

Inderpal Grewal

*Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First-Century America*

Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press (2017)

ISBN: 978-0-8223-6898-4 (PB)

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**Quote:** "This is a bold, brave, and forthright book. It is not for the thin-skinned among those who are part of the neoliberal establishment."

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Inderpal Grewal's *Saving the Security State* is a thoughtful, interdisciplinary critique of neoliberalism in the United States in the twenty-first century. Utilizing tools borrowed from postcolonial and transnational studies, American studies, security studies, media studies, law and society, critical race theory, and gender studies, Grewal examines what she calls "advanced neoliberalism" from a variety of vantage points in an attempt to piece together in a responsible way the various interlocking and overlapping components of the quandary that is contemporary US politics. Through myriad disciplinary lenses, Grewal examines closely Hurricane Katrina, American humanitarianism, the US crackdown on Muslim charities in the aftermath of 9/11, the phenomena of "security moms" and "security feminists," the concept of "parental control" technology, and the murders at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin in 2012 to try to make sense of a cultural politics in the United States that Grewal argues produces "exceptional citizens," primarily white, Christian men who police and preserve the security state. In the process, Grewal argues that there exists an international network of white-supremacist organizations that operates to support authoritarian American security and surveillance regimes.

A thoroughgoing critique of US ("advanced") neoliberalism and authoritarian power, *Saving the Security State* argues in favor of changes in US policy that would, in Grewal's view, achieve antiracist, antisecurity, and anti-imperialist objectives. Specifically, Grewal takes issue with, among other US policies, the "widespread incarceration of people of color," the "surveillance of everyone," new modes of online data-gathering that government agencies use to increase policing, the creation of "no-fly lists," increased deportation, and injunctions posted all over public spaces in most cities and towns asking people to "say something if you see something" (127), all of which she would have changed or eliminated.

In the introduction, Grewal sets the tone of the book by stating that the American "empire" asks its citizens to participate in two seemingly divergent "modes of participation," surveillance and

saving, in a way that co-constructs citizens as both subjects of militarization and subjects of welfare.

Chapter 1 uses primarily the tools of media studies to examine the US handling of Hurricane Katrina, and the international response thereto, to exemplify and explain recent shifts in state and US power. According to Grewal, the massive bungling that constituted the US response to Hurricane Katrina was accompanied by the exposure--through transnational media systems--of US indifference to and incompetence regarding the welfare of the state's nonwhite citizens (who were Katrina's most prominent victims). On the global stage, US power, lack of power, violence, and collaboration and partnership with corporations was exposed, with the result that private organizations came to be seen as embodying the virtues of self-helping, American individuals. Part of this picture, for Grewal, is the fact that corporations were used by the US to be the face of help for Katrina victims, resulting in the anthropomorphization of (profit-centered) corporations. The goal, as well as the end result, according to Grewal, was the (unjustified but very public) valorization of American individualism. The (false) picture painted was that individuals (in the form of corporations), not the US government, provided what little help was given to Katrina victims.

In chapter 2, US humanitarianism is analyzed and revealed to be a vehicle through which inequalities between Americans and others are made visible, as well as a mechanism for the sanitization of, and justification for, American military intervention. All of this entails, for Grewal, a concept of what it means to be an American citizen that includes, among other things, a personal identity as a world-traveling caregiver, a selfless, moral global citizen who is just trying to do good in the world. At the same time, according to Grewal, US humanitarianism is coupled with surveillance. By this Grewal means that the American engaged in international humanitarian efforts is typically at the same time a tourist as well as a sort of spy, taking in the sights for pleasure and also for data-gathering.

