

The Securitisation of the Border – Are We Really Protected?

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AMY GARRY, AUG 20 2013

Introduction

In his critique of the traditional approaches to security within the discipline of international relations, John Williams has suggested that these analyses have “tended to take borders for granted merely as part of the ‘fixtures and fittings’ of the international system.”^[1] If this reasoning is taken to its natural conclusion, that security facilitates minimal insecurity, what is the point of border security? What does the border provide security for? Does it create order and what actually secures security? Conversely, McKenzie Wark has argued, “the threat of security is [...] security itself.”^[2] Conceptual ‘struggles’ such as these form the basis of a critical examination of the practices that are associated with the border, and underpin the hypothesis of this essay: that the understandings and practices implemented in relation to border security do not provide universal security, quite the opposite. The core purpose of this essay will be to argue that securitization, and border security in particular, create a society of exclusions and therefore does not provide security for all. Furthermore, while traditional understandings of security focus upon the protection and integrity of a sovereign territory, this paper will propose that both exclusion and insecurity remain evident within a sovereign territory.

In order to develop a proposition that analyses security and insecurity within the process of (in)securitization, first and foremost it is necessary to establish a coherent and concise understanding of what we mean by border security. The search for an essential concept of securitization is outside the scope of this essay and would only serve to digress from the paper’s hypothesis. In any case, there is no single theory of borders. Accordingly, this paper will concentrate specifically on the issue of border security in order to examine and elucidate as clearly as possible, the problems that are inherent in analyses of this subject matter.

To support the claims of this paper, an analysis of the border-related research and how it has been defined by academics will be discussed, in order to highlight not only the subject’s arbitrary nature, but also how borders create exclusion. To this end, R.B.J. Walker’s^[3] theorizations of ‘inside/outside’ will be considered—his notions of the exclusionary nature of the border and how they “can be understood as a marker of the limits of sovereign power assumed to be located and fixed at the geographical outer-edge of the sovereign territory of the state”.^[4] This will be followed by a discussion of Walker and Didier Bigo’s^[5] collaborative work that uses the example of the Mobius Strip in order to pose the questions: what really is the difference between us and them? Does security provide protection?

This paper will examine the ways in which the border is ‘secured’, who belongs and who does not belong, the included and the excluded, and will consider specific examples such as the border security practices that exist between the US and Mexico. In addition, the role of the state in border security will be examined and its relationship to the protection of a sovereign territory. The purpose of this analysis will be to argue that exclusions exist within a sovereign territory, thus questioning the validity of border security.

The Creation of Exclusion: An Analysis of the Border

Is the border, as has been suggested, the “transit from one sovereign territory to another”,^[6] or is it merely an

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imaginary geographical line that separates states? Geographers have “traditionally understood borders (or boundaries) as constituting the physical and highly visible lines of separation between political, social and economic spaces.”^[7] However, would it not be more helpful to consider the border not only as a ‘fixed’ entity that can be physically crossed at the periphery of a sovereign state, but also as a concept such as Louise Amoore’s biometric borders theory that re-works the Möbius strip analogy (where a boundary exists but no one knows who is inside and who is outside), arguing that “the management of the border cannot be understood simply as a matter of geopolitical policing and disciplining of the movement of bodies across mapped space.”^[8] Conversely, Vaughan-Williams suggests that it is “At the border key decisions are made about who is ‘legitimate’ and who is ‘illegitimate’; who is ‘trusted’ and who is ‘risky’; who can be allowed to cross freely and who is excluded.”^[9] Therefore, in order to understand why the practices behind border security can create not only a society of exclusion, but also insecurity, it is necessary to examine how the border is discussed and critiqued. Accordingly, Walker’s seminal work on ‘inside/outside’ and his collaborative work with Bigo on the Mobius strip will be used as a critique of traditional understandings of the border and to highlight its exclusionary nature and the potential for insecurity.

