

Governing Through Fear : Immigration, Security and the Institutionalization of Exception in the United States

الحكم من خلال الخوف: الهجرة، الأمن، وتأسيس الإستثناء في الولايات المتحدة

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Abstract

Informations about Article

Date de réception: 23/03/2026

Date d'acceptation: 29/04/2026

Key Words

state of exception

immigration policy

democratic governance

fear

This article explores how the United States has employed fear to create a permanent state of exception through immigration policies. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's work on the «state of exception» and other critical security studies, the study shows how a temporary state of emergency following September 11, 2001, has evolved into a permanent bureaucratic structure based on the rule of exception through three interlocking mechanisms : the creation of legal exceptions that circumvent constitutional law in immigration enforcement, the use of technology to implement an unprecedented scale of surveillance, and the bureaucratic practices that institutionalize the state of exception. By analyzing fear-based politics in U.S. immigration policy, this article argues that the emergency reaction to perceived threats has evolved into a vicious circle in which crisis rhetoric serves as a justification for the gradual expansion of the states powers, creating a parallel legal system in which rights are suspended and the rule of exception is established.

From the early two-thousands to the mid-twenty-twenties, the relationship between immigration policy and national security considerations has altered the landscape of American governance. The temporary emergency measures enacted following the events of September 11 have established a state of exception that has blurred the line between extraordinary powers and democratic governance. This transformation of democratic rule has not only resulted in the construction of physical barriers and detention centers, but has also led to the institutionalization of anti-immigrant feeling as an acceptable political practice of governance.

In State of Exception, political theorist Giorgio Agamben asserts, “the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency... has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones” (Agamben, 2005). Agamben's words seem prescient when examining U.S. immigration policy that

has precipitated an enormous security apparatus working beyond constitutional oversight.

This article explores the way U.S. immigration and security policies have contributed to the establishment of a permanent state of exception by means of three interconnected mechanisms: the creation of legal exceptions that circumvent constitutional law in immigration enforcement, the use of surveillance technologies that blur the lines between citizens and non-citizens, and the bureaucratic establishment of emergency measures as permanent practices. In this article we try to answer the following questions: How does a democratic society reconcile the rule of law with the systematic suspension of legal protections? What are the motives of private companies in maintaining and expanding systems of detention and surveillance? These questions guide our study, not only to understand how fear has been institutionalized, but also why the institutionalization of

fear is an existential threat to democratic governance that goes far beyond immigration policy.

Throughout its history, the United States has always pursued immigration policies that balanced inclusion with exclusion, celebrating difference but at the same time fearing the alien. But a significant change took place at the dawn of the 21st century that triggered a new attitude and perspective on immigration and diversity. After September 11, the U.S. adopted an immigration policy based on exclusion, fear, and the exceptional rule.

Forty-five days after the fall of the Twin Towers, the Bush administration rushed through Congress to pass the USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism), a law that sought to maximize American national security, particularly related to foreign terrorism. Supposedly temporary, the act was a necessary measure in extraordinary times. Yet, more than two decades later, many of its provisions are still being enforced, having been renewed repeatedly, expanded, and normalized into the everyday operations of government. As Louise Amoore points out in her analysis *Biometric Borders*, “the war on terror has afforded new opportunities to govern through risk, to make the exceptional measures appear as the prudent and responsible course of action” (Amoore, 2006).

The creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002, a federal executive department responsible for public security, marked another crucial turning point. It signaled the rearticulation of the state in relation to citizen and non-citizen populations. Immigration enforcement, a previously minor concern to the federal government, suddenly became strongly tied to national security in ways that seemed unimaginable just few years ago. ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) assumed responsibility for this novel security initiative with a budget that grew from \$3.3 billion in 2003 to over \$8 billion in 2020, becoming one of the largest law enforcement agencies in the federal government.

What is so striking about this change is that it occurred in plain sight, but went mostly unnoticed by the general public. The architecture of exception was assembled not in secret or in classified meetings but via congressional appropriations, executive directives, and court rulings that were individually logical and defensible, but cumulatively

unprecedented. In matters of Security and Immigration, Didier Bigo explains, the governmentality of “unease” functions through the very banalization of the exceptional that normalizes it as a response to manufactured fears (Bigo, 2002).

