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Environmental Securitization within the United Nations: A Political Ecology Perspective

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Environmental Securitization within the United Nations: a Political Ecology perspective

If empirical evidence shows that environmental security is on the United Nations agenda, very few studies try to understand the agenda-setting process of this issue. My thesis research intends to fill this gap by analyzing the process of environmental securitization within this organization. Securitization theories and critical security studies propose an initial set of useful theoretical tools. Nonetheless, this paper argues that they are not the only ones, and that Political Ecology could provide another interesting perspective as well as encourage an interdisciplinary dialogue. By promoting transdisciplinarity, highlighting the social and economic dimensions of environmental conflicts, and calling attention to the power and knowledge structures at the foundation of the securitization process, Political Ecology proposes highly relevant additions to the study of environmental securitization within the United Nations. This paper argues that this particular example shows the benefits of collaboration between political ecologists and Securitization theorists – and, more generally speaking, international relations scholars – and therefore advocates for more mutual and constructive dialogue among these different schools of thought.



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ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIZATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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CONTENTS

Introduction 5

I. Empirical and theoretical relevance 8

 1. The process of Environmental Securitization: from a political to a security issue - the School of Copenhagen Theory 9

 2. Environmental Securitization within the United Nations: the case study's relevance..... 11

 3. An empirical study to fill a theoretical gap 12

II. Securitization theories and Political Ecology: common grounds15

 1. A critical approach based on discourse and practice analysis 16

 2. Multilevel studies 18

III. Opportunities from a political ecology perspective21

 1. Benefits from Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity..... 22

 2. The ecological conflict approach: broadening actors and issue scopes 24

 3. Going beyond discourse analysis: power, knowledge, and scientific reflexivity..... 26

Conclusion : a mutual productive dialogue.....29

References31

■ INTRODUCTION

Among several emerging issues that were discussed during preparations for the 2012 United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development – Rio+20 –, environmental security¹ appears to be one of the most contentious. Whilst the G77 refused to consider climate change as a legitimate concern for the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)², defining it as a development issue, very few states seemed willing to discuss the issue during the Earth Summit³.

Yet, the United Nations⁴ (UN) has shown interest in environment⁵ and security⁶ related issues for years. A specific branch of the United Nations Environment Program⁷ (UNEP) has been looking at the links between natural resources and conflicts for several years⁸. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) is now trying to decrease the ecological footprints of its missions⁹, and many agencies connect both issues in publications and projects¹⁰. Hence, despite the apparent reluctance of member-states to link the environment and security in the highest multilateral arena, environmental security definitely seems to be on the UN agenda. Nonetheless, environmental security within the UN has never been the subject of exhaustive academic research.

While environmental security has been long studied in Political Science and International Relations (Barnett, 2010), the United Nations and multilateralism now constitute a commonplace topic in these disciplines (Simmons, Martin, 2002). However, very few studies focus on both subjects and propose a transversal analysis¹¹.

In order to apprehend this case study, an appropriate theoretical framework needs to be defined. Securitization theories and critical security studies propose a first set of theoretical tools which could be applied to this case and help to appreciate its various aspects. Nonetheless, I believe that they are not the only ones and that Political Ecology¹² could bring a different interesting perspective and promote an interdisciplinary dialogue.

Indeed, by drawing interest to resource dependence instead of resource scarcity and by linking environmental and social conflicts (Le Billon, 2001), Political Ecology includes economic and social dimensions in the study of environmental security. It also implies a large scale of actors, not only focusing on the Security Council or the member-states for instance. Therefore, based on a general literature review, this paper compares the main

¹ To be understood as environment and security related issues. The definitions and debates around the concept will be discussed later in the paper.

² Following a British request, the Security Council discussed climate change and security in July of 2011. Although the G77 and China recognized a potential link between these issues, they called for discussions on that topic to take place within the General Assembly. They argued that since climate change is a development issue that concerns all countries, the Security Council, as a non-universal arena, should not be in charge of this question (UN Security Council, Presidential Statement, July 20, 2011, SC/10332).

³ It was barely mentioned during the negotiations until late March when the European Commission added a short paragraph on that topic to the draft paper (Deputy Sub-Programme Coordinator – UNEP Disasters and Conflicts Programme, interview, Geneva, April 11, 2012). It was, at the end, not included in the final statement.

⁴ Weiss and Thakur define the United Nations in three different parts: The states, international civil servants, and civil society as well as commissions (Weiss, Thakur, 2010). In this introduction, the UN should be understood as a whole, even if the various levels are to be differentiated and analyzed separately.

⁵ The environment is to be understood in a broad way as meaning “*the biosphere that humans and other species inhabit*” (Grant, 2011).

⁶ In order to avoid any confusion, I use the concept of security even if studies most often focus on insecurity and its causes (David, 2006, p. 47).

⁷ Its creation was decided during the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. It is mandated “to provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations” (UNEP website).

⁸ The Environmental Cooperation and Peacebuilding Programme of UNEP’s Post-Conflict and Disasters Management Branch (UNEP website).

⁹ DPKO website.

¹⁰ One can notably mention the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

¹¹ A few publications cover this topic, however, the most recent one was written in the early 2000s, they all mainly explore it from a legal point of view, and they propose a rather normative perspective by looking at who should be in charge or the best ways to deal with this issue (Elliott, 2003; Imber, 1994; Sand, 1991; Tinker, 1992; 2001)

¹² As Peter Walker and Paul Robbins show, the definitions of Political Ecology are numerous (Robbins, 2004, p. 5-7; Walker, 2006). This paper does not intend to discuss those intra-field debates or to opt for a specific one, but prefers a general and broad meaning of the discipline as “empirical, research-based explorations to explain linkages in the condition and change of social/environmental systems, with explicit consideration of relations of power” (Robbins, 2004, p. 12).

ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIZATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Political Ecology assumptions, research topics, and methodological approaches to the Securitization theories and aims at examining how Political Ecology could bring a relevant perspective to the study of environmental securitization within the UN. Hence, this paper intends to build bridges between these two fields that the literature never connects, despite the potential benefits of collaboration between Securitization theorists and political ecologists.

After briefly describing the empirical and theoretical relevance of my case study, this paper discusses the common grounds that Securitization theories and Political Ecology share. It then presents the specific benefits of the Political Ecology perspective for the case of environmental security within the UN. This work argues that an integrative approach, such as the one promoted by Political Ecology, is highly relevant to analyze the trajectory of the concept of environmental security within the UN and the process of securitization as well as to perceive all the dimensions of UN's work in order to prevent and manage ecological conflicts¹³. Finally, through this example, it intends to encourage more dialogue between IR scholars and political ecologists.

¹³ This specific notion drawn from Political Ecology will be discussed later.

**ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIZATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS:
A POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE**

I. EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL RELEVANCE

My research project aspires to understand how the environment and security are linked in the UN arena and how UN agencies connect these two issues. In other words, it intends to observe the securitization of the environment within this international organization. Before discussing the empirical relevance of this case study and the detailed objectives of this project, we should first look at the Securitization theories¹⁴.

1. THE PROCESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIZATION: FROM A POLITICAL TO A SECURITY ISSUE – THE SCHOOL OF COPENHAGEN THEORY

The nearly unanimous consensus (Battistella, 2006, p. 461) surrounding Arnold Wolfers' 1962 definition of the concept of security¹⁵ does not prevent debates and rather opposing approaches among security studies scholars. Long-confused with strategic studies¹⁶, security studies enjoyed renewed interest in the 1980s and 1990s, and even more since the end of the Cold War (David, 2006, p. 47; Waever, 1995, pp. 46-86). The notion of security has gradually been broadened both by academics, especially the authors of the School of Copenhagen, and by practitioners¹⁷. However, despite the general agreement on an unlimited definition to the military dimension of security, the object¹⁸, the sectors, and the levels of analysis which should be favored are still being discussed. Environmental security, one result of this broadening process, does not avoid such debates.

The main discussions on environmental security relate to the object of this security and the types of threats which are implied. While a few studies present the environment as the referent object of this security¹⁹, many scholars focus on state security (Frederick, 1993; Homer-Dixon, 1998; Pagney, 2008). Indeed, the environment could threaten the territorial integrity of a state and/or provoke inter and intra-state conflicts, especially because of resource scarcity. Contrary to this quite classical approach, other definitions²⁰ rather concentrate on human activity and human beings. They aim at determining effective threats to human development, and thus the type of human development which should be preserved (Barnett, 2010; Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998), as well as at questioning the social and intersubjective construction of those threats²¹. As a result, the definitions of the notion of environmental security are as numerous as the studies about it.

For this research a comprehensive definition is preferred. Environmental security includes the different aspects mentioned above: Classical rivalries between two entities in conflict (states, but also communities, cities, tribes, etc.) following the degradation of their environment (i); The protection of human beings against environmental threats of natural or human origin – natural disasters as well as nuclear accidents for instance – (Robinson, 2008)

¹⁴ I use the plural since I believe that the additional approaches that complete the Securitization theory of the School of Copenhagen can be considered as new theories of this process of securitization.

¹⁵ “[S]ecurity, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threat to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked” (Quoted from Hughes & Meng, 2011, p.6).

¹⁶ A traditional approach in terms of security, focusing on states and military threats.

¹⁷ The Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, published in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development notably developed the concept of human security and all of its associated dimensions; the research undertaken by several American governmental agencies on environmental security at the end of the 1980s also reveals the interest of practitioners in a more broadened definition of security (Barnett, 2010, pp. 123-131).

¹⁸ The object is the referent of this security, the unit which should be protected.

¹⁹ “[...] environmental security is not about threats to nature or to ‘Mother Earth’ as such” (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998, p. 77). Eric Stern, on the contrary, defends a more comprehensive approach giving priority to the environment itself (Stern, 1995).

²⁰ The School of Copenhagen and critical theories are introduced together due to their interest in a discursive approach and human activity. However, it must be specified that in the first texts of the authors of the School of Copenhagen, state and national security remain essential, even if in the case of environmental security human activity is presented as the referent object of this security.

²¹ If critical theories defend a subjective definition of security that would be a social construction instead of an objective reality, the social construction, once integrated, may have tangible impacts on a concrete reality.

iii); and The preservation of the environment in general (iii). This definition constitutes a starting point for a more general examination of the process of securitization and the evolution of international security management²².

Indeed, environmental security, as well as health or food securities, primarily constitutes the example of a semantic evolution in International Relations: from a scientific issue²³, it progressively becomes a political and a security issue. This process and its mechanisms deserve our attention. First, we should examine the transformation into a political issue, the supposed first step towards securitization (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998).

Politicization happens when *"the issue is part of public policy, requiring government decisions and resources allocation, or, more rarely, some other form of communal government"* (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998, p. 23). It could happen suddenly, following a major event on the international scene for example, or progressively, notably after the work of norm entrepreneurs (Becker, 1985). It is not necessarily a voluntary move it could arise from a long-term modification of values (Nay, 2008, p. 409). In the case of the environment, its politicization is obvious²⁴, even if this process, as well as securitization, has not been the object of a precise analysis by International Relations scholars.

If, following the politicization definition, one could easily define securitization as its inscription on the security agenda, or according to Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver and Jaap de Wilde as *"a more extreme version of politicization"* (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998, p. 23), the theorization of the process is currently being drafted. The authors of the School of Copenhagen first attempted to define it.

