

## Symbolic violence in border crossing – a bodily geopolitics

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**Abstract:** This paper asks how to understand the relationship between symbolism and violence. The issue is tentatively accounted for by proposing two analytically distinguishable ways in which violence relates to symbolism: ‘symbolic domination’ and ‘symbolic violence’. The paper discusses the first in relation to border crossing as a common practice among travelers world wide. It then moves on to looking at how symbolic violence may operate as a more covert but nevertheless influential part of the geopolitical world ordering. By way of concluding the paper briefly discusses the ramifications of these forms of symbolic power when the geopolitical exception is becoming the norm.

*Keywords:* geopolitics, symbolic violence, body, borders, resistance

### War and the changing forms of violence

Karl von Clausewitz (1832/2004) wrote famously that war is the continuation of politics by other means. By this formulation he wanted to stress that war is an extension of states’ foreign policy, *not* an anomaly in human behavior. The practical science of *geopolitics* adopted this Clausewitzian view to make sense of the world order that it approached as unfolding from major states’ ability to wage war in what was essentially a global system. Indeed, as Halford Mackinder (1904) wrote in his famous piece *The geographical pivot of history*:

*“Every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe, and the weak elements in the political*

*and economic organism of the world will be shattered in consequence.”*

Indeed, a great majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wars can be characterized as military violations of an established geopolitical order. Modern military conflicts were typically set in motion by strategic or economic goals of the great powers, or the perceived mismatch between ethnic homelands and nation-state territories. Wars used to be territorial and their battlegrounds could be placed on the map (Strachan 1991).

However, literature on “new (forms of) war” has argued for some years now that this modernist understanding of war is becoming increasingly defunct, even obsolete. Not only are we faced with *de-territorialized forms of war* such as the “war on terror”, but wars also are increasingly difficult to distinguish from

organized crime or large-scale violations of human rights (Kaldor 2006). Moreover, contemporary wars are increasingly waged also in the realm of symbolism – by means of knowledge production, categorization and rhetoric (Paasi 1998; Andersen 2006; Häkli 2008).

Even armed conflicts that look traditional on the surface, such as the Gulf Wars of 1991 and 2003, were symbolically mediated from outset to outcome. In both wars significant maneuvers were carried out in the spaces of the international media and the internet, starting from the launch of their catchy nicknames ‘Operation Desert-Storm’ and ‘Enduring Freedom’. At stake in these battles were the justification of the military action, and the convenient characterization of the warring parties, crystallizing in slogans such as ‘Northern Alliance’ and ‘the Axis of Evil’, as well as euphemistic expressions like ‘soft targets’ and ‘collateral damage’ (meaning civilian casualties) (Coleman 2003; Tumber & Palmer 2004).

So much is evident from the extensive literature on the changing forms of violent conflicts and their symbolic mediation. What I’m asking in this paper is how we should understand the relationship between symbolism and violence more generally. I tentatively account for the issue by proposing two analytically distinguishable ways in which violence relates to symbolism: the first is *symbolic domination* and second is *symbolic violence*. I begin with discussing the first in relation to border crossing as a very common practice among travelers world wide (Salter 2006; Paasi 2013). I then move on to looking at how symbolic violence may

operate as a more covert but nevertheless influential part of geopolitical world ordering. By way of concluding I briefly discuss the ramifications these forms of symbolic power have when the geopolitical exception is becoming the norm.

## The bodily geopolitics of border crossing

Symbolic domination occurs when one actor has the capacity to impose upon another actor categories of identity that the latter deems inappropriate or incorrect. Such domination is based on a power asymmetry, whereby one speaker has a dominant position that usually derives from institutional delegation (Bourdieu 1989). Symbolic domination is, then, a matter of communication: There are those who speak, and those who are spoken to. A key aspect here is, however, that symbolic domination may be *resisted* because it can be recognized as misrepresentation of personal or collective identity.

How, then, is symbolic domination related to geopolitical conflicts? The answer seems obvious when we consider the symbolic domination practiced by the very military institutions involved in the business of war (e.g. Dalby 2003; Andersen 2006). However, symbolic domination can not be confined to the military realm (Paasi 1999; 2009; Häkli & Paasi 2003). Rather it has spilled over to people’s daily life throughout the world. This has become evident especially in the ‘war on terror’ after 9/11, and the securitization of everyday life that this war has brought about (e.g. Dodds

2007; Sidaway 2008). An example familiar to vast numbers of people is related to traveling and border crossing.

In Giorgio Agamben's (1998) terms, the war on terrorism has resulted in policies and institutional practices that reflect the 'logic of emergency'. Among such practices are procedures aimed at passenger *risk profiling* that David Lyon (2003) calls 'social sorting'. Social sorting refers to the selective classification of people on national, ethnic, racial, or religious grounds for purposes of determining how likely it is that they engage in terrorist or other unwanted activities.

Contemporary practices of social sorting are aided by sophisticated technologies. For example the US Homeland Security Office of Biometric Identity Management (formerly the US VISIT Program) is an organization responsible for supplying technologies for collecting, storing and analyzing biometric data so as to "accurately identify people [...] and determine whether those people pose a risk to the United States" (OBIM 2015). As part of its functioning it can access data containing information about travellers' behaviour, financial situation, health, and previous destinations so as to perform a risk calculus on the basis of pre-determined risk factors (Amoore 2006). Passengers are then categorized as trustworthy, questionable or dangerous (Morgan & Pritchard 2005).

