Government-Sponsored Systemic Character Assassination

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Episodes of character association (CA) among political figures are ubiquitous in the current political landscape of the United States, where political campaigns routinely include ad hominem attacks of one's opponent. Yet, another form of CA lies beneath the surface of political figures hurling insults at each other. CA is also situated within certain social-political systems that strategically deploy mechanisms to dominate a targeted population group by casting them as inherently inferior to society's so-called pure members. The primary objective of this article is to characterize systemic character assassination [SCA] within the United States as an insidious form of disciplinary control. After identifying certain features of governmental domination over segments of society (section 1), the author introduces the notion of SCA (section 2). A case study is provided of the systemic denigration of migrants seeking asylum in the United States (section 3). This case is followed by an analysis of SCA in terms of the power dynamics between governmental authorities and the targeted population group (section 4). All of which indicates a fundamental tension between the state's legitimacy as rightful rulers and its illegitimacy from the perspective of those subjected to the insidious manipulations of SCA.

Keywords

collective erasure, governmentality, power relations, resistance, state-sponsored violence, stigmatization, structural violence, symbolic violence, systemic character assassination

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Character assassinations [CA] have become normalized in the political landscape of the United States. The instruments used for maligning political figures are quite varied. These include anonymous lies, misquoting, manipulation of photos, silencing, acts of vandalism, name-calling, labeling with demonizing images, and accusations of mental illness, sexual deviance and other moral infractions (Shiraev, 2014). In the 2016 presidential campaigns of the United States, the presidential candidates routinely resorted to such accusations. Donald Trump considers Barack Obama a liar because of Obama's denial of his Muslim identity and Hillary Clinton corrupt. Hillary Clinton responded to the allegation by saying Trump was mentally unfit for the office of the Presidency (Kelly, 2018). In a climate of acrimony among political factions, the accusation of a negative action is often converted to a negative character.

One powerful technique for maligning the character of political figures centers on deployment of Nazi imagery. In recent years, Vladimir Putin, Barack Obama and Donald Trump have been compared to Hitler and their policies maligned as suitable for the government of Nazi Germany (Laruelle, 2020, p. 308). With such comparisons, the character assassins seek to affix an irremovable trait on a political figure, casting them as fundamentally irredeemable. The protagonists of such attacks position themselves as truth-seekers who can expose the lies of a political figure, as if to declare: "This is who they *really* are!" Such protagonists seem to follow the norm that political capital is gained from *ad hominem* attacks. Current political rhetoric seems to accuse a political figure of lying, cheating or stealing money. With such accusations, the targeted official is then cast as a liar, cheat or thief.

These examples follow a pattern in which one or more attacker intentionally seeks to harm or diminish the character of other individuals or groups through an instrument of degradation. Clearly, the agent's purposive action is critical to such cases of CA. These cases conform to a pattern of agent-instrument-object, where an agent performs an action through the use of an instrument that targets an object.

Is intentionality necessary for all cases of CA? I believe not. For a certain category of CA, an agent's malicious intent is not required. Nor is an attacking instrument, such as name-calling, necessary. There is a category of CA in the underbelly of social-political systems. Such systems center a structure that crystalizes certain population groups as inferiors. With such systems, their lowly placement in the social-political order defines their existence. They are essentialized as diminished beings in such an order. The marginalized group members should know their place, recognize the limits of their

rewards and security and act properly with high power group members. No explicit subject-instrument-object sequence is required for such a placement.

The primary objective of this chapter is to develop the notion of governmental authorities' *systemic character assassination* [SCA] of targeted population groups. I begin with an overview of the ever-prevent dangers of governmental over-reach (section 1). I then introduce the notion of SCA (section 2), followed by a case study regarding the systemic degradation of migrants by governmental authorities of the United States (section 3). I then recast the notion of SCA in terms of the dynamics of power between governmental authorities and a targeted population group (section 4). My concluding remarks center on a critical paradox of governmental power generally, revealing a perennial tension between its authority over political subjects and the ability of such subjects to rebel, resistance and react negatively.

