

Interview - Holger Stritzel

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr Holger Stritzel is a Lecturer in German Foreign Policy at King's College London. His research interests include: Securitization Theory, German and American foreign and security policies, transatlantic relations and Critical Security Studies. Holger completed a PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His publications include: *Securitization and Counter-Securitization in Afghanistan* co-authored with Sean Chang and *Security in Translation: Securitization Theory and the Localization of Threat*.

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in Critical Security Studies?

For me, critical security studies has turned surprisingly quickly into a very creative conceptual space beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. The creativity and openness of this discourse has always been a major fascination and attraction for me, being originally socialised in a rather narrow definition of political science and what it means to be "scientific". I think this discourse is exceptionally dynamic and I wouldn't want to single out any specific debate or perspective. Personally, I am currently particularly interested in visual securitization, practice theory and notions of the everyday in relation to foreign policy.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

That's difficult to say. I don't think I can, or want to, construct any linear narrative of change or progression in my thinking. The world is changing, I am changing, and the way I am looking at it is changing. I am always surprised how much these things actually depend on various contingencies. But having been exposed to discourse theory has certainly influenced me intellectually – the idea of opening discourses, exploring underlying assumptions and destabilizing what is taken for granted. I find this very useful both intellectually and politically, although contrary to some of my colleagues, I wouldn't say that it predisposes you to any particular political project, campaign or specific political decision.

Securitization scholars analyse instances when actors 'speak security' regarding a particular issue – thereby possibly contributing to securitization by commenting on it. Where do you stand on this ethical dilemma?

I have always felt that this problem has been a bit exaggerated in academic debates, considering the practical impact that securitization theorists actually have. We inevitably live in a constructed space but the critical project of opening thinking space is certainly a useful corrective. Being in this way critical does not mean to be "against" everything. For me, it is more about increasing sensitivity and highlighting complexities that are overlooked or deliberately suppressed.

As an expert on securitization theory, do you feel that the essence and theoretical elegance of the Copenhagen School is sufficiently retained by 'second generation' securitization scholarship?

I can certainly see the point that Wæver's central idea to focus on the transformative power of the speech act – which is different from discourse or discursive practices – is lost in several studies and reflections. Yet, this is not only true

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for second generation scholars but for 'Security: A New Framework for Analysis' as well. There is also the tendency in some contributions to just add yet another single aspect or concept that the Copenhagen School seem to have "neglected" or not explicated. I think what we can observe are securitization *studies* – based on different theories of securitization. For me, this is a positive development.

On a more general level, I have always found this argument – whether framed as "elegance" or "parsimony" – highly problematic. I think what critical security studies certainly needs least is another Kenneth Waltz. Critical theory does not aim to be predictive – for which one would inevitably need few "variables" – nor is it a piece of art. For me, the critical project is about opening rather than narrowing thinking space, and it is typically the starting point of a reflective conceptual engagement with empirical material.

Do you have any plans to further explore or build on the concept of counter-securitization, outlined in your co-authored article with Sean Chang?

I am currently working on an article on visual securitization but my research is actually moving into a different direction overall. In the next couple of years I am planning to explore foreign policy networks through a practice theoretical lens and I am in the early stages of a first research monograph about this applied to the history of transatlantic relations.

Securitization theory has been critiqued for being euro/western-centric, blind to gender and overemphasizing speech acts and visual communication. In what ways will securitization theory have to change to retain relevance?

I think there have been several interesting attempts to overcome some of these biases. Just think about the work of Juha Vuori and others. Traditional securitization theory has probably peaked a couple of years ago and several securitization theorists seem to have moved into slightly different directions. But securitization studies actually continue to surprise me and I hope this dynamic will not get lost too soon.

For the Copenhagen School, securitization occurs when issues become detached from normal political debate and elevated to emergency or exception. Where do you see the boundary between normal and exceptional politics?

This is a central and crucial conceptual boundary constructed by the Copenhagen School. But as such; it is also a possible starting point to explore this issue, for example, by focussing on how everyday practices or technology or certain operational logics, rather than speech acts, establish exceptional politics. In this sense, the slightly artificial conceptual boundary of normal and exceptional politics can be useful to deconstruct it in the context of specific projects.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of Critical Security Studies?

My main advice would probably be to focus on interesting problems and questions, and to resist tendencies to homogenize what counts as valuable research. Unfortunately, there are inherent tendencies of dogmatism, arrogance and domination in any intellectual discourse and the space created by critical security studies is certainly no exception. But I hope enough critical scholars will continue to follow their own instincts and perhaps listen a bit less to conventional keynote speeches, roundtable discussions or the most recent major funding call.

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This interview was conducted by Michael Bolt. Michael is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.