

## Shaping the Grammar of Security

*There is a right to life in illegality.*<sup>1</sup>

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In Australia, asylum seekers are subject, broadly speaking, to two distinct illegality regimes of regulation and relationship: the first governs the legal status of persons present in the territory, and the second governs admission to community membership through populist discourses based on ethnic nationalism. The Coalition government's 'Operation Sovereign Borders' secures the deterrence of asylum seekers arriving by boat (also known as 'irregular maritime arrivals' or IMAs) through "the active creation of horror" (Farrell, 2014) and also in the form of new government plans to develop systems to share biometric data with other nations in order to detect high-risk individuals before they enter the country. These practices of pre-emptive deterrence at the territorial edge of the state construct the political identity of asylum seekers as the 'illegal other', and as a threat to national security and to national identity. At the core of these illegality regimes lies the endorsement of exclusionary norms through the *grammar of security*. Who is responsible for the endorsement of these norms and how do they (re)produce illegality regimes? In answering this question, I draw on the Copenhagen School's securitization theory and critical realist ontology. In particular, I examine the performative aspects of the *speech act*, interrogating the causal mechanisms behind securitization moves as well as the agents that give the language of security its performative power.

The security threats posed by IMAs are the material cause of securitizing moves, and are the continually reproduced outcome of human agency in Australia's parliamentary government. Indeed, Australia's illegality regimes reproduce illegality and insecurity through the mutual endorsement of exclusionary norms by the Coalition government and the major opposition party, the Australian Labor Party. How are securitization moves legitimized and sustained through illegality regimes? How may they be resisted? I hypothesize that securitizing actors and audiences operate from *norm circles* in the political sphere, each exerting agential powers that endorse norms of belonging and exclusion by agreeing or disagreeing on what constitutes security and what does not. In so doing, they shape the grammar of security, either endorsing illegality regimes and securitization practices or delegitimizing them. The case study of Sweden illustrates how the securitization discourses mobilizing illegality regimes may be resisted through norm circles in the political sphere that endorse norms of egalitarianism, justice and equality.

### The Illegality of IMAs

In Australia, the grammar of security is legitimized via the norms of exclusion and fear, and acquires performative force through the practices of criminalization and pre-emptive deterrence. 'Operation Sovereign Borders' was launched in 2013 by Australia's Coalition government who declared the border protection crisis – triggered by a 'relative handful' of boat arrivals of asylum seekers (Zannettino, 2012: 1108) – as a national emergency. When in Australia a total of 7,983 boat people arrived in 2011-2012 the time of a great panic over unauthorized arrivals set in. In Italy, 30,100 migrants arrived by boat from North Africa between January 1 and September 30 last year. A senior military commander of 3-star ranking currently leads 'Operation Sovereign Borders' which aims at stopping 'illegal maritime arrivals' of asylum seekers to Australia by turning boats back to Indonesia. The language of war has since been used to justify operational secrecy.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Agier (Agier 2008: 96)

Australia enforces the illegality of IMAs by denying these asylum seekers who are territorially present the Convention rights they ought to be granted under international law – rights that must be respected by state parties until and unless a negative determination of the refugee's claim to protection is rendered (Hathaway, 2005: 278). Because refugee status under the Convention arises from “the nature of one's predicament rather than from a formal determination of status,” certain refugee interests should be immediately and unconditionally recognized. Primarily, this includes the right to enter and remain in the territory of a state party until and unless they are found not to be Convention refugees; and the right not to be arbitrarily detained or otherwise penalized for seeking protection. Yet, the state crime associated with Australia's border policing denies asylum seekers these fundamental rights with policies resting on their alienation, criminalization and abuse. As Michael Grewcock (2013: 12) argues, “[t]hese three elements are bound together by the various attempts to externalize Australia's border controls and, where possible, physically prevent unauthorized entry into Australia's migration zone.”