In addition, for Grewal, US humanitarianism operates as an individualizing and racializing sovereignty. Whereas the media casts US humanitarianism as based on American impulses of kindness, caring, and good citizenship, in reality US humanitarianism operates as a mechanization for the mobilization of US persuasion and influence, transforming war into a humanitarian project. According to Grewal, US humanitarianism reduces demands on the state by citizens, places low-income citizens at the mercy of the wealthy, and weakens connections between people and the state. In addition, US humanitarianism rejects the sovereignty of the state in the name of a so-called higher moral order. Importantly, as Grewal sees it, Christianity plays a key role in US humanitarianism, often resulting in the exclusion of Muslims from the category of "humanitarian." In other words, what Grewal calls "humanitarian citizenship" (or those who count as humanitarian) is created in the process, and includes only American Christians. In addition, US humanitarianism "replaces the language of activism and rights with that of charity," and "[places] low-income citizens at the mercy of the wealthy" (65).

The central idea of chapter 3 is the process through which US humanitarianism became a form of state influence and persuasion that was essential to the geopolitics of the war on terror during the first eight years of the new millennium. During this time period, according to Grewal, both "exceptional citizens" and "their Others" were produced in four ways: (1) US citizens became

"exceptional Christian humanitarians" as contrasted with Muslims, (2) deliberately vague laws were developed that were sufficiently flexible to facilitate the criminalization of (mostly) Muslims in the name of humanitarianism, (3) white Christian evangelicals received government aid and funding that supported their welfare work but also allowed them to remain unaccountable to federal guidelines, and (4) humanitarianism became fused with Christian missionary activities. After 9/11, according to Grewal, state surveillance and racial harassment of Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians operated alongside the exceptionalism accorded to evangelical Christians.

An example provided by Grewal of a deliberately vague law that facilitated the criminalization of (mostly) Muslims is George W. Bush's post-9/11 executive order targeting humanitarian organizations, resulting in the closing down of many American Islamic charities. At the same time, most humanitarian funding in the post-9/11 era went through the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI), formed in 2001 by George W. Bush, and this funding went almost entirely to Christian groups. Problematically, these groups did not abide by federal nondiscrimination regulations governing beneficiaries and hiring requirements. Since as a result of these realities, federally funded humanitarianism had primarily an (unregulated) Christian face, US humanitarianism became fused in the public eye with Christian missionary activities.

The role of "imperial feminism" in Grewal's "advanced neoliberalism" is examined in chapter 4. "Imperial feminism," according to Grewal, is a form of feminism with a European history and attachments to whiteness and empire. Importantly, "imperial feminism" is composed of mostly white women and involves what Grewal calls the "Orientalist" idea of saving Muslim women that is used to justify war. "Imperial feminism" also involves those who support war in the name of demanding from the government more "security" for state and family. Adding complexity, many feminisms support "imperial feminism" in a less direct way. Even feminisms that struggle against racialized feminine and feminist norms, as well as those who are anti-imperialist and antiwar, have been affected by neoliberal policies and imperial wars, as all were recruited into what Grewal sees as the militarization and securitization of everyday life. Two key forms that "imperial feminism" takes are the "security feminist" and the "security mom." The "security feminist" appears as a liberal, white, and patriotic feminist working for the state and military. The "security mom" is a conservative, white, and patriotic supporter of state security and the heterosexual, white family. In chapter 4, Grewal analyzes the shared existence of these forms of "imperial feminism" with the American belief that women in the United States have better lives than women in other parts of the world, even as American women continue to experience gendered inequalities, cuts in welfare for women with families, and what Grewal (correctly) describes as the banality of sexual violence in the United States.

"Parental control" technologies and their role in "advanced neoliberalism" are the subject of chapter 5. According to Grewal, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there exists a widespread belief that Internet and communication technologies have created a generational divide between children and parents rooted in the fact that the children have grown up in the digital age. Known as "digital natives," twenty-first-century American children are the "precision targets" of these technologies, according to Grewal, resulting, in part, in surveillance becoming a key part of American parenting. The way Grewal sees it, parents are now expected to surveil. The American family has become securitized, connecting militarism to family and gender. This

surveillance entails data-gathering and data-selling, with the fear of infiltration driving the surveillance coexisting with the fear of infiltration historically reserved for immigrants and nonwhites. Pointedly, observes Grewal, surveillance activities carried out by nonwhites, particularly Muslim youth, often leads to terrorism charges, whereas surveillance activities carried out by white Christians are encouraged and supported. Technology, concludes Grewal, is shaped by the needs and desires of capital and military research.

