

Security State Logic and Neoliberal Splendor: The Treasure Trove Border

Written by Gabrielle Wolf

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GABRIELLE WOLF, FEB 22 2018

The nation-state must constantly re-legitimize itself in the eyes of its citizenry. In the United States, government actors employ a security state logic to maintain the powerful relationship between the nation and its governed people—positioning the United States as a “homeland” under attack that must be protected with strong borders and military adroitness. This security state logic facilitates militarization of the U.S./Mexico border. The fortification of the border is characterized by intensification and exorbitant spending. Whilst forbidding the flow of people across the border, United States government officials and corporate elites engage in cross-border trade, encouraging the free-flow of goods and capital. As such, the U.S./Mexico border is exemplary of a paradoxical border. The contemporary U.S./Mexico border is illustrative of not only the construction of a border through security-state discourse, but also how the maintenance of a *border under constant attack* benefits neoliberal economies in America by perpetuating ceaseless conflict and military spending.

Security State Logic

Security can be regarded as “freedom from imagined or real danger in the present or future” (Graham and Gregory, 2009:672). In examining security in geography, Simon Dalby employs critical geopolitics to actively question the construction of taken-for-granted categories and their effects in the rethinking of environmental security (2002). Because situations appear more or less risky depending upon the positions of the threatened persons or groups, Dalby argues that “threats and dangers, and who or what is threatened, are then a matter of politics in particular contexts, rather than of an ontology that can be clarified through conceptual analysis” (2002:12). Maintaining a logic of security, then, necessitates a narrative about the vulnerability of a group and the construction of a threat that “targets” said group. This “threat” is time and space contingent, so a state of security is only deemed meaningful by its social and contextual environment (Waever, 1995 in Ackleson, 2005a). In terms of societal security, a society must be protected from influences that threaten the citizenry’s sense of self-identity (Terriff et al., 1999). A logic of security, therefore, relies on the mobilization of collective identity and memory. In the case of the U.S./Mexico border, the security threat has been positioned to be that of the “illegal” Mexican[1] immigrant, who threatens the American public through ambiguous yet “dire” means. The construction of security at the U.S./Mexico incorporates the building and maintenance of both physical (border fortifications, surveillance, and security agencies) and social structures (the disposition of a social environment wherein government elites and federal agencies command responses to perceived threats) (Ackleson, 2005a).

A State is, in part, defined by its exercise over a territorially demarcated area (Mann, 1984). As such, the state exerts power through exercises of territoriality, a mechanism by which a government “uses area to classify and assign things” and controls access in and out of specified areas (Sack, 1986:21-34 in Anderson and O’Dowd, 1999:598). A state’s power over a territory, however, is not static and constant. In order to maintain political legitimacy and authority over a body politic, nation-state actors need to (re)legitimize the purpose of the state (Purcell and Nevins, 2005). By protecting its citizenry from “dangerous outsiders”, the transactional relationship between the state and its citizenry is honored, and the state maintains legitimacy.

A technology used by modern nation-states to patrol the border is biopower, which is constituted by the “numerous

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and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault, 1978:140). Biopower allows for the control of entire populations, and is especially visible at the modern border due to the practices of categorization, technologization, surveillance, and inclusion/exclusion which control systems of mobility, life, and death in border zones. The United States uses a security state logic to codify its use of biopower at the U.S./Mexico border. In the course of this discussion, a “security state logic” will be regarded as a rationality that legitimates the ways in which the nation-state discursively constructs a threat that is “other” from the body politic and justifies exertions of force upon those excluded.

History of the U.S./Mexico Border and Construction of the “Alien”

A Constructed Border

Borders are dynamic, contested, and constructed artifacts on the ground (Agnew, 2008). On the one hand, borders are simply lines drawn on a map that aid in practical governance. On the other hand, borders are constructed mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion based on dominant discourse that can dictate mobility and precarity (Agnew, 2008; Butler, 2004). The border itself is not confined to a drawn line, but is expansive and envelops border zones and society as a whole (Paasi, 1996 in Paasi, 2005). United States Border Patrol exercises power over a vast land area outside of the official border “zone”, as illustrated by recent instances of citizenship monitoring at border checkpoints well inside of border states (Morrissey, 2017) and of the detainment of people in ambulances who pass through border checkpoints en route to emergency care (Associated Press, 2017).

