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Caught between Scylla and Charybdis: Forced Displacement on the 'Mind-map' of Antagonistic Security

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LAURA ZUBER, APR 7 2025

People who are forcibly displaced often flee from situations that became unliveable into situations engineered into being unliveable. One can deduce this insight from a rich pool of scholarship emerging on borders, migration and their governance globally but particularly across countries and regions associated with the 'Global North' – such as Europe, guarded by what became known as the deadliest sea border in the world, the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, it carries a sad irony that the Mediterranean Sea shall be home to the mythical creatures Scylla and Charybdis, whose myths were likely inspired by perilous rock formations (Scylla) and dangerous currents (Charybdis), which made it difficult for people to reach a safe haven through waters; so much so that “being between Scylla and Charybdis” became a proverbial way for saying “being caught between a rock and a hard place” – between two difficult or impossible situations.

Today, Scylla and Charybdis become reality for people forcibly on the move across borders. However, rather than rocks and currents, the monsters are made manifest through hostile politics and policies producing the abandonment, depletion and criminalisation of many who seek safety in affluent destination countries. These processes can be usefully read through the notion of necropolitics developed by Achille Mbembe, denoting (very simply said) a kind of governance that heightens the vulnerability to premature death of people who are perceived as 'lesser', 'undeserving' or 'unwanted'. In my research, I develop and trace the notion of 'antagonistic security' as the underlying logic producing and spanning these necropolitical landscapes. In this article, I want to briefly show how the logic of antagonistic security underpins material realities in contemporary migration governance, at whose sharp ends await the necropolitics of criminalisation, surveillance, destitution and premature death, such as in the context of dangerous sea crossings. To do this, I first introduce antagonistic security and then discuss how and why it translates into forms of migration governance that are oftentimes subject to much criticism and resistance in scholarship and beyond.

What is 'antagonistic security'?

We all need to eat. Too obvious? Sometimes, the most powerful analyses and insights emerge from the plainest of observations. Feminist analyses around social reproduction exemplify this. In my research, I think about social reproduction as embodied facts of our interdependent lives – our shared needs for food, care or shelter – that I argue ontologically ground what it means to be safe and secure, without ifs and buts; we cannot suspend these needs, and certainly not without dire consequences. This means that I am thinking security *as and through* social reproduction.

The big question of social reproduction is how to organise it. It is thus a primordial question of policy and (global) political economy, which *also* renders it a question of capitalism as the latter's globally prevailing form. What kind of 'security project' is capitalism? In other words, what logics and processes are characteristic of capitalist organisations of life or social reproduction?

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In my research, I found that scholars thinking about the raciality of capitalism offer important points of reference: for one, they are interested in understanding material processes characterising capitalist organisations of life, among others the appropriation of vital resources for capital, such as land and labour. However, they move beyond the material, with scholars such as Stuart Hall and Sylvia Wynter tracing the logics, epistemes, unquestioned assumptions and origin myths that produce and enable these processes and vice versa. This body of scholarship explains how the race construct emerged to encode 'ontological human difference'. Or, the idea that someone can be less than human, an idea strongly interwoven with the material realities of conquest, war, colonialism and slavery in the context of what was emerging as capitalism.

What we can learn from feminist and decolonial scholars is that in order for people to become *exploited* and *subjected* to various other forms of structural violence, they must first be made *exploitable* and *subjectable*. As such, in my interpretation, the study of the raciality of capitalism is thus the study of dehumanisation and the ways it links to, and sustains, violent logics and materialities of capitalism as a global political economy. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it: "Capitalism requires inequality and [...] in the entire social order of the world as it has developed and changed and rebelled under capitalism, we see over and over again that the requirement of inequality becomes manifest through racism."

From this scholarship, one can conclude that if capitalism is a security project (a form of organising social reproduction), then it is a highly antagonistic one: it suggests that conditions of social reproduction can and need to be 'secured' from, against, or at the expense of certain people perceived (via racism/dehumanisation) as 'other' to a modern understanding of 'the human'. In capitalism's epistemological matrix, 'the human' and its 'other' are thus willed into theoretical being and put into an antagonistic relationship to each other; via the construct of race, but, as Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò on the concept of antagonistic security explains, also broadly via "whatever social stratifications are available that rank people into the deserving and undeserving."

