"A great and beautiful wall”. Racism and populism in Donald Trump’s discourse on immigration

This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:
This version is available http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1656075 since 2018-10-29T15:21:24Z

Published version:
DOI:10.1075/jlac.5.2.06dem

Terms of use:
Open Access
Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)
Massimiliano Demata

“A great and beautiful wall”. Donald Trump’s populist discourse on immigration

This paper focuses on Trump’s aggressive language on immigration. By analyzing a data set made of public speeches, interviews, and statements from Trump’s official website, the paper will look at how certain lexico-grammatical and intertextual choices in Trump’s representation of immigration display all the typical features of a populist agenda. Trump’s texts will be analyzed according to Wodak’s Discourse-Historical approach: Trump’s own “politics of fear” and language on immigration are evidence of the strong currency of values associated with right wing, ethno-nationalist populism, once the core ideological tenets only of certain fringe movements such as the Tea Party, but now firmly established in mainstream politics.

Keywords: Trump, immigration, racism, populism, discourse analysis.
Massimiliano Demata

“A great and beautiful wall”. Donald Trump’s populist discourse on immigration

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on Donald Trump’s language on immigration, one of the most important and most controversial topics in the successful presidential campaign of the Republican candidate. His proposed construction of “a great and beautiful wall” at the US-Mexico border, the idea of repatriating 11 million illegal Mexican immigrants, and the constant association of immigration with crime and terrorism have all been considered evidence of Trump’s overt racism and of certain populist feelings that have resonated strongly among large conservative and right-wing segments of the American electorate. During the first few weeks of his mandate, it is very clear that the newly-elected President of the United States of America intends to keep his electoral pledges on immigration, in line with his controversial populist agenda. But how has Trump’s own populism developed? Which are the ideological roots of his immigration policies, and how has he articulated his set of controversial discourse topics in his campaign?

In the analysis of Trump’s discourse, elaborated through a set of sources made of public speeches, interviews, and official statements, I will apply the methodology and the analytical categorization proposed by the Discourse-Historical Approach to answer these questions: the focus of my analysis will be on discourse, as the data source and the findings of the micro linguistic analysis will be linked to the socio-political context level, i.e. to ideologies and social macro structures. I will address those components of discourse which are most relevant in constructing ideology, that is, the “ideological structures of discourse”, which are those structures of discourse “that are specifically involved in the (re) production of power abuse” (van Dijk 2016, 73). By looking at how Trump characterizes social actors,
their actions and the argumentation sustaining his discourse, it will become clear that most of his repository of topoi are ideologically anchored in populism. Trump’s own “politics of fear” and language on immigration are evidence of the strong currency of values associated with right wing, ethno-nationalist populism, once the core ideological tenets only of certain fringe movements such as the Tea Party, but now firmly established in mainstream American politics (Wodak 2015b). More specifically, his emphasis on border control as a discourse topic and on situating the identity of the “other” in relationship with national borders can be explained in terms of recent debates on bordering identities and on the process of alienization connected to the narratives generated by the power exercised by means of borders.

2. The Discourse-Historical Approach and Populism

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), as developed by Ruth Wodak and her colleagues (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 2016; Wodak 2001, 2015a; Wodak et al, 2009) elaborated a set of analytical tools to analyse discourses and their links to the level of social structures. As a methodology based on critical discourse analysis, the DHA has been used to analyse the founding elements of contemporary forms of racism, to unmask and underline the incongruences and contradictions of racist discourse and to locate them in specific historical contexts by employing an interdisciplinary approach. The DHA has been particularly effective in assessing discursive representations of social groups, and specifically minority “outgroups”: Wodak’s “case studies” include the discourses of racism and antisemitism of European populist right-wing parties and movements (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2015a). The DHA has proved to be particularly accurate in delineating the strategies behind these discourses and the links between ideologies, discourses, and texts.
According to Reisigl and Wodak (2016, 32, emphasis in the original), the DHA has three dimensions of analysis: the identification of “the specific content or topic(s) of a specific discourse”, the investigation of “discursive strategies”, and the examination of “linguistic means (as types) and context-dependent linguistic realizations (as tokens)”.

As discourse, in Wodak’s formulation, is constituted by a set of textual practices that are context-dependent, it is necessary to account for those elements constituting context itself. At the same time, as in all formulations of CDA, in the DHA the micro level of language and the social and ideological macro structures always have dialogic relations (KhosraviNik, 2010).

