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Neoliberal re-regulation, and the simultaneous opening and hardening of national territorial boundaries

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On 22 October 2014, José Palazón, a photographer with a human rights group in Melilla, a Spanish (semi-)enclave of 12 square kilometres in north Africa that borders on Morocco, took a photo of a dozen or so individuals who appeared to be unauthorized migrants. They were stuck atop a 6-metre-high fence, the last of three layers of barricades that divide the territory from Morocco. Taken from Spain’s side of the international boundary, the photo shows the migrants looking down on white-clad golfers on a verdant course. Meanwhile, one of the golfers looks at the would-be intruders at a distance while his partner gets ready to hit the ball and a Spanish border guard on a ladder tries to beckon the men to climb down so he and his fellow police officers can arrest them (see Kassam 2014b).

The photo went viral. The image of the stark, heavily policed divide between white golfers and black migrants and spaces of privilege and deprivation captures what many have come to characterize as global apartheid (e.g. Dalby 1999; Nevins 2008, 2010, 2012; Sharma 2006). At the same time, it speaks to the particular dynamics of Morocco’s boundary with Melilla – as well as that with Ceuta, another Spanish semi-enclave, approximately 400 kilometres east of Melilla: both vestiges of Spanish colonialism are the sites of much conflict as migrants frequently storm their fortified divides in large numbers to gain access to the space of the European Union (see Carr 2012; DiCintio 2013; Johnson 2014). As Palazón explained to the Spanish newspaper El País in regard to Melilla, ‘The photo reflects the situation really well – the differences that exist here and all the ugliness that is happening here’ (quoted in Kassam 2014b).

The image, to the extent it demonstrates the growing hardening of boundaries between the relatively powerful and disadvantaged, also reflects the neoliberal moment in which we live. As a newspaper article from 2007 stated, ‘whole countries are fencing up’ (Dyer 2007). Referring to the growth in territorial boundary barriers and related policing infrastructure that nation-states across the globe have erected in the name of (among other reasons) stymieing unauthorized migrants and fighting terrorism, the article’s central assertion has only become more salient since its publication (see, e.g., Jones 2012).
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Policing divides between nationalized spaces of privilege and disadvantage are hardly new. The mid- to late 1800s saw the emergence of the beginnings of immigration restriction between what used to be called ‘white men’s countries’ and the rest of the world (with the exclusion of people from Asia being the central concern; see McKeown 2008) – a development indicative of the newness of national immigration controls broadly. It was also a time when the notion arose that mobility was a universal human right, but only for those of European descent (see Lake and Reynolds 2008). This is indicative of what Matthew Sparke refers to as ‘liberalism’s own inaugural double standards – with rights for whites in Europe and often utter inhumanity in the colonies’ (Sparke 2006: 175).

Rather than casting these seemingly conflicting ‘ways of seeing’ and being as simply contradictions, we should see them as manifestations of co-productive, and sometimes complementary, processes that reflect and reproduce a world of gross inequalities between peoples and places (see McKeown 2008). What makes the neoliberal era unique in this regard is the depth to which these historical-geographical origins are buried – making it seem as if the past truly is past – and the strength of contemporary boundary policing regimes. These regimes are officially based on distinctions that are non-racial and instead discriminate on the basis of legality – that is, one’s nation-state-granted right (or lack thereof) to enter, reside, or work in a particular nationalized space.

The lack of overt racial criteria has led some to assert that race – as a central criterion for determining mobility across global space – is extinct. Historians Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, for instance, suggest that racial exclusion in the realm of immigration is a relic of the past. Indeed, they say, with the demise of South Africa’s apartheid regime, ‘the last bastion of white supremacy’ has disappeared (Lake and Reynolds 2008: 356).

Neoliberalism is many things. Herein, I argue that central to it is whiteness – whiteness of a different form than existed in the era of ‘white men’s countries’ – one that is more difficult to see only because the violence that underlies and produces it has become so normalized, and its socio-territorial expressions (in the form of national boundary policing regimes) so well established. It is a type of ‘difference’ that complements the various ways in which a number of scholars have analysed neoliberalism in relation to territorial boundaries – the focus of the next section.

Neoliberal boundaries

Neoliberalism has attracted the attention of many scholars interested in territorial boundaries. Initially, it was those swept up by capitalist triumphalism in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall that seemed most captivated. Seemingly inspired by Francis Fukuyama’s (1989) assertion of the ‘end of history’, business management scholar Kenichi Ohmae (1995), for instance, proclaimed the coming end of the nation-state, arguing that economic globalization and the concomitant growing liberalization of national economies had made national boundaries redundant. It became obvious rather quickly, however, that nation-states, as sociologist Michael Mann (1993) puts it, were not dying, but diversifying as they developed.

