

Security and the problem of context: a hermeneutical critique of securitisation theory

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Abstract. How do we know when we are dealing with security issue? This is a cardinal question in Security Studies, and securitisation theory provides an authoritative yet incomplete answer, mainly because it rules out that the meaning of security can vary contextually. To overcome this limitation, we need a hermeneutical perspective centred on the liminality of security as a category in-between theory and policy, which produces a more precise algorithm for empirical research. A contextual hermeneutics of security signals that normative awareness is necessary even in the absence of a unifying normative manifesto, also confronts the spectre of the “death of security” invoked by those who object to the potentially endless broadening of its meaning.

Introduction

Securitisation theory is one of the relatively few recent genuine advances in security theory.¹ Central to its successful incorporation in Security Studies is its innovative attempt to answer the most crucial question of the discipline: What is security? This question seems to divide the discipline not only because security could be called an ‘essentially contested concept’,² but also – primarily so – because it is the starting point of many other related debates, concerning who are the legitimate authors of security policy, which beneficiaries should have priority, or what are the most adequate strategies of implementation. What marks out securitisation theory is that in addition to answering the ‘who, what, where and how’ of security, it also allows potentially new interpretations of what security actually *means*. Should this promise be delivered, it would indeed be a major contribution to Security Studies and IR in general. This is because, as Baldwin has pointed out, there are very few new concepts of security around,³ and also because – contra Baldwin – the (potentially) new understanding of security offered by securitisation theory would

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¹ The key texts are Ole Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, in Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86; Ole Wæver, ‘European Security Identities’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 34:1 (1996), pp. 103–132; Barry Buzan et al., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

² Walter B. Gallie, ‘Essentially Contested Concepts’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1956), pp. 167–198.

³ David Baldwin, ‘The Concept of Security’, *Review of International Studies*, 23:1 (1994), pp. 22–3.

significantly change security analysis. If, as securitisation theorists argue, 'security is what actors make of it',⁴ then the analysis of security would no longer proceed by applying a conceptual framework to an empirical context. Instead, the concept of security, and by extension security theory in general, would become entirely contextual. Is this really the case – or is this possible at all? This is the 'problem of context' in Security Studies, which this article addresses through a critique of securitisation theory from a hermeneutical perspective that engages what Charles Taylor called an inescapable requirement for any social scientist: 'confronting one's language of explanation with that of one's subjects' self-understanding'.⁵

Conceptual sophistication, methodological neatness and empirical orientation are three key characteristics that have drawn to securitisation theory, as Williams notes, the attention of fans and critics alike.⁶ Securitisation theory has been used in the study of policy areas which include migration,⁷ human rights,⁸ European integration,⁹ terrorism and the global war on terror,¹⁰ and global health.¹¹ Three types of related problems stand out particularly from the recent developments and critiques of securitisation theory: conceptual, epistemological, and normative.¹² Conceptual critiques refer primarily to the structure of securitisation theory, in particular its use of speech act theory,¹³ and to adjacent but still essential concepts, such as social identity.¹⁴ The second type of critique concerns the manner in which

⁴ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 48.

⁵ Charles Taylor, 'The Hermeneutics of Conflict', in James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), p. 226.

⁶ Michael C. Williams, 'Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 47:4 (2003), p. 512.

⁷ Jeff Huysmans, 'The Question of the Limit: Securitization and the Aesthetics of Horror in Political Realism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 27:3 (1998), pp. 569–589; Jeff Huysmans, 'The European Union and the Securitization of Migration', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 38:5 (2000), pp. 751–777.

⁸ Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'We the Peoples: Contending Discourses of Security in Human Rights Theory and Practice', *International Relations*, 18:1 (2004), pp. 9–23.

⁹ Christopher S. Browning, 'The Region-Building Approach Revisited: The Continued Othering of Russia in Discourses of Region-Building in the European North', *Geopolitics*, 8:1 (2003), pp. 45–71; Atsuko Higashino, 'For the Sake of "Peace and Security"? The Role of Security in the European Union Enlargement Eastwards', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 39:4 (2004), pp. 347–368; Helene Sjursen, 'Changes to European Security in a Communicative Perspective', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 39:2 (2004), pp. 107–28.

¹⁰ Morten Kelstrup, 'Globalisation and Societal Insecurity: The Securitization of Terrorism and Competing Strategies for Global Governance', in Stefano Guzzini and Dietrich Jung (eds.), *Contemporary Security Analysis and Copenhagen Peace Research* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 106–16; Barry Buzan, 'Will the 'Global War on Terrorism' Be the New Cold War?', *International Affairs*, 82:6 (2006), pp. 1101–18.

¹¹ Stephan Elbe, 'Should HIV/AIDS Be Securitized? The Ethical Dilemmas of Linking HIV/AIDS and Security', *International Studies Quarterly*, 50:1 (2006), pp. 119–44; Colin McInnes, 'HIV/AIDS and Security', *International Affairs*, 82:2 (2006), pp. 315–26.

¹² Ole Wæver offers his own assessment of the 'internal problems' and 'external criticism' of securitisation theory in 'Securitization: Taking Stock of a Research Programme in Security Studies', paper presented at the PIPES seminar, University of Chicago, 24 February 2003, especially pp. 26–30.

¹³ Thierry Balzacq, 'The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:2 (2005), pp. 171–201; Holger Stritzel, 'Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and beyond', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13:3, pp. 357–83. See also Williams, 'Words, Images'.

¹⁴ Mathias Albert, 'Security as Boundary Function: Changing Identities and Securitization in World Politics', *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 3:1 (1998), pp. 23–46; Bill McSweeney, 'Identity and Security: Buzan and the Copenhagen School', *Review of International Studies*, 22:1 (1996),

securitisation theory 'reads' empirical contexts, primarily its ability to identify, give voice to, or silence securitisation actors.¹⁵ Perhaps the most widely debated issues in securitisation theory fall in the final category, addressing its normative aspects and implications: either those engendered by the inevitable metamorphosis of practices of theorising securitisation into practices of securitisation,¹⁶ or those generated by the contradictions between securitisation/de-securitisation and the 'practicing political ideology' of liberalism.¹⁷

This article builds on these recent additions to securitisation theory in order to further refine and extend its significant contribution to the analysis of contemporary security by addressing a fourth type of problem, and one much less frequently observed.¹⁸ Dubbed here 'contextual', this problem contains a fusion of the previous three at the moment when securitisation theory delivers its answer to the primordial question signalled above: what is security? Its position here is acutely contradictory. Securitisation theory urges the analyst not to engage in the evaluation of security issues qua security issues (either 'real' or 'unreal'), since this is decided by the actors who decide to securitise or not these issues. At the same time however, securitisation theory provides a yardstick for estimating whether given policies are about security or not, since 'security' is what fulfils the criteria of securitisation, and *nothing else*. As a result, securitisation theory is torn between its aim to establish the 'essence' of security, and its claim that security is what actors make of it. From its perspective, Taylor's 'confrontation' between conceptual language and the subjects' self-understanding has theory winning all the time.

Does security have indeed an unchanging essence, as securitisation theory assumes? Can security not become something other than our current theoretical fiat, through the combination of bustle, serendipity and power usually labelled

pp. 82–93; Bill McSweeney, 'Durkheim and the Copenhagen School: A Response to Buzan and Wæver', *Review of International Studies*, 24:1 (1998), pp. 137–40.

¹⁵ Lene Hansen, 'The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 285–306; Iver B. Neumann, 'Identity and the Outbreak of War: Or Why the Copenhagen School of Security Should Include the Idea of Violation in its Framework of Analysis', *International Journal of Peace Studies*, 3:1 (1998), pp. 7–22; see also Balzacq, 'Three Faces' and Williams, 'Words, Images'.

¹⁶ Claudia Aradau, 'The Perverse Politics of Four-Letter Words: Risk and Pity in the Securitisation of Human Trafficking', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33:2 (2004), pp. 251–77; Claudia Aradau, 'Security and the Democratic Scene: Desecuritization and Emancipation', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 7:4 (2004), pp. 388–413; Andreas Behnke, 'The Message or the Messenger? Reflections on the Role of Security Experts and the Securitization of Political Issues', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 35:1 (2000), pp. 89–105; Johan Eriksson, 'Observers or Advocates? On the Political Role of Security Analysts', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 34:3 (1999), pp. 311–30; Johan Eriksson, 'Debating the Politics of Security Studies. Response to Goldmann, Wæver and Williams', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 34:3 (1999), pp. 345–52; Jeff Huysmans, 'Language and the Mobilisation of Security Expectations. The Normative Dilemma of Speaking and Writing Security', paper for the ECPR Joint Sessions, workshop *Redefining Security*, Mannheim, 26–31 March 1999; Ole Wæver, 'Securitizing Sectors? Reply to Eriksson', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 34:3 (1999), pp. 334–40; Michael C. Williams, 'The Practices of Security: Critical Contributions. Reply to Eriksson', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 34: (1999), pp. 341–4.