According to them, *"[...] the exact definition and criteria of securitization is constituted by the intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects"* (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998, p. 25). In other words, it concerns the designation of a threat to survival and the recognition of it (intersubjectivity) in order to treat it with the exceptional and urgent measures which characterize the security field²⁵. More precisely, Ole Waever specifies in his article *"Securitization and desecuritization"* that elites, by labeling topics as security issues, are at the origin of the process of securitization (Waever, 1995, p. 57). So, for them, securitization would be a speech act.

From this definition, Buzan et al. propose a methodology to analyze the process. According to them, securitization can be observed without indicators. Securitizing actors and moves should be observed directly, their efficiency being judged by the acceptance from the audience. One should finally estimate *"[w]hen [...] an argument with this particular rhetorical and semiotic structure achieves sufficient effect to make an audience tolerate violations of rules that would otherwise have to be obeyed"* (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998, p. 25).

If it's true that the Copenhagen School's theory of Securitization constitutes a significant breakthrough in the comprehension of security (David, 2006, p. 64), it is, nonetheless, an incomplete model. It does, however, propose some interesting elements for understanding the process of environmental securitization as I intend to study it within the United Nations; however, it presents some limits that my research, based on an empirically relevant case, tries to overcome.

²² Management is understood as the fulfillment *"by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, [of the] adjustment or [of the] settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace"* (United Nations Charter, Article 1).

²³ I notably think of ecology, environmental sciences and climatology.

²⁴ The environment is without doubt on the political agenda, and this politicization strongly complicates international negotiations on related issues. Indeed, contrary to specific questions left to scientific fields such as telecommunications, the environment, as a political issue, is integrated into larger debates on states sovereignty or international inequalities. For instance, the difficulties encountered to reach a common agreement during the Copenhagen Summit on climate change illustrate the complications induced by politicization.

²⁵ This vision of the exceptionality and urgency of the security field constitutes a theoretical bias whose argumentative validity is important to evaluate.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIZATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS: THE CASE STUDY'S RELEVANCE

The study of the securitization of the environment within the UN appears to be empirically relevant for several reasons.

First, the concept of environmental security comes from UN multilateralism: the link between security and the environment was made during the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998, p. 71), and the expression of 'environmental security' was initially mentioned in the Brundtland Report of 1987 (Barnett, 2010).

Secondly, the UN appears to be a privileged actor to deal with this issue. On the one hand, the UN is concerned by all the various levels implied in the notion of environmental security (state security, human security, and environmental protection). On the other hand, the universality of environmental issues, and thus the impossible exclusive national management, put environmental security on the UN agenda responsible for collective security²⁶. Furthermore, the UN is able to work at and to link the global – as an arena for collective decisions and international negotiations – and the local levels, notably through the implementation of development projects and capacity building in partnership with local authorities²⁷. Yet, the famous motto "*think globally, act locally*" especially concerns the environmental sector (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998, p. 87). Finally, whereas states usually base their policy on a short-term perspective – following electoral timelines for instance –, international organizations (IOs) are supposed to produce predictability on the international scene in order to promote international cooperation (Rittberger, Zangl, 2006, pp. 17-20). They are expected to have long-term considerations. Yet, environmental issues, especially climate change, are particularly involved in long-term dynamics that require present sacrifices for future risks not necessarily noticeable today.

Finally, in the current context of the global economic crisis and the promotion of a green economy²⁸, of globalization and interdependence (Keohane, Nye, 2001), of opposition against a "*club diplomacy*" (Badie, 2011) and of the rise of ecological consciousness (Barnett, 2010), the securitization of the environment can constitute a strategic move. Indeed, besides the actual threat that the environment could represent in security terms²⁹, which could explain the UN's involvement, the environment could be strategically securitized in order to overcome the significant failures of UN multilateralism with regards to environmental issues.

As mentioned earlier, besides the apparent empirical relevance of this case study, this research on environmental securitization within the United Nations intends to fill a theoretical gap – the absence of complete transversal study – and overcome at least some of the numerous criticisms addressed to the School of Copenhagen's Securitization theory.

²⁶ According to Article 1 of the UN Charter, the first purpose of the UN is "[t]o maintain international peace and security" (UN Charter, Article 1).

²⁷ The UNDP, for instance, has country teams and offices in almost every state and implements development programs following the wishes and authorizations of the governments.

²⁸ It was one of the two main topics on the agenda of the 5th Earth Summit, Rio+20.

²⁹ Thierry Balzacq shows that some sectors currently being securitized also constitute real threats to international, national, or human security, and don't only depend on speech acts (Balzacq, 2011).

3. AN EMPIRICAL STUDY TO FILL A THEORETICAL GAP

Before discussing the benefits of this empirical study, additional theories on the securitization process should be mentioned.

As previously stated, the School of Copenhagen has been highly criticized for its overly restrictive definition of the securitization process by scholars promoting a more comprehensive approach to define securitization not only as a speech act³⁰ (Balzacq, 2011; Bigo, 2005; Floyd, 2010; Stritzel, 2007).

First, some propositions are raised in order to improve the School of Copenhagen theory. Defining a philosophical or an internalist model, Stritzel encourages focusing on the linguistic approach, without adding incoherent elements and concentrating on the “performativity” of the discourse (Stritzel, 2007). Likewise, Floyd points out the absence of consideration with regards to actors’ intentions; based on a more constructivist approach, she proposes to open the black box of the state in order to look at the intentions of the different actors in the process of securitization. Didier Bigo’s study also focuses on actors; in a sociological perspective, he analyzes the professional field of security actors (notably police and military forces) in terms of discourse and practice – inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. A more precise study of securitizing actors is then privileged.

