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# Dangerous Liaisons: Securitization Theory and Schmittian Legacy

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## Abstract

*Securitization theory, developed within the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, on several occasions was compared to the political theory set out by Carl Schmitt. His conceptualization of the political as a domain of exception is similar to understanding of security in Securitization theory as a domain that breaks with established rules of the game through obtaining legitimacy for extraordinary measures. The aim of this work is to thoroughly compare the two theoretical arguments and establish their common as well as diverging points. It's main argument is that although Securitization Theory shares certain thematic and narrative similarities with Carl Schmitt's theory, its concept is wider, epistemology different and it reach opposite normative conclusions.*

*Key words: political, security, securitization, realism, social-constructivism, Carl Schmitt*

\* \* \*

“The ability to get to the verge without getting into war is the necessary art. If you cannot master it [...] if you are scared to go the brink, you are lost”. This is how John Foster Dulles defined the art of politics and its role in a dreadful game of ensuring collective survival. The controversial German jurist and political scientist Carl Schmitt went even further than that. According to him, this horrifying limit that divides self from other along the

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friend/foe axis, is the realm where the essence of the political is constituted.

During the interwar period Carl Schmitt was one of the most prominent scholars in Europe. As a staunch conservative, anti-Semite and fervent critic of liberal democracy he joined the National Socialist Party in 1933. After the War, academic interest in Schmitt's political theory was for a long time disallowed by the ideological burden that his work carried. Over time, as the distance between the contemporary world and that of the Third Reich has grown, the Nazi stain has faded and attention to Schmitt's work has reawakened. In International Relations, his work is usually associated with the school of classical realism. After a long period of silence, the influence of his thinking on the postwar realism of Hans Morgenthau and Edward Carr has only recently been acknowledged.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, his work has also started to be affiliated with the social constructivist Securitization Theory (ST) developed by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies (CoS).<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the following paper is to discuss this 'dangerous liaison' between the two theories. My central argument is that although ST shares thematic and narrative similarities with Carl Schmitt's theory, its concept is broader, its epistemology is different and conclusions are opposite. The paper therefore proceeds in three steps. Firstly, the main tenets of the two theories will be defined. Secondly, their common points will be analyzed. Thirdly and finally, the paper will highlight the conceptual and epistemological differences, as well as the opposite normative conclusions between ST and Schmitt's political theory.

### Basic Concepts: Security and the Political

According to its instigator, Ole Waever, when ST was first formulated in 1988 it wasn't directly inspired by Carl Schmitt.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, although the author had been acquainted with Schmitt's general ideas, Waever only read his works in detail after the speech act theory of security had already been formulated. Nevertheless, Waever admitted that he noticed certain points in which the two theories resembled one another but also aspects in which they departed from each other.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On this discussion see: William E. Scheuerman, *Carl Schmitt* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 1999); Charles Jones, *E. H. Carr and International Relations: a Duty to Lie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Jan Willem Honig, "Totalitarianism and Realism: Hans Morgenthau German Years," in *Roots of Realism*, ed. Benjamin Frankel. (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 283-313.

<sup>2</sup> CoS covers three major areas: Securitization Theory which was largely developed by Ole Waever and Security Sectors and Regional Security Complex Theory which mostly results from Buzan's work. The following paper is going to address the first two. Confused by what the three different areas are, and who they belong to!!! On ST see: Ronnie D. Lipschutz, ed., *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). On SoS see Buzan Barry, Waever Ole and Jap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework For Analysis* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1998). On Schmitt's influence on CoS see: Jef Huysmans, "The Question of Limit: Desecuritization and the Aesthetics of Horror in Political Realism," *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, 27 (3) (1998): 569-589. and Michael Williams, "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, 47 (2003): 511-531.

<sup>3</sup> For further reading: Waever, O. (1988) *The Speech Act.* In *Security*. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>4</sup> For further reading: Waever, O. *Tidsskriftet Politik*. Available from: <http://www.tidsskriftetpolitik.dk/index.php?id=125> [Accessed 18 November 2005]



The aim of this paper is to cast light on both the common and diverging points between the two theorists. Michael Williams argues that “in the Copenhagen School the concept of security plays a role almost identical to that which Schmitt defined as his concept of the political” (Williams, 2003: 515). In order to test this argument we shall first outline the basic premises of the two concepts.