¹⁷ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, 'Liberalism and Security: The Contradictions of the Liberal Leviathan', Copenhagen Peace Research Institute *Working Paper* 23 (1998), p. 1; see also Jeff Huysmans, 'Minding Exceptions: The Politics of Insecurity and Liberal Democracy', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 3:3 (2004), pp. 321–41.

¹⁸ Notable exceptions are Nils Bubandt, 'Vernacular Security: The Politics of Feeling Safe in Global, National and Local Worlds', *Security Dialogue*, 36:3 (2005), pp. 275–96; Matt McDonald, 'Securitization and the Construction of Security', *European Journal of International Relations*, 14:4 (2008); Balzacq, 'Three Faces'.

‘interaction’ or ‘construction’? Is it possible at all for eminently political concepts such as security, which exist in a liminal space between theory and practice, to be suspended from politics and distilled into a perennial category? This contradiction runs deeper than securitisation theory, and at stake in its resolution are the epistemological and methodological foundations of the discipline of Security Studies as a whole, primarily its understanding of the relationship between security theory and practice. This article formulates a hermeneutical reworking of securitisation theory that does not predetermine the winner in Taylor’s confrontation. To think hermeneutically is therefore to focus on the contextual meaning of security, but also to recognise that security is embodied in the understandings of theorists and their subjects alike.¹⁹

My argument proceeds in three moves. First, I discuss critically some of the key claims of securitisation theory. Encapsulating the core of securitisation theory, these claims are that a) actors *define* security; b) actors *construct* security; c) security becomes ‘what actors make of it’ through securitising *speech acts*; d) the construction of security, and security itself, must be understood as a *practice*. The sequential exploration of these issues replaces a more conventional presentation of securitisation theory, with the aim of showing that they all converge towards a crucial statement which is currently absent from the apparatus of securitisation theory: the *definition of security* is a matter of context.

Second, I argue on the basis of this discussion that securitisation theory is ambivalent in its hermeneutic stance, and as a result, methodologically and epistemologically contradictory. A contextual and metamorphic understanding of security produces, I argue, a more precise algorithm for empirical research, focused on the construction of threats, referent objects, securitisation actors, security practices and the very meaning of security.

The final section explores the consequences of this hermeneutical critique of securitisation theory for Security Studies in general. In two ‘corollaries for the contextual study of security’, the final section will engage two crucial debates likely to be affected by the thesis of the primacy of context. The first concerns the potential dissolution of security as a conceptual and political referent engendered by context-focused security analysis. The second refers to the necessity and desirability of the normative dimension of security theory. The corollaries challenge the position taken by securitisation theory in these two debates. A ‘context first’ strategy refocuses securitisation theory empirically by dislodging the definitional fiat that obstructs it, and elicits a normative dimension that is not only necessary, but also unavoidable in the evaluation of different conceptions of security and the policies they inspire. While the first aspect is incompletely delivered, the second is explicitly rejected by securitisation theory.

¹⁹ I refer generically to ‘hermeneutics’ in this article conscious that this masks its schisms and overlooks many of its nuances as well as its critiques. In doing so, I hope to draw attention to the significance of context, interpretation, and the liminality of meaning, while at the same time not make the argument hostage to the many debates that fracture hermeneutics itself. My reading of hermeneutics draws very broadly from Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, translated by K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989); Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1980); Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics Vol. 1, Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

In essence therefore, my argument is one for a robust contextualism in Security Studies, with securitisation theory as a useful starting point. This provides the initial step in the formulation of a hermeneutical approach in Security Studies that builds upon the existing links between securitisation theory and a variety of perspectives in international relations theory (IR), from traditional realism to constructivism, critical theory, and pragmatism. In addition, this approach encourages the empirical investigation of the imperative questions signalled above from a perspective that is neither conceptually foreclosed, nor politically unengaged.

Key elements of securitisation theory: a critical overview

The success of securitisation theory rests at least partially on its ability to overcome the divide between 'broad' and 'traditional' takes on security by identifying a logic common to both of them. Underlying this divide is a major debate of security theory, namely the epistemologically and methodologically laden proposition that new *approaches* to security (as opposed to the traditional, realist take) are necessary for the empirical study of new *concepts* of security. Most of the research in the broad school of security takes as its starting point a perceived empirical transformation of security especially in the past two decades, and in no small measure due to securitisation theory, talk of 'new concepts of security' is now quite common. Securitisation theory shares with this movement in Security Studies two principles: (1) there are analytical as well as political benefits in thinking of security in broad terms; and (2) the concept and the practice of security are the product of a more or less loosely defined process of construction. Both principles challenge exclusively statist and militarist understandings of security, and open up a wider framework for the study and practice of security which includes a variety of actors who are affected by security or who provide security, as well as a multiplicity of fields of interaction which generate security threats.²⁰

Importantly, securitisation theory can also placate some of the concerns of traditional security theorists, who find it relatively easy to accept the essential consequence of securitisation: security *was made* the way it is. There are no theoretical impediments to agreeing that at some point in the distant past some issues have become security issues, if it is also noted that since then these security issues and the associated ways of doing something about them have sedimented in a form pretty much identical with that suggested by traditional security analysis.²¹ This reading of securitisation allows a predominantly military and state-centric

²⁰ A significant variety can be found under this broad theoretical umbrella – critical security studies, constructivist, feminist and post-structuralist approaches. Key texts are Ken Booth, (ed.), *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner, 2005); David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester and Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press/Manchester University Press, 1998); Peter Katzenstein, (ed.), *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, (eds), *Critical Security Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Richard Wyn Jones, 'Message in a Bottle? Theory and Praxis in Critical Security Studies', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 16:3 (1995), pp. 299–319.

²¹ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 35.

understanding of security to remain the focus of analysis in many empirical cases. Yet even if traditional security analysts might be swayed by the idea of securitisation in *illo tempore*, their principled objection to a continuous reiteration of such processes of securitisation is both empirical and analytical: actors do not re-securitise too often, and even if they *are* tempted to broaden the scope of security, this is undesirable because it destroys the coherence of security as a practical and political field, leading to poor security analysis and even poorer security policies.²² Since new concepts of security either do not exist or are undesirable, traditional theorists are thus likely to reject a division of analytical labour with the newer approaches in security studies.

Securitisation theory perceives as artificial this division of labour between broad and traditional security studies, and tries to transcend it by producing a unified analytical framework that accounts for the manner in which security is contextually produced and practically deployed by relevant actors. The success of this strategy is highly dependant on the manner in which securitisation theory defines security, and the manner in which this definition is used in the empirical study of security policy.

Defining

This attempt to straddle traditional and critical approaches rests on the definition of security – more precisely, the *definitions* of security – offered by securitisation theory. The first, ‘discursive’, definition inscribes securitisation theory in the broad school of security through its understanding of security as a speech act.²³ This means that whatever counts as security is the product of a discursive process through which, as Williams puts it, ‘threats become represented and recognized’.²⁴ The second definition, establishing a somewhat surprising, but durable continuity with traditional approaches, describes security as ‘survival in the face of existential threats’.²⁵ Securitisation theory starts therefore from the logical conclusion that no referent objects can be excluded analytically, because as we can and did see, empirically, different objects have been securitised.²⁶ Its combination of Arnold Wolfers’s classic definition – security is ‘the absence of threats to acquired values’²⁷ – with the neo-realist emphasis on survival thus produces a form of ‘neo-conventional security analysis [which] sticks to the traditional core of the concept of security (existential threats, survival), but is undogmatic as to both sectors (not only military) and referent objects (not only the state)’.²⁸

²² Stephen Walt, ‘The Renaissance of Security Studies’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 35:2 (1991), p. 213.

²³ Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, p. 55.

²⁴ Williams, ‘Words, Images’, p. 513.

²⁵ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 27.

²⁶ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, pp. 70–1.

²⁷ Arnold Wolfers, ‘National Security as an Ambiguous Symbol’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 67:4 (1952), p. 485.

²⁸ Wæver, ‘European Security Identities’, p. 110. As Williams observes, this conception of what security is *about* is the product of the ‘Schmittian legacy’ traceable in Wæver’s work. Williams, ‘Words, Images’, pp. 514–15; see also Ole Wæver, ‘Security Agendas Old and New, and How to Survive Them’, Working Paper No. 6, Universidad Torcuato di Tella, September 2000. It is important to

Unnoticed by most students of securitisation theory, the two definitions are not only radically distinct – one apparently open, the other distinctly inflexible – but also bound up in a hierarchy that privileges the traditional definition over its discursive counterpart. This hierarchy performs a key function for securitisation theory: it locks-in the *meaning* of security and insulates it from conceptual variation or practical reformulation.²⁹ Not only does this allow swift decisions concerning what is security and what is not, but it also remedies the apparent chasm between broad and traditional conceptions of security. Once the logic of survival is included into the discursive practice of securitisation, traditional security policies become familiar once again, while policies based on apparently new conceptions of security become the subject of a simple test that validates their *nature* as security policies.

