

The Biopolitics of Security: Oil, Empire, and the Sports Utility Vehicle

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In the wake of 9/11 the Bush administration has called upon established foreign policy discourses to cement the idea of a nation at war.¹ Given the amorphous and often virtual nature of the “war on terror,” in which the adversary is by definition largely unseen, the association of other resistant elements with terrorism has become a mechanism for materializing the threat. Notorious in this regard was the Bush administration’s linking of internal and external threats by aligning individual drug use at home with support for terrorism abroad. In itself, this is not a new argument, with alleged links to terrorism having been featured in previous episodes of the country’s “war on drugs.”² However, the Bush administration went one step further by making a causal connection between individual behavior and international danger. In 2002, the Office for National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) launched a campaign of hard-hitting advertisements in which the social choices of hedonistic youngsters were said to directly enrich and enable terrorists threatening the United States.³

Others at Home and Abroad Post-9/11

This argument, which was controversial, sought to discipline domestic behavior by linking it to external danger. One ironic response to the campaign, first made by columnist Arianna Huffington, was to argue that if funding terrorism was the concern, then “soccer moms” driving sports utility vehicles (SUVs) were more easily linked to the problem through the increased revenues for Middle East oil producers their reliance on an uneconomical family vehicle generated. Huffington reported that two Hollywood producers had written spoof scripts for advertisements that parodied the ONDCP campaign. Linking individual consumer choice with the international threat of the moment, one of these scripts declared the SUVs parked in families’ driveways to be “the biggest weapons of mass destruction.”⁴

Huffington’s column generated considerable debate, and a new lobby group—the Detroit Project—was launched so the anti-SUV advertisements

could be produced and broadcast as part of a campaign to link improved fuel efficiency with national security. Although most television stations refused to air the commercials (demonstrating a corporate fear of controversy), they garnered much attention, and came to highlight the cultural clash between SUV manufacturers and users and those concerned about the vehicles' communal effects.⁵

This controversy raged in the months leading up to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and was part of a larger discourse about the relationship between oil and security. While the ONDCP campaign targeted the casual narcotic user, the Detroit Project advertisements in effect saw the United States as an addict whose oil habit could be satisfied only by an act of international crime. Both arguments sought to individualize responsibility by positing a tight causal connection between personal choice and political effect, thereby following in a long line of issues whose social and political context have been subsumed by the politics of individualization. While the Detroit Project advertisements simplified issues in a manner akin to the ONDCP campaign, in the context of the relationship between oil and security, they did raise difficult issues with respect to the relationship between the domestic and the foreign.

While individual SUV owner-drivers cannot be said to directly endorse terrorism simply as a result of automotive choice, it is the case that the SUV has come to underpin U.S. dependence on imported oil. This dependence in turn underpins the U.S. strategic interest in global oil supply, especially in the Middle East, where the American military presence has generated such animus. As a result, the SUV symbolizes the need for the U.S. to maintain its global military reach. Given the dangers this global military presence provokes, it might be possible to say the SUV is one of America's greatest national security threats. This article explores the validity of those connections as part of a critical examination and retheorization of the relationship between oil and security. Its aim is to conceptualize the relationship between individual choices and geopolitical effects, yet to do so without adopting the moral leveling of crude arguments that demonize certain individual behaviors in the correlation of drugs, oil, and terror.

Central to this rethinking of the relationship between oil and security is an appreciation of the role law has played in making the SUV possible, and the way different laws have combined to produce a series of cultural, social, and political effects that stretch beyond America's borders. U.S. environmental legislation in the early 1970s—especially the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Energy Policy Conservation Act of 1975, which established fuel economy standards—permitted the differential treatment of cars and light trucks, which

the automakers exploited to the detriment of both efficiency and the environment. The rise of the SUV has also been made possible by building codes, zoning regulations, and legislation such as the Interstate Highways and Defense Act of 1956, all of which have materialized urban America's reliance on private transport. Supported further by tax rebates and trade tariffs, the SUV has come to embody a form of radically individualistic citizenship that is being underwritten by new developments in jurisprudence.⁶ However, the impact of domestic law reaches beyond domestic society. Contrary to the new citizenship's ethos of autonomy and disconnection, the SUV has played a role in creating a number of international legal effects, most notably the United States' rejection of the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the illegal invasion of Iraq.

The conceptual starting point for the required rethinking of the relationship between oil and security is that the interconnections between what appear as individual consumer preferences for certain vehicles and their geopolitical effects should be regarded as part of a complex called "automobility." In John Urry's assessment, "automobility can be conceptualized as a self-organizing autopoietic, non-linear system that spreads worldwide, and includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs."⁷ As a complex system, automobility has profoundly affected the social and geographical structure of daily life. In the environment it has spawned, the territorialities of home, leisure, and work have been "unbundled" such that urbanism has been "splintered."⁸

While automobility is recognized as a worldwide system, notwithstanding the occasional references to oil rich states, petroleum supplies, and import dependence, the focus of the literature is principally domestic, with relatively little attention to the global security context.⁹ This essay argues that with the unbundling of domestic territorialities in the context of new global networks, we need to appreciate the way (especially though not exclusively in the United States) the "unbounded" consumption of automobility produces an "unbordered" sense of the state in which security interests extend well beyond the national homeland.

At the same time, this deterritorialization of the space of automobility and its security effects does not mean we exist above and beyond territory. To the contrary, the globalization of automobility and its security implications results in the creation of new borderlands with uneven consequences. These borderlands are conventionally understood as distant, wild places of insecurity where foreign intervention will be necessary to ensure domestic interests are secured. They include zones of exploration and the spaces traversed by

pipelines, both of which involve the further marginalization of impoverished indigenous communities. The fate of these people and places is subsumed by the privilege accorded a resource (oil) that is central to the American way of life, the security of which is regarded as a fundamental strategic issue.¹⁰

However, if we understand borderlands as spatially disparate contact zones where practices intersect, actors and issues meld into one another, and conflicts potentially arise, then the translocal borderlands of automobility encompass networks that connect cultures of individual consumption with practices of global security. They do so through multiple sites of materialization and territorialization at “home” and “abroad.” As a consequence, this argument intends not only to supplement the automobility literature’s focus on the “inside,” but also to overcome the way arguments about resource conflicts emphasize the “outside.” This essay thus aims to bring the question of security into the heart of the concern with automobility to demonstrate how these consumer practices contribute to the production of national identity.