Government Sponsored Character Assassinations

Of course, governmental authorities can abuse their power in many ways. One sort of abuse consists of the excessive use of physical force against its political subjects. Rather than the superficial features of governmental power, such excessive use of force is central to the sovereign state. The ever-present threat of state-sponsored violence underlies every governmental program. Such a threat is critical to the state's right to rule over its subjects. Max Weber recognized such a threat. He writes: "We have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. The state is considered the sole source of the 'right' to use violence" (Weber, 1946, p. 78). Michel Foucault finds in governmental power the constant threat of a different violence: state agencies' mastery over mind and body. Hospitals, schools, and public health agencies deploy technologies that can manipulate each recipient of their services. All represent the non-elected forms of state power over its subjects.[1] With such controls, the patient, student, client, or prisoner are objectified as the subjects of the techno-science of administration. Pierre Bourdieu warned against the *symbolic violence* of classification systems that prefigure state domination. In certain cases, such systems are manufactured to contort the thoughts of political subjects

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[1] Foucault defines governmentality as an "ensemble force by the institutions, procedures, analyzes and reflection, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power" regarding the management of the masses (1991, p. 102).

regarding their sense of identity and relations with others.[2] He focused on the taken-for-granted notions that contort the bonds and breaks between political subjects to define who and what 'we' are and are not as a nationality.

The instruments of state-sponsored symbolic violence can be particularly pernicious. In recent decades, such violence has led to the slaughter of large segments of a nation's population. Consider, for example, the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the Serbian attacks on Bosniaks in the 1990s, and the genocidal violence perpetrated in Darfur by the central government of Sudan. In these three cases, state propagandists dehumanized the targeted population with accusations of their irredeemable impurity. This means their taints cannot be removed by donning new clothing, amassing more wealth, or acquiring enhanced professional skills. This symbolic violence of manufactured degradation of a population group is designed to position them as fundamentally inferior. The complexities of population groups are thus reduced to crystalized polarities of purity and danger. As the impurities of society are cast as existential threats, the moral imperative for 'good violence' follows in lock-step. Anyone who loves their country, their neighbors and their children must presumably join the fight for survival. The narrative sequence of such propaganda tends to conform to the following pattern:

- They have threatened us.
- They will always threaten us.
- They are bad.
- We are potential victims.
- We are normal, pure or virtuous.

As "they' are depicted as vicious, wicked, evil, or subhuman, "we" are good, brave, valiant, righteous and just.

Such narratives are intensified with emotionally riveting images. In addition to such narratives of enemy brutality, many propagandists for war traffic in images of the enemy as dirty, decayed or diseased (Alexander, et al., 2005). Such images became interlinked with the fear of the enemy's pollution of the 'good people' at home. The fear that comes with heart-pondering images of enemy devastation of innocents is not only an individual emotion. Such fear is shared as part of the collective consciousness among all

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[2] According to Bourdieu et al., "Through the framing it imposes upon practices, the state establishes and inculcates common forms and categories of perception and appreciation, social frameworks of perceptions, of understanding or of memory, in short state forms of classification" (1994, p. 13).

those who perceive themselves as potential targets. In the prelude to episodes of genocidal violence, protagonists often rely on the insect imagery. For example, the Hutu extremists advanced a propaganda campaign that cast the Tutsis as snakes and roaches. The proclamation of "kill or be killed" typically followed such vile projections.

These state-sponsored propaganda campaigns draw upon instruments of *stigmatization*. Based on findings by social psychologists, stigmatization consists of three elements (Goffman, 1963). First, an individual [or group] exhibits certain features, or is accused falsely of exhibiting certain features that are unusual or distinctive—features that are cast as negative traits. Second, such features are presumably affixed to their essential nature as if a fundamental taint on their character. They are forever marked as lesser beings, as if living with a taint on their soul. Corrective measures cannot remove the taint of impurity. Third, in stigmatizing others, the accusers tacitly cast themselves and/or their affiliated social-political group as innocents. This practice of collective degradation gives the accusers a feeling of self-purification. For those who experience suffering, scapegoating practices can provide psychological comfort and relieve them of culpability. Such accusers can relish in their supremacy over the impurities of society.

Character Assassination as Collective Erasure

Of course, not all cases of state-sponsored stigmatization center on such explicit and vile degradation. Some governments stigmatize a segment of the population through subtle means.

