

Securitization and Mythologization

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“In desperate situations man will always have recourse to desperate means – and our present-day political myths have been such desperate means.” (Cassirer 1932: 279)

Abstract

The Copenhagen School characterizes the process of securitization by *speech acts*; when a public issue is labeled as a security threat through a speech act it is transformed into a depoliticized object that poses an *existential threat* to a referent object, such as the state or a collective identity. Ernst Cassirer proposed a theory of symbolic forms to explain how we represent the world and how culture is developed. The basic symbolic forms are the ones of language and myth, where the latter is the form through which man first spontaneously attempted to give meaning to his emotional and social aspects of life. However, in modern political context, political myth have been fabricated for political purposes, as was seen in Nazi Germany. This article will explore the theoretical frameworks of the Copenhagen School and of Cassirer’s symbolic forms and examine where and how they overlap. My contention is that securitization might also be an instance of mythologization, since they both have strong emotional qualities, create narratives or myths, and are both intersubjective in nature. In the end I will briefly analyze whether Islam/Muslims are securitized and also mythologized in a Danish context.

Introduction

The post-structuralism approach in securitization studies emphasizes the potency of language for the construction of security objects, and it is by

many regarded as an unwanted child of the postmodern era. Post-structuralism, with its lack of predictive theories, is a stark contrast to the positivist models of modernity; its infusion into security studies have broadened the horizon of security issues and refocused its attention to how vital matters of security are constructed through discourses and discursive practices. The Copenhagen School characterizes the process of securitization by *speech acts*; when an object¹ in the world is labeled as a security threat through speech acts it is transformed into a depoliticized object that poses an *existential threat*.

In this essay I will inquire into the relationship between the process of securitization as understood by the Copenhagen School and political myths as conceived by Ernst Cassirer. I will argue that securitization can sometimes also be *mythologization*², and in laying out this analysis I will try to answer how exactly an object in the world becomes symbolically represented as an existential threat and obtains mythical qualities. As a case study I will briefly look at Islam/Muslims in Denmark, which have been highly politicized over the last several years to the point where they, arguably, have become securitized and possibly also mythologized.

Securitization

Securitization is a concept that stems from IR (international relations) with its own idiosyncratic meaning most commonly grounded in power politics. Within the traditional military-political sector and understanding of security studies, security has been a matter of a threat to the survival of the state. This existential threat to a referent object legitimizes extreme protocols in dealing with the danger that are not confined to usual political conduct, typically and specifically the measures would be use of military

¹ An object signifies potentially everything that can become a matter of securitization.

² Cassirer does not explicitly use this term himself, but I find it useful since it conveys a dynamical process.

force (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 26). The Copenhagen School of thought attempts to expand the theoretical field of security studies within IR with their *constructivist* approach. They accentuate the importance of how the world is represented by the human mind through language and how these images play a role in matters of security. However, this does not imply a denial of the existence of an objective world, but rather that our perceptions and understanding of it is contingent upon social constructions and representations.³ The core of securitization theory is the ‘speech act’ which is a concept conceived in the field of language theory from the philosopher J. L. Austin (1962). By articulating certain words something is done or something happens (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 26). Utterances are not necessarily mere descriptive propositions that hold truth values but can in effect materialize themselves through the actions they set in motion. Symbols then permeate the very fabric of our reality and are constantly impacting its course, transforming reality according to the meanings encoded in the symbols; “by saying the words, something is done (like betting, giving a promise, naming a ship)” (Wæver 1988; Austin 1975; 98ff. in Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 26).

For something to count as a security issue it must be through a speech act presented as an existential threat (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 24). An existential threat means that the object poses a danger to the referent object’s desired values. A minority group within society might for example be perceived by certain actors – political actors for instance – as an existential threat to the collective identity of the majority population.⁴ When

³ To what degree the perception and understanding of the world is contingent upon social constructions and representations can be discussed. The pre-linguistic biological constitutions, such as needs for reproduction and survival, also mediate our engagement with the world and thus affect our perceptions and understandings.

