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Understanding The Politics of Code Through An Examination Of Border Crossing

By using Giles Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control” and focusing on Deleuze’s theorizations, as well as the imagined scenario of “code” he details as thought up by his friend Felix Guattari, the politics of code describes the power relationship in post modern society, where access is granted based on providing the correct data or code, that has transformed the individual into the dividual. This politics of code, as originating from Deleuze and Guattari, make us "subject" and makes others "subject” by reducing us to data or code that can be tracked. The movie “Argo” and my own experiences provide an example of this subject-making process by shedding light on the codes associated with border crossing that make us subject to border patrol. “Argo” is about a successful CIA mission to rescue six U.S. diplomats from Iran in 1979 during a hostage crisis (*Argo)*. They are able to sneak out of the country and make it through security by following the logics of “code” at the airport. While this movie is based on a true story, border crossing has become much more difficult as new technologies have been put in place. The traveling of people is now tracked in a database. Even I have also been made subject as I crossed the border into Canada on many different occasions. I was classified by the type of vehicle I was in, my company, and by my race, and these factors determined if I would be subject to more scrutiny. Even when I knew that I had nothing to hide, I still felt nervous, which indicated the power relationship between the border patrol officers and me. The readings by Poster, Bowker and Star, as well as Magnet can be connected to this logic of "code" of border crossing. In most cases, there are ways to resist the politics of code and resist being made subject such as through hacking or gaming your way through the logics of power. However, the border control operations in today’s control society make it hard to work around the logics in place. Perhaps, through fraud, or fake identities, or through other forms of illegal border crossing, one could resist abiding by the norms of border control, but there seems to be many controls in place that make one unable to resist.

The politics of code can be further explored through the use of Giles Deleuze's "Postscript on the Societies of Control." Foucault’s theorized about environments of enclosure in disciplinary societies such as the family, the school, the barracks, the factory, and the prison (Deleuze 3). All of these spaces of enclosure are limited spaces with limited freedom, and power relationships develop between those who own the space and those who reside in it. The environment legitimizes the power. For example, in the prison, prisoners must follow the rules, or codes, of the prison in order to not get in trouble when one of the guards on duty. The logic of the environment creates the norms around which to live. The prisoners know that if they act out, then based on the logic of the prison, they will be reprimanded, and this pushes them to abide by the norms.

Deleuze shifts the theoretical lense and looks at how the “societies of control” are replacing the disciplinary societies that Foucault theorized about (Deleuze 4). Foucault examines a new form of this space, the “panopticon”, where prisoners do not know when they’re being watched. In the “panopticon”, the guards can see in, but the prisoners can’t see out. This creates alienation between the prisoners and those that they are subject to. The power relationship scares the prisoners into self-policing themselves and checking themselves for abnormalities. In a society of control, individuals are continuously and limitlessly controlled by systems of domination (Deleuze 5). In this type of space, the prisoners have no freedom because they always fear that they are being watched. The “panopticon” is an adaption of the prison that is never finished being under control. This continuous form of surveillance exemplifies the control society. “Enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point” (Deleuze 4). The disciplinary society of the past was discontinuous, but the control society of today is more like a wavelength. It is always changing and has the ability to adapt.

In a disciplinary society, a person is seen as an individual, but in the control society that is no longer the case. A signature or a number is no longer important in a control society, but a code or a password is the key to access: “The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become ‘*dividuals,*’ and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘*banks*’” (Deleuze 5). Instead of seeing people as valuable, it is actually the data produced by the individuals that becomes valuable in the society of control. The idea of humans as “dividuals” suggests that people are just the sum of multiple pieces of data. The logic of the society of control is that the repetition of the behavior that appeals to the law of society, also known as the code, gains access. The code provides a sense of security, because according to the logic of the society of control, only the correct code will allow access. Technology also operates under a similar logic, but it is not determining. It just matches society with a similar coded language.

Deleuze details the scenario of “code” as thought up by his friend Felix Guattari to further explain his theorizations on the politics of code. Guattari presents the idea of “universal modulation” by imagining a city where citizens would each carry an electronic access card to cross barriers, but the cards would also be used to track each person’s position in a database (Deleuze 7). While this idea could at first be cast off as science fiction, the surveillance that he describes in his imagined city mirrors the ways that we are being made “subject” today. It is impossible to cross a national border without a passport, which is scanned into a database. Sometimes biometrics technologies are even used at the border as additional forms of security. Data from computers, credit cards, and cell phones are possibly being monitored as well. By tracking these devices, governments or corporations can collect data off of people and classify them in order to either prevent security risks or appeal to their consumers. In today’s society, it is also hard to tell when we are being surveilled, and in order to gain access we often have to make our data available to the institution. In *The Second Media Age,* Mark Poster takes a poststructuralist approach to understanding how one is made subject that connects to Deleuze’s ideas and the politics of code. By looking at Foucault’s “panopticon”, Poster suggests that databases operate as a “super panopticon” (Poster 69). Since databases work continuously and systematically, people are made subject through interpolation. They are constantly being hailed even when no one is physically there. Data is continuously taken from people as they cross borders, or browse the web, or collect welfare, which makes them subject to the institutions that use that data to gain knowledge about them and record it.

As mentioned above, the politics of code exists in our everyday lives, and it is also demonstrated in many popular films. In a recently released film called “Argo”, a kind of code is demonstrated as the CIA provided the U.S. diplomats with fake Canadian passports and fake identities, or the code, that help them make it through border control during a hostage crisis at an Iranian airport (*Argo*). They were able to gain access onto the plane, because they knew the logics of code that they would need to abide by in order to make it through. While this movie was based on a true story, border crossing has changed a lot since 1979 when the film takes place. Technologies are in place to keep this from happening, and the politics of code are a lot more complicated than they once were at the border. Growing up in Michigan, a state that borders Canada, I have seen firsthand how this is true. When I was a child and traveling with my family, you hardly needed a birth certificate to make it across the border, but today if I try to cross the border I must have a passport and be prepared to answer many questions as to why I am trying to gain access into the country. I’ve realized through my own experiences when crossing the border, as well as the readings by Magnet, Poster, and Bowker and Star, that personal identity has been reduced to data that can be used to classify, control access, increase security, gain knowledge, and maintain a continuous power relationship where we are made subject.

When crossing the border, one’s passport is scanned into a database. By providing the right data, or code, one is granted access, but this data is also used to represent that person. In Shoshana Magnet’s *When Biometrics Fail: Gender, Race and the Technology of Identity*, what Deleuze describes as the transformation from the individual into the “dividual” is referred to as “corporeal fetishism” (Magnet 4). Both theorists see how the body is now only valued as an object, thing, or inventory. The passport provides a way for identity to be read off the body. It provides the database with statistics that represent who you are, but the data from it also provides a record or when and how many times you have crossed the border. Before 9/11, the United States didn’t see the need to record passage between our country and our northern neighbor, but post 9/11, increased security at the border has been the attempt at solving our problems. Magnet describes the fears that encourage looking at the body for the data it provides: “We are told that the stakes are high and that we forgo biometrics at our own risk. Without biometrics, crime will rise unchecked and terrorists will flood across U.S. borders” (Magnet 8). National security has become a higher priority than the privacy of citizens, and many new measures are being implemented to prevent any more terrorist attacks.

The body is becoming even more of a commodity as biometric security measures are being placed at the border. One example of this “corporeal fetishism” is a NEXUS frequent-flyer program that stores iris information from their subscribers in a database so that they can cross the U.S.- Canada border without the hassle of dealing with customs agents. (Magnet 11-12). Bodies are broken down into their parts, such as irises, and that part is used to determine the value of an individual as if it was a piece of human inventory. The data is compiled from border crossings to monitor for any security risks and project the illusion of increased security. However, in the process, the body is made to be replicable and transformable, and this only codifies existing forms of discrimination.

Before biometrics was added to the border, passports were used to collect data on the border crossers as well. Passports contained digitized photos, embossed seals, watermarks, ultraviolet and fluorescent light verification features, security laminations, microprinting and holograms (Magnet 13). All of these aspects of the passport can be viewed as a different part of the code that was needed for me to gain access across the border. After 9/11, a security complex developed at the U.S.-Canada Border. Initially, false statements were made that the terrorists came into the United States through the U.S.-Canada Border, and even though these statements were false, the border between the U.S. and Canada would never be the same (Magnet 16). Before 9/11, I used to travel to Canada often with my family to go skiing, and sometimes we weren’t even asked to show identification. We definitely weren’t required to have a passport to pass into a country regarded as our friendly neighbor. The border between the United States and Canada is the longest in the world and stretches more than five thousand miles (Magnet 92). Before 9/11 this entire stretch was undefended. Canada posed no risk to us, but after 9/11 a security complex developed. The Canadians were depicted as potential terrorist threats, and biometrics helped create a more secure border: “Featured in all US- Canada border accords signed after 9/11, biometric technologies were central to the transformation of Canadians in the U.S. cultural imaginary” (Magnet 16). The logic to gain access at the border is continuously transforming to allow for greater security as well as data collection. The transformative quality of the logic and the data used to represent people at the border fits into the politics of code found in Deleuze’s society of control.

The code needed to gain access at the border is getting more complex each year. When I was a child, my family just had to tell the officer where we were going and how long we would be there. Sometimes, border patrol agents asked to see a birth certificate, the representation of self or code at the time, but this wasn’t always the case. A few years later, we were required to have passports, which provided even more data to represent our identity. In addition, today, there seems to be some biometric measures, and our data is collected in a database that gives the border control institution knowledge, which gives them power over us, and makes us subject. The border between Canada and the United States is becoming more visible as the years pass, especially since 9/11. After government officials started voicing anxiety about the ease with which Canadians could slip into the U.S. unnoticed, they started looking for ways to make the logic of code at the border more complex such as biometric technologies (Magnet 100). The U.S. once used human decision makers to grant access, but that power now resides in the machines that are collecting increasingly more data from people and inputting that knowledge into a database. At the border in today’s society of control, access is obtained by presenting the a part of yourself, a representation, a piece of data, a code.

Classification is also a part of the border crossing process. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star’s “Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences” examines how our lives are built around systems of classification and standard formats that group everything, including people, as objects (Bowker 1). In the film *Argo,* the logic of code that operates at the Iranian airport is based on the categorization of the Canadians as good and the Americans as bad. Knowing that they will be classified based on their country of origin, the CIA operative in the film creates fake Canadian passports for the group (*Argo).*  By presenting the data or code that says that they are Canadian, they are granted access onto the airplane and are able to escape from Iran. After rescuing the U.S. diplomats from Iran with the help of the Canadians in 1979, Canada was also categorized. When all of the other countries’ ambassadors turned their backs on the Americans, the Canadians were the only ones to open the doors to them (*Argo).* Thus, the Canadians were labeled and classified as our friendly, heroic neighbors.

The logics of code that are in place at the U.S.-Canada border today are a result of Canada’s categorization changing from that of a non-threat to the United States into that of a threat after 9/11. When the classification changed, the need for increased border control and more data was the result. I have crossed the U.S.-Canada border many times over the past twenty years of my life, and each time I was inspected through surveillance cameras before I reached the border and labeled a low or high security risk. Often the process of classifying whether I was a threat or not consisted of looking at my vehicle, my gender, my age, and my race. Bowker and Star define classification as: “*a spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal segmentation of the world”* anda ‘classficiation system’ as a set of boxes into which things can be put to then do some kind of work—bureaucratic or knowledge production” (Bowker 10). In order to classify someone is a high security risk, the border patrol agents use physical traits to group them.

For example, when I go through border patrol with my immediate family in my dad’s mid-sized sedan, I am usually subject to very little questioning. Based on my company and our vehicle, we are classified as a non-risk. However, while coming back into the United States from Niagara Falls with my boyfriend last winter, I was subject to even more scrutiny because I was classified as possible trouble due to my age. Since I had just turned nineteen, the legal drinking age in Canada, the border patrol officer asked if I had purchased a fake identification card while in Canada, a felony. He also demanded that we show proof of our hotel stay since he needed more data to classify us as safe to pass through and grant us access across the border. On another occasion, I traveled across the border on a bus, and I was asked to pull over and get off of the bus in order for a more extensive search to be conducted. One can assume that this was the result of this type of vehicle being classified as a higher security risk. In order to protect against pollutants, whether that be terrorists, diseases, etc., a set of rules or standards are usually in place to make sure that the logic is consistent and working to only allow access to those who should have it, those who don’t display Otherness. Bowker and Stars define a standard as any set of agreed-upon rules for the production of objects. A standard spans more than one community of practice (Bowker and Stars 13). A standard finds value in difference, and, therefore, connects well with the process of classification. A standard is what classifies an object as different and denies access.

At the border, we are made subject to the border patrol agents. To understand this better, one must explore Mark Poster’s post structuralist view of subject making. While crossing the border, one is under the influence of the border control officers. When I cross the border, I become nervous as I approach the border. Even when I know that I am not doing anything wrong, I still check myself during the entire border crossing process and become subject. This self-policing that makes one a subject is called interpolation, and it is the process by which one is constantly being hailed even when no one is physically there. I check myself and act in a way that will appeal to the border patrol in the same way that the inmates behave under continuous surveillance in the panopticon: “The panopticon shapes and molds the behavior of the criminals, producing, in a sense, a new person” (Poster 67). The institutional control behind the border control officer gives them power over me, the subject that they gather information about. I know that the border patrol officers have authority from the government, and the power from that institution to deny me access or question me excessively keeps causes this self-policing.

Databases are a form of new media that has changed the logic of code when crossing borders. Databases are continuous and last forever, so every time that someone crosses the border, information is recorded about them. In contrast to old media, such as books that can go away and provide distance between subject and object, databases interlink subject and object and eliminate distance. Credit cards and cell phones allow us to be surveilled even when no one is physically watching us. The passport for instant is another distance eliminating device, because border patrol officers know where we have been because of data even when they didn’t physically see us in each of those places. These border patrol operations give the government power over citizens: “Agencies of all kinds – military, police, governmental, corporate – continuously gather data and exchange it from one computer to another while the individuals to whom this data refers have little control over its flow or, in many cases, knowledge of its existence” (Poster 64). Everything that we do is recorded, technology is following us everywhere and collecting to data to figure out who we are as people. Databases create a body of knowledge of who people are: “Individual actions now leave trails of digitized information which are regularly accumulated in computer databases” (Poster 65). If a border patrol agent, saw that our data showed us going and coming from the country at a higher frequency than usual, we might be read as a suspicious person. The data about us is a lot more important when crossing the border than who we appear to be: “Marxists for their part have shown how databases are a new form of information as commodity” (Poster 65). When crossing the border, I have never been asked what type of person I am; instead, the data from my passport is recorded and evaluated, and they decide whether I am the kind of person who should be given access. From recording all of these border crossings, the government has a lot of data on citizens: “Databases provide contemporary governments with vast stores of accessible information about the population which facilitates the fashioning of policies that maintain stability” (Poster 92). We are subject to the government because we don’t even know how much information they have on us. Their ability to collect data from us gives them power over us.

Databases can also be viewed as a new form of discourse. In the post modern world, it is much harder to disarticulate the different themes in your life. In this new form of discourse, code communicates knowledge and truths (Poster 78). Practices, such as crossing the border, are producing knowledge. Different things that people do are being compiled and recorded as artifacts and texts. Foucault’s prison system rationality is based on a power difference that is never forgotten. The subject is always aware that someone has authority over him in the panopticon. Poster suggests that a database is a “super penopticon” (Poster 69). Where Foucault’s panopticon puts the inmates under continuous surveillance, databases put citizens under continuous surveillance by the government as well. Poster explains how the super panopticon is more unobtrusive than panopticon but surveys us more accurately (Poster 69). In the panopticon, the guards monitor the prisoners by physically watching them through a two-way mirror. However, in the super panopticon, data is being gathered from individuals, and this code is much more accurate than physical observations. Both spaces create a power relationship by never ending surveillance over their subject: “Like the prison databases work continuously, systematically and surreptitiously, accumulating information about individuals and composing it into profiles” (Poster 69). People are continuously being tracked by multiple entities, and even though those entities aren’t physically present, they still have power. “Databases are discourse, in the first instance, because they effect a constitution of the subject. They are a form of writing, of inscribing symbolic traces, that extends the basic principle of writing as difference, as making different and as distancing, differing, putting off to what must be its ultimate realization” (Poster 85). While crossing the border, one becomes apart of this discourse. From the beginning, a border crosser realizes that they are being surveilled- this makes them subject. Then, the data is collected from their body. Next, that data becomes part of a record that represents that individual. This knowledge is used by the government, but the individual is not shown how so, which makes that individual subject. Even though it is said that we have freedom, we cannot NOT be tracked, and we don’t know everything that is tracking us.

Sometimes the power relationships that are created by the politics of code do not seem right, and it is important to challenge being made subject in ways that infringe on our rights. The politics of code of border crossing infringes significantly on individual privacy, but it is hard to recognize ways in which we can resist the logic of crossing the border. The technology and precautions have been put in place at the border so that there is no way to hack, game, or resist being made subject. In the film *Argo*, the U.S. diplomats were able to hack their way through the logic of code by presenting fake identification and fraudulent tickets, but these methods of resistance would not be possible today. Since we live in a control society, it is hard to see beyond the perspective that we are unable to resist the power of the institution. So many safe guards have been put in place to stop someone from getting through the border without going through this process, that it is hard to imagine a way around them. Some far-fetched ideas can be hypothesized such as fake identification, fraud, and illegal border crossing such as not at a designated location, but I don’t know how applicable these forms of resistance would actually be.

Resistance is important, because there are many discriminatory classifications systems involved in the politic of code. Bowker and Stars believe that systems will adapt over time due to changes that will come naturally in our society:

Reality is ‘that which resists,’ according to Latour’s (1987) Pragmatist-inspired definition. The resistances that designers and users encounter will change the ubiquitous networks of classifications and standards. Although convergence may appear at times to create an inescapable cycle of feedback and verification, the very multiplicity of people, things and processes involved mean that they are never locked in for all time (Bowker and Star 49).

The biometric technologies, classification, and questioning at the border take a lot of time, and many individual would support resisting by removing the red tape that makes it so difficult for us to cross. Changing policy would be the only way to cut down on the red tape, but that is very diffcult because: “Whether we wish to uninvent any particular aspect of complex information infrastructure is properly a political and public issue. Because it has rarely been cast in that light, tyrannies of various sorts flourish” (Bowker and Star 49-50). In my own experience, it can often take at least a half hour to cross the bridge from Detroit, Michigan into Canada. Systems can become so complex that no one person and no organization can predict or administer good policy (Bowker 50). Often it is important to resist when time is lost for unnecessary measures. Changing policy would be one of the only ways to eliminate this consequence of the logic, and that probably won’t happen for a long time.

Another way to resist becoming subject at the border would be to illegally cross the border at an unauthorized location that it is not monitored or patrolled. Data would not be taken from you, because you would avoid the process of having your passport swiped or your irises scanned. This would free you from becoming a part of the discourse that the database is creating. Eventually, cell phone records, credit card records, or other forms of surveillance could expose your illegal crossing, and resistance might not be worth this risk. Most individual would probably rather be made subject as a border crosser than be made subject as an inmate in a prison, which could be the result of an illegal crossing. Unfortunately, there are not many ways to avoid being surveilled, which is why resistance is so hard to accomplish. Our privacy hardly exists anymore in the society of control that we live in: “Without such privacy, resistance to the state is impossible because privacy is a sort of small cloud within which critical reason may safely function, the space of independent thought, distant from the influence of the phenomenal, perceptual world of the senses” (Poster 65). Due to our lack of privacy and the complexity of the logic of code at the border, we are unable to resist being made subject to the institution that the border patrol officer represents.

Another form of resistance possible would be to gain access to the government’s database. We would no longer become unknowing subjects, and we would have just as much information as the government. Their power over us would not be as strong if we had access too. Poster consider access for all in *The Second Media Age*: “To counter this stabilizing effect of databases, Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, suggests that a new emancipatory politics would consist in giving everyone access to databases” (Poster 92).By democratizing information, each individual would have access to the same information as the government. However, by giving this information to everyone, it would make it harder for the government to maintain high national security. Security has been deemed more important than privacy, and that is why it is very hard to think of plausible ways to resist. While individuals do not necessarily want to be broken down into their parts and be viewed as data in order to gain access, we choose to believe what the government says- that this is necessary to ensure security- anyway. I am willing to go through the process of border crossing and abide by the norms of the system in order to get access, because I know that the logic of code of this system could prevent the access across the border of someone without the right code, someone dangerous.

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