The first step in this argument is to reconceptualize the relationship between foreign policy, security, and identity so we can appreciate what is at stake in linking internal behaviors with external threats at this juncture in American politics. This allows us to set the grounds for a spatial understanding that goes beyond the “domestic” versus the “foreign.” The second step is to consider how the domain of the cultural, social, and political can be conceptualized so that the complexity of the interconnections can be appreciated. Central to this is an understanding of the way “domestic” law, regulation, and policy work to create the geopolitics of identity in the new borderlands of automobility. This is illustrated in this essay’s third and fourth sections, which tell the story of U.S. oil consumption, automobility, and regulation. Regulation refers to more than governmental policy; it encompasses the question of the production of desire. An account of the SUV’s rise to popularity as family transport in the United States thus demonstrates how questions of geopolitics and identity are linked to a cultural politics of desire that exists beyond the institutionalized sites of the state. The SUV is the icon through which the relationship of security to automobility can be best understood, precisely because the SUV constitutes a cultural site that transgresses the inside and outside of the nation and—through the conceptualizations of security it both embodies and invokes—because the SUV folds the foreign back into the domestic, thereby rendering each problematic.

Together these elements will demonstrate that the predominant representation of oil as simply an external, material cause of insecurity is insufficient for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of contemporary geo-



Figure 1.
Photograph by Amy Alkon,
advicegoddess.com.

politics. However, while this article was prompted by and written in the context of the U.S.–led invasion of Iraq and its aftermath, the argument is not seeking to explain the causes of and reasons for that invasion (fig. 1).¹¹ Instead, it seeks to articulate an understanding of the conditions of possibility for the specific decisions that led to that invasion as a particular moment of U.S. (and allied) global strategy. The effect of this U.S.–led security strategy is to “reborder” the state in a multitude of cultural and political sites as a way of containing the social forces that have splintered both conventional locales and frames of reference.

Foreign Policy, Security, and Identity: From Geopolitics to Biopolitics

As an imagined community, the state can be seen as the effect of formalized practices and ritualized acts that operate in its name or in the service of its ideals. This understanding, which is enabled by shifting our theoretical commitments from a belief in pre-given subjects to a concern with the problematic of subjectivity, renders foreign policy as a boundary-producing political performance in which the spatial domains of inside/outside, self/other, and domestic/foreign are constituted through the writing of threats as externalized dangers.

The narratives of primary and stable identities that continue to govern much of the social sciences obscure such an understanding. In international relations these concepts of identity limit analysis to a concern with the domestic influences on foreign policy; this perspective allows for a consideration of the influence of the internal forces on state identity, but it assumes that the external is a fixed reality that presents itself to the pre-given state and its agents. In contrast, by assuming that the identity of the state is performatively constituted, we can argue that there are no foundations of state identity that exist prior to the problematic of identity/difference that situates the state within the framework of inside/outside and self/other. Identity is constituted in relation to difference, and difference is constituted in relation to identity, which means that the “state,” the “international system,” and the “dangers” to each are coeval in their construction.

Over time, of course, ambiguity is disciplined, contingency is fixed, and dominant meanings are established. In the history of U.S. foreign policy—regardless of the radically different contexts in which it has operated—the formalized practices and ritualized acts of security discourse have worked to produce a conception of the United States in which freedom, liberty, law, democracy, individualism, faith, order, prosperity, and civilization are claimed to exist because of the constant struggle with and often violent suppression of opponents said to embody tyranny, oppression, anarchy, totalitarianism, collectivism, atheism, and barbarism.

This record demonstrates that the boundary-producing political performance of foreign policy does more than inscribe a geopolitical marker on a map. This construction of social space also involves an axiological dimension in which the delineation of an inside from an outside gives rise to a moral hierarchy that renders the domestic superior and the foreign inferior. Foreign policy thus incorporates an ethical power of segregation in its performance of identity/difference. While this produces a geography of “foreign” (even “evil”) others in conventional terms, it also requires a disciplining of “domestic” elements on the inside that challenge this state identity. This is achieved through exclusionary practices in which resistant elements to a secure identity on the “inside” are linked through a discourse of “danger” with threats identified and located on the “outside.” Though global in scope, these effects are national in their legitimation.¹²

The ONDCP drugs and terror campaign was an overt example of this sort of exclusionary practice. However, the boundary-producing political performances of foreign policy operate within a global context wherein relations of sovereignty are changing. Although Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have

overplayed the transition from modern sovereignty to imperial sovereignty in *Empire*, there is little doubt that new relations of power and identity are present. According to Hardt and Negri, in our current condition,

Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow.¹³

As shall be argued here, the sense of fading national colors is being resisted by the reassertion of national identity boundaries through foreign policy's writing of danger in a range of cultural sites. Nonetheless, this takes place within the context of flow, flexibility, and reterritorialization summarized by Hardt and Negri. Moreover, these transformations are part and parcel of change in the relations of production. As Hardt and Negri declare: "In the postmodernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends ever more toward what we will call biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another."¹⁴ While the implied periodization of the term *postmodernization* renders it problematic, the notion of biopolitics, with its connecting and penetrative networks across and through all domains of life, opens up new possibilities for conceptualizing the complex relationships that embrace oil, security, U.S. policy, and the SUV. In Todd Gitlin's words, "the SUV is the place where foreign policy meets the road."¹⁵ It is also the place where the road affects foreign policy. Biopolitics is a key concept in understanding how those meetings take place.

Michel Foucault argues that biopolitics arrives with the historical transformation in waging war from the defense of the sovereign to securing the existence of a population. In Foucault's argument, this historical shift means that decisions to fight are made in terms of collective survival, and killing is justified by the necessity of preserving life.¹⁶ It is this centering of the life of the population rather than the safety of the sovereign or the security of territory that is the hallmark of biopolitical power that distinguishes it from sovereign power. Giorgio Agamben has extended the notion through the concept of the administration of life and argues that the defense of life often takes place in a zone of indistinction between violence and the law such that sovereignty can be violated in the name of life.¹⁷ Indeed, the biopolitical privileging of life has provided the rationale for some of the worst cases of mass death, with geno-

cide deemed “understandable” as one group’s life is violently secured through the demise of another group.¹⁸