⁴ A central concept within the Copenhagen Schools’ theoretical framework is the idea of sectors; these are fields with specific types of securitization interactions. These include military, political, economic, societal and environmental sectors, and they “encourage different forms of relationships between relevant actors to develop and generally encourage

something is perceived as such it undermines normal politics, and the new rules and laws instantiated as a consequence of the existential threat collide with human rights. Abnormal political conduct is relative to the norm of a specific state, and deviation in a western liberal democracy can take the form of “secrecy, levying taxes or conscription, placing limitations on otherwise inviolable rights, or focusing society’s energy and resources on a specific task.” (ibid., 24). But for this to happen an attempted move to securitize an issue must be accepted by a relevant audience; the way to make an audience acquiescent is, among other things, according to Cassirer, by the usage of a specific language (magical or mythical) (Cassirer 1932: 283). This is because political myths paralyze their victims by invoking fear, and a securitization move attempts to perform the same maneuver. This will be unfolded more in the next section.

What would in the first place constitute a successful securitization act? Three criteria must be met in a chronological order: branding an object as an existential threat, emergency measures, and an impact on interunit relations by a disruption of the rules that govern the relationship (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998, 26). For instance, in the case of war between two states, the usual agreements and rules that govern the relationship are disowned, and what determines the course of action is a state’s own values and priorities.

As to the ontological nature of security, it is not realist since there is not an extra-cultural standard against which it can be judged whether an object is a ‘real’ threat or not. Existential threats are subjective, since they are ultimately determined by relevant actors. However, even subjectivity is not adequate, because the actors are not isolated subjects, but always already existing in a cultural, discursive and political context (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 31). Therefore, it would be a mistake to reduce security

different definitions of referent objects (the ‘whom’ in ‘security for whom?’)” (McDonald 2008: 68).

to the object itself and its qualities, or to the subjective mind's interpretation capacities; instead it is more sensical to view its nature as one of intersubjectivity (cf. Arendt 1958, 1959; Wæver 1990; Huysmans 1996 in Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 31). This connects with the fact that the attempt to securitize an issue into an existential threat must be seen as such by a relevant audience; one could say that an object as a securitized object realizes itself in the collective subjectivity within a political context.

The quality of security in general is “the staging of existential issues in politics to lift them above politics. In security discourse, an issue is *dramatized* and presented as an issue of supreme superiority.” (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 26; my italics). Viewing securitization as a drama signifies the emotional qualities an issue or object obtains once it is labeled as an existential threat. Additionally, the Copenhagen School understands securitization as an extreme version of politics and theorizes that any public issue can be found on the following spectrum:

“Ranging from *nonpoliticized* (meaning the state does not deal with it and it is not in any other way made an issue of public debate and decision) through *politicized* (meaning the issue is part of public policy, requiring government decision and resource allocations or, more rarely, some other form of communal governance) to *securitized* (meaning the issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure).” (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 23-24; my italics)

Once a public issue or object is lifted above politics and becomes an existential threat it can invoke strong emotional reactions such as fear, disgust or hatred, and can thereby undermine a more critical approach to the matter at hand. Yet, once an issue is lifted out of politics it cannot ultimately be exempt from critical examination, because how would the concept of de-securitization be explained? Whether an issue is securitized

or not is contingent upon the perception of a relevant audience, but there will always in a modern pluralistic context be groups of people who will not perceive the same issue as a matter of security and therefore resist against it, thereby functioning as facilitating actors for the process of de-securitization.