As a result of these draconian policies, unauthorized refugees are alienated legally as unlawful non-citizens and ideologically as illegitimate queue jumpers; criminalized through the use of detention; associated with people smugglers; abused through the impacts of indefinite detention and are forcibly removed. Such treatment was exemplified between 2001–2007 by the ‘Pacific Solution’ under which, “all unauthorized arrivals were forcibly transferred to an Australian-funded detention centre on Nauru and, depending on the outcome of their asylum application, they were either resettled (often in a third state) or returned (sometimes with fatal consequences) to the source state” (Grewcock, 2013: 11). Indeed, the so-called non-punitive detention of asylum seekers in Australia is in fact punitive because the detention is prison-like and highly restrictive. Where political parties exclude IMAs as the nations' ‘other’, framing them as a threat not only to national identity, but also to national security it becomes easy to justify policies of indefinite mandatory detention, risk profiling and other forms of deterrence. National security is defined here as “the acknowledgment and management of conditions that could violate the three pillars of the state: the state's physical base in terms of territory and population; its institutions; and the shared idea of the state among its citizens” (Sjöstedt, 2013: 145).

The third pillar associated with a ‘shared idea of the state among its citizens’ centers on an ethnic conception of citizenship and belonging in Australia. Discourses on ‘belonging’ provide the centrifugal force in norm circles of the popular sovereignty – of “We the people”, the *demos*, the citizens (Bosniak, 2006). The discourses on ‘belonging’ are based on discursive constructions of *national identity* by administrative and political powers in these specific social circles, which normatively *include* citizens and *exclude* the alien ‘other’. Citizenship as an ideal is understood to embody a commitment against subordination, but citizenship can also represent an axis of subordination itself (Bosniak, 2006: 1). This occurs when the act of self-constitution through which the *demos* itself, creates the distinction between the included and the excluded. This act of self-constitution of the popular sovereignty (of “We the people”) is, Benhabib argues, a fluid process of public debate and negotiations both inside and outside of the institutional framework, which she names “democratic iterations” (Benhabib, 2004: 179). It is the process through which the *demos* imbue a concept – be it ‘citizenship’ or ‘the other’ – with new meaning through repetition (Benhabib, 2004: 179). Through an ongoing deployment, the iteration is a continual reconstitution of the original concept and thus, also a dissolution of its embedded meaning and its preservation (Benhabib, 2004). In Australia, these iterations occur within securitization discourses, rooted in historically embedded concepts of race, belonging and nationhood, which will be examined more closely in subsequent sections. I concur with Amaya-Castro (2011) in his view of citizenship as a “sign of political engagement”. The concept of illegality understood through this paradigm, “is intended to protect the exclusive

nature of the political realm” (Amaya-Castro 2011: 156). Illegality, in this sense, constructs the polarities of citizenship by securing the *demos* against the illegal and threatening ‘other’, acquiring such potency through securitization discourses.

### **Securitization Theory & Illegality Regimes**

The Copenhagen School holds that security is a social construction developed through the security *speech act* (Buzan et al., 1998). In the speech act, an actor makes the claim that a referent object, in this case, the citizenry or *demos*, confronts an existential threat.

The basic mechanism of this fundamental transformation draws on John L. Austin’s concept of ‘performative utterances’ (see Austin, 1962). Applying Austin, Wæver argues that the very utterance of ‘security’ is more than just saying or describing something but the performing of an action. For the Copenhagen School, the main effect of uttering security is its potential to let an audience tolerate violations of rules that would otherwise have been obeyed.<sup>2</sup>

This speech act, or securitization move, is successful if the target audience accepts the claim that the referent object faces an existential threat as well as the implicit claim that the continued survival of the *demos* is valuable. According to the Copenhagen School, “a successful speech act is a combination of language and society” (Buzan et al. 1998: 32). To this end securitization theory posits ‘facilitating conditions’ that can facilitate or hinder the success of the securitization move, divided into internal and external aspects. The internal elements relate to the role of the grammar of security: the internal conditions of linguistic-grammatical form, which determine the way the speech act is enacted and the way a matter is presented as an existential threat (Buzan et al. 1998). The external aspect of the securitization move relates to the social capital of the securitizing actor and the nature of the claimed threat, i.e. the extent to which it conforms to commonly held beliefs of what is ‘threatening’. In this paper, I focus on the internal aspects of the speech act wherein speaking ‘security’ draws the issue of asylum into the field of exceptionality where securitizing actors may claim special rights to use whatever means are necessary to block the prevailing threat presented by asylum seekers (Wæver, 1995). These norms are enforced by groups of people, such as political parties in Parliament or non-governmental organizations such as the Red Cross in civil society that are committed to endorsing a specific standard of observable behavior with regards to the inclusion of asylum seekers to the *demos*. Dave Elder-Vass (2010a: 86) refers to these specific groups of norm-endorsing people as *norm circles*.

