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What is in an Act? On security speech acts and little security nothings¹

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Abstract

This article makes a claim for re-engaging the concept of 'act' in the study of securitisation. While much has been written about the discursive and communicative aspects of securitising, the concept of 'act' that contains much of the politicality of the speech act approach to security has been relatively ignored. The task of re-engaging 'acts' is particularly pertinent in the contemporary context in which politically salient speech acts are heavily displaced by securitising practices and devices that appear as banal, little security nothings. The main purpose of the article is to start framing a research agenda that asks what political acts can be in diffuse security processes that efface securitising speech acts.

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'I discuss security as a speech act', Ole Wæver writes in 1995 (Wæver, 1995). This idea has played a significant role in rallying research that studies insecurity not as an environmental condition upon which one acts but as the discursive rendition of that environment through security practice. Wæver and his colleagues at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute were not the only ones working the linguistic turn in philosophy and social theory into security studies (e.g. Campbell, 1992, Der Derian and Shapiro, 1989, Fierke, 1998) but theirs was among the most successful in International Studies. Since the mid-1990s, it has been taken up by an increasing number of people studying a wide range of securitising processes and has persistently generated intense conceptual and theoretical debates about the nature of securitising.

Compared to other linguistic conceptions of security (such as language games, writing security, security discourse), which are more intuitively adept to studying intersubjective processes of meaning construction, the notion of 'security speech act' expresses a more recognisable political investment. The notion of 'act' carries both a conception of the political and a possibility for a political critique of security practice that resonates with conventional understandings of politics emphasising the role of political elite and key political institutions like parliaments and diplomacy.

This article argues for re-engaging the concept of 'act' in the security speech act. The first section argues this on the grounds that the notion of 'act' rather than speech carries the political investment – including the possibility for political critique– of the securitisation approach. The second section adds a complication to the call for this re-engagement. A number of significant securitising processes exist, among others instances of the technologically mediated spread of surveillance and the folding of securitising into everyday life, which are effacing speech acts with weighty decision-making significance. Speech acts of security seem to be displaced by the diffuse and associative securitising work of what from the perspective of existential speech acts mostly appear as little security nothings, such as programming algorithms, routine collections of data, and looking at CCTV cameras. The third section demonstrates that it remains nevertheless important to engage the concept of 'act' for a political study of securitising. Such re-engaging will require letting go of the exceptionalist rendition of acts in the securitisation approach, however, and developing conceptions of acts that can account for rupture in the diffuse politics of little security nothings.

The 'act' in security speech acts

Because the move towards understanding security as a practice of making insecurities was strongly embedded in the linguistic turn, much attention went to examining discourse and speech: including the ontological status of language, discourse as methodology, speech acts as a particular form of speech, and rhetorical structures and grammars of security speech. Discussions opened up, sometimes briefly sometimes sustained and intense, over issues such as the meaning of security that was 'activated' in the speech act, the exclusion of silence, the relevance of images, and the conditions of felicity of a speech act. The conception of 'act' itself, however, has remained largely untouched. It mainly functioned as a signifier included for expressing the performative nature of language, i.e. marking that language does not mirror the world but acts upon it and creates stuff.

Recently the question of the effects of speech acts of security on its audience led to a focus on theorising communicative relations. Moving the discussion from what is invested in the security

speech to how this investment is (or, is not) carried from speakers to audiences brings practice more explicitly into the picture. It is not just the speech that matters but the circulation of security speech and its appropriation or refusal by those who are addressed. This interrogation of the speech act, however, does not unpack explicitly what is invested in the notion of 'act' either. It folds the act into conceptions of interaction – pragmatist (Balzacq, 2005) or dramaturgical (Salter, 2008) – and an interest in the effectiveness of speech act, i.e. in its outward orientation.

Yet, the notion of 'act' is central for understanding the political investment made in moving towards studying security as a speech act. The concept of 'act' conditions the political critique of security practice that is possible within this approach.

