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Interview – Rita Floyd

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAY 2 2021

Dr Rita Floyd is an Associate Professor in Conflict and Security at the University of Birmingham. She was previously a mid-career Fellow of the Independent Social Research Foundation and, before that, a Birmingham Fellow. Prior to this, Dr Floyd was an Economic and Social Research Council post-doctoral fellow and afterwards a British Academy post-doctoral fellow, both at the University of Warwick. She is the author of numerous peer-reviewed articles on security theory, environmental security and ethics and security. Dr Floyd recently published 'Securitisation and the function of functional actors' in Critical Studies on Security, and 'Security cooperation as a primary institution of western international society' in Global Change, Peace & Security. She is the author of Security and the Environment: Securitisation Theory and US Environmental Security Policy. Her second monograph is titled The Morality of Security: A Theory of Just Securitization. Dr Floyd is currently working on a follow-up monograph that considers whether, and if so when, the use of emergency measures can be morally required and of which actors.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

There are many interesting research areas and debates out there. For instance the future of European security; the possibility of environmental peace-building; the impact Artificial Intelligence will have on warfighting and the morality of war, the role geoengineering can and perhaps should play in regards to climate change and how this should be regulated. Personally, however, I am most interested in debates and research concerning the ethics of security and securitization. There are multiple reasons for this, but ultimately it's because I care about making a positive difference in the world. Don't get me wrong, I don't think that I can make a difference directly, at most my work could enable relevant security practitioners to make a difference.

I also think that we as a discipline have done an awful lot on security as a practice and on what it means to be secure, but we haven't done nearly enough on identifying when states and other actors may securitize and whether they sometimes have a moral obligation to securitize. There are reasons for this lacuna. One is that those who stress the value of being secure often reject violent or forcible means to achieve that value. For many, emancipation means precisely to move away from a narrow, forcible conceptualisation of security. Another is that those who have written not about the value of security but about the practice of security, have tended to point to the negative consequences of securitization only and on that basis they have recommended desecuritization, sometimes even anti-securitization. But this is changing. I think that there are more and more people who would like to go beyond simply analysing who does what in securitization processes and to point in the direction of desecuritization. There are scholars who would like to be able to meaningfully say whether securitization is good or bad. What has brought this about? Well, desecuritization as a normative strategy rests on the idea that we cannot know if threats are real, ergo that there are never grounds for justified securitization. Climate change but also pandemics, and other foreseeable health crises, notably anti-microbial resistance, are changing this. Many scholars who have hitherto promoted desecuritization, which emerged in the context of the securitization of immigration, are gravely concerned about the climate threat and the lack of sufficient action to limit dangerous increases of global surface temperature. If this is so, securitization may well be not only justified, but morally necessary and hence we find ourselves at the beginnings of a bigger debate. For me, it is exciting and in many ways rewarding to be a part of this.

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

It depends how far back you want to go. I remember identifying as a realist after my undergraduate degree at the University of Portsmouth (2000-2003). I think this was because most people teaching me there were realists, certainly teaching was dominated by the 'neo-neo' debate. During my years of postgraduate study I briefly flirted with post-modernism. I certainly recall reading Jim George's Discourses of Global Politics (1994) and being nearly bowled over. But that was only a very brief spell. In an effort to understand inter alia securitization theory better I spent many hours reading Derrida and Foucault. Ultimately, however, I remained unconvinced and consequently gravitated back closer towards the mainstream.

I also recall many friendly disagreements with my supervisor and mentor Professor Stuart Croft on the relative merits of post-modernism, the existence of real threats and so on. But that was good too. You ask below what I would recommend to younger scholars and students; I'd say emancipation from your teachers is definitely character-building. This is helped by moving around and doing your UG, MA and PhD in different places.

As regards to who has influenced me the most, I confess that I've always fancied having one of those life defining moments whereby I walk into a second-hand bookshop (probably in Oxford, although there are few left) and by chance come across a work that becomes an eternal guide. This has not happened to me, but to be sure within the different subfields some people have been absolutely crucial. Notably, Barry Buzan regarding my understanding of security and international order but also on how to build an argument. While discovering Len Doyal and Ian Gough's A Theory of Human Need (1991) offered the key to theorizing what I refer to as the just referent object.

Beyond books I have also been influenced by my husband Jonathan Floyd, who is a Senior Lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Bristol. As I became ever more interested in political theory and moral philosophy, which was probably already influenced by our many discussions, I have always been fortunate to have someone very knowledgeable to talk to and to bounce ideas off.

Why do you believe that just securitization is important in the 21st Century? Where do you see the need for just securitization the most?

One reason why just securitization is important is because there is now so much in the way of securitization. Of course many securitizations are 'merely' rhetorical securitizations, which is to say a threat articulation plus audience (mostly tacit) consent. Nevertheless individual states' responses to the Covid-19 virus show that full securitization (rhetorical securitization plus a relevant change of behaviour in the securitizing actor or an actor they are in a position of power over) is not reserved for terrorism and other agent-intended threats.

Just Securitization Theory advances universal moral principles that define what needs to be the case so that securitization is – from a moral point of view – permissible. These principles are as follows: just cause (made up of a just reason and the just referent object), right intention, macro-proportionality and a success condition. There are also criteria specifying just conduct in securitization, notably targeted response, least harmful measures and a criterion that stresses the ineluctability of certain key human rights. The thinking behind just securitization theory is that because securitization itself does harm (not 'only' to threateners, but also to beneficiaries and to innocent bystanders) its occurrence and its destructiveness ought to be curtailed as much as possible. Consequently the threshold for just securitization is high.

Given that securitization can occur anywhere, just securitization is relevant everywhere. With some trepidation I'd like to suggest that the need for just securitization is perhaps greatest in autocratic states, because unjust securitization in autocratic states is likely to cause greater harm than unjust securitization in bona fide (mature liberal) democracies. Democratic states have various checks and balances including during the securitization process. As Andrew W. Neal's new book (Security as Politics) lucidly shows, here securitization is subject to debate. Moreover, echoing the liberal democratic peace thesis, politicians want to be re-elected. It is also the case that liberal democratic states tend to care about how they are perceived internationally (external legitimacy). None of this is true in autocracies. Consider the situation in Myanmar right now. Here the military government fires live rounds of ammunitions into unarmed groups of protesters in an effort to secure their own political regime. They are not constrained by what the people think; there is zero accountability and they do not care about external legitimacy.

Their only objective is regime survival.

What role can scholars play in ensuring moral securitization occurs?

First of all, let's be clear on the role scholars play in the securitization process. Scholars are unlikely to be securitizing actors. They do not usually utter a securitizing speech act with a view to launching – either by themselves or with others – emergency measures. Instead they fulfil one or more of the following roles. They could be (1) securitization pre-emptors, that is, actors that seek to pre-empt securitization by discouraging would-be securitizing actors from initiating securitization. Or (2) securitization-requesters, which is an actor who seeks to convince more powerful/strategically positioned actors of the need to securitize. They could be (3) audiences, which I take to be the addressee of the securitizing speech act, that is the referent object and/or the threatener. Scholars could also be (4) functional actors, who veto or endorse securitizations that concern others. Finally they could be (5) desecuritization requestors, actors who call on securitizing actors to unmake securitization. This shows that while securitization scholars are not in the business of securitizing, they can critically intervene in the securitization process at multiple times. To do this most effectively and free from personal political bias they need a theory that enables them to make judgements on the relative value or disvalue of any given past or present securitization. Just Securitization Theory (JST) as developed in my 2019 book The Morality of Security: A theory of just securitization enables scholars to do just that.

My ongoing work on The Duty to secure: From just to mandatory securitization goes further still. The concept of mandatory securitization enables scholars and other users to hold 'should-be' securitizing actors accountable for the failure to securitize. Indeed my new book develops a framework for how the United Nations Security Council and international law need to be changed/reformed to make mandatory securitization a reality. Scholars play a vital role in pushing forward ideas enabling them to become a reality.

I believe that if just securitization research became widely known it could quite plausibly penetrate practitioners' rhetoric and deeds. And it could enable ordinary persons to hold practitioners accountable for the way they securitize, and in line with my new project on the duty to secure also for when actors fail to securitize. Note here that the just war tradition has achieved precisely that, even if it is sometimes abused by policy makers. In order to get just securitization out there however, this project requires many more people to work on it. We need contest, debate and synthesis, only then might our scholarly voice be heard.

Do you believe that Covid-19 has been morally securitised?

This is a very difficult question; in part because Covid-19 is not as indiscriminately lethal as other previously securitized virus diseases, notably Ebola. I haven't done much work on the issue, but luckily my Birmingham colleague Professor Mark Webber and I have discussed this so often that I feel reasonably well prepared. Before I can have a go at answering this question, let us narrow things down by time (I'll go for March, April 2020) and place (I'll go for the UK). What Just Securitization Theory (JST), which is my version of a theory of justified securitization, enables one to do is to apply the criteria to the securitization of Covid in the UK in March 2020. So let's see what this would look like.

Just cause is defined by an objective existential threat to a just referent object. One referent object in the given case were the British people, who automatically qualify as a just referent object because they are, in the relevant sense, morally innocent. The second referent was the NHS. In line with JST, social and political orders qualify when they satisfy a minimum level of basic human needs (autonomy and physical health), it should be self-explanatory why the NHS thus qualifies as a just referent object.

Moving on, the next issue is this: were these referents objectively existentially threatened by Covid-19? I think to examine this we have to look at excess mortality. In March/April 2020 excess mortality was consistently high, over 100% in England. Plus – at that time – we did not know the after effects (e.g. long term health complications of Covid).

But what about the NHS? In what sense was or is the NHS existentially threatened? I can see that in principle the NHS can be existentially threatened. Most notably perhaps when the idea of free and universal healthcare to all is challenged on ideological grounds by a ruling political party keen to offload health matters to the private sector. But I struggle to see how the NHS being overwhelmed by coronavirus patients threatens the NHS per se. Such a situation would not meaningfully alter the NHS, instead it would threaten those unable to receive the necessary care. In other words, here too the entities threatened are persons not the NHS.

The next criterion is right intention, that is, did just cause inform the government's choice to securitize? In the Covid case this is surprisingly easy to answer. In the UK securitization has few, if any, benefits for the government (this may be different in autocratic countries who might use Covid to suppress the opposition or protests), in fact here the whole thing would be an exercise of self-harm. In short, there is no doubt that the UK government intended to secure the British people from the disease.

Moving on, macro proportionality requires us to weigh up the harm caused by securitization against the harm prevented. Much of the harm caused – in March/April 2020 – was comparatively minor (not being allowed to socialise etc.). I think that initially at least the harm prevented outweighed the harm caused, but this depends on how long security measures go on for. Each day the harm to the economy and the harm to people with other health conditions (delayed cancer treatments, in the UK over the course of the pandemic amounting to 44,000 cases (March 2021) who were not seen by the NHS increases. This shows that we need to assess proportionality continually throughout the securitization of Covid. To me it seems likely that securitization was proportionate at timex (March/April 2020) but not at timey. Without looking into this in detail I can't put a date on it, but generally speaking once the harm to the economy was too great and the effects of long Covid clear as relatively benign.

The final criterion of just initiation is that securitization needs to have a higher chance of satisfying just cause than less harmful alternatives (for instance, voluntary shielding as opposed to national lockdown). Clearly Sweden opted for the less harmful alternative during lockdown one. It seems to me that a case could be made that national lockdown offered ex ante better chances of success in bringing down excess mortality than voluntarily shielding. In other words what the government did during the first wave seems morally permissible. Saying this, I would like to stress that at this stage the UK government was not morally obligated to opt for lockdown. Admittedly there was a lot of external pressure (including from the media and the public) and they may have felt that they had no choice, but the fact is that the government would have been within their rights to try voluntary shielding, and other political solutions first, and only once these failed would they have been morally obligated to opt for securitization and lockdown.

Do you see the widening and deepening of security as problematic?

A bigger challenge than widening and deepening security is the – for want of a better term – loosening of security, which is to say the fact that security practice increasingly does not lead to exceptional measures. To say that such cases simply are not security is contra the constructivist rulebook whereby practitioners, not scholars, ought to decide what is and what isn't security. But there is a problem. The loosening of security means that it is increasingly unclear what sets security apart from ordinary politics. This is a problem for people like me, because in order to theorise the ethics of security practice we need to know what is and what isn't security. Put differently, we need to know what we are talking about before we can talk about it some more. Ultimately this situation can only be aided by introducing thresholds. For instance by saying – in much the same way as the Copenhagen school did in Security: A new framework for analysis (1998) – that successful securitization entails emergency measures. Doing this will mean that some interesting situations will not be accounted for, while it will raise the hackles on more constructivist scholars. For me personally it leads to a sort of disordered position. Whereby I simultaneously hold that security is decided by actors and does not need to take exceptional form, but – in my work on ethics and security – I exclude anything that is not exceptional security practise.

Are there any positive security developments that demonstrate aspects of moral securitization?

Quite possibly yes. Two recent examples come to mind. First, I think that the securitization of Covid-19 virus disease has brought many voices not often part of security discourses to this area. The moral justification for lock-down has

been discussed in a number of places, not only in academic journals, but also, for example, by the Equality and Human Rights Commission which works with the UK government. To me this suggests that the ethics of security now enjoys a greater platform, or better, it has one at all. My second example further supports this. Likely as a long-term effect of Edward Snowden's damning revelations, in February 2021 GCHQ took the highly unusual step of publishing a report entitled Pioneering a New National Security: The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. The report discusses in some detail the ethical considerations and challenges brought about by the use of AI in data gathering, surveillance and so on. To my mind, these examples show that there is now an openness for the inclusion of ethical thinking into security practice. Another reason why this topic is so exciting.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Not sure if I have any good advice to give, but one thing that has served me well has been to work in two areas. If my work on securitization had not succeeded I could have always focused more on environmental/climate security and vice versa. So I'd recommend developing two research areas in tandem. In that way if you get frustrated with one, or things don't work out, you always have the other to fall back on.