Elder-Vass (2010b) defines these norm circles as specific kinds of social circles – as those “having emergent causal powers to influence their members, by virtue of the ways in which those members interact in them” (122). The ontological framework, offered by the critical realist tradition, identifies such capabilities as the real causal powers of things or entities (Elder-Vass, 2010a). Within norm circles in the political environment – such as political parties endorsing a common norm – securitizing actors reproduce illegality regimes through successful speech acts, engaging in a “morphogenetic cycle of causation”. In the simplest version of the political norm circle model, the parts of this entity are the individual human agents who are committed to endorsing and enforcing the norm, and who are aware that other members of the circle share their commitment. Within this normative environment, they feel an obligation to them to endorse and enforce the norm concerned. They understand that failure to observe the norm concerned prompts negative sanctions, while observing the norm elicits a positive response. As Elder-Vass argues, “[t]his

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<sup>2</sup> Wæver, 2003: 11; Stritzel 2007: 361.

understanding of the normative environment in turn leads the individuals concerned to ... internalize a tendency to conform to the norm concerned. Norm circles, then, produce a tendency among individuals to conform to the norms that they espouse; and it is this tendency that is the causal power responsible for normative social institutions” (Archer and Elder-Vass 2011: 101).

For political parties in Parliament, policy is legitimized through norms or values associated with a particular party’s conception of itself and of what it represents (Sjursen, 2002: 495). In Australia, the norms and values it attaches to asylum policy may refer to a particular idea of the ‘good life’ that is grounded in the identity of Australia as a nation. Where this norm acquires endorsement by members of other political parties in Parliament, a norm circle based on this common identity is established. Alternatively, a political party could seek to justify generous refugee policies by referring to duties and responsibilities emerging as a result of belonging to a particular community (states signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention) or the norms of justice and egalitarianism it espouses (Sjursen, 2002). Sweden exemplifies such a case and will be examined later. The Coalition government of Australia, however, justifies its deterrent policies by referring to the threat to shared values that are part of Australia’s national identity that asylum seekers, particularly IMAs, pose.

The recent return of 41 ethnic Tamil asylum seekers to Sri Lanka in July 2014 reflects the “rapid and inadequate screening interviews” of asylum seekers conducted at sea and is plainly in breach of Australia’s obligations under international refugee and human rights law, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. A statement by legal scholars condemns the nature of the “summary” procedures that do not comply with minimum standards on refugee status determination under international law. Indeed, holding asylum seekers on boats in this manner also “amounts to incommunicado detention without judicial scrutiny” (Watson, 2014). Australia receives the largest number of IMAs from Afghanistan, Iran and Sri Lanka (DIAC 2013: 10) and criminalizes these ‘un-Australian’ individuals on an ethnic calculus that equates them to potential ‘terrorists’ and ‘criminals’. Stirring racial animosity in this manner has been a political strategy to gain electoral advantage in Australia. Hegemonic political parties evoke “ethnic national identity, shared ancestry and race” Ignatieff (1993: 9) as the dominant criteria by which membership in the nation is defined. Ethnic nationalism in this sense tells people to “only trust those of your own blood” (Shulman 2002: 559).