The problems of international relations, by contrast, are usually framed in terms of differentiations of political space. They emerge from geo-political separation of territorial communities in space, a separation that may be taken to imply both the non-existence of a common community that may be improved over time and, consequently, the marginality of questions that presume the possibility of temporal progress within particular communities.^[10]

What Walker is suggesting here is that the spatial element impedes our understandings of the border, and this analysis is supported by Amoore’s thesis when she argues that borders can be “deployed to divide bodies at international boundaries, airports, railway stations, or subways, or city streets, in the office or the neighbourhood.”^[11] This highlights the confusing nature of the problem that arises in discussions relating to concepts of the border and border security. It is apparent, therefore, that theories of what the border is remain in a constant state of ambiguity and transition.

The complex and problematic nature of analyses of border securitization are further emphasized by Etienne Balibar, who argues that “We are living in a conjecture of the vacillation of borders [...] borders are no longer at the border, an institutionalised site that could be marginalised on the ground and inscribed on the map, where one sovereignty ends and another begins.”^[12] So, if borders are institutionalized sites of governance, what system of control do they command? How can it be reliably argued that the border provides security and protects a sovereign territory if the concept and definition of a border is unclear?

Security should be understood as a process of ‘securitization/insecuritization’ of the borders, and as Bigo argues, “Securitization is, [...] not an answer to insecuritization, but a capacity to manage (and create) insecurity”.^[13] The general assumption that borders represent all those within the boundaries of a state is erroneous because it disconnects and disregards the individual, thus creating exclusion. Furthermore, it ignores the differences and disparities that exist between peoples within the global society and, as Ákos Kopper has argued:

For centuries, the prevailing understanding of the political relied on an imaginary where borders were conceived like the lines of a coloring book, cutting political space into distinct state boxes, where citizens were defined congruously with the box of their state [...] the coloring book’s imaginary is increasingly ill-fitted to describe socio-political realities.^[14]

Borders that are constructed, in particular those for the protection of a sovereign territory, do not come to fruition organically. Consider, for example, the case of Rwanda and the separation between Hutu’s and Tutsi’s. Under Belgian colonial rule, the divisions between tribes were created by the introduction of identification of the tribes,^[15] and the colonisers gave greater power and status to members of the Tutsi tribe.^[16] It could be argued that this policy, produced to create security and protection within a sovereign territory, did the opposite. Recent research has linked the events that occurred in April 1994 in Rwanda, now accepted worldwide as genocide, can be traced back to the divisions made within the state under its former colony.^[17] The example of Rwanda also ‘fits’ with other critiques of the traditional approaches to border security analysis. For example, Achille Mbembe developed the concept of ‘necropower’, viewed as a form of governance,^[18] “to characterise the way in which the dynamics of territorial

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fragmentation referred to by Fanon combine with a proliferation of sites of violence that result in the death in the colony.”^[19] This exemplifies how insecurity is prevalent within a state and how mechanisms that are used to ‘secure’ can actually create exclusions.

An interesting alternative to the ‘us and them’ border debate is provided by Bigo and Walker, who refute both the Schmittian account of the limits on territory, law and sovereignty^[20] (that the law is essential in maintaining a harmonious civil society), and Chris Brown’s argument that “identity is always about difference, borders are about maintaining difference.”^[21] Instead, they adopt the metaphor of the Möbius strip as a comparison to other topologies that affirm distinctions between internal and external sites of sociopolitical life.^[22] This metaphor is used “to solve the *aporia* of the instituted circle delimiting inside and outside”^[23] and asks do borders really make a difference? For example, there are languages that are classified as national languages that are used both in South Africa and Zimbabwe,^[24] and there are also eleven official languages within South Africa.^[25]

If this line of reasoning is accepted, could it not, therefore, be argued that borders are only conceptual spaces, and what really exists are practices of exclusion and inclusion? Bigo and Walker suggest that:

the arbitrariness of origins and the legitimacy of any consensus about the need to have a border as a line of separation and differentiation, a need that is over and above any more specific dispute about where the border is to be located [...] It may recreate and multiply boundaries as lines of exclusion, especially when it comes to the negation of these boundaries and attempts to ‘integrate’.^[26]

Furthermore, they argue that:

boundaries are not clearly oriented in space [...] it is impossible to define once and for all what is inside and what is outside. No one can identify [...] the location of an edge differentiating once and for all the internal and external [...] The location of any boundary cannot be reduced to an assumed location or territoriality.^[27]

The convincing assumptions that can be deduced from these critical analyses is that ambiguity exists in relation to what is inside and what is outside perceived boundaries.