However, the role of biopolitical power in the administration of life is equally obvious and ubiquitous in domains other than the extreme cases of violence or war. The difference between the sovereign and the biopolitical can be understood in terms of the contrast between Foucault’s notion of “disciplinary society” and Gilles Deleuze’s conception of “the society of control,” a distinction that plays an important role in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*. According to Hardt and Negri, in the disciplinary society, “social command is constructed through a diffuse network of *dispositifs* or apparatuses that produce and regulate customs, habits, and productive practices.” In the society of control, “mechanisms of command become ever more democratic, ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens.” This means that the society of control is “characterized by an intensification and generalization of the normalizing apparatuses of disciplinarity that internally animate our common and daily practices, but in contrast to discipline, this control extends well outside the structured sites of social institutions through flexible and fluctuating networks.”¹⁹

Network is, therefore, the prevailing metaphor for social organization in the era of biopolitical power, and it is a conception that permits us to understand how the effects of our actions, choices, and life are propagated beyond the boundaries of our time-space location.²⁰ It is also a conception that allows us to appreciate how war has come to have a special prominence in producing the political order of liberal societies. Networks, through their extensive connectivity, function in terms of their strategic interactions. This means that “social relations become suffused with considerations of power, calculation, security and threat.”²¹ As a result, “global biopolitics operates as a strategic game in which the principle of war is assimilated into the very weft and warp of the socio-economic and cultural networks of biopolitical relations.”²²

This theoretical concern with biopolitical relations of power in the context of networked societies is consistent with an analytical shift to the problematic of subjectivity as central to understanding the relationship between foreign policy and identity. That is because both are concerned with “a shift from a preoccupation with physical and isolated entities, whose relations are described largely in terms of interactive exchange, to beings-in-relation, whose structures [are] decisively influenced by patterns of connectivity.”²³ At the same time, while conceptual approaches are moving away from understandings premised on the existence of physical and isolated entities, the social and political structures that are produced by network patterns of connectivity often appear

to be physical and isolated. As Lieven de Caeter argues, we don't live in networks; we live in capsules. Capsules are enclaves and envelopes that function as nodes, hubs, and termini in the various networks and contain a multitude of spaces and scales. These enclaves can include states, gated communities, or vehicles—with the latter two manifesting the “SUV model of citizenship” Mitchell has provocatively described.²⁴ Nonetheless, though capsules like these appear physical and isolated, there is “no network without capsules. The more networking, the more capsules. Ergo: the degree of capsularisation is directly proportional to the growth of networks.”²⁵ The result is that biopolitical relations of power produce new borderlands that transgress conventional understandings of inside/outside and isolated/connected.

Together these shifts pose a major theoretical challenge to much of the social sciences, which have adhered ontologically to a distinction between the ideal and the material, which privileges economic renderings of complex social assemblages.²⁶ As we shall see, overcoming this challenge does not mean denying the importance of materialism but, rather, moving beyond a simplistic consideration of objects by reconceptualizing materialism so it is understood as interwoven with cultural, social, and political networks. This means that “paying increased attention to the material actually requires a more expansive engagement with the immaterial.”²⁷

The Biopolitics of Oil and Security

Most accounts of the role of oil in U.S. foreign policy embody economic assumptions, rendering oil in materialistic terms as an independent variable that causes states to behave in particular ways. In the prelude to the invasion of Iraq, even the best commentaries represented oil as the real reason motivating the buildup to war.²⁸ In this vein, a Greenpeace campaign pictured the (oil) “drums of war” and invited people to read about “what’s really behind the war on Iraq.”²⁹ In addition to manifesting specific epistemological assumptions, these views regard resource geopolitics as primarily a question of supply. Before we move beyond this frame of reference to explore what goes unexplained by this focus, we need to appreciate the infrastructure of oil resource geopolitics that makes this issue so important.

Securing global oil supply has been a tenet of U.S. foreign policy in the post–World War II era. Because the Middle East holds two-thirds of the known reserves of oil, this objective has made the region an unavoidable concern for successive U.S. administrations. As the largest and most economical supplier of Middle East oil, Saudi Arabia has had a central place in this strategic calcu-

lation, with the United States agreeing to defend (internally and externally) the Saudi regime in return for privileged access to Saudi oil. Over the years, this arrangement has cost the United States tens of billions of dollars in military assistance.³⁰ This strategy was formalized in the Carter Doctrine of 1980, which, in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, declared that any power that threatened to control the Persian Gulf area would be directly challenging fundamental U.S. national security interests and would be seen as engaged in an assault on the United States.

None of this would be required if the United States did not rely on imported oil for its economic well-being. However, in 2002 oil imports fueled 53 percent of domestic consumption, and the U.S. Department of Energy forecasts only increasing dependence. By 2025 oil import dependence is expected to rise to around 70 percent of domestic needs.³¹ These percentages mean the United States will consume an additional 8.7 million barrels of oil per day by 2025. Given that total petroleum imports in 2002 were 11.4 million barrels per day, this is a very substantial increase.

In recent years, faced with increased dependence on oil imports, the United States has been seeking to diversify supply, with some paradoxical outcomes. As the country was preparing to go to war with Iraq, the United States was importing half of all Iraqi exports (which satisfied only 8 percent of America's needs), even though this indirectly funded the regime of Saddam Hussein.³² Some Republicans in Congress used this data to smear then-Democratic Senate leader Tom Daschle as an Iraqi sympathizer, arguing that the Democrat's failure to support drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR)—as the Bush administration desired—forced America into unholy commercial alliances.³³ While this argument conveniently overlooked the fact that ANWR's 3 billion barrels of reserves could supply only six months of the United States' total oil needs, it demonstrated how the internalization of a cleavage between business and environmental interests is sustained through an association with external threat.³⁴

The drive for diversification is now a major security objective. In the 2001 review of energy policy chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney, the final chapter of the report focused exclusively on strengthening global alliances with energy producers to achieve that goal.³⁵ However, the geopolitical pursuit of energy security is likely to produce new and intensive forms of insecurity for those in the new resource zones, which are located in some of the most strategically unstable global locations.³⁶ As a result, the United States has been providing increased military support to governments in the Caspian Basin area, Latin

America, and sub-Saharan Africa—regardless of their ideological complexion or human rights record.³⁷

A geopolitical understanding of these developments is necessary but not sufficient. That is because the geopolitical frame focuses solely on the supply of oil without interrogating the demand for this resource that makes it so valuable. Possession of a material resource is meaningless unless social networks value that resource. As such, an analysis of the demand side, and attention to the politics of consumption as much as the problem of production, is a first step toward understanding the biopolitics of security.

