Discourses of Borders and the Nation in the USA
A Discourse-Historical Analysis

MASSIMILIANO DEMATA
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This book introduces an innovative critical analysis of borders in contemporary political discourse, using examples from the Trump presidency and early stages of the Biden presidency to explore how borders are used as mechanisms of power to invoke different notions of national identity.

This volume considers borders as discursive constructs, reflecting on their importance in the construction and expression of national identity across different forms of modern political discourse. Employing a framework informed by Ruth Wodak’s Discourse-Historical Approach, Demata examines how analysing discourse from the Trump and Biden presidencies can reveal unique insights into how politicians use borders to recontextualise historical discourses of national identity and employ discursive strategies of inclusion and exclusion in promoting the idea of the nation. In adopting an approach which situates these discourses within their historical and socio-cultural contexts, the volume helps to further bridge the gap between different disciplines and offers a multi-faceted understanding of notions of borders and national identity in contemporary political language.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars in the fields of discourse analysis, language and power, language and politics, political science, and border studies.

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Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the assistance, advice, encouragement or teaching of many people, some of them both colleagues and friends, who have helped me at various stages and degrees of my long, slow and often frustrating writing path. I would like to thank Michelangelo Conoscenti, who is more than just a friend and a colleague and who has believed in me from day one of our friendship; Astrid Fellner and Eva Nossem at Saarland University, who welcomed me as a Visiting Professor at Saarland University in 2020 and gave me the opportunity to start working on my book; Elisabeth Vallet, with whom I have worked several times in the last three years and who made the term “interdisciplinarity” a concrete reality; Thierry Fortin, who gave me the opportunity to teach a postgraduate course on “Discourses of Borders: nations, walls, security” at Sciences Po Lyon in September–October 2021; and my students at the University of Turin and Sciences Po Lyon. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Giuseppe Balirano, Elena Di Giovanni and Marianna Zummo, without whose encouragement this book would not have been finished. I would also like to thank Harry Dixon and Elysse Preposi at Routledge: their help and patience have been crucial in having my initial book proposal accepted and in enabling me to complete this book. Finally, I would like to thank the three people who have been central to my academic and personal life. I am enormously indebted to Ruth Wodak: her writings opened, to quote William Blake, the doors of perception to the complexities and intricacies of discourse, and (unbeknown to her!) she has always been the model and lodestar for my research; last, but first really, my wife Jole and my daughter Grace have patiently coped with my frequent distractions from family life, have constantly supported me, and have unfailingly showed me that there is always love, joy and happiness in life beyond academia.
In the last, revised chapter of the second edition of his epochal *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Eric Hobsbawm reflected on the resurgence of nationalism on the basis of the new nations born out of the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the new nationalist movements—such as Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front in France—and their ethnocentric tendencies. Many such nationalist movements were openly based on xenophobia as well as, often, racism. Hobsbawm argued:

> What is the nature of this cry of distress or fury? Time and again such movements of ethnic identity seem to be reactions of weakness and fear, attempts to erect barricades to keep at bay the forces of the modern world (…) What fuels such defensive reactions, whether against real or imaginary threats, is a combination of international population movements with the ultra-rapid, fundamental and unprecedented socio-economic transformations so characteristic of the third quarter of our century.

(1992: 170–171)

One cannot fail to spot an eerie resemblance between Hobsbawm’s reflections on the racism-infused nationalism of the late twentieth century and what is happening in many nations in the first segment of the twenty-first century. While there have obviously been many changes in the world’s social and political scenario, the new populist leaders—Donald J. Trump, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán and many others—are appealing to “real or imaginary threats,” their programme being based on the need to protect the nation from “the forces of the modern world” by “erect[ing] barricades.” One wonders whether Hobsbawm was aware that the war image implied in his use of “barricade” could also be taken literally: the world of nations and the ideology of nationalism are founded on a fixed distinction between “our” nation and...
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all other nations, and this distinction has increasingly been made visible, geopolitically as well as physically, by strong, militarised borders, often in the shape of walls.

The force of attraction exercised on the electorate by populist movements, parties and leaders in many countries worldwide relies, in many respects, on the same “cry of distress and fury” that Hobsbawm identified in the early 1990s, and has prompted very similar (or even stronger) reactions of closure of, and exclusion from, the nation and its borders. With the current wave of populism and nationalism, borders have once again become the focus of politics and all the discourses related to it. This is particularly relevant when we look at contemporary populist narratives of the nation: these narratives focus on fear, risk and danger evolving around certain threats (imaginary, exaggerated or real) to the integrity of the nation and its inhabitants. A nation is represented as under threat if and when its borders are crossed by threatening “strangers” of some sort or another, in a continuation (or at least a new cycle) of the nativist tendencies which Hobsbawm perceived three decades ago.

This book addresses the role played by borders as a key discourse topic of the narratives of the nation which have emerged in the USA during and after the presidency of Donald J. Trump. More specifically, I have analysed borders in the discourse of the last two US presidents, Trump and Joe Biden, and of two key progressive politicians, Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton. This choice derives from the awareness that, in the public sphere (in the Habermasian sense of the term) in the USA and elsewhere, borders play a key role in the discourses of the nation. Analysing the discourse structures and strategies used to represent them can shed light on how a nation is conceptualised, and even visualised, by its citizens. This is particularly true in what should be considered as the most influential (and, in terms of the social order of a nation, hegemonic) discourse domain, that is politics. If notions such as the “Trump Wall,” “hard border,” “smart borders,” “porous borders” and “border security” have become so frequent both in specialised discourses (e.g. in Geopolitics and in Border Studies) and at the popular level through the media and among the electorate, this is also due to the way they are structured and recontextualised in discourse. As what US politicians say or write is inevitably prioritised in the order of discourse, they are bound to be influential in society: their statements about borders inevitably condition citizens’ perceptions of borders as well as of their own nation.

This book is based on the assumption that the function of borders is not merely institutional, but is part of a process in which the concept of the nation is continually naturalised and legitimised through discourse. Accordingly, this book attempts to fulfil the need for an interdisciplinary approach capable of accounting for the complex recontextualisations that take place