Myth and language as symbolic forms

Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms offers a representational view of reality and is therefore in concordance with the Copenhagen School's constructivist epistemology. The theory tries to explain the evolution of culture as a function of an interplay between the various symbolic forms that currently exist but have not always done so. The symbolic forms include myth, religion, language, art, science, where myth and language are the most basic ones which all the rest have evolved from (Friedman 2011). Via the symbolic forms the world is represented accordingly, which in effect shapes the lived world into a specific form. Building on from Kant, a form is a condition of possible experience, which organizes phenomena into a meaningful unity and from Cassirer's point of view creates a fact of culture (Friedman 2011). The forms are, in other words, constitutive functions of the mind, where language and myth are but two forms (Bishop 2004: 132). Cassirer is interested in how the world appears to the subject through the operations of the symbolic forms, that is, through a construction of the world. Humans, in contrast to animals, have the capacity to respond symbolically to their experiences, and through this symbolic expression attempt to objectify reality. The symbolic form of language "objectify our sense-perceptions. In the very act of a linguistic expression our perceptions assume a new form." (Cassirer 1932: 45). Language for Cassirer, as for Austin and the Copenhagen School, is not merely an instrument for giving names to already finished given objects in an independent objective space, thereby purely descriptively representing an external complete reality; rather, language "it

is itself the means of the formation of objects. Indeed, in a certain sense, it is *the* means, the most important and the most perfect instrument for the production and construction of a pure ‘world of objects’.” (ibid., 127). In this sense language is a tool of differentiation of the reality and furnishes it with a logical structure and gives reality a value. But whereas the use of language implies an empirical reality, myth is fantastical, absurd and stands in opposition to reality (ibid., 45). However, whilst language objectifies sense-perceptions, “mythical symbolism leads to an objectification of feelings.” (ibid., 45). Myths are stories or narratives with their own logical structure that give meaning to the intense emotional and social aspects of life. Furthermore, myth is best understood through its relation to language claims Cassirer, inasmuch as they have a common root (Coskun 2007: 160); this common root in man is the spontaneous act of giving form and meaning to “immediate impulses or sense impressions that spring up from life.” (ibid., 161). They are man’s first attempt to organize the disorganized emotional forces present in every human existence. Myth creation, or what I call mythologization (the act of symbolically expressing emotions into mythical images or stories) is an intellectual process whereby the experience of emotions are classified into meaningful representations. To be sure, the intellect plays only one part in mythologization. Myth “sprouts from deep human emotions.” (Cassirer 1932: 43). Emotions are the driving forces of mythologization, and not reason, although reason is what ultimately symbolizes and give structure to the emotions. Moreover, what distinguishes symbolic reactions from physical reactions is that the former obtain a more durable status, whereas the latter are transient.

In relation to politics, which will be explored in the next section, it is important to understand the nature of authentic myths. Cassirer states that,

“Genuine myth does not possess [...] philosophical freedom; for the images in which it lives are not *known* as images. They are not regarded as symbols but

as realities. This reality cannot be rejected or criticized. It has to be accepted in a passive way” (Cassirer 1946: 47)

In this sense, the subjects under the symbolic governance of myths cannot politicize about the myths that occupy their minds, for they are taken as immediate and absolute truths. This absolute stance towards a myth or a set of myths cannot be criticized because that would necessitate reflective consciousness of the myths as myths. Therefore, myth is not to be understood in the modern usage of the word, where it means “a widely held but false belief or idea”, because this understanding would require a ‘breaking of the spell’ so to speak. This begs the question of how genuine myths then became and become viewed as false stories or images of the world; man’s increasing use of technology gave him more control of his surroundings and began to loosen the grip of myths, which paved the way for the scientific symbolic form which does not create emotionally laden symbolism but instead pure abstract interpretations of reality. But when the mythico-religious worldview is the dominant one, critical judgement is in the best case moved into the background and in the worst case it is suspended.