The exclusionary norms underlying ethnic nationalism are a significant feature of political ideology in the Coalition government and its major opposition party. The coherence of these major political parties on the issue – i.e. their belonging in a norm circle which endorses the illegality of asylum seekers based on shared identity rooted in ethnic nationalism – enables securitizing speech acts to be accepted by a majority of the target audience in Parliament, thus mobilizing criminalization policies. The repetitive use of the word ‘illegal’ to label these human beings rather than specific actions, repeated references to asylum seekers and IMAs as ‘invaders’; implicit and explicit links between IMAs, law-breaking and invasion; and the unsubstantiated rhetorical links between ‘illegal aliens’ and ills such as violence and unemployment shapes the grammar of security in Australia. This type of language positions asylum seekers, refugees and others who might be mistaken for undocumented migrants “as both dangerous and less than human” (Chavez, 2010: 149). It represents the populist language that has been used by successive Australian governments to wedge the electorate against ‘non-Australians’ and protect the ‘heartland’. The causal powers of securitizing actors and the agency exerted by their target audience in accepting the discourse, thus reproduce and reinforce illegality regimes in Australia.

## The Grammar of Security

Since the Howard era of government, Australian Prime Ministers from the Australian Labor Party and the current Coalition government led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott have successfully employed mainstream iterations of populism, using wedge politics to divide the demos between the 'good' Australian and an antagonistic 'other'. This occurred predominantly in the Howard era and in the recent federal elections where populist discourses were used to achieve electoral success by conceptualizing the 'other' as the enemy of 'the people'. Here, the 'other' is linked to Taggart's conception of 'the heartland', which can be understood as 'a territory of the imagination... an evocation of that life and those qualities worth defending... that place, embodying the positive aspects of everyday life' (2000: 95). This concept locates populism's core appeal in the political realm of passion and emotion, where sociocultural symbols and rhetoric take precedence. The securitization of asylum, embedded in populist discourse, dichotomizes this political sphere. Populist rhetoric used here successfully achieves conservative political change while dampening concerns over a growing, xenophobic ethnic nationalism (Snow and Moffitt, 2012). According to the Brisbane Courier Mail and the Sydney Morning Herald,

'we' are soon to be 'awash', 'swamped', 'weathering the influx', of 'waves', 'tides', 'migratory floods', of 'aliens', 'queue jumpers', 'illegal immigrants', 'people smugglers', 'boat people', 'bogus' and 'phony' applicants, upon 'our shores' and 'deserted beaches' that make up the 'promised land', the 'land of hope', the 'lucky country', and they continue to 'slip through', 'sneak in', 'invade' with 'false papers' or 'no papers', 'exotic diseases', 'criminal gangs' and 'organized crime'. In response, 'we' should have 'closed doors' only having temporary 'open doors', we should respond 'nationally' with the 'navy and armed services at the ready', 'we' should 'send messages', 'deter', 'lock up' and 'detain', 'we' should not be 'exploited', 'played for a fool' or be a 'forelock-tugging serf'.<sup>3</sup>

Evoking 'the people' as the legitimate inhabitants of the nation effectively construes one segment of the community as the legitimate 'whole' community, while construing the 'other' as an individual who threatens the 'Australian way of life' and Australian sense of identity. It is very difficult for 'outsiders' from countries like Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Iran to meet the ethnic criteria because "one cannot choose or change one's genes or ancestors" (Shulman 2002: 559). But such a strategy is a convenient one to inspire fear of discord and disharmony as the dominance of the majority ethnic group – the white Australian – falls under threat. The exception here is "immigrants who are of the same ethnic stock as the dominant group in the ethnic nation" (Shulman 2002: 562).

In Australia, the hegemony of such securitization discourses are problematized through the causal power of individuals in the federal government, and enabled not only through existing illegality regimes, but also the history that precedes them. Australia's current anxiety about "a relative handful of refugees" is directly connected to its history of racial exclusion and subordination (Zannettino, 2012: 1108). Today, asylum seekers and refugees have become the prime proponents of this disruptive force to social cohesion. They are described as a 'threat' to the 'Australian way of life,' blamed for contributing to a rise in crime and other social problems, described as 'economic migrants' who are taking advantage of social benefits or taking away jobs from the local population, and are responsible for shifting the racial composition of Australia and diluting its cultural identity. Population history in Australia is entrenched with "official debates and policies of successive

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<sup>3</sup> Pickering, 2001: 172.

governments addressing the issue as a question about the racial reproduction of the nation” (ibid.). Such pre-existing anxieties on national identity are reflected in the values and norms endorsed by norm circles in the political sphere and have historically affected how people have experienced collective identity in society.

