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CRITICAL SECURITY STUDIES, SECURITIZATION,  
AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION<sup>1\*</sup>

*Atahan DEMIRKOL<sup>2</sup>*

**Abstract**

This study dwells on the quest for a critical security perspective on international migration. Therefore, how international migration could be perceived through critical security studies is the main research question of this study. Critical security studies (CSS) or Welsh School of security studies emerged after Robert Cox's debate between problem-solving and critical theories, especially after the 1990s. In this respect, CSS focus on questioning the mainstream theories and their interpretation of security. Instead of accepting the state as the referent object, critical security studies provide other elements that may be threatened, so that related to the security. On the one hand, CSS is, therefore, critical towards the traditional approaches to security such as realism and liberalism. Securitization, on the other hand, as Copenhagen School provided a speech act to put an issue into the field of security. International migration is one of the accurate examples of securitization. In this study, we employed CSS and securitization perspectives to international migration to understand how international migration could be assessed through critical theories.

**Keywords:** Critical Security Studies, Copenhagen School, International Migration

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<sup>1\*</sup> This paper is designed as a short working paper of an ongoing research by the author.

## Introduction

Robert Cox's renowned article is believed to trigger the argument between critical theories and problem-solving theories (1981:126-55). According to his classification, problem-solving theories take the world into consideration as it is, whereas the critical theories approach is skeptical about world order and power relations (Browning and McDonald, 2013:238). As it is true that his article and interpretation sparked a debate among International Relations (IR) scholars, CSS came to the agenda of scholars only in the 1990s (Browning and McDonald, 2013:236). Originally, CSS had its roots in peace studies (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2021:32). The critical theory and security studies nexus has been explained by Browning and McDonald as follows:

“Applied to the study of security, such an understanding of a ‘critical’ approach encourages a focus on the socially constructed nature of security and a series of fundamental questions such as: ‘Whose security is (or should be) prioritized?’, ‘What are the key threats to security and how are they identified?’, ‘Where do security discourses come from?’ and ‘Whose interests do they serve?’” (Browning and McDonald, 2013:238).

CSS, according to Wyn Jones, “is for ‘the voiceless, the unrepresented, the powerless,’ and its purpose is their emancipation” (Jones, 1999:123). Therefore, it is significant to understand that CSS questions the nature of security studies and the concept of security. CSS clearly challenges the foundations of realism by undermining its ontology, epistemology, and key features (Newman, 2010:83-84). The traditional approaches to security take state as the one which should be secured, that is, the referent object. The referent object is, therefore, “[a]n entity that is taken as the focus for analysis in security studies” (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2021:4). Nevertheless, from an explicit position of view, CSS broadened the application of referent object terms. CSS warns scholars to approach security from the lens of state, namely, national security (Wæver, 2012:52). Instead of the military security approach in traditional security studies, CSS deepened the understanding and

expanded the referent object, including environmental security, economic security, and human security (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2021:33). The breaking point was, generally, the human security approach of the 1994 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report. According to the UNDP Report, human security is described as it “means, first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease, and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life - whether in homes, in jobs or in communities” (UNDP, 1994:3). Therefore, the scope of security and its meaning have been broadened. The vital concept in CSS is emancipation. Although there are various schools in CSS, according to Wæver, Aberystwyth School should be taken into consideration as representing CSS due to the emancipatory concept (Wæver, 2012:52).

Deepening and broadening the meaning and extent of security crystallized with Copenhagen School's studies. Copenhagen School (CS) refers to the studies of a research group at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute since 1985 (Wæver, 2012:66). CS, mainly forms around three principles: i) securitization, ii) sectors, iii) regional security complexes (Wæver, 2012:52-53). To put it briefly, securitization is a speech act, mainly done by powerful actors such as politicians or media, to put an issue into the core of security. To do so, there should be an existential threat against the referent object, or it should be perceived as an existential threat, and the existential threat should be uttered by a powerful actor to the audience. After that stage, if the audience agrees or is convinced by the discourses of the powerful actor, then the issue becomes securitized and extraordinary measures could become available against this threat (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde, 1998). These are the basic assumptions and stages of the CS securitization process. As being said, international migration is a core example of the securitization process; CSS, in this respect, attempts to analyze how the policy shift occurred regarding international migration from a positive perspective to security so that threat perception (Rumelili and Karadağ, 2017:86). In terms of deepening the meaning of security, CS suggests new sectors related to security, namely, military security, political security, economic security, societal security, and environmental security (Rumelili and Karadağ, 2017:8). To the extent of this study, the most important sector is societal security, which refers to language, culture, religion, traditions, and related components to the society