To some degree, this is unsurprising, because it reflects the aim of securitisation theory to identify a ‘characteristic pattern with an inner logic’ that makes it possible to study different empirical manifestations of security ‘without losing the essential quality of the concept’.³⁰ Security Studies in general would thus escape the endless debates concerning ‘what is a real threat or a real security problem’ sparked by the broadening of its agenda.³¹ Yet paradoxically, this attempt to resist judgements about what *real security problems are* – an argument that contrasts with that of Critical Security Theory on epistemological, but also on normative grounds³² – results in a much stronger claim about what *real security means*: security always means survival in the face of existential threats.

As already suggested in the preamble, a first contradiction of securitisation theory is therefore that between its intention to establish an intransient essence of security, and its scepticism of all analytical frameworks which ‘assume that “security” has a general meaning independent of its context’.³³ As will be argued below, this contradiction affects quite dramatically a number of other dimensions of securitisation theory, in particular its disposition towards practices of security and their actors.

And constructing security

Having identified the ‘particular sociopolitical logic that is characteristic of security’,³⁴ and more specifically its ‘rhetorical structure [referring to] survival,

note that this continuity can also be observed in other approaches, from critical security studies to constructivism to the paradigm of human security. Other attempts to examine the concept and meaning of security maintain, albeit in a slightly modified form, this ‘essence’ of security. See Jeff Huysmans, ‘Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 234 and 236. See also Behnke, ‘Reflections’, pp. 90–91.

²⁹ Jeff Huysmans, ‘Revisiting Copenhagen. Or, on the Creative Development of a Security Studies Agenda in Europe’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:4 (1998), pp. 500–1; Williams, ‘Words, Images’, p. 516; McDonald, ‘Securitization and the Construction of Security’.

³⁰ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 27.

³¹ Barry Buzan, ‘Rethinking Security’ after the Cold War’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 32:1 (1997), p. 19.

³² Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 35.

³³ Wæver, ‘Taking Stock’, p. 9, footnote 33.

³⁴ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 33.

priority of action',³⁵ securitisation theory aims to study the mechanisms that produce an 'intersubjective and socially constructed' security.³⁶ This logical and rhetorical structure provides a reliable methodological instrument that is geared-up for adjudicating empirical reality. However, the ambition to answer the question 'How do we know when we are dealing with a security issue or policy?' is undermined by the notion of construction upon which the concept of securitisation rests.

Its potential turn towards a 'radical constructivism'³⁷ is placated by the hierarchy of definitions that underlies securitisation theory, and by the adoption of a temporal perspective that gives privilege to the past over the present, and the sedimented over the actively dynamic. Since security is, like all social constructions, both durable enough, and taken-for-granted enough, securitisation theorists think it reasonable to establish definitionally the meaning of security, and also to expect that we would always end up anyway studying how security has been constructed. In the reference to an 'intersubjective and socially constructed' security, neither *security*, nor the *logic* of security is actually constructed. Both are definitional givens. Only threats are constructed in the sense that various issues are framed as existential threats. To quote Buzan et al. again, 'security means survival in the face of existential threats, but what constitutes an existential threat is not the same'.³⁸

Not that this observation would come as a surprise to securitisation theorists. They deflect this critique – formulated initially by McSweeney³⁹ – by acknowledging first that their 'inert constructivism'⁴⁰ studies construction in its sedimented form, and second that their take on the constructedness of security is not matched by the constructedness of other things.⁴¹ What *is* constructed, they argue – that is, the links between threats and referent objects, and the conditions of legitimacy for successful claims to security – is sufficiently significant. Most importantly, the selective identification of the things that *are* constructed allows much needed analytical rigour. Yet does it make sense, empirically as well as analytically, that threats are intersubjectively defined,⁴² or that sovereignty can change its meaning,⁴³ but that the meaning of security is permanently locked away from anything actors might want to do with it? Any notion of intersubjective interaction cannot be divided into areas where construction happens and others where it does not. Wæver is all too aware of this matter, and even notes that for 'a constructivist, it is – or should be – impossible to create a dichotomy between the fully constructed and thus totally fluid on the one hand and the given on the other hand'.⁴⁴ However, this is precisely what the definition of security in securitisation theory effects, reducing the construction of security to the successful production of the

³⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁶ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 31.

³⁷ Buzan, 'Rethinking Security', p. 20.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁹ McSweeney, 'Identity and Security'.

⁴⁰ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 205.

⁴¹ Ibid., *Security*, pp. 35 and 203–7; Huysmans, 'Revisiting Copenhagen', 493.

⁴² Ibid., *Security*, p. 25.

⁴³ Wæver, 'European Security Identities', p. 116.

⁴⁴ Wæver, 'Taking Stock', p. 28.

'label security'.⁴⁵ While labelling can indeed be seen as an intersubjective process, it still remains confined to the legitimisation of the label and excludes from construction the label itself, that is, the meaning of security.

If the definition of security is axiomatically out of the actors' reach – the second definition tells us that actors cannot operate with a concept of security that is *not* about survival – then the notion of construction that underpins securitisation theory must be re-evaluated, and its empirical relevance reconsidered. What if recalcitrant actors contradict the theorist? If actors do (not) use broad definitions of security, does it mean that theorists also should (not)? Who securitises what, in what context, and to what degree of success – the focal points of securitisation theory – is indeed important for understanding how security is made, but this understanding is incomplete if it fails to observe that it inevitably rests on contextual definitions of security. As suggested by Buzan's own distinction between mature and immature anarchies,⁴⁶ or Wendt's distinction between cultures of anarchy,⁴⁷ different conceptions and practices of security can operate in different places and at different times. The construction of security must therefore be understood as a practice (whose result is the meaning of security) that contextually constitutes other practices (thereby known as security policies), which contribute themselves to the continuous construction, sedimentation, and re-negotiation of what security means.

With speech-acts

One does not need to embark on a quest to make securitisation theory more constructivist in order to formulate this argument. What is at stake here is the promising and potentially radical answer it offers to the question 'what is security?' That this is so is amply demonstrated by a return to the tension between its two definitions of security.

Perhaps the most innovative element of securitisation theory is its understanding of security as a speech act. Initially, this definition instigated a dramatic shift in the understanding of the relationship between the concept and practice of security. Actors were no longer seen to act on the basis of a definition of security. Rather, actors did security by uttering security:⁴⁸ as Wæver argued, 'the word "security" is the *act*'.⁴⁹ Bold and innovative as it was, this idea could not be sustained because it raised the contextual problem signalled above. Empirical analysis risked encountering security with a meaning different from that postulated by securitisation theory. Consequently, its imperative rhetorical structure – 'existential threats, emergency action, and effects on inter-unit relations by breaking free of rules'⁵⁰ – takes precedence over the word security: 'we use', Buzan

⁴⁵ Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', p. 50; Wæver, 'European Security Identities', p. 106; Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd edition (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

⁴⁷ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 26.

⁴⁹ Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', p. 55, original emphasis.

⁵⁰ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 26.

et al. claimed, ‘this logic as a definition of security because it has a consistency and precision the word as such lacks’.⁵¹

Clearly contradicting the definition of the speech act, Buzan *et al.* argued further that actors ‘who securitize do not necessarily say “security”, nor does their use of the term *security* necessarily always constitute a security act’.⁵² Thus, the essential ingredient of securitisation is no longer the word security, but the words threat and survival. Actors no longer do security by uttering security: they do security by uttering ‘threat to survival’ and (something equivalent to) ‘exceptional measures’. Through the dislocation of the word security from securitisation practice, definitional stability is maintained at the not inconsiderable cost of weakening the most powerful element of securitisation theory. In this manner, one of the most significant contributions to security theory ends up paradoxically eliminating security itself from its conceptual apparatus and vocabulary. This virtual excising of security has significant effects:

(1) The first is that analysts become exclusively competent in identifying security situations. What actors say and do in *their own terms* is relevant only when it corresponds to theoretical prescription. Analysts could thus end up deliberately disregarding key security dynamics, or including involuntary or contextually accidental quasi-securitisations in the form of appeal to exceptional measures.⁵³

(2) If we ignore actors uttering ‘security’, we are no longer able to identify the moments when *they* conjure up a security context. When actors say security, they establish a rhetorically and practically appropriate frame of reference. Security is therefore essential – for actor and analyst alike – in order to understand the actors’ *intention* to enter this semantic field, this language game, this logic of action. Put briefly, security is a necessary part of security analysis because of its power to draw a field of interaction intersubjectively shared by all actors involved.