Genealogy of myth in the modern state

Despite the immediate, expressive and bottom-up nature of mythologically representing reality, it can in the modern state emerge through a complete opposite process; as Cassirer describes,

“Myth has always been described as the result of an unconscious activity and as a free product of the imagination. But here we find myth according to plan. The new political myths do not grow up freely; they are not wild fruits of an exuberant imagination. They are artificial things fabricated by very skillful and cunning artisans [...] myths can be manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as any other modern weapon – as machine guns or airplanes.” (Cassirer 1932: 282)

Myths used as political instruments emerge from a top-down process with a specific purpose in mind. Like a hammer is made for the purpose of hammering things in, a myth is made for the purpose of evoking specific emotions and controlling the people who believe in them; it is a powerful political tool even though a myth in and of itself is not political. Equally it can be claimed that a securitized object is not political but is used for political aims. It would not be political anymore if we accept that it has stepped out of the arena of public debate and become an existential threat. The actors who would be most successful in their attempts to mythologize an object would be actors in positions of power, since these persons are usually granted legitimacy and authority partly in virtue of their position, although they do not have the exclusive rights or power to securitize (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 31). Cassirer goes on to claim that for the creation of political myths, a change in the function of language has to happen. No more is the predominant function of language semantic, but magical (Cassirer 1932: 283). But what characterizes magical language, and how does it relate to language of securitization? Magical or mythological language uses words that are not only descriptive, but laden with emotions and “violent passions” (ibid., 283). Even though speech acts and the use of language is powerful, for Cassirer language alone would not be enough; new rites must also be implemented in order for the speech acts to have full power.

The overlap between securitization and mythologization

In this section I will tentatively try to delineate points of convergence between securitization and mythologization in an effort to qualify under which conditions securitization is also mythologization.⁵ Securitization

⁵ A deeper analysis that incorporates more conceptual tools from both the Copenhagen School and Cassirer’s ideas would require more space, and therefore it is beyond the scope of this article to try to do so. I leave this challenge to my future self or someone else who already has a better grasp of the matters at hand.

occurs when an issue through a speech act has successfully been represented as an existential threat to a referent object. Mythologization identifies the act whereby an emotion is symbolically expressed as an emotionally charged image or narrative. Both processes are fundamentally concerned with the creation of narratives through the symbolic use of language first and foremost. When an issue becomes securitized it becomes a symbol of something dangerous that elicits action immediately due to its severity (Buzan, Wæver, Wilde 1998: 24). Both securitization and mythologization instill intense emotional qualities in the issue/narrative. Because of the specific emotional dramatization and language employed to express an existential threat, as for instance the language Hitler used in describing the Jews, I would therefore argue that the existential threat can obtain mythical qualities. As Coskun writes, “Although the image world of myth consists of symbols, it is still highly dramatized.” (Coskun 2008: 162). The drama components is present both in securitization and mythologization. The portrayal of Jewish people was both visually and linguistically fantastical and absurd, since the depictions were out of proportions and therefore seen as something subhuman. In that example, Jews were securitized since they were seen as an existential threat to not only the German collective identity and German culture, but also to the economy and the state. At the same time, Jews became a political myth, a deliberate construction propagated through mass media technology.

Another fundamental intersection between securitization as understood by the Copenhagen School and Cassirer’s theory of mythical representation via symbolic expression is the concern with the emergence of meaning through intersubjective processes (McDonald 2008: 68). In this intersection there are two components then, ‘meaning’ and ‘intersubjectivity’; when an emotion is symbolically expressed through myth it undergoes a radical change. The representation of it either internally or externally is not the emotion itself, but always an image or narrative of the

emotion, which is relative to the social context one inhabits (Cassirer 1932: 43). In other words, the emotion obtains a symbolic meaning it did not have before and it is therefore not simply a depiction of the emotion. Myths orient action and can legitimize behavior in order to deal with certain difficult circumstances. Equally, when a politicized issue metamorphoses into an existential threat, it obtains a new meaning and affords and demands new protocol; through the use of security language something is done to a public issue that warrants certain measures. In the case of securitization, what is spoken to is the emotion of fear. But when an emotion, a practice, or an object is represented as mythical the affective responses it can invoke is not limited to negative emotions, since myths can be about many different aspects relating to human life. Nevertheless, the creation of myths might still be mostly associated with fear, since fear of the unknown might let the imagination loose. As Coskun writes, “Only when man is confronted with a problem or task that seems to exceed his natural powers or that is dangerous and uncertain does myth become a viable option.” (Coskun 2007: 162). Germany after WW1 during the 20’s was just such a chaotic state of affairs that fertilized the ground for the creation of myths. The second aspect of the fundamental intersection is sociality or intersubjectivity, which is the nature of both securitization and mythologization. In the mythical worldview, the ‘I’ has not or is not differentiated from the collective desires and from the community.⁶ One can only know and feel oneself through his or her social relations, which means that the self is not yet an ethical being, since this requires man to step out from his immediate innocent environment and become reflectively self-aware (ibid., 161). Cassirer diagnosed a regression to a more mythical form of existence during Nazi Germany through the proliferation of political myths, which managed to sway the public. Mythical