Although B. Obama had promised reform during his campaign, his administration expanded many of the immigration programs. The Secure Communities program, a data-sharing program that relies on coordination between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, was expanded to virtually every jurisdiction in the country. Deportations reached record levels—over 400,000 in 2012 alone. Such policy not only represents a major departure from American liberal values, but it also indicates how deeply entrenched the logic of securitization is in the thinking of government officials. The institutional architecture of fear trapped even the most ideologically committed of administrations to immigration reform.

Any remaining pretense that these programs had been intended to be temporary emergency measures was completely eliminated during the Trump years. The Muslim travel ban, family separations at the border, “Remain in Mexico” were all portrayed as assertions of sovereign power. Stephen Miller, Trump’s homeland security advisor, the architect of many of these policies, explicitly framed them in civilizational terms, presenting America under existential threat where no measure was too extreme.

The entrenchment of fear can be examined through legal mechanisms that authorize and support exceptionalism. The U.S. legal system, committed to a purported separation of powers and checks and balances, has shown remarkable flexibility in accommodating permanent state of emergency, particularly when the targets of these measures are not American citizens.

The doctrine of congressional and Executive plenary power over immigration, established in the late nineteenth century, conferred upon both Congress and President virtually unlimited authority in matters of immigration. Unlike citizens, non-citizens, especially migrants arrested at the border, are not protected by the same set of constitutional rights. As Hiroshi Motomura, a leading scholar of immigration and citizenship law, argues “immigration law exists in a constitutional netherworld, where the usual rules don’t apply and government power

reaches its zenith” (Motomura, 2014). This is a feature of government functioning that has been carefully maintained and cultivated, not a defect in the system.

The most subtle aspect of this transition is the way in which “the border” has been redefined. The regulatory notion of a “100-mile border zone” (which effectively grants Border Patrol agents expanded search and arrest powers) covers nearly two-thirds of the American population. Major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia, among many others, all lie within this zone. The border is now everywhere and nowhere.

Another example of emergency legislation becoming part of the permanent infrastructure is the REAL ID Act (2005), passed as part of military appropriations measures and presented as a national security legislation. This legislation significantly altered the relations between federal and state governments, forcing states to implement federal security standards for identification, creating thus new categories of people suspended in legal limbo. Writing about immigration-related government logics, Jonathan Xavier Inda states that “the result of these multiple regimes of control is a form of inclusive exclusion whereby migrants are brought within the ambit of the law only to be stripped of juridical status” (Inda, 2006).

Perhaps there is no better example of the normalization of exception than the immigration detention system. The United States operates the largest immigration detention apparatus in the world, annually imprisoning hundreds of thousands of individuals in over 200 detention facilities. These individuals are not criminals in the conventional sense; many are asylum applicants, individuals who have overstayed their visas, or those caught up in administrative legal processes. They are detained for months or even years without sufficient due process.

This system is legally justified under the pretext that detention is not a punishment, but a civil or administrative act. It enables the state to circumvent constitutional protections against cruel and unusual punishment like the right to an attorney. In a trenchant critique of crimmigration César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández contends that «the fusion of criminal and immigration law has produced a removal regime that mimics the enforcement of criminal law but none of its procedural safeguards» (García Hernández, 2013).

During COVID-19, the U.S. administration extended

these extraordinary powers. An obscure provision related to public health, Title 42, was established, it authorizes U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to deny entry to individuals who may pose a health risk. Under this authority, over 2.8 million expulsions were carried out without judicial review or protection. The use of this provision in response to a public health pandemic does not lessen the dangerous precedent it sets, any kind of crisis, manufactured or real, can now be used to suspend legal obligations.

The institutionalization of fear goes beyond legislative and regulatory provisions; it includes an enormous technological apparatus that makes constant surveillance and control possible. “We are living, as Shoshana Zuboff warns, in an age of surveillance capitalism,” but in the context of immigration, it turns into surveillance authoritarianism, where digital footprints can be used as evidence of an illegal or dangerous status» (Zuboff, 2019). Biometric data is collected and used for immigration enforcement. The government collects biometrics of millions of visitors and immigrants in the U.S. each year, including fingerprints, facial images, iris scans, and DNA samples. Big databases such as IDENT and HART receive and share this information between agencies and, in some cases, even with foreign governments.”The biometric border”, as Louise Amoore describes it, “is the portable border, carried by mobile bodies at the very same time as it is deployed to divide bodies at international boundaries, airports, railway stations, on subways or city streets” (Amoore, 2006).