Let's start from two short quotes that express the political dimensions of the security speech act:

'By uttering "security" a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it.' (Wæver, 1995: 55)

'Thereby the actor has claimed a right to handle the issue through extraordinary means to break the normal political rules of the game ...' (Buzan et al., 1998: 24)

The key political quality of the speech act of security is a break in the normal political rules of the game. When security becomes an act it is not a routine practice, an acting out of given procedures and institutionalised conditions of felicity, a habitual practice, but it creates a scene in which actors and things are brought into a relation that challenges a given way of doing things. It sets something in motion by enacting the unexpected, unknown, unpredictable (Isin, 2008: 27). A break in instituted normality is what makes securitisation – a state-representative moving a particular development into a [security] area – political.

Following Isin's work on 'acts', let's use the term 'rupture' to express this central quality of an act. (Isin, 2008) An act creates 'a scene' that ruptures a given order. The idea of rupture does not refer to replacing one order with another or one conception of order challenging another, however. Rather it refers to practices that create boundary conditions, however infinitesimal and momentary, through enacting limits of a given order. Enacting refers to both expressing limits and bringing the limits into being as an issue of contestation.² They 'raise the bet' and create 'a test case'.

'The point of my argument, however, is not that to speak "security" means simply to talk in a higher-pitched voice. It is slightly more complex than that: "security" is a specific move that entails consequences which involve risking oneself and offering a specific issue as a test case. Doing this may have a price and, in that sense, it could be regarded as a way to "raise the bet".' (Wæver, 1995: 75)

At issue is not if an audience accepts the speech act of security – if the intentionality of securitising by those speaking security is realised through an audience agreeing with them or not. Neither is it whether security practices and technologies become institutionalised in routines and technologies one encounters at airports or embassies. The 'realisation' of an act consists of the creation of a rupturing scene itself, irrespective of its acceptance and institutionalisation. 'To act, then, is neither arriving at a scene nor fleeing from it, but actually engaging in its creation.' (Isin, 2008: 27) What matters is that the scene brought into existence as 'an assemblage of acts, actions and actors in a

² For examples: Isin and Nielsen (2008); Andrijasevic et al. (2010), Aradau et al. (2010)

historically and geographically concrete situation' (Isin, 2008: 24) by actors remaining at the rupturing scene rather than fleeing from it.

Speech acts rupture a given situation in *a decision* to create. The concept of decision is another central element of the politicality of acts, as used in the securitisation literature. When 'a state-representative moves a particular development into a [security] area' when 'they offer a specific issue as a test case' they make a decision. 'Decision' here does not simply refer to an expression of volition – the will to create, to decide – or of choice between given options. As a political category it implies, what Isin following Bakhtin calls, answerability (Isin, 2008: 28-35). Answerability has different dimensions. An act actualised in a decision introduces responsibility towards others. One cannot hide behind necessity, routine, habits in the act of security creation. Speaking security is a decision to rupture a situation with certain calculable consequences for others. 'Power holders' can then be made responsible and procedures of accountability can be applied. Combined with instituted demands for and mechanisms of transparency and accountability of decisions, rendering responsible is a central element of political criticism of security practice, especially since the latter often seeks special status by claiming to be under the spell of necessity – no choices when survival is at stake – and by instituting an imperative of secrecy – revealing intelligence will help enemies and criminals in countering intelligence gathering (e.g. Wood and Dupont, 2006). This is the first way in which the concept of act introduces a condition of political critique of securitisation.

Answerability to others also refers to the authorisation of authority. What authorises decisions to rupture the given? The security speech act legitimates authority to move from the normal procedures of democratic politics to exceptional political measures by referring to existential threats that cannot be met within the confines of the 'usual' procedures and repertoire of actions. Answerability to others here brings the process of securitising to political judgement in public debate around the legitimacy of transgressive authority moving matters into a terrain of exceptional politics. Political critique often mobilises the priority of constitutional and fundamental rights, institutional checks and balances, the relation between security and freedom to enact this answerability of speech acts of security.

Both forms of answerability fold the rupture somehow back into an existing order – into instituted practices of political legitimisation and political responsabilisation. While transgressing an existing situation, the politics of rupture are connected back to normative and political orders that provide the basis for evaluating and contesting the acceptability of transgressions in terms of calculable consequences of the act – translated back into responsibility of the actors for their decisions – and norms of authorisation.