Collective erasure consists of a manufactured distortion of the social-political order in ways that diminish or remove a population group from the nation's consciousness. In extreme cases, the targeted population group becomes symbolically invisible in the social-political order. Explicit erasure occurs in states that define the nation through a religious category. For example, the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia, Article 1, states, "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion; Allah's Book and the Sunnah of His Prophet, Allah's prayers and peace be upon him, are its constitution." By defining the nation in religious terms, Saudi Arabia is implicitly subordinating members of other faiths, which serves as the legalized basis of discriminatory practices. In like measure, Israel's eleven Basic Laws—like a constitutional law—define the state as, "the state of the Jewish people." This implies a sub-citizen status for non-Jews.

Collective erasure can also be implied in a constitutional principle without being explicit. The preamble to the United States Constitution defines "a more perfect Union"

with equal justice for all, but excludes voting rights for servants, women, and men without property. Other examples of tacit erasure are more easily hidden from the public. Consider cases where an indigenous group's history is expunged from school textbooks or where accounts of their slaughter at the hands of the nation's military leaders is ignored through public monuments glorifying these leaders. Other cases of erasure involve the technicalities of governmental administration, as in the failure to recognize the existence of an indigenous group.[3]

These examples of explicit and tacit erasure show that certain sorts of CA are located in social or political systems. Collective erasure represents a kind of system that CA of certain population groups defines. *Systemic character assassination* [SCA] is defined through mechanisms that foster a diminished positioning of a population group in the nation's collective understanding of the social-political order. Within SCA, such a group is assigned, artificially, a lower rank; they are cast as society's inferiors. Such diminished positioning represents a critical element of the society's structure, which implies a rank ordering of superior and inferior population groups. SCA constitutes a form of *structural violence*, in which the social-political systems of society are defined through mechanisms of inequality that makes the low power group vulnerable to abuse and suffering (Galtung, 1969). Structural violence causes destruction of the basic conditions of living such as extreme poverty, chronic hunger, unhealthy living conditions, or the denial of basic education.[4] The mechanisms of SCA are typically depersonalized. Neither an agent with malice nor an instrument of direct vitriolic attack is required. No act of lying, silencing, name-calling, demonization or accusation of criminality is necessary for SCA to be operative. To be sure, specific actions of CA can reaffirm such systemic repositioning. But again, the defining element of SCA is not a particular act; SCA is defined by a structure of acts that privileges the categorical repositioning of a population group in society.

SCA is illustrated in the structural violence committed by the federal authorities of the United States against migrants who illegally cross the nation's southern border.

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[3] For example, the Monacan Indians, who lived in the region of Virginia, only received an official state designation in 1989. In that year, Virginia's government and general assembly recognized this tribe formally. As of 2018, they are one of seven federally recognized tribes in the state (Hantman 2018, 157-8).

[4] Johan Galtung writes, "Inequality then shows up in differential morbidity and mortality rates, between individuals in a district, between districts in a nation, and between nations in the international system - in a chain of interlocking feudal relationships" (Galtung, 1969, pp. 177).

Systemic Character Assassination of Migrants

Currently, 33.8 million immigrants are authorized to live in the United States; an additional 11.1 million migrants live in the country illegally (Pew Research Center, 2015). These unauthorized immigrants entered the country illegally or overstayed their temporary visa. They tend to remain for extended periods, with approximately 66 percent of them having lived in the United States for ten years or more (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Like every sovereign state, the U.S. has the right to monitor and control the flow of migrants into its country, consistent with international law. Yet, within this right, many political figures have cast both authorized and unauthorized immigrants as criminals who represent an existential threat to native born Americans. The stigma of "dangerous invaders" is embodied in the categorical positioning of those migrants who enter through the U.S.-Mexico border. Such a stigma is intensified through images of "hordes" of criminals laying siege there. Political officials, such as Senator Ted Cruz, Congresswoman Michele Bachman and Congressman Steve King, have railed against their alleged crimes, recounting alleged episodes of sexual violence, gangland murders, and drug smugglers. Before his ascension to the presidency, candidate Donald Trump intensified the rhetoric with his tweet of July 13, 2015:

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best . . . They're sending people that have many problems, and they're bringing those problems to us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people (Reilly, 2016).

Such political rhetoric over immigration has the effect of virtually essentializing migrants as invaders, which is to say that a large population of dangerous criminals are living amidst the nation's good people.