(3) A central insight of securitisation theory and contemporary security theory in general is eradicated: understanding the *power* of security. Security is always powerful and never inconsequential, no matter how messy, frivolous or inconsistent the actors’ use of the word may be. In securitisation theory, this understanding inhered in its emphasis on the contested nature of securitisation, whose success depends on the legitimacy of its actors and referent objects. Thus, the focus on threats/survival rather than security conceals what Buzan *et al.* themselves called the ‘power politics’ of the concept of security.⁵⁴

(4) The concept of securitisation has gradually lost its precision. In the latest formulations, ‘threats’ can be securitised, as well as ‘forces’, ‘actors and processes’ or ‘issues’.⁵⁵ Evidently, to argue that threats are securitised works against the logic of securitisation theory: this assumes that there exist threats which are subsequently securitised, whereas initially securitisation suggested that something being a threat is a matter of intersubjective construction. The distinction between threat and referent object is also blurred. Initially, securitisation meant that an issue ‘is

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵² Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 33; also Wæver, ‘European Security Identities’, p. 109, fn.30.

⁵³ Balzacq, ‘Three Faces’, pp. 188–90.

⁵⁴ See Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, pp. 31–2; 208; and Wæver, ‘Taking Stock’, p. 33.

⁵⁵ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, p. 465.

presented as an existential threat'.⁵⁶ That is to say, to securitise an issue meant to construct *it* as an existential *threat* to a referent object. Lately however, Laustsen and Wæver argue that 'the act of referring to [. . .] objects as *threatened* typically means securitizing an issue',⁵⁷ but also that 'the act of securitizing an issue involves the identification of an enemy *threatening* a referent object'.⁵⁸ Securitisation seems to mean simultaneously identifying referent objects *and* identifying enemies.⁵⁹

(5) At stake is therefore more than just a shift from a word (security) to another (threat/survival/exceptional measures). A nominal understanding of security would produce a research methodology whose only ambition is to discover the word security. The issue here is the attempt to interpret the *meaning* of security as it is deployed by situated actors. After all, the relevance of 'existential fear' or 'threat' is *produced* by security itself, because for many actors, *now*, security means 'freedom from fear/threat'. It is important therefore to hang onto security in order to track and understand its effects and their potential transformation.

To sum up, its hierarchy of definitions of security affects the conceptual coherence of securitisation theory, blurring its operationalisation of speech acts and its methodological outlook, risking as a consequence losing one of its key strengths: its focus on what actors do, in their own terms. This latter issue calls attention to another essential ingredient of securitisation theory, namely its understanding of security as practice.

Security as practice

Practice is very much present in the vocabulary of securitisation theory. Security, argues Wæver, 'is a practice'.⁶⁰ What this practice entails precisely remains open to interpretation, and securitisation theorists offer two options. In the first instance, the practice of security is seen as 'a specific way of framing an issue'.⁶¹ Through this practice an issue 'becomes a security issue not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat'.⁶² To practice security is therefore to frame, to present. However, a different formulation stipulates that 'the label "security" has become the indicator of [. . .] a specific field of practice'.⁶³ In this field, 'states threaten each other, challenge each other's sovereignty, try to impose their will on each other, defend their independence'.⁶⁴ To practice security is thus to threaten, challenge, impose and defend.

⁵⁶ Buzan et al., *Security*, pp. 24–5.

⁵⁷ Carsten Bagge Laustsen and Ole Wæver, 'In Defence of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitization', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29:3 (2000), p. 719, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Laustsen and Wæver, 'Religion', p. 732, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ In the same article, the statement 'fundamentalism is securitized' means at one point that *fundamentalism* must be defended against challenges to it, while later 'fundamentalism is securitized' means that *states* must defend *against* fundamentalism (pp. 720–3). This contradiction does not simply reflect the mutual securitization of 'fundamentalists' and 'secularists' (p. 723); rather, it signals the use of 'securitization' to denote two different practices.

⁶⁰ Wæver, 'European Security Identities', p. 106.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶² Buzan et al., *Security*, pp. 24–5.

⁶³ Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', p. 50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Clearly, this ambiguity is derived from the two different definitions of security formulated by securitisation theory. It also confirms the difficulty in reconciling them. If security is at the same time a ‘speech act’ and ‘survival’, then naturally to ‘practice security’ would mean to frame *and* to survive. This reconciliation is however not permitted by the structure of securitisation, for two reasons. (1) Securitisation also means ‘declaring something – a referent object – existentially threatened’.⁶⁵ This seems to entail that *securitisation* and *security* are interchangeable concepts, because they mean the same thing: to practice security is to frame, and to securitise is also to frame. (2) Although traditional definitions see security practices as survival practices, securitisation theory cannot make this equivalence because it allocates a specific role to survival practices: quite clearly, threatening, challenging and defending fall under the distinct heading of exceptional measures. To *argue* that something requires exceptional measures is not the same as to *take* exceptional measures, unless we take exceptional measures to be speech acts too – which is not how securitisation theory sees them, for the obvious reason that for example ‘defending’ is not a speech act. Thus, if ‘security practice’ means securitisation, then logically security practice cannot mean survival practice (in the form of exceptional measures). Exceptional measures are those practices that *enact* a successful instance of securitisation.

The role of practice in securitisation theory must therefore be reconsidered. A suggestive example is the application of securitisation theory to European integration and to the study of societal security in different empirical contexts. A key characteristic of European security is that the integration of the Central and East European countries in the institutional framework of the EU, NATO and the OSCE has been defined by policy-makers as a *security* policy. Seen through the lens of securitisation theory, this would mean that European security actors have identified a set of threats and a set of exceptional measures – that is, institutionalised integration itself – to solve them. This moves integration from the realm of normal politics to that of security politics, which implies that the lack of institutionalisation is ‘normal’, a proposition which is as theoretically laden as it is empirically false. Securitisation theorists argue however that there are two reasons why European integration *is not* a security issue: first, because the actors involved do not speak the language of threats, exceptional measures, and point of no return, and thus the definition of security is not fulfilled; and second, because security policy has been replaced by a process of desecuritisation which has transformed the nature of international relations in this context.⁶⁶

This reading of European security is nevertheless deeply problematic. Key here is that European actors still stubbornly speak security, even in the absence of existential threats. This means that, although desecuritisation (understood here as an absence of threat-labelling and exceptional measures-calling) has occurred, security is still present, but in a different form – for example, that of a security

⁶⁵ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 36.

⁶⁶ Wæver, ‘European Security Identities’, p. 120. Wæver also offers a second, conflicting interpretation: integration *can* be read as security policy directed against the existential threat posed by Europe’s own bloody past. See also Jouko Huru, ‘On the Changing Essence of Security’, in Jouko Huru et al. (eds), *New Dimensions of Security in Central and Northeastern Europe*, Research Report No. 83 (Tampere: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 1998), especially pp. 19–21.

community.⁶⁷ The practices of a security community remain practices of security, although *different* security practices. It is precisely for this reason that integration is ‘normal’ politics and *also* security politics: the ‘normalisation’ of institutionalised integration is at the very heart of European security, so national or institutional actors have very seldom portrayed integration as ‘exceptional’.

The problem becomes even more apparent in the study of societal security, the area where securitisation theory has been applied most often, and where its consequences have been most widely debated.⁶⁸ A brief reminder: in the societal sector, securitisation means the identification of existential threats (for example, migration) to a referent object (the identity of a society) and calls for exceptional measures (for example, asylum and border control policies) that fall ‘outside the normal bounds of political procedure’.⁶⁹ In his study of Danish security politics, Wæver draws attention to the role played by the mass media – through TV programmes, for example – both in the *securitisation*, and in the *securing* of national identity, and concludes that ‘culture [becomes] security policy’.⁷⁰

But it is difficult to argue that the policies studied by Wæver are *security* policies. To argue that ‘culture is security policy’ would contradict the definition of securitisation: ‘[if] by means of an argument about the priority and urgency of an existential threat the securitising actor has managed to break free of procedures or rules he or she would otherwise be bound by, we are witnessing a case of securitization’.⁷¹ Are TV-shows-as-security-policies ‘free of the rules’ of daily TV programming, or national and European politics? Is cultural policy – indeed, capital C ‘Culture’ – at any times exceptional and urgent? Are cultural politics and identity politics *ever* outside ‘normal’ politics? Such an argument rests on the contested categories of ‘normality’ and normal politics, which securitisation theory does not define.

A further illustration of this problem is the argument formulated by Buzan *et al.* in their analysis of the societal security sector, that ‘to engage in self-redefinition will in many cases be an important security strategy’.⁷² This statement begets a similar question: why and when is self-redefinition *exceptional*, ab-normal politics? Clearly, self-redefinition is not always, or even seldom, exceptional. Conditions of exceptionality (and normality) are highly contextual. Taking the example of migration policies, even if it is not clear what makes them exceptional (or not) inside the European Union, one must only look beyond its borders to see that such policies are in place, and very ‘normal’ politics. By the Copenhagen School’s own standards, what counts as normal or exceptional – not only what counts as a threat – is different in different contexts. Wæver observes that ‘[in] the application on concrete cases, quite hopeless debates often emerge on whether something is “ordinary” or “extra-ordinary”’,⁷³ and while hinting that the solution could be more case studies that would help in the production of ‘better

⁶⁷ Browning illustrates an empirical context in which actors ‘do’ security without explicitly ‘talking security’ in ‘Region-Building’. See also Williams, ‘Words, Images’, pp. 526–7.