Besides the amelioration of this theory, other approaches are proposed. On the one hand, the sociological approach supports three main ideas to understand the process of securitization: “*the centrality of audience*”, “*the co-dependency of agency and context*”, and “*the dispositif and the structuring force of practices*” (Balzacq, 2011, pp. 1-30). On the other hand, the externalist approach focuses on the idea of “*discursive embeddedness*”, promoting a triangular analysis of the text and its “performative” capacities, the context in which it is embedded, and the positional power of the actor producing the discourse (Stritzel, 2007). These additional approaches propose an interactionist analysis³¹ of the process of securitization which could be quite useful for my research³².

However, despite these complementary thoughts, some other aspects of the securitization process remain absent.

First, as Balzacq and Stritzel recognize, the lack of empirical studies on the securitization process is critical (Balzacq, 2011; Stritzel, 2007). Inspired by a sociological approach to International Relations which requires the development of empirical studies (Devin, 2007, p. 4) my project aims at filling this gap by examining a precise empirical case to analyze environmental securitization.

Secondly, no empirical studies validate the distinction between scientific agenda/international scale and political agenda/national scale drawn by the authors of the School of Copenhagen. Indeed, according to them, the securitization of the environment is led by political actors at the national level; scientific actors, such as epistemic communities, only support the strategies of those political actors on the international scene (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998). Yet, if the literature remains silent on the role of international organizations during this process, my research intends to reveal the IOs’ securitizing moves and to understand the potential fusion and transfers between the political and scientific agendas.

³⁰ The sociological approach presented by Thierry Balzacq and the externalist model described by Holger Stritzel are not the only additional theories on the process of securitization, but they are the ones which particularly drew my attention (Balzacq, 2011; Stritzel, 2007). I also would like to mention the works of Rita Floyd and Didier Bigo which bring further insights (Bigo, 2005; Floyd, 2010).

³¹ Interactionism is a sociological approach based on the analysis of social relations and individual perception and understanding of these relations (Delas, Milly, 1997, p. 283).

³² Regarding the various levels of analysis, my research is using both structuralist and interactionist theories. The importance of the structuralist context can’t be neglected to analyze the United Nations Security Council’s decisions for instance; the interactionist approach is much more useful to understand the itinerary of environmental security between small programs and specific UN agencies.

Thirdly, this study endeavors to evaluate the application of the actor/audience/context triangle. The process of securitization of the environment within the United Nations seems to reveal the complexity of this triangle and requires flexibility in the use of categorization. The UN could be a securitizing actor promoting the concept of environmental security, an audience listening to the securitizing discourse of states or epistemic communities, and the context in which this kind of discourse is occurring. These categories are overlapping and this research tries to assess this interconnection and define the relevant level of analysis.

Fourthly, this case study calls into question the level of environmental securitization. According to Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, what one can observe is more a politicization rather than a securitization (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998). Politicization of the environment is unquestionable; however, I would be less skeptical than the authors of the School of Copenhagen and would not conclude a total failure of securitizing moves. I would rather say, with Maria Julia Trombetta, that we can notice some transformations among security practices, at least for a few fields³³, which reveal a form of discourse efficiency in securitizing the environment (Trombetta, 2011). Therefore, some dimensions of the environment are not only politicized but also securitized.

Finally, this study attempts to understand if securitization could happen without politicization. Regarding the definition provided by the authors of the School of Copenhagen – they define securitization as the more extreme form of politicization – the answer to this question should be negative (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998, p. 23). Yet, some empirical elements let one think that, in the case of environmental securitization inside the United Nations, a depoliticized securitization could constitute a research hypothesis. Indeed, the local work of some programs, especially those implemented by the UNEP's Post-Conflict and Disaster Management Branch³⁴, intend to present environmental security³⁵ as a rather technical and practical issue which requires a non-politicized scientific approach. Therefore, these programs could reveal an attempt at securitization without politicization.

In summary, the study of environmental securitization within the United Nations provides an opportunity to fill theoretical gaps and contribute to the theorization of the process of securitization. An additional Political Ecology perspective can be extremely precious all the more since Securitization theories and Political Ecology share some common grounds.

³³ Maria Julia Trombetta especially refers to environmental conflicts and the securitization of the depletion of the stratospheric ozone (Trombetta, 2011, pp. 143-148.). One can also notice the multiplication of studies related to climate change and security, notably by scholars whose previous works focused on the concept of environmental security (for instance Barnett, Matthew, McDonald, 2010; Dalby, 2009).

³⁴ Participant's observation, Geneva, May-August, 2011.

³⁵ It is worth noting that this expression and the use of security language are carefully avoided.

II. SECURITIZATION THEORIES AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY: COMMON GROUNDS

Despite their apparent differences – different disciplines, methods, research topics, etc. – Securitization theories and Political Ecology have some interesting common grounds that advocate for more dialogue and exchange between scholars. Both critical, these approaches also promote multilevel analysis.

1. A CRITICAL APPROACH BASED ON DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE ANALYSIS

“The general term critical theory has come to apply to those schools of thought that have challenged what is often generalized to be the positivist orthodoxy in Western social science” (Booth, 2005, p. 10). This definition is clear: to be critical, an approach or a theory must challenge the mainstream orthodoxy of its own field. Political Ecology and Securitization theories follow this rule by relying on discourse as well as practice analysis.

Even if Political Ecology as an independent field might be *“lacking any single coherent theoretical approach or message”* (Walker, 2006, p. 384), showing a large diversity of methods and objectives, its critical perspective is common to all studies. In other words, despite what could be called a problem solving perspective (Walker, 2006), political ecologists are all critical social scientists (Walker, 2006, p. 384). This characteristic can be explained by the numerous theoretical approaches that have inspired political ecologists from the very beginning. As Paul Robbins explains:

“The emergence of a wide range of crucial theoretical concepts in the recent decades – drawn from common property theory, green materialism, peasant studies, feminist development studies, discourse theory, critical environmental history, and postcolonial theory – constitute a new and robust toolkit to directly tackle [the pressing multi-scale questions of development-era environmental change]. They together form the eclectic equipment of political ecology” (Robbins, 2004, p. 42).

