



Introduction

This book proposes a revision of the Copenhagen School's influential securitisation theory that both allows insights into the intentions of securitising actors, and enables the moral evaluation of securitisation and desecuritisation in the environmental sector of security. Securitisation theory holds that in international relations an issue becomes a matter of emergency politics/a security issue not because something constitutes an objective threat to the state or to some other entity, but rather because a powerful securitising actor argues that something constitutes an existential threat to some object that needs to be dealt with immediately if the object is to survive. The idea that by saying something, something is being done is, in language theory, known as a 'performative speech act'. In securitisation theory, however, the performative speech act part – the securitising move – only evolves into a complete securitisation at the point when a designated 'audience' accepts the speech act. Upon acceptance by the audience, the issue is said to have moved out of the sphere of normal politics and into the realm of emergency politics, where it can be dealt with swiftly and without the normal rules and regulations of policy making. As regards the concept of security, this means that it has no meaning outside of this logic; security is a 'self-referential' practice; the meaning of security is *what is done with it*.

The idea that security is a self-referential practice is not only the essence of securitisation theory; it is also the secret of the theory's popularity and its explanatory potency. More readily than rival security theories, it allows the security analyst to account for the essentially contested nature of security where one and the same concept may mean entirely different, and even opposing, things. Yet although this is a clear, strong point on the part of securitisation theory, the Copenhagen School's preoccupation with the idea that security is a self-referential practice brings with it two major shortcomings. First, when using securitisation theory an analyst is only able to study the

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‘[self-referential] practice that *makes* something into security issues’.¹ Thus, the securitisation analyst studies who can securitise, on what issues, under what conditions, and with what effects,² whilst questions above and beyond the practice of security, such as those concerning the *intentions* of securitising actors (e.g. ‘why do actors securitise?’), are ignored.³ In this book I shall revise securitisation theory so that the analyst can account for the intentions of securitising actors. I argue that vital clues regarding the intentions of securitisers can be found in the identities of the *beneficiaries* of any given security policy.

Second, the idea that security is a self-referential practice allows no conceptual room for the theorising of what really *is* a security issue, nor for what *ought* to be securitised.⁴ Under the Copenhagen School’s

¹ Ole Wæver, *Concepts of Security* (Copenhagen: Institute of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, 1997), p. 48 (emphasis in the original).

² Wæver, *Concepts of Security*, pp. 14, 48; Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 27.

³ I use the word ‘ignored’ here deliberately as the Copenhagen School does not offer a theory for why actors securitise. Indeed, as I will show later on, the possibility of such analysis is actively rejected by Wæver. This said, for the sake of completeness it should be noted that at one point in their *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998, p. 27) Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde list ‘why do actors securitise?’ among the questions answerable by performing securitisation studies. They argue: ‘Based on a clear idea of the nature of security, securitization studies aim to gain an increasingly precise understanding of who securitizes, on what issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why, with what results, and, not least, under what conditions (i.e., what explains when securitization is successful?)’ (*ibid.*, p. 32). That the ‘why’ is included here in the list of what can be done with securitisation theory does not, however, refer to the ability to theorise a securitising actor’s intentions; instead it is a function of the fact that once one has analysed (a) who has done what with regard to security, and (b) what threats a given actor considers dangerous, one inevitably also learns about the reasons any given securitising actor holds for *why* security measures are considered necessary. In other words, the securitisation analyst’s ability to answer the question ‘why do actors securitise?’ extends to nothing above and beyond simply replicating what the securitising actor said. The problems with this approach are examined in Chapter 2.

⁴ In more detail, the Copenhagen School argues: ‘Our securitization approach is radically constructivist regarding security, which ultimately is a specific form of social praxis. Security issues are made security issues by acts of securitization. [...] We do not try to peek behind this to decide whether it is *really* a threat (which would reduce the entire securitization approach to a theory of perceptions and misperceptions). Security *is* a quality actors inject into issues by securitizing them, which means to stage them on the political arena [...] and then to have them accepted by a sufficient audience to sanction extraordinary defensive moves’ (Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 204).

theoretical framework, the security analyst and the securitising actor are ‘functionally distinct’ entities with the security analyst in no position to assume the role of the securitising actor at any point of the analysis.⁵ This, however, does not mean that the Copenhagen School feels ‘obliged to agree’ with any given securitisation.⁶ On the contrary, the school holds strong views about the value of both securitisation and also of desecuritisation. They argue that, in all but a few circumstances, securitisations are morally wrong, whereas desecuritisations are morally right.⁷ Notably, they arrive at these conclusions by way of what they take to be the effects or *consequences* of either action. In the case of securitisation, they take the consequences to be de-democratisation, depoliticisation, the security dilemma and conflict. In the case of desecuritisation, they expect politicisation, understood as a general opening up of debate. Although it is not the securitisation analyst’s *aim* to bring about desecuritisation (unlike, for instance, the Critical security theorist who seeks to bring about emancipation or encourage self-emancipation), the securitisation analyst is potentially able, by providing insights into the effects of securitisation, to reduce both the scale and number of escalations and security dilemmas found in the world.⁸