Yet, the security speech act in Wæver's and Buzan's formulation cannot be fully folded back into given orders. As 'a move that entails consequences which involve risking oneself and offering a specific issue as a test case', it retains traces of a more excessive conception of act. As Isin argues, the concept of act refers to rupturing actions that somehow are always also a move into the unexpected and unknown³. Arguably, this dimension of the conception of act takes it outside of the Austinian framing of speech act, which is heavily embedded in instituted structures of meaning. It is important, however, to include this dimension to understand the paradoxical notion of politics that

³ In current international studies this aspect is brought out most sharply in Derridean readings of the political: Edkins 1999.

is invested in the concept of act. The politicality of the act cannot be exhausted by process of legitimisation and accountability. It implies a third answerability; answerability as the affirmation of undecidability, the radical openness and the creativity of being, the possibility of the unexpected; actions that cannot be fully folded back into calculability and instituted normativity. This answerability implies the possibility for a political critique that demands that the rupture – i.e. security emergencies – enacted through the speech acts of security are not immediately politically closed by mobilising security institutions and routines that are embedded in the existing order. In this conception, the security speech act creates a gravitational moment in which political critique does not simply depend on bringing into play instituted practices of accountability and legitimacy to hold the claim to transgressive power to account but also thrives in the rupture of the given order that the security speech act constitutes. This paradoxical condition of politicality (Isin, 2008: 29) that is invested in the security speech *act* has often remained unexplored. The political critique of the speaking of security usually folds the act back into a given order. Without reference to an order one cannot say much about the speech act and the immediate political answerability implied by the decision requires referencing back to an order. Yet, as act it also retains a radical distance from normative and causal orders; its politicality resides in its rupturing quality. While the former answerability is often deployed to demonstrate the un-democratic, and in Wæver and Buzan's terminology depoliticizing, qualities, the latter answerability points in the opposite direction of the speech act of security being radically politicising.⁴

Wæver and Buzan politically substantiate this paradoxical quality of the act by folding it into political exceptionalism. As argued elsewhere (Huysmans, 2006, Huysmans, 1998), when they say that by declaring security the power holders claim special rights they do not simply mean that they rupture but also that rupturing through calling upon existential situations brings exceptionalist politics into play. Exceptionalism authorises transgressive authority and enacts limits of a given order by calling upon existential threats. In doing so however, it does not simply enact a given legal and political order that sanctions transgressive power in emergency situations. The exceptionalist actualisation of the decision also posits a politics of creating *ex nihilo*. Declaring that the existing normative order cannot cope with an existentially threatening situation then implies a claim to enact new possibilities of what is right and wrong. This conception links the security speech act to the recent revival of conceptions of sovereignty as the expression of a politics that is placed both inside and outside an existing normative order.⁵

More directly important for the discussion here is that it links the act to moments of political gravity and a split between political exceptionality and normality. Exceptionalist acts are not ephemeral disruptions but key events which put the existing order in the balance; they posit politics as moments with decisional gravity – sovereign moments. Declaring an existential condition pulls forces towards a decisive scene, an assembly of actions and actors that carry weight both in terms of

⁴ The politicizing nature of declaring existential insecurity is not often picked up in the literature on securitizing. The most outspoken articulation of it is in work that embraces the Schmittean notion of the political that is invested in the speech act of security. On the latter see especially: Behnke (forthcoming 2011)

⁵ Currently this idea is mobilised by references to Agamben's work who borrows the idea from Schmitt (Agamben, 1998). Conceptions of the political based on the paradox of the act should not be simply reduced to a Schmittean inspired conception of sovereignty, however. There is more to political theory of the act (Isin and Nielsen, 2008; Villa, 1996; Arendt 1958) and sovereignty (Prokhovnik, 2007, Walker 2010) than Agamben and Schmitt.

producing cracks in a given order and making issues into a test case. Exceptionalist politics also draws a sharp distinction between the routine, alienation, reiteration of the everyday and the decisiveness and creativity of the moments of exception – the moments of existential threat. Speech acts of security enact a sharp distinction between the exceptional and the banal, the political and the everyday, the routine and creative. This implies an elitist vision of politics. Securitising analysis mostly focuses on leaders or politicians – ‘statesmen’ – who speak security with sufficient cloud while ordinary people continue their everyday life.

