

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Europe's Border Crisis: Biopolitical Security and Beyond*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780198747024 (cloth)

In September 2015, a picture of a three-year-old Syrian boy lying lifeless on a Turkish beach quickly spread around the world, leading to reactions by many governments and people. Even if little Aylan was not the first—nor the last—human being dying on the edge of the continent, for various reasons his tragic image prompted international responses to what was then already called a “migrant and refugee crisis” in the Mediterranean. But while international organizations, NGOs and local populations develop fragmented responses to this situation, most EU leaders seem without true political willingness to generate an adequate plan for collective action. And the few plans they try fail, as they have failed for decades now. This is so mainly because, as it has been shown by critical geographers of migration policies, among others, the main “solution” (enhanced border control) reinforces the “problem” of irregular migration. A new way of thinking about Europe’s borders is needed. And this is precisely the aim of Nick Vaughan-Williams’ *Europe’s Border Crisis*, published later in 2015, with a [front-cover](#), resonating with recent news, sporting a red and white life-belt floating on the blue sea.

The book is a dense, provocative and timely reflection on the debate on border security and migration management in Europe and beyond. Indeed, questions of migration and borders are at the core of radical geography and other social sciences. They have produced a thriving literature offering critical perspectives on current migration policies, detention and deportation, and border controls, especially in North America and the EU, highlighting the hidden dimension of international migrations and their “management” by states or other actors. But Vaughan-Williams’ book offers new perspectives. It combines a distinctive and original interpretation of the main facets of biopolitical theory with an analysis of EU border security policies in a powerful critique of the very foundations of contemporary European policies. Together with current advances in academic geography and migration and border studies, it provides new resources for radical thought—and possibly for action.

The author’s opening claim is that a crisis point has emerged, in which irregular migrants

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are treated both as a security threat to the EU and as threatened human beings who are in need of saving. Vaughan-Williams underlines deservedly that the rise of bordering practices under the rubric of humanitarianism has not attracted sufficient attention, and argues that securitization and humanitarianism are “twinned elements” (p.18) of biopolitical governmentality. This leads to paradoxical situations in which humanitarian policies and practices often expose irregular migrants to dehumanizing and lethal border security mechanisms. The dominant way of understanding this apparent paradox—blaming the gap between policy and practice—fails to address the deeper political issues at stake and ends up perpetuating the terms of the crisis. In order to offer an alternative diagnosis and move beyond the present impasse, Vaughan-Williams offers an innovative exegesis of four major contemporary political philosophers, which he then applies to an analysis of contemporary EU migration policies and refugee issues in the Mediterranean. Chapter 2 shows how Foucault might help us understand the “positive characteristics” of biopolitical bordering practices. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus on the “negative aspects” of those contemporary practices, drawing on frameworks developed by Agamben, Derrida and Esposito, in order to analyse not only Foucault’s concept of “letting die” but also the process of “dehumanization” and “animalization” of migrants, in radical contrast with notions of humanitarian border security. According to Vaughan-Williams, the limits of Foucauldian biopolitics and Agambian thanatopolitics are exposed by the discourse of animalization, which is a necessary condition for the rhetoric of humanitarianism (p.84). As a result, both negative and positive dimensions of EU border security appear as characteristic of tensions within biopolitical techniques of government. After having explored the insights and limits of the biopolitical, thanatopolitical and zoopolitical paradigms, the author discusses Esposito’s immunity paradigm and the concept of “immunitary borders” (p.113) that underpins most of his findings. He shows that in the context of this paradigm “irregular migrants are always already framed as the kind of contagion that requires ever more aggressive border control” (p.119). In this context, “biopolitical border security practices” (p.67) designed to protect and save lives often contain the potential violence that threatens those very lives and ends up killