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## International Journal of Refugee Law

2011

### Publication Review

#### The Securitization of Humanitarian Migration: Digging Moats and Sinking Boats

Scott D. Watson

Reviewed by Thanos Zartaloudis

**Subject:** Immigration

**\*I.J.R.L. 575** At the outset it needs to be stated that I am not an international relations theorist and thus my review here is constructively engaged with Watson's book from a wider perspective. The book's analysis emerges from within international relations theory (and securitization theory in particular) and claims to be a groundbreaking attempt at enlarging the conventional approaches to what is termed 'humanitarian migration' (or forced migration). Yet it needs to be noted that the theorising on security that is presented in this work remains within the narrow confines of international relations theory and, as inevitable as this may be for academic monographs, it is also a problem. For instance, given the widespread discussion across many disciplines over the notions of sovereignty, security and exceptionalism with regard to, among others, the theoretical work of Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, securitization is considered in this book only within the narrow and often outdated confines of what predominates in conventional and slowly progressing critical international relations theories. Besides the necessary questioning of academic interdisciplinarity and its usually problematic and narrow focus, it can be suggested that there is also the wider problem of the self-disciplining of the disciplines. Securitization studies, and theories in particular, appear to have often taken their object of study, to a smaller or larger extent, at face value in terms of its dominance in public discourse, negating the possibility of considering their own complicity in justifying and reproducing the securitizing apparatuses at a discursive level even when, as with Watson here, a valuable attempt is made to approach the dominant discourse critically.

This is at work in Watson's book to the extent that security is seen both in the sense of the restrictive and violent policies of states against migrants and asylum seekers and its internal evaluation, but also in the sense of the good humanitarian work that has been done over 'positively' securitized instances of emergency. Logically there is indeed a difference between such negative and positive objectifications of security issues but overall, today, it is hard to bypass the key destructive role of securitization as a capitalist and western discourse of a governmental spectacular apparatus overshadowing politics, the economy and **\*I.J.R.L. 576** so-called benevolent humanitarianism. My comments, here, are thus open (as much as limited) given this preliminary and general concern, which is not, however, to suggest that this book is without significant merit in its scholarly attempt to decipher and critique instances of the global problem of securitization. The wider perspective in mind at this point relates also to the objectification entailed in securitization as such: that is, 'forced' asylum seeking or 'humanitarian' migration. It is in my view becoming harder and harder to say anything really direct about the tragedy of asylum seeking around the globe and the restrictive and biopolitical neutralizing and apoliticizing government of large segments of the planet's population, when researchers become more and more confined to minute disciplinary perspectives on the problem at hand. In other words, there is a wider problem of how to think of the problem in question as such. While it is very useful to gain knowledge and ideas from a study like Watson's, it begs the question of the need for a wider theorisation as well as for a political consideration of migration in general beyond the spectacular dogma of security and international relations as a *discipline* (in both senses of the term). This is neither Watson's purpose nor the direct purpose of this review, however, so let us take a step back and see what the book is trying to present.

A leading element of the inquiry by Watson is to examine the empirical evidence for the securitization of two States, Canada and Australia, as a response to migration (in particular to asylum seekers and refugees, though broadly conceived). Are states as securitized as theorists claim them to be? At one level this is a useful inquiry with regard to the so-called facts of the matter. However, it risks missing the point of securitization being not just a matter of policy, discourse and international relations, but above all a spectacularized public discourse mentality (or, to use Foucault's term, a governmentality).

Furthermore, it risks ignoring the neutralization of the contemporary situation in the so-called 'critical' reproduction of securitization as a governmental apparatus that presupposes, in the first place, the blurring of the factual and the politico-judicial (or the norm). If I know that Canada, for instance, is less securitized than Australia, I may learn something indeed about the facts of the matter, but the mentality of securitization remains nonetheless present and as influential in all capitalist states and the reasons for this are not analysed here beyond the field of international relations discourse. Securitization, for example, is also a vast multinational industry, a consideration largely missing from Watson's book. Specificity is a very important value and Watson serves it well in his study of the differences in policy and practice between Canada and Australia but, as his conclusion points out, the facts are not the end of the matter. A note is pressing at this point, also, as to *\*I.J.R.L. 577* the use of discourse theory in this book, which, while well-intended and useful to a significant extent, will strike a reader less familiar with the slow integration of contemporary 'continental' theory in international relations theorising as a rather outdated approach to discourse in itself. At least for the purposes of Watson's book, it would have been welcome to have more of an in-depth analysis of what exactly is presupposed in the use of discourse-analysis, theoretically speaking, within the context of contemporary international relations thought.

Watson begins the book with what is by now a most evident and banal perniciousness of states pledging to protect refugees and at the same time employing militarized, restrictive, inhumane and hypocritical policies, laws and bureaucratic measures against their protection in a number of direct and indirect ways. The reference by Watson to this 'contradictory' approach is hardly as revealing as is claimed, however. Hannah Arendt, for instance, showed this a long time ago.<sup>1</sup> Watson writes: 'The movement of refugee populations and the unauthorised arrival of asylum seekers are not simply matters of humanitarian concern or of national security; they expose the complexity and contradictions of the modern nation-state and demonstrate the competing political, economic and humanitarian values associated with the management of international migration' (p.1). While Watson appears to wish to work with this 'contradiction', perhaps in the hope that this system is to be perfectible, in my view such a contradiction does not expose the complexity and progressive contradictions of the modern nation-state and the international migration control system, but rather its ethical poverty and exhaustion. This becomes an implicit concern with the reference to discursive 'changes', as interrogated by Watson, with regard to the increased and dominant now securitized set of priorities in states' border controls and migration policies. It becomes a vicious circle to consider that discursive changes have 'altered the policy options available to political elites' (p. 2). Is it the other way around? Is discourse itself not an apparatus that neutralizes the accountability of its author? In any case the book asks: 'how is it that migration policies designed to limit the number of asylum seekers that can access the protection of the state have come to be accepted by liberal states that are (or claim to be) committed to the protection of refugees?' (p. 2). The answer, risking oversimplification, is: securitization discourse and policy have rendered restrictive migration policies acceptable and necessary. As Watson is aware, certainly, the answer cannot come from just a discursive look at securitization, since the problem of restrictive and hypocritical policies (particularly, though not exclusively, western ones) encompasses political, moral, legal and economic apparatuses. *\*I.J.R.L. 578* We have been led by the political and economic elites of the developed world to consider that restrictive migration policies are necessary, and yet the recent securitization in the post-9/11 period is only an intensification of a long process of hypocrisy. Do we not risk further justifying securitization's attempt at worldwide dominance by holding it as an over-determinant (albeit critical) explanation of the situation in which we live? Are we not enlarging the already imaginary receptive 'audience' of securitization while ignoring the functionality of securitization as an apparatus of apolitical spectacularisation in a wider context?

Watson offers three key contributions in this work. First, he offers us factual interrogations and analyses of the influence of 'legitimizing actors', such as the political opposition, the media and the judiciary, on the success of securitization attempts in Canada and Australia. It is a useful treatment that could be measured against the complicity of the media, the opposition (in at least parliamentary democracies) and the judiciary to the worst policies of the executive and the equally dominant role of governmental bureaucracy. There are significant points to be raised of instances when the judiciary succeeds in providing some checks and balances, but we know well by now that these do not account for much in the overall picture of the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. Second, Watson's monograph offers us a set of clarifications and theoretical reorganizations (in the first two chapters) from within international relations theory as to the way forward, from at least the perspective of this particular discipline, and in this Watson advances the cause of a more critical discourse within the field. But it has to be said that theoretically this book is not at its strongest. The most interesting and engaging parts of the book entail, by far, the factual analysis of the situations in Canada and