⁶⁸ Ole Wæver *et al.*, *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe* (London: Pinter, 1993).

⁶⁹ Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, pp. 24 and 122.

⁷⁰ Wæver, ‘European Security Identities’, p. 114.

⁷¹ Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 25.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷³ Wæver, ‘Taking Stock’, p. 27.

definition and probably differentiation',⁷⁴ he remains convinced that 'the extraordinary measures cannot be left out of the theory'.⁷⁵

But what should security *mean*, in order for 'self-redefinition' to be an exceptional, as well as an adequate security practice? Strengthening, protecting, or redefining Danish identity are part of a process that could be set in a paradigm of security, but for reasons that have less to do with exceptional measures, and more with the simultaneous re-articulation of the meaning of security and of Danish-ness.⁷⁶ Exceptional measures might therefore not always be security measures, and security measures might not always be exceptional. The measures – exceptional or not – that deal with supposed threats to identity are constituted as *security* measures by contextual definitions of security. One cannot postulate a definition of security either as 'freedom from threat', or as 'self-redefinition': these definitions are context-specific and intersubjectively constituted through practices that go beyond labelling threats.

What this means then, is that security theory must grasp an apparently elementary, but still largely ignored proposition: security politics in general is organised by *particular definitions* of security, which constitute not only the practices that define threats, but also those through which security is achieved, for example measures whose exceptionality is context-bound. *What* these measures are precisely is of essential significance, empirically as well as analytically. Empirically, it is different security practices that are the bedrock of different cultures of anarchy. Analytically, the very possibility of different security practices is at the heart of any normative assessment of security policy. Yet clearly, in order to be able to handle the difference between security practices understood in this manner, securitisation theory needs another dimension, required by the previous two: to practice security is also to construct the meaning of security. Different ways of achieving security warrant at least the hypothesis – to be investigated empirically – that they are based on a different meaning of security. We cannot, in other words, conceptualise a de-contextualised security.

Securitisation theory to the max

What precisely does it mean to 'contextualise the study of security'? To contextualise means to adopt an epistemological and methodological perspective that, while privileging the actors' definition of security, recognises the liminality of security as a category in-between theory and policy, and constantly engages the contradictions and normative consequences of contextual definitions of security. At first sight, it may seem that securitisation theory is the contextual approach *par excellence*, since its key aim is to study securitisation where and when it happens. Securitisation theory contextualises at two levels, process-specific and region-specific. At the first level, it studies speech acts and their 'external, contextual and social' facilitating conditions, which are key to understanding which issues are

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷⁶ See Peter Lawler, 'Scandinavian Exceptionalism and European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 35:4 (1997), pp. 565–94.

securitised, how different types of actors act and how they interact with their audience.⁷⁷ At the second level, securitisation theory combines the study of cross-sectoral dynamics of security with a regional level of analysis, producing what is now a fully developed regional security complex theory.⁷⁸

How then does securitisation theory cope with Taylor's hermeneutical challenge? Its authors are clearly not blind to the necessity to confront its conceptual apparatus with the language of its actors, and are inclined – at least apparently – to give primacy to actor versus analyst. This is demonstrated by a number of quite categorical statements. Since, the Copenhagen School authors argue, 'the *meaning of a concept lies in its usage* and is not something we can define analytically or philosophically according to what would be best',⁷⁹ security analysts 'cannot stand up against acts of securitisation saying this is not security',⁸⁰ because 'security is what actors make of it'.⁸¹

Categorical as they may be, these statements are contradicted, as we have seen above, by the hierarchy of the two definitions of security, whose intention (not only its effect) is precisely to eliminate contextualisation. Rigorously applied, securitisation theory provides a method of sifting through empirical observations that does not 'make analysts hostage to the self-understanding of the actors',⁸² and thus answers Taylor's litmus test directly – and negatively.⁸³ As we shall see in the next section, this negative answer is deeply problematic in general because it isolates the concept of security from its actors and politics. More specifically, this answer is problematic because, conjuring something uncomfortably close to objectivism for an approach built on a notion of intersubjectivity, it is contradictory in securitisation theory's own terms.

Buzan *et al.* clearly state that 'it is neither politically nor analytically useful to try to [...] teach the actors to understand the term correctly'.⁸⁴ As a consequence, students of security *must* take the self-understandings of the actors for real, because there is nothing outside these self-understandings to validate the exercise. We are thus required to *simultaneously* (1) take for real what actors say: when what actors say operates along the definitions of securitisation theory, analysis must investigate these speech acts in order to understand their underlying conditions and success; and (2) not to take for real what actors say, if their speech acts do not conform to the definition of security adopted. As a result, securitisation theory is completely warped methodologically as well as epistemologically.

From a methodological point of view, securitisation switches from the study of speech acts to the study of something which, as Buzan *et al.* write, 'lies not in what people consciously think the concept means but in how they implicitly use in some ways and not others'.⁸⁵ Such a reliance on the implicit meaning of security is

⁷⁷ Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 32; also Balzacq, 'Three Faces'.

⁷⁸ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*.

⁷⁹ Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 24, emphasis added.

⁸⁰ Wæver, 'Securitizing Sectors', p. 337.

⁸¹ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, p. 48, original emphasis.

⁸² Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 34.

⁸³ Here Buzan *et al.* follow Taylor very closely. Taylor argues that 'That one must confront one's language with that of one's subjects doesn't involve accepting this language', in 'The Hermeneutics of Conflict', p. 228.

⁸⁴ Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 31.

⁸⁵ Buzan *et al.*, *Security*, p. 24; see Wæver, 'Taking Stock', p. 9.

problematic for several reasons, already alluded to in the section where I examined the use of speech acts in securitisation theory. (a) Speech acts are *by definition* explicit, so to rely on implicit meanings is to ignore the speech acts themselves. Explicit, *public* utterances and texts are the raw material of discourse analysis, as securitisation theorists themselves argue.⁸⁶ (b) Although it is undoubtedly useful to explore the implicit meanings that constitute security discourse and practice, the relationship between the implicit and explicit meaning of security is not only methodologically, but also normatively thorny. In an immediate sense, eliciting potential implicit meanings is precisely the task of a hermeneutics of security. However, it is problematic to predicate the analysis of contextual meaning on the *superiority* of analytical interpretations of the implicit. What if actors formulate explicitly security in some way, but contradict themselves – and securitisation theorists – and use it implicitly in another (or the other way round, or any possible combination of the ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’)? Other than by theoretical axiom, it is difficult to establish any grounds for a hierarchy of the implicit and explicit uses of the concept of security. (c) The emphasis on the implicit at the expense of the explicit meaning of security actually reduces the discursive thrust of securitisation theory, and thus creates the risk of falling back precisely into the trap that securitisation theory was designed to avoid: that of treating political discourse as a mask, a mere façade that covers something deeper and more significant – usually ‘interests’, or in this case, implicit meanings.

To illustrate the epistemological contradiction created by securitisation theory’s acute anxiety of becoming ‘hostage to the self-understanding of the actors’, it is useful to return to Wæver’s analysis of European security. His argument is that since the actors involved in NATO enlargement have not conformed to the rhetorical structure of securitisation, we must argue – against everything *the actors involved* have said and done in the past decade – that NATO enlargement was falsely labelled a security issue. Their use of security is the result of error or habit, so in that case security is an empty signifier. Inevitably therefore, securitisation theory results in an epistemological disengagement from the empirical context investigated. Theoretical definition trumps situated practice; conceptual fiat takes precedence over what actors do. Security, after all, is not exactly what actors make of it. Rather, it is what actors make of it when actors happen to act in theoretically prescribed ways. The *meaning* of what is investigated lies not in the actors’ own interpretations, and not even in the analysts’ interpretations of what actors do. Meaning in general is axiomatically prescribed in pre-given concepts.

Yet security analysis has no choice but to rely on the self-understanding of actors, precisely because its task is to probe, question and unravel these self-understandings. Without this commitment, security theory loses its ability to discern its analytical objects, not to mention its political relevance. A hermeneutics of security is therefore necessary in order to avoid analytical impasses such as those signalled above.

⁸⁶ See Ole Wæver, ‘Identity, Communities and Foreign Policy’, in Lene Hansen & Ole Wæver (eds.), *European Integration and National Identity: The challenge of the Nordic States* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 20–50; Buzan et al., *Security*, pp. 176–178

Break it down now: constructing security in context

I have argued thus far that in order to fulfil its significant analytical potential, securitisation theory must have a thicker and more consistent understanding of its key argument that ‘security is constructed’. As the previous sections have shown, to argue that security is constructed is to argue for the importance of context. Empirically, security analysis can tease out the content of the statement ‘security is what actors make of it’ by focusing on several distinct dimensions, which are simultaneously at play and mutually reinforcing:

(1) The construction of *threats*: what issue/object becomes a threat, and why? In this instance, security analysis must determine not only which pre-existing threat is rhetorically attached to which referent object, but also, must undertake a genealogy of threats that takes into account the actors’ history, identities, and strategic myths.