Traditional approaches to border security often ignore differences that are apparent within a state, and produce a society of exclusions:

in relation to sovereignty, which is all too easily understood in terms of one specific topology, now so deeply embedded in claims about state sovereignty that encourage us to ignore the work that is done on the lines of inclusions and exclusion that are always taken for granted, rather than as a practice that might enable differentiations, discriminations and demarcations that cannot be reduced to structural exclusion and systematic marginalisations.^[28]

This leads to the next aspect of this paper that will examine the ways in which the border is secured and how the mechanisms used to control mobility are applied, in particular those using biometric technology. The purpose of this is to strengthen this essay’s argument that the practices put in place to maximize security actually maximize insecurity because it produces a society of exclusion. As Amoore states, “the crossing of a physical territorial border is only one border crossing in a limitless series of journeys that traverse and inscribe the boundaries of safe/dangerous, civil/uncivil, legitimate traveller/illegal migrant.”^[29]

The Securitisation of the Border

It has been argued in the previous section that according to traditional analyses, borders are rigid and absolute entities, and create exclusions both within society and across state boundaries. So, how are borders governed and secured, and what are the consequences of the use of technological tools such as biometrics (electronic personal data used to control and govern the movement of people across borders)?^[30] It is the proposition of this paper that they do not improve security, but rather they extend the differences between ‘us and them’, thereby sustaining a

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society of exclusions. The shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes^[31] is but one example of how this system of law enforcement has failed. Furthermore, this analysis will highlight the limitations of sovereign power, arguing that exclusions and insecurity exist both outside and inside the border of a sovereign territory, and it concurs with Bigo's argument that "each practice of security creates more insecurity and fear of other groups".^[32]

An interesting example to consider is the securitization of the border between the US and Mexico. In the aftermath of the attacks on September 11th 2001, the US-Mexico border relationship became more complex vis à vis security issues, and the 9/11 Commission Report proposed that the US-Mexico border was a 'weak link' in the overall security of the US.^[33] Moreover, it stated that "Had information coordination technology been properly in place before September 11, the pre-attack activities of the hijackers could have been identified and prevented. There may have been a different outcome."^[34] It is interesting that a link is made to their border with Mexico in relation to the attacks of the 9/11, but a similar connection is not made to other acts of 'terrorism' in America, such as the shooting at Sandy Hook in Newtown where twelve children and six adults were shot dead,^[35] or the bombing in Boston in April 2013 where three people were killed.^[36] Is the Commission suggesting that the 'coordination technologies' that were not available prior to 9/11 should have prevented these attacks?

Between 1996 and 2006, approximately 4000 people have died in attempting to cross the US-Mexico border.^[37] This loss of life is a particular example of insecurity that occurred in an area where protection and security was supposed to be provided. A Schmittian perspective would challenge this argument by reasoning that loss of life is legitimized in order to protect those inside the boundaries of the sovereign territory.^[38] However, this does not take into consideration the economic security of the US and how the excessive protection and securitization of the border had a direct and detrimental impact upon the US economy. As David Newman has argued, "The changing functional characteristics of the US-Mexico boundary is a good example of the clash between the securitization and the economic discourse in relation to borders".^[39] For instance, the agricultural economy in the US is substantial, and 51% of those who work within the industry are undocumented workers.^[40] Therefore, if tighter controls were enforced to secure the border, thus restricting migration, the US's economy would suffer resulting in economic insecurity. This highlights the inherent problems of attempting to analyse the border as an absolute, in particular because it does not take into consideration the ambiguous and complex nature of the relationship between authority, borders, and law.