According to Wodak (2001, 66-67) and Reisigl and Wodak (2016, 27-28), there are three key dimensions of analysis which account for the contextual collocations of texts: intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and field of action. The analysis of the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships among different texts, genres and discourses contribute to an understanding of the textual and discursive circulation and influence between different texts and discourses which occur in a given discourse. Fields of action, on the other hand, are areas of social reality which have specific functions within discourse, and in them specific discursive practices are embedded. Each field of action is realised through a set of distinct genres or subgenres. Wodak (2001, 68) and Reisigl and Wodak (2016, 29) identify several fields of political action (e.g. Lawmaking procedure, Formation of public attitudes, Inter-Party formation of attitudes, opinions and will, Political advertising), and each field has its own genres (e.g. typical subgenres of Political advertising include election programs, election slogans, election speech, election brochure). Different topics are addressed by texts belonging to one or more genres. In turn, a discourse about a certain topic can initially find its realization in a certain field of action and then move into another one.

A key dimension of the DHA is the identification of discursive strategies, which are a set of practices, including discursive practices, that are used in order to achieve certain aims.
Discursive strategies are “systematic ways of using language” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 44) and as such they have to be explored when undertaking the analysis of discourses and texts. Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 2016) identify five discursive strategies in their analysis of racist discourse: nomination (the linguistic identity of the persons involved), predication (the qualities and characteristics attributed to them), argumentation (the argumentative schemes used to discriminate against the excluded persons), perspectivization (the perspective from which such attributions and nominations are expressed) and intensification or mitigation (that is, of the judgements expressed on them). Central to Wodak’s analysis of argumentation is the concept of *topos*. Topoi are strategies of argumentation that are used to persuade people of the validity of some claim and are displayed in language through conditional or causal paraphrases. The analysis of *topoi* is therefore crucial in understanding the nature of the (seemingly) rational and convincing discriminatory practices at the basis of racist discourse.

The analysis of Trump’s discourse of immigration will employ some of the analytical strategies of DHA outlined here and used by Wodak (2015) herself in her work on racism and antisemitism. Indeed, not unlike the discourses of the European racist movements analysed by Wodak, Trump’s discourse on immigration is elaborated following certain discursive strategies which are quite typical of populism. The ideological basis of populism, together with racism itself, constitutes an important set of discursive elements which Trump draws from in elaborating his own picture of immigration. The “higher” level of analysis in this paper localizes Trump’s discourse on immigration in the context of populism as its main ideological and socio-political macrostructure.

The single aspect which the different studies of populism (e.g. Canovan 1981, 1984; Taggart 2000; Laclau 2005) agree on is that populism, by its own definition and in all its declinations, is a celebration of “the people”. Populist leaders, whether right-wing, centre or left-wing, always claim to speak and act on behalf of the people, and it is from the people that
Populism draws its rhetorical strength. The people are seen as a unified whole, an undifferentiated mass which, in virtue of their supposed numerosity and homogeneity, constitute the majority of the state and represent the will of the nation. The populist speaks and acts on behalf of the people, who are therefore projected as the factor conferring authority and legitimacy to the populist leader in his or her struggle against the supposed enemies of the nation.

Populism and populist leaders usually emerge in moments of crisis caused by threats, whether real or imaginary, to the existence of the “heartland” (Taggart 2000). As a matter of fact, a key populist strategy is the identification of certain groups as enemies of the nation. This strategy is used to rally against a visible enemy to attack as well as to construct an identity for the “people”, who can thus define themselves on the basis of their enemies (Taggart 2000, 93-94). Populists usually attack those social groups who they see as going against the interests and the welfare of the people. There are usually two segments of society who are singled out by populist leaders: the elites and the minority groups. These are groups who do not fit into the populist picture of a supposedly homogeneous nation: they are portrayed as going against the interests of the people and the nation and are therefore demonized. In the United States in particular, the rhetoric of anti-elitism has a long and successful history (Canovan 1984). The elite is seen as undifferentiated and shifting groups, for example industrialists, bankers, politicians and the establishment as a whole, or the highly educated, liberal-leaning oligarchy from New England, and these two, often overlapping, “groups” are seen as corrupt and distant from the real needs of “the people”. American populism, and especially right-wing populism, has also attacked those minority groups which, in virtue of their small number, make claims for special status: immigrants, feminists or the unemployed appear as privileged elites who impose their special rights on the majority. The populist rhetoric is based on the construction of oppositional roles: elites, just like
immigrants, function as the “others”, one of the poles of a “relational concept” (Wodak 2015a, 26), from which populism takes its force and legitimacy, the other pole being “the people” and the “heartland”. And the creation of dichotomies (e.g. the people vs the elites or the immigrants), as argued by Laclau (2005, 18), is a consequence of the simplification of the political space which is at the basis of populism itself.