Political scientist Peter Andreas (2009), in focusing on the boundary policing regime in the US–Mexico borderlands, makes a similar argument. He asserts that the strengthening of border control apparatuses demonstrates that the economic liberalism and the associated redesign of instruments of government are ‘less about reducing the regulatory state than about retooling and redeploying it’. Among the ironies of this development, Andreas contends, is that it illustrates how the most economically advanced countries ‘remain most resistant to economic liberalism’ as manifested by their ‘building up their protective walls against two of the developing world’s leading exports: drugs and migrant labor’ (ibid.: 141).
It is many of these very same countries – for example, Australia, Canada, the USA, and those of the European Union – that tend to champion neoliberal economic policies as a universal prescription via so-called free trade mechanisms. While this might seem like a contradiction, given the simultaneous ‘hardening’ of their own territorial boundaries, it reflects a more complex relationship, one involving the reworking of the state–citizen nexus that increasingly embodies the twinning of what Sparke (2006: 153) calls ‘securitized nationalism’ and ‘free market transnationalism’. In this regard, he writes, ‘borders are consequential condensation points where wider changes in state-making and the nature of citizenship are worked out on the ground’ (ibid.: 152). As the state redesigns itself, it also changes its relationship to, and redefines (in part by enhancing the differences within), the citizenry. Thus, boundary and immigration restrictions are not simply about limiting movement, but also status. As border and migration scholars Anderson, Sharma and Wright (2009: 6) point out, ‘restrictive immigration policies have enabled states to shift the status they accord migrating people’. This has led, they assert, to fewer individuals who have migrated without having a status accompanied by rights within the new national spaces in which they find themselves.

In trying to explain the emergence of neoliberal boundaries – particularly the rise of ‘walled states’ – political theorist Wendy Brown (2010) builds on the work of sociologist Saskia Sassen (1996). Brown asserts that the combined forces of de-regulated, increasingly globalized capital and the increasing power of transnational politico-legal institutions challenge nation-state sovereignty; it is the very undermining of the nation-state that gives rise to the hardened boundaries – walled ones being the most obvious expression. Yet, as Andreas (2009) points out, it is too simple to see states as merely reactive given that they have helped to produce, discursively and materially, the very conditions – in the form of a border ‘out of control’ – to which they have responded via enhanced policing.

In the case of the US–Canada borderlands, where one sees the implementation of an expedited boundary crossing regime (for some) and heightened state violence in the form of expedited deportations (for others), there is, Sparke asserts, a ‘neoliberal double standard’ – one ‘like liberalism’s own inaugural double standards’ referred to earlier. In the context of the US–Canada borderlands, this double standard is manifest via eased trans-boundary mobility for the business elite and highly restricted mobility (at best) for those deemed as outsiders. This is enabled by a boundary crossing apparatus that is far more orderly (and ordered) than that which existed not too long ago. As in the case of the various Israeli-administered ‘border crossings’ or ‘international terminals’ – that is, checkpoints – between the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel (see Braverman 2011), the trappings of modernity are present: for example, sophisticated sensors and scanners, biometric identification cards, and electronic databases – all managed by what is presented as a sophisticated, highly rational and professional bureaucracy.

The bureaucracy is expansive – or at least its champions seek that it should be so – in that it tends to spread to realms where it has hitherto not existed. In the process, individual bodies become increasingly categorized, marked (via identity documents, for instance) and regulated (see, for example, Nevins 2014). As such, they effectively become embodied manifestations of territorial boundaries. This speaks to the mobility of boundaries under neoliberalism. As such, the locations of the boundaries – institutionally, socially and geographically – are increasingly difficult to pin down. Boundaries both thicken (in that the policed zone of exclusion goes beyond the official boundary line and spreads into the interior) and migrate – inward to bodies and locales and outward, pre-emptively, to other nation-states – thus making more precarious the lives of migrating persons (Flynn 2002; Coleman 2007; Varsanyi 2008; Ashutosh and Mountz 2011; Mountz 2011; Miller 2014).
Finally, neoliberal boundaries are characterized by discourse infused with the logic of capital. In the case of Israel’s new border regime, Palestinian crossers become consumers, Israeli regulators of mobility become service providers (Braverman 2011). In the case of the US–Mexico border region, neoliberal rhetoric similarly emphasizes the needs of consumers and producers – but at a more macro level. In this regard, the ‘securing’ of the borderlands is presented as central to the needs of capital – in terms of both investors in the region and in relation to the smooth flow of goods and people (of a privileged sort) – so as to produce an economic prosperity that will benefit all. This is the topic that the next section examines in relation to the US–Mexico borderlands in particular.