Do immigrants represent a security threat? The evidence about their criminality is quite clear. While some immigrants—authorized and unauthorized—violate criminal law, native-born men have a higher rate of imprisonment for violation of criminal law than immigrant men. According to a 2008 report by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the actual number of MS-13 gang members crossing the border illegally represents a tiny percentage (only 0.0075 percent) of the total number of migrants. For immigrants residing in the U.S., the rate of incarceration of immigrants is lower than native-born residents. In 2014, unauthorized immigrants were incarcerated at a rate that is 44 percent

below that of native-born citizens (Landgrave & Nowrasteh, 2017). This is consistent with a 2010 American Immigration Council study of incarcerated 18-39-year-old men. Of these men, 1.6 % were immigrants, while 3.3 % were native born.

Nevertheless, many governmental institutions define the immigration problem as a threat to national security. This framing of immigration has direct policy implications for the U.S. immigration enforcement agencies within the Department of Homeland Security: Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE] and Customs and Border Patrol [CPB]. As their names indicate, both agencies establish national security as their primary mission, developing strategies needed, presumably, to ward off threats to the homeland. From its website, ICE identifies the objective of its enforcement and removal operations [ERO] as follows:

> The ERO directorate upholds U.S. immigration law at, within, and beyond our borders. ERO's work is critical to the enforcement of immigration law against those who present a danger to our national security, are a threat to public safety, or who otherwise undermine the integrity of our immigration system (https://www.ice.gov/about).

Additionally, former acting Director of ICE Thomas Homan offered the following testimony in 2016 to the Homeland Security Subcommittee of the U.S. Congress:

> You should look over your shoulder, and you need to be worried . . . Most of the criminal aliens we find in the interior of the United States, they entered as a non-criminal. If we wait for them to violate yet another law against a citizen of this country, then it's too late. We shouldn't wait for them to become a criminal. (Foley, 2017)

With such a rationale, ICE has established itself as a law enforcement agency. This is illustrated, for example, in a formal partnership known as ICE directive 287 (g) between ICE and the local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. This directive requires criminal justice officials to provide ICE officials with critical information about the whereabouts of unauthorized immigrants.

With immigrants positioned as security threats, some state legislative bodies have enacted measures that draw upon military strategies. Recent immigration laws are designed to promote "voluntary" self-deportation of illegal migrants through government-sponsored attrition. Of course, attrition is a familiar strategy of military leaders. During World War I, allied forces sought to destroy the enemy's resources

through a series of incursions over an extended period, seeking to undermine their will to fight. In like measure, legislators around the country have adopted a strategy of fear to undermine the sense of security of immigrants. In Arizona, the statute SB 1070 is designed to threaten "illegals" in public spaces. This law requires police officers to check the legality of anyone who is "reasonably suspected" of unlawful residency, prohibits employers from hiring "illegals" and property owners cannot rent to them. The law's rationale is conveyed as follows: "The intent of this act is to make attrition through enforcement the public policy of all state and local government agencies in Arizona, to discourage and deter the unlawful entry and presence of aliens" (Maldonado, 2010). The law's primary architect rationalized the law as a means to promote the "voluntary" self-deportation of illegal immigrants.[5] Alabama's HB 56 law also establishes attrition as state policy. According to the law's chief sponsor, the law is intended to attach "every aspect of an illegal alien's life . . . to make it difficult for them to live here so they will deport themselves (Waslin, 2012, p. 3). Similar restrictive laws were enacted in Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah. These laws are designed to generate fear as state policy, so "illegal immigrants" will realize the dangers of entering public spaces.

Conjoined with this militaristic rhetoric of legislative bodies is the courtroom policies that criminalize migrants. In 2005, the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice launched Operation Streamline [OS]. This program was originally designed to combat drug trafficking, weapons trafficking and human smuggling. In recent years, OS has been extended to prosecute those convicted migrant who enter the U.S. illegally. This extension was included within the "zero-tolerance" policy of 2018 by Attorney General Jeff Sessions (Robertson, et al., 2012). Circumventing the civil immigration system, OS requires that all cases of undocumented entry from Mexico be handled through the criminal justice system. What distinguishes OS from most other cases of criminality is the fast-paced courtroom proceedings that occur with a large group of defendants. Violations of immigration laws are also treated as a criminal rather than an administrative matter. Those prosecuted for the first time are charged with a

