Massimiliano Demata

Discourses of Borders and the Nation in the USA

A Discourse-Historical Analysis

London and New York, Routledge, 2023, pp. 86

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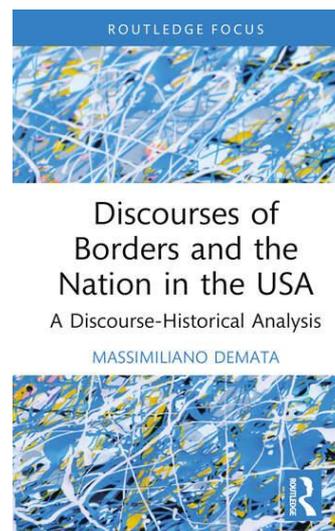
Keywords: *migrations, border control, identity politics, discourse-historical approach*

We live in a globalised era of increased mobility, flows and cross-cultural exchanges, with social networks instantaneously connecting millions of people in transnational communities, thus licensing the idea of a closer world where concepts related to national sovereignty, custom barriers and regulations are relics of the past (McLuhan 1964). However, borders still play a prominent role and are far from obsolete in today's liquid society (Bauman 2012).

In the last few decades, the number of border walls and fences built worldwide to prevent unauthorised crossings has increased dramatically (Dumbrava 2022), particularly after the migratory crisis of 2015/16, fuelled by the anti-immigration rhetoric of rising right-wing populist forces (Lorenzetti 2020; Wodak 2015). Moreover, despite raising debate about the compatibility of border walls with EU laws and fundamental human rights, even the EU/Schengen area, which is currently surrounded or crisscrossed by nineteen separation fences stretching over 2,000 kilometres, is affected by the phenomenon (Ruiz Benedicto and Brunet 2018).

Massimiliano Demata's monograph *Discourse of Borders and the Nation in the USA* investigates border rhetoric in the US political context, starting from what can be considered the most emblematic example of border wall in contemporary society, namely the so-called 'Trump's wall.' The fenced barrier at the southern US-Mexico border, whose building started in 1990 under the Presidency of George H. W. Bush, with additional barriers erected under Bill Clinton's Administration, has been strongly associated with Donald J. Trump since the former US President made it the hallmark of his 2016 presidential campaign.

In the last few years, Trump, with his anti-immigration rhetoric and vitriolic Twitter style, has been the focus of scholarly research from a variety of perspectives as the prototypical right-wing populist leader (Lorenzetti 2020; Ross and Rivers 2020). However, Demata's work integrates very well-known elements of Trump's 'us' *versus* 'them' rhetoric with a novel analytical perspective encompassing Trump's role as a successful tycoon. Moreover, adopting the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak 2015) theoretical-methodological perspective and thus relying on the triangulation between different research methods and principles and the analysis of a diversified dataset, including tweets, electoral speeches, and press statements, the volume also examines the progressive rhetoric of borders.

The book is articulated in three chapters. In Chapter 1, the author introduces his theoretical framework while also presenting the role of borders as negotiated in the discourse of the Nation. On the one hand, borders legitimate the very existence of nations by institutionalising their sovereignty in specific territories, as nations are not natural phenomena but social and political constructions represented in the minds of the nationalised subjects as sovereign and limited political units, "imagined political communities" (Anderson 1983, 5-6). On the other, they are instrumental in enacting a logic of exclusion between 'our' nation and other nations. As such, they contribute to the marginalisation and otherisation of those unwanted outside the border (Bauman 2012) and are fundamental in promoting a politics of fear and securitisation (Wodak 2015; Bauman 2012).

Chapter 2, "The Trump Wall: The Discourse and Aesthetics of Exclusion," is the book's core and presents the most remarkable insights into the discourse of the Nation. The author's thesis is that Trump deploys multiple and diversified rhetorical devices to legitimate the building and expansion of the wall. They range from the well-known discourse of fear and the exclusion of the 'illegal aliens' through the rhetorical creation of a threat to the security of the nation, a common *topos* in right-wing populist discourse (Lorenzetti 2020), to a focus on real estate discourse. Through a detailed excursus of branding discourse, Demata successfully argues that the wall in Trump's rhetoric fulfils three distinct functions. Firstly, it is designed to reduce undocumented immigration and criminality; then, it is beneficial for protecting the country's economy from a cheap workforce that might 'steal' other people's jobs and drive down wages. Finally, through the strategic recontextualisation of the aesthetics of real estate marketing discourse in politics, Trump's 'beautiful' wall comes to symbolise the privilege of being on 'the right side of the barrier,' i.e., the privilege of being American. By name-branding the wall and bestowing it with the aura of success of many of his trademark creations, Trump makes it a potent tool of national identity creation connected with social status.

Chapter 3 contrasts Trump's border rhetoric with the progressive perspective. Concentrating on the discourse of three leading politicians, namely Hillary Rodham Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden, through a diversified dataset, this shorter chapter highlights that border rhetoric and the idea of borders as protecting national security are *de facto* constitutive of American politics, regardless of political orientation and despite the more empathetic tone employed by progressive politicians. The topic of family separation related to Trump's 'zero tolerance' immigration enforcement policy introduced in 2018 offers progressive politicians, in particular Clinton and Biden, the opportunity to recontextualise family values and the Nation as a family in more humanitarian terms compatible with the Democratic view of the US as a nation of immigrants where ethnic variety is an asset.

Despite the current emphasis on an interconnected world and a borderless society, borders still play a crucial role in political discourse and nation-building across the political spectrum and national communities. At the end of the 20th century, they passed from being political-territorial delimitations in which nation-states exercise their sovereignty to tools for intercepting and regulating migratory movements, "geographical spaces where new threats appear, thus turning them into securitised spaces" (Vallet 2014, 144).

Massimiliano Demata's work amply proves this pervasiveness in the US political context, complementing other works in Critical Discourse Analysis devoted to the topic (Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013; Wodak 2015).

This short but very rich and detailed monograph is a valuable instrument for graduate and post-graduate students and scholars interested in political discourse analysis or immigration discourse. It provides a clear and in-depth overview of nation-building rhetorical strategies and the role of borders as otherisation devices in the post-truth era. The qualitative approach adopted and the diversified data sources employed are especially helpful in presenting the multifarious and interconnected aspects of the phenomenon's complexity.

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