Therefore, these inspiring theoretical tools have led to the constitution of Political Ecology as *“a field of critical research”* (Robbins, 2004, p. 5), which has been progressively completed by other critical approaches.

In the 1990s, some political ecologists who were inspired by post-structuralist approaches *“increasingly turned [their] attention to local-level studies of environmental movements, discursive and symbolic politics, and the institutional nexus of power, knowledge and practice”* (Walker, 2005, p. 75). By analyzing discourse and practice, political ecologists aim to go beyond conventional explanations and therefore try to understand the social construction – and the implied power relationship – of broad concepts such as the environment or even ecology³⁶. In other words, through *“dialectical critique”* as well as discourse and practice analysis, political ecologists aim *“at unearthing the roots of present-day attitudes and actions”* (Atkinson, 1991, p. 6). Both the objective and the methods echo with Securitization theories.

As mentioned earlier, security studies classically look at threats to state security from a national interest perspective (Battistella, 2006). Critical security studies, on the other hand, try to go beyond strategic studies by broadening the definition of security and its object. Securitization theories follow this tradition. First, they don't focus on state security. By drawing interests to different sectors – social, economic, environmental, health, and so on – these approaches actually tend to privilege human beings as the object of the security they look at. This *“human security”* approach echoes with Grove-White's perspective encouraging political ecologists to *“humanize*

³⁶ This interesting aspect will be discussed later as a useful addition to Securitization theories.

the research agenda" (Grove-White, 1996). Secondly, they don't consider security as a simple, tangible and empirical fact but try to understand the social construction of threats, not only through discourse by the School of Copenhagen (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998), but also through practice (Balzacq, 2011).

Based on the speech act theory, the scholars of the School of Copenhagen propose to understand the securitization process through discourse analysis; hence, contrary to classical security studies, they try to discover the roots of security public policies by analyzing the creation and perception of threats (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998). To complete this model, the sociological approach proposed by Thierry Balzacq also provides interesting critical perspectives that are partly based on practice analysis (Balzacq, 2011). Indeed, besides the emphasis on the "*contextual circumstances*" and "*cultural meaning*" of discourses (Balzacq, 2011, p. 11), which contribute to the observation of the discursive construction of security issues, Balzacq stresses "*the structuring force of practices*" and the idea of "*habits inherited from different social fields*" as well as *dispositif* to reveal the importance of practices to understand the securitization process (Balzacq, 2011, p. 15). Both the discursive and sociological Securitization theories challenge the mainstream approaches in security studies.

Therefore, like Political Ecology, Securitization theories constitute critical approaches that not only rely on discourse and practice analysis, but also promote multilevel studies.

2. MULTILEVEL STUDIES

A multilevel approach is very interesting in the study of international organizations due to their various components – states, agencies, sub-programs, country teams, etc. – and levels of action which are local as well as global. This perspective, promoted by political ecologists and some Securitization scholars, is extremely relevant to my case study and incites the use of new methodological approaches to explore it.

Just as “*theoretical approaches*” in Political Ecology are only “*as wide as the range of subject matter*” (Walker, 2006, p. 391), levels of analysis are numerous. Although structural Political Ecology used to be inclined to work on broad regional topics, since the 1990s interest in micro-level studies is growing (Walker, 2006, p. 387). Hence, looking at both “*macro-structural frameworks*” and “*micro-politics*” (Walker, 2005, p. 75), Political Ecology studies facilitate the exploration of local-global connections (Adam, 1996, p. 86). For example, the Political Ecology of scale promoted by Karl Zimmerer and Thomas Bassett, which relies on the idea that “*diverse environmental processes interact with social processes, creating different scales of mutual relations that produce distinctive political ecologies*”, encourages a multi-scale approach looking at local, regional, national and international levels (Zimmerer, Bassett, 2003, p. 3). Without engaging in the debate on the social construction of these scales³⁷, I believe that the multilevel approach promoted by Political Ecology is quite pertinent to my research and close to some Securitization scholars’ perspectives.

Even if the School of Copenhagen tends to focus on the national level, and more particularly on governments (Buzan, Waever, De Wilde, 1998), the sociological approach by Thierry Balzacq and Didier Bigo’s studies on security actors such as militaries and policemen invite the application of a micro perspective to analyze securitization processes (Balzacq, 2011; Bigo, 2005). For Balzacq, the “*micro-practices of securitization*” deserve our attention to the same extent as macro level discourses (Balzacq, 2011). Hence, he encourages the observation of daily manifestations and the adoption of an interpretative approach in order to overcome the limits of spoken words (Wilkinson, 2011). As a result, unconventional methods to analyze the securitization process, such as ethnographical approaches, are promoted. This multilevel perspective encouraging specific micro-level methods³⁸ seems highly appropriate for the study of environmental securitization within the United Nations.

As mentioned in the introduction, the study of international organizations requires a multilevel perspective; in the case of the United Nations, it needs to take the following into consideration: States as actors of global forums such as the Security Council, as members of executive committees of the different UN agencies, and as quite influential clients and donors (i); International civil servants who have their own objectives and agendas (ii); and Civil society which works with the UN agencies at the local level, but also influences negotiations through its Economic and Social Council’s (ECOSOC) status for Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or through scientific reports for epistemic communities (Weiss, Thakur, 2010) (iii). Likewise, this variety of UN actors work at the international level through international negotiations, at the regional level through partnerships with regional organizations, at the national level through country teams, and at the local level through local projects implemented by local NGOs and the local population. As a result, it seems relevant to have a multilevel approach to study the UN’s securitizing moves. Furthermore, like the Political Ecology perspective revealed, the case of the environment is even more concerned by this multiplicity of the relevant levels of analysis. Thus, IOs, the securitization process, and the study of the environment all require the application of a multilevel approach.