(Rumelili and Karadağ, 2017:8). Societal security emerges when there is a threat perception against the societal identity (Küçük, 2021:7), which is mostly posed by immigrants in a country.

After the military security view, which is generally linking immigrants with terrorism, societal security is the second significant area of securitization of immigration in the field of CSS. Societal security basically occurs when there is a distinction between locals and immigrants as *self* and *others*. Immigrants, from this perspective, are labeled as dangerous to the incumbent culture and identity (Karyotis, 2007:1-17). Therefore, it becomes a security issue and poses a threat against the referent object, namely, culture. Although the economic security affected by immigrants is also questioned, and although there are various answers to this question (Csanyi, 2020:7), national security and societal security are the vitals for immigration policies nowadays. This paper intends to provide brief introductory information about CSS, CS, and the international migration relationship. This study will, therefore, briefly outline the CSS and immigration nexus and provide views on the societal security of immigration.

### Critical Security Studies (CSS)

As mentioned in the introduction part, CSS mainly aims to criticize traditional schools of security, which put the state at the epicenter of security issues. The state-based view of security is mostly concerned with the security of the state in means of securing the state from threats. This is mainly the realistic American strategic culture and foreign policy concerning state security and power relations (Demirkol, 2021:1-17). Yet, CSS broadens and deepens the understanding of security and its extent to various sectors. These sectors might be the environment, society, economy, health, or human beings as social groups (Bilgin, 2014:9-24). According to CSS, “[s]ecurity is about what *is* a threat, and the analyst can tell whether something really is a security problem and for whom” (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde, 1998:204). Thus, security has no objective definition as it is a subjectively invented concept (Booth and Vale, 1997:332). Being said, a theory -or a security theory- cannot be detached from society so that it

is interpretative (Stamnes, 2004:162). A CSS scholar would explicitly say that threats are constructed through subjective manners (Krause, 1998:306).

From a basic perspective, it is easy to understand traditional security studies and their main supporting points. After the Second World War (WWII) and during the Cold War, military security was the main concern of security studies due to the universal atmosphere regarding the war-prone nature. Yet, the post-Cold War era triggered a new debate about security by asking these famous questions: What is security? Whose security? Therefore, one can easily distinguish the security perceptions of the Cold War era and post-Cold War era (McCormack, 2010:28). Obviously, the state-centered security understanding so that the conflict between states was not applicable anymore after the Cold War (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2021:34).

The relationship between CSS and CS comes from their constructivist approach (Karyotis, 2007:2), although they are labeled as different schools by Wæver (2012:52). Hynek and Chandler refer to CS as a second-generation CSS (Hynek and Chandler, 2013:52). Indeed, CSS is not a uniform approach, and it consists of different points of view on security (Stamnes, 2004:162). According to Buzan et al., they are both constructivists while noting that CS is more constructivist (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde, 1998:205). Therefore, we smoothly pass to the CS and international migration. The societal security threat approach to international migration has been a trending issue in international migration studies (Kaygusuz, 2021:65) as the far-right populist parties have gained more support in recent years, especially in Europe. CS, in this respect, focuses on the securitization of migration through the societal security concept (Küçük, 2021:7).