Schmitt developed his concept of the political in two seminal works *Political Theology* (1922) and *The Concept of the Political* (1932). There, he makes a stark difference between *party politics* (politics in further text) and the *political*. While the former is the reflex of antagonisms of domestic parties, the latter is the reflex of antagonism with another state. *Politics* and the *political* exist in a relation of negative correlation. The more internal antagonisms are intensified, the weaker is the common identity of the state vis-à-vis another state (Schmitt, 1996: 32). Schmitt’s basic assumption about interstate relations is clearly a realist one. War is a real and ever-present possibility between states and derives from the everlasting pattern of human relations of friend and enemy.

War is neither the aim nor the purpose nor even the very content of the political. But as an ever-present possibility it is the leading presupposition that determines in a characteristic way human action and thinking, and thereby creates specifically *political* behavior (Schmitt, 1996: 34). This human condition creates the necessity for a singular, absolute, arbitrary and final decision that breaks with the existing order, identifies self and other along the friend/enemy axis and creates new political order *ex nihilo*. The moment when the enemy is identified in concrete clarity is therefore the highest and the most creative moment of pure life and is therefore comparable to a miracle in theology.

On the other side, ST was first conceived by Ole Wæver in 1988 and was later developed by the CoS. It constituted a radical break from Traditional Security Studies by departing from the materialist assumption that security exists prior to words and that its aim is to prevent threats from being materialized. While the traditional studies’ central concern is ‘how we become more secure’, ST asks instead ‘how an issue becomes a security issue’. Inspired by the works of Wendt, Austin and Searle, ST is developed on the social-constructivist assumption that language exists prior to security and not *vice versa*.

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Security is conceptualized as a speech act that takes an emergency issue beyond normal politics into an area of security thus justifying exceptional measures that wouldn't otherwise be acceptable. ST also introduces the reverse concept of de-securitization or unmaking of security. What then is security? With the help of language theory, we can regard 'security' as a speech act. In this sense, security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance *itself* is the act. By saying it, something is done (Waever, 1995: 55).

Now that we have laid out the main tenets of the two approaches, we can proceed with the analysis of their similarities and differences.

### Common Points

In order to read Securitization Theory through Schmittian lenses we first have to concede that Schmitt's distinction between (party) *politics* and the *political* corresponds to the ST distinction between *politics* and *security*. While the former pair in dichotomy (i.e. *politics* and *politics*) is in both cases a realm of regular rules of the game, the latter (i.e. *political* and *security*) is the realm of uncertainty, exception and voluntarism. In that respect Williams' claim is acceptable and can be developed with two additional points.

Firstly, both theories' constitutive concepts are devoid of any ontology: they are regarded as performative acts. In the work of Schmitt it is an act of decision on amity/enmity, while in Waever's theory it is a speech act that identifies threats, proclaims emergency action and demands exceptional measures. As Waever puts it: "In this approach, the meaning of the concept lies in its usage and is not something we can define according to what would be analytically or philosophically the best." (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998: 24). Similar is Schmitt's definition: "The political [...] does not describe its own substance but only the intensity of an association or dissociation of human beings." (Schmitt, 1996: 38).

The second common idea is their inescapably similar narrative. It starts with an actor that identifies the threat and therefore gains the right to break the rules. In Schmitt's theory, the actor is a sovereign, the threat is a foreign enemy and the act of its identification is the exceptional decision that breaks the



rule and creates a new *political* order. In ST, the actor is a securitizing actor, the identification of threat is a securitizing move that calls for emergency action and the outcome is a justification for breaking the rules. Without any doubt ST tends to retain traditional realist themes of security studies such as survival, existential threats, situation of maximum danger, potentially unlimited conflict, state power claiming extraordinary rights, etc. It packs them into a narrative that is almost identical to Schmitt's.

The conceptual similarity and narrative overlapping undeniably exist between the two theories. However, their basic epistemological premises and their conclusions are opposite.

### **Differences: epistemology, concepts and conclusions**

Schmitt's basic premise is objectivistic and a realist one. Inspired by Hobbes, he states that war between nation states is an ever-present possibility. The *political* world is therefore a pluriverse not a universe (Schmitt, 1996: 53). He argues that if a people lose the energy to maintain itself in the sphere of the political, it will not vanish from the world, 'only the weakest people will disappear (Schmitt, 1996: 53). This human condition derives from amity/enmity which are neither metaphor nor symbol, but concrete and existential concepts (Schmitt, 1996: 27). In opposition, Waever is a social constructivist. His basic premise is that language shapes the reality and that ideas matter. Thus, security is no more an objective necessity for existence and survival of the self but is regarded as speech and an argument about the survival of the self.