3. Data

The analysis will be carried out by delving into a heterogeneous dataset which includes one official speech, the transcripts of two TV interviews, the first GOP debate and a video message, three statements from Trump’s official website, one Facebook post, and one of Trump’s own books. Most of these written or spoken texts have appeared between June 2015 and March 2016, that is, the period when Trump’s immigration policies gradually became the ideological core of his campaign.

The texts analysed here belong to different textual genres and “fields of action”, as they fulfil different functions within discourse. Following Wodak’s categories, Trump’s TV interviews on talk shows as well as the Facebook post belong to the field of “Formation of public attitudes, opinions and will”, his election programme and video message fulfils the field of “Political advertising”, while his book and speeches at rallies are part of the field of “Party-Internal formation of attitudes, opinions and will”. The diversity of the textual genres of the texts analysed in this essay is accounted for by the fact that they share the same discourse topic, i.e. immigration, and they do so through their dialogic qualities: a topic addressed in a single text is often quoted, summarised or referred to in one or more other texts belonging to different genres, using necessarily different generic strategies, thus establishing chains of texts spreading to different or overlapping segments of the public
through different media. This is a phenomenon that has intensified since the appearance of social media, which naturally foster the elaboration of political discourse across different media and different genres. Texts belonging to different genres establish intertextual and interdiscursive relationships, for example Facebook posts or Tweets echoing TV interviews or public statements.

**Theoretical Framework**

The analysis of Trump’s discourse on immigration will focus, in line with Reisigl and Wodak’s own analysis of racism, on those discursive strategies which realize positive and negative presentation of the “other” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 45-90), specifically nomination, predication and argumentation. Indeed, Trump’s discourse on immigration overlaps with and includes elements that distinctively belong to discursive strategies that are often associated to that of racism such as those analysed by Reisigl and Wodak.

4. **Analysis and discussion**

**Nomination and Predication of social actors**

The construction and representation of social actors in discourse is done through referential or nomination strategies (i.e., how persons are referred to linguistically), which co-occur with predicational strategies (i.e., the characteristics and qualities attributed to social actors on the basis of the evaluative attributions of positive or negative traits) (Wodak 2015a; Reisigl and Wodak 2001). When certain social actors are the object of attack from a hegemonic group, negative other-description and the negative activities attributed to them are the key ideological structures of discourse which are instrumental to the discursive representation (and marginalization) of the “other”: the outgroup is given lexical attributes and actions
which define it as outside the moral and social norms of the “majority”. Indeed, following a
typical populist strategy, Trump identifies immigrants crossing borders as the outgroup by
constantly attaching to them the labels of “criminals” and “illegal”. The association between
immigration and crime is made repeatedly by Trump, who considers Mexican immigrants to
be mainly murderers, rapists or drug traffickers. The collocation “illegal immigrants” (or,
alternately, a depersonalized “illegal immigration”) occurs almost every time Trump speaks
of immigration, for example in the GOP debate on 6 August 2015:

(1) If it weren't for me, you wouldn't even be talking about illegal immigration
(Trump 2015e).¹

or in a televised campaign ad:

(2) We will build a wall. It will be a great wall. It will do what it's supposed to do
Keep illegal immigrants out (Trump 2016a).

The predication associated with “illegal immigrants” or “illegal immigration” is of
two, often overlapping, kinds. Immigrants “come in” illegally, some of them already have a
criminal record, and some or most of them are bound to commit crimes while in the USA,
hence the necessity to keep them out, emphasized by Trump in speeches and interviews:

(3) The military is standing there holding guns and people are just walking right in
front, coming into our country… You've got these people coming, half of them
are criminals (Trump 2015b).

(4) I am extremely, extremely tough on illegal immigration. I'm extremely tough on
people coming into this country (Trump 2015g).

(5) We have to stop the inflow of illegals coming into our country (Trump 2016a).

¹ Emphasis in quotations is added by the author.
The association of immigration and crime is given substance through official data. In the section of his programme called “Immigration Reform that will Make America Great Again”, published on his official website in August 2015, Trump mentions two instances of crimes, supported by media reports and statistics:

(6) The impact [of illegal immigration from Mexico] in terms of crime has been tragic. In recent weeks, the headlines have been covered with cases of criminals who crossed our border illegally only to go on to commit horrific crimes against Americans. Most recently, an illegal immigrant from Mexico, with a long arrest record, is charged with breaking into a 64 year-old woman’s home, crushing her skull and eye sockets with a hammer, raping her, and murdering her. The Police Chief in Santa Maria says the “blood trail” leads straight to Washington. In 2011, the Government Accountability Office found that there were a shocking 3 million arrests attached to the incarcerated alien population, including tens of thousands of violent beatings, rapes and murders (Trump 2015d).

