Demographics, Perceptions & the Weakening Securitisation of the US-Mexico Border

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Changing Demographics, Changing Perceptions: Are U.S. Audiences Beginning to Reject the Characterisation of Immigration as a Security Threat?

Once peaceful and relatively neglected, the border zone between the United States (US) and Mexico has altered radically in the last two decades. Today, the border is one of the most frequently travelled and heavily fortified land-crossings in the world, patrolled by an array of law enforcement, intelligence and military agencies as well as private security contractors and vigilante groups (Jones, 2011). It is now no exaggeration to say that the US-Mexico border has become 'securitised', conceptualised by government and political officials through the lens of national security that legitimates the use of emergency state tools designed to address existential threats to the state (Heyman, 2008). This phenomenon of securitisation has been justified by key securitising actors via numerous speech acts, in particular by appealing to moral and formal support such as the deterrence of undocumented migrants, the

prevention of terrorism, and the reduction of drug trafficking and spill-over violence. Nevertheless, while the securitisation of the US-Mexico border can be simplistically and deterministically explained through the Copenhagen School (CS) approach, this conventional theory of securitisation does not adequately account for the psycho-cultural orientation and nature of the audience, as well as the disparity of power exhibited between securitising actors and audience members. As the demographic make-up of America shifts, with a greater proportion of the US population identifying as Hispanic or Latino, this is beginning to alter, and in some cases erode, the dominant securitisation discourse on US immigration.

This essay attempts to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the securitisation of US-Mexico border migration by examining the largely unexplored role of the audience in the development of a security narrative. By utilising Thierry Balzacq's (2005) explicitly constructivist adaptation of the CS speech act as a context-centred and audience-centred strategic practice rather than a linear action, deeper comprehension into the role of changing demographics, temporal context, and shifting societal attitudes can be obtained. The essay proceeds in three main parts. First, a theoretical examination of the CS approach to securitisation is undertaken, highlighting its under-theorisation of the role of the audience. Balzacq's perlocutionary model is suggested as the most convincing reformulation of traditional securitisation theory that enables a more in-depth understanding of audience dynamics in securitising moves. Second, the historical securitisation of US immigration beginning in the 1980s to the present day is explored. This section emphasises the appeals by securitising actors to the audience through formal and moral forms of support. Third, it is argued that in recent years American audiences have begun to partly reject the securitisation discourse on migration. In doing so, formerly persuasive moral and formal forms of support have eroded, and a reversal of the securitisation process is occurring.

An Audience-based Refinement of the Copenhagen School Approach

Since its emergence in the period following the end of the Cold War, securitisation theory has established itself as one of the central critical approaches in the field of security studies. Standing in opposition to the more dominant realist and neo-realist concepts and paradigms of state security, much critical security study research is grounded in the early securitisation theory literature articulated in the principal texts of the Copenhagen School, in particular Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde's *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (1998). In expanding the field of security studies and moving beyond its narrow, positivist focus on the political and military sectors, the Copenhagen School (CS) forwards a constructivist framework to explore how certain issues come to be perceived as security issues (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). In simple terms, the CS approach sees securitisation as a process through which elite or 'securitising' actors label an issue as a security issue through a 'speech act'. As Wæver (1995) outlines, the issue becomes securitised simply because it is expressed in terms of security. The result of this process is that the issue is taken out of the sphere of ordinary politics and into the sphere of security in which extraordinary and emergency measures are justified to deal with the supposed existential threat. Thus, for the CS, security issues cannot be considered objectively verifiable, but are socially constructed by securitising actors through a supposedly intersubjective process (Emmers, 2003). Because of this, the role of the audience is fundamental to any successful securitisation as an issue will only be characterised in terms of security if the securitising move persuades the applicable audience to accept the existential nature of the threat. Nevertheless, while it is clear that this conceptual framework seemingly specifies a crucial role for the audience, the acceptance of the securitisation narrative by the audience is rarely expounded upon, beyond its initial introduction, by the CS (McDonald, 2008).