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[5] In full support of this law, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer cited immigrant criminality as the justification for this law:
Well, we all know that the majority of the people that are coming to Arizona and trespassing are not becoming drug mules . . . The drug cartels have taken control of the immigration. So, they are criminals. They're breaking the law when they are trespassing and they're criminals when they pack the marijuana and the drugs on their backs … Human rights violations that have taken place (by the cartels) victimizing immigrants and the families are abhorrent (CNN Wire Staff, 2010).

misdemeanor which requires a maximum six-month sentence (Lydgate, 2010). Those charged with illegal entry with a previous prosecution for the same sort of violation are charged with a felony which carries a maximum two-year sentence. Defense attorneys encourage the defendants to plead guilty, which would bring a shorter prison term compared to those defendants who do not plead guilty and are subsequently convicted. As a result, under OS, those defendants who do in fact plead guilty are prosecuted at a rate of 99% (Lydgate, 2010).

Operation Streamline has been implemented in the Federal District Court of every U.S.-Mexico border area, except for California (Robertson, et al., 2012). For example, the Federal District Court of Tucson, Arizona, is responsible for large numbers of immigration-related cases in the country. On one particular day, they prosecuted 70 in 30 minutes, an average of 25 seconds per case, according to the *New York Times* (Santos, 2014). This District Court has handled up to 200 cases of unauthorized border crossings in a single morning. On other days this District Court will provide slightly more time per case, as much as two minutes per defendant (Robertson, et al., 2012, p. 2).

On January 9, 2020, I observed an OS proceeding in Tucson Federal Court, where a large group of migrants were accused of illegal entry or reentry into the U.S. In a sterile courtroom, about 50 young people, presumably all Latinos/as, entered with chains at their waist/hands and at their feet. They were dressed in sloppy clothes, such as baggy jeans and tee shirts, possibly those worn when they were apprehended days or weeks before. I saw no orange prison clothes. I documented portions of the interaction between judge and defendants. The judged read out the names of 10 defendants, then explained the accusation against them:

> "Each has been charged with either a misdemeanor for entry into the United States or a felony for entry with a prior deportation. Each of you signed a guilty plea. The guilty plea means that if you enter again, you could be charged and punished."

The judge then read the name of one defendant.

> "Did you plead guilty in your plea agreement?"

> "Si," was the reply.

> "Did your attorney explain your charges?"

"Si."

"Did you have difficulty understanding the charges?"

"No."

"Do you now plead guilty to these charges?"

"Si."

"By pleading guilty, you are waiving certain rights and you agree to stipulate removal. Mr. … Did you enter the United States through Sasabe [Arizona]?"

"Si."

The judge declared the guilt of the defendant and ordered a sentence of time served.

This back-and-forth interaction was repeated for each of the 10 defendants standing in a row. The entire exchange between judge and defendant took about 60 seconds. The sentencing of the first 10 people was the same minus the time served since their incarceration, as presumably they were picked up together. Then another group of 10 defendants stepped up and engaged in the same process, resulting in all cases of conviction and sentencing. After this group of 40 defendants walked out of the courtroom in shackles, another group of about 40 other shackled defendants shuffled in, and then another group of about 20. The entire proceeding for approximately 100 defendants took 75 minutes. All of them would be deported immediately, for those whose sentence was time served, or be transferred to prison to serve the remainder of their sentence (Marcías-Rojas, 2016, p. 94).

Of course, the OS cases vary. For example, in some cases the names of the town where the defendants were apprehended were Douglas or Nogales. Also, the sentencing ranged from time-served to as much as 180 days. The sentences were varied; 30 days was frequent; one had 75 days, another 105, and one 160 days. There was no explanation for this variation. As I learned later, lengthy sentences were most likely given to those who re-entered the country after a prior deportation, which represents a felony.

As the judge read their rights and solicited their responses, it struck me that he used a respectful tone towards the defendants and expressed concern for their well-being. After delivering the guilty sentence, he said to each defendant, "Good luck to you." No insults were hurled, nor was there evidence of lying, name-calling, or malicious labeling.

This interaction between judge and defendants lacked any expression or tone of hostility or disdain.