The most illustrative example of this difference is a case of securitization in the environmental sector whose referent object is environment directly and human civilization indirectly. This generates the possibility of a security universe that is constituted by the existence of a global threat, such as global warming for example, and not by otherness, let alone enmity. Such a speech construction overcomes the Schmittian inevitability of a security pluriverse of political communities and actually represents an absolute contradiction of his friend/enemy concept. From a constructivist point of view

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similar arguments could be made for all other security sectors (Wendt, 2003).

An important conceptual difference concerns the relation of *politics* vis-à-vis the *political/security*. As stressed above, Carl Schmitt makes a clear-cut qualitative distinction between the *political* and the rest of *politics*. *Politics* is identified with the liberal democratic and pluralist procedures of internal political negotiation and calculation. It is a nihilist realm that neutralizes the *political* domain which is a sphere of creation, existence, and meaning. Once the *political* is created it radically breaks with *politics*. On the other side, although it acknowledges the difference between the two, especially sharpened at the international level, ST argues that securitization is only a more extreme version of politicization.<sup>5</sup>

Another diverging point between the two theories concerns the question about who can securitize. For Schmitt the ‘sovereign is he who decides upon the exception’ (Schmitt, 1985: 5).

In contrast, Waever identifies a series of conditions for that. In order to succeed, a speech act has to follow the grammar of security, be spelled out by someone who holds the position of authority and has to refer to an existential threat that is generally held by the audience to be threatening (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998: 23). ST introduces an audience as an active negotiator of security while in Schmitt’s analysis it is a completely passive receiver of the exceptional sovereign decision.

Finally Schmitt and Waever come to diametrically opposite conclusions. For Schmitt since the world of politics is dangerous one in which “*homo homini lupus est*” the more *political* the better. The *political* is superior to *politics* and the exception is superior to the rule. It is a higher sphere of existence where political collectivities exit liberal automaticity, neutralization and nihilism and enter into the realm of real existence and political creativity.<sup>6</sup> On the other side, in Waever’s work security is completely de-mystified and de-aesthetized. From such a perspective since it implies necessity, exceptionality and voluntarism security gets to be perceived as anti-democratic. As a result, by introducing the communicative action and discursive ethics Waever considers security as a negative phenomenon and a failure to tackle an issue by choice, public debate

<sup>5</sup> “Any public issue can be placed on the spectrum ranging from non-politicized [...] through politicized [...] to securitized...” (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 23.)

<sup>6</sup> For discussion on the roots of Schmitt’s anti-liberal political philosophy see: Wolin, R. and Schmitt, C. (1992) ‘Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and Aesthetics of Horror.’ *Political theory*, 20 (3), pp. 424–447.



and negotiation (Williams, 2003: 523). Waever therefore proposes de-securitization, or the unmaking of security as an optimal long term option. Waever's ideal of *a-security* is actually what Schmitt repudiates the most - victory of order over exception, reason over will and *politics* over the *political*.

### Conclusion

Reading Securitization Theory through the Manichean lenses of Carl Schmitt's political theory is only justified to a certain extent. The two theories do share similar themes and narratives but they nonetheless substantially diverge in terms of critical, conceptual and epistemological junctures, and in their opposite normative conclusions.

The distinction between friend and enemy, which is essential for Schmitt, is a possible but not an unavoidable dimension of security as a speech act. Threats do often but not always emerge from enemies. Inspired by Hobbes, Schmitt makes an objectivistic assumption about the intrinsic enmity of the political world. Securitization theory is clearly rooted in a radically opposite nominalist and social constructivist epistemology which assumes that social realities are constructed by language. Finally, the normative conclusions of the two theories are opposite. While for Schmitt the *political* is a realm of life and vitality, for ST it is a "failure to deal with issues as normal politics" (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998: 29). Taking into consideration everything said, it is difficult to agree with the assertion that ST is located at the intersection of Schmittian Realism and Social Constructivism. However, it can still be a link that will "foster an engaged dialogue and debate across analytic traditions" (Williams, 2003: 528).

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