News items, real stories and statistics have an argumentative function: they provide empirical evidence of the danger posed by illegal immigrants as a whole. The inclusion of official figures coming from government offices (“a shocking 3 million arrests attached to the incarcerated alien population”) follows a key category of ideological discourse analysis called “the number game” (van Dijk 2000, 2005): official figures display objectivity, thus lending credibility to the danger Trump projects onto the immigrants.

There are two other groups of social actors who are routinely evoked by Trump in his discourse on immigrants and immigration: terrorists, specifically Muslim terrorists, and refugees, especially from Syria. These two groups are often quoted by Trump in the context of illegal immigration. An example is Trump’s interview with Fox on 18 October 2015, when
he was asked about 9/11 and what he would have done to prevent the terrorist attacks had he been president at the time. His answer immediately links terrorism to illegal immigration:

(7) Well, I would have been much different, I must tell you. Somebody said, well, it wouldn't have been any different. Well, it would have been. I am extremely, extremely tough on illegal immigration. I'm extremely tough on people coming into this country. I believe that if I were running things, I doubt those families would have - I doubt that those people would have been in the country. So there's a good chance that those people would not have been in our country (Trump 2015g).

Trump continually projects the image of existing, lax border security and advocates the necessity of being “extremely tough on illegal immigration” and “on people coming into this country”, and in doing so the image of illegal immigrants inevitably merges with that of terrorists and Syrian refugees, as was evident in his speech in Des Moines, Iowa, on 24 January 2016:

(8) They're walking. The military is standing there holding guns and people are just walking right in front, coming into our country. It is so terrible. It is so unfair. It is so incompetent. And we don’t have the best coming in. We have people that are criminals, we have people that are crooks. You can certainly have terrorists. You can certainly have Islamic terrorists. You can have anything coming across the border. We don’t do anything about it (Trump 2015b).

As categories of social actors, illegal immigrants, Syrian refugees and terrorists share the same categories of predication: they come across the border illegally to threaten American security.
The distance that Trump ascribes to immigrants through certain instances of nomination and predication is strengthened by his use of the pronoun *they*. In discussing immigration, Trump uses *they* as part of his negative representation of the enemies of America. The plural pronoun does not always identify a concrete, recognizable group of individuals, but rather undistinguished, generalized Mexicans who are attributed negative identities and actions. As declared on 16 June 2015, in the Presidential announcement speech:

(9) When Mexico sends its people, *they’re not sending their best*. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. *They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.* And some, I assume, are good people (Trump 2015c).

Interestingly, in the same passage the identity of *they* switches from a collectivised Mexico (“they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems…”) to immigrants themselves (“and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists”), thus attacking at the same time Mexico as a nation and those Mexicans who cross the border. In Trump’s formulation, *they* indicates distance from the “deontic centre” in discourse and suitably points to geographical as well as moral distance from the self, highlighting exclusion, separation and distance from self, the speaker and his/her audience. (Chilton 2004, 57-61). Indeed, *they* is connected with material processes (“bringing problems with us”, “bring drugs”, “bring crime”) and relational processes of identification (“They’re rapists”) which emphasize the vicious nature of the “stranger”, while the final disclaimer (“And some, I assume, are good people”) is so short, marginal and hedged (“I assume”) that it does little or nothing to defuse the violent rhetoric of the whole passage.
Metaphors, which can also be analysed as part of predication, assign certain values to the social actors involved. Trump often uses the “flood” metaphor, a metaphor which is frequently used in discourse against immigration (Hart 2010, 153-54) and which reinforces the sense of danger and otherness associated with immigrants as social actors:

(10) The first thing we need to do is secure our southern border – and we need to do it now. We have to stop that flood, and the best way to do that is to build a wall (Trump 2015a).

(11) We have to stop the inflow of illegals coming in to our country (Trump 2016a).

(12) Pew polling shows 83 percent of all voters - Democrats, Republicans and Independents - think immigration should be frozen or reduced. The biggest beneficiaries of allowing fewer foreign workers into our country would be minority workers, including all immigrants now living here, who are competing for jobs, benefits and community resources against record waves of foreign workers (Trump 2016b).

