possible, for instance, to reconceptualize securitizing moves as discursive or non-discursive acts that challenge and, when successful, transform the existing regime of practices. This also means that there is no grand theory of securitization. Instead, as recently claimed in the pages of this journal, there are various theories of securitization. However, they all negotiate their position within a common framework of thinking and are all characterized by conceptual apparatuses that ultimately derive from the analytics of government. In other words, the use of the analytics of government highlights the different types of theorizing identified by Balzacq, Guzzini, Patomäki, Wæver and Williams, while both the obstacles to and the possibilities for their concrete articulations are better understood.<sup>180</sup>



As previously argued, when securitization is invoked, a specific grammar of security is activated. It is notably characterized by the closure of political options, the oligopoly of decision-making, restrictions to public deliberation and the creation of 'deontic powers' – that is, powers such as rights, duties, obligations, derogations and permissions – that follow from the collective acceptance by a community that a phenomenon is a threat.<sup>181</sup> These deontic powers enable the authorities to take any action that they deem necessary to curb the threat, such as claiming budgetary resources, withholding information, launching military operations, suspending civil liberties or changing the political regime. In this sense, securitizing moves can be understood as attempts at transforming existing regimes of practices.

However, the idea of investigating securitization processes through the lenses of the analytics of government is not a panacea for three main reasons. First of all, at the theoretical level, scholars remain uncertain as to the exact nature of securitization theory.<sup>182</sup> For instance, our discussion of identity and migration has shown that the disagreement between McSweeney and the CS was primarily due to different understandings of the theoretical characteristics of securitization. In a recent article, Hansen has injected more poststructuralism into securitization theory in order to bolster its theoretical identity.<sup>183</sup> This has resulted in replacing the previous emphasis on constructivism and realism with a more poststructuralist tone. Thus, linkages between securitization theory and other theoretical enterprises remain largely under-studied and under-specified. The second source of difficulty concerns the issue of method. More precisely, it stems from the uncertainty as to whether there is any analytical technique that fares better in capturing securitizing processes. As shown earlier, the disagreements appear to reflect, at least to some extent, matters of preferences. Researchers often use techniques that they deem most appropriate to understand the case at hand or trust techniques in which they have a certain expertise. However, the choice of a method cannot be considered merely a matter of taste. Finally, a persistent point of contention concerns methodology, namely the question of what counts as an instance of securitization. For example, in the case of migration, some claim that securitization theory is not an appropriate lens through which the security character of an issue such as migration can be grasped. In contrast, as we have seen, the use of securitization theory has been less controversial for studying issues such as global pandemics, where discursive occurrences appear to play an important role. The remainder of this section analyses in greater depth the consequences of these three sources of disagreement among scholars for securitization theory. It also offers suggestions to surmount the obstacles identified in order to take studies of securitization forward.

## *Theory*

Securitization theory stands at the intersection of three streams of IR theory – realism, poststructuralism and constructivism. Disagreements among these approaches can be reduced to ascertaining the extent to which threats primarily have a material or institutional quality – in short, whether threats are 'real'. For the proponents of securitization theory, realists assume, rather than explore, how threats acquire a saliency high enough to cause political action. In contrast, this article has shown that securitization theory is

agnostic as to the reality of threats. Indeed, according to securitization theorists, the collective acceptance that something counts as a threat is not decided solely on the basis of the correspondence between discourse and reality. Exposure to relevant evidence cannot, in itself, account for the belief of a community in a phenomenon; the interests and the needs of the community are equally constitutive of how a community sees, thinks about and deals with a phenomenon. This argument is supported by most of the empirical studies examined above and has important consequences. In particular, securitization theory claims that the intersubjective representation of reality (constructivism about facts) is not necessarily incompatible with the possibility that some features of the world, independent from people and their beliefs about those, are capable of explaining why a community holds that something is a threat (objectivism about rational explanations).<sup>184</sup> This is different from arguing that the meaning of such features is independent from people. In this light, one of the strengths of securitization theory is to relate language and mind to the impact of the external world on regulating the content of the two.

Can there be a normative theory of securitization? Floyd's answer is affirmative.<sup>185</sup> A just theory of securitization attempts to establish the criteria under which it is *right* to present a phenomenon as a threat. Thus, it does not aim to deduce assumptions from an analysis of securitizing moves but to establish assumptions that precede the phenomenon under study. This suggestion raises a different set of questions, but the most damaging criticism that has been levelled at Floyd's position is that a just theory of securitization might eventually tilt the debate on the reality of threats towards purely objectivist conceptions.<sup>186</sup> Prioritizing the normative structuring of securitizing moves changes the goal of securitization theory and, consequently, the significance of what counts as a theoretical contribution. These challenges do not lie close to the surface. They will therefore require a serious engagement between proponents and sceptics because a refutation does not stand for an alternative.

