Politicising Security at the Boundaries: Privacy in Surveillance and Cybersecurity

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Abstract: This article looks into the politicisation of security. Politicisation, in contrast to securitisation, presupposes that security issues are controversially debated in a public arena without foregone conclusions as to how they are going to be handled. In order to locate and observe politicisation processes empirically, we suggest to look at privacy, a key notion and main tool for resistance vis-à-vis security logics. By examining two issue areas (video surveillance and cybersecurity), we highlight different tactics through which privacy is mobilised as a boundary object to politicise security. The invocation of privacy offers an alternative viewpoint on security, one where the human (digital) body and a human centred notion of security is at the centre. The value of its integrity and the need for its protection is a weighty counter to the abstract and often absolute claims of ‘more security’ through technological means.

Keywords: politicisation; security; democracy; privacy; surveillance; cybersecurity

1. Introduction

How much politics is there in security – and how much security in politics? This question is at the heart of the theoretical engagement with security politics. Holding a prominent position in the academic debate, securitisation theory deals with a type of security that is discursively tied to the highest possible political stakes, since it is about existential threats to the survival of the state and its society. Therefore, invoking security is a powerful mobiliser that can help legitimise extraordinary responses and undemocratic procedures.1 In securitisation theory, security is therefore emptied of politics as security is put above politics.

On the other hand, many of the current security issues in the West are hardly about the outright survival of the state or society, but characterised by the risk of (wilful) disruption of modern life in open, liberal societies. Dealing with such

risks empowers a range of specific government rationalities, like the permanent surveillance of populations or the precautionary arrests of suspects. When engaging with the political handling of these issues, the research focus shifts to everyday security practices of less traditional security actors such as civil protection or police agencies. Their management of security risks puts security below politics, into the realm of (technical) routine procedures.

Next to these two dynamics, there is a third, which is the focus of this article and the special issue it is part of: security issues that are politicised, meaning they are controversially debated in a public arena, without foregone conclusions as to how they are going to be handled. This facet has received decidedly less attention in the security political literature than the other two. In this article, we ask: how can we make sense of the politicisation of security theoretically? How does the politicisation of security unfold and what/who is driving/resisting it? And, finally, how does politicisation affect the normative quality of security politics?

In the first part of the article, we engage with a theoretical body of literature on politicisation with the aim to enrich the existing securitisation debate. In order to locate and observe politicisation processes empirically, we suggest using the concept of ‘boundary object’ from Science and Technology Studies (STS). Boundary objects are characterised by ‘interpretive flexibility’, as they operate as mediators in the coordination process between different communities of practice. If there is a boundary object, there is contestation. Therefore, if controversy, awareness/engagement, and the use of public arenas is a prerequisite trait of politicisation, as Hagmann et al. argue in their introduction to this issue, then the existence of boundary objects is a necessary condition for the existence of a politicised security issue.

In a second part, we look at the concept of privacy, a key notion and main tool for resistance vis-à-vis security logics. By examining two issue areas (video surveillance and cybersecurity), we highlight different tactics through which the boundary object ‘privacy’ is mobilised to re-engage and politicise security. We show in the third part how the invocation of privacy offers an alternative viewpoint on security, one where the human (digital) body and a human centred notion of security is at the centre. The value of its integrity and the need for its protection is a weighty counter to the abstract and often absolute claims of ‘more security’ through technological means. We end the article with a few thoughts about the normative implications of studying politicisation processes in the security field.

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2. Politicisation at the boundaries

P politicisation and desecuritisation (and their twin concepts depoliticisation and securitisation) share many assumptions, although they were developed in distinct fields and for distinct empirical and theoretical puzzles. At their core, both revolve around concepts of ‘the political’; more precisely, around how an ideal of democratic deliberation stands in contrast to less desirable forms of politics. One form (securitisation) is dominated by the logic of urgency and the other (depoliticisation) by improving economic efficiency. Both engage with the repercussions of a subtraction of a pluralistic, legitimate and fair debate about policy issues from government. Subsequently, scholars have pondered how such a removal of proper politics from government could be prevented or reversed, in other words, how issues could be repoliticised or desecuritised.

Symptomatically for an understanding of ideal politics, Hansen writes:

*Politics is about providing stability to social relations, at the same time as it entails openness as to what kind of, stable solutions should be provided. To politicize something is thus to do two things: to claim that this is of significance for the society in question and to make it the subject of debate and contestation.*

The normative unease of many analysts originates from how security, with the sense of urgency that it implies, as well as neoliberalism and its imperative of profit accumulation, are deeply transformative of liberal democratic ideals of deliberation and related slowness. Both favour discursive TINA (‘there is no alternative’) constructions and thereby foreclose contestation and open-ended debates. The question thus becomes, as Aradau frames it, ‘do we want politics of exceptional measures or do we want democratic politics of slow procedures which can be contested?’

The answer from both sets of literature is clear-cut: There is a (normative) commitment to ‘normal politics’ and the democratic responsibility and accountability that come with it.

In the following, we engage with both literatures with an eye on the question of how security can be politicised according to the theory. Then, we suggest the concept of ‘boundary objects’ from science and technology studies (STS) as a useful analytical tool to capture and study dispersed discourses and actors in the endeavour to re/politicise and de/securitise security.

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8. For reasons of space and focus on our main argument, we limit ourselves to a discussion of the speech act focused securitization literature, often referred to as the “Copenhagen School”. Other securitization scholars have highlighted the role of bureaucratic practices, professional knowledge, and technological innovations as important drivers of securitization processes that often remain below the visible surface of public discourse. See for example Didier Bigo, “Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27, no. 1 (2002): 63–92; Jef Huysmans, “What’s in an Act? On Security Speech Acts and Little Security Nothings,” *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 4–5 (2011): 371–83. The preference for democratic political procedures is however shared by most of these authors as well.