(13) The fact is, since then, many killings, murders, crime, drugs are pouring across the border, our money going out and the drugs coming in. (Trump 2015e)

By associating immigrants with a source domain with such sinister implications, Trump implies that their entrance into the nation is akin to a natural catastrophe, thus directing his supporters’ moral judgement. The metaphorical image of immigration as a flood or a dangerous liquid threatening to disrupt the order of a nation is well-established in right-wing discourse both in the UK and the USA (Charteris-Black 2006; Semino 2008, 95-97), and its ideological implication is to de-humanize immigrants, to deprive them of individual identity (Santa Ana 1999). These types of metaphors are recurrent in political discourse because of their ideological significance, for example when dominant groups use them as instruments of
social control, as marginal groups are portrayed as a threat to society (Fairclough 2001, 99-100).

“But we need... to build a wall, we need to keep illegals out.” Argumentation in Trump’s discourse

The discourse topic emerging most clearly from Trump’s texts addressing immigration is border control, and specifically his proposal of building a wall between the USA and Mexico to prevent illegal immigrants from coming into the USA. The idea of the wall has become a centrepiece of Trump’s 2016 presidential bid. However outrageous, impractical and, to many, even ridiculous this proposal might sound, it helped Trump achieve widespread consensus among vast sections of the electorate and eventually win the Republican nomination. With his wall proposal, Trump touched an issue which resonated strongly with the Republican electorate. An August 2015 Rasmussen poll found that 70% of likely Republican voters supported the wall, with 51% of total voters agreeing with it (Rasmussen Reports 2015). A similar picture was revealed by a poll conducted a month later: while the American public still seemed generally divided on the issue of the wall (48% opposed it, while 43% were in favour of it), the figures for each party told a different story: 73% of Republicans supported the wall, while only 31% of Democrats did (Monmouth University Poll 2015). As of March 2016, the idea of the wall remained the single most popular issue regarding immigration among Trump’s supporters, with 79% of them backing his idea of building a wall, while other issues regarding immigration had far lesser appeal (Doherty 2016).² In securing the Republican nomination in July 2016, Trump managed to reap

²To put things in perspective, in the same survey only 52% of Trump’s supporters backed the deportation of illegal immigrants, while 48% said they should be allowed to stay in the USA legally. 48% of Trump’s supporters asked for stronger law enforcement and better border security (Doherty 2016).
political profits from the general Republican mood on immigration, and the support to his
d-wall proposal is so strong that he has long appeared like a single-issue candidate.

The popularity of the wall can be accounted for by certain argumentation strategies
employed by Trump in his discourse on immigration, namely, the need for a physical barrier
to stop illegal immigrants from entering the country and, therefore, to prevent crime and
social danger. The discourse topic of the wall, separating the USA and Mexico and thus
guaranteeing the security of American citizens, is the basis for an argumentative scheme
which justifies the exclusion of “illegal immigrants”. This scheme is fulfilled by a (formal)
topos of cause, within a causal scheme whereby a cause (open borders) results into an effect
(crime, loss of jobs):

Argument: our borders are open

Conclusion rule: illegal Mexican immigrants who come to the USA steal our
jobs and commit crimes because our borders are open.

Truth claim: illegal Mexican immigrants who come to the USA steal our jobs
and commit crimes.

This (formal) topos of cause is connected to the (content-related) topos of threat or danger,
whereby if there are threats or dangers, then something should be done to counteract them.

Argument: illegal Mexican immigrants who come to the USA steal our jobs
and commit crimes

Conclusion rule: if we build a wall, illegal immigrants from Mexico will be stopped

Truth claim: illegal immigrants from Mexico will be stopped
However, the wall is presented by Trump as a necessary instrument to put an end not just to the crimes committed by illegal immigrants, but also to the potential danger coming from Islamic terrorists. Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric resonated with contemporary events linked to terrorism, such as the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, the San Bernardino shootings in early December 2015, which involved a Muslim couple, and the stream of news of atrocities committed by ISIS. The above topoi of cause and of threat of danger should therefore be expanded as such:

Argument: our borders are open

Conclusion rule: illegal Mexican immigrants and Islamic terrorists who come to the USA commit crimes because our borders are open.

Truth claim: illegal Mexican immigrants and Islamic terrorists who come to the USA commit crimes.

Argument: illegal Mexican immigrants and Islamic terrorists who come to the USA commit crimes

Conclusion rule: if we build a wall, illegal immigrants from Mexico and Islamic terrorists will be stopped

Truth claim: illegal immigrants from Mexico and Islamic terrorists will be stopped

The topoi of cause and of threat/danger emphasize the role of the wall as the key discourse topic which, together with the nominations and predications associated with “illegal
immigrants” and Islamic terrorists, lend internal coherence to Trump’s discourse on immigration and make it credible.