³⁷Zimmerer and Bassett go further in their multi-scale approach by looking at the social-environmental production of those scales. If this additional thought is also interesting, it is not directly discussed in this paper.

³⁸ This importance which is credited to the micro-level is one element that led to the choice of an ethnographical approach for my study, through the use of participant observation. This observation of micro-level practices of securitization seems essential to have a complete overview of environmental securitization within the United Nations.

ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIZATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Therefore, by relying on a critical approach that promotes multilevel analysis, Securitization theories and Political Ecology are quite similar. However, some specific aspects drawn from a Political Ecology perspective also constitute additional approaches and thoughts which could complete my theoretical framework of analyzing the environmental securitization process within the United Nations.

III. OPPORTUNITIES FROM A POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Opportunities for the study of environmental securitization from a Political Ecology perspective are quite numerous. Besides considering the environment as one subject of environmental security³⁹, Political Ecology initially encourages the exploration of an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach. The studies on ecological conflicts also provide a comprehensive analysis that is quite useful for understanding the variety of securitizing moves and actors. Finally, post-structuralist Political Ecology encourages going beyond discourse analysis to explore the social construction of environmental security and the power relations implied therein.

1. BENEFITS FROM INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

Interdisciplinarity defined as *“the linking and moderate integration of disciplines”*, and transdisciplinarity understood as *“the high-level, fused integration of disciplines”* (Zimmerer, Bassett, 2003, p. 2), seem fundamental to Political Ecology. Yet, I believe my study could highly benefit from these perspectives.

The terminology *“Political Ecology”* relies on the fusion of two disciplines: ecology and political science. Therefore, from the beginning, Political Ecology has been interdisciplinary and it might explain why, according to Robbins, *“This burgeoning field has attracted several generations of scholars from the fields of anthropology, forestry, development studies, environmental sociology, environmental history, and geography”* (Robbins, 2004, p. 5). Rooted in natural sciences which define ecology *“as the study of the interrelationships between living organisms and their physical environment”* (Walker, 2005, p. 78), Political Ecology first focused on biophysical change, but took economic and political perspectives into account. Although *“‘environmental politics’ or ‘politicized environmental’ approaches dominate current political ecology texts”* (Zimmerer, Bassett, 2003, p. 3), the physical environment is not completely neglected and detailed ecological analyses are still central to Political Ecology studies (Walker, 2005, p. 75). Therefore, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are still fundamental to Political Ecology, as the following statement from Zimmerer and Bassett confirms:

“By framing our volume as a political ecology, we are highlighting our commitment to the diversity and the plurality of political ecology. We consciously seek to avoid disciplining political ecology in the sense of excluding complementary and equally vibrant approaches. To the contrary, we encourage the flourishing of political ecology to include the fullest possible range of approaches. Indeed, a geographical approach strongly endorses the tight interweaving of disciplines that is a defining characteristic of political ecology” (Zimmerer, Bassett, 2003, p. 2).

This commitment to interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity is one of many angles that Political Ecology could bring to my study.

Since I do not want to privilege one specific IR theory, as several different ones could propose interesting perspectives for studying environmental securitization within the UN⁴⁰, I would like to have a broad disciplinary approach. As was mentioned earlier, the plurality of the environment as a research topic easily explains this willingness to consider multiple disciplines. In addition I believe, like Susan Strange, that in international relations today, this interdisciplinary approach should be promoted:

³⁹ As mentioned earlier, the environment as such is rarely the subject of environmental security. Yet, an ecological approach based on a natural sciences' definition of ecology leads one to consider environmental protection more closely as a potential securitizing move.

⁴⁰ Several IR theories have already contributed to the study of the UN, but I do not favor any specific positions in an effort to take different views into consideration. For instance, on the one hand the realist perspective on international organizations as being states' instruments leads one to consider the importance of state actors within the UN; on the other hand, liberal institutionalism scholars tend to observe the independent moves of IOs and discourage neglect of their potential self-determination.

ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIZATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

“In short, there is no escaping the imperative of multidisciplinary in the understanding of change and outcomes in the international political economy. Geography, demography, sociology, law, anthropology all have valuable insights to contribute. [...] I am only suggesting that our times no longer allow us the comfort of separatist specialization in the social sciences, and that however difficult, the attempt has to be made at synthesis and blending, imperfect as we know the results are bound to be” (Strange, 1996, p. xv).

Therefore, to study environmental securitization within the United Nations, perspectives from international law, sociology, political science, history, anthropology⁴¹ or even Political Ecology, as this paper intends to show, could bring useful insights to complete the IR background.

This use of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in Political Ecology is rather inspiring for my study which also could benefit from the environmental conflict thesis developed by some political ecologists and elaborated upon below.

⁴¹ For example, the work of Sandrine Revet on the anthropology of natural disasters could be interesting.

2. THE ECOLOGICAL CONFLICT APPROACH: BROADENING ACTORS AND ISSUE SCOPES

The ecological conflict approach or the environmental conflict thesis (Robbins, 2004, pp. 172-186) are generic phrases to gather the different studies in which political ecologists connect the environment and conflict. Proposing a very different perspective from the usual aforementioned work on environmental security, they invite a rethinking of the link between the environment and security by broadening the issues and the actors concerned.

First, I will discuss the three main elements of the Political Ecology perspective on environmental conflict: The role of resource abundance instead of resource scarcity (i); Vulnerability⁴² and dependence⁴³ as fundamental aspects of ecological conflicts (ii); and The importance of resource property and access as the main driver of conflicts (iii).