The U.S./Mexico border was conceived through United States territory-building, when the United States annexed 40% of Mexico’s territory following The Mexican War of 1846-1848 (Cohen, 2003). Although Mexico’s northern 2,075-mile boundary with the United States is now formally undisputed (Cohen, 2003), the border has been historically constructed to be a contemporary site of violence, policing, and exertions of biopower.

Intensification

The history of the U.S./Mexico border is uneven and marked by intensification. The state of the contemporary border follows legislated policy elevation and a change in security discourse since the 1970s. Prior to the 1970s, 20th century U.S. border policy was relatively benign and, excluding brief exercises like “Operation Wetback”, did not indicate an intense national concern for Latin American security threats (Purcell and Nevins, 2005). Beginning in the 1970s, an awareness of national territory and “the border” accelerated. The Reagan administration in the 1980s oversaw the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) and a 130% increase in funds for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) (Nevins, 2002). The monetary and staff expansion of the INS, in conjunction with the perception of the IRCA as a failure, helped to fuel anti-immigration sentiment and enabled the possibility for future fortifications. In 1993, El Paso Border Patrol Chief Silvestre Reyes launched the initiative Operation Blockade (later renamed “Operation Hold the Line”) (Nevins, 2002). Also enacted during the Clinton administration was Operation Gatekeeper, which further militarized, technologized, and invested in fortifying the U.S./Mexico border (Nevins, 2002). Since 1994, the United States Border Patrol has increased from 4,000 to 21,000 agents, illustrating a dramatic increase in patrolling actors (Miller, 2014). From the 1970s onwards, the realization of the U.S. southern border as a coherent place that needs to be secured has facilitated intensifying investment, fortification, and situation of agents. This fortification acts as a discursive positive feedback loop: with every additional reinforcement at the border, the notion of the border as a place of violence and war only becomes more and more rooted in reality. This semblance can then be used by government actors to justify the devotion of additional funds and equipment to the region.

Manufacturing the “Illegal”

In the 1990s, representations of “illegal” immigrants and an “out-of-control” border by national and state players, as well as citizen groups, produced unprecedented concern for the security of the United States at the U.S./Mexico border (Purcell and Nevins, 2005). A multiplicity of political-geographic fears stoked security discourse. The possibilities of famished public finances, native-born workers losing jobs to immigrants, the destruction of an

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American cultural identity, and violent crime (Purcell and Nevins, 2005) were a few prospects of the future, imaginative geography that seemingly threatened the United States in the 1990s. Much of these fears were voiced by localized coalitions, like California Coalition for Immigration Reform and the Voice of Citizens Together (Purcell and Nevins, 2005), who, in conjunction with government actors seeking to gain political clout, discursively produced a coherent, threatening border.

The history of the fortification of the U.S./Mexico border parallels the construction of the “threatening immigrant”. As per Foucault, powerful discursive practices of categorization are not just repressive but also productive (1977). Official United States articulations describing the southern boundary as “a grossly under-resourced line of defense against... invading hordes from Mexico and other points in Latin America” (Purcell and Nevins, 2005:220) produced a link between “the migrant” and danger to the American citizenry. In doing so, immigrants were constructed by state actors as a security threat (Ackleson, 2005a). Repeated powerful “speech acts” (Waever in Ackleson, 2005a) nicknaming Latin American migrants as “Aliens”, “Wetbacks”, “Tonks”[2], and “Illegals” distanced the idea of an immigrant from a human being, and empowered the dehumanization through repetition. Whether or not “illegal” migration threatened the United States is inconsequential: the threat was perceived, integrated into discourse, and thus made into a reality.

By discursively re-making a person who crosses the U.S./Mexico border into an “illegal”, the migrant body is made vulnerable to a state of exclusion. In discussing biopower in terms of inclusion and exclusion, philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that the state is able to define “the meaning of what it is to be human and thereby distinguishes an excess, the migrant as something other than human, which cannot be made sense of in terms of the nation-state” (Kovras and Robins, 2016:43). A state of exclusion strips the immigrant of what makes him human, forcing him to exist in a state of what Agamben calls, “bare life”. This makes the migrant vulnerable to the power of the state without having the protected rights that others, like citizens, would be afforded. By forcing immigrants into a state of bare life, the “illegalization” (Nevins, 2002) of Latin American migrants makes them fully vulnerable to the force of U.S. biopower, and exposes them to systems of violence at the U.S./Mexico border.