The Production and Regulation of Oil Consumption in the United States

The value of oil comes from its centrality to one of the defining characteristics of U.S. society—mobility. It is mobility that drives U.S. oil consumption as the transportation sector accounts for two-thirds of petroleum use. In turn, passenger vehicles are the largest consumers of oil in the transportation sector, using 40 percent of the 20 million barrels of oil consumed each day. Their central role in the consumption of oil is only going to expand, as increases in the number, size, and usage of vehicles propel America's petroleum appetite. Of the additional 8.7 million barrels of oil that will be required each day by 2025, 7.1 million barrels (more than 80 percent) will be needed to fuel the growth in automobility. In global terms, this appetite is staggering, with the U.S. passenger vehicle fleet alone responsible for one-tenth of all petroleum consumption.³⁸

There is a regulatory regime designed to address the consumption of oil and the foreign dependence it produces, which, over time, has produced new borders of identity at home and abroad. In response to the oil price hikes of the early 1970s, Congress passed the Energy Policy Conservation Act of 1975, which, in part, established fuel economy guidelines for vehicles.³⁹ The governance of fuel economy is centered on the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards, which establish a target figure for the combined output of a particular manufacturer. The objective was to double the 1974 fleet fuel economy average by 1985, with a graded series of improvements up to 27.5 miles per gallon, where it has remained since 1990.⁴⁰

At the heart of the CAFE standards is the distinction between a “car” and a “light truck.” Cars are defined simply as “4-wheel vehicle[s] not designed for off-road use” while light trucks are four-wheel vehicles

designed for off-road operation (has 4-wheel drive or is more than 6,000 lbs. GVWR and has physical features consistent with those of a truck); *or* which is designed to perform at least one of the following functions: (1) transport more than 10 people; (2) provide temporary living quarters; (3) transport property in an open bed; (4) permit greater cargo-carrying capacity than passenger-carrying volume; *or* (5) can be converted to an open bed vehicle by removal of rear seats to form a flat continuous floor with the use of simple tools.⁴¹

This distinction is significant because when the CAFE regime was established, in contrast to its treatment of cars, Congress did not set a target for the improvement of light truck fuel economy. The first standard came in 1979 (15.8 mpg) and rose to 20.7 mpg in 1996 with a marginal increase to 22.2 mpg required by 2007.⁴² These standards fall well short of what is technologically possible in automotive efficiency, with 20.7 mpg being no more than what had been achieved on the road in 1983.⁴³

It was a consumer politics of identity that motivated the distinction between cars and light trucks. Automotive manufacturers, industry groups, and their political allies in Congress argued that light trucks were the “workhorses of America,” and “commercially vital” for the blue-collar businessmen and farmers who needed cheap transport for their materials. However, by the late 1960s manufacturers had started to stress the family and leisure benefits in advertisements for light trucks, and by the time Congress was creating the distinction between cars and light trucks on the grounds of commercial utility, more than two-thirds of the light trucks on the road were being used as family transport, with nearly three-quarters carrying no freight whatsoever.⁴⁴ Moreover, each time the regulations changed, automakers altered their models so they could escape the restrictions set by CAFE standards. When the weight limit for light trucks subject to CAFE standards rose from 6,000 lbs. to 8,500 lbs., automakers kept their products free from the standards by increasing the size of their models to 8,550 lbs. or more. As a result, the regulatory regime turned many light trucks into the heaviest passenger vehicles on the road.⁴⁵

Light trucks did not only benefit from more lenient fuel economy standards. They were granted less restrictive environmental standards and exempted from “gas guzzler” and luxury taxes, and their purchase can be written off against income tax.⁴⁶ These benefits were granted because light trucks were a market sector U.S. automakers had almost exclusively to themselves following the imposition in 1964 of a 25 percent tariff on imports. In place for nearly thirty years (and still in place for pickup trucks), these benefits gave U.S. automakers comparative advantage in an underregulated sector of the market, and policymakers have been lobbied incessantly about the need to protect this

valuable sector.⁴⁷ It is this dynamic that has led the automotive industry to be one of the principal opponents to international climate control agreements. Faced with pressure to improve fuel efficiency in order to reduce emissions, the major manufacturers argued such requirements would harm their economic position, a claim that was pivotal in the Bush administration's decision to withdraw U.S. support for the Kyoto protocol.⁴⁸

Creating Inefficiency and the SUV

The CAFE regulatory regime has helped reduce American oil imports—without these minimal standards the United States would be currently using an additional 2.8 million barrels of oil per day.⁴⁹ However, overall this legal framework has failed to curb import dependence. Indeed, the CAFE regulatory regime has had two profoundly negative effects. The first has been to permit an overall *decline* in U.S. automotive efficiency in the last twenty years. While the original goal of the 1975 legislation was achieved in its first decade, fuel economy has been getting worse ever since. Because of the popularity of light trucks, the U.S. vehicle fleet is currently 6 percent less efficient than the peak achieved in 1987–88.⁵⁰

The second consequence of the CAFE regulatory regime is that it has *created* the market position of light trucks that in turn have undermined the original gains in automotive fuel efficiency. The distinction between cars and light trucks created a market niche in which the automakers could profitably produce heavy, inefficient, polluting, and unsafe vehicles. And as the policymakers have made incremental steps toward tightening the regulations, the automakers' drive to escape these controls has meant the production of even larger and less efficient vehicles. According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, this regulatory-induced expansion is "almost like an arms race."⁵¹ This interplay in the network connecting policymakers, auto manufacturers, and consumers is, therefore, a classic example of the strategic interactions that define social relations in a biopolitical context.

Given the favorable regulatory regime, the auto manufacturers have exploited the opportunities afforded light trucks to such a degree they have changed the character of the new vehicle market. With the weak regulatory regime permitting old technology as the basis for light trucks, low production costs mean these vehicles are particularly profitable. As a result, the big three American automakers now make more light trucks than cars, and light trucks (a category including pickups, minivans, and SUVs) outsold cars for the first time in 2001.⁵² In particular, the boom in SUV sales (which increased by a

factor of 10 to 25 percent in this time) has seen light trucks overtake the car as the favored form of passenger vehicle in the United States.⁵³ With light trucks constituting 54 percent of the new vehicle market in 2003–04, large pickup trucks became increasingly popular, and automakers ensuring their new “luxury crossover vehicles” are officially classified as light trucks, this sector looks set to dominate family motoring in the United States for some time.⁵⁴

SUVs and the Politics of Desire

While the regulatory regime has constructed the market position of the “light truck,” and while the automakers have developed and exploited this market development to profitable ends, it nonetheless took consumers to purchase these products in large numbers for light trucks to surpass the car as the favored passenger vehicle. What, then, is it about light trucks, especially the SUV, which appeals so to American consumer desire?

