

## Reflections: Extreme Geographies

### Extreme and extremist geographies: commentary on the revanchist impulse and its consequences for everyday bordering

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Political xenophobia needs to be explained politically. At the same time, while political xenophobia is not a necessary consequence of neoliberalism, the idea of what counts as 'political' needs to be expanded. I suggest that one fruitful, non-reductionist strategy for understanding the consequences of identity bordering consists in exploring links between securitization and the politicization of identity and national belonging. Inspired by the ideas of Henk van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy, I approach the extreme geographies of identity politics from an ethical and philosophical perspective, arguing that a powerful revanchist and self-referential narrative of authenticity and autonomy is influencing both everyday bordering practices and the way security is discursively framed.

Keywords: bordering, identity politics, political xenophobia, national identity, nationalism, anti-liberalism

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Recent political events have not only seen an upswing in extremism but also extreme polarisation in the search for explanations for this upswing. Brexit and 'Trumpism' can be explained by neoliberal economics, the inequalities of global 'free' trade, the worldwide backlash against politics of diversity and perceived threats to identity. In reality, all of these processes are closely intertwined and thus inseparable; emphasis on one or the other factor is ultimately reductionist and likely a result of individual theoretical or political commitments. To add to this complexity, it is not clear that many populists are actually true believers in extreme political ideas. Donald Trump, for example, is clearly more opportunist than ideologue, willing to use extremist views to the extent that they provide popular support.

What is clear, however, is that extremist political ideas of national identity have deep roots and cannot be explained away in terms of underlying systemic or structural logics. To paraphrase Gellner's (1992) famous question: if we live in a post-modern world, why are political (and religious) extremisms so prevalent? As Fassin and Windels (2016) argue, political xenophobia needs to be explained politically. In contrary to Bessner and Sparke (2017), simply evoking what Collier (2012) terms the "Leviathan of Neoliberalism" will clearly not do the job. At the same time, while political xenophobia is not a necessary consequence of neoliberalism, the idea of what counts as 'political' needs to be expanded. As Fassin and Windels (2016, 3) argue, political xenophobia needs to be unpacked where it operates as a political discourse and practice: "this, in the end, is what might be learned from the European tale of two crises." Thus, while there is perhaps no clear-cut explanation for the resurgence of extremism, I suggest that one fruitful, non-reductionist strategy for understanding its consequences

consists in exploring links between securitization and the politicization of identity and national belonging. Inspired by the ideas of Henk van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy, I approach the extreme geographies of identity politics from an ethical and philosophical perspective, arguing that a powerful revanchist and self-referential narrative of authenticity and autonomy is influencing both everyday bordering practices and the way security is discursively framed.

Revanchism as defined here specifically refers to recovering lost national and identity status by suggesting a triumph of realism (and natural laws guiding human nature) over liberal idealism. In accordance with the resurgence of revanchist identity politics, for example in Hungary, we see a new conservative appreciation of, and attempt to objectivize, nationalism, supposedly rediscovering the strength of an idea *that was always true*. In this vein, Mitchell (2017) suggests that the new appreciation of nationalism is a reaction to left-wing emphasis of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism and rebukes of national pride and religious faith. This belief has its security-oriented counterpart as well. Hanson (2016), a conservative American observer of foreign policy, sees with Trump and the resurgence of national pride a reaffirmation of the laws of human nature and the centrality of national (i.e. US-American) will and overwhelming national power as main elements of world security order.

Junco (2017) has defined nationalism as a social imaginary based on a form of collective narcissism. And indeed, revanchism promotes a narcissistic self-referentiality – the notion that certain group specific ways of being or seeing the world are inherently correct but have been unjustly suppressed or falsified and thus require more forceful representation. Moreover, cultural nationalism, coupled with politics of new sovereigntism that reifies national interests and unilateralism (see Spiro 2000) presents itself, and gleans much of its popularity, as a counterweight to globalism and that alienation of national culture. Put in more pointed terms, we appear to be witnessing the resurgence of a nation-state centred identity politics that not only repudiates liberalism but frames cosmopolitanism, almost in Hegelian terms, as antithetical to ‘true’ freedom (Axelsen 2013).

Particularly in national conservative circles, internationalism and globalization are seen as threats to cultural diversity, drivers of a global monoculture that is wiping out diversity rather than increasing it (see Deneen 2009). This view of the world (and diversity) is founded on a neo-Herderian and highly distorted ideal of the world as composed of countless cultural monocultures and clearly bounded, and often incompatible, cultural spaces. For example, both European and national identity are understood as organic and primordial rather than constructed. Identity is destiny rather than choice. In addition, much national conservative sentiment closely associates Christian faith with cultural concepts of Europe. Historical experience, including the emergence and spread of Christendom, but also the common experience of the Enlightenment define what is, what is not, and what can never be Europe.