Border Policy: 9/11 and NAFTA

The attacks on 9/11 were shocking events which facilitated the discursive conflation of “immigrant” with “terrorist” and allowed increased investment at the border. In discussing the U.S. Border Patrol response to the attacks on the World Trade Center, assistant port director of Progreso, Texas Gilbert Aldaz stated that “since 9/11... the biggest change in our mission is to defend our border from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction” (Aldaz, quoted in Pinkerton, 2003 in Ackleson 2005b:140). Despite discourse connecting U.S. southern border immigration with terrorism, the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks entered the United States “legally” with tourist and student visas, not “illegally” via Mexico (Ackleson, 2003). Still, speech acts made in the wake of 9/11 connecting terrorism to border migration were performative utterances which drew upon fear and trauma to will a political categorization of the “terrorist Latin-American migrant” into being. Post-2001, the border is perceived as not only a place to keep out “illegals”, but also a battlefield on which the “homeland” is protected from terrorists. The defense policy response to the attacks on 9/11 existed within a larger politico-economic environment, however, which lends further insight into the fortification of the border.

Since the Reagan administration, the United States had pursued an economic policy of neoliberalism, which, as defined by scholar David Harvey (2005:2-3) is:

“A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade... Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”

In the case of the U.S./Mexico border, the most impactful piece of neoliberal legislation has been the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994. The agreement reduced many trade barriers

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between Mexico, the United States, and Canada and aimed to “lock-in” neoliberal reform decisions made by Mexico in the 1980s (Blecker, 2014). The agreement had further insinuations for the citizens of the United States and Mexico. Because immigration is spurred by an unequal economic balance on either side of a border, Mexico’s adoption of NAFTA came with the hopes that it would enable the country to economically succeed, and as Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari said, to “export goods not people” (Carlos Salinas in Blecker, 2014). In the United States, Bill Clinton promised the curbing of illegal Mexican immigration and increased employment for citizens in U.S. industries (Blecker, 2014).

The attacks on 9/11 provided a “shock” that could be utilized by the Bush administration and U.S. government elites to solidify and further the neoliberal concept of privatization whilst claiming a logic of “necessary” security and democracy. The “omnipresent sense of peril” after the attacks greatly expanded the US executive branch’s authority on policing, surveillance, and war-waging (Klein, 2007:298). With these expanded powers, the enriched subsidiaries of defense could be sold and privatized for a profit (Klein, 2007). What followed 9/11 concerning the border was not just a rhetorical conflation of immigrant with terrorist, but a fortification mechanism for profit, which perpetuates ceaseless war and surveillance.

Perpetual “War on __insert_threat_here__”

The logic of security, by definition dependent upon imaginative geographies and a constructed threat, is much more effective as a “stimulus to collective action” than as a method for “proposing desirable futures” (Dalby, 2002:164). In the United States, politicians who had supported the construction of a \$2.4 billion border wall under the Bush administration have yet to be able to describe what a secure border would look like (Slack et al., 2016). Without proposing an ideal border, a security state logic reasonably facilitates perpetual conflict. During what Nevins describes as the Gatekeeper Era of the 1990s and early 2000s (2002), the U.S./Mexico border had increasingly undergone militarization, which enhances the border through “the use of military rhetoric and ideology, as well as military tactics, strategy, technology, equipment and forces” (Dunn, 1996:3 in Slack et al., 2016).