The genealogy of the SUV can be traced to the Jeep, a small vehicle that came to prominence in World War II. The U.S. Army wanted a light four-wheel-drive truck that could transport troops and a heavy machine gun, and more than half a million were produced. Highly successful in all its tasks, “the Jeep became a sign, the emblem, the alter ego of the American fighting machine.”⁵⁵ From the outset, then, the SUV has been marked by the military. Once the war had been won, Jeep traded on its military background and attempted to modify and sell its vehicles to the family market. Never very successful, given that the U.S. market then favored stylish and comfortable station wagons for large families, the company stumbled along and was sold to the American Motors Corporation (AMC) in 1969.⁵⁶

When AMC undertook to revitalize the Jeep brand, it noticed that the Wagoneer model was sold mostly to affluent families in urban areas who respected Jeep’s military heritage and wanted to be associated with its outdoor image. On the back of this assessment, Jeep sales expanded rapidly in the early 1970s, with *Time* magazine calling the basic model a “macho-chic machine.” However, as a basically primitive piece of technology, built on the same World War II truck chassis that made it famous, the Jeep was a vehicle swimming against the tide of environmental consciousness and safety regulation in 1970s America. But Washington policymakers were very reluctant to regulate a weak Midwest auto producer out of business, so Jeep executives successfully lobbied to have Jeep classified as a truck, thus freeing it from new legislation such as the Clean Air Act of 1970.⁵⁷ This established the precedent for differentiating light trucks from cars that the CAFE standards enshrined to such devastating effect.

The military background of the Jeep was part of the heritage that played a role in the development of the model that launched the boom in SUVs—the Ford Explorer. In 1986 when Ford designers began the process of developing a new model line for the 1990s, their methods were more anthropological than automotive:

They started by trying to take the cultural pulse of the time, paying special attention to the evolving values of the baby boomer generation. They watched some of the most popular movies of the time: *Rambo First Blood, Part II, Rocky IV*, and *Top Gun*. They clipped photographs from magazines and arranged them into a series of large collages, each for a different period of a few years, and were struck by how many people were wearing cowboy hats and other Western attire in their collage of contemporary photos. They took note of the wide media attention give[n] to the two Jeeps that Reagan kept at his ranch near Santa Barbara, California.⁵⁸

The most important SUV was conceived in a time dominated by the paramilitary culture that emerged after, and in response to, America's defeat in Vietnam. Obvious in the Hollywood movies the Ford designers watched, it was manifested as well in "techno-thriller" novels by the likes of Tom Clancy and the emergence of paintball as a popular national game. In this energetic cultural militarism, which saw the remasculinization of American identity, heroes were those individuals who overcome the bureaucratic constraints of daily life, braved abnormal environments to fight America's enemies, and often traveled in exotic vehicles.⁵⁹

Incorporating some of the codes of cultural militarism, the Explorer also embodied elements of the classic rhetoric of American identity, thus demonstrating the way in which vehicles are part of the imaginaries, geographies, and practices of national identity (fig. 2).⁶⁰ Baby boomers did not want vehicles akin to the old-fashioned station wagons that had dominated the family vehicle market until the 1990s. Instead, they wanted to use their increasing affluence to express a rugged individualism by purchasing vehicles that allowed them to "to feel a bond with the great outdoors and the American frontier."⁶¹ Central to this was four-wheel-drive technology. Prospective buyers told consumer researchers they almost never used this capacity but wanted it anyway. The fact that 80 percent of SUV owners live in urban areas and no more than 13 percent of their vehicles have been off road does not diminish this desire (fig. 3).⁶² The reasoning behind this paradox was that four-wheel drive

offered the promise of unfettered freedom to drive anywhere during vacations. These customers might have given up their childhood dreams of becoming firefighters, police officers or superheroes, and had instead become parents with desk jobs and oversized mortgages.

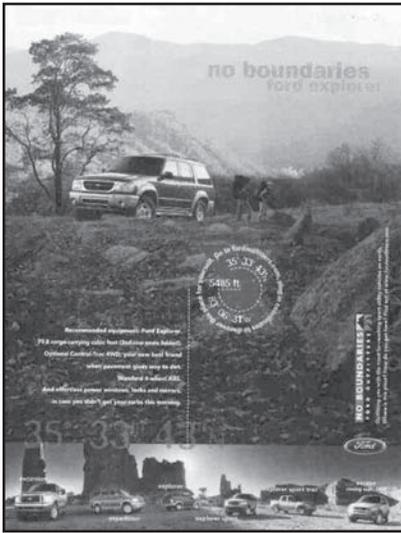


Figure 2. “No Boundaries.” Ford Explorer advertisement.

September 11). The same conditions that have led to the private security guard industry and the growth in gated communities are behind the consumer’s desire to ensure that the family vehicle offers a high level of personal security. Amidst this neo-medievalization of society, as Americans retreat to our fortified enclaves (or capsules) secure against others, SUVs become “armored cars for the battlefield.”⁶⁴

With high front ends, towering driving positions, fenders designed to replicate the haunches of wild animals, and grills intentionally designed to evoke snarling jungle cats, SUVs give their owners an aggressively panoptic disposition to the world.⁶⁵ With names like Tracker, Equinox, Freestyle, Escape, Defender, Trail Blazer, Navigator, Pathfinder, and Warrior—or designations that come from American Indians (Cherokee, Navajo) or places in the American West (Tahoe, Yukon)—SUVs populate the crowded urban routes of daily life with representations of the militarized frontier.⁶⁶ In the words of one marketing consultant, they say to the outside world: “America, we’re risk takers; America, we’re rugged.”⁶⁷ This comes across in interviews with SUV owners in California who, while acknowledging the problems caused by the motoring choice, explain it in terms of security: “The world is becoming a harder and more violent place to live, so we wrap ourselves with the big vehicles.” In the words of another: “It gives you a barrier, makes you feel less threatened” (fig. 4).⁶⁸ Crucially, both those voices belong to mothers and indicate how SUVs find particular favor among women. Keen on the high riding position for

But they told Ford researchers that SUVs made them feel like they were still carefree, adventurous spirits who could drop everything and head for the great outdoors at a moment’s notice if they really wanted to do so.⁶³