Re-ordering the US–Mexico borderlands

Since the mid-1990s, the US–Mexico borderlands have undergone a dramatic transformation in terms of the policing apparatus. To give one example, the number of US Border Patrol agents (the vast majority of whom are deployed along the US–Mexico divide) expanded from 4,287 in fiscal year (FY) 1994 to almost 21,000 in FY 2014. In FY 2012, the combined budget of US Customs and Border Protection, the parent agency of the Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE (which focuses on immigration policing in the US interior), and a biometric tracking system called US VISIT, totalled almost $18 billion (Meissner et al. 2013).

This transformation began to unfold in the context of the debate preceding the approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its coming into force on 1 January 1994. According to Robert Bach, who served as the Executive Associate Commissioner for Policy and Planning for the US Immigration and Naturalization Service in the mid- to late 1990s, the policy of the Clinton administration (which Bach helped to design) was such that it perceived the US–Mexico border region as an opportunity, a place, and an anchor.

The border is an opportunity in that its proper organization allows trans-boundary, regional integration and NAFTA to occur and allows for economic progress on both sides. The border is a place in the sense that its socio-cultural patterns are geographically unique – an important factor to consider so that federal policy works for families, workers, and employers on both sides of the international divide. And, although border policy is only one piece of a much larger strategy of immigration enforcement, the border is an anchor, primarily for the purposes of law enforcement. To realize its vision, the Clinton administration sought to build an institutional framework within and upon which the ‘market’ could flourish. As a set of institutional relationships based on the law, this market is taken to be one in which everyone can participate, and from which people on both sides of the boundary can and will benefit (Bach 1997).

The Clinton administration and many NAFTA backers assumed (or at least argued) that the simultaneous implementation of stronger immigrant enforcement measures and the development of a relatively barrier-free boundary to goods and capital would lead to greater levels of prosperity for people on both sides of the boundary. As an assistant to Alan Bersin, the Clinton administration’s ‘border czar’, explained to me in 1997 in relation to the boundary build-up in the San Diego area,

[N]o one says that the immigration initiatives [of the Clinton administration] are the unilateral answer to economic problems [that exist in Mexico and drive unauthorized immigration]. But they are one way of responding to it and managing the problems so we can have this region that flourishes. That you decrease the amount of illegal activity and bring the benefits to the people that are law-abiding – the majority of the people. People want to come and see the Padres [San Diego’s professional baseball team], they
want to come and see the Chargers [San Diego’s professional football team]. The types of joint programs that we could be doing are numerous, but we need a little bit more certainty.

(Cobian 1997, personal communication)

It is through the creation of a regime of law and order in the border region that this vision will supposedly be realized. And in a part of San Ysidro (southern San Diego) that used to be an area of heavy (unauthorized) migrant traffic and Border Patrol chases, one abutting the boundary, it seems to have come to be. Since 2001, Las Americas Premium Outlets (originally called the Shops at Las Americas) – a shopping mall that features dozens of stores such as those of Banana Republic, Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and Nike, and whose southern perimeter of its parking lot is the steel boundary wall – has been open to well-resourced shoppers from the USA and Mexico. In October 2014, the Outlets at the Borders, another mall, opened next door (Harvey 2014). Such ‘success’ has led some to dub San Ysidro – a largely Latino area with a high concentration of poverty and where per capita annual income is less than half of that of San Diego as a whole – ‘a shopping mecca’ (e.g. Mannes 2012).

Of course, the cost of buying the products in the stores of this shopping mecca, or a ticket for a Padres or Chargers game, is far beyond the means of the vast majority of people in Tijuana, a city where the average daily wage of a factory worker (in 2014) is less than $15 (Zaragoza 2014). Furthermore, it is not possible for a significant proportion of Tijuana’s residents – given their modest means and lack of participation in the formal economy (and thus possessing no proof of steady employment, among other criteria they would need to satisfy) – to gain permission to visit the USA.