The Copenhagen School anticipates that the securitisation analyst will arrive at the very same conclusions regarding the outcomes of securitisation and desecuritisation; this much is clear from the claim of

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 33–4.
⁶ *Ibid.* p. 34.
⁷ In the following I will use ‘morally right’ and ‘morally permissible’ interchangeably; and do the same with ‘morally wrong’ and ‘morally prohibited’. Although the Copenhagen School does not use either one of these descriptions, their statements that ‘securitization should be seen as a *negative*’ whilst ‘desecuritization is the *optimal long-range option*’ show that this is what is meant (*ibid.* p. 29). In previous publications I have used their language of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’, as opposed to morally right and morally wrong, but I no longer see any reason to use this language and not the language of morality. I should further like to stress that although the Copenhagen School has this one-sided view of securitisation and desecuritisation they recognise that the mobilisation power unique to security can occasionally be put to good ends, and also that there is a certain attraction in this mobilisation power itself. They argue: ‘In some cases securitization of issues is unavoidable, as when states are faced with the implacable or barbarian aggressor. Because of its prioritizing imperative, securitization also has tactical attractions – for example, as a way to obtain sufficient attention for environmental problems’ (*ibid.* p. 29).
⁸ *Ibid.* p. 206.

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Ole Wæver (who is the originator of securitisation theory) that ‘it is the duty of the securitisation analyst to point to the importance of desecuritisation’.⁹ This is also what is meant when the Copenhagen School writes that: ‘One of the purposes of [the securitisation] approach should be that it becomes possible to *evaluate* whether one finds it good or bad to securitize a certain issue’.¹⁰ If, however, we take seriously the Copenhagen School’s view that securitisation and desecuritisation are to be judged in view of their *outcomes*, then it is difficult to concur. Not only do securitisations not always lead to conflict and the security dilemma, but also, even if it is true that securitisation leads to the suspension of ordinary (democratic) politics, this is a morally wrong outcome only if we value democratic decision-making above everything else. If, for instance, we value the reduction of human wretchedness in the world above all else, then the suspension of ordinary politics is morally permissible, provided that human beings at large are the beneficiaries of security policies, and not power holders and elites.

In this book, by use of the example of the environmental sector of security, I intend to show that securitisations are not categorically morally wrong, but rather that, depending on the beneficiary of environmental security policies, securitisation can be morally permissible. Similarly, the finding that desecuritisation is categorically morally right holds only if desecuritisation always leads to politicisation – the Copenhagen School’s anticipated outcome of desecuritisation. Again, using the example of the environmental sector of security, I shall show that desecuritisation does not always produce the same expected outcome, but rather can also lead to depoliticisation. Depending on the outcome, desecuritisation can then be either morally permissible or morally prohibited.

Considering that both the ability to theorise intentions and the ability to genuinely morally evaluate security policies are – or should be – essential parts of security analysis more generally, improvement on either front is clearly highly desirable. That being so, my aim in this book is to devise a stronger and even more compelling securitisation theory.

⁹ This point was repeatedly made during the PhD training course ‘Security Theory – Critical Innovations’ in Copenhagen, Denmark (29 November–3 December 2004) conducted by Professor Wæver.

¹⁰ Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 34 (emphasis added).

Overview of chapters

This book consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 offers a detailed analysis of securitisation theory. The chapter is structured into three parts. In the first part I examine in what way selected works by John L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, Carl Schmitt and Kenneth Waltz (the posited intellectual ancestors of the Copenhagen School) are relevant for securitisation theory. Above all, I argue that what is included in/excluded from the theory (most notably for the purposes of this book, intentions) can be explained by going back to these thinkers. In the second part I analyse the meaning of ‘post-structural realism’ (Ole Wæver’s self-described position) for securitisation theory. I argue that both securitisation theory’s analytical strength and its normative weakness derive from this notion. Finally, in the third part I consider the coherence of securitisation theory over time and focus on the move away from state-centrism to a state-dominated field of analysis. I argue that this move is consistent with the logic of security according to securitisation theory. I further argue that as long as securitisations occur in practice, a basic core of securitisation theory remains useful into the future; which is why it is sensible to improve the theory in the various ways here suggested.

