

## **Savage Frontier: Making News and Security on the Argentine Border**

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### Study Guide

#### Introduction

1. The book begins with a story of an incident, in which the national gendarmerie detains a team of journalists from Buenos Aires for crossing the border between Brazil and Argentina through a clandestine path (*pique*). What does this episode tell us about news production and security in the tri-border region? How are news production and security related? Why is making news and making security in the area likened to a game of hide-and-seek?
2. The Spanish word "frontera" is translated into English both as "border" and "frontier" (p. 9). What are the definitions and connotations of each of these terms? Why do Iguazúenses object when the tri-border area is called "Triple Frontera"?
3. What role does the media play in circulating the discourse of "frontera caliente"?
4. What is securitization? What events and how led to the securitization of the tri-border area?
5. How is media both a "stage" for performing security and a "threat" to security? Explain why for the media "security concerns are a double-edged sword" (p. 19).
6. How is violence defined? What is the definition of crime? Why is it difficult to represent violence and crime in the media? What are some of the problems that journalists face when portraying violence and crime?
7. What is the difference between legality and legitimacy? How do journalists in Iguazú use "news as tactics" when covering illegalized activities?
8. Why were many radio stations in Iguazú called "pirate" or "clandestine"? How did "pirate" media contribute to strengthening the Argentine state in the border region?

#### Chapter 1

1. Why is the chapter called "breaking the code of silence"? How do journalists approach public secrets? Do anthropologists deal with silenced topics the same way?
2. Ethnography and journalism are two parallel modes of knowledge production (p. 46). What are the similarities between them? What are their differences?
3. How did switching her roles between being an anthropologist and a journalist impact on the author's experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork and writing the book?

#### Chapter 2

1. In what ways does the media "see" like the state? Discuss the following excerpt (p. 96): "The media's 'seeing like a state' implies thematic, logistical, economic and political schemes that reduce the physical and social geography of the country into a legible narrative, based on the rhetorical opposition between civilization and barbarism, order and porous borders, state and frontier."

2. What is the genealogy of the opposition between civilization and barbarism? Discuss the origins of this divisive narrative in Western political theory and explain how political leaders in Latin America used this trope to legitimate state building and military intervention.
3. Who was Domingo Sarmiento and what is his legacy in Argentina?
4. Where is the province of Misiones? Why has it been portrayed as the nation-state's "dislocated arm"? What are the underlying assumptions and the potential implications of using this metaphor?
5. How have the tri-border region's unusual geography and its history of autonomy contribute to the difficulties of establishing Argentine government's control in Misiones?
6. Why is frontier-making an effective tool of statecraft? Discuss and explain the following excerpt (p. 70): "The story of an incomplete project—a state that fails to exert control over its borders, where competing actors and ideologies challenge its laws and authority—can be effectively conjured up by the government to justify its policies and actions in the name of security."
7. Why was it important to have effective connection via transportation and communications infrastructure between Buenos Aires and the Argentine Northeast?
8. Why were the tourism industry and the security forces the two main pillars of state-building in Misiones?
9. Discuss and explain the following excerpt (p. 80): "Misiones has become the scene of a highly politicized, self-justifying, and self-perpetuating cycle of law violation and law enforcement, which locks the traffickers and the border control apparatus in a perpetual fight and leads to an escalation of the problem." Do you agree that border control is a ritualized performance, a game?
10. What news stories from the province of Misiones most commonly appear in the Argentine mass media? Why is the region represented through the lenses of nature and criminality? Has the depiction of Misiones in contemporary metropolitan dailies changed since its portrayal in the nineteenth century press?
11. What is a "newsworthy" story? What does newsworthiness depend on? By using the example of *Clarín*, discuss how political, logistical and financial aspects of the media industry shape the topics that are covered in the news.
12. How does the media reproduce the dominant geography of security? Discuss how media's coverage of tropical diseases and child malnourishment contribute to the securitization of the border and criminalization of poverty.