The build-up of the boundary and its NAFTAization are also linked in another, more nefarious, manner. Growing liberalization of the Mexican economy has facilitated a significant exodus from Mexico’s countryside (see, for example, Warnock 1995). Numerous studies suggested that the implementation of NAFTA would only intensify this process. Research suggested that the rural exodus, combined with the resulting intensifying links between the two countries, would lead to a significant increase in migration from Mexico to the USA (Massey and Espinosa 1997; Andreas 1998) – a development of which the Clinton administration was very much aware, even though it publicly argued that NAFTA would lessen migratory pressures and thus serve as a boundary control tool (see, for example, Reno 1993).

As INS Commissioner Doris Meissner admitted during testimony to Congress in November 1993, she foresaw that NAFTA would most likely lead to an increase in unauthorized immigration from Mexico to the USA in the short and medium terms, leading her to state, ‘Responding to the likely short-to-medium-term impacts of NAFTA will require strengthening our enforcement efforts along the border, both at and between ports of entry’ (US Congress 1994: 36). In other words, the liberalization of Mexico’s economy would increase migratory pressures among those displaced in the name of economic efficiency, which, in turn, would require an increase in boundary policing. Meissner’s words proved to be prescient (see Massey et al. 2002; see also Delgado-Wise and Márquez Covarrubias 2008; Nevins 2007 and 2010).

It would be far too simple to reduce the build-up of the boundary policing apparatus to the neoliberal trade agreement (and neoliberalism more broadly) – indeed, there were myriad factors that brought about this change (see Andreas, 2009; Dunn 2009; Nevins 2010). Nonetheless, there is a significant relationship, one that demonstrates how, in some regards, ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ the boundary complement one another. At the same time, to the extent that the liberalization of the boundary has allowed for easier movement into the USA for the relatively elite in Mexico and beyond, while the simultaneous growth in restriction has made
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international mobility markedly more difficult for people on the socio-economic margins of Mexico and elsewhere, it illustrates the two-tiered system of humanity inherent in a neoliberal political-economic era (see Sparke 2006).

Thus, the alleged problem of illegal immigration, as it relates to the US–Mexico boundary, is, to a significant degree, made in the USA. By increasing the porosity of the US–Mexico boundary through trade liberalization, the state must strengthen this boundary in other ways. This seeming paradox is consistent with the observation that globalization does not necessarily lead to a decline in nationalism. In fact, globalization can actually serve to enhance the differences between citizens and so-called aliens (Manzo 1996). In this way, rising boundary-related illegality (such as unauthorized immigration) is an integral part of the NAFTAization of the US–Mexico border region.

This dialectical process dovetails with the ‘gatekeeper’ state, the task of which is to provide extraterritorial opportunities for national territory-based capital (thus intensifying the destabilizing process of globalization, meaning here the increasing, trans-boundary flow of people, goods and capital) while, somewhat paradoxically, providing security against the perceived social costs unleashed by globalization – especially (unwanted) immigration. This task of security provision becomes all the more necessary in the face of the effects of a neoliberal-fuelled form of globalization which intensifies competition between localities, weakens social safety nets, and generally increases socio-economic instability (see Peck and Tickell 1994; Nevins and Peluso 2008).

Yet, rather than fighting the national-based sources of socio-economic instability (largely corporate and financial interests) whose very interests the state disproportionately represents, the neoliberalized state casts its gaze beyond the nation’s socio-territorial boundaries, focusing on the alien as a principal source of social problems. The alien takes the form of the criminal, the poor, and the foreigner who are often one and the same.

From the perspective of US officials, the growth of illegal or criminal activity is one of the most significant costs of an increasingly interconnected world, requiring the state to respond with efforts to create order. And a key source of the disorder is the unauthorized immigrant, the transgressor of the law of the boundary and, thus, a criminal, one who is inextricably tied to a socio-geographical zone of violence. It is violent in the sense that the migrant’s very ‘criminal’ status requires the power of the state to arrest and expel him. And it is violent in that the unsanctioned migrant – at least the ones who enter US territory without authorization (as opposed to those who enter with authorization but overstay their visas) – must pass through an increasingly militarized and foreboding landscape, one they share not only with US authorities but also with smugglers of contraband, such as illicit drugs, who those authorities are trying to apprehend. One result is a growing number of migrant deaths in the US–Mexico borderlands (see Nevins 2008 and 2010) and beyond.

**Conclusion: whiteness of a different colour**

On 6 February 2014 hundreds of unauthorized migrants, largely from sub-Saharan Africa, tried to storm the land barrier between Morocco and Ceuta, only to be repelled by Spanish authorities. Later that same day, a large group of migrants tried to enter Ceuta by sea, by swimming around the artificial breakwater that separates the Mediterranean waters of Morocco from those of Spain. Spanish authorities tried to deter them by firing rubber bullets in their vicinity. At least 15 of the migrants ended up drowning (Kassam 2014a).