The most alarming development in immigration enforcement is the use of predictive analytics. ICE’s FALCON program, for instance, is designed to use data analysis and pattern recognition to predict targets for arrest and deportation. The system produces feedback loops where previous enforcement practices based on racial and ethnic prejudice are integrated into new technologies that reproduce and intensify discrimination. In *Race After Technology*, Ruha Benjamin explains, “the use of new technologies reflects and reproduces existing inequities but is celebrated and thought to be more objective or progressive than the discriminatory practices of a prior era” (Benjamin, 2019).

What’s also alarming is the involvement of the private sector in this policy. Companies like Palantir, Amazon, and

Microsoft vie for multimillion-dollar contracts with the U.S. government, offering their products and technologies as solutions to security problems that are often intentionally manufactured. Under the guise of protection, the private sector profits off fear to keep surveillance imperatives in place, regardless of democratic values.

The reasons why emergency measures become permanent institutions can be found in processes of bureaucratization, normalization, and legitimation. Understanding these various processes is fundamental to gaining a full picture of how the governance by fear developed an institutional character.

Key to this process is the bureaucratization of extraordinary measures. Ad hoc emergency responses gradually evolve to standard procedures, training guides, and metrics. Career trajectories become available for those who specialize in extraordinary measures. Professional organizations and associations emerge; conferences are held facilitating the exchange of ideas. Max Weber recognized long ago that the logic of bureaucracy is independent of the logic of its initial impetus, but once established it endlessly strives for self-perpetuation.

Private contractors play a significant role in this process. CoreCivic and GEO Group, among others, do not merely operate detention centers, but also lobby to keep them filled. They support think tanks and researchers who publish reports in support of detention. They donate hundreds of thousands of dollars to political campaigns. They employ former government officials as executives and lobbyists. Together, these public and private entities create what detention scholar David Hernández refers to as an “immigration industrial complex” (Hernández, 2008, p. 385).

Furthermore, language is a key factor in the process of normalization. Terms such as “illegal alien,” “criminal alien,” and “border security” describe immigration in ways that establish extraordinary measures as necessary and appropriate. In his study on immigration metaphors, Otto Santa Ana describes “the recurring use of water metaphors (e.g. floods, waves, surges) produces the image of a natural calamity that necessitates an emergency response” (Santa Ana, 2002). The effects of this language are reinforced by political discourse and media repetition. The production of knowledge about immigration threats is an important mechanism of institutionalization. Endless

reports, statistics, and analyses about immigration as a problem to be addressed through security measures are produced by government agencies, think tanks, and academic institutions. Anthropologist Josiah Heyman notes, “the border patrol does not just enforce the law; it produces a particular kind of knowledge about the border that justifies its own existence and expansion” (Heyman, 2008).

In the process of manufacturing such knowledge, data is often manipulated or misrepresented. Crime statistics are selectively used to make immigrants seem criminal, even though the overwhelming evidence shows that immigrants are less likely than native-born citizens to commit crimes. Cost-benefit analyses of immigration ignore the positive economic impact of the people coming from foreign countries, focusing instead only on the negative impact. Specialists see this production of knowledge not simply as an erroneous social science but as an intentional effort to manipulate data in order to create fear and justify exceptional measures.

The immigration policy that institutionalizes fear has broader implications for democratic values and institutions. It creates an appropriate political climate where any otherwise illegal and unpopular measure could be used and implemented, even at the cost of undermining civil and human rights.

The immigration enforcement powers that presidents have wielded in this context have contributed to the growth of an imperial presidency. The notion that the president can unilaterally change immigration law, either through Obama’s DACA program or Trump’s declaration of a national emergency, demonstrates an ascending presidential power in the U.S. In this context, Peter Margulies explains that “immigration exceptionalism serves as a gateway drug for broader assertions of unilateral executive authority” (Margulies, 2015).

The erosion of privacy rights in the name of a broadly defined immigration enforcement affects people residing in the border zone. The technologies of surveillance and monitoring originally targeted at immigrants have become increasingly directed at the general population. Intelligence sharing through fusion centers, license plate readers that track movements of vehicles, facial recognition software used in public spaces -all originally deployed to apprehend “illegal immigrants” and terrorists-

have become mechanisms for keeping watch on the whole population.

