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Securitization Theory: A Matter of Words

This chapter explores the genesis of the Securitization Theory – its ontological origin and epistemological development; its historical and intellectual roots. It addresses fundamental questions as to what the theory ‘does’, how it ‘does it’ and what steps and processes are essential to make the theory ‘work’ – and as such be effective. It explores who and what created the theory and why, predating it within its political and global context, which so critically has underwritten this new theoretical framework. This chapter also points to the applications of the theory and provides an example of its current utilization (international migration). It engages with the theory’s critics and its intellectual investment, the debate imbued with its various ‘ambiguities’. It also briefly reflects on other theoretical frameworks and how they have effectively succeeded (or failed) to recognize and interpret the rape–security nexus.

Rape and securitization

What is securitization?

Barry Buzan and Ole Waever first introduced the Securitization Theory – as ‘a tool for practical security analysis’ (Taureck, 2006, p. 53) – to a broader scholastic audience in the late 1980s. The concept of securitization, generally put, defined for Buzan and Waever a framing and shifting of an issue or a concern from normal or ordinary politics into the realm of security. The theory primarily held, in elemental terms, that someone or something ‘could not be dealt with the regular way’ and, therefore, demanded unprecedented attention and treatment. Once an issue reached this point ‘of no return’, this ‘terrain beyond normalcy/the ordinary and the previously understood’, it operated coherently as an
existential threat and, hence, a security issue. The processes or the acts of securitization turned a concern or problem – climate change, migration, HIV/AIDS infection, sexual violence – into a danger and labeled it accordingly. It redefined its significance and its degree of importance by elevating it from the regular level to the threat and security sphere.

The act of securitization itself shifts an issue beyond and above the margins of the non-political and political. Once applied to wartime rape, for example, securitization then not only advances the act of rape from a ‘natural/common/opportunistic’ occurrence to a war instrumentality, but it assumes an existential threat component. It has then been performatively, for example, through an active interplay between securitization subjects constructed as a security problem and becomes a regional, national or even international security issue. By doing so, it also de-genderizes rape, removes women as ‘depoliticized’ entities and re-establishes them as ‘active agents’ (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 247). It elevates an issue from the policy level to the ‘existentially threatening’ stage (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 214).

**Historical and global context**

Securitization Theory, among others, emerged from a growing debate among security scholars after the end of the Cold War, challenging core (neo)-realist and (neo)-liberal theoretical views. Realists almost exclusively linked security to force and military objectives and implications. Realism and liberalism solely focused on the nation state and the prevalence of power, sovereignty and national interest as dominating security objectives. The post-Cold War security debate within security studies shifted these assumptions. It tried to re-evaluate what the breakdown of the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union really meant: what it signified for international relations in general – and for international security studies and its intellectual discourse in particular. While realists and liberals, through their narrow theoretical lenses, struggled to explain the peaceful end of the Cold War, Buzan and Waever viewed the newly emerging frontier as a platform to redefine security. The sudden absence of bi-polar nuclear muscle flexing presented an operational backdrop for a new, expanded theoretical framing of security within a new political reality.

Security studies and in particular its traditional pillars, (neo-)realism and (neo-) liberalism, privileged the nation state as the core security object – the sole referent object that needed to be secured. Wars were fought and peace ‘waged’ to safeguard the state, its people, borders,