Within the CS framework, Wæver (1995) stresses that ordinary political issues become securitised and are perceived as threats through the use of language. Thus, the real focus is on the speech act or the illocutionary acts originally formulated in Austin's (1962) linguistic theory (Hayes, 2012). In attempting to develop a universal framework for the construction of threat, the CS does not fully account for the social and contextual factors that are necessary to fully comprehend the construction of security (Stritzel, 2007). Curiously, Wæver incorporates these factors in subsequent studies, but makes little attempt to integrate this into the CS approach by going beyond the simplistic assertion that audience acquiescence is essential to the effectiveness of any securitising move (Hansen & Wæver, 2001). This under-theorisation of the role of the audience leads to a gap between what the CS claims as security being an intersubjective process in which negotiation between security actors and audience members are central, versus the reality of a more performative, self-referential process in which security actors merely 'converse'

between themselves (Hughes, 2007). Therefore, in order to incorporate the idea of meaningful audience participation, it is necessary for the role of the speech act to be relegated somewhat to only one part of the securitisation process. Various critical security theorists have attempted to do this by modifying the original CS approach (Roe, 2008; Salter, 2008), but it is the work of Thierry Balzacq that forwards the most convincing incorporation of audience dynamics (2005; 2011).

Balzacq offers an expansion and refinement of the CS approach by attempting to move beyond the narrow conception of the speech act as a static and formally defined discursive action. Rather, he argues that an effective speech act need not require all of the conditions of success or 'felicity circumstances' to fully prevail, but that the act of securitisation is a pragmatic, strategic practice in which the psycho-cultural disposition of the audience and the power dynamics between both audience and securitising actor play fundamental roles (2005). Thus, in Balzacq's perlocutionary model, speech acts such as a Presidential keynote address on immigration reform (The White House, 2013) are not simply successful because a conventional set of rules are adhered to by the securitising actors. Instead, elite actors undertake a far more complex discursive practice designed to encourage the audience to adopt or reinforce the thesis being offered (Balzacq, 2008). Through the incorporation of strategic practices and purposes, Balzacq's model takes securitisation beyond its normative environment and entrenches it in social and contextual circumstances in which multiple securitising actors and audience groups struggle to construct (and deconstruct) different security narratives (Salter & Piche, 2011). In the case of Hispanic migration to the US, it is clear that key securitising actors such as political parties, politicians, federal and state institutions, government and bureaucratic officials as well as businesses, campaign groups and lobbyists are all locked in a constant battle for supremacy of their message.

Taking from the theoretical analysis above, it is therefore important to view securitising moves as part of a complex intersubjective process in which speech acts are not confined as singular events, but as part of an on-going process defined by multiple actors, circumstances and contexts, and in particular audience reactions and perceptions. Indeed, while conventional theories of securitisation do examine the discourse surrounding a security issue, they predominantly do so through the view of different securitising actors that control a situation, rather than through the power dynamic between influential political actors and the audience (Doty, 1999). For example, it is often the case in studies of the securitisation of migration that specific securitising acts or particular immigration or labour policies are explored without reference to how audiences are involved in the formulation of these policies, as well as how the justifications for the policies are received by audiences both before and after implementation. This brings the discussion to the necessary elements for a successful securitisation to occur. Building on the work of Balzacq (2005), as well as the earlier contributions from Suganami (1999) and Williams (1998; 2003), it is apparent that the influencing actor's speech must resonate with the audience's experiences. This is done by appealing to both formal and moral support. Although both forms of support are not always necessary, they are the central tools of securitising actors to ensure the audience's (re)acceptance of the discourse of security. The more convincing, and if both justifications are utilised the more congruent, the supporting rationalisations are, the more likely a securitising move will succeed. It is from this final point that the next part of this essay proceeds by exploring the role of the audience in acquiescing to the specific forms of formal and moral support utilised by key securitising actors.

