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The Ideological Securitization of COVID-19: Perspectives from the Right and the Left

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UGO GAUDINO, JUL 28 2020

Contesting the Meanings of Security

As many critical IR scholars widely recognize, security is an ‘essentially contested concept’. Imported in the field by Buzan (1991), this fortunate definition expresses how subjective a concept security is, grounded in ‘ideological or moral elements’ (Fierke, 2015:34) that eschew precise categorization and empirical evidences. In the wake of post-positivist research agendas in IR, securitization theories of first (Buzan, Waever and the Copenhagen School) and second generations (Paris School and the collective C.A.S.E., 2006) have become a well-established sub-field. Plenty of young scholars excavated how security is socially constructed in a given context by political agents with the goal to prioritize the urgency of an issue and the existential threat it poses to – most of the times – the survival of the State. Moreover, a heated debate began between critics of the alleged racial biases inherent in the theory and scholars upholding the application of securitization to debunk racial and ethnical biases inherent in domestic and international security policies.

The interpretation of security as a semantic field that goes beyond military and strategic studies has been by now accepted. Not only did critical theorists pick up the security language to address economic, health, environmental and cultural challenges. Following this wave, policymakers veer towards a broader understanding of the plural security threats and referent objects that electors have in mind while uttering the codeword security. In endorsing this contextual understanding, yet, we should not ignore that security ‘carries with it a history and a set of connotations that it cannot escape’ (Waever, 1995), namely a Manichean and coercive logic that risks to escalate the debate on the issue deemed under threat (cf. Balzacq, 2015). Bearing such ethical and epistemological caveats in mind, this short intervention suggests reading some security dynamics and implications of the COVID-19 outbreak through the interpretivist lens of securitization. Let me clarify from the outset that adopting a constructivist prism does not mean to deny the material lethality of the virus. To the opposite, a critical perspective serves to uphold a consideration of pandemics as public health issues, rather than security drama (for a general overview of the security – health nexus, cf. McInnes, 2008).

As witnessed over the last months, security is a polymorph and thick concept that might evoke processes of securitization and of friend/foe binary oppositions. Besides this inner agonistic core, I agree that securitization is a complex process laying on three pillars (Balzacq, 2005): the *agents* (*actors*, *audiences*, and *silenced* subjects); the discourses sedimented in plural historical and geographical *contexts*; the *acts* mobilized to translate security in effective tools, which can be broadly divided in speech acts, policies, practices and non-verbal gestures. The Copenhagen School original version (Buzan et. al., 1998) has been hitherto the most common one privileged by scholars who delved into health issues. Yet, I proceed differently by giving analytical purchase to contextual drivers of security making and to the identity of political agents shaping securitization.

My framework is less moulded upon the Copenhagen School than on an eclectic cross-fertilization between Paris School contributions and “ontological security” focus on how the security of the Self is jeopardized when her norms, values and routines are challenged by unexpected sources of discomfort, anxiety and psychological trauma (cf. Mitzen, 2006; Browning, Joenniemi, 2017). In doing so, I stress how COVID-19 is being framed pretty much all

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around the globe as a national and international threat against both physical safety and the existential way of life of citizens. A third element of my approach is the focus on political ideology, a shadow cone of securitization literature that begs for deeper research (cf. Williams, 2019). Although narratives about COVID-19 converge on its imminent threat to our life, the process is nuanced as it is entangled with ideological perspectives and traditional security policies put forward by political parties. Most of securitization theorists and ontological security scholars assume that the securitizing actor is the central State which speaks security to protect its survival or to ward off threats against its normal institutional routine.

The State-centric perspective has been translated into a methodological privilege to (i) analyse security bureaucracies (such as governmental departments), the armed forces and the Police instead of political subjects and party leaders and (ii) to treat some issues as general national security prerogatives, by meaning that defence, security and intelligence affairs shall be dealt independently from the affiliation of the party in power. The wave of coronavirus embodies first and foremost a threat to human health. It can be argued, thereby, that both the abovementioned conditions are respected. In spite of loud disagreement upon the measures to implement to keep ourselves safe and flatten the curve of infections, a majority of political actors deemed COVID-19 as imminent threat to the security of State institutions and to the cohesion of national community at first. The consensus prompting to securitization of health complications has been fairly bipartisan, initially eased by a temporary rally-round-the-flag mechanism and by the plea to find national unity vis-à-vis the invisible enemy. Nonetheless, in a distinct understanding of securitization, I argue that discursive differences impinge upon how Right (radical, conservative) and Left (social-democratic, social-liberals) policymakers articulate security threats according to values and ideological moorings cherished by their partisan tradition.