⁶ To what extent a regress might occur in the modern West, where the differentiated ‘I’ both in an ontogenetic and cultural sense reverts to a more primitive mythical lifeform is debatable.

thinking is therefore not only limited to primitive societies but can emerge even in more modern technological societies. However, due to the highly individualized culture in the West, a mass abandonment of one's individuality and surrender to the collectivity might prove to be unlikely. At any rate, mythologization is perhaps the extreme end of securitization and is latent in the atmosphere that securitization brings into being. When an issue or object is securitized it seems to overlap greatly with the mythologization due to the strong negative emotional component, strong symbolism and meaning (narratives or discourse), and the intersubjective nature of security and myth. However, whilst securitization might have things in common with mythologization, the latter does not have to overlap with the former, since a myth is not limited to an existential threat.

There is an interesting perspective to be made to the philosopher Giorgio Agamben with regards to the distinction between securitization and mythologization. Agamben sees the modern state as being in a perpetual state of exception (Mills 2018), which could be classified as not being normal (abiding by normal political measures in the West) relative to the framework of the Copenhagen School. In this case the exceptional state *is* the norm; the nature of the modern state is in this way because the subjects exists in a paradoxical mode of being; on the one hand they are granted rights from the state and thereby they are more than animals (*zoe*). On the other hand, they are within the state reduced to 'bare life' where they are in effect a depoliticized being, because they are governed by laws that are inherently meaningless, since the state has the capacity to break the laws that protect the individuals (*ibid.*). In relation to security matters, following the logic laid out by the Copenhagen School that securitization means exceptional measures, the state from Agamben's perspective would then be a constant securitized atmosphere or space, where extreme measures might be normalized because they are meant to protect the subjects. But whose values and whose interest does a perpetual state of exception mainly serve?

However, Agamben's state of exception might mean that security is a primary lens that structures the social and political world, but this does not necessarily imply that the state is equally mythologized. The reason for this is that a mythological reality is charged with emotionality and meaning, whereas Agamben's state of exception is one of utter meaninglessness, like it is in a concentration camp, which Agamben likens the modern state to (ibid.). The modern state of Agamben is meaningless because the subjects are fundamentally without any rights and therefore not seen as sacred individuals.

The Status of Islam/Muslims in Denmark

In Denmark there is a pernicious discourse and rhetoric about Islam and Muslims; Dansk Folkeparti (The Danish People's Party) became the second largest party in 2015⁷ in a period with mass immigration into Europe, the majority of immigrants being Muslims (Graham-Harrison & Rasmussen 2018). Islam is perceived as a threat to the freedom of speech, Danish national identity, Danish culture, Danish economy, which therefore securely places Islam as an existential threat to the Danish state and a large portion of Danish citizens (Hansen 2011: 363-364). Insofar as there are people who attempt to portray Islam and/or Muslims as existential threats the actions of these people can be labelled as securitizations acts. One prime example of such a move, of which there are many, are the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in 2005: this event sparked enagement within the Islamic world and initiated endless debates about the threat of Islam to the West generally and Denmark specifically; what was proclaimed to being threatened was a core value of the West, namely the celebrated value of freedom of speech (ibid.,

⁷ The recent Danish election cut the size and influence of the party by more than half of its mandates. This does not necessarily undermine the analysis, since a new far-right party, Nye Borgerlige has been accepted into the government, and a very radical far-right party, Stram Kurs, received 1,8 percent of votes, where 2 percent is the threshold.