## Method

The second source of intense discussions within the literature on securitization has its roots in one of the most enduring debates in social sciences: Is there a 'better' method for studying securitization processes? While discourse analysis remains the dominant method, a growing number of scholars have called for the use of a broader range of approaches, including, among others, content analysis and ethnographic research.<sup>187</sup> The method that has attracted most interest is arguably process-tracing.<sup>188</sup> The aim of process-tracing is to determine the social mechanisms that underline a phenomenon.<sup>189</sup> In particular, proponents of process-tracing argue that results generated by discourse analysis highlight whether securitization has happened or not and how it has taken shape, but that process-tracing fares better than discourse analysis in uncovering *why* certain securitizing moves succeed and when. However, if this is true, then securitization scholars will have to settle a complicated matter: either adopting process-tracing and amending the requirements for a parsimonious theory or preserving parsimony at the expense of explaining 'more completely the outcome at hand'.<sup>190</sup> A possible way forward would be to design a middle-range theory of securitization, which accounts for the most important factors of the process under scrutiny. The latest developments in securitization theory

seem to suggest that this is the direction in which many securitization scholars are currently heading.

### **Methodology**

The last source of controversy in securitization theory is not the least difficult to tackle. At its core, it focuses on the following question: What are the relevant criteria for adjudicating whether a development is an instance of securitization? Although this is a very significant problem, it has not received the attention that it deserves to date. Without a clear discussion of this issue, it will remain difficult to distinguish between works that demonstrate how the use of securitization theory brings out new knowledge from works that merely apply securitization to different cases and may only generate limited insights. On the one hand, as previously shown, an issue becomes securitized if and only if an audience accepts the claims made by a securitizing actor. On the other hand, it may be difficult to precisely identify the relevant audience as long as different political regimes tolerate and value different kinds of audience. Consequently, it is possible that the audience granting moral support disagrees with the audience that contributes to the creation of deontic powers. Even more importantly, it is still unclear whether, for an issue to be regarded as securitized, the audience has to concur with the diagnosis alone, the cure proposed or both. As a result, there are no clear-cut boundaries between what qualifies as an instance of securitization and what does not.

This is the starting point of some correctives to the initial version of securitization theory that have been put forward by securitization scholars. Rather than attempting to single out the most significant audience, some advocate focusing on practices. They argue that securitizing moves are entrenched in daily micro-practices and technological devices.<sup>191</sup> Others claim that bureaucratic games conceal securitizing moves from the view of the general public.<sup>192</sup> In this sense, securitizing games happen in the backstage.<sup>193</sup> Echoing a practice-oriented approach to securitization, a new strand is emerging around risk analysis. Here, however, the challenge will be to determine the extent to which the theoretical rationales of risk and securitization are complementary, incommensurable or mutually substitutable. In other words, is risk an important factor for explaining how securitization might evolve or for specifying the boundaries of the applicability of securitization theory? The scholarly debate on the relationship between risk, security and securitization is intense and characterized by significantly different viewpoints.<sup>194</sup> The conclusions that it reaches may have an important impact on the development of studies of securitization in future.

### **Conclusion**

This article set out to take stock of the achievements of securitization theory to date. Specifically, it began by discussing the concepts at the heart of the theory, around which most of the criticisms levelled at the CS's original formulation of the theory have also revolved. It then highlighted the various insights – both empirical and theoretical – that have been garnered through the application of securitization theory to empirical cases. It was argued that those have not only considerably added to our knowledge of various

security issues, but also led to interesting theoretical reflections that have enabled the further development of securitization theory. Finally, various challenges faced by securitization scholars concerning theory, method and methodology were outlined, alongside some suggestions for addressing them.

Overall, this article has attempted to show that securitization theory has already delivered rich results and possesses significant strengths. Thanks notably to empirical studies, securitization has developed beyond its initial focus on the speech act. As a result, the distinctiveness of securitization theory currently lies in its capacity to articulate a specific approach to security – influenced by the speech act – with an ‘analytics of government’, which emphasizes practices and processes. In this respect, this article does not claim that the problems it raises and the solutions it proposes are exclusive. It is also acknowledged that the relationship between the analytics of government and securitization theory is complex. Nonetheless, this article suggests that the analytics of government can be *one* fruitful strategy for bridging approaches to securitization that are often treated as key divides (‘either/or’) in the literature.

By addressing performatives, social commitments, regimes of practices and contextuality, securitization theory is able to provide alternative accounts of and shed new light on the origins and maintenance of security challenges, wars, ethnic conflicts, security communities and balances of threats, among others. This is because, contrary to a common misconception, it does not merely replace material threats with institutional or social threats. In addition, it is well equipped for articulating the security character of new transnational or global issues, such as environmental degradation, epidemics or migration, and for deciphering the political implications – that is, social commitments and practices of accountability – of the designation of some phenomena as threats. Nevertheless, securitization theory faces three types of challenges, related, respectively, to theory, method and methodology. The capacity of scholars to overcome those will strongly influence the extent to which securitization theory is able to make a significant contribution to the debates in Security Studies and International Relations in the years to come.

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