In a report issued in September 2014, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that upwards of 3,072 migrants had already died that year throughout the Mediterranean in trying to reach European territory (IOM/OIM 2014). The organization...
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conservatively estimated that 4,077 migrants worldwide had lost their lives during that same period in trying to traverse the space between places of insecurity and those of relative privilege. Taking a longer view, the IOM estimated at least 40,000 migrant deaths across the globe since 2000, the majority of them in the Mediterranean (ibid.). While the IOM report is silent on the matter of race and class – as are the officials from the countries and entities working hard to repel the migrants – it should be hardly surprising that those dying are almost exclusively people of colour and low-income (ibid.).

It is not that travel towards Europe from without is inherently a problem from the perspective of the European Union and its member-states. It is the mobility of those deemed as the wrong kind of people – given their socio-economic status and from where they come – that is deemed problematic – and threatening. Thus, in the case of Melilla’s Club Campo de Golf, it is a territory in need of policing, one to be secured from unauthorized persons from ‘outside’. As one writer wryly commented, ‘No room in paradise. We need the space for golf courses’ (Jones 2014).

Such logic helps explain why the Club Campo de Golf received official assistance in the form of a subsidy of €1.1 million from the European Regional Development Fund (an agency of the European Union) in the 2000s. A commissioner of the EU explained why, in justifying the denial of a petition calling into question the subsidy, by noting the golf club’s objective was to ‘increase tourism, create jobs and promote sport and sporting values’ (quoted in Kassam 2014b). In other words, tourists – the well-heeled and the disproportionately white – are to be welcomed, while persons trying to enter Spanish territory from Morocco via the golf course receive the antithesis of a welcome. Indeed, in Melilla on that day of 22 October 2014 referred to in the opening of this chapter, a number of Spanish police officers beat at least one of the migrants with their batons to the point where the man appeared to be unconscious (Kassam 2014b).

A central principle of international boundary walls, physical and metaphorical, is what the great human and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois once called ‘the problem of the color line’ – the global racial divide that he powerfully decried in his epic 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007) as ‘the problem of the Twentieth Century’. Du Bois was writing at a time when most of the modern techniques used to classify peoples and regulate territorial boundaries were born – the 1880s to 1910s, according to McKeown (2008) – as part of an effort to exclude those hailing from Asia from migrating to white-settler nations (e.g. Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the USA).

Today that line is one that still divides those who have the benefit of racial and national privilege from those who possess the obverse to which that privilege is inextricably tied: the disadvantage of the global majority. That disadvantage translates into less access and control over the planet’s resources, less political power on the world stage, and restricted mobility between countries. It concerns whiteness and blackness in ways that a strict focus on pigmentation and other physical markers does not allow. This helps explain why, almost two decades after writing of the colour line, Du Bois (1975: 16) characterized whiteness as first and foremost about power, not mere phenotype, or ‘the ownership of the earth forever and ever. Amen’.

Those who travel precariously in a world of profound inequality, who are compelled to risk their lives in order to reach spaces of relative social and biophysical security, are the ‘owned’. Their mobility across territorial boundaries – especially those dividing the rich and poor, the white and non-white, ‘owners’ and the dispossessed – is highly limited. Indeed, it is often violently repulsed. By contrast, the ‘owners’ are members of the global minority, i.e. those who benefit from ‘whiteness’ in Du Bois’s terms; they can generally traverse the world’s space without serious obstacle or threat, and at the moment of their choosing.

If neoliberalism is, among other things, a regime characterized by the liberalization and de-regulation of national economies and increasing ‘flows’ of capital and commodities between...
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them, it is also marked by intensifying regulation of immigration and boundary controls. Thus, while the neoliberal era has seen a marked increase in trans-boundary mobility by the relatively affluent, it has also seen a simultaneous hardening of territorial boundaries for those migrating bodies deemed less than desirable by receiving countries. As David Delaney (2007) observes, territories both reflect and produce the social orders to which they are tied. In this regard, the growing filter-like aspect of national territorial boundaries – one that increasingly regulates, among others, the non-white due to marked growth in state policing capacity – is inextricably tied to the neoliberal era.

Notes

2 Bach (1997) referred to this policy as the ‘Meissner doctrine’ – named after then INS Commissioner Doris Meissner and her late husband Charles Meissner (who died in 1996), the former head of international commerce at the Department of Commerce.

References