### Copenhagen School (CS) and International Migration<sup>3</sup>

CS, as its main argument, conceptualizes securitization by advocating that it is a speech act (Taureck, 2006:54). The speech act is done by a political actor or media, which are the two powerful actors, for instance. To securitize an issue, the powerful

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<sup>3</sup> The author has partly used his forthcoming publication “Demirkol, A. (Forthcoming). An Empirical Analysis of Securitization Discourse in The European Union. *Migration Letters*.” to form this section. Yet, as it was not possible to cite, it is just indicated as a footnote.

actors come to the front and use their voices to impress the audience. The claim which is made by the powerful actors is that *the issue* is related to an existential threat to the *referent object* –generally the state. Yet, CS deepened the understanding of referent objects from a state-based perspective to political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors (Wilkinson, 2007:9). Therefore, securitization occurs if a powerful actor convinces the audience that *something* is a real danger against *some existential thing* so that it would be able to take *extraordinary measures* against the threat.

Societal security has been embedded in the security studies by CS by claiming that it did not have a place in traditional security studies (Buzan and Wæver, 1997:242). To put it clearly, Buzan and Wæver indicate that they “tried to show how ‘societies’ defined in terms of identity could be seen as the referent object for some cases” (Buzan and Wæver, 1997:242). Therefore, CS has basically taken identities into consideration in security studies. Indeed, this approach is related to international migration and its securitization of it.

CS mainly argues that migration is securitized, but it ought to be de-securitized. The securitization of immigration starts with uttering that immigrants are threats to the economy, culture, and national security. Accordingly, international migration has been perceived as a threat to national security, welfare, and identity in most countries. However, the easiest way to label immigrants as a threat is by calling them *deviants* to the incumbent culture. As security is defined to be free from threat according to CS, societal security is keeping the identity and culture fixed during the flows of diversification of them (Wæver et al., 1993:23). The relationship between societal security and international migration is crystal clear as Alexseev notes that in 2005, almost half of the adult population in Russia was supporting the exclusionist approach to the immigrants (Alexseev, 2011:509-23). This issue, generally, is as same in other countries as Russia. Most of the increasing support for far-right parties in Europe, which has been a great part of elections in the EU countries in recent years, focused on the societal security regarding immigrants. The belief that immigrants will destabilize the identity and culture of the locals is a form of securitization of immigration from CS’ perspective. By doing so, immigrants are posed as a threat against the referent object, that is, identity.



## Discussion and Concluding Remarks

CSS has a point to criticize traditional security studies regarding their state-oriented view of security. Security should include other sectors and aspects such as the environment, humans, economy, and society. According to CSS, security is a constructive process as it is being constructed through one's perspective regarding threats to the referent object. At this stage, CS comes to the field as another constructive theory within the framework of CSS. CS mainly argues about securitization migration and supports the de-securitization of migration.

However, securitization of migration has been occurring worldwide during the last decades, especially after 9/11. The securitization of migration has accelerated after the terrorist attacks to the United States of America (USA) and the attacks in European countries. The common action of the target countries was blaming the immigration for such terrorist attacks, and they have become paranoid about immigration regarding the security concerns. Besides perceiving immigrants as a source of terrorism, they are also regarded as *deviants* to the incumbent local culture. This perspective leads us to the societal security concept of CS. Societal security refers to the securitization of the identity of the dominant culture in a country. From this side, international migration poses an existential threat to the referent object, that is, identity.

The international migration-societal security nexus should be a topic to focus on nowadays. The increasing power of far-right populist parties all around the world endangers the perception of international migration and immigrants' rights regarding societal security. The xenophobic ideas, including closing millions of refugees to the camps, pushing them out of the countries, or even attacking them on the borders, are not rare issues today. General European politics have seen this agenda in the recent years during the elections. Most right-wing parties supported anti-immigrant discourse in regard to Syrian refugee protection crisis (Kale, 2017:55-84).

On the one hand, rather than being anxious about societal security, there are many examples of successful integration processes, which should be considered. One great example is the case of Canada for refugee or immigrant integration to the local

culture. On the other hand, it is also a shame for EU countries to exhibit exclusionary practices against immigration as the EU promotes the idea of *unity in diversity*. The diversity ought to be applied to the immigrants as well.

From the perspectives of CSS and CS, international migration should not be considered as an existential threat to referent object –identity– but regarded as an opportunity for diversity. Populism against immigrants should be the first problem to be addressed in national politics before the international policies, as it should be a bottom-up process. Therefore, a new political agenda for countries being compelled with xenophobia and societal security issues is needed.

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