To the preferred customers of international airports, business people and other 'low-risk' groups, social sorting hardly manifests itself. But those who fail to qualify as legitimate travelers – for example passengers who appear to be Arab or Muslim, or are known political activists – may face unwanted

consequences such as delayed border crossing, denied access to flight, or even deportation (Häkli 2007). A case in point is John Dear, a dissident peace activist and Jesuit priest, who describes a disturbing experience of social sorting in the following way.

*"I got to the Southwest Airlines gate at the San Jose airport, on my way to Los Angeles, but as soon as the attendant saw my boarding pass, he shouted, 'You can't be here. You have to be searched!' Everyone's jaws dropped, and all the passengers backed away from me". The flight was delayed while Dear was taken aside and minutely searched, with more than 100 passengers looking on nervously (Lindorff 2002).*

This is how symbolic domination related to the 'war on terror' spills over and turns into geopolitics on the scale of a person's body. The situation is an encounter between an institution and a person isolated for the purposes of examination, which effectively confines the person's political maneuvering space to the scale of her or his body (Salter 2006). However, when symbolic domination related to border crossing is recognized by those who are subject to it, the domination can be resisted at least in non-aggressive ways.

This possibility to resistance is well captured in an autobiographical narrative by the performance artist Rozalinda Borcila. In much of her art she has explored the reflexive interplay between body, (subjective) identity and (objective) identification in border crossing. This is how she recollects two incidents, the

latter of which she entered much more resourceful and prepared than the former:

*“1994. I am at the US-Canadian border, attempting to travel with only a Romanian passport and no visa. I have been in the US for a year, and am acutely aware of being visibly marked as other. My body betrays itself almost immediately: I was asked to give evidence of my identity with a passport and was quickly denied passage.*

*A few years later, I have rehearsed the American body, its costume, accent, license. In order to pass through, I must pass for. It becomes necessary to be re-marked, to court disappearance, invisibility – and to strategically consider crossing recognition thresholds. The border agent assumes I am American, and asks only for a driver’s license. The test is complete in this moment of strategic mis-recognition.” (Borcila 2002, 149)*

As this case aptly shows, ‘war on terror’ has extended into various realms of people’s daily life, but when recognized as symbolic domination its invasiveness can be resisted, thus making it at least to some degree vulnerable to the mundane politics of everyday life. This, however, is not the case with *symbolic violence* that I now turn to.

## The geopolitics of symbolic violence

According to Pierre Bourdieu symbolic violence is “the violence that is exercised upon a social agent with her or his complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 272). Key here is the *misrecognition* of dominance. Symbolic violence operates through the imposition of categories of

thought and perception upon dominated social agents who, by adopting these as part of their conception of self, come to take the social order to be just. Consequently, they fail to recognize being dominated and instead take their position to be “right”.

So how, then, is symbolic violence related to ‘war on terror’? What I have argued above is that physical violence is a major cause for symbolic domination because it creates and sustains power differentials between individuals and groups (cf. Mansbach 2003). I have also sought to highlight that, when recognized, symbolic domination can be resisted, even though the tactics of this resistance may vary from overt opposition to subtle conformism, or ‘ruse’ as Michel de Certeau (1984) would have it. In other words, while resistance can be almost hopelessly difficult, domination always opens a space for politics.

However, as Bourdieu (1989) posits, when symbolic domination is mis-recognized it turns into *symbolic violence*. Certainly, symbolic domination is harmful in its own right, but major consequences of the ‘war on terror’ also come in the form of symbolic violence. This is so precisely because, when mis-recognised, domination is naturalized and the concomitant categories of identity became part of the world order taken for granted (Kallio & Häkli 2010). To the extent that these categories create and reproduce hierarchical or dismissive labels, their naturalization may congeal stereotypical attitudes towards specific groups of people.

When thinking of the ‘war on terror’, categorical and stigmatizing understandings of the Islamic world are a case in point. The identities it has proposed have taken hold of people’s conception of self among

large sections of Muslim and non-Muslim populations (Richmond 2003; Falah *et al.* 2006). In consequence, what originated as a geopolitical conflict is now often misrepresented as an internal problem of those who are being dominated. A false opposition between Muslim and non-Muslim identities is then mis-recognized and its geopolitics veiled as something like ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington 1993).

But this is not all. The naturalized orders emanating from the ‘war on terror’ reach the scale of body, too. For example when ‘social sorting’ produces categories of identity that are internalized by those who are being sorted, it turns into symbolic violence on individual scale (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). War then takes the form of officially fabricated categories that convey defamation upon subjects who partake in social sorting but misrecognize its domination.

## Conclusion

In the aftermath of 9/11 we have all been turned into potential suspects with our identities put to doubt. The institutional authority to inflict symbolic violence in the name of a heightened sense of security is gradually turning exception into a norm: we can all be stopped in the street, be interrogated on our identities, and ultimately have them invaded by ones that fit in with the narratives rooted in the ‘global civil war’. In this sense it might make sense to paraphrase Clausewitz’s famous dictum by stating that symbolic violence is the continuation of war by other means.

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