Trump made his proposal of building a wall in June 2015, early in the nomination season, but the clamour and controversy of his proposal obfuscated the fact that he had already proposed this idea in the past. In his 2011 book, *Time to Get Tough*, his early political manifesto, Trump had praised the 20-foot wall built on the US-Mexico border in Yuma, Arizona, a wall which, he claims, has helped reduce the number of illegal immigrants entering the country, stressing that “properly built walls work” (Trump 2011, 147). Other Republicans were no less explicit about the usefulness of building a wall as a barrier to illegal immigration. Conservative pundit Ann Coulter was herself one of the most influential advocates of restrictive measures for immigration. In *Adios America*, her 2015 best-selling book, Coulter looks at how Israel and China strengthened their borders (with Palestine and North Korea respectively) by building fences, preventing the intrusion of unwanted illegal aliens as well as potential terrorists and advocating the same policy for the US-Mexican border.\(^3\)

Trump elaborates on the function of the wall to prevent illegal immigration in several of his speeches, statements and texts appearing on social media. During his official Presidential announcement speech, on 16 June 2015, he declared:

\[\text{(14) I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively, I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall (Trump 2015c).}\]

---

\(^3\) Coulter influenced Trump in some of his key proposals about immigration, something that she would proudly boast about and that Trump himself was ready to acknowledge (Beinart 2015; Hananoki 2015).
Trump’s successful business merges with his political career, as his words point to an interdiscursive connection to a commonly shared knowledge of Trump the real estate developer. Building a wall between the USA and Mexico is necessary to keep illegal immigrants, who are accused of being the main cause of crime, out of the country.

During the first GOP debate, aired by Fox on 6 August 2015, Trump answered a specific question on the crime allegedly coming from Mexico, stressing the need to build a wall but this time introducing a new element, the presence of “a big beautiful door” regulating entrance to the USA:

(15) Q: You say that the Mexican government is sending criminals--rapists, drug dealers--across the border.

TRUMP: So, if it weren't for me, you wouldn't even be talking about illegal immigration. You wouldn't even be talking about it. This was not a subject that was on anybody's mind until I brought it up at my announcement. (…) The fact is, since then, many killings, murders, crime, drugs pouring across the border, are money going out and the drugs coming in. And I said we need to build a wall, and it has to be built quickly. And I don't mind having a big beautiful door in that wall so that people can come into this country legally. But we need, Jeb (Bush), to build a wall, we need to keep illegals out (Trump 2015e).

The same points were again given resonance when he discussed them on 22 September 2015 in an interview during CBS’s comedy programme “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert”:

(16) TRUMP: (…) We have to have a wall. We have to have a border. And in that wall we're going to have a beautiful big fat door where people can -- they come into the country, and they come -- listen to me.
COLBERT: A beautiful big fat door?
TRUMP: A beautiful door where people can come into the country, but they have to come in legally. That’s what a country is all about. (2015f)

While the wall would keep criminals out of the country, people can still come to the USA legally through “a beautiful big fat door”, which means an institutional entrance to the nation, regulated by the state.

The wall, preventing unwanted people from entering the USA, and the “beautiful big fat door”, regulating physical access to the nation, are key topics in Trump’s construction of national borders, which are conceived as shapers of identity. A border is a discriminating structure, separating “legal” from “illegal” incomers, and is a state institution which has the power to regulate access to the motherland. Trump considers borders to be the key instrument of what DeChaine (2009) calls alienization, that is, a project that makes certain individuals and groups unassimilable and excluded from the national body. Alienization is effected in narratives, verbal and non-verbal, through a bordering rhetoric, which is the convergence of nationalist, capitalist and racist thought, whereby borders are instruments of power, in that they determine racial and legal identities (DeChaine 2009, 47-52).

Trump’s wall answers another important aspect of alienization, that is, the insecurity generated by the perception of dangers, real or projected, represented as coming from outside the nation, to the point that the very existence of the nation is under threat. The lack of border integrity produces narratives of insecurity and danger associated with “aliens” who cross the border. This can be seen in Trump’s obsessive connection between illegal immigration, borders and the integrity of the nation state itself. In the section on immigration of his manifesto, “Immigration Reform That Will Make America Great Again”, Trump connects the supposedly fallen state of the USA with the current policies on immigration.
According to the three “core principles of real immigration reform”, a border coincides with a wall, and the absence of borders pre-empts the very existence of a nation:

(17) 1. **A nation without borders is not a nation.** There must be a wall across the southern border.

2. **A nation without laws is not a nation.** Laws passed in accordance with our Constitutional system of government must be enforced.

3. **A nation that does not serve its own citizens is not a nation.** Any immigration plan must improve jobs, wages and security for all Americans. (Trump 2015d)

In Trump’s construction of alienization, borders produce spaces of identity and difference: the identity of the individuals outside the border is measured against the laws of the country. In later speeches and public statements, Trump makes the same identification of borders and nation over and over again:

Look, we have a country, we have borders. We have no border right now; we don't have a country (...) We can have a great and beautiful wall. When it will be up, it will stop. We'll have our border. And guess what? Nobody comes in unless they have their papers, and they come in legally. And we stop crime, and we stop problems, and we stop drug trade which is massive. You know, we have so much drug trade, the cartels, are pouring through, just like there’s nothing, pouring through… Chicago, New York, Los Angeles… the money goes out, the drugs come in… we’re gonna stop it (Trump 2015f).

We don't have a country if we don't have borders. We will build a wall. It will be a great wall. It will do what it's supposed to do. Keep illegal immigrants out (Trump 2016a).
The assumption here is that the USA is no longer a proper nation because of the lack of a border keeping “illegal immigrants out”, with all the dangers caused by the arrival of unwanted aliens, and this is because there cannot be a country without borders, as the former is identified because of the existence of the latter.

As has been observed in the above discussion on social actors, Trump often talks about issues of security by merging representations of illegal immigrants, terrorists and Syrian refugees in the same discourse. Accordingly, the topic of the wall was continually discussed by Trump during the nomination campaign in either the context of immigration or in that of terrorism, or when he discussed both immigration and terrorism at the same time. He makes the connection between the wall, secure borders and terrorism very explicitly in his own book *Crippled America*:

(18) Walls work. The Israelis spent $2 million per kilometre to build a wall – which has been largely successful in stopping terrorists from getting into the country. (…) While obviously we don’t face the same level of terrorist threat as our closest Middle East ally, there is no question about the value of a wall in the fight against terrorism (Trump 2015a, 24).

Visual materials on social media make the connection between the wall and the threat of terrorism even more explicitly. In an update appearing on his Facebook page on 22 November 2015, Trump published an image made of two photos (see Figure 1). The update read:

13 Syrian refugees were caught trying to get into the U.S. through the Southern Border. How many made it? WE NEED THE WALL! (Trump 2015h)

“@@ Insert TrumpWall.png here”
Trump here refers to the news of 13 Syrians who arrived in the USA illegally by crossing the US-Mexico border, that is, the same gateway to the USA as the one used by illegal immigrants. With this image Trump highlights the porous nature of the southern border, which is crossed not just by Mexicans, but also by people coming from places usually associated with Islamic terrorism. The photo on top showed the wall between Israel and the Palestinian territories, while the one at the bottom was arguably taken at the USA-Mexico border and showed a fence, separating the two nations. The contrast between the two photos is between security and vulnerability, between the wall defending Israeli territories from the Palestinian ones and the weak fences between Mexico and the USA. The strength and the security displayed by the image of the Israeli wall clearly reinforced the sense of weakness associated with the US’ southern border, the assumption being that the Israeli-Palestinian wall is working well and keeps terrorists away, while there is basically no barrier between the USA and Mexico, and the USA is therefore vulnerable and open to attacks from rapists, thieves as well as terrorists coming from Mexico. By showing the photos of the two borders, Trump is appealing to certain intertextual and interdiscursive features and to the collective knowledge of a country where, as far as Middle East policy is concerned, most people side with Israel and associate Palestinians with terrorism. Thus, the Israeli wall induces Trump’s electorate to interpret the crossing of the US-Mexico border as a category of threat similar to that of terrorism, with the wall being the discourse topic shared by the two discourses, while reinforcing the issue of security in terms of both immigration and terrorism.

5. Borders, Walls and Nations
In his arguments in favour of the wall and against “illegal immigration”, Trump draws from a populist and nationalistic ethos, which is strictly connected with the existence of borders. Indeed, borders are one of the most tangible experiences of the state, because it is in borders that citizenship and the sense of belonging to a nation are most powerfully enforced. In his definition of nation as an “imagined community”, the mental image of the nation which is shared by all members of that nation, Benedict Anderson highlights the importance of borders:

The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations (Anderson 1991, 7).