Furthermore, a clandestine economy exists at the US-Mexico border whereby firearms that are manufactured in the US, therefore support its protection, are smuggled into Mexico,^[41] where they create mass insecurity evidenced by the cartel wars.^[42] Moreover, the border is also a gateway for illegal drugs to enter the US,^[43] thus creating further issues of security in the US, not only with drug use, but also with the criminal activities that are attached to the smuggling and dealing of drugs.^[44] This resonates with the Möbius strip metaphor because security and insecurity are evident on both sides of the border; therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between the 'us' and the 'them', and notions of inside and outside cannot be totally separated.

The 9/11 attacks on the US and the London bombings on 7th July 2005 served as a reminder to the West that they are not fully protected against international threats and prompted the implementation of biometrics for the securitization of the border. Amoore argues that "though the biometric border is becoming an almost ubiquitous frontier in the war on terror, it also contains ambivalent, antagonistic and undecidable moments that make it contestable,"^[45] suggesting that "bodies of migrants and travellers themselves become sites of multiple encoded boundaries."^[46] The use of the biometric border is becoming more evident in the protection and securitisation of the border, and this analysis of border control highlights the problematic nature of securitization, chiefly because it does not provide security and protection for all within the boundaries of a sovereign territory. At times, securitization measures can serve to segregate and create a society of exclusion.

Biometric borders are both a subjective and arbitrary system of surveillance that breeds exclusionary elements, hence insecurity, and it has been argued that the border is bio-political "because of the focus on the body of populations through the encoding of travellers to allow for their classification according to perceived levels of risk."^[47] For example, EU citizens are generally able to travel freely within the boundaries of the Union and are considered not to pose a 'threat'. But how accurate is this assumption? Jean-Charles de Menezes (non-EU citizen) was shot dead by the Metropolitan Police at Stockwell Underground Station on 22nd July 2005 because he was suspected of being

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a threat,^[46] yet Derrick Bird who killed twelve people in Cumbria on 2nd June 2010 was not suspected of being a threat.^[49] Therefore, the EU system treats its citizens as a collective (the 'us' of the scenario) while non-citizens are viewed differently (the 'them'). European borders are in a state of transition and are invaded as much as they are protected, and this is at the core of analyses that support the argument that security processes can create insecurity.

Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to produce a hypothesis that consisted of two analytical elements. Firstly, to discuss the arbitrary nature of the concept of the border and the difficulty in establishing what is meant by the border and its securitization. Secondly, to argue that border security creates a society of exclusions through its inherent protection mechanisms, and how this exclusionary nature has the potential to produce insecurity for some.

It has been argued that due to the complex and diverse nature of the study regarding borders, it is difficult to provide a definitive and meaningful understanding of what a border is, and therefore concurs with Balzacq *et al* that "the label "security" cannot be considered as a concept which can capture a coherent set of practices. Security is, instead, the result of a process of (in)securitization. It is a kaleidoscope of practices non-reducible to a core meaning or/and a linguistic formulation".^[50] Moreover, with specific reference to the theory and practice of international relations, conceptualisations of border security become even more complex when "the discipline works by affirming very clear boundaries as the condition under which the problem of the international might be engaged, even though it is the very capacity to affirm clear boundaries...".^[51] It has also been argued that border security can create a society of exclusion, and the Möbius strip analogy and its critique of the more traditional approaches to notions of a border has been used to support this argument.

This paper has focused on ways in which the border is secured. The notion of biometric borders has been examined and it is proposed that this system of law enforcement not only creates exclusion and a differentiation between 'us and them', but also how it can create insecurity for some, as exemplified in the case of Jean-Charles de Menezes. Finally, by examining issues of migration and the securitization of the US-Mexico border, it is suggested that the implementation of even greater security measures negatively impacts on the US's security and economic stability.

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