### Chapter 3

1. Explain the following claim (p. 104): "The Triple Frontier is both an experiential and a discursive category." What implications does this double character of the Triple Frontier have for ethnographers who study it? Why is it important to examine "the process of translation and negotiation of the global security discourse"? From an ethnographic perspective, what are some of the difficulties of studying security as discourse?
2. How has American media, including *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, CBS News and others, portrayed the Triple Frontier?
3. In what ways is security "a self-referential discourse based on constructing large-scale threats"?
4. How have local residents, among them government officials and journalists, challenged the "frontera caliente" narrative and resisted the securitization of the area? Why do they reject global and national security discourses?

5. Michel Foucault wrote that the milieu in which a security apparatus works produces a circular link between causes and effects (p. 109). Explain this claim. Do you think this applies to the case of the Triple Frontier?
6. Based on the material included in this chapter, how would you answer the following question (p. 115): "Can knowledge producers effectively destabilize the global discourse of security that frames border residents as threats"?
7. How did André's personal biography, as a long-term resident of the border area and a professional journalist, impact on his understanding of "the world of illegality" in Eastern Paraguay?
8. Discuss and explain the following statement by *Página/12* columnist Martín Granovsky: "*Vivir al límite* [to live on the edge] is not the same as *vivir en el límite* [to live on the margins]" (p. 129).

#### Chapter 4

1. How is security on the local scale different from its national and global forms? Why is it important for anthropologists to study security as a lived experience?
2. How is the understanding of security in Iguazú influenced by the criminalization of the border region, by the collective memory of state violence during the military dictatorship, and by economic uncertainty that residents face in their daily lives? What are some of the other factors that influence their perception of security and their experience of insecurity?
3. What is the dominant geography of violence and crime in the Argentine national space? How do Iguazúenses reverse it? Why do they call Buenos Aires the historical and geographical center of state violence and violent crime? Discuss and explain the following excerpt (p. 135): "Geography of blame for crime and violence is predicated on the opposition of the urban core and the rural periphery, of the center of the state and its territorial margins, even if they are constitutive of each other."
4. What is "*convivencia*"? How is it similar to and how is it different from "complicity"? How does *convivencia* constrain news-making? How does it protect journalists? Discuss the following excerpt (p. 172): "Complicity and *convivencia*, more than mechanisms of media censorship and control, worked as modes of protection from harm for journalists, physical as well as economic."
5. Explain the saying "*pueblo chico, infierno grande*" (p. 137).
6. Why are statistics inaccurate representations of crime? How is crime a social fact? How can anthropology contribute to our understanding of crime?
7. What is a "symbiotic" relationship? In what ways are interactions between the security forces and the local media in Iguazú symbiotic? What are some of the consequences of the present symbiotic ties between law enforcement and news reporters?
8. In what ways does the public memory of the brutal military dictatorship shape news-making in Iguazú?
9. Why is the "copy and paste" format of crime coverage in Iguazú news media "a ritualistic performance"? Discuss the following excerpt (p. 161): "In this small-town scenario, the monotonous copy-and-paste style of publishing of crime news, first sketched and authorized by the *fuerzas*, can be understood as a tactic that journalists use to balance their potentially risky profession with the need to ensure their own safety." How is news-making in Iguazú "both pragmatic and performative" (p. 171)?
10. "We are all neighbors," said Yanina to the federal police chief in Iguazú. What does it mean? Why does it matter? What does this statement tell us about news-making and security?
11. Why is it important for news reporters in Iguazú to be trained in the "gymnastics of journalism"?

12. What are some of the obstacles that prevent reporting on violence against women? Why is it difficult to write about human trafficking in the media?

## Chapter 5

1. Why do local journalists occupy “a multifaceted and seemingly contradictory position” (p. 175) in the community? What is contradictory about their social position? In what ways does their role as residents of Iguazú conflict with their mandates as news reporters?
2. What is the difference between activities that are defined as “legal,” “legitimate,” and “licit” (and, conversely, illegal, illegitimate, illicit)?
3. How do journalists maneuver between information “for the record,” “on the record,” and “off the record”?
4. What is the “informal” economy? How does it intersect with the “formal” economy?
5. What international agreements regulate the movement of goods between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay? How do regional trade treaties exacerbate social inequalities in border communities?
6. Why is smuggling “an unavoidable side effect of structural inequalities created by the border” (p. 181)?
7. What is “moral economy”? What are its norms and limits in Iguazú?
8. Why do Iguazúenses tolerate and even engage in informal market activities, when it involves breaking the law? What are some of the creative ways that they have developed to circumvent control at the customs?
9. How does selective news reporting produce (or reaffirm) the boundary between law and crime? How does media coverage legitimate the informal economy?
10. What is “the common sense” of living on the border? How is it different from legal norms of the state? What happens when “the letter of the law and local practices, as well as local social and moral regimes, [...] do not coincide” (p. 199)?
11. How does common sense determine and limit what news stories journalists create? Discuss the following excerpt (p. 193): “Faced with what they see as longstanding government injustice, Iguazú journalists use local common sense to justify their refusal to report on petty smuggling and other minor law infringements, thereby contesting the state-centered communicative cartographies that underlie the mass media’s coverage of law and crime.”