The attempt herein below is not to infer generalizable findings about Western party typologies, divided by quite blurred political cleavages. Too many factors would be at stake to elicit the strategies brought to the fore by differing Cabinets, even among case studies usually included in one-size-fit-all category (e.g. the Danish and the Swedish social-democratic parties). However, the analytical focus on the political polarities, starting from the muscular revival of far right, helps to decipher the discursive repertoire behind securitization of COVID-19. After an early period of ambivalent hesitations, the prioritization of the virus amidst security affairs was solicited by scientific epistemic communities and endorsed by political elites through highly effective but problematic metaphors of war. Despite the similarities, leaders of different political affiliations created their own cluster of intertwined security issues worsened by the virus. In hindsight, COVID-19 has been a suitable excuse to further securitize events and policies already vital for each political agenda.

Such a brief contribution has some evident limitations, vitiated as it is by a prevalent focus on Italian political parties – understood in relation to the wider Western geopolitical scenario- and by a cherry-picking methodology that aims to be critical rather than rigorous. I certainly restrain from offering a comprehensive analysis of events that are still ongoing and that would by all means need finetuned scrutiny and broader comparative attention. That said, I aim to provide some relevant illustrations to unpack the fissiparous meanings of security – e.g. how different political ideologies craft security – and stress the normative concerns raised even by the intuitively justified securitization of a very demanding health issue. More specifically, some questions inspired me in the observation of security discourses wrapping the governance of pandemic: Which amount of freedom should we sacrifice to secure our life against COVID-19? Is it such urgent security threat to be prioritized over the others? Is the enemy embodied by COVID-19 invisible or visible?

Far-right and Security Clusters: Xenophobia, Libertarianism, Negationism

Let's start this enquiry from the Far Right – both as Radical Right parties and as Extreme Right movements (Mudde, 2019). Radical right leaders have exploited the fear mongering around COVID-19 to scapegoat foreigners for the pandemics and to propose the adoption of tougher entry and integration policies. The Italian case study is exemplary. From the very beginning of the crisis, both the *League* and *Brothers of Italy* vigorously called to seal the borders with China. While a certain Sinophobia was generally widespread between January and February – alongside with the fear of contagious Italians travelling from Lombardia and Veneto – COVID-19 was too much of an occasion for nativist politicians to preventively securitize Mediterranean flows, even in a period when the virus was not circulating

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in Africa. The nexus migration-terrorism was cunningly replaced by the one between migration-diseases, as shown by the lively interactions and likes received by some articles on social media. So far, many right-wing newspapers (*Il Giornale*, *La Verità*) and extreme right websites (*Il Primato Nazionale*, voice of *CasaPound Italia*) have fuelled xenophobia and hostility towards alleged plague-spreaders, as we recently witnessed before migrants rescued by the Ocean Viking were allowed to disembark. Security discourses of this fabric elevate Italian “forgotten men” as first reference of urgent measures: not only are subaltern subjectivities marginalised, but also accused of embezzling vital resources that should have been allocated to the Italian healthcare system.

By a similar token, another contentious issue tightly entangled with the securitization of migration is related to Islam, as Muslims in Italy are still massively pushed outside the boundaries of the social contract. An unsurprising double standard framed Salvini’s request to open Catholic Churches for Easter (an electoral move promptly dissuaded by the Vatican) and the articles published two weeks later by *Il Giornale* evoking the eventual turmoil due to the closure of mosques during Ramadan. Chauvinist and populist tones were chosen to bolster the Islamophobic narration offered by right-wing publishing industry, that handled the COVID-19 outbreak with the purpose to reinforce well-known anti-Muslim tropes – hyper-religiosity, communitarianism, risks of social unrest. Within far right narratives in Italy and worldwide, the invisible virus was embodied by extra-European migrants – chief among them Muslims-, by the evergreen Jewish global threat – COVID-19 as an invention of Soros – or by despised members of economic globalist elites à la Bill Gates. These handful of arguments figure amidst the leitmotifs hijacked by far-right speakers to support the implementation of security decrees and promote a violent radicalization of the debate.