Combined with this fantasy of vehicular freedom, SUV owners manifest a concern with social insecurity. French medical anthropologist turned marketing consultant Claude Rapaille argues that SUVs offer the physical embodiment of Americans’ concern with “survival and reproduction.” According to Rapaille, the United States is a society riven with the fear of crime and other insecurities (even in the period prior to

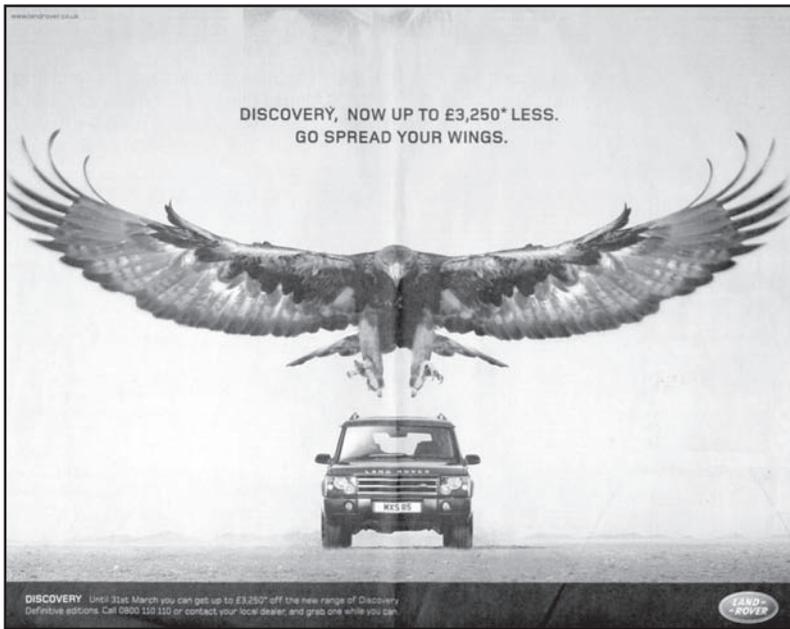


Figure 3. “Spread Your Wings.” U.K. Land Rover Discovery advertisement.

maximum visibility, women also find that the large ground clearance of their four-wheel drive vehicles intersects with their concerns about security. In one study, respondents surprised researchers by telling them this feature meant “it’s easier to see if someone is hiding underneath or lurking behind it.”⁶⁹ Together these desires coalesce into a sense of the SUV being an “urban assault vehicle” for the homeland city at war—albeit with the expected comforts that also make it a form of “portable civilization”—with the driver as a military figure, confronting, but safe from, an insecure world.⁷⁰

Nowhere do the vectors of security, war, and the SUV intersect more clearly than in the production of the Humvee and Hummer. In 1981 the U.S. military determined that a larger vehicle was required to replace the Jeep. The resulting High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (or Humvee) came to prominence during the first Gulf War in 1990–91, carrying forward the place of these four-wheel-drive vehicles in the global construction of American identity.⁷¹ The Hummer gained notoriety when Arnold Schwarzenegger purchased one for civilian use, provoking the manufacturers to see how they could benefit from the then-emerging SUV boom. As with early Jeeps, the first Humvee was a crude vehicle, so in 2001 the company produced a more refined but still gargantuan Hummer H2. Said to be infused with “military-derived DNA,”

Jeep
THERE'S ONLY ONE

**■ OK, IT'S MASSIVELY OVER-ENGINEERED FOR THE SCHOOL RUN.
AND THE PROBLEM WITH THAT IS WHAT, PRECISELY?**

NEW JEEP CHEROKEE 2.8 CRD AUTOMATIC It's not the only vehicle on the road with a torque, fuel-efficient, common rail diesel engine, a 5 speed automatic gearbox, independent front suspension or a highly sophisticated 4-wheel drive system. But it is the only one that's built like a Jeep Cherokee. For a limited period, prices start at £16,995* for the 2.4 Sport and £20,525* for the 2.8 CRD Sport shown. Reasonable enough, when you think what goes into it. www.jeep.co.uk or call 0800 616 159.

Model featured Jeep Cherokee 2.8 CRD Sport (Auto) with Alloy Wheels and Special Paint. £20,525* OTR. *Cherokee prices include £1000 cashback available on all models registered before 30.09.03.
Jeep Cherokee 2.8 Common Rail Diesel mpg(L/100km), 20.6(13.7) urban, 33.6(8.4) ex-urban, 27.4(10.3) combined (CO2 274 g/km). 4208

the H2 was regarded by its owners as embodying “testosterone.”⁷² In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the already favorable consumer ratings for the Hummer soared as people prioritized personal security at a time of permanent and unconventional war.

With televised coverage of the invasion of Iraq once again foregrounding the Humvee, the Hummer H2 became the best-selling large luxury SUV in America (with women accounting for one-third of all purchases). Hummer

Figure 4.

“Massively Over-Engineered for the School Run.” U.K. Jeep Cherokee advertisement.

owners have exhibited a profound patriotism, and the vehicles have come to occupy a special cultural place (as the featured vehicle on the popular TV show *CSI: Miami*, for example). As one H2 owner declared, “When I turn on the TV, I see wall-to-wall Humvees, and I’m proud . . . They’re not out there in Audi A4’s . . . I’m proud of my country, and I’m proud to be driving a product that is making a significant contribution.”⁷³ Advertisements for the Hummer have called up all the reasons people favor SUVs and are leavened with some measure of self-parody. Alongside images of the H2, the tag lines include “When the asteroid hits and civilization crumbles, you’ll be ready”; “It only looks like this because it is badass”; and—with special appeal to the prospective female customer—“A new way to threaten men.” One Hummer poster, for which the copywriters might not have appreciated the contemporary geopolitical significance of their statement, inadvertently encapsulated the H2’s meaning: “Excessive. In a Rome at the height its power sort of way” (fig. 5).⁷⁴

Unsurprisingly, the in-your-face-attitude of the Hummer (part of “the axes of evil”) has made it a favorite target of protest groups campaigning against SUVs, ranging from Web sites abusing H2 owners to the satire of Bill Maher and Micah Ian Wright, the evangelical “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign, and the Earth Liberation Front’s (ELF) arson against the vehicles.⁷⁵ Responding to what the FBI regards as “domestic terrorism” by the ELF, Hummer owners have wrapped the flag ever more tightly around their vehicle. According to the founder of the International Hummer Owners Group (IHOG [*sic*]), “the H2 is an American icon . . . it’s a symbol of what we all hold so dearly above all else, the fact we have the freedom of choice, the freedom of happiness, the freedom of adventure and discovery, and the ultimate freedom of expression. Those who deface a Hummer in words or deeds . . . deface the American flag and what it stands for.”⁷⁶