However, borders are not just a political or institutional entity defining the physical limits of nations, but are also part of our national consciousness. They transcend the physical limits of the state as they are “meaning-making and meaning-carrying entities” and “both structures and symbols of a state’s security and sovereignty” (Donnan and Wilson 1999, 15, my emphasis), as they constitute a cultural construct which plays a key role in the definition of a nationally shared identity. Our national identity is a “boundary consciousness” (Billig 1995, 22), a consciousness as “nationals”, belonging to one (and only one) national entity and separated from other nations by borders.

The sense of national belonging attached to the concept of borders is always accompanied by a parallel but opposite set of discursive strategies based on the exclusion of the “other”. A nation manages processes of identity and otherness (Wodak 2014), and this is the essence of the narratives of populism, which construct opposite (and artificially constructed) roles, fulfilled by those who belong to the nation and those who are (seen as) excluded from it. Walls, of course, include and exclude, protect and separate. And borders
are the place where the sense of national identity is constructed in terms of difference from others and where differences in terms of national identity overlap with other differences, such as religion or race, and where, as a consequence, otherness is constructed (Lamont and Molnár 2002). In this sense, Trump gives visible shape to spatial and national boundaries on the basis of class and ethnic differences; in order to do that, borders are supposed to be “very, very powerful” (Trump 2015b) so that they will divide – and protect – “us” from the “other”.

Trump’s proposal of building a wall to secure the US-Mexico border was not created out of a vacuum. In attacking illegal immigrants, in associating crime with immigration, and in advocating the construction of a physical barrier to provide security and protection from outside enemies, Trump exploits certain popular understandings and experiences of citizenship, identity and national integrity that have been current for a long time in the United States. At the level of popular imagination, the US-Mexico border has long been projected as an unruly place, escaping control from the authority of the state (DeChaine 2012, 8). In this sense, Trump’s campaign on illegal immigration follows the evolution of the discourse of border militarization. For the past three decades, immigration and drug trafficking have been the main motivations behind an increase in military presence at the US-Mexico border aimed at preventing the influx of migrants. Border militarization was at the centre of a political discourse which saw the US-Mexico border in connection with immigration and the intensification of the “War on Drugs” in the early part of George HW Bush’s presidency and, after 9/11, the “War on Terror”. For this reason, borders have become a source of insecurity in the national imagery, as border rhetoric has increasingly displayed the merging of the potential dangers coming from undocumented immigrants and those coming from terrorists (Chavez 2012). In general terms, then, the alienization of the migrant is a response to the border anxieties produced by globalization and the post-9/11 climate, and it is a form of othering, a construction of narratives that describes the migrant as different or inferior. It
also provides the national community with a set of symbolic resources for naming and evaluating the “alien” in negative terms as compared to the “native” – it is, in other words, a set of hegemonic narratives, including economic and crime-related arguments, which claims to distinguish the American (majority) from the un-American (minorities) (DeChaine 2009, 48) and in so doing it claims to forge and maintain shared American civic values.

Trump’s wall is an essential element of the symbolic enactment of alienization. In Trump’s conception, the border is a regulatory element: by regulating the modality of entrance into the country, it discriminates between legal guests and illegal aliens, between those who follow the US law and those who transgress it. The border is “a rhetorical mode of enactment” (DeChaine 2002, 2), in which the meanings of “citizen” and “alien” are played out. Borders are given certain important rhetorical and regulatory powers: borders determine the nature of belonging to, or exclusion from the national political community and act as instruments for social action.

6. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the nature of Trump’s discursive strategies in the context of the contemporary immigration discourse in the USA, a discourse which is dominated by the border rhetoric of national security and which affirms certain typical populist ideas. In Trump’s populist narrative, the “illegal” in “illegal immigrant” or “illegal immigration” is a premodifier which has become a constitutive element of the identity of the migrant. Crucially, while “illegal” is a quality attached to the migrant, its conceptualization and use derive from the role played by the bordering practices and by the power wielded through them. Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric reinforces a vision of the nation and of its borders which is based on a power which is realized through the legitimization of the identity of some
subjects and the alienization or exclusion of others: in Trump’s nationalist narrative the alienized subject is marginalized and kept out of the space of the US homeland. Through his wall proposal, which is instrumental in providing social actors with certain (negative) roles, Trump exploits a prevalent narrative which views the US-Mexico border as a gateway to the nation from unwanted and threatening enemies. Trump wants to “make America great again” through immigration reform because, by demarcating borders, both geographically, physically and socially, and by excluding the “alien” element, he has drawn the rhetorical outlines of group identity, and specifically of who should be, and who should not be, American.

References


