ELSEVIER

Political Geography 24 (2005) 165–184

Political Geography

www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Constructing security on the U.S.–Mexico border

Jason Ackleson

Department of Government, New Mexico State University, P.O. Box 30001 - MSC 3BN, Las Cruces, NM 88003, United States

Abstract

This article examines U.S.–Mexico border security in both the pre- and post-September 11th, 2001 periods. It argues for and then employs a constructivist approach to better understand the socio-political context in which the United States has formulated policy solutions for certain defined threats or risks—namely undocumented migration, drugs, and terrorism. It explains how these phenomena are treated as security issues on the border, a process that involves the rhetoric and symbolism of political projects concerned with identity, power, and order. This analysis is accomplished through an evaluation of both policy changes and public discourse. The article contends that, in response to a number of transnational threats, a gradual merging of societal and state security has occurred in both periods. The piece concludes with some thoughts on the place of this approach within border studies and the future of U.S.–Mexico border security.

Keywords: U.S.–Mexico border; Security; Discourse; Migration; Terrorism

Introduction

Security issues are complicating and accelerating the transformation of many international borders. We often think of security as an issue or arena of power, of the military and police forces, of defense hardware and troop deployments, of

E-mail address: jackleso@nmsu.edu

0962-6298/$ - see front matter © 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2004.09.017

intelligence and conflict. And indeed it is. International Relations (IR) and other disciplines have traditionally focused on these aspects of security which have an important role to play on the U.S.–Mexico border as well as in other contentious settings around the world.[1]

This article, however, operates from a different, yet complementary, approach. It sets out to probe the ways in which security is "constructed" in this dynamic and important region that is both barrier and bridge to many transnational flows, including trade, migrants, and narcotics. "Constructed" is not taken to mean only how *physical* security—such as agents, fortifications, surveillance and the like are deployed—but also the nature of the *social* environment in which actors, like United States government elites and federal agencies, formulate solutions and then take security actions against perceived "threats" or "risks." The underlying perspective that informs this research accepts that even these material structures and policy manifestations have and are given meaning only by the social context through which they are interpreted. This context provides agents, such as states, with certain understandings—and thus constitution—of their interests vis-à-vis different security threats. This approach is meant to supplement, not replace, competing approaches to the examination of border security (such as rationalist, institutional, or mainstream neoliberal/neorealist perspectives) by shedding light on dimensions of the problem sometimes overlooked or de-emphasized by such work.

To get at how the process of constituting interests works, an analysis of public discourse can be useful to help unlock the social context of border security. Discourse is understood as the defining "scripts" of international politics: public documents, speeches, legislation, and other symbolic resources. More specifically, this article is interested in the genesis of security "problems" on the frontier and the knowledges or solutions which the dominant U.S. policy discourse on border control has authorized to solve them. Accordingly, a brief theoretical context for the three concepts under use here—migration, security, and constructivism—opens the discussion.

The second component of the article then evaluates how undocumented migrants, or so-called "illegal aliens," are constructed as one of these security problems. The argument is made that the process is connected to danger, identity, power, and public order. An empirical look at official state discourse on migration and border control helps build these connections within the general politics of security on the U.S.–Mexico border. Again, such an analysis is meant to complement mainstream studies of security. A similar approach is then applied in the third section of the essay to border security in the post-September 11th era, with its somewhat new focus on weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. In both periods, the article maintains

[1] Confusion often results in the varied and sometimes inconsistent usage of the terms border, boundary, and frontier in Political Geography and International Relations and other disciplines. A border, in its deployment here, refers to a legal (constructed) political line of difference—commonly an interstate boundary (hence it is used interchangeably here with boundary). A frontier or borderland, alternatively, is seen as a zonal space that encompasses the limits and junctions of various political, social, and cultural communities.