Programs like 287(g) and Secure Communities, central examples of crimmigration, have blurred the boundaries between local police and immigration authorities, changing the role of police officers into that of immigration agents. Losing trust in their local police, victims and witnesses become more and more reluctant to report crimes for fear of being deported. Police departments have clearly become unsafe places for immigrants. Sociologist Monica Varsanyi has described this development as “the devolution of immigration policing ... the embedding of the exception in the routine relations between residents and the local government” (Varsanyi, 2008).

More broadly, governing through fear corrodes the concept of democracy. When Americans are constantly told they are under threat, that they have to take extraordinary measures to protect themselves, they lose their ability to think of alternative futures. In *Walled States* Wendy Brown asserts that the walls we build, both physical and legal, do not just keep others out, they confine us within the boundaries of our own fears. Democracy needs a certain amount of confidence, a belief that we will be able to work through problems together without resorting to authoritarian measures. Fear destroys that confidence (Brown, 2010).

The economic cost of the immigration enforcement is staggering. The United States is spending more than \$18 billion each year on the enforcement immigration laws, more than all other federal criminal law enforcement agencies combined. This excludes the economic cost of restricted immigration, spending by states and localities, and the loss of human capital when talented workers are not permitted to contribute to the economy. Economists have calculated that comprehensive immigration reform could add trillions of dollars to the GDP over the next few decades.

Another consequence of the U.S. immigration policy developments in recent years has been the externalization of border control. Through policies such as “Remain in Mexico”, safe third countries agreements, and the Mexico-Southern Border Program, the United States has stretched its border enforcement beyond its own geographic space. This process has created what anthropologist Wendy Vogt refers to as “zones of abandonment,” leaving migrants

trapped in a permanent state of suspension (Vogt, 2018). Instead of alleviating the suffering of humanitarian crises, these practices led to « a system of warehousing refugees in camps and urban slums”, whereby vulnerable populations are kept at a remove from Western coasts (Betts & Collier, 2017).

On the other hand, the effects of the institutionalization of fear have extended beyond American borders. The “War on Terror” and “Immigration fear” have served as an example to governments around the world, providing them with a rationale to adopt similar practices. When the oldest democracy in the world subscribes to the logic of permanent exception, no doubt it legitimizes such behavior by other countries.

American surveillance and intelligence technologies are spreading globally. Some scholars have described this new phenomenon as creating an “electronic curtain,” a digital barrier harder to penetrate than any physical wall. American companies export biometric systems, databases, and analytical tools to governments all over the world, with limited concern about their use. Privacy scholar Petra Molnar notes, refugees and migrants have become “test subjects” for new surveillance technologies that are later used elsewhere (Molnar, 2019).

In the name of security, international cooperation agreements have created new dependencies. Nations unwilling to accept their deported citizens may suffer economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure. Those willing to cooperate, on the other hand, will be rewarded with military assistance and favorable trade terms. Such practice led to “an industry of illegality”, as development scholar Ruben Andersson calls it, a system whereby countries draw economic and political benefits from managing and containing human mobility. (Andersson, 2006).

By analysing fear-based politics in U.S. immigration policy, this article has shown how the state of exception becomes normalized, and how it influences the democratic governance. It argues that the post-9/11 years represent not just a period of heightened immigration enforcement but a shift in the nature of the relationship between the American state and both American citizens and immigrants. Based on the examination of the plenary power doctrine, the REAL

ID Act, the use of technology (biometrics, predictive databases), and enforcement practices (the creation of a multi-billion-dollar enforcement system), this study has shown how the state of exception, as theorized by Agamben, has come to define U.S. governance. The state of exception has seeped into local police practices as well as international treaties, creating a parallel structure that has led to the establishment of a permanent exception as a tool of governance.