(2) The construction of *referent objects*: how does an ‘object’ become a ‘referent object of security’? Securitisation theory prompts the analyst to identify these objects and map their distribution in a given security environment, be it regionally or sectorally defined. Taking the example of societal security, the empirical investigation of the process through which identity *becomes* an object of reference for securitisation is essential, because it is obvious that identity is not constituted as a unitary object in every context.⁸⁷

(3) The construction of *securitisation actors*: as Hansen demonstrates, actors are differently empowered to perform securitisation speech acts.⁸⁸ The conditions of this empowerment are necessarily contextual, so the question concerns not only the process through which different actors are constituted as legitimate voices in the process of securitisation, but also the ‘cultural construction of agency’.⁸⁹ This does not only refer to the manner in which political elites or state bureaucrats arrogate the right to securitise. It also concerns the way in which the media, civil society or academia (or the ‘security analyst’ as a category that transverses these sectors of activity), are represented or represent themselves as legitimate securitisation actors.

(4) The construction of security *measures*: how does a specific practice become a security practice? Empirically, this means investigating the logic of interaction, criteria of rationality, normative structures, and so on, which make these actions intelligible and contextually adequate as *security policies*.

(5) The construction of the *meaning of security*: most importantly, what does security mean? This does not preclude the possibility that actors operate precisely with the definition of security used by securitisation theorists – on the contrary, this is likely to be often the case. However, this must be established not by conceptual fiat, but by studying the categories of meaning that circumscribe the actors’ interactions.

As shown above, many of the recent contributions to securitisation theory explore in detail one or more of these dimensions. Although to some degree

⁸⁷ Williams, ‘Words, Images’, p. 519. Paul Roe examines the constitution of ‘migrants’ and ‘the migrant’ as referent objects of securitization in ‘Securitization and Minority Rights: Conditions of Desecuritization’, *Security Dialogue*, 35:3 (2004), pp. 279–94.

⁸⁸ Hansen, ‘The Little Mermaid’.

⁸⁹ John W. Meyer and Ronald L. Jepperson, ‘The “Actors” of Modern Society: The Cultural Construction of Social Agency’, *Sociological Theory*, 18: 1 (2000), pp. 100–20.

artificial, the algorithm maintains a holistic understanding of securitisation, through an emphasis on the mechanisms of legitimation and the role of audiences, issues which span across all five dimensions. It is nevertheless the final dimension, concerning possible contextual changes in the *definition* of security, which makes this more than an algorithm for empirical research. This dimension revives the contribution of securitisation theory to the central question identified at the beginning of this article: What is security? This dimension could provide evidence of emerging new concepts of security, as well as the theoretical instruments for their interpretation. Yet the problems entailed by ‘seeing security their way’ – to paraphrase Quentin Skinner⁹⁰ – require serious consideration, if this research algorithm is to prompt security theory towards a hermeneutics of security that is methodologically and epistemologically robust. In the following section I will sketch the conceptual and normative parameters of a hermeneutics of security, drawing broadly from existing contributions to IR and security theory.

Contexts of security: a hermeneutical approach

To argue that context matters is in a way trivial. In practically all fields of analysis in IR – from realism to constructivism, from critical theory to pragmatism, as well as in alliance theory, strategic studies, foreign policy analysis and critical geopolitics – one can find references to the significance of empirical variation, and as a consequence to the need to contextualise, to devise theoretical constructs that are context-sensitive and epistemologically and methodologically precise. Calls to contextualise security are also not new. It could be argued that all regional,⁹¹ postcolonial,⁹² or issue-specific security analyses⁹³ reflect a commitment to study security in context. However, the emphasis on the importance of context has seldom moved beyond general support, and the conceptual implications of this move in security theory have not been fully mapped out despite the fact that this principle is the driving force behind many recent advances in IR theory that challenge its assumptions of universality regarding central concepts (such as rationality or interest) or logics of interaction (such as anarchy).

⁹⁰ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, p. 1.

⁹¹ See for example Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*; Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (eds), *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organisation and International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Peter Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005); Anthony D. Lake and Patrick Morgan (eds), *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). For regional studies using securitization theory, see Graeme Herd and Joan Löfgren, ‘“Societal Security”, the Baltic States and EU Integration’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 36:3 (2001), pp. 273–96; Higashino, ‘For the Sake of Peace and Security’; Sjørusen, ‘Changes to European Security’.

⁹² Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies’, *Review of International Studies*, 32:4 (2006), pp. 329–52.

⁹³ See Matti Jutila, ‘Desecuritizing Minority Rights: Against Determinism’, *Security Dialogue*, 37:2 (2006), pp. 167–85; Mark Neufeld, ‘Pitfalls of Emancipation and Discourses of Security: Reflections on Canada’s “Security with a Human Face”’, *International Relations*, 18:1 (2004), pp. 109–23; Paul Roe, ‘Misperception and Ethnic Conflict: Transylvania’s Societal Security Dilemma’, *Review of International Studies*, 28:1 (2002), pp. 57–74.

Calls to reform and adapt the conceptual apparatus of Security Studies in order to ‘catch up with the present practices of security policy’⁹⁴ are also heard increasingly often. As Dunne and Wheeler argue, it has become necessary to provide ‘a radically different theoretical account of the *meaning* and *production* of security’,⁹⁵ which reflects the fact that ‘what security *means*, and how we *enact* it, is a matter of social and political convention, hence amenable to change’.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, security theory has remained, as Huysmans noted, ‘relatively insensitive to changes in/of the security logic itself’.⁹⁷ Most often, conceptual moves which apparently subscribe to these principles operate only at the level of referent objects (‘who’) and security measures (‘how’). As a result, they neither formulate new concepts of security, nor do they track empirically the formulation of such new definitions by actors in various contexts.

Rasmussen’s observation points out not only that the operational meaning of security *might* change, but that it has *already* changed. The solution to this, he argues, is a theoretical perspective – which he labels ‘reflexive security studies’ – that makes ‘conceptual change an empirical matter’, and thus ‘offers one possibility for taking account of (the) transformation of practice’.⁹⁸ Similar in form to the argument for contextualisation formulated in this article, Rasmussen’s thesis is formulated against the backdrop of the emergent literature on risk. However, the contextual focus of his claim that ‘the point is not how to apply the concept of security, but that the concept of security itself is changing’⁹⁹ is potentially subverted either (a) by the reduction of this change to ‘the rules by which security issues are *spotted*’ – which means that it is *not* security itself that changes,¹⁰⁰ or (b) by the adoption of a different conceptual fiat – which would thus replace ‘security means survival’ with ‘security means risk-management’. A contextual analysis of security does not necessarily seek to provide a new definition of security, because this would contradict the hermeneutic and empirical imperative ‘actors first’, and as a consequence would end up producing a different orthodoxy which, as Rytövuori-Apunen put it, ‘emphasizes theoretical perspective and conceptual logic’ yet at the cost of losing ‘its footprints in its colloquial interpretations’.¹⁰¹ Conceptual openness must therefore be matched by empirical focus, since *any* (re)definition of security may be ‘appropriate in one context (but) may be inappropriate in others’.¹⁰²

Perhaps closest to a contextual reading of security is Nils Bubandt’s concept of ‘vernacular security’, which also takes as its starting point the idea that security ‘is

⁹⁴ Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, “‘It Sounds Like a Riddle’: Security Studies, the War on Terror and Risk”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33:2 (2004), p. 395.

⁹⁵ Dunne and Wheeler, ‘We the Peoples’, p. 9, emphasis added.

⁹⁶ Behnke, ‘Reflections’, p. 96, emphasis added. See also Matt McDonald, ‘Environment and Security: Global Eco-Politics and Brazilian Deforestation’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 24:2 (2003), pp. 69–94.

⁹⁷ Huysmans, ‘Language and Mobilisation’, p. 25.

⁹⁸ Rasmussen, ‘Riddle’, p. 392.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

¹⁰⁰ Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, ‘Reflexive Security: NATO and International Risk Society’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30:2 (2002), p. 308, emphasis added.

¹⁰¹ Helena Rytövuori-Apunen, ‘Forget Post-Positivist IR! The Legacy of IR Theory as the Locus for a Pragmatist Turn’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 40:2 (2005), p. 163.