Excess in the automotive world is not restricted to the Hummer, however. In many ways it has been only the most obvious manifestation of a recent trend. At the 2003 Detroit motor show, on the eve of war with Iraq, many



Figure 5. “Excessive. In a Rome at the Height of Its Power Sort of Way.” Hummer print advertisement, 2002.

new models with vast engines and enhanced power were displayed. With styling cues taken from the muscle cars of the 1960s (which were produced prior to the onset of the “Vietnam syndrome”), these new designs were read as bold assertions of “American technological virtuosity” and “American self-confidence.” At the same time, this bravado—what Claude Rapaille labeled a “return to pride and power”—was seen as a response to the political climate of crisis and fear.⁷⁷

This trend was epitomized when Ford unveiled its new concept vehicle, the SYN^{US} (a name derived from “synthesis” and “urban sanctuary” to emphasize that the outside is about security while the inside is about a high-tech life) at the 2005 Detroit motor show (fig. 6).⁷⁸ Although a small SUV, the SYN^{US} demonstrates how the foreign is folded back into the domestic by reference to the border zones of contemporary urban life. As the promotional blurb argues, “as the population shifts back to the big cities, you’ll need a rolling urban command center. Enter the SYN^{US} concept vehicle, a mobile techno sanctuary sculpted in urban armor and inspired by the popular B-cars of congested international hotspots.” The styling is “intimidating”; it deploys protective shutters when parked and has bullet-resistant windows, all designed to make “any mission possible.” At the same time as it takes the notion of an urban assault vehicle to its logical conclusion, it also parades a fine sense of portable civilization, with an interior that can be “a mini-home theater with multi-



Figure 6. "Vaulting into the Urban Future." Ford SYN^{US} ad from <http://www.fordvehicles.com/autoshow/concept/synus/> (accessed June 29, 2005).

configuration seating and multi-media work station . . . Plus, you can monitor your surroundings in real time as seen by the rear-mounted cameras."⁷⁹ There

could be no finer transport for the new SUV citizen.

What these developments indicate is the extent to which the discourses of homeland security are being materialized in automotive form. As De Caeter argues, the fear produced by networks unbundling and splintering our locales means we retreat to capsules, but this increased capsularization only enhances fear, which in turn drives further capsularization. By addressing cultural anxieties with embodiments of material power, the U.S. auto industry is therefore pursuing a path familiar to national security policy. But this response is also paradoxical, because meeting insecurities founded on oil dependence with products that will consume ever more petroleum is simply to promote the conditions of crisis.

Paradoxes of the SUV

Much about the rise of the SUV appears paradoxical. Given the centrality of security to the appeal of the SUV, the foremost paradox of these vehicles concerns safety. SUV owners are convinced the size of their vehicles is synonymous with their safety, while accident records show SUVs are more dangerous than cars. The occupant death rate per million SUVs is some 6 percent higher than the equivalent for cars, meaning that an additional three thousand people die annually because they are in SUVs rather than cars, thereby replicating the death toll of September 11 every year.⁸⁰ The principal reason for the SUV's poor safety record is its tendency to roll over in accidents. The vehicle height that owners cherish for its ground clearance and visibility makes SUVs prone to tip easily. Rollovers account for one-third of all road deaths in the United States, and the fatality rate for rollovers in SUVs is three times higher than for

rollovers in cars, but neither the industry nor the regulators have addressed this problem.⁸¹

In collisions that do not result in rollovers, SUVs do offer their occupants greater safety when compared with those in the other vehicle. However, the safety of SUV occupants comes at the cost of substantially higher death rates for those they collide with. When SUVs hit a car from the side, the occupant of the car is twenty-nine times more likely to be killed than those riding in the SUV.⁸² What this means is that in collisions that do not result in rollovers, SUVs achieve their relative safety by externalizing danger. Keith Bradsher has concluded that “for each [Ford] Explorer driver whose life is saved in a two-vehicle conclusion by choosing an Explorer instead of a large car, an extra five drivers are killed in vehicles struck by Explorers.”⁸³ This has led the current head of the NHTSA to lament that “the theory that I am going to protect myself and my family even if it costs other peoples lives has been the operative incentive for the design of these vehicles, and that’s just wrong.”⁸⁴ But in the absence of regulation, individuals faced with growing numbers of SUVs on the road are going to opt for these vehicles, even though this will increase the collective danger. The result, in Bradsher’s words, is a “highway arms race.”⁸⁵

Other paradoxes in the rise of the SUV also involve the relationship between the individual and the collective. The SUV’s popularity is drawn from its association with the freedom and rugged individuality of the frontier, but the dominant market position of the light truck sector would not have been possible without the regulatory designs of Washington bureaucrats and politicians. The SUV invokes notions of wilderness and adventure, even though its owners, who rarely if ever venture beyond the urban, are driving a vehicle that is highly damaging to the environment.⁸⁶ And SUV owners defend their vehicle choice against criticisms of these kinds by invoking an American’s right to be free of government and regulation, even though the entire infrastructure of motoring that makes it possible to choose one model over another—road construction, maintenance, law enforcement, and the like—requires a state subsidy upward of \$2.4 trillion annually.⁸⁷ The pervasiveness of these paradoxes stems from the way individual choices are part of a biopolitical whole with geopolitical consequences, something signaled by the concept of automobility.

The Auto Social Formation of Automobility

The concept of automobility—or that of the “auto social formation” or “car culture”—calls attention to the hybrid assemblage or machinic complex that the apparently autonomous entities of car and driver compose.⁸⁸ In the “automobilized time-space” of contemporary society we can observe a networked, sociotechnical infrastructure that is in process, an infrastructure in which there is “the ceaseless and mobile interplay between many different scales, from the body to the globe.”⁸⁹ Automobility thus is one dimension of empire, in the sense proposed by Hardt and Negri.