The evidence presented in this article has demonstrated that fear is embedded within three key mechanisms: the legal architecture of exception, the technological architecture of surveillance, and the bureaucratic process of normalization. The legal architecture is characterized by strategic ambiguity based on expanding the concept of “the border” to encompass two-thirds of the U.S. population, creating categories such as “arriving aliens”, making administrative detention legally acceptable, allowing enforcement agencies to circumvent constitutional protection. The technological architecture of surveillance, promoted by companies such as Palantir and CoreCivic, strengthens systems of control that have given rise to a direct interest in producing fear. The bureaucratic normalization of fear turns emergency into standard operating procedure and creates metrics that encourage arrests and deportations instead of promoting public safety. These three mechanisms complement and

reinforce each other, producing a system that cannot be easily dismantled through political or legal challenges. Fear-based governance in the U.S. has also international reverberations. The export of surveillance technology, pressure on other countries to receive their deported citizens, and the creation of “buffer zones”, as in the case of “Remain in Mexico”, have led other states to adopt American immigration enforcement policies. U.S. global influence and its purported commitment to human rights offer other states a legal cover to apply similar policies of indefinite detention, mass surveillance, and suspension of due process. Furthermore, American corporations draw huge profits from this worldwide fear-based governance by selling necessary technologies and services, creating a perverse incentive for its perpetuation and expansion. Ultimately, the institutionalization of fear in American immigration and security policy reflects a deep change in the nature of democratic governance; the rule of law has de facto been replaced by the law of exception; surveillance prevailed over security surveillance; and the democratic deliberation has given way to bureaucratized emergency. Far from being an isolated problem, what Americans are dealing with is a systemic reconfiguration of state power, a web of legal, technological, and administrative mechanisms that, when interconnected, form a self-perpetuating apparatus of control.

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ملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية

حالة الاستثناء
سياسة الهجرة
الحكم الديمقراطي
الخوف

يتناول هذا المقال كيفية توظيف الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية للخوف كأداة لإرساء قاعدة حكم مبنية على حالة الاستثناء من خلال سياسات الهجرة. استنادًا إلى نظريته جورجيو أغامبين حول "حالة الاستثناء" ودراسات أمنية نقدية أخرى، تكشف هذه الدراسة كيف تطورت حالة الطوارئ المؤقتة التي أعقبت أحداث 11 سبتمبر 2001 إلى هيكل بيروقراطي قائم على مبدأ الاستثناء من خلال ثلاث آليات مترابطة ومتداخلة: - إنشاء استثناءات قانونية تتجاوز القانون الدستوري في تطبيق قوانين الهجرة - استخدام التكنولوجيا لتنفيذ رقابة شامله غير مسبوقه - ترسيخ الممارسات البيروقراطية التي تحول الاستثناء الى نهج ثابت. من خلال تحليل السياسة الأمريكية للهجرة القائمة على الخوف، تؤكد هذه الدراسة أن التعامل مع المخاطر في الولايات المتحدة قد تطور إلى حلقة مغلقة يستخدم فيها خطاب الأزمة لتبرير التوسع التدريجي لسلطات الدولة، منتجا بذلك منظومة قانونية موازية تعلق فيها الحقوق ويرسخ فيها حكم الاستثناء.

Gouverner par la peur : Immigration, Sécurité et Institutionnalisation de l'État d'Exception aux Etats-Unis

Résumé

Cet article examine la manière dont les États-Unis ont utilisé la peur pour créer un état d'exception permanent à travers les politiques d'immigration. S'appuyant sur les travaux de Giorgio Agamben sur l'«état d'exception» et d'autres études critiques en matière de sécurité, l'étude montre comment un état d'urgence temporaire suite au 11 septembre 2001 s'est transformé en une nouvelle structure bureaucratique permanente basée sur la règle de l'exception à travers trois mécanismes interconnectés : la création d'exceptions légales qui contournent la loi constitutionnelle dans l'application des lois sur l'immigration, l'utilisation de la technologie pour mettre en œuvre une surveillance à une échelle sans précédent, et les pratiques bureaucratiques qui institutionnalisent l'état d'exception. En analysant les politiques basées sur la peur dans la politique d'immigration américaine, cet article soutient que la réaction d'urgence face aux menaces perçues a évolué en un cercle vicieux dans lequel la rhétorique de crise sert de justification à l'expansion progressive des pouvoirs de l'État, créant un système juridique parallèle dans lequel les droits sont suspendus. Et la règle de l'exception est établie.

Mots clés

état d'exception
politique d'immigration
gouvernance démocratique
peur



Competing interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests

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