Racism and the Politics of Fear at the US-Mexico Border

When securitizing an issue, the reality of the threat does not matter; instead, it is the discourse used to legitimize it as such (Buzan et al., 1998). In other words, "security is what actors make of it" (Wæver, 1993, p. 27). Thus, security is defined through discourse, and its meaning will depend on what is accepted as security in a particular societal and historical context (Buzan, 1993). Conceptualizing the US-Mexico border in the context of societal and national security legitimizes the use of state emergency tools designed to counter existential threats (Adamson, 2006). Separating young children from their parents, and detaining them at the US-Mexico border illustrates the severity of the measures the state takes in response to a perceived threat. This paper will argue that constructing migrants as a security threat to national identity reinforces racist discourse and the politics of fear, and, consequently, the exploitation of and discrimination against migrants in the United States.

The paper will do the following. First, it will trace the securitization of the US-Mexico border through a historical analysis of the process, beginning in the early 1980s, to outline the securitizing moves made by several securitizing actors that shifted migration into the realm of emergency security. Second, it will analyze how migrants were constructed as an existential security threat, which will be followed by a problematization of the referent object to demonstrate that although migration is an international issue, it is not one that is a threat to cultural homogeneity or national identity. Problematizing the subject of security – namely, national identity – shows that the securitization of migrants is iniquitous. The aim is to demonstrate the effect and power of security discourse in the creation of existential threats.

The rise of new security threats expanded the security agenda that was once known to be narrow or limited (Buzan et al.,1998). This expansion played a crucial role in developing new critical security approaches (McSweeney, 1996). In this development, securitization theory made two main contributions to the field. First, broadening the security agenda to include environmental, societal, and economic security in addition to traditional military and political sectors (Buzan et al.,1998). Second, it provided a constructivist framework of understanding and analyzing how issues become security threats. It outlines the process in which issues are moved from the political sphere to the security sphere by a securitizing actor. Thus, security issues are intersubjective and socially constructed.

However, not all issues are security threats. According to Buzan et al. (1998, p. 5), "they have to be staged as existential threats to a referent object by a securitizing actor who thereby generates endorsement of emergency measures beyond rules that would otherwise bind". As such, by presenting an issue as one of high significance, the actor claims the necessity to use extraordinary means to overcome it. Therefore, security is a speech act (Wæver, 1995; Balzacq et al., 2014). By speaking in security terms, the actor moves the issue into the security sphere. Walker (1997) emphasizes that to understand the concept of security, one must be able to understand who the subject of security is. Thus, understanding the meaning of security is an exploration into who is being rendered insecure and under what circumstances. This entails two things: examining ways political subjects are constituted and then to ask what security means to them (Walker, 1997). In the US-Mexico border case, national identity is perceived to be insecure in light of rapid migration.

Through tracing the US-Mexico border's historical security discourse, it is clear that there is not one definitive speech act that marked the securitization of migration. Instead, the process is multidimensional, involving various securitizing actors and practices in the framework of political discourse (Huysmans, 2014). From the early 1980s, migration from

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Mexico and Central America exponentially increased in the United States as a result of civil wars in the region (Bigo, 2002). During this period, the Reagan administration authorized what is known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act, which is the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (Reagan, 1986). This act penalized businesses deliberately hiring undocumented illegal migrants (Guerette and Clarke, 2005). Before passing the new act, President Reagan invoked security discourse to rationalize the decision (1986). This, in line with the Copenhagen School, constitutes as a speech act, as it raises the issue of migration in the United States from politicized to securitized (Huysmans, 1995). Thus, constructing migration as a security issue justifies employing extreme security measures. In succeeding years, the number of raids by Border Patrol Forces to arrest undocumented and illegal migrants increased through increasing border zone personnel and containment operations (Pallitro and Heyman, 2002).

The 1990s witnessed the most significant upsurge in illegal migration (Adamson, 2006). The increase in illegal migration was a consequence of three main developments: a thriving US economy, the lasting effect of the largely unsuccessful campaign of the war on drugs, and NAFTA (Huysmans, 2014). Leading political parties and pro-business lobby groups were key securitizing actors during this time and justified the crackdown on illegal migration as a necessity to prevent further drug-associated crimes and violence. This persuasive narrative convinced the American public. However, speech acts employing the language of security were infrequent until the events of September 11 (Collyer, 2006). The declaration of a 'war on terror' by President Bush is the point at which the US-Mexico border could genuinely be considered securitized. The fear of terrorism was, to the American people, intertwined with the perceived threat of undocumented migration. Even though the perpetrators of the attack entered with valid visas, and by air (Collyer, 2006). Following the attacks, the audience was more receptive to subsequent legislative securitizing moves that fit their established anarchical narrative. Thus, since September 11, explicit links were drawn between migration and terrorism, regardless of truth (Huysmans, 2014).