*Saving the Security State* ends with an inquiry into what Grewal calls the "shooter," or the figure of the angry, white, Christian man who "sees himself as dispossessed from his rightful place of power in the nation and exerting the sovereignty given to him by virtue of his gender and race" (185). Associated with the mass shootings that now occur frequently in the United States, the "shooter" is nonetheless not called a killer, a murderer, or a criminal. Along with the other "exceptional US citizens" listed in Grewal's book, the "shooter" instead "belongs to the past and future of the racial, imperial security state" that is the United States. He is antigovernment and sees government as an illicit power over the freedom of white power. And so he is a kind of hero, a saver of the security state "in which he finds the power of white supremacy" (186). Curiously, for Grewal, few other countries allow their inhabitants to amass weapons, resulting in a gun culture in the United States that is different in scale from that of any other country. According to Grewal, the result is a private militia and the militarization of the home through the production of patriarchy.

Within this framework, the killing in Oak Creek, Wisconsin in 2012 of five people and a policeman in a Sikh temple, and the 2015 killing of nine people in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in which nonwhite religious worshippers were targeted in private places of worship, are deemed "hate crimes" rather than terrorist acts, with the term "terrorist" reserved for nonwhite, usually Muslim, acts of racialized violence. Grewal is particularly dismayed by the fact that, in her view, the term *shooter* is constructed as a sovereign citizen and that this construction "places this figure in the historical genealogy of the making of the American nation, specifically the long history of settler colonialism, Manifest Destiny, and westward expansion" (193), whereas the term *terrorist* is reserved for an actor whose motives are never individualized, but are attributed solely to a collective religious or cultural identity.

The theme of *Saving the Security State*--that the United States in the early twenty-first century is a wolf of surveillance and militarization (dramatically enhanced and exacerbated by the influence of the Internet) in the sheep's clothing of humanitarianism and so-called good parenting skills--rings true to anyone who is old enough to have been an adult before 9/11 and/or anyone whose personal identity is outside of the basic demographic of Grewal's exceptional citizen(s). For anyone else, it is either an eye-opener or a shock to the system, depending on their training and life experiences. In this book, Grewal captures--through her multidisciplinary engagement with the key features of early twenty-first-century American political life--something important and troubling about the odd state of affairs in which we find ourselves here in the post-9/11 digital age.

Most provocative about Grewal's book is her claim that the "exceptional citizens" she describes (and their politico-cultural support systems) constitute a network of white supremacists self-

consciously engaged in the collective work of reinforcing the systems of racial and economic domination and hierarchy that have historically shaped the Western world (from a certain point of view). Also of note is Grewal's calling out of certain feminisms with regard to what she sees as their participation (whether deliberate or inadvertent) in that same project. This is a bold, brave, and forthright book. It is not for the thin-skinned among those who are part of the neoliberal establishment. From a philosophical point of view, this book is a harsh critique of the rhetoric of universal human rights, a brash and direct confrontation with the hubris that many see in the Western claim (rooted in natural-law theory and Kantian ethics) to have discovered and articulated rules and regulations according to which the rest of world should live on pain of the charge of lacking in civility or moral worth.

*Saving the Security State* is one author's incisive critique of what she sees as a distinctively American sort of hypocrisy that pervades US politics in the early twenty-first century. It is recommended reading for anyone who is interested in a perspective on American politico-cultural life in the contemporary age of someone who is well-trained in the responsible utilization of multiple disciplinary lenses, and whose lived experiences are outside of the politico-cultural machine that constitutes mainstream twenty-first-century American political life.