Additionally, authoritarianism – the third feature of Radical Right parties aside with nativism and populism (Mudde, 2007)- was tactically endorsed whereby ideological cognates parties had enough clout to call for exceptional measures and rule by decrees. The unlimited powers handed to Orbán in Hungary to halt the spread of the virus without a predefined end date – formally ended on June 16 – was positively welcomed by both Salvini and Meloni. And yet, the penchant for such authoritarian manners and centralized solutions has not brought them to sympathize with the gradual imposition of lockdown measures, fiercely contrasted by party leaders, extreme right movements, football hooligans and street level thuggery (as witnessed during some protests in Rome). The unsettling events ushered in by COVID-19 drove to ironical convergencies in the battle against top-down emergency decrees. An unusual entanglement bundled together post-fascists rioters, anti-welfare conservatism, and critical legal / security theorists by the likes of Agamben (2005), whose early polemical stance against governing the pandemics through the “state of exception” earned him much criticism.

In my view, a twofold interpretation is needed. On one hand, the anti-lockdown crusade has been prosaically instrumentalised to undermine the solidity of centre-left Cabinets (e.g. Italy, Spain) and to prevent conservative governments (e.g. the Tories) to endorse the same alleged illiberal measures. On the other, this pattern harks back to clear ideological references that lead to a double securitization of (i) individual and (ii) economic liberties, preserved by Right-wing actors against new security threats – quarantine measures, mask wearing and governmental restrictions. These two libertarian facets of security have been energetically flagged across the right-to-centre spectrum, from extreme fringe networks to mainstream political formations. In the anglosphere, it is worth looking at how alt right and nationalist groups weaponized white masculine individual freedom to contest the imposition of lockdown. Beyond the scepticism towards the prevention of COVID-19 showed by Johnson and especially by Trump – who juggled between minimizing the risks and blaming China- the armed protest and irruption in Michigan Capitol is a toxic mix of white privilege and pandemic conspiracy theories. As trivial an episode pinpoints that referent objects of securitization change according to ideas and norms – even the most brutal – advanced by particular agents. This means that securitization theory, with its focus on existential threats and extraordinary tools, is neither necessarily centred on the survival of State institutions nor declared by State bureaucrats.

Centre-Left Parties: An Appetite for Securitization?

I have said that COVID-19 was framed as a national and international security issue by most of Governments in charge, through an apparent shared consensus among political parties of distinct political views. And yet, in my attempt to drill down into partisan ideology and discourses on pandemics and security, I illustrated some relevant propositions advanced from a far right background, where the new coronavirus has been cunningly associated with

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threats from migrants, Jews, Muslims, globalist elites and top-down imposition of “stay-at-home” policies. To say that many Cabinets led totally or partially by Western left-wing parties are turning into authoritarian decision-makers would mean to pander in a fallacious accuse violently cultivated by populist trolls and accelerationist conspiracies.

Nonetheless, a critical glance on a certain securitizing habitus developed before COVID-19 and then reproduced by Western left-wing parties (socialists, social-democrats, social-liberals) should not be dismissed at all, as we would throw away the baby with the bathwater. Admittedly, such analysis is rather limited because of the scattered and heterogeneous sample of Leftist parties in Western European Cabinets (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden). On top of that, a complementary reflection on which historical Left-wing values are preserved or neglected today falls out of the scope of this contribution. But still, claiming that the Left also speaks security and evokes concerning threats should not be anathema. Some preliminary evidence, which needs to be further built, is available both in terms of policies and with respect to referent norms and values of security discourses.

It should be a matter of discussion why some left-wing parties indulged in a rather authoritarian style to manage unexpected events framed as emergency crisis during last decade – Mediterranean migration flows, terrorist attacks, and last but not least the global pandemics. I would not underestimate the risk that a gradual inclination to translate right-wing jargon and recur to extraordinary solutions may turn into a usual option. Focusing on Italy, some former Cabinet members of the *Democratic Party* (DP) (in the previous legislature, 2013-18) ushered in a right-ward turn in securitizing Mediterranean migration, implementing tougher counter-terrorist policies and knotting the constitutional recognition of Islam as official religion to inescapable security concerns about Muslim radicalization.

COVID-19 seems to be another pair of sleeves. Firstly, the DP occupies a minority position in the coalition Government with the Five Star Movement. Its implicit support to shift the realm of discussions outside the Parliament and advocate for severe lockdown measures should be carefully evaluated once the panic is over. Secondly, the DP succeeded to propose some measures that design an alternative way of conceptualizing security, clustering the protection of our physical safety with the security of subaltern subjectivities, too often kept at the bay of official discourses. As underlined by Shani (2020) the referent subject of typical COVID-19 securitization is the ‘homeowner with the economic means to take time off work and stockpile food (...) a racialized, bourgeois and gendered subject’.