Securitization of migration deepened in the next decade not only through a series of consecutive speech acts but also in legal action. Namely, the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the Secure Border Initiative of 2005, the Secure Fence Act of 2006, and amendments to the United States Border Patrol (Homeland Security, 2002; Homeland Security, 2005; Collyer, 2006; Homeland Security, 2006). At this time, discussing illegal migration alongside real existential national threats, such as terrorism and drug violence, was prevalent. Indeed, politicians were aware that, to audiences, a reduction in illegal migration meant a decrease in unemployment and prevention of the proliferation of non-white communities, both gratifying outcomes to them (Huysmans, 1995; Togral, 2011). Balzacq (2011, p. 38) explained this tactic in saying, "Politicians cloak security arguments in the semantic repertoire of the national audience in order to win support". Thus, by essentially telling the people what they want to hear, politicians gain their support to advance their security agendas. As such, the state has a sustained role in constructing the opinions of the political community (Huysmans, 2000).

The nature of security is subjective; whether a factor constitutes a threat to an actor depends on how it is perceived (Buzan, 1991; Walker, 1997). Security language constructs a problem as an existential threat to a referent object to legitimize the use of exceptional methods to tackle the threat (Balzacq et al., 2014). In the US, migration was not only framed as an existential threat but was also linked to other existential threats such as terrorism, giving it a sense of authenticity (Adamson, 2006). The post-attack panic made it more likely for people to believe the migration was not only an existential threat but also an immediate one.

In the process of securitizing migration, a critical governmental instrument was used to steer public opinion on migrants: fear (Huysmans and Squire, 2017). People harbor personal fears, which stem from mainly perceiving migrants as dangerous. This perceived fear, though detached from reality, is an assessment of personal vulnerability to victimization. Securitizing actors used fear to convince the audiences that they are the victims and are being victimized by the increase in migration. Yet, instead of reducing migration, tighter borders only led to racist discourse, exclusionary practices as well as fear and violence both at the border and within the state. For instance, citizens of specific nationalities are more likely to be defined as migrants, while others are rejected based on preconceptions of their countries of origin. As such, "security is a practice not of responding to enemies and fear but of creating them" (Huysmans, 2014, p.33).

Using fear as a tactic promotes the rejection of anything that does not align with the national identity. An implication

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of promoting fear against migrants is the generalization of all migrants as a singular existential threat with a complete disregard for differences between asylum-seekers, refugees, and so on (Collyer, 2006; Buzan, 1991). Presenting all migrants as a single unitary group serves to construct a homogenous American national identity – the referent object – that is at risk. Also, generalization reveals the inability or unwillingness of securitizing actors to view migrants as individual human beings as opposed to a general threat category (Bigo, 2002; Huysmans and Squire, 2017). Aside from creating a cynical public perception, the strict enforcement of state migration policies, as a direct consequence of securitizing acts, deeply disrupts the lives of migrants. Through fear and frequent securitizing moves, the US systemically promotes the dehumanization of migrants.

The role of constructing a racist atmosphere in the migration securitization process has not gone unnoticed. Ibrahim (2005), for instance, argued that racism is the most modern form of exercising power relations. As mentioned above, the perceived fear that cultural differences lead to societal breakdown strengthened the securitization of migration (Ibrahim, 2005). Thus, immigration policies reinforce the conception of "cultural homogeneity as a stabilizing factor" (Huysmans, 2000, p.753) in which "the protection and transformation of cultural identity is one of the key issues through which the politics of belonging and the question of migration are connected" (Huysmans, 2000, p.762). In other words, the cultural differences between Mexicans and Americans are seen as a threat to the nation's socio-political cohesion (Buzan, 1993). This leads to the preservation of one culture through the exclusion of other social groups.

The racist discourse that focuses on cultural differences as a basis of exclusion is classified as 'new racism' (Ibrahim, 2005; Togral, 2011). According to Togral (2011), depicting migrants as an existential security threat is a covert form of racism. It is more subtle compared to other forms as it is for the "preservation of one's identity, own way of life and values in the face of the destabilizing and damaging effects of other cultures" (Lazaridis, 2016, p.220). Hence, it only adds a cultural dimension to pre-existent racist practices. Although it is not in direct reference to race, it, nevertheless, "functions to maintain racial hierarchies of oppression" (Lazaridis, 2016, p.222). Additionally, President Trump exacerbated racism regarding migrants by almost exclusively referring to them as gang members, brutal murderers, unaccompanied aliens, vicious coyotes, ruthless gangs, rapists, and illegal aliens – just to name a few (The White House, 2018; The White House, 2019).