To sum up, the conception of act that is at work in the security speech act thus combines two political elements. First the speech *act* of security is a creative move that ruptures a given state of affairs – security is made where it was not. Secondly, the political conception of rupture is folded into an exceptionalist scripting of the act – breaking the normal rules of the game on existential grounds. Second, although it is this notion of rupturing in which the possibility for political critique is invested, the substantive conception of politics that is mobilised in the critique mirrors key elements of the exceptionalist reading of the nature of politics, and in particular the importance of decisions with gravity and a distinction between the extra-ordinary and ordinary, between the exceptional and the banal.

These two characteristics of exceptionalist acts do not cover all there is to the exceptionalism as mobilised in the security speech act but they are important for raising another issue that is at stake in opening up the question of the meaning of the concept of ‘act’. So far, I have focused on setting out the importance of revisiting the concept of ‘act’ in the speech act of security if we are interested in the conception of politics and the conditions of political critique that are invested in the securitisation approach. It is a call for engaging the notion of ‘act’ in relation to a literature on security speech acts that has focused heavily on speech and its limits. In the second part of the article I want to argue that revisiting the notion of ‘act’ cannot uncritically reproduce its exceptionalist framing, however. I have argued the ethico-political stakes of such a reproduction, elsewhere (Huysmans 1998, 2006). Here, I want to bring out a more sociological reason. Reading politics through a conception of act that works with a sharp distinction between the everyday and the exceptional and that links political rupture to a gravitational conception of decision is problematic for securitising processes in which little security nothings rather than political speech acts with critical weight do the securitising work. In remainder of the article, I argue that securitising processes that efface security speech acts as substantiated by Wæver and Buzan, add an important complication to a project that seeks to recapture the politicality of security practice through the concept of ‘act’.

Act-effacing securitising?

Securitising in contemporary world politics develops significantly through unspectacular processes of technologically driven surveillance, risk management, and precautionary governance. These processes are less about declaring a territorialised enemy and threat of war than about dispersing techniques of administering uncertainty and ‘mapping’ dangers. I am not talking in the first place about ‘the war on terror’, which has now become a central reference point for many of these discussions, but about the dispersal of risk management techniques, surveillance, data mining and profiling, the rendition of objects like letters into matters of concern over danger (Neyland, 2009) and other processes of rendering and dispersing insecurities. A rich body of work exists that analyses the nature and implications of surveillance, precautionary and pre-emptive security practice, and

governing through risk (Amoore and de Goede, 2008c, Aradau et al., 2008, Aradau and van Munster, 2008, Daase and Kessler, 2007, Ericson, 2007, Ericson and Haggerty, 1997, Lobo-Guerrero 2011, Tsoukala, 2009). One of the peculiar elements that is brought out by some of this literature is that this securitising process effaces 'acts'.

In the dispersed practices of the contemporary security apparatus, we may never know if a decision *is* a decision (...) or if it has been 'controlled by previous knowledge' and 'programmed'.
(Amoore & de Goede 2008b: 180)

The statement can be read in different ways but I want to bring out two particular characteristics of this securitising process that indicate that 'acts' – i.e. actualisations of decisions – as defined in the speech act approach are a problematic category for the analysis as well as political critique of this process. The speech *act* of security works with a notion of gravitation rather than diffusion and with a distinction between the everyday and the exceptionality of security acts. A process that erodes decisions challenges both.

The securitising that Amoore and de Goede refer to is a highly dispersed and dispersing practice. It is heavily mediated by surveillance technologies that associate people, sites, things, and time into risk profiles. As a result the process is strongly 'automated', not in the sense of a machine just doing what it is programmed to do, but in the sense of a process that associates largely without single critical moments of decision⁶. Decisions are taken all the time, both in the development and the application but they are dispersed and it is relatively difficult to assign critically significant actions to particular actors or to aggregate sets of actions into a limited group of actors who have the capacity to create an assemblage of security. Securitising develops through a wide variety of mediators that connect data, people, sites, and times but in connecting also change the material they are connecting (Latour, 2005: 39) – e.g. programming an algorithm that connects data in a way that differentiates patterns of travelling in degrees of danger. If mediations are numerous, constantly shifting and dispersed, it becomes very difficult if not impossible to assess which actions are actualising a decision that brings into play the limits of a given order and that has gravity. Gravity refers to a capacity for producing cracks and can be grounded in institutionalised position, mobilisation of bodies, unexpected public action, etc.