In Australia, discourses on who should or shouldn’t ‘belong’ to the *demos* are predominantly shaped by the nation’s history of racial exclusion and subordination. The discourse on ‘belonging’ that privileges ethnic nationalism through the maintenance of a white and mono-cultural nation has its origins in colonization – the colonial period was characterized the development of a New Britannia, “a white, Christian nation that remained attached to its colonial motherland” (ibid.). As Zannettino describes,

This undertaking was based on the eradication and dispossession of Australia’s indigenous peoples as well as the brutal treatment of non-European immigrants, particularly the Chinese who arrived in Australia in relatively large numbers during the gold rush era. These practices of dispossession and brutality were justified through the invocation of social Darwinist ideologies, which promulgated the superiority of the white race. (Ibid.)

In 1901, the newly federated Australian parliament introduced the Immigration Restriction Act, a mechanism that marked the beginning of the White Australia Policy. ‘Otherness’ has also been targeted by various political parties and governments such as Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party (established in 1997), the long-standing Howard government (1996–2007), and the recent Gillard government (2010–2013), which was led by “a Prime Minister whose ‘right kind of migrant’ is a reproduction of her own image” (ibid. 1106). The shared distrust by government and its opposition leaves the securitization of asylum, premised on ethnic nationalism, uncontested. In the following section, the case study of Sweden reveals how attempts to securitize the issue of asylum may be resisted through the endorsement of civic nationalism, where norms of egalitarianism, equality and justice are privileged in norm circles within the Parliament that cut across political parties, and where exclusionary norms underlying the grammar of security are rejected.

### **Challenging the Grammar of Security**

In combination with generous refugee integration programmes, the tolerant attitudes and espousal of ethnic diversity at the political level are distinguishing hallmarks of the Swedish approach to dealing with refugees and asylum seekers (Castles and Miller 1998, 2009; Valenta and Bruna, 2010: 464). Refugee policy in Sweden, it is argued, is based on humanitarian norms, comprehensiveness, generosity, internationalism and humanism (Abiri, 2000). These norms manifest in the political environment through an inclusive civic nationalism in which, “national unity and membership in the nation derive from attachment to a common territory, citizenship, belief in the same political principles or ideology, respect for political institutions and enjoyment of equal political rights, and will to be a part of the nation” (Shulman 2002: 559). How do the norms of civic nationalism affect the endorsement of illegality regimes and the securitization of asylum through speech acts?

In Sweden, the inclusive nationalist identity established through civic nationalism is premised on norms of justice and egalitarianism. Political parties that endorse these norms in turn influence policies on asylum seekers and refugees through their relations with each other based on shared norms. The concept of ‘intersectionality’ has long been a feature of feminist thinking and the term has recently become prominent in critical realist discussions of norm circles and their relationality. In this paper, I adopt Elder-Vass’ use of the term, ‘intersectionality’ as “the property that a set of groups has when they intersect with each

other” (Elder-Vass 2010b: 131). Here, the concept refers not just to intersections between common interest groups in Parliament but to individual agents with causal powers, acting as part of multiple, distinct socio-political entities. This concept of ‘intersectionality’ amongst political parties of the Swedish parliament illustrates how shared norms can be used to build alliances across seemingly different political parties. Interlocking norms of egalitarianism and justice have been used to build effective alliances between small political parties in the Swedish Parliament where the desire to form relations across lines of difference has motivated the formation of intersectional civic national identities that include the ‘other’.