Chapter 2 develops my own revised securitisation theory. Contrary to the Copenhagen School, I argue that a securitisation exists, not when an audience accepts the existential threat justification, but instead when there is a change in relevant behaviour by the relevant agent, that is justified by this agent with reference to the declared threat. Securitisation then consists of two events: existential threat justification (the securitising move) and subsequent security practice. In a second step I lower the bar for the success of securitisation to a degree that securitisations are successful simply by virtue of existing, and not at the point when normally binding rules are broken and emergency measures are taken. The crucial idea informing this move is that even if a securitisation is not followed by the actions which constitute the Copenhagen School’s criteria for success, the securitiser still has reasons for why they securitised; reasons that hold vital clues about the securitiser’s intentions. In line with this, in a third step, I suggest that securitisations can take one of two forms, both of which allow insights into the intentions of securitising actors. The first form refers to those securitisations where what is done in the name of

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security (security practice) matches the rhetoric of the existential threat justification (securitising move). I argue that in such cases it is the intention of the securitising actor to secure the referent object of security they themselves identified as existentially threatened; I call this a 'referent object benefiting securitisation'. The second form refers to securitisations where there is a mismatch between the securitising move and the security practice. I propose that in such cases, it is not the referent object that benefits from the securitisation, but rather the securitising actor benefits, for example, by gaining a *raison d'être*, or by maintaining existing levels of funding. In such cases it is reasonable to suggest that an issue is or was securitised because of the benefits this has for the securitising actor. Correspondingly, I call this type of securitisation, 'agent benefiting securitisation'.

Existing securitisation theory is complete only with the concept of 'desecuritisation'. Desecuritisation is understood as the process whereby securitisation is reversed and formerly securitised issues are moved 'out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere'.¹¹ In a fourth step I challenge this assumption as too simplistic, and I argue that this equation holds up only because the Copenhagen School works with such a wide definition of politicisation that desecuritisation almost invariably leads to politicisation. In its place, I set forth a narrower definition of politicisation as resting with official political authority only. On that basis it becomes possible to suggest that desecuritisation sometimes leads to depoliticisation.

In a fifth theoretical step I propose that my distinctions between (1) two types of securitisation in terms of who or what they benefit, and (2) two types of desecuritisation ('desecuritisation as politicisation' and 'desecuritisation as depoliticisation'), enable us to start thinking cogently about morally right and morally wrong securitisations and desecuritisations in the environmental sector of security.

Chapter 3 is the first of three empirical chapters that aim to test my revised securitisation theory on the example of United States environmental security from 1993 to 2009. It analyses the rise of environmental security in the US American context and locates the securitising move. Environmental security was first mentioned in the US National Security Strategy in 1991 and later under Clinton it became an intrinsic

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 4.

part of US leaders/US government officials’ vocabulary, and – as I will argue – the issue was subsequently securitised. Although the case of US environmental security under the Clinton administrations from 1993 to 2000 is regarded as the best-known example of environmental security in the relevant literature, a comprehensive analysis into the reasons of the Clinton administrations for securitising the environment remains outstanding.

Chapter 4 investigates what happened to environmental security besides rhetorical acknowledgement by relevant policy-makers. I shall show that the existential threat justification was not matched by security practice. Informed by my revised securitisation theory, I propose that the beneficiary of securitisation was not the stated referent object of security (in this case the American people), but rather it was the securitising actor itself that benefited from environmental security. This case study is thus an example of agent-benefiting securitisation.

In Chapter 5 I examine what happened to the various environmental security policies under the two George W. Bush administrations (hereafter Bush administrations) from 2001 to 2009. I argue that this case study is an example of ‘desecuritisation as depoliticisation’, because not only were the issues formerly part of environmental security no longer regarded as security issues by the Bush administrations, but they all but vanished from the administrations’ political agenda.

Chapter 6 is the moral evaluation of securitisation and desecuritisation in the environmental sector of security. Extrapolating from the Copenhagen School I propose that securitisation has no intrinsic value; what matters are the consequences of securitisation alone. A focus on consequences corresponds to what in moral philosophy is known as a consequentialist ethic. Consequentialists hold that the right thing to do in any situation is to act with a view to maximising the best consequences.¹² What the consequentialist believes to be the best consequences depends, in turn, on the unit of value they endorse. On par with a majority of consequentialists I endorse human well-being as the highest value, and I argue that a functioning natural non-human environment is a necessary requirement for human

¹² Usually maximising, but there are exceptions, e.g. Michael Slote’s *satisficing consequentialism* – the idea that an act is morally right if the consequences are good enough: Michael A. Slote, *Common-sense Morality and Consequentialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

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well-being. On this basis I am able to argue that only environmental security as human security is morally permissible, because only here are human beings the *beneficiaries* of the security policy. Other approaches to environmental security (environmental security as national security and ecological security) that promote different referent objects of environmental security altogether, are dismissed as morally untenable. As regards desecuritisation, the idea that the environment is instrumentally valuable to human ends means that only ‘desecuritisation as politicisation’ is morally right, as the safeguarding and protection of the global environment require political leadership at the highest level.