Concretely, this antagonistic relationship renders the 'othered' guilty until proven innocent, or until the 'othered' proves their 'deservingness' of ... what exactly? Precisely of the rightful claim to secure access to the conditions of social reproduction; the claim to a life in safety and dignity. The concept and logic of 'deservingness' thus sustains the human/other antagonism and exemplifies what is at stake. In the UK, we can often see this narrative at work in discussions around migration (including asylum) and welfare, for example, in the often-exaggerated fear and panic over 'undeserving', i.e. 'bogus' and 'fraudulent' claims and the threat they pose to tax payer money – in a country that continued seeing a "remarkable surge [...] in private wealth" during a deadly decade of austerity.

From the above, we can see that engagement with antagonistic security, its presumptions and workings, opens interest beyond forced displacement into a broader enquiry into the state and borders, their function and ways of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the implications of a colonial world in the latter's becoming. Approaching the study of security from the feminist perspective I introduce can be useful in identifying these interconnections. It helps us to get a deeper understanding of why many people may find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place trying to manifest a better life.

What I learned from interviews and conversations with people knowing the sharp ends of the UK's often-hostile approach to migration and welfare is that when life becomes difficult or impossible, this often means that everyday life (social reproduction) becomes a perpetual crisis. Antagonistic security manifests as permanent crises in the everyday for certain people liable to prove their 'deservingness' according to its logics. I now turn to examine the concrete fabric of some of these crises to make the link between antagonistic security and harmful material processes in migration governance.

The necropolitics of antagonistic security

In my research, I trace the workings of antagonistic security on four deeply interconnected levels: its logic (or 'cosmology'), which I outlined above, which then shapes political economy and everyday life within that political economy, before finally coming to fulfilment viscerally in the body.

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On the level of political economy, including the latter's legal production, one can observe that a strict and inhibiting governance of migration has intensified since the Global War on Terror but sprouts from longer histories of capitalism and colonialism. This entails processes, such as the external outsourcing or internal deputisation of borders, that are tied to the argument of securitisation and that aim to make *access to* and *life* (social reproduction) *in* the state difficult or impossible for those whose claim to 'deservingness' is fragile, suspect or already forfeited. This process enables and fuels exploitation at its receiving end.

Everyday life or social reproduction becomes difficult or impossible under circumstances reigned by the logic of 'deservingness', product of antagonistic security. In the UK, the previous decade saw this logic landing violently on many people's everyday lives in the forms of austerity and an increasingly hostile immigration politics. Whose access to nutritious food is secure? Whose access to safe and adequate housing is secure? To the prospect of Indefinite Leave to Remain? To disability support? To the right healthcare? Who is safe from destitution? These are but a few threads in the complex fabric of everyday life and they intrinsically tie issues of 'deservingness' to the question of life and (premature) death. After all, "[i]t's not just as though you're going to feel worse if you don't have secure access to housing or food or water but you are more likely to die sooner."

The above means that depleting material processes set in motion by antagonistic security logics do not halt at everyday life but necessarily try to 'crawl under the skin' to come to fulfilment in the body in forms of ill-health or even premature death. This does not mean that they stifle contestation, resistance, and knowledge production that showcases their workings. What is arguable is that the logic of antagonistic security, in the extents to which it is being magnified in our current organisation of life, translates into material processes of hostility, neglect and abandonment of people already made vulnerable through marginalisation.

Conclusion

In this article, I offered insight into my thinking about antagonistic security and argued its links to necropolitical logics and processes at work in migration governance today, while mapping these onto broader enquiries into the (welfare) state and borders. While the above processes can impact people of all racial identities, their logic is tied to race and racism, as well as the latter's function in capitalist and colonial organisations of life. Scholarship engaging the raciality of capitalism, as well as scholarship on the nexus of feminist security studies and feminist (global) political economy is well-equipped to understand antagonistic notions and practices of security and how they currently shape the world and people's lives within.

Finally, many of us benefit from the above cosmology and political economy, enjoying satisfying everyday lives and good health to varying degrees. Many can live comfortably. Otherwise, antagonistic security would unlikely prevail in the first place. Against this background, the question then remains: Could the damages done ever be mended? Or, are the conditions of our social reproduction and our abilities to think and feel the world around us already too attuned to manifested antagonism? Scylla and Charybdis would likely say 'yes'.

About the author:

Laura Zuber (she/her) recently finished her PhD in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. Her research is situated on the nexus between Feminist Political Economy and Feminist Security Studies with a keen interest in the topics of capitalism, social reproduction, migration and social policy. She has lectured and published on crisis and disaster governance from feminist perspectives. She received, through a dual-degree program, a Master's degree in English Studies, Multilingual and Intercultural Communication from the University of Málaga and a Master's degree in European Studies from the University of Passau, where she also received her Bachelor's degree in Media and Communication.

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