A Historical Analysis of the Securitisation of US Migration

When tracing the historical security discourse defining US-Mexico border migration, it is clear that no speech act singularly defined the securitisation process. Rather, as has been examined above and affirming Balzacq's thesis, the process of securitisation has been one of continuous struggle and contestation with numerous actors performing securitising moves to varying degrees of success (Andreas, 2009). This process is generally accepted to have begun in the early 1980s during a period of rapid growth in northward migration from Mexico and Central America, spurred by civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua as well as severe economic shocks dealt by the Institutional Revolutionary Party's decision to liberally reform Mexico's economy (Arreola, 2004). Interestingly, this period is often defined by the formal support obtained by the Reagan administration to authorise the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, otherwise known as the 'Simpson-Mazzoli Act', which penalised medium and large businesses who knowingly employed undocumented migrants (Massey, 2004). In President Reagan's address before signing the law, he invoked the language of security as a means to justify stemming illegal migration (1986). According to the

CS approach, this constitutes a single speech act that elevates the issue of migration to a security issue and justifies the extraordinary measures outlined in the Act. However, the bill did not simply emanate from the negotiations of government officials or even discussions amongst elite policymakers. Rather, it was the result of complex interactions between 'audience groups', some of which rejected the security narrative (Swarns, 2006). For instance, the business community opposed large sections of the bill resulting in many provisions being watered down. Meanwhile, the wider lay-public rejected its harsh stance on illegal immigrants resulting in an amendment that enabled nearly three million undocumented migrants to receive an amnesty and legal pathway to citizenship (Abrajano & Lundgren, 2014). In subsequent years, increasing numbers of raids were carried out by the Border Patrol Force to apprehend undocumented migrants while more forceful operational strategies were implemented, including increasing the number of containment operations and personnel deployed in the border zone (Sarabia, 2012). Yet, the practices that operated under the concept of 'prevention through deterrence' seldom appealed to the moral support of national security and gained little traction with audiences beyond governmental frameworks. This reflects the importance of the audience in wholly or partially rejecting security narratives, commonly ignored by the CS approach.

By the 1990s, political agendas seemingly reflected contemporary social and economic circumstances, including the biggest ever upsurge in illegal migration caused by the accession of the North American Free Trade Agreement, a booming US economy and the chronic impact of the 'war on drugs' (Correa-Cabrera & Rojas-Arenaza, 2012). Key securitising actors, in particular both main political parties and pro-business lobby groups, conflated the issue of migration with the moral justification of preventing further drug-associated violence and converged their views to present a formidably persuasive narrative. Although speech acts utilising the language of national security were still uncommon, the American public was increasingly convinced by the formal support garnered by political officials. This formal support legitimated later actions such as President Clinton's appointment of two former generals as 'drug czars' and the Border Patrol's cooperation with the Mexican Army (Allen, 2000). However, it was not until the events of September 11, 2001 and President Bush's declaration of a "war on terror" that the US-Mexico border could truly be considered to be securitised (Bush, 2001, para. 10). By then, in the minds of many Americans, the moral panic of terrorism was inseparable from the perceived threat of uncontrolled illegal land migration, despite the attackers entering the US by air with visas. Formal support soon followed this, with overwhelming Congressional support for the USA PATRIOT Act whose name itself elicited strong emotional audience responses (de Beaugrande, 2004). Yet Bush's 'pivotal' speech act in the aftermath of 9/11 were not successful simply because illegal migration was framed as a potential national security threat, but because they were part of a wider government-backed strategic move to securitise migration based on countless follow-up press releases, Congressional speeches and news reports. The combination of these appeals to both formal and moral support resonated strongly with a more emotionally receptive audience who accepted subsequent legislative securitising moves that affirmed their already established anarchical worldview.

The next decade represented a deepening of the securitisation of migration, not just through successive speech acts, but via additional forms of formal support such as the establishment of a Homeland Security Department with a border security duty, a new National Border Patrol Strategy aiming for complete 'operational control' over borders, and the Secure Border Initiative and Secure Fence Act (Gates, 2013). While only representing a small proportion of the extensive formal support garnered by securitising actors during this time, a process of convergence of moral justifications was also occurring in which terrorism prevention, domestic employment protection and drug violence deterrence all became embodiments of the 'public sentiment' to stem illegal migration. Indeed, politicians' promises to dramatically reduce the number of undocumented migrants were equated by numerous audiences with assurances to decrease unemployment and prevent the proliferation of non-white communities (Ryder, 2012). This exemplifies Balzacq's thesis that "while seeking formal acquiescence, political officials also cloak security arguments in the semantic repertoire of the national audience in order to win support" (2005, p. 185).

