

Border Crossings: Our Criminals, Their Criminals, and “Good Fences”

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, SEP 1 2018

Robert Frost comes to mind any time I hear the ear-ache-incurring debates regarding the projected border wall between the United States and Mexico. I have lived near borders for most of my life. I was born in Alaska, the only U.S. state closely bordering the former Soviet Union (at least, when I was born). It also borders the North Pole, bringing it very close to Scandinavia, but that is another story.... I have also lived in Israel (near three different international borders at various times), and in the West Bank (near the Israeli and the Jordanian borders). I have crossed the border, by car and by foot, between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which I assure you is manned by sub-machine guns the likes of which we had the opportunity to hear readied for fire. I have seen more sub-machine guns than I like to recall in my various border crossings. In my youth, I lived near the border between the U.S. and Canada in Vermont, a nearly self-regulated border in which the greatest contraband was Canadian beer and maple syrup. That same area now trends to heroin.

Not all borders are the same. But they all share one thing in common: people will cross them illegally if they can – if only for the fun of it. To wit – Canadian beer. I know tales of border crossings that I will never share in all of these contexts. They range from the poignant to the mundane and ridiculous “thrill-seeking” kind.

I have also traveled in many border countries – in parts of Africa, Asia, and elsewhere, including one Central American country in the 1980s, which was about as much of a free-for-all in terms of rule of law as I have ever witnessed (my friend and I were picked up by the local U.S. drug heffes to ensure our compliance with their rules and our protection by them).

While I have never been to Mexico (it is on my wish-list), it is my understanding that Mexican tequila is a great attractor for U.S. party-tourism, more so than baja fish tacos (one of the greatest foods ever conceived). It may hold a greater allure, certainly, than Canadian beer or maple syrup.

But, unfortunately, these are not the only commodities of allure in that border context.

In an ideal world, “open borders” would be a hope to which to aspire. However, open borders means no passports, no documents. Everyone is equal. Every border is open. Everyone is officially welcomed in every way, for work, for study, etc. In a sense, it is a Bedouin paradise. It is a truly free world.

“Open borders” does not mean un-documented workers who are held as slaves with no civil rights – because they have no passport or other papers. The idea of open borders inherently means that everyone is official everywhere, and that borders are free to cross everywhere. Open borders obviates the need for national passports or documentation.

That is certainly not the case in our current empirical context. We are not anywhere close to “there” yet.

Robert Frost states, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall....” They are broken by nature and in need of repair every year, at least in Vermont, where he lived. They are crossed by people, too. By hunters, Frost says; or, I might

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add, by thrill-seekers, sometimes just because they are there. They might be crossed for humanitarian reasons as well, as in the Underground Railroad. Some spaces need a wall, Frost suggests, and some spaces don't. His neighbor, he says, reminds him, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

For several hundred years, anyway, we are living in an era of borders, fences, enclosures, and walls.

The border with Mexico is ripe with human trafficking. It is overloaded with criminals on both sides of the border who make tidy sums from trafficking in human beings. Many un-documented people who come into the U.S. to work live in employer-owned shanties as slaves or close-to slaves. I have heard people who support this practice say, *Well, it is more than they would make at home* Maybe. Maybe not. Slavery is illegal everywhere and certainly, within the borders of the United States of America.

Some of my students from south Florida, in response to movies such as *Traffic*, have talked about growing up seeing the lines of migrant workers gathered for work pick-ups in the early morning, as they were on the bus to school. Shanty districts for migrant workers are a well-known secret across the U.S. Many of us know where at least a few of them are in our own local or regional contexts. These workers are left alone by most – except by their employers, who have the power of slave owner over them. We *are* an empathetic society. Slave owners are not. White collar or not, slave owners are part of our criminals.

The drug trafficking across the U.S.-Mexican border hardly needs highlighting. I am in favor of legalizing drugs – precisely in order to put the criminal element in jail. People die from illegal drugs, and from illegal drug traffickers, every day on both sides of the border. Legalizing substances and putting them under medical regulation, not to mention taxation to pay for our roads and border regulation, is an excellent idea.

Patience, forgiveness, and empathy does not mean killing ourselves as a consequence of sympathy for the blight of drug traffickers, drug consumers, human traffickers, and slave owners.

No one is served by the lack of a well-regulated border – given that we are still living in a border-ridden world, complete with passports and documents – except for their criminals and our criminals.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).