363-364). In the cartoons and in the context they were submerged into we see the dramatized component of securitization that stirred up extreme emotions; furthermore, the way different actors engaged with the event and its aftermath reflected how the conflict was rooted in the myth or discourse of the 'clash of civilizations' (ibid., 364). The depiction of the prophet with a bomb was an attempt to portray Islam as a matter of security⁸, but whether or not this securitizing move was successful depends of the reception of the audience.

When current policies and rhetoric are examined surrounding Islam and Muslims in Denmark a case for a successful securitization move can be made. The recent burqa/niqab ban is a good example (Graham-Harrison & Rasmussen 2018); the measures taken in order to avoid what is perceived as a threat to Danish identity was the passing of a law that many human rights groups said undermined otherwise inviolable rights. Advocates of the law even said that the issue was a matter of *public safety* (Sørensen & Specia 2018). In a similar legislation passed in France in recent years, the UN panel ruled it as a violation against human rights (Barnes 2018). Not only was this law extreme insofar as it limited the rights of individuals whose action did not cause harm to others, a lot of resources in Denmark was allocated to this symbolic problem.

Islam and Muslims are highly stereotyped and is the primary marker for many people that distinguishes between Danish and non-Danish. Muslims are being targeted and are subject for vile rhetoric, and it is claimed by some political actors that Islam will take over the West and instill Sharia Law, and no distinction is made between Islam and radical Islam. Political actors conjure up mythical images of Islam as an evil force that wants to take over the world, and that being a Muslim per say is incompatible with Danish culture. However, there are groups in the Danish society with Islam as their

⁸ Securitization moves are therefore not limited to political actors in the sense of government officials for instance.

religion that are perfectly integrated and, in some respects, do even better than their Danish peers; this group is the Bosniaks, Bosnian Muslims that immigrated into Denmark in the 90's due to civil war in now ex-Yugoslavia (Dmitruk, Hadzic, Sherman 2005). This case demonstrates the possibility of coexistence between the Danish society and Islam, and perhaps when disharmony is found it should be sought in fanaticism, which always poses a threat to order in a democratic society. Religion as a symbolic form interacting with other symbolic forms may manifest itself in more secular versions that can be integrated into a society that is also secular.

Whilst it can be hard to determine conclusively the status of Islam and Muslims in Denmark, debates, rhetoric, policies about and pertaining to Islam/Muslims suggests that it they are securitized and mythologized. Islam seems to have become symbolized as a mythological object which poses an existential threat to Danish values and the Danish culture at large, Islam and Muslims are mythologized insofar as they are dramatized issues and imbued with emotional qualities, a narrative which has fantastical elements. Muslims are perceived as the dangerous other that jeopardize the Danish way of living and the Danish nation state, and a discourse is constructed around it. By representing Islam in a securitized and mythological manner exceptional measure can be taken in an attempt to alleviate the civil unrest and the posited danger.

Conclusion

Securitization seems to greatly overlap with mythologization, because both processes dramatize an issue or object and instill certain emotional qualities into the object that then possess the power to invoke exceptional measures in order to combat the existential threat. Both the post-structuralist approach from the Copenhagen School and Cassirer's symbolic forms are concerned with the way in which we humans construe and represent the world through language, and additionally through mythology.

I have reviewed the case of Islam and Muslim in Denmark as a potentially securitized issue, but also a potentially political myth or at least having qualities of a political myth. To what extent this is the case requires a broader analysis. In this article I have tried to give a tentative appraisal of its status and there are at least several indicators that it might be securitized and also mythical; one indicator is the language used to describe it and the discourse in which the engagement with the issue occurs; Islam and Muslims seem to pose a threat to Danish values. The Danish cartoons of Muhammad may be interpreted as mythological symbolism that try to link Islam with terrorism, and furthermore, there are measures taken today, such as the burqa/niqab ban that many would regard as being exceptional, since they are often construed as being in conflict with human rights.

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