The Swedish political environment is moulded on a “principle of levelling” (Nathalie Blanc-Noël 2010: 10). In this model, the State is seen as an ally of the people, as it eradicates privileges. As Nathalie Blanc-Noël argues, “the social contract is placed between the individual and the State at the expense of institutions, which makes a deep difference with other European countries” (ibid.). Consequently, the first core norm underlying Swedish national identity is equality. According to Arne Ruth, Swedish “third worldism” has also become a central aspect of Swedish national identity: “equality at home” and “justice abroad” have come to be regarded as complementary and mutually supporting norms (ibid. 10-11). This committed internationalism had a logical impact on refugee policy. Welcoming third world refugees in the 70’s and in the 80’s was an extension of Swedish solidarity. Politicians endorsed these norms again in 2011, preventing securitizing actors from gaining political leverage on the issue of asylum.

With the 2010 elections, the political landscape changed when the Sweden Democrats, a populist right-wing party with xenophobic and anti-Muslim views, gained seats in the Riksdag (Swedish parliament). In reaction to the election results, the major political parties publicly declared that they would not cooperate with the newcomers on migration-related (or other) issues, and in March 2011 the Government (the ruling liberal/conservative coalition) and the Green party presented an agreement on migration policy, explicitly aiming to bar xenophobic forces from influence. The right to asylum was emphasized in the agreement, as was the position that Sweden, with its humanitarian asylum policy, was to provide a refuge for those fleeing persecution and oppression. This served as a signal for unity against extremist views and the maintenance of a ‘generous’ refugee policy. The coalition of political parties endorsing norms of equality and justice through these norm circles prevented security speech acts, or securitization moves from gaining acceptance with the target audience – in this case, the Riksdag. Furthermore, Swedish party structure in combination with the government formation rules create possibilities for small parties with liberal migration preferences (the Liberal Party, the Green Party, the Left Party, the Centre Party and the Christian Democratic Party) to influence national refugee policies in a more generous direction not allowing either xenophobic nor the major parties to mobilise a restrictive policy agenda (Spehar 2012).

The agential power of small parties and the role of individual human agents committed to endorsing “justice abroad” was clearly evident between 2006 and 2007. During that time, Sweden became the most important destination country for Iraqi asylum-seekers in the EU. Spehar argues that the large increase in Iraqi asylum seekers was attributed to the enactment of a temporary Asylum Act, which entered into force from November 2005 to March 2006. The Act made it easier for forced migrant families to obtain a residence permit and was pushed forward by “a grand coalition of grassroots’ movements, religious communities and small political parties (the Centre, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, the Greens and the Left party)” (Spehar 2012: 15; Aliens Act 2005: 716). More than 50 per cent of the granted permits during 2006 were due to a temporary change in the Aliens Act (Swedish Migration Board) resulting in Sweden being the highest receiver country among OECD countries for Iraqi refugees between 2006 and 2008 (Spehar 2012: 15). Indeed, the

power of norm circles in the political environment to resist securitization discourses and influence generous refugee policies is strongly exemplified in the Swedish case.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that in Australia, illegality regimes are endorsed by norm circles in the political sphere that privilege the exclusion of IMAs based on implicit principles of ethnic nationalism. The agential power of securitizing actors is complemented by a receptive target audience in Parliament who share a distrust of ‘otherness’ and rely on fear as a populist discourse to gain electoral advantage. The consequence is the endorsement of illegality regimes through security speech acts by political actors, where securitizing moves reinforce illegality regimes in cycles of causation. The Swedish case study demonstrates the agential power of the audience targeted by the security speech act – the political parties in the Riksdag belonging to norm circles of justice and equality – in their ability to resist securitization discourses by engaging in a coalitional national identity formation, based on norms of justice, equality and egalitarianism. By agreeing or disagreeing on what constitutes security and what does not, these agents ultimately reject the exclusionary norms underlying the grammar of security. While norms centred on privileging ethnic nationalism dominate Australian political and populist discourse, the securitization of asylum is likely to continue. Consequently, the proliferation of its illegality regime is likely to remain exponential in such an uncontested political environment. Nevertheless, as this paper reveals, the causal powers of agents belonging to norm circles can reject the exclusionary norms behind the grammar of security by evoking instead, the norms of justice, equality and egalitarianism present in Australian national imaginary.

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