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The securitization of mobility

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Abstract

“The securitization of mobility” is state-led intervention in individual mobility to minimize perceived public threats. The securitization does not aim to limit mobility, but rather to ensure the continuity of population mobility and therefore to maintain the established social order. The securitization measures can have significant impacts on individual privacy as well as on various socioeconomic relations.

Theme

Securitizing Mobilities

Keywords

“point-to-point” labour transport, Foucault, financial securitization, securitization of borders, commercial intermediaries

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“The securitization of mobility” is state-led intervention in individual mobility to minimize perceived public threats. A pertinent example is viral contagion. While the government is the central actor in such interventions, the involvement of other actors, such as employers, technology companies and community organizations, is also critical. Securitization measures include contact tracing, quarantine requirements, contactless delivery, and traveller screening and restrictions (e.g. mandatory health certificates to travel). The fundamental purpose of the securitization of mobility is not to limit mobility, but rather to ensure the *continuity* of population mobility and therefore to maintain the established social order.

The significance of the securitization of mobility has become evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. With such measures, key workers such as health personnel and transport workers can move relatively smoothly and safely, the economy can reopen before the pandemic has ended, and the spread of the virus is monitored on a large scale in real time. But securitization measures also raise concerns, particularly regarding personal privacy and data management. This entry suggests that the implications can be more far-reaching.

Two stages of mobility securitization in China during COVID

What does the securitization of mobility look like? My documentary studies and preliminary field research with Chaogou Xing on migrant workers and traders in China, which we started in 2019, suggests that citizens are “encapsulated” in sociotechnical systems of monitoring. Following the initial shock and total lockdown from January to March 2020, the specific patterns of encapsulation have evolved in two stages.

During the first stage, local governments and employers dispatched migrant workers, accompanied by government officials, from their homes to worksites on chartered trains and buses in a “point-to-point” manner. This first took place between February and April 2020 across China. Some localities resumed this practice between February and March 2021 when large numbers of migrants returned to cities to work after the Chinese New Year holiday.²

During the second stage, with the increase of mobility, “point-to-point” transport has given way to a more elaborate system that links local governments, residential communities, employers and commercial intermediaries. Different actors work together to link migrants’ multiple legs of mobility into ostensibly seamless journeys: long-distance travel from their rural homes to the city is linked to their movement within the city from the train station to accommodation, and to subsequent movements between their accommodation and worksites. The government assigns responsibilities to landlords (typically via the community administration or real estate agencies), and labour agencies ensure quarantine arrangements and monitor migrant workers’ travel histories and health. Landlords and labour agencies are also obliged to provide help to migrants. Those who fail to do so are publicly criticized and can be delicensed. Landlords and labour agencies appear compliant, and some welcome the additional responsibilities. The fragmented, short-term contractual relations that migrant workers have with these landlords and labour agencies are turned into social relations for control and assistance. In short, by assuming the role of social control, they

² Xiang, Biao. 2021. Point-to-point labour transport: the securitization of mobility after lockdown. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

have further strengthened their positions in relation to migrants. For at least some migrants, then, it has become more difficult to seek employment without labour agencies, they now have little leeway to bargain about rents, and a host of other issues have arisen. In this context, it becomes clear that the securitization of mobility can have as significant an impact on socioeconomic relations as on individual privacy.

The Copenhagen School and the Foucauldian approach

I use the term “securitization”—rather than the restriction, regulation, control, or policing of mobility—to describe interventions in individuals’ mobility for two reasons. First, these measures do not aim to hinder or stop mobility, and thus differ from typical mobility control or restriction. Second, instead of being carried out by the government through a set of general, blanket policies, the measures are implemented by multiple actors in multiple operations.

My use of “securitization” is directly inspired by two bodies of literature. The first is the Copenhagen School, which coined the term. By securitization, they stress that security should be examined as practices rather than a given condition or an idea. Security is always about the actions of turning something into a security concern.³

The second is Foucault’s theory on apparatuses of security (before he generalized it into a theory of neoliberal governmentality). The apparatus of security represents a form of governance that is based on the calculation of the distribution of risks across the population, in contrast to juridical power (based on black-and-white penal codes and punishment) and to disciplinary power (with a focus on correcting individual behaviour). Foucault illustrated the three modes of governance by comparing the European reactions to leprosy, the plague, and smallpox. Leprosy in the Medieval was dealt with through a binary divide. Those who had the disease were separated off and excluded from the larger society, which was to remain disease-free. The response to the plague in modern times was projected to the larger population, involving partitioning the affected regions and imposing regulations on people’s behaviour—when people were permitted to go out, where, and what one should eat. The contemporary management of smallpox is based on detailed knowledge of “how many people are infected with smallpox, at what age, with what effects...and the statistical effects on the population in general”. Leprosy is associated with exclusion, the plague with quarantine, and the smallpox with the security apparatus of epidemic management.⁴ The securitization of mobility represents an even more typical case of the security apparatus in epidemic management. In most cases, the measures do not aim to eradicate the virus or even to protect the population per se. The goal is to maintain the status quo—the circulation of people and goods that are deemed unstoppable and are critical for existing socioeconomic order⁵—with acceptable, calculated risks.

Political, financial and social securitization

³ Wæver, Ole. 1995. Securitization and desecuritization. In: Lipschutz, Ronnie (ed.) *On Security*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 46–86.

⁴ Foucault, Michel. 2009. *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Springer.

⁵ Xiang, Biao. 2020. The gyroscope-like economy: hypermobility, structural imbalance and pandemic governance in China. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 21:4, 521-532.