As argued in the previous section, the concept of 'act' politicises securitising processes precisely by identifying particular moments that concentrate developments into actualisations of a decision that ruptures normal procedures of practice. If instead of 'moments of critical decision' we have a myriad of decisions in a process that is continuously made and remade, then what is left of the analytics as well as political critique of securitising that is invested in the notion of speech act? It invites moving from speech *acts* of security to concepts and methodologies that facilitate studying practices and processes of dispersed associating. From the perspective of 'speech acts' this associating will mostly look unspectacular, unexceptional, continuous, and repetitive; instead of speech acts we get the securitising 'work' of a multiplicity of little security nothings.

⁶ For example: G.J.D. Smith shows the complexity of assembling surveillance via CCTV when looked at from the perspective of the practice of CCTV operators: (Smith, 2009)

To briefly illustrate the shift in perspective that is implied here, let's re-read Daniel Neyland's (2009), example of how letters, as everyday objects, are transformed into an object of danger.⁷ In his analysis of mundane terror Neyland mentions a webpage on letter bombs that the British Security Service MI5 had temporarily set up. The website was one device in which MI5 was securitising letters. In setting out what a letter bomb is, how to recognise a suspicious letter, how to deal with it, MI5 appropriated a mundane object in a securitising process. The letter bomb is not simply appropriated by a security agency, however, It also stands for a whole set of banal, little connections (e.g. postal delivery, postal sorting, explosive or incendiary substances, posting, unusual place of origin, couriers, recipients, the place of origin of the sender, police). Interpreting the website as an action by MI5 to securitise letters by setting out a set of criteria and guidelines would focus attention on the gravitational force of this moment and somehow disconnect it from the 'network of connections' in which the website operates as a mediator. Taking the website as a mediating device connecting things and people among whom suspicion of letters might or might not already circulate would draw attention immediately to the diffuse associating that is taking place. The website can be the starting point of the analysis but it remains one particular thing and moment in a set of connections and mediations that took place simultaneously, before and after. In the end, the analytics places the website not as a securitising moment with critical gravity – i.e. a moment in which one had a non-security situation before and a security situation after – but as one of several relatively small moments and actions that invest insecurity in everyday objects and relations. Securitising then takes the form of a scattered process in which the website and letters connect various things and persons in a network of suspicion. Such an analysis shifts understanding from the website as a speech act to the diffuse securitising work in which what appears as little security nothings from the perspective of security speech acts play the key role.

This associative interpretation of letter bombs also brings out that the diffuse processes of securitising challenge the boundary between security practice and daily life. The letters move through a wide set of banal relations. Many surveillance practices can be read in a similar way. The often are strongly embedded in everyday actions and relations, thus coming across as routine and banal; a banality which is reinforced by the strong technological mediation of data and practice. Writing algorithms is central to the functioning of data mining. Introducing loyalty cards to track consumption patterns, introducing credit card payments as the obvious form of payment thus making it possible to profile cash payments as suspicious, and developing many other data gathering devices are central to turn transactional traces into insecurity profiles. Many of these practices come about in piecemeal fashion and slip into daily life without much ado and when connected to the rendition and dispersal of risks, precaution and control of dangers fade out the distinction between the everyday and security practice. Governing sites and lives through risk calculation, for example, often operate in diverse areas of life meshing policing with insurance practice, business with national security, etc. (Amoore, 2006, Ericson and Haggerty, 1997, Lobo-Guerrero 2011, Lund Petersen, 2008)

In these securitising processes daily life as a realm upon which security professionals practice protection is folded into the security practice itself. Risk management, surveillance, and