Yet, the symbols at the systems level are clear. The defendants' shackles reminded me of the chain gangs of the South—a familiar symbol of racialized criminal justice. Beneath the verbal commands of the courtroom guards, the restrictions of the physical movements and the shackles around their bodies lies the latent power of systemic degradation. OS establishes the positioning of migrants as lesser beings in relation to the prosecution of native-born Americans. Their courtroom cases are rushed as is their time with defense attorneys. What I witnessed was the manifestations of the systemic positioning of migrants as criminals, yet without insult, slander, name-calling or malicious labeling. This is a clear case of SCA.

Systemic Character Assassination as Power

SCA can be understood through the *power relations* among categories of people. A deep dive into the meaning of governmental power is instructive for understanding SCA. In general, power represents a disposition—a potentiality—to act in certain ways that potentially influence others. This includes the capacity to dominate, rule, govern, sway, control influence, legislate, or alter the behavior and thoughts of the nation's population. As a potentiality, power is observable only when it is exercised and not before. This potentiality of power is realized in governmental programs to contribute to society's health, well-being, and security, or in programs that harm, threaten or severely neglect certain people.

With this course-grained conception, we can think of the power of SCA as simple and objective. First, the following logicality can capture the simplicity of such power. If certain enabling conditions are realized, then the agent with power can act in ways that influences another person or group. This pattern implies directionality from an agent to a person or group being influenced, like an arrow's flight. Second, power seems to be something that is possessed, like money exchanged for commodities or services.

These two characteristics of power regarding its linearity and objectivity as a commodity are inappropriate for understanding the power dynamics of SCA. First, such power relations do not imply a simple linearity. The idea that power begins and ends within a sequence of potential interactions between agent and target tacitly suppresses the many social-political influences on such interactions. In general, state power has no single source. It lacks concrete directionality, and it is not independent of the actions, processes, and thoughts of governmental officials. Second, power cannot be acquired,

seized, possessed, accumulated, and hoarded by any human agent. Regarding its meaning, Foucault (1990) argues that power is not something tangible like a commodity. Power has neither directionality nor a fixed point of origin. Never concentrated entirely in the hands of a single person, not even political tyrants, power is like "manifold relations of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions" (p. 94).
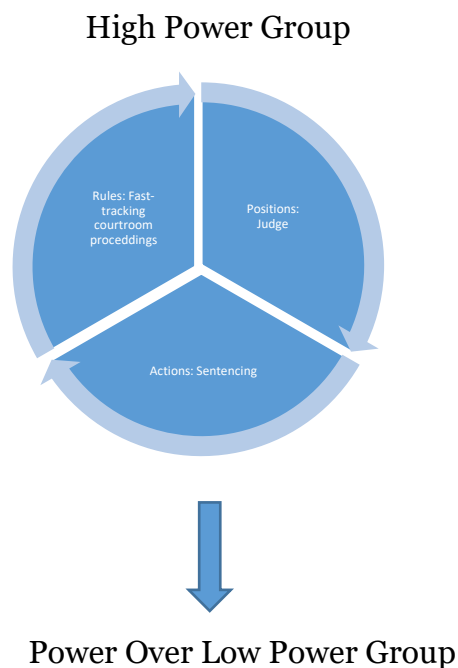
Regarding SCA, the deep meaning of its power centers on certain fields of practice.[6] That is, such power can be understood through the capacity of certain actors to exert their influence over others in particular fields of practice. A field consists of a landscape of practices guided by socially sanctioned norms such as the explicit rules of the organization, commands by an institution's director, and public principles that guide the institution's operations (Bourdieu et al, 1994).[7] Within a field, each player engages in certain strategic practices as they navigate through the channels of power. Such practices represent tactics for surviving, struggling or possibly advancing within the ranks. Within a field, each participant is given a certain degree of capital. Additionally, the field is structured in ways that determine the range of possible action for each participant. Conformity to the field's game rules is expected; successful navigation in a field requires skillful mastery of such rules. Some rules are explicit, such as executive orders to subordinates, and others are tacit, such as mundane expectations for the proper displays of deference, respect and honor to superiors. Yet, each field offers a certain range of flexibility, where the agent is given some license in selecting or applying the rules. But the agent who goes too far by explicitly violating rules risks reprimand, punishment or hardship imposed on the offender.