## Chapter 6

1. Why were adoptions a public secret, a “tema tabú” in Iguazú? Why were Iguazúenses reluctant to talk about adoptions in public?
2. What is “informal fosterage” (*criadazgo*)? What is “irregular adoption”? What is “sale of children”? What is “child trafficking”? What are the consequences of conflating these terms and using them interchangeably in media coverage?
3. Why is the blind application of the uncompromising dichotomy between victims and perpetrators, which characterizes much of the government and human rights work on human trafficking and child trafficking cases, problematic? Explain the following excerpt (p. 232): “Governments, in conjunction with the mainstream media, eagerly deploy the grammar of international law and the vocabulary of criminal threats in ways that have mixed consequences for communities targeted by these discourses.” What are those “mixed consequences”?
4. How does anthropology allow us to “deconstruct the taken-for-granted norms that stigmatize and criminalize certain ‘morally questionable’ behaviors” (p. 205)? How does an anthropological

perspective help us understand and explain the differences between irregular adoptions, sale of children, and child trafficking, addressed in this chapter?

5. Discuss the following excerpt (p. 209): "State intervention in the name of security—its legal and bureaucratic fight against child trafficking and the sale of children, complemented by strengthened law enforcement—was counterproductive. It only worsened the precarious living conditions and deepened the economic insecurity of the poor, which were the initial conditions that made irregular adoption practices, including the sale of children, possible." How does the fear of criminalization caused by negative media portrayals condition news-making in Iguazú?
6. Explain the following excerpt (p. 229): "I felt frustration and helplessness realizing that the camera could not adequately capture the nuances of this social reality without establishing moral and legal categories that would distort it." Why was it difficult for the author as journalist to confront the social reality of adoptions?
7. What does the ethnographic story about the production of a television program tell us about "the predicament of the media in situations where concerns about legality, publicity, and security are at odds" (p. 233)?
8. What are the similarities and differences between ethnography and journalism as two distinct, yet overlapping modes of representation and knowledge production?
9. What are the ethics and the politics of ethnography? How do they compare to ethical and political mandates of journalism?
10. Can this book contribute to the discourse of criminalization, marginalization and securitization directed at Iguazú and its residents? How does the author explain and justify her decision to write about people who engage in illegalized practices? Discuss the following excerpt (p. 236): "The risk of the text being used against the intentions of its author fades against the risk of leaving illegalized activities in the ethnographic blindspot and thereby participating in complicity with political structures and powerful actors that perpetuate conditions of insecurity under which Iguazúenses live." What do you think is the right choice, ethically and politically, when writing about outlawed activities: self-censorship or full exposure, or something in between? Why?

## Conclusion

1. How can their jobs in the news media prevent journalists from partaking in the informal exchanges common on the border?
2. How do journalists use news-making as a tool in making security?
3. Why do journalists prefer leaving the informal economy invisible and illegible to the government instead of making news about it?
4. Explain the following excerpt (p. 245): "As a social practice, news-making is laid across a terrain fractured by structural inequalities and reconstituted by local alliances, which hold the media accountable to the rules of maneuvering between shared stories on the record and practical knowledge off the record."
5. Why is ethnography "an effective method for studying the news media as the nodal point between the global and the local scales of making security, where the two blend into each other and cannot be split apart"? (p. 245)
6. What are the politics and the ethics of writing a book about people who violate the law? What becomes news in Iguazú and what does not is tightly linked to concerns over security. How do such concerns affect the content of an ethnographic book? How does the author explain her decision to write about illegalized practices, despite the possibility that this book could contribute to further criminalization of the border region?