In the case of the US-Mexico border, the US often refers to the national identity as the subject of security. The obvious alternative is that human beings are arrested at the border, separated, and placed in detention camps of cruel and inhumane nature. According to the Copenhagen School, identity falls under the societal sector of security (Wæver, 1995). Societal insecurity happens when a community perceives a development or change as a threat to their survival (Wæver, 1995). Fear, used as a tactic, fortified people's perceptions of migrants as a threat to societal cohesion. The existence of migrants in America endangers the 'we' identity that societal security is built upon (Wæver, 1993). Clearly, societal security, as discussed in the securitization theory, has racist connotations. It encourages the rejection of any culture or people that are different. It even goes a step further by claiming this rejection is for security purposes, not acknowledging that it perpetuates systemic racism. For instance, when audiences accept that migrants are a security threat, states can exercise legal and political prejudice against them. Another criticism offered by McSweeney (1996) argues that social security often leads to the insecurity of others, such as migrants, which are then perceived as a threat. So, to protect the national identity, any consequences to be faced by migrants, from exploitation to discrimination, are legitimized.

According to Huysmans, "The securitization of migration reproduces a myth that a homogenous national community or Western civilization existed in the past and can be re-established today through the exclusion of those migrants who are identified as cultural aliens" (1995,p.102). In a political sense, mobilizing the fear of migration asserts the permanence of a particular community, reinforces extreme nationalism, and exaggerates the fear of the 'other', allowing room for exploitation (Buzan, 1993; Huysmans, 1995). Exceptionalism is a central theme of American identity. The sense of being something entirely apart from the rest of the world is troubling. It can escalate into superior self-congratulation and even self-righteousness. As long as the American identity is framed as the referent object in the securitization of migration, migrants will continue to be viewed as threatening or undesirable subjects. They are rarely de-politicized as vulnerable subjects. Placing migrants on the other end of the "migration-security nexus" (Huysmans, 1995, p.64) consolidates articulating migration as a security threat.

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Securitizing the US-Mexico border was flawed from the beginning, as migrants were already portrayed as threats regardless of fact or value. It reinforced the exclusionary and racist practices that are evident at the US-Mexico border today. The excessive differentiation between migrants and natives not only legitimizes but also justifies violence against them (Huysmans, 1995). As such, this brings up the question of whether an issue such as migration should be securitized at all. The only way to revert a securitized issue is to stop using security language in reference to it completely. Thus, "if an issue is no longer understood and acted upon as a security issue, it stops being a security issue" (Huysmans, 1995, p.65). However, other theorists disagree and argue that once an issue is securitized, it is difficult or even impossible to go back, or "de-securitize" (Weaver, 1995).

An attempted approach to de-securitizing the language in the societal sector is replacing the collective with the individual (Huysmans, 1995). In other words, using 'migrant' instead of 'migrants' provides a possible escape from the us-them dichotomy that fuels fear and racism. However, this is easier said than done, as Huysmans (1995, p. 290) argues both minorities and majorities "strive for the reification of distinct collectivities". The only possible way to normalize discourse related to migrants is either the death of collectivity or a potential change in the us-them dichotomy. Securitization theory, through its framework, created a trap in which once an issue or subject is securitized, it is impossible to change. The ease with which one can securitize an issue, compared with the difficulty of normalizing that same issue, is a significant shortcoming of the theory and shows that, once security discourse is initiated, it only serves to escalate and create disorder.

Perhaps, what is needed is not de-securitization of migration but a re-evaluation of the referent object. In the process of securitizing migration, the national identity was framed to be at risk. Instead the referent object should shift to individual migrants themselves to deconstruct them as a threat to national identity. However, that would require the audience to accept what they were conditioned not to accept, and make migration a part of normal politics again. Moving beyond that, the security-oriented approach should be replaced by an alternative human rights approach, especially in reference to forced migration or trafficking. Placing these issues in the spectrum of security already problematizes the outcome and violates the fundamental human rights of migrants. Constructing migrants as security threats, rather than victims, legitimizes the exercise of violence against migrants. Therefore, security cannot be the focus of discussion; the focus should be on human rights.

The securitization of migration in the US border reinforces racism and a community based on fear of differences. The role of fear in the process of categorizing migrants as an existential security threat is significant. It can lead to a dangerous generalization with extremely negative connotations. The securitization of migration also reinforces racism and exclusion based on cultural differences. The focus on societal identity, while disregarding the security of migrants themselves, has led to a reality of systemic abuse and violation of migrant rights. Due to the migrants' vulnerable states, the state has framed them to be the existential threat by tackling the collective fear in the American community since the attacks of September 11.

This essay argued that the securitization of migrants and constructing them as an existential threat to national identity encourages fear and racism. Furthermore, putting an issue with vulnerable subjects, such as migrants, in the security spectrum is severely problematic. Instead, migration should be approached from a human rights stance, not a security one. Placing the wellbeing of displaced people behind a socially-constructed and fragile concept of identity is the most questionable of all. The fact that anything could be a security threat if somebody in power linguistically framed it well is merely a tool used to justify states' illegitimate use and abuse of power on those perceived deserving of lesser human rights and basic decency. To reiterate, migration is an international issue, but it is not an existential threat to cultural and national identity.

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Date written: November 2020