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[6] For this distinction between surface meaning and deep meaning, I draw upon the insights of 20th-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. He argued that a term's surface meaning, which he called its surface grammar, consists of a network of similarities—family resemblances—across a potentially wide range of contexts in which a term is used. A term's deep meaning lies beneath its surface in the forms of life—patterns of practice and thought—that are presupposed in the proper use of the term. For example, the deep meaning of 'violence' refers to forms of life that impact an agent's psychological state, the history of social relations between agent and target and the social norms that underpin the violent behavior. The deep meaning of violence reveals its underlying processes, mechanisms and structures, all of which contribute to understanding its surface meaning.

[7] A field refers to "networks of social relations, structured systems of social positions, within which struggles or maneuvers take place over resources, stakes and access" (Oakes et al., 1998, p. 260).

Moreover, a field is structured with respect to the social or political positions assigned to its participants (Bourdieu et al., 1994). In general, a position refers to the relative normative stance that an individual or group is assigned as implicated in certain social interactions with others (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). Actors adopt, are assigned, are born into, or are forcibly defined by positions. Within a position, actors are afforded a certain degree of power in their relations with others; they are given certain social capital, which an agent can use for his or her advantage. For example, positions are reflected in the normalized interactions between doctors and their patients, prison guards and the prisoners, and militant commanders and their subordinates.

There are three elements to the power dynamics of SCA: rules, positions and actions. These interlocking elements are located within a field of practice. These elements are represented in Figure 1 regarding the courtroom proceedings associated with Operation Streamline.
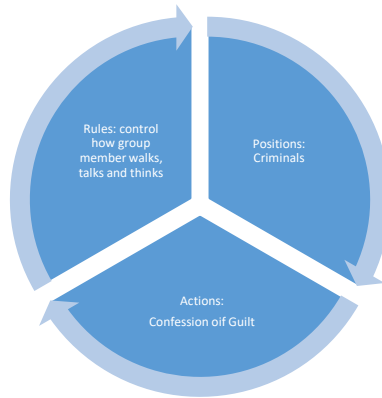
High Power Group

Rules: Fast-tracking courtroom proceddings

Positions: Judge

Actions: Sentencing

Power Over Low Power Group

Figure 1 Systemic Character Assassination Field of Practice

Regarding the power relations of SCA, there is always the possibility of *resistance*. Returning to the OS that I observed in Arizona, no defendant exhibited any outward sign of resisting the directives and judgments in the courtroom hearing. Yet, resistance is evident in the repetition of unauthorized border crossing. Again, the Department of Justice rationalizes the need for OS on the grounds of deterrence, arguing that the sheer volume of prosecutions would significantly reduce the number of unauthorized border crossings. Yet, many migrants have not been deterred. According to recent research findings, the rate of the prosecutions of immigration violations has no significant deterrent effect. The documented failure of OS to deter migrants demonstrates the power of resistance against the criminal justice system. The decision to migrate is influenced more strongly by "push factors," such as the fear of life-threatening violence in one's home country and "pull factors" such as the lure of joining loved ones living in the U.S. (Corradini et al., 2018, p. 3).

Conclusion

Character assassination does not always occur with an agent's intentions to degrade someone. In cases of protracted conflicts, governmental powers tend to contort the social-political order in ways that rationalize their dominance. Within such an order, the placement of low power group as inferiors captures, presumably, their essential nature. They are living with a taint that cannot be removed by their actions, achievements or individual character traits. Such placement defines systems of malignant categorical positioning, which in turn constitutes a sort of existential violence.

Yet, the exercise of governmental power reveals a fundamental paradox. Exercising control over their subjects potentially undermines their capacity to control them in

subsequent contexts. The possible resistance to such power is an ever-present condition of the field of power-oriented practices. Governmental officials exercising power has the counter-effect of undermining their subsequent use of power. Possible resistance is not a secondary impact of self-contained governmental power. Such resistance is included tacitly in the exercise of such power, reflecting the dynamism of the relationship between agent and target. With such dynamism, the agent of power in one field of practice can target agents of another field. The exertion of legitimate power by a governmental authority within their state-centric field has a direct impact on the reactive-power of the targeted population group within their community-centric field of practices. Of course, the paradoxical nature of governmental power is an anathema to most governmental authorities, who are guided by a linear conception of sovereign power. Such simplicities serve the interests of authorities to artificially suppress the disabling conditions of their controls, as such conditions are completely alien to governmental mandates.

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