National identity and patriotism are not by definition negative sentiments. However, nationalism becomes a problem when, exacerbated by socio-economic stress and geopolitical instability, it results in obscurantism, identity bordering and an aggravated accentuation of perceived difference between people, cultures and states. Revanchism, therefore, is anything but benign and, at heart, revanchist identity politics are anti-democratic and authoritarian. To quote O’Meara (2013, 168), a follower of identity ideas who does not cloak his opinions in mainstream conservatism, by the “democratic levelling of liberalism” that “suppresses very healthy expressions of authority and superiority” and that robs national societies of the “the collective liberty of a people of nation to pursue its destiny as it took cultural, historical and biological form rather than merely economical.”

Political xenophobia needs to be understood in political terms and within this context the concept of ontological security (Rumelili 2015) is particularly salient as it emphasizes aspects of national identity that are prone to radicalization as well as equates bordering processes to securitization. The revanchist link between identity bordering and ontological security involves an amplified insistence on the ethics of the particular – “a metaphysical struggle for the meaning of space and locality” (Drenthen 2010, 323). Nationalist populism has achieved a degree of commonsense status through threat scenarios of terrorism, increasing social burdens, and islamophobia as well as a general dislike of the European Union. In terms of extreme geographies, it engenders and justifies practices of everyday border-making that transform individuals and groups into ‘security subjects’ merely on the base of personal traits. Securitization is the process by which specific issues, phenomena and/or groups are framed in terms of security (see Waever 1995, Balzacq 2005). However, states and state-

like institutions have no monopoly here; one of the most salient and potentially problematic aspects of securitization is the framing of threat in ways that emphasize national and cultural uniqueness in everyday terms (Larsen et al. 2009) and through the appropriation of 'popular geopolitics' that emphasise cultural clashes and outright religious wars (Williams & Boyce 2013; Shim 2016).

The impacts of identity bordering on ontological security pose the EU as well as most national societies with concrete dilemmas where collective values, liberal ideas and ethics are put to severe tests that could have considerable domestic social and political repercussions. The revanchist impulse resonates with the illiberal populism that has repudiated many of the basic premises of European Union, particularly more cosmopolitan ideas of shared European citizenship and cultural tolerance. Playing on a politics of national alienation, illiberalism seeks to change the rules by which questions of migration, citizenship, and ultimately mobility are discussed and dealt with politically. Everyday bordering as anti-migrant securitization, and the populist contagion it supports, casts an ominous shadow over intercultural relations as well as social dialogue (Kallis 2013; Yuval-Davis et al. 2016). The case of Hungary is an excellent example of this practice. In legitimizing border closures and with a dismissive approach to Europe's refugee crisis, the present Hungarian government under Viktor Orbán has stylized itself as a guardian of Europe's historical legacy and Christian culture (e.g. Taynor 2015; *The Guardian* 2016). Orbán's government has warned constantly of the dangers of 'unnatural migration' and the emergence of parallel (Islamic) societies that will threaten Europe's welfare, security and identity (e.g. Kegl 2016). This discourse is supported by constant negative Hungarian media coverage of Europe's refugee crisis and conspiracy theories that suggest an 'externally' driven exploitation of Europe's open societies.

The political expedient of social classification reduces the wealth of entanglements, social situations, identities that characterize real life to highly schematic and misleading forms of political and social bordering. Sen (2007, 45) warns that the doctrine of singular identities, such as that promulgated in the Hungarian case, is a crude classification instrument that is also "grossly confrontational in form and implication." The idea that choiceless identity forges an individual and/or national destiny lurks behind identity bordering. Similarly, Taylor (1991) argues that great political and social harm resides in the unreflective confusion of authenticity of manner (self-identity) and matter (e.g. the definition of social goals). The securitization of migrants and migration threatens to poison multicultural conviviality, for example in Europe's major metropolitan centres, by legitimising a biopolitics of selection that could severely curtail the freedom of movement of 'suspicious' groups and individuals.

Given this situation, how might we go about de-securitizing our bordering practices? Revanchism is unreasonable because it ultimately requires violence of one sort or another rather than dialogue to fix belief. Furthermore, romanticized notions of true cultures as 'pure' have scant basis in historical experience; in terms of most urban contexts around the globe, multiculturalism has been the dominant social reality for decades if not centuries. Ultimately, revanchism's inability to deliver and long term benefits in terms of social development render it unsustainable in the long run. However, in the shorter term we would need a process of desecuritization that involves a conscious decoupling of identity and security related issues in political discourse (Rumelili 2015). As Sen (2007) urges, political debate must resist singular and civilizational understandings of identity and their reductionist treatment of complex social realities. Desecuritization would be an important first step in opening up notions of community, belonging and citizenship to include ever larger cross-section of humanity.

Van Houtum and Bueno Lacey (2015) have argued that societies (and the EU) should accept the fact that, similarly to tourism, business and trade, mobility and migration are part of everyday life. A major problem remains the lack of EU-wide migration and asylum policies based on grounded factual knowledge of migration and a resulting emphasis on racialized stereotypes, threat narratives and politics of exclusion. Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy also suggest the EU might develop a more decisive geopolitical vision in order to address the causes of migration and help stabilize embattled states from which increasing numbers of affected people are attempting to escape. Given the threat these developments pose to national societies and to international relations more generally, the EU, despite its contradictions and crises, is perhaps one of the few potential actors that might provide scenarios of desecuritization based on a holistic understanding of human security and a truly cosmopolitan understanding of political community.

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