¹⁰² Nicholas Thomas and William T. Tow, ‘Gaining Security by Trashing the State? A Reply to Bellamy & McDonald’, *Security Dialogue*, 33:3 (2002), p. 380.

conceptualised and politically practised differently in different places and at different times', and at the same time emphasises an ethnographic, 'bottom-up, actor-oriented' methodology.¹⁰³ In Bubandt's view, this approach is vital for security analysis because it demonstrates that once the 'concept of security is contextualised in terms of local political histories, it becomes apparent that "security" as a political problem is neither unchanging nor semantically homogenous'.¹⁰⁴

What are, then, the consequences of a contextually-focused hermeneutics of security? Two key problems emerge from locating security in the space *shared* by 'one's language of explanation with that of one's subjects' self-understanding', to rephrase Taylor's formulation. Both are central to the debates that have shaped the general landscape of Security Studies, both are issues of contention between the traditional and broad schools of security, and both are central to the emergence of securitisation theory in this landscape. The first concerns the dissolution of security as a conceptual and political referent, if security means indeed 'anything and everything' actors might want it to mean. An equally significant problem concerns the normative implications of a context first strategy, which would seem to require an abdication from the normative impulse of security analysis. As I will demonstrate below in a discussion of two corollaries for the contextual study of security, a context-centred perspective changes the answers given to these problems by the initial formulation of securitisation theory.

Two corollaries for the contextual study of security

(1) The first corollary concerns the immediate question raised by the hermeneutical principle that we must privilege the actors' security definitions: Can security really mean *anything*? Securitisation theorists' fear of becoming hostage to the actors' self-understanding is a reflection of their attempt to avoid 'the slippery slope of "everything is security"', the scenario anticipated and dreaded by the critics of the broad school.¹⁰⁵ In an immediate sense, the answer is unavoidable: yes, in principle security *could* mean anything, according to the manner in which actors contextually define it. This is the essence of the idea that security is what actors make of it. However, potentially radical diversity of the meaning of security need not cause the angst of lost disciplinary identity and analytical precision.

First of all, the (unlikely) scenario of security meaning 'anything' for situated actors would be interesting rather than devastating. Of course, the death of security as we know it would be big news. Its significance must not, however, be judged in terms of the consequences for the disciplinary study of security, but rather, in terms of its effect on our understanding of the relationship between the theory and practice of international politics. Semantically sealed concepts may be useful for marking out with certainty the objects of theoretical inquiry and

¹⁰³ Bubandt, 'Vernacular Security', p. 291.

¹⁰⁴ Bubandt, 'Vernacular Security', p. 276. However, Bubandt also claims that his 'argument is not a relativist assertion that there are multiple cultural constructions of security' (p. 277). This statement seems difficult to reconcile with his claim that vernacular security allows a 'break with the universalist pretensions of the concept of "human security"' (p. 278).

¹⁰⁵ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, p. 71.

disciplinary *domaines réservés*. However, social science concepts in general, those of IR in particular, and the concept of security especially are not only open to change – think of the meaning of democracy, for instance – but they also exist theoretically by virtue of a continuous conversation between theory and the praxis it tries to make sense of. A perennial foreclosing of the concept of security omits the fact that where security is concerned, ‘theory has become embodied and hides itself in a public praxis’.¹⁰⁶ Talk of the ‘corruption’ of the concept of security¹⁰⁷ evokes therefore a conceptual purity that is as illusory as the supremacy of theorist over actor it attempts to establish. The death of security would therefore provide an interesting live example of the transformation of conceptually embodied political praxis that has long been the subject of Skinnerian contextualism and studies in conceptual history.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, this diversity cannot be observed yet, and it is even in principle highly unlikely. This is not, however, because security has an ‘ontological content’,¹⁰⁹ be it that identified by securitisation theory, or that suggested by critical or risk theorists. Even if ‘ontologically anomalous’,¹¹⁰ security does not mean ‘everything’ because all actors always have a limited practical baggage, sedimented in contextually legitimate narratives and logics of action.¹¹¹ To argue hermeneutically for the significance of context is therefore not to argue for the boundless meaning of security: on the contrary, it is to highlight its boundedness – or in Gadamerian terms, to explore the ‘horizons’ within which actors and security analysts alike come to understand what security means as well as what it means to practice security.¹¹² Securitisation theorists are in this sense right to note the sedimentation of a certain meaning of security, but they transform this observation into a conceptual axiom, rather than maintaining the theoretical principle and practical possibility that sedimented categories of meaning can change.

An equally interesting question raised by the primacy of context is whether it is *possible* to analyse a security context based solely on the actors’ definitions – that is, without a prior concept of security. Of course, concept-free analysis is not only epistemologically dubious, but also practically improbable. The professionalisation of the discipline of security studies ensures that analysts will always engage an empirical context equipped with a range of conceptual lenses (and most likely, a

¹⁰⁶ Patrick A. Heelan, ‘Hermeneutical Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Science’, in Hugh J. Silverman (ed.), *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 226.

¹⁰⁷ Rita Floyd, ‘Towards a Consequentialist Evaluation of Security: Bringing together the Copenhagen and the Welsh Schools of Security Studies’, *Review of International Studies*, 33:2 (2007), p. 349.

¹⁰⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, translated by Todd Presner, Kerstin Behnke, and Jobst Welge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁹ Matt McDonald, ‘Human Security and the Construction of Security’, *Global Society*, 16:3 (2002), p. 288. McDonald argued later that ‘security is not an ontological given’, in ‘Environment and Security’, p. 73 and 86.

¹¹⁰ J.M. Bernstein, ‘Grand Narratives’, in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur. Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 114–5.

¹¹¹ See Williams, ‘Words, Images’, p. 524. For a detailed discussion, see Felix Ciută, ‘Narratives of Security: Strategy and Identity in the European Context’, in Richard Mole (ed.), *Discursive Constructions of Identity in European Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 190–207.

¹¹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 302–7. See also Paul Ricoeur, ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’, in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur. Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 20–33; Jerome Bruner, ‘Life as Narrative’, *Social Research* 54:1 (1987), pp. 11–32; Jerome Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry*, 18:1 (1991), pp. 1–21.

preference for one of them). By their very nature as *security* analysts, security analysts have already drawn the field of their inquiry in specific ways, so it is impossible – bar an unlikely situation of simple ignorance – to examine any empirical context, at any time, without a concept of security. What is more interesting in this sense is that the same can be said about policy-making communities, which are often deliberately contaminated conceptually in the sense that politicians and bureaucrats explicitly subscribe to one or another conceptual formulation of security.¹¹³ Further attesting the liminality of security – and the fact that practitioners are well aware of it – this double hermeneutics of security is one of the key reasons why the probability that security could mean ‘anything’ is very low. This signals that the key problem in this sense is not the perennial open-endedness of the meaning of security. Rather, the key concern here is with the *consequences* of a security theory that takes security as situated actors define it. This risks reproducing the categories of praxis that govern a context, or transferring them to other empirical contexts, or foreclosing alternative political horizons.

(2) This leads us to the second corollary, which concerns the normative dimension of a hermeneutics of security: are ethnographies of security necessarily neutral? Is a normative commitment – to a particular vision of security or to particular outcomes of security policies, as advocated by critical security theorists, for example – a facultative appendage of security analysis?

My answer is that normative awareness is inherent in the very principle of the contextual variation of the meaning of security. To demonstrate this, we must ask first what kind of decisions the security analyst can legitimately take when studying a context of security. From the perspective of securitisation theory, these decisions are definitional: they are confined to observing whether the actors’ moves fulfil the structural parameters of securitisation. This is because securitisation theory is predicated on an intention to *avoid* normative evaluations, because they would require precisely the objectivist understanding of ‘real security’ that securitisation theory wants to shun. In this sense, securitisation theory is thoroughly contextual and advocates normative neutrality: any attempt to adjudicate the ‘reality’ of security issues would constitute second-order securitisation, hence would be normatively biased, so analysts must ‘observe how others advocate’.¹¹⁴ In essence therefore, the aim for normative neutrality of securitisation theory is generated by its acknowledgment of the fact that all definitions of security produced by situated actors are already and always normative.¹¹⁵

However, this analytical neutrality is unsustainable even in the short term, for two reasons. The first, widely debated already, is that to engage in the analysis of securitisation is inevitably to securitise, willingly or not – which is in essence a statement about the liminality of security.¹¹⁶ The second reason is that securitisation theorists take it as their task ‘to show the *effects* of either excessive

¹¹³ See Eriksson, ‘Observers or Advocates’, p. 316. For a study of such conceptual ‘contamination’, see Felix Ciută, ‘Region? *Why* Region? Security, Hermeneutics, and the Making of the Black Sea Region’, *Geopolitics*, 13:1 (2008), pp. 120–47.

¹¹⁴ Eriksson, ‘Observers or Advocates’, p. 314.

¹¹⁵ Eriksson, ‘Observers or Advocates’, p. 313; Williams, ‘Practices of Security’, p. 342.

¹¹⁶ See Eriksson, ‘Observers or Advocates’; Eriksson, ‘Politics of Security’, and Huysmans, ‘Language and Mobilisation’.

securitisation [...] or of not securitising'.¹¹⁷ Even if it might be possible for security analysts to limit their focus to the consequences of a particular instance of securitisation – noting for example that the effect of securitisation in one instance is continental war or genocide – it is implausible that the analysis can stop there. Not only do securitisation theorists express a preference for desecuritisation and 'responsible' securitisation,¹¹⁸ but also, all criteria – such as cost effectiveness, or number of casualties – for evaluating security policies are obviously normatively saturated. Furthermore, to focus only on the effects of securitisation is insufficient because this ignores the effects of different concepts and practices of security deployed in a particular context. Normative judgements are inherent in the analytical evaluation of the means, ends and consequences of security measures, exceptional or not.