The Troop-Cop

The U.S./Mexico border acts as a crucible for the merging of military and policing power. Overseas military engagement has become increasingly interested in ensuring regional stability, whilst domestic policing has integrated recycled military technology, increased surveillance, and decreased restraint in use of force to manage the state (Weiss, 2011). Police officers in some areas of the United States, like those in Arizona who are obligated under SB-1070 to use “reasonable suspicion” to identify people who might have crossed into the U.S. informally (Miller, 2014), are increasingly involved in *fighting the border war*. Additionally, many former military actors trained in fighting “enemy combatants” are hired as U.S. Border Patrol Agents (Slack et al., 2016). Recycling of military equipment is perhaps one of the most literal ways in which war can be observed at the border. Under the Pentagon’s “1033 program”, some \$5 billion in excess war equipment has been granted to local police departments and Customs and Border Protection (Jones and Johnson, 2016). Once distinct, the separate roles of military and police merge at the border.

Preferred Military Strategy: Deterrence

The United States’ preferred strategy at its southern border is deterrence, or the implementation of enforcement practices which push migrants into more and more violent terrain to discourage border crossings. Since the conceptions of the visible procedures Operation Hold the Line and Operation Gatekeeper, there has been a decrease in crossings through some highly secured parts of the Arizona desert, where 4,000 US Border Patrol Agents are stationed in the Tucson sector alone[3] (Slack et al., 2016). Instead, enforcement strategy has encouraged migrants to follow routes through more dangerous terrains, like that of South Texas or other parts of the Arizona desert, which are less patrolled but have deceptively deadly geographies (Slack et al., 2016). By deterring migrants through violent geographies, the United States uses biopower to systematize, organize, and put to death innumerable migrants. This structural violence perpetuates ongoing warfare by erasing bodies of victims that are isolated and camouflaged by extreme climates. Of bodies actually recovered in Arizona over a decade during the

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Gatekeeper Era, Daniel Martinez and colleagues reported that nearly 34% remain unidentified (Slack et al., 2016). By pushing people through precarious routes, US border actors realize a violent geography wherein perpetrators of violence are absolved of political blame, especially when there are no bodies to spur political action.

In forcing people through deadly geographies, deterrence perfectly illustrates “the ways in which sovereign power produces a radical exposure abandoning subjects, stripping their identities to that of bare life, and thereby creating spaces of exception of a “juridical void” which permits abuses and killings without punishment” (Doty, 2011:602). The use of deterrence allows the construction of a violent geography that provides a “moral alibi” (Doty, 2011) for US policy makers, who can blame immigrant deaths on other players: the desert, coyotes, or the migrants themselves. Through deterrence, the United States is able to maintain the appearance of a protectorate whilst blamelessly facilitating deaths on a continuing, war-like scale.

To Call It What It Is

Discursive practices facilitate perpetual war on the border. Calling a conflict, a “war” constructs it as a threat to collective security, and allows the nation-state to legitimate itself by protecting the citizenry from whomever they are at war with. Furthermore, the emotional power of the concept of war facilitates mobilization for a decided cause. “Politically-laden idioms such as the ‘War on Drugs,’ ‘War on Terror,’ and ‘war to control the border’ have transformed the border debate from one about sensible immigration to one about protecting the state from “alien invaders” as a military mandate” (Slack et al., 2016). Casually utilizing emotional, war-related terms allows the United States to act violently and forcefully without following rules of war with an official declaration. The willingness of American state actors and media to label border disputes a “war” whilst simultaneously avoiding discussion on U.S. foreign military crusades in Iraq and Afghanistan also shows at least a willing (mis)direction of attention away from disputes in the Middle East and towards those at the border. Despite the implication that immigrants are “at war” with the US, many who cross the border “illegally” are themselves claiming refuge from violent geographies in Central and South American countries.

In addition to the emotional capital gained by referring to the border as a “war-zone”, there is also an economic stimulus to support endless conflict. Regarding a “war” as perpetual allows continuous economic investment in a trustworthy market that will not soon collapse.

Surveillance

Since 9/11, the American policy at the border has been to increase border security and implement defensive border technologies. Border surveillance has been about maximizing economic power whilst maintaining a preventative rhetoric of security and defense from terrorists (Ackleson, 2005b). In a 2002 speech in El Paso, Texas, President Bush promoted his 22-point Smart Borders Plan (Bush, 2002):

We must work to make sure our border is modernized so that the commerce that takes place can move more freely, can be expedited so as [sic] it makes it easier for people to have jobs and find work. On the other hand, we want to use our technology to make sure that we weed out those who we don’t want in our country — the terrorists, the coyotes, the smugglers, those who prey on innocent life.