After an early ambivalent phase, the DP attempted to fill the gaps in the steadfast plea to pursue strict quarantine rules. The approval of generous welfare State policies to “cure” and “recovery” Italy – as the two main decrees were dubbed – has the credit to include some foreign workers (employed in agriculture and caretaking jobs) who will be regularised after the expiration of their residence permit. As far as gender issues are concerned, despite the preoccupation of the Minister of Health, further efforts could have been done for another kind of viral threat, namely the domestic violence escalated during the quarantine. Recent data collected from several countries show an appalling rise of texts and messages to report abuses, which is another demonstration of the mutable essence of securitization according to variable norms and priorities – who is in jeopardy and from what kind of threats?

Concluding Remarks

To sum up, it is reasonable to predict that over the coming years security scholars and pundits may interpret COVID-19 through the lens of securitization theory. To make it a fruitful intellectual enterprise, such analyses on the interplay between health affairs and security slogans should keep in mind at least two caveats.

The first one is normative. Even if security has been widened and deepened in terms of referent objects, it still evokes a constellation of categories associated with the ‘mindset of national security problems’, as Deudney stressed in relation to environmental problems (1990: 466; see also Huysmans, 2002). Sedimented grammars of security cannot be suddenly eradicated from historical nexus with State sovereignty and military regulations of threats, as last spring discussion on Chinese “mask diplomacy” and current fears on “vaccine nationalism” aptly testify. There are undoubtedly positive outcomes in the security paradigm, such as higher degree of public awareness and richer resources. Albeit Floyd (2011) designed a just securitization model based on (i) objective existential threat, (ii) a morally legitimate referent object and (iii) an appropriate security response, several pioneering

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articles on the securitization of health issues (HIV/AIDS, Elbe, 2006; avian flu, Youde, 2008; SARS and avian flu, Wishnick, 2010) contend that such approach results in more shortcomings than practical advantages. In particular, Elbe (2006:120) cautioned against shifting the governance of viruses from civil society to State bureaucracies through funding allocations and potential crackdown on individual civil liberties and human rights. The friend/foe dynamics triggered by security lexicon ends up nationalizing the efforts to contain the virus and to hinder multilateral concertation. On a micro scale, it exacerbates daily interactions up until regressing in Hobbesian state of nature, sadly instantiated by supermarkets looting of last March. Neither do we need this agonistic narrowmindedness, nor to exaggerate the lethal threats aroused by COVID-19, as some pundits did regarding possible bioterrorist attacks. Promoting a healthier global society and preventing health dangers should be hierarchized, rather than potential escalating call to securitize.

Additionally, I would suggest a methodological orientation to link the enquiries about security and COVID-19 with the cluster of related referent objects – commercial and economic interest, gender and racial equality, preservation of national social bonds – that political actors and stakeholders advance during securitization of as urgent an issue as the pandemics. As I pinpointed in this article, the protection of physical safety, above all in times of pandemics, appears to be a mutually shared national security issue to treat in an objective and rational fashion. A limited understanding of this approach ignores that parties and movements are instead more likely to instrumentalize such threats in line with sedimented framework of beliefs and values at the core of their security agenda.

The assessment of nationalistic, liberal-conservative, and progressive discourses uttered around COVID-19 can induce some conclusions. As an example of chauvinistic rhetoric, the scapegoating of tourists, foreign students and workers, and ethnic minorities that erupted from far-right narratives (not only in the West, as Islamophobic reactions in India remind us) existed even before infections fanned out across borders. With respect to mainstream policymakers, liberal and conservatives alike wholeheartedly asked to stay at home to save lives. A belated move that could be read as an attempt to secure public health services after years of tremendous budget cuts and privatizations, frequently enacted by the very same parties in charge to govern the pandemics. Economic and commercial interests are an apical preoccupation and referent object of securitizing discourses about health. This was disclosed in literature, like in Elbe (2018) enquiry on pharmaceutical policies and medical security counter measures, and more prosaically exhibited by slogans such as “protect the NHS”. In terms of progressive agenda encouraged by subjects on the Left, the securitization of health might be clustered in a specific commitment to the security of subaltern subjects and minority groups. In this respect, parties would be more sensible to listen to the domestic abuses suffered by women during lockdown and to vulnerable categories disproportionately targeted by COVID-19 – e.g. BAME citizens are at increased risk of acquiring the infection.

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