

Detroit's demise and the security-first agenda

CANADA'S BORDER POLITICS

Canada is often characterized as a border nation with much of its population located within a geographic region that lies within 100 kilometres of the US border; however, in spite of our proximity to the United States, we are relative newcomers to border politics. Many of Canada's land crossings are in rural or sparsely populated regions and thus the border as a territorial limit has had little effect on the Canadian imagination until recently. However, we are quickly recognizing new realities emerging from the mandates of the US Department of Homeland Security since its formation in 2002. The steady militarization of the Mexico–US border is the most obvious manifestation of the new “security-first” mandate. San Diego-based architect Teddy Cruz suggests that the changes in the conception of the border are serving to carve up the continent by forming a “political equator” that has emerged in the last decade. Similarly, we are witnessing the steady thickening of the border on the Canadian side after a long historical period when the United States and Canada shared the world's longest undefended boundary.

WINDSOR–DETROIT HISTORY

The Windsor–Detroit region is exceptional in this border geography because it is the largest metropolitan area that straddles the 49th parallel. These twin cities occupy a unique position in North America, and the complications arising from the increasingly bifurcated, post-industrial urban fabric serve as a pretext for thinking about the geopolitics of North America as it is braced between the conflicting mandates of trade and security. These two cities are saddled with the burden of the border as their infrastructure ages and wait times increase. This, coupled with the US subprime lending crisis and the long, slow death of the American auto industry, has led to a growing sense of despondency

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not seen in the region since the late 1960s.

To suggest that Windsor is dependent on Detroit is to underestimate the relation between the two cities. Windsor became amalgamated as a city in 1930 after the completion of the Ambassador Bridge (1929) and the Detroit–Windsor tunnel (1930). Prior to this time it was a collection of border communities along the shores of the Detroit River. The city of Windsor was founded initially because of the imperial trade advantages that could be gained by locating auto production on the Canadian side in the early part of the 20th century. Hence, Windsor was primarily a manufacturing outpost—Detroit's annex in Canada. The trade infrastructure established by the 1930s still serves as the lifeline connecting these two regions. As a result, this region can be described as both binational and bipolar, heavily dependent on the fluctuations of a single industry and

hence susceptible to cycles of depression and mania.

A vision of the twin cities as a paradigm of modern postwar international relations was put forward in the urban planning schemes of the 1950s and 1960s: a proposed gondola crossing connecting the commercial centres of Windsor and Detroit serves as a poignant reminder of an earlier era and the historical connections of an urban community whose identity often overrides its respective national agendas. However, much of the modern imprint of Windsor–Detroit has been neglected or abandoned in favour of newer suburban communities that skirt the periphery of this sprawling region where the city gives way to a hybrid “rurbanism,” constantly gnawing away at the rural landscape in a long, slow bid to escape the political and economic problems that began in the 1940s.

MODERN SUBURBANIZATION

Close to 5 million people currently live in the Windsor–Detroit metropolitan region (a region that covers approximately 142 square miles). However, most of the population occupies the suburban and exurban towns and cities that form networks around the inner city, whose population has just recently dipped under 1 million. Detroit is often said to be shrinking, but as architect and urbanist Kyong Park points out, Detroit is more accurately moving, pushing outward toward its peripheries. This exurban expansion that is taking place on both sides of the border contributes to the fragmentation of the region. On the Canadian side, new suburban developments quietly mimic the American disdain for urban culture. A relatively wealthy international suburban doughnut extends from Bloomfield Hills, Michigan to LaSalle, Ontario.

At the centre of the doughnut are the two international border crossings that seem to reinforce this centrifugal **Detroit's demise, security-first agenda, page 27**

innocent Canadian citizen. Significantly, Arar remains on the US security watch list; no apology has been offered by the Bush administration, and he remains barred from any travel to the United States. The fallout from the Arar inquiry focused Canadian attention once again on very deep problems between the two countries on the management of the Canada-US security file.

These anxieties were heightened further in late December 2006 when the Canadian Supreme Court struck down the use of security certificates to hold suspects indefinitely without trial, access

to a lawyer, or constitutional protections and required the government to provide new legislation. The court gave the government one year to change the law and more legal challenges to the new legislation are anticipated. Many legal experts believe that the rights of the accused are not adequately protected. There is a growing consensus among human rights activists, legal activists, and key opinion makers in the mass media that Canadian governments have gone too far with intrusive security measures and have neglected due process and the rule of law guaranteed by the *Charter of Rights*

and Freedoms. As Ottawa continues to struggle to find the right balance between security and individual rights, the new border regime adds a whole new layer of complexity and urgency to Canada-US security relations. Finding adequate solutions to the new border regime will take the better part of the next decade as costs, delays, and diplomatic conflicts inevitably multiply and spin out of political control without the proper oversight and regulatory mechanisms in place. ❁

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movement toward the suburban periphery. The separation of this border region began as communities on both sides plotted their exit from the city, and the current border problems have been a long time coming. As a relic from an earlier industrial era, the border crossings traverse their respective inner cities, which have become legendary dead zones where one waits to cross between the two countries. The closing of the pedestrian lane of the Ambassador Bridge many years ago sealed off any casual contact between the two cities. Today, the picturesque order of the Windsor waterfront serves as a temporary viewing platform to gaze out at the spectacle of Detroit's impressive collection of glass towers and art deco skyscrapers without the supposed dangers of an encounter with inner city Detroit. But behind these waterfront facades, the urban centres have hollowed out. Traveling by car is a precondition to crossing, and this has affected the downtown regions; as a result of this cultural and geographic fragmentation, communities on both sides are less connected than at any point in the last 80 years.

SECURITY AND HISTORY

This steady suburbanization is by no means unique; however, in looking to Detroit's history we might read a series of population movements and urban planning events that laid the groundwork

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for the security-first agenda. The prioritization of security in recent years was not solely born of the events surrounding 9/11. Detroit's legacy of racial segregation coupled with its wartime role as the "arsenal of democracy" made it the first American city to self-destruct, and its decentralization and sprawl became a model for suburban development in the United States from the 1950s onward. Detroit's downfall began long before the 1967 riots. In the late 1940s and 1950s decentralized planning schemes were set in motion first by the Federal Housing Administration, which moved to block financing of new urban housing in favour of suburban planning, and then by the *National Defense and Interstate Highway Act* of 1956, which financed the construction of freeways that effectively moved affluent white urban populations out to the suburbs, as southern black immigrants moved in as Detroit's wartime economy boomed. The strategy of decentralization that took place in these years was military in essence: the United States wished to avoid centralized urban

concentrations in order to be less susceptible to foreign bombing campaigns like those carried out by the US forces that devastated the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, the legacy of a bunker mentality emerged as Detroit became increasingly decentralized.

The Cold War legacy that underwrites the development of a suburban nation has hardened into an ideology that will take generations to challenge. No change of administration, however drastic, could possibly counter the bunker mentality that began long before the Department of Homeland Security was established. The erosion of the public sphere that had been fully achieved by the 1970s has only recently been challenged by the substitution of virtual communities in the last decade; however, the kinds of sequestered spaces that are the mainstay of American life show no signs of changing anytime soon. The kind of thin or porous borders anticipated in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall now seem like utopian visions for a transnational future that never arrived. ❁