The relationship between the auto and the urban has always been at its strongest in the United States. The beautification of cities through the construction of avenues, malls, and parkways in the early twentieth century coincided with and furthered the rise of the automobile.⁹⁰ While the development of technology was obviously important, a transformation in American urban culture—wherein streets came to be viewed as traffic ways rather than recreational social spaces—was fundamental to the creation of the auto social formation.⁹¹ Most obvious in the urban planning of Robert Moses, whose bridges, expressways, and parkways transformed New York City and its environs, these infrastructural developments came to be the leitmotif of modernity.⁹² National highway systems became the centerpieces of utopian plans—as in General Motors’ “Futurama” in the 1939 World’s Fair in New York—and were realized in the cold war years as a consequence of the Interstate Highways and Defense Act of 1956.⁹³

Although constructed as a means to achieve the unification of social life, the web of traffic routes that permeate urban space have in practice furthered the fragmentation of the urban and its peri-urban and suburban spaces, creating in the process new borderlands (which in turn require new capsules of security).⁹⁴ The distancing of life elements (home from work, family from friends, haves from have nots) that are part of this urban fissure in turn promotes further reliance on automobility as people seek to overcome, traverse, or bypass these divisions. Importantly, this partitioning of the urban world has been codified in and encouraged by planning legislation. Embodying a functionalist view of the city as an organized machine, American urban planners from the 1920s on relied on a system of zoning controls that separated uses and imposed homogenous criteria on specified areas. Hostile to mixed usage or hybrid formations, these uniform zoning codes (known as Euclidean zoning after a 1926 Supreme Court decision in favor of the village of Euclid) have produced urban sprawl and the elongation of travel routes.⁹⁵ In the ab-

sence of public transport systems, these urban forms have further increased reliance on the car. For residents of the border zones known as “edge cities,” there is little choice but to rely on private transport for mobility. Contemporary urban life is both sustained by oil in the form of the car and requires increasing oil consumption through the use of the car urban life promotes. Citizens are thus coerced into a limited flexibility, creating a situation that is “a wonderful testament to the ability of a sociomaterial structure to serve its own reproduction.”⁹⁶

Not that this is exclusive to America. The United States remains the archetypical case of the auto social formation, with more automobiles than registered drivers, and a per capita fuel consumption rate that is ten times the rate of Japan’s and twenty times as much as European city dwellers.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, the social forces behind automobility are global, and societies other than the United States (China, for example) are witnessing profound growth in private vehicle usage. SUVs are growing in popularity—while equally attracting opprobrium—in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK, and other EU states.⁹⁸ As the icon of automobility, the SUV is imperial.

Concluding Themes

The SUV is a vehicle of singular importance. It is a node in a series of networks that range from the body to the globe, which, when combined, establish the conditions of possibility for U.S. strategic policy and demonstrate that geopolitics needs to be understood in the context of biopolitics. In the story outlined here, it is the central role of mobility in American society that grants oil its social value. This article has outlined the key moments of connectivity in those networks that have given rise to the American auto social formation—the way the transport sector dominates petroleum use; the importance of passenger vehicles as the major consumers of oil in the transport sector; how light trucks have come to be the auto manufacturers’ dominant product, overtaking the car as the choice for the majority of families, who find themselves with little choice other than the private vehicle as they move through the domains of their lives. All this—the auto social formation of automobility—has resulted in a situation in which energy efficiency declines and dependence on oil from unstable regions increases as Americans drive further in less economical vehicles. Pivotal in this account is the role played by various laws and regulations—including fuel economy standards, exemptions for light trucks, tax rebates, trade tariffs, international environmental agreements, and zoning codes—in enabling and supporting automobility. Indeed, the story is tragic

insofar as the regulatory regime designed to increase energy efficiency and reduce oil dependence (the CAFE standards) has in fact created inefficiency and given rise to a class of vehicles (SUVs) that undermine the overall objective. Those vehicles are the embodiment of a new articulation of citizenship that effaces its social and global connectivity, but SUVs are unquestionably implicated in (if not solely responsible for) the United States' rejection of the Kyoto Protocols and its initiation of an illegal international conflict.

The SUV's importance goes well beyond these instrumentalized concerns, because a renewed emphasis on the material requires an extended engagement with the immaterial. As such, the SUV is the icon of automobility in contemporary America, invested with codes drawn from the militarized frontier culture of post-Vietnam America and manifesting the strategic game animating social and cultural networks in contemporary liberal society. The SUV is the vehicle of empire, when empire is understood as the deterritorialized apparatus of rule that is global in scope but national and local in its effects. The SUV is a materialization of America's global security attitude, functioning as a gargantuan capsule of excess consumption in an uncertain world. With its military genealogy and its claim to provide personal security through the externalization of danger, the SUV is itself a boundary-producing political performance inscribing new geopolitical borderlands at home and abroad through social relations of security, threat, and war. The SUV draws the understanding of security as sizeable enclosure into daily life, folds the foreign into the domestic, and links the inside to the outside, thereby simultaneously transgressing bounded domains while enacting the performative rebordering of American identity.

Because of the SUV's cultural power and pivotal place in the constitution of contemporary America, challenging its encoded performances is a difficult proposition. Instrumentally, rectification could begin with changes in the regulatory regime to increase economy standards (perhaps via efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as the state of California proposes) and a political recognition that energy conservation is itself "the first and cheapest rapid-deployment energy resource."⁹⁹ But bringing about change involves something more incisive than fine-tuning public policy. As this article makes clear, a biopolitical understanding of automobility is necessary, because we are dealing with dispositions and practices that exceed the structured sites of social institutions. Transformation therefore requires so much more than the individualization of responsibility proposed in the advertisements encouraged by the Detroit Project. Can the politics of desire be remodeled to make the SUV an "unpatriotic relic"?¹⁰⁰ Only if America's security attitude can resist the

reinscription of the homeland at war and begin to work with the networks of the biopolitical that exceed yet effect the borders of our communities.

Notes

This article has been a long time in the making and incurred many debts along the way. The argument was first tried out in a roundtable on Hardt and Negri's *Empire* at the 2002 American Political Science Association annual meeting in Chicago, where the conversation included William Connolly and Michael Hardt. Since then audiences in Politics and International Relations departments at the Universities of Birmingham, Durham, Leeds, Newcastle, St. Andrews, Sussex, the Open University, Sun Yat Sen University, and the National University of Taiwan have been helpful interlocutors. Thanks for comments, citations, and encouragement is due to Steve Graham, Jef Huysmans, Kate Manzo, Gordon MacLeod, Mat Paterson, Simon Philpott, Robert Warren, and Geoff Vigar. Special mention needs to be made of the participants at the "Legal Borderlands" symposium at Pomona College in September 2004 for their contributions. In particular, the comments of Mary Dudziak, Inderpal Grewal, Leti Volpp, and two anonymous readers for *American Quarterly* were of great benefit. All, however, are absolved of responsibility for the final version.

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