In addition, the normative substance of (apparently neutral) conceptual statements risks being entirely effaced.¹¹⁹ Analysts may of course interpret situated security concepts/practices in a manner that transcends the categories of meaning offered by the context itself. However, it is the status conferred to these interpretations that brings forth the normative dilemmas of hermeneutics, already alluded to above.¹²⁰ To offer an interpretation in the name of a better *description* of the concept of security is essentially to point out meaning already inherent in a context. Yet an analyst will observe that a particular security strategy ignores the regional distribution of power, or that a gender dimension is absent from a particular definition/practice of security only because s/he has *already* made a decision that such a dimension could or should be present. This decision is not merely descriptive, because it endorses a particular definition of security (a traditional take on security would simply not operate in terms that include gender), and consequently, it refigures differently the relationship between the concept of security and the practices that constitute and are constituted by this concept. A prescriptive observation – a gender dimension should be present where it is absent, military capabilities should be considered where they are ignored – cannot therefore be justified analytically, but only normatively. In turn, these prescriptions are contestable in normative terms, either by the actors themselves or by other analysts.

Furthermore, the issue is not only which security concept should be preferred, if empirical research uncovers coexisting contradictory concepts – although this is of course an important and inevitable issue. Of equal significance is the relationship between analytical prescription and contextual meaning/practice, relationship that is not only hermeneutically ineluctable, but also problematic from an ethical point of view. To point out the ethical implications of different contextual definitions of

¹¹⁷ Buzan et al., *Security*, p. 40, emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Buzan, 'Rethinking Security', p. 21; Eriksson, 'Observers or Advocates', p. 322; Wæver, 'Securitizing Sectors', p. 335.

¹¹⁹ An argument made for some time by the post-positivist IR literature. See for example Michael C. Williams, 'Identity and the Politics of Security', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 204–25.

¹²⁰ The normative dimension of hermeneutics has been the subject of its sustained dialogue with Critical Theory, and following Hans-Georg Gadamer, Richard Bernstein argues that the idea of emancipation is 'already intrinsic in hermeneutic understanding'. 'The Constellation of Hermeneutics, Critical Theory, and Deconstruction', in Robert J. Dostal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 271.

security is one thing – one that calls into question the situatedness of the analyst just as much as it takes for granted the situatedness of actors. To champion a concept of security from an analytical perspective – ‘real security is emancipation’, or ‘real security is the ability to win war’, for example – is not only to make a normative judgement, but it is also to invoke of necessity the superiority of analytical formulations. In other words, the study of different contexts of security engages security analyst normatively, whereas trying to establish an essence of security brings into play an ethical position as well as a position of power. While tempting, the assumption that the analyst always knows better is fraught with pitfalls.

Despite these difficulties, the analytical benefits of a contextual perspective far outweigh the costs. The normative evaluation of concepts and practices of security policies is vital to theoretical innovation – a point that links the two corollaries. It is, after all, a mix of empirical observation, policy prescription and normative dissatisfaction that has produced most, if not all of the theoretical innovations in security theory during the past decades, including the sectoral approach, the concept of human security, and securitisation theory itself. In addition, the fact that security actors are prompted to justify their policies in explicitly normative terms is theoretically and politically significant, and can only add to the richness and sophistication of each contextual study.

To sum up, a normative *awareness* is not necessarily the product of a fixed normative *commitment* to a strategy of securitisation, a concept, or a set of security measures or another. Rather, the very existence of different concepts and practices of security means that the normative evaluation of ‘really existing security policies’ is desirable just as it is unavoidable.¹²¹

Conclusion

If anything, a contextual approach to security implies the impossibility of discovering or asserting the ‘essence of security’. Its purpose is neither to re-invent the meaning of security, nor to expand its boundaries. Rather, it is to argue that contexts of security can be studied confidently even in the absence of a perennial category of security. Moreover, this absence – or to put it differently, its ontological anomalousness – is theoretically and ethically enabling. As I have sought to demonstrate in this article, a contextual approach strengthens the empirical focus of security analysis without losing its conceptual and theoretical sophistication, and securitisation theory offers the most promising starting point in this attempt. My argument has been that, in order to maximise its analytical potential, securitisation theory needs a stronger contextual orientation. Doing so involves breaking some of its taboos but also, restating and strengthening some of its pivotal claims, especially those regarding the constructedness of security and the actor-oriented focus on speech acts.

As shown above, challenging the conceptual freeze of securitisation theory actually strengthens its force and conceptual clarity, and re-empowers empirically

¹²¹ See Huysmans, ‘Language and Mobilisation’, p. 11; in contrast, see Eriksson, ‘Observers or Advocates’, p. 321.

and normatively security theory in general. Even if artificial, the formulation of an algorithm of research that breaks down the notion of an intersubjective and socially constructed security in its constitutive elements – the construction of threats, referent objects, securitisation actors, security measures, and the meaning of security – recovers the analytical and political weight of the claim that security is what actors make of it. Granted, the application of this algorithm is unlikely to uncover radically new meanings and practices of security – at least not very often. Nonetheless, this would not be a confirmation of any axiomatic definition of security. On the contrary, this is a strong signal of the need for contextual sensitivity which preserves the empirical orientation as well as the conceptually innovative impulse that produced securitisation theory itself.

Furthermore, strengthening the contextual dimension of securitisation theory re-situates it in the debates between the traditional, broad and critical schools of thought in Security Studies. Since the contextual variation of the meaning of security requires normative awareness, securitisation theory can abandon its forced and unattainable neutrality, and focus deliberately on the evaluation of securitisation and security practices even in the absence of a unifying normative manifesto. The two corollaries give securitisation theory an additional insight in the co-constitution of theory and practice, opening-up a rich field for further research into the ‘double hermeneutics’ of security and the knowledge transfer between political and academic communities.¹²² Two puzzles still remain, and they both point out potential directions for the further development of securitisation theory in particular, and a hermeneutics of security more generally. The first, formulated by Ferguson and Mansbach a decade and a half ago, asks the simple yet inevitable question: ‘Is everything contextual?’¹²³ Whether contextualism translates easily into a general theory is obviously open to debate, and although different answers have already been given – for example by pragmatists in IR, or the literature on case studies¹²⁴ – from the perspective formulated here this seems unlikely. A second puzzle is offered by a related and equally immediate question: how can we reconcile an analytical understanding of security as contextually constructed with the constant presence of security in different contexts? Security is persistently present in contexts – different anarchic subsystems, or different cultures of security – with profoundly different attributes, structures of meaning and logics of action.¹²⁵ The main task for the future development of a hermeneutics of security is therefore this: to conceptualise security in a manner that is sensitive to context, taking seriously

¹²² See Ciută, ‘Why Region?’.

¹²³ Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, ‘Between Celebration and Despair: Constructive Suggestions for Future International Theory’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 35:4 (1991), p. 367.

¹²⁴ See for example Molly Cochran, ‘Deweyan Pragmatism and Post-Positivist Social Science in IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:3 (2002), pp. 525–548; Peter M. Haas and Ernst B. Haas, ‘Pragmatic Constructivism and the Study of International Institutions’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:3 (2002), pp. 573–601; Gerard Holden, ‘Who Contextualizes the Contextualizers? Disciplinary History and the Discourse about IR Discourse’, *Review of International Studies*, 28:2 (2002), pp. 253–70; Iver B. Neumann, ‘Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:3 (2002), pp. 627–52. For a useful overview of the case-study methodology, see Roger Gomm et al. (eds) *Case Study Method: Key Issues, Key Texts* (London: Sage, 2000).

¹²⁵ For a first cut, see Felix Ciută, ‘The End(s) of NATO: Security, Strategic Action and Narrative Transformation’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 23:1 (2002), pp. 35–62. See also Ciută, ‘Narratives of Security’, especially pp. 200–5.

the definitions and practices of actors, and is simultaneously able to look beyond these constructions, to denaturalise their meaning, to reveal their contradictions as well as their constructed nature.¹²⁶ In this sense, securitisation theory remains the most promising starting point for the formulation of a hermeneutics of security which responds to the not negligible epistemological and methodological difficulties raised by the study of what Fierke felicitously called ‘an underlying continuity to changes in the meaning of security’.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ See for example Jutta Weldes et al., ‘Introduction: Constructing Insecurity’, in Jutta Weldes et al., (eds), *Cultures of Insecurity. States, Communities, and the Production of Danger* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), especially pp. 19–20.

¹²⁷ Karin Fierke, ‘Changing Worlds of Security’, in Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams (eds), *Critical Security Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 248.