Contrary to the common belief inherited from Homer-Dixon's work (Homer-Dixon, 1998), political ecologists such as Philippe Le Billon do not identify resource scarcity, but rather resource abundance as the main source of environmental conflicts (Le Billon, 2001). Two principal aspects are discussed. First, an abundant resource, if valuable, can provoke tensions over its use, control, and earnings. For instance, Le Billon notes that *"resources can also motivate secessions in resource-rich regions"* (Le Billon, 2001, p. 574). The ongoing conflict between Sudan and South Sudan over oil resources is an example as South Sudan notably claimed its independence to acquire 50 percent of those resources. Likewise, those valuable resources can encourage *"violent state control"* as their obtainment motivates competing elites (Le Billon, 2001, p. 573). Secondly, resources can also constitute a means to finance conflicts through the acquisition of arms and the payment of mercenaries (Le Billon, 2001, p. 569). The example of the *"blood diamonds"* in Africa illustrates this ability to fund conflicts through natural resources.

A second aspect of the Political Ecology perspective on environmental conflicts relies on the idea of vulnerability and dependency. Barbara Johnston talks about the human dimensions of water scarcity and shows that it is not scarcity *per se* which matters, but how it is experienced and how vulnerable the population concerned is; in other words, water scarcity is relative (Jonhston, 2003). She goes even further by explaining that scarcity can be manufactured:

"They suggest the complex interplay between biophysical conditions, processes, human actions, and human relationships, and illustrate ways in which the experience of water scarcity is, through inept actions or purposeful behavior, manufactured. The perception of critical resource scarcity – current crisis or impending doom – can also be manufactured and at times exploited to meet various agendas" (Jonhston, 2003, p. 85).

This notion of the relativity of a resource situation incites one to contextualize and to avoid broad comments like that water scarcity leads to conflicts. Likewise, the vulnerability of the population concerned is not the only element to take into consideration when studying the relationship between natural resources and conflicts; the dependence of this population is a second point that political ecologists identify. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, Political Ecology draws its inspiration from various critical schools such as that of dependency theory (Robbins, 2004). From a conflict perspective, resource dependence can be defined as *"a historical product associated with a pattern of relation with the global economy, through colonial powers, private transborder commercial interests, and domestic elites"*. It can drive inequalities, social tensions, and conflicts (Le Billon, 2001, p. 566). The importance of dependence in conflicts is highly related to resource property and access, the last component of ecological conflicts that I would like to discuss.

⁴² The concept of vulnerability is not discussed in this paper, however, it is to be understood in a broad sense, as susceptibility to be harmed.

⁴³ Dependence is broadly understood as being characteristic of a relation where A depends on B. Dependency theory and resource dependence will be discussed later.

ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIZATION WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS: A POLITICAL ECOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

By attempting to uncover “*the social and discursive politics of access and control over resources*” (Walker, 2005, p. 78), political ecologists point out the role of resource property as a driver of ecological conflict. Indeed, as Robbins shows, the environmental conflict thesis establishes a strong link between social structures, environmental access, property institutions, and conflicts (Robbins, 2004, pp. 172-186). First, resource enclosure can lead to scarcity and result in conflicts – the use of water resources by foreign companies in water-stressed regions can, for instance, intensify scarcity. Secondly, resource appropriation is a factor related to inequalities and social tensions. As Le Billon shows, resource appropriation can lead to exclusion and criminalization (Le Billon, 2001, p. 575). But more importantly, the social structures that frame resource access can create unequal development and divisions among society. More specifically, Robbins mentions the class, gender, and ethnic issues that are related to environmental property (Robbins, 2004, pp. 172-186). In other words, “*Increasing scarcities produced through resource enclosure or appropriation by state authorities, private firms, or social elites accelerate conflict between groups (gender, class, or ethnicity)*” (Robbins, 2004, p. 173).

After briefly describing the main features of the Political Ecology approach in terms of environmental conflicts⁴⁴, I would like to discuss the implications for my environmental securitization study. First, it encourages us to look at resource quantity as a whole, not only focusing on scarce resources. For instance, it invites us to examine tensions surrounding valuable resources and international treaties, mechanisms – such as the Kimberley process related to diamonds –, or programs which try to regulate the economy of those resources. Generally speaking, it leads one to take economic actors into consideration more and thus, in my case, UN bodies such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) or the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and the ECOSOC – not only the Security Council. Likewise, development programs related to resource access and property must be associated in the study of environmental securitization. Finally, the Political Ecology perspective described above incites one to consider social conflicts as well as inequalities and to observe the tensions between different social groups, notably in terms of vulnerability and dependence. For instance, the work of UN Women to improve women’s livelihoods and autonomy should be investigated. Likewise, this approach stimulates reflection on the object of the environmental security, notably by urging us to specify the particular groups whose human security is threatened.

In summary, a Political Ecology perspective encourages us to broaden the scope of actors and issues in order to observe and to understand the securitization of the environment within the United Nations. It invites us to take the social and economic aspects of this process into consideration more. The study of this process can also be improved and completed through a post-structuralist Political Ecology perspective.

⁴⁴ This paper does not pretend to review all of the aspects and subtleties of this field of research, but rather proposes a broad summary of such approaches in order to see what they could bring to my case study.

3. GOING BEYOND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: POWER, KNOWLEDGE AND SCIENTIFIC

REFLEXIVITY

As mentioned above, Political Ecology as well as Securitization theories can be qualified as critical schools of thought since they challenge the mainstream orthodoxy. However, some Political Ecology works seem to go further by trying to, in a post-structuralist⁴⁵ manner, observe power and knowledge relationships that exist with regards to environmental issues. In my case, it invites us to understand the social construction of environmental security and its impacts in terms of power, knowledge, and scientific reflexivity.