Discourse on the modernization of the border allows government actors like George W. Bush to blame deaths of migrants (caused by U.S. routing of migrants through geographies of violence) on a constructed threat (the coyote, smuggler, or terrorist). With a Smart Border, government players, as actors constituting the nation-state elite, are able to sit back as seemingly passive observers of the state’s own biopower—all while facilitating the mobility of capital.

The Smart Border initiative during the Bush administration was an expensive task. The first Smart Border initiative budgeted over \$1 billion, and due to glitches and malfunctions, only the main implementation, Project 28, is still working (Jones and Johnson, 2016). In 2012, the construction of the Integrated Fixed Tower, a 68km virtual fence project spearheaded by the Department of Homeland Security, began construction with a \$390-\$465 million budget.

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The valuable contract for the IFT belongs to an American subsidiary of Elbit Systems, an Israeli defense contractor (Jones and Johnson, 2016). The construction of a Smart border supports neoliberal interests: not only does it ease the cross-border mobility of capital by using technology to scan shipping containers instead of inspecting every passing automobile; it also operates with large budgets which are invested in private companies.

Since the Smart Border initiative of the Bush administration, the border has been increasingly technologized with surveillance, biometrics, information tech, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs, a.k.a. drones) to patrol bodies crossing or attempting to cross the border (Ackleson, 2003; Jones and Johnson, 2016). These technologies expand beyond the exact boundary line, effectively stretching the influence of United States border patrol to include vast regions of the U.S. and Mexico. Flight technologies like drones expand the border in two-dimensional area, but also increase U.S. power at the border aerially to change the spatiality of border enforcement (Jones and Johnson, 2016). Technologies like UAVs now exert the biopower in a multiplicity of ways: in 2004, a pilot study deemed drones suitable for reconnaissance, surveillance, targeting and acquisition (RTSA) on the border (US Department of Homeland Security, 2012, in Jones and Johnson, 2016). Since then, U.S. Border Patrol has expanded to using nine predator drones at the border, which constitutes the largest fleet in American domestic airspace (Dolan and Thompson 2013; Elias 2012) in (Jones and Johnson, 2016). The technologization of the border allows force to be exerted over large, three-dimensional spaces without attendant human administration.

Conclusion: The Paradoxical Border

The U.S./Mexico border is a place of paradox. Accelerating fortification of the border through military and technological means attempts to stop the movement of people whilst facilitating the movement of capital. Security state rhetoric claiming a desire to provide safety for American people does so by manufacturing violent geographies that have caused thousands of deaths via deterrence. Investment in militarizing the border has done little to end violence, but instead feeds perpetual war. And a nation-state preaching democracy, freedom, and justice perpetuates exclusion and violence in the name of defending these beloved, ethical pillars. The paradoxes that exist at the U.S./Mexico border show the tension between a logic of a security state and a logic of neoliberal economic interest. Within this tension, though, the United States has facilitated the erection of a key site for the neoliberal project based on security discourse: the treasure trove border.

Money is not just being made at the border, however. Neoliberalism actually benefits from “illegal” immigration, which supplies a constant source of “illegal”, low-paid, precarious labor. A labor force of “illegal” immigrants will work for less than minimum wage, provide jobs that other Americans are unwilling to do, and sometimes combat labor shortages (Kitroeff and Mohan, 2017). These people are unable to unionize or claim workers’ rights, making them fodder for exploitative interests. The United States’ legislation of “the illegal” feeds the neoliberal system by not only investing billions to fortify the border in perpetual war, but also by establishing a category of precarious human who can provide cheap labor but cannot demand humane treatment.

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Notes

[1] Latin-American migration to the United States is actually comprised of a miscellany of people from Mexico, Central America, South America, and the American Caribbean Islands. The constructed discursive threat, however, obfuscates national variations in migrants who might simply pass *through* Mexico. As such, the perceived threat is largely constructed to be "Mexican".

[2] "Tonk" is an especially violent moniker used by U.S. Border Patrol agents. It refers to the sound of a border-crosser being hit on the head by a metal flashlight (Nevins, 2002).

[3] Up from just 300 agents in 1992 (Slack et al., 2016).

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