The securitization of mobility may indicate some specific ways that socioeconomic relations are reorganized. The changes are more likely to be patchwork rather than systemic, hidden rather than obvious. In order to help to discern the possible changes, it may be useful to compare the securitization of mobility to what scholars have described as securitization in the domains of politics, finance, and social life.

Political securitization

“Political securitization” refers to state elevation of an issue to a security concern. Once “securitized”, the issue becomes an existential threat to the public, calls for emergency actions, including wars and the suspension of the law, and allows government agencies to break free of rules and to form new inter-unit relations.⁶ The “securitization of borders” provides a powerful example. Through it, immigration control, an otherwise civic matter, is transformed into an *exception* in order to minimize cross-border mobility. The securitization of mobility, in contrast, aims to introduce *routines and norms*, and to minimize disruptions in mobility.

Furthermore, the securitization of borders entails highly concentrated effort. A small number of designated agencies undertake special measures on specific sites, mainly along international borders. They target specific groups, particularly immigrants. Often carried out in a secretive manner, the securitization of migration control is shielded from the general public. In contrast, the securitization of mobility is widely diffused and affects the entire population on a daily basis. As Foucault argues, an apparatus of security has to operate with a certain level of individual freedom that is not based on “the exemptions and privileges attached to a person, but the possibility of movement, change of place, and processes of circulation of both people and things.”⁷ He characterized security concerns as concerns about “an indefinite series of mobile elements”:

“x number of carts, x number of passers-by, x number of thieves, x number of miasmas, and so on. An indefinite series of events that will occur: so many boats will berth, so many carts will arrive, and so on. And equally an indefinite series of accumulating units: how many inhabitants, how many houses, and so on. I think the management of these series that, because they are open series can only be controlled by an estimate of probabilities, is pretty much the essential characteristic of the mechanism of security.”⁸

Financial securitization

The Foucauldian understanding of securitization comes close to what happened in the world of finance. “Financial securitization” pools debts of different kinds by different parties into packages, and sells these debt relations to a third party. The third party (the investor) hopes to receive repayments from the various debtors that would eventually exceed what the investor paid. It is called “securitization” because it is assumed that, by mixing the debts together, risks are spread

⁶ Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde identify “existential threats, emergency action, and effects on inter unit relations by breaking free of rules” as three distinct components of securitization. See: Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde. 1997. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc.

⁷ Foucault. 2009, pp. 48-49.

⁸ Foucault. 2009, p. 35.

thin and returns would be secured. With securitization, “loans no longer stayed with the lender. Instead, they were sold on to others, who sliced, diced and puréed individual debts to synthesize new assets.”⁹ The U.S. subprime mortgage crisis in 2008 is the best known outcome of financial securitization, but such practice is widespread and has continued after the 2008 disaster.

Financial securitization and the securitization of mobility share three features: (1) their commitment to endless circulation as a basis of order and a solution to potential contradictions; (2) their methods of spreading risks (in the case of financial securitization) or responsibilities (the securitization of mobility); and (3) the tendency toward expansion. This tendency toward expansion can be seen in financial securitization (which has contributed to the proliferation of financial derivatives and complication of relations between creditors, debtors, investors and asset-holders), and in the securitization of mobility (where labour agencies extend surveillance from workers to employers). Or, as Foucault put it, the apparatuses of security “have the constant tendency to expand; they are centrifugal... Security therefore involves organizing, or anyway allowing the development of ever-wider circuits.”¹⁰

Social securitization

“Social securitization” is most commonly used in urban studies, referring to such phenomena as gated communities, private security service, and increasingly ubiquitous security cameras, in the context of the withdrawal of public welfare in cities.¹¹ Low used the term to describe “interlocking and overlapping spatial, legal, institutional, governmental, and financial strategies of producing security in its multiple meanings and dimensions in private housing environments.”¹² Røyrvik argues that the securitization of social life “creates qualitative relations of social distrust and distancing, generates cultures of fear and militarism, and produces misery and deep patterns of global inequality.”¹³ Røyrvik regards the sociality of securitization as a direct result of political and financial securitization, rather than as a distinct set of measures.

The securitization of mobility can be seen as part of social securitization, particularly in the sense that they both seek to maintain the established order without addressing the root cause of disturbance. Poverty alleviation would provide economic security, and universal health care would offer health security, but they are not “securitization”. They touch on real politics, entailing the systemic redistribution of resources. Securitization consists of highly complicated practices, but avoids fundamental changes. (This explains my reservation about Foucault’s generalization of neoliberal governmentality as the defining mode of governance, for it suggests that direct political contestations about resources and dominance do not matter.)

⁹ Krugman, Paul. 2009. The Market Mystique. *The New York Times*. 27 March 2009; Cited in: Røyrvik, Emil. 2010. The Sociality of Securitization: Symbolic Weapons of Mass Deception. *iNtergraph: Journal of Dialogic Anthropology*, 2(2): 1–16.

¹⁰ Foucault. 2009, p. 45.

¹¹ Lippert, Randy K. and Kevin Walby. 2014. *Policing Cities: Urban Securitization and Regulation in a 21st Century World*. London: Routledge.

¹² Low, Setha M. 2011. Claiming space for an engaged anthropology: Spatial inequality and social exclusion. *American Anthropologist*, 113(3): 389.

¹³ Røyrvik, Emil. 2010. The Sociality of Securitization: Symbolic Weapons of Mass Deception. *iNtergraph: Journal of Dialogic Anthropology*, 2(2): 16.