Australia. Inevitably the discourse-centred approach in even the factual narratives and analyses of the book is at times narrow, which, while justified for the purposes of the book, lacks an equally useful focus on economic and socio-historical detail to enhance the analysis further. Much is made of focusing on so-called transformative or 'crisis moments' when the unity of the state is 'discursively renegotiated', but the contemporary point that government is indeed now a government of continuous crises appears to be missed. By focusing on the sovereign state's imagesuffused spectacular politics and security acclamations as much as on the discursive transformations effected and affecting mainly the political and societal elites, the analysis risks celebrating, inadvertently, the imagined reproduction of so-called public perceptions of fear. For example, the minimal space devoted in this work to the racism underpinning the restrictive policies of Australia and Canada, because it may 'have less resonance in these societies or [because] there has been an elite consensus to not raise the issue' (p. 6), indicates the problem *\*I.J.R.L. 579* with public discourse based analyses. Ultimately the spectacularisation of securitized public discourse analyzed here misses the opportunity to expose in more detail such discourse itself as a spectacle-producing and as a neutralizing force of economic, social and racial oppression. Chapter Five, however, offers a good exposition of the racist role of visa policies.

The third key contribution that Watson's book offers is a preliminary critique to how conventional theories of migration policy and publiccentred discourse tend to presuppose a unitary and rational body of actors, including a passive image of the refugee as powerless and 'threatened'. In doing so Watson follows the path of constructivist theories of international relations (which, it has to be said, appear in this field decades after appearing in other fields), but the limitation of constructivist discourse theories when discourse itself is not exposed for its own unitary and rationalistic presuppositions could be explored in much more detail.

As the economy of the book's analysis requires, Canada and Australia provide two very interesting examples but this does seem to limit the analysis to a one-sided, western perspective on a global situation, which could be served better by an investigation of what happens on the periphery of the western borders in question (although, in the case of Australia, this is to an extent covered). The key role of securitized global information networks building up the restrictive-migration case as a self-evident justification is also not explored in any detail, nor are the economic interests of states in complicity with those of international security corporations. Irrespective of these possible drawbacks, the analysis of the two case studies provides a detailed and very useful exposure of the counter-factual claims made under the securitization apparatus, as well as an exposure, of interest to legal analysts and scholars in particular, of the fact that a law-centred approach misses an analysis of the laws and policies that are 'deemed unacceptable and [which] remain outside the realm of possible actions by the state' (p. 10). Watson pays due attention to 'legislative change' in the securitization process but perhaps entertains a too romantic belief in the checks and balances offered against the executive's policies and laws by the judiciary and the media. After all, counter-factuality as much as counter-legality has never really been major success claims against the restrictive and hypocritical claims of the elites. Nonetheless, in Watson's analysis, the inclusion of the role of non-governmental organizations and activists in particular, albeit short, is a welcome addition to a state-centred approach in the field.

Through the detailed analyses of the situations regarding detention in Canada (in Chapter Three) and in Australia (in Chapter Four, with a detailed focus on the Tampa crisis), it is shown how public discourse *\*I.J.R.L. 580* functions in refiguring the conception and image of the asylum seeker as a securitized threat (and as threatened) and the consequent normalization of emergency measures undertaken to that contradictory effect. The comparison and critical analysis of elements of policy and law in Australia and Canada does provide a careful look at the reasons for this degree-differentiation, when the two States, for different reasons, employ restrictive measures in, to some extent, opposed manners. However, the fact of the normalization that takes place through the apparatuses of securitization remains in both States and the overall 'logic' of the humanitarianization of migration remains shared. While identical treatment or similar willingness to implement and enforce restrictive policy measures may not be the case in the compared territories, the case of how the dogma of security operates requires further critical attacks than this preliminary step offered by Watson. Otherwise we shall remain convinced that because security and humanitarian crises can attain positive meanings in some regards, while in the meantime they are utilized in the most negative and destructive of ways against the oppressed and most vulnerable populations of this planet, we could be misled into thinking that we indirectly retain the drawbacks of the securitized humanitarian apparatuses, while celebrating its relative successes in the name of a progress through which the system of restrictionism can perfect itself. Watson is well aware of the danger, but while his concept

of 'gradations of securitization' may serve well the empirical analyses he puts forward, it does not aid a wider theoretical and political reflection on the perpetuation of this predicament advanced by the self-proclaimed benefactors of humanity. Humanitarianism, it needs to be said, albeit very briefly here, is not, as Watson suggests to an extent, a 'desecurizing discourse,' but the benevolent side of the complicity at the worst.

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<sup>1</sup> See, H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1979), ch. 5.