“Although everybody today seems to be aware that nature is ‘socially constructed’, many continue to assume a relatively unproblematic rendition of nature. Central to this rendition is the assumption that ‘nature’ exists out there, beyond our constructions. Nature, however, is neither unconstructed nor unconnected” (Escobar, 1996, p. 340).

Through this provocative assertion, Escobar reminds us that the concept of the environment – e.g. environmental security – is socially constructed. As a result, through my study of environmental securitization within the UN, I should consider the plurality of definitions for the notion of the environment and not take this for granted. Just as I observe how UN discourse and practice can securitize the environment, I should also observe how they can “*environmentalize*” security and, more generally speaking, how they construct what is to be understood by the notion of the environment. Furthermore, the environment is not only a question of representation, but also a matter of knowledge (Walker, 2005, p. 78). Yet, the UN and its associated actors such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change⁴⁶ are supposed to produce knowledge on environmental issues⁴⁷, thus contributing to the construction of “*knowledge structures*” (Stritzel, 2007, p. 373). These structures that Stritzel only considers as contextual aids or restraining factors of a securitization process (Stritzel, 2007, p. 373) seem to be an extremely powerful aspect which has been rather neglected in Securitization studies.

It is true that Securitization theories are close to post-structuralism which is defined as “*a theory of the production of social reality*”. Indeed, “*post-structuralism focuses on the role of language in the construction of social reality; it treats language not as the reflection of ‘reality’ but as constitutive of it*” (Escobar, 1996, p. 326). Yet, Securitization theorists, by considering securitization as a speech act, try to understand the discursive construction of security issues. However, they do not study the power and knowledge relations which are implied in this process. As a consequence, I should deepen my study in order to expose the power structures that lie underneath the securitization process, as Robbins advises:

“If accounts about people like herders or farmers or things like cattle or trees are conditioned and stabilized by social structures of power, the problem is not only understanding how social and environmental conditions change over time, or how they become undesirable, or how they can be changed. The problem is also understanding how scientific accounts, government documents, and local stories about those same social and environmental conditions are formed and made powerful by state institutions, media companies, experts, and families” (Robbins, 2004, p. 66).

Thus, through the analysis of environmental securitization within the United Nations, I should try to understand how UN discourse on environmental security is formed and made powerful as well as how the UN can contribute

⁴⁵ The debates on post-structuralist approaches and definitions are not discussed in this paper. Post-structuralism is to be understood, in a broad way, as including linguistic theories – trying to understand the structure of language and culture – and sociological theories that are focused on the structure of society and human agency (McCormick, 2007).

⁴⁶ The IPCC was established in 1988 by UNEP and the World Meteorological Organization, two UN bodies (IPCC website).

⁴⁷ UNEP website.

to strengthen any social production on this issue. This knowledge and power nexus also tends to confirm that in order to complete the School of Copenhagen model, intentions are extremely important (Floyd, 2010). Therefore, the post-structuralist approach on knowledge and power which is promoted by some political ecologists invites us to deepen the reflection on the process of securitization and, more generally speaking, on the UN's role in environmental knowledge construction. Regarding this knowledge construction, Zimmerer and Bassett affirm that *"ecological science continues to expand worldwide within the context of development institutions where it is a source of information and a claim to power and influence"* (Zimmerer, Bassett, 2003, p. 281). Yet, if by securitizing the environment the UN can contribute to redefining the social construction of the environment, researchers studying and writing about this process might also contribute.

Indeed, the final element that Political Ecology studies have brought – at least indirectly – to my attention for this research is the importance of scientific reflexivity. As we saw above, knowledge and power are interlinked and ecological discourse such as that produced by researchers can transform the public sphere (Eder, 1996, pp. 203-223). In other words, *"The human conceptions reproduced in such 'scientific' discourses may well be part of that which has come to [be] crystallised as the modern environmental problem"* (Lash, Szerszynski, Wynne, 1996, p. 2). If this problem seems inevitable, being conscious of the possible impacts of our studies might be useful. This requires scientific reflexivity (Adam, 1996, pp. 100-101). When using ethnographical methods – through participant observation – to carry out my research, I need to be reflexive with regards to both the potential impacts of my presence in the field as well as my possible subjective bias due to the immersion (Schatz, 2009). Likewise, it seems quite important to consider the inherent effects of my work on the social construction of those concepts I study.

By promoting interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, broadening my approach on environmental conflicts, and highlighting the power and knowledge structures beneath the securitization process, Political Ecology brings a very interesting perspective to my study of environmental securitization within the United Nations.

■ CONCLUSION : A MUTUAL PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE

This paper intends to show the numerous opportunities of a Political Ecology perspective for the study of environmental securitization within the United Nations. After explaining the Securitization theories, their applications to the UN case, and the gaps that my research tries to fill, this paper describes the two main common grounds that political ecologists and Securitization theorists share – a critical approach and a multilevel perspective. Finally, it describes the additional angles that Political Ecology invites us to explore. For my study, this includes such approaches and concepts as interdisciplinarity, the social and economic dimensions of environmental conflicts, and the power-knowledge nexus behind the securitization process.

This paper does not pretend to give a complete overview of the benefits of Political Ecology or to discuss the interdisciplinary debates on the definition and the objectives of the field; rather, it tries to underline some interesting and original perspectives found in different Political Ecology studies which can bring stimulating insights to the analysis of environmental securitization. Furthermore, this paper advocates interdisciplinary dialogue and exchanges among political ecologists and Securitization theory scholars. Indeed, if they share a critical approach, *“critique by itself is not engagement”* (Walker, 2006, p. 392). Yet, through the example of the environmental securitization within the United Nations, this paper shows the relevance of building bridges between these approaches. Therefore, with a strong belief in the mutual benefits of a constructive discussion between these fields, this paper intends to engage itself in the promotion of more dialogue.

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