⁷ Several mundane objects are made into carriers of danger nowadays (e.g. bottles of liquids, fertilizers (<http://www.secureyourfertiliser.gov.uk/>), etc.). Each would lend itself nicely to an analytics of dispersed mediation and tracing of networks of insecurity.

precautionary methods work within daily life, as much as upon it. Credit cards, cctv, filling in forms for a myriad of services, monitoring workers, consumer data, advertising that sustains precautionary dispositions, products carrying risks (e.g. fertilisers) intertwine profiling, control, national security with daily activities. The issue is therefore not simply a securitisation of everyday life, i.e. making daily life an object of security practice or everyday objects and practices becoming carriers of risk and danger (Aas et al., 2009: 2) The rendition and circulation of insecurity takes place through daily practices themselves making it difficult to separate the governmental apparatus, private or public, that work upon daily life by means of the practices of daily life themselves (Furedi, 2002, Huysmans, 2009, Isin, 2004). Many little and banal daily activities, meetings, regulations are actively part of the shaping of securitising processes.

Securitising I am referring to here is less an actualisation of a critical decision and more a continuous process of assembling objects, subjects and practices. The loss of decisional gravitation and of a separation between the everyday and the exceptional challenge the notion of exceptionalist rupture that is embedded in the speech act of security. The concept of 'rupture' draws attention to a fixed frame of reference, a given order that has been able to aggregate a multiplicity of practices, subjects and objects into a whole expressing a particular rationale. The rupture is an event that demonstrates the existence of order and its limits by breaking the 'habitual'. In exceptionalist readings of rupture power consists in the capacity and practice of aggregating and fixing multiplicity into a 'global' practice and in the capacity to disrupt the aggregation so as to make new aggregations possible. Yet, decisional speech acts and ruptures lose much of their critical significance in a securitising process that create insecurities mainly through dispersing, through continuously associating, re-associating, tweaking and experimenting with materials, procedures, regulations, etc. The scene of securitising is then not one of expressing or disrupting a given order but of creating things, meanings, subjects in habitual, everyday innovation in meetings, discussions, regulations, programming, etc. Power is then to be understood as infinitesimal mediations, as little nothings, dispersed in a continuously developing security *bricolage* that takes place in practices of sketching, trials, meetings, regulations, etc. (Latour, 2005) Exceptional rupture gives way to innovations and controversies that are worked in dispersed sites and habitual everyday, ordinary practices of associating (see e.g. Walters (2011) on standardisation practices).⁸ In relation to such processes, decisional speech acts with gravitas have at best limited analytical relevance and at worst misconstrue the analysis by assigning excessive significance to actions that have limited power – that are themselves simply another little security nothing that gains its significance from the limited work it does in a highly diffuse associative process.

The politicality of effacing acts

Questioning the adequacy of the concept of 'security speech act' has implications for the understanding of the politics of insecurity and the possibility of a political critique of securitising. Both security professionals and the political elite often efface decisive acts that open the full register of answerability from the securitising process. They emphasise the necessity and the technological nature of the process. Decisions are presented as calculations of efficiency and effectiveness. Social control and surveillance is introduced for a particular event (e.g. Olympic games) or in particular

⁸ The difficulty to separate public from private in these processes further reinforces the difficulty to identify the exceptional moments that mostly work through public manifestation.

sites (e.g. shopping mall) and then expands to other areas of life without much public discussion.(Amoore and de Goede, 2008b, Tsoukala, 2009) The turn in security strategy to risk management and technologically mediated pre-emption and surveillance is often interpreted as reinforcing the technocratic and dispersing orientation of securitising. These developments are seen as being particularly successful in effacing security speech acts from the process, circumventing public processes of legitimisation and decision-making.

In these situations, retaining the political spectre invested in the notion of ‘speech act’ is at first sight important for retaining the possibility of political critique, for not naively falling into reproductive knowledge that iteratively sustains presentations of a technocratic and heavily depoliticized process.⁹ The concept of ‘security act’ makes a critical analysis possible by drawing attention to the decisions that are taken in this process and the moments of gravity when significant choices are made to securitise. It connects technocratic discourse and practice back to political decisions and answerability, and thus to questions of accountability, legitimacy, and public judgement.

The issue, however, is how to engage the question of acts when the effacing of ‘acts of security’ in the dispersal of decisions and the folding of daily life and security practice is part of the very nature of this securitising process. The effacing is not a symbolic strategy simply hiding the significance of ‘speech acts of security’. It is ontological rather than ideological. ‘Ontologising’ processes always runs the risk of ‘naturalising’ what for political analysis – in this case, of surveillance and risk management – is a key political stake: the de-politicising of security (Amoore and de Goede, 2008c, Ericson, 2007, Lyon, 2001, Lyon, 2007, Lyon, 2006). Does a security analytics of assembling of little security nothings that I propose above not end up simply reproducing the de-politicising process of diffuse securitising? Effacing ‘acts’ seems to come down to effacing the conditions of political critique of securitising, a condition which the concept of ‘speech act’ of security did so outspokenly reintroduce in security studies. Therefore, one can argue that the importance of the diffuse processes of securitising today make it more rather than less urgent to revisit the notion of act and the conditions of its possibility.

If the processes demonstrate a radical dispersed associating in which decisive speech acts – as understood in the securitisation approach – are indeed not particularly significant, or more adequately, if the action one would normally identify as such an act (e.g. a declaration by the president) are of marginal or only limited significance to how the process intertwines practices, people and things over time and in sites in novel ways, a project of re-engaging acts as the condition of a political analytics and critique cannot simply reproduce the conception of speech act as set out above, however. For example, many of the securitising practices continuously work across the public/private boundary therefore challenging the relevance of this distinction for understanding the practices of associating and for bringing a political critique to bear upon them; calling simply for a decisive public debate and contestation cannot be an unquestioned default position of political answers to the depoliticising work of securitising practice. Unquestioningly harking back to ‘acts’ as the key to the politics of insecurity would be equally naive to simply embracing the idea that acts have vanished. If the securitising developed in surveillance, risk management and precautionary practice indeed works in such a way that decisions with gravity are ontologically marginalised – rather than strategically, calculatively hidden – than the conception of act as developed by Wæver

⁹ For a classic statement along these lines, see Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. (Arendt, 1963)

and Buzan will neither provide the claimed analytical insight into the workings of power nor the possibility for effective political critique. One of the key challenges of arguing for re-engaging the notion of act – as I did in the first section – therefore is to reconceptualise the notion of act and the politicality invested in its understanding of rupture so that it can support a political analytics and critique of associating, assembling, dispersing security practices in which the distinction between ordinary and extra-ordinary, everyday and exceptional are folded and in which exceptional ruptures become processes of often little innovations, struggles become mundane controversies, and orders become temporary limited settlements.

The challenges involved in reformulating acts as rupture and answerability in relation to diffuse associative securitising without somehow falling back into linking little actions to the immense state sovereignty invested in them has become very visible in some analyses of US and European counter-terrorist practice. Let me use the work on surveillance, bordering and tracing by Louise Amoore and Marieke de Goede (2008b) as an example. As indicated in the previous section, their work analyses how the securitising of transactions in the war on terror is driven by mundane technologies and mostly relatively unspectacular actions. They show how in this process decisive acts, distinctions between public and private, etc. are eroded and how security practices folds into daily life. What interests me here though is that they also explicitly tackle the question of what politics of insecurity is taking place and what a political critique of these diffuse processes can be. Although the securitising process is dispersing, folding into daily life and effacing exceptional decisions, the political dimension of their work start from a critique of the exceptionality that security practices create. '[T]ransactions become precisely the basis for designation of exception, for the settling out of finite differentials of normality and deviation.' (Amoore and de Goede, 2008b: 174) The data gathering and practices of control become politically important because they aggregate transactions into 'a broader assemblage of "screening" practices that algorithmically designate and classify the population' (Amoore and de Goede, 2008b: 179) and in doing so profile populations who are placed outside of the order and can be treated beyond the normal rules of engagement. To get critical leverage on the process they perform the Agambean move of accepting the dispersed often technocratic forms of governance – usually conceptualised in line with Foucault's analytics of biopolitics and governmentality – while continuing to focus politics on sites of exceptionalism where securitising works through displacing the practices of democratic governance most extremely (Mühle 2007). Political critique becomes possible at this point by breaking a depersonalised logic of assembling down into embodied acts that actualise decisions contributing to the rupturing of the given framework of citizenship, human rights, etc. with exceptionalist consequences. The rupture in democratic practice is made personal by assigning 'critical' decision-making to particular people. Amoore and de Goede (2008a: 13) draw among others on Judith Butler, here. Butler works this scheme by devolving the sovereign power to decide arbitrarily to the many professionals who implement policies, including immigration officials, border guards, private security personnel, and thus make sovereign arbitrary decisions, partly deriving from embodying the power of the state, in everyday engagements – she refers to them as 'petty sovereigns'¹⁰. (Butler, 2004: 56) It is the judgement and action of the official and quasi-official individuals who 'implement' security for the state that makes them accountable and responsible. In doing so, sovereignty as the way into

¹⁰ Labelling them as petty sovereigns overstates the power they often have but also simplifies the complexity of practices that take place and the significance of their place in a much broader practice of assembling. See for example: Smith, 2009.

understanding politics is saved in a security process in which the normal process of aggregation through which sovereignty is supposed to be articulated is difficult to pin down.(Amoore, 2006) We thus see a reintroduction of acts as *decisions* with gravitational power – the many petty sovereigns enact the exceptionalism of the state – that can be publicly called to account at both the individual and collective level.

Reintroducing exceptional acts and the mechanisms of accountability, responsibility, and legitimacy through which one can bring these sites to political account in this way remains problematic, however. Amoore and de Goede's study of the practices of surveillance and risk management shows that the process functions in such a way that decisions with gravity, which can be identified as being especially significant for creating the exceptional stratifications and discriminations, are difficult to find, if they exist in the first place. Hence their question: 'How is responsibility to be reintroduced to the decision, such that it confronts the political difficulties of indecision?' (Amoore and de Goede, 2008b: 182)The focus on responsibility in this question does not hide the conundrum that surrounds the issue of decision here. Is retaining the decision – an act that actualises a decision that has special weight and thus can be called responsible – as the central vehicle of a political reading and critique possible and valuable when the process of securitising does not work through these kinds of decisions? Their interpretation of surveillance indicates that the issue is not immediately the presence or absence of decision but how to read politically dispersal and processes in which decisions cannot be aggregated into critical moments and sites that rupture a given order. Reinserting 'decision' in a process that effaces it does not solve the problem. It leads to reading politics as ethics with its focus on individual responsibility to act on principles of conduct and on aggregating – rather than associating – little actions by connecting subjective decisions to the reproduction of a sovereign decision to securitise, to make an exception.¹¹ In that sense, the conception of politics and political critique remains locked within the model of exceptionalism – and sovereignty – that is mobilised by the speech act of security.

Conclusion

By asking 'what is in an act?' I have sought to open an agenda for re-engaging the conception of act in relation to securitisation. I argued the current pertinence of such a move on two grounds. Working in greater depth on the concept of act recovers a focus on conceptions of politics and possibilities of political critique in the literature on securitising which increasingly concentrates on discourse analysis, sociology of communication and the limits of speech. Re-engaging the concept of act has been made significantly more complex, however, given the contemporary significance of securitising processes that seem to efface speech acts of security that have decisional gravity – that take a situation from non-security into security. Engaging the question of the politicality of securitising processes through the notion of act can therefore not simply reproduce the 'speech act of security' but needs to rethink what 'acts' can be in diffuse securitising processes where little

¹¹ Among others, a discussion with Derridean readings of politics, ethics and decisions, which informs Amoore and de Goede's reading, is called for here. Derridean approaches are one way of re-engaging the question of act as rupture. They occupy an interesting position that retains elements of the 'exceptionality' of acts while diluting the gravitational dimensions of the speech act. I can't develop that discussion explicitly here, however. It requires a more lengthy engagement, especially since I think a more relational analytics of acts as enactment of controversies and disputes is a more interesting way forward.

security nothings rather than decisive acts with exceptionalising power do the immense work of making and circulating insecurities.¹²

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¹² To paraphrase Gombrowicz quoted in Bayart et al. (2008: 11)

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