Chapter 7, which concludes the book, briefly considers the implications of this revised securitisation theory for security studies more generally and proposes a pathway for further research. I suggest that my analysis is relevant for the other sectors of security (identified by the Copenhagen School as military, societal, political and economic security) as well, because if there exist morally right and morally wrong securitisations and desecuritisations in the environmental sector of security, it is safe to assume that such distinctions exist in all sectors of security. Although my moral evaluation of securitisation and desecuritisation in the environmental sector does not suggest what these are for the remaining sectors of security, I argue that it offers some valuable insights into how to morally evaluate security policies in general.

1 *The nature of securitisation theory*

Introduction

In Ole Wæver's many writings on securitisation theory there are three recurring as well as puzzling claims that have been left largely unexplained, even though each of them is vital for a comprehensive understanding of the theory. There is, first of all, the unconventional mix of theorists that are said to form the intellectual ancestors of the Copenhagen School. According to Wæver these include, besides John L. Austin and Jacques Derrida, Carl Schmitt and Kenneth Waltz.¹ Aside from the odd reference to one or more of these thinkers, it is, however, not clear what precisely is drawn from them and what in turn this means for the realm of securitisation theory. Consequently, there is some disagreement among those working on securitisation theory whether all of these thinkers are relevant. The conventional wisdom is that Waltz matters primarily for the Copenhagen School's regional security complex theory and the concept of sectors, and not so much for securitisation theory. This is contestable and in what follows I will draw out the important ways in which Waltz matters for securitisation theory too.

Second, Wæver (at least in his published work) has never satisfactorily explained what he means when he refers to his own alternative position as one of 'post-structural realism'. Considering the philosophical underpinnings of securitisation theory coupled with the lack of explanation one may wonder if this amounts to more than a mere amalgamation of labels. After all post-structural realism is a contentious position, considering that it seeks to combine two of the most opposed epistemological, ontological and methodological positions – poststructuralism and realism – into a unified position.

¹ Ole Wæver, 'Aberystwyth, Paris, Copenhagen: New Schools in Security Theory and the Origins between Core and Periphery', unpublished paper, presented at the International Studies Association's 45th Annual Convention in Montreal, Canada (2004), p. 13.

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Third and finally, there is the issue of Wæver's changed opinion on the role of the state in security analysis. Thus, in 1995, he forcefully argued 'the concept of security refers to the state',² but only three years later in 1998 he, as one of the Copenhagen School's joint authors of *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, makes the case for the incorporation of other referent objects of security, including the individual. Does such a move constitute a fundamental contradiction in the theory over time, or is this consistent with the theory?

This chapter clarifies each of these three unclear issue areas. In order to do this I draw heavily on a number of unpublished papers by Wæver, all of which, however, have been presented at international conferences such as the International Studies Association's annual convention. It is important to note that there is *nothing* in these unpublished papers that contradicts the published work; use of unpublished work merely allowed for a better and more comprehensive understanding of securitisation theory and of the influences upon Wæver's thinking in developing the theory. Overall, the benefit of the analysis offered in this chapter is fourfold: first, it shows what can and cannot be done with using securitisation theory; second, it highlights the theory's strengths and weaknesses; third, it explains what is included into the theory (excluded from it) and why; and finally fourth, it aims to predict the longevity of securitisation theory.

The intellectual ancestors of securitisation theory

John L. Austin

'Security' is basically a speech act, or more precisely an 'illocutionary act' [. . .]. Security is the sound coming forth when power-holders claim the need to use their special right to block certain developments by reference to the 'security' of the state (or political order); a special right to use extraordinary means going beyond their register in 'everyday politics'; a special right grounded in the basic image of the modern state having the supply of security and stability as its primary task.³

² Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', in Ronnie D. Lipschutz, *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 49.

³ This quote is taken from Wæver's essay 'Ideologies of Stabilization' published as part of his 1997 PhD thesis *Concepts of Security* (Copenhagen: Institute of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, 1997), p. 157. Please note, however, that the quote itself is older than this essay. In footnote 1 it states: 'The first part