The Role of the Audience in Rejecting the Security Narrative

In many ways, the analysis of the period following the September 11th terrorist attacks above reflects the conventional CS framework in which audiences appear to be directly, and immediately, impacted by the speech acts of securitising actors. While it highlights that political actors were somewhat responsive to audience reactions, it is unclear to what extent audiences were willing to adopt the dominant security discourse. Bringing the perlocutionary

model to its conclusion, as well as incorporating elements of the Paris School's critique of the narrow CS approach (Bigo, 2002), this final section argues that that in recent years the American audience has begun to partly reject the securitisation narrative on migration. This has resulted not only in the erosion of both moral and formal forms of support, but also a reversal of the securitisation process in which securitising actors respond to majority audience perceptions. The main part of this phenomenon arguably stems from the cumulative increase in successive decades of the Hispanic population, from 15 to over 50 million between 1980 and 2010 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). The most recent United States Census Bureau (2011) data puts the Hispanic population at approximately 16.7% of the population, with ethnic minorities projected to make up more than half of the children under-18 within five years. The 2008 election of Barack Obama highlighted this demographic shift with an unprecedented 71% of historically conservative Hispanic voters backing the Democratic nominee (Lopez & Taylor, 2012). However, simple demographic shifts are meaningless in the context of securitisation without emphasising the transformation of both white and non-white audience attitudes to migration. The increasing integration of Hispanic and Latino communities into wider society has eroded the now less prevalent fear of a so-called 'brown tide' (Santa Ana, 2002). Indeed, this is readily evidenced in the more recent discourse espoused by the non-agricultural business community, both a significant securitising actor and audience group, who, spurred by technology firms and the US Chamber of Commerce, shifted their position by arguing against the conflation of legal and illegal migration and advocating for comprehensive immigration reform. In addition, contextual circumstances have been significant as the so-called 'wars' on terror and drugs have faded in their resonance to many US audiences, and therefore have lost their persuasive power as moral justifications. At the height of violent drug-fuelled crime in the 1990s, opinion polls showed a majority of US citizens rated drug violence as the most important problem to be addressed (Newport, 2002). Today, less than 0.5% of the public classifies illegal drugs as the main security threat. Moreover, as the US Department of State's most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism* states, there remains "no terrorist group [which has] targeted US citizens in or from Mexican territory" (2013, p. 39).

Nevertheless, while moral support is a powerful persuasive tool for securitising actors, formal support can continue to exist without moral justification through entrenched routine practices and legislative frameworks emphasising securitisation. This remains the biggest hurdle for diminishing securitisation or even more ambitious attempts at desecuritisation. Important within this process is an audience-based deconstructivist strategy often employed by burgeoning civil and immigrant rights advocate organisations. The transition in perception of the Hispanic or Latino identity from racial to cultural has enabled immigrants to form identities that move beyond conventional categorisation (Huysmans, 2008). Not only does this complement existing US conceptions of hyphenated nationalism, but it provides a convincing rebuttal to the protean nature of fear of the 'Other' and its exploitation by right-wing securitising actors (Perlstein, 2013). Most importantly, with regard to entrenched formal forms of support, Hispanic and other pro-immigrant political candidates are gaining administrative and governmental power in many of the fastest growing and most populous constituencies (The Economist, 2010). In doing so, they lend further electoral significance to the Hispanic and Latino vote and both consciously and unconsciously elevate the role of the pro-immigrant audience group. While this certainly does not amount to the removal of obstructions towards diminishing the dominant security discourse on migration, as the failure of comprehensive immigration reform legislation demonstrates, it still represents a significant step towards this goal.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the securitisation of US-Mexico border migration by examining the under-theorised role of the audience in the development of security discourses. At both a theoretical and contextual level, it is clear that a more audience-focused adaptation of the CS approach enables deeper comprehension of the securitisation process as a strategic, intersubjective practice rather than a linear, discursive act. While the trend since the September 11th attacks has been towards a deepening of the security narrative, shifting demographic trends support an oppositional thesis in which American audiences have begun to partly reject the securitisation of migration. Whether the erosion of dominant securitising actors' moral and formal forms of support will continue remains to be seen. Nevertheless, this analysis highlights that avenues for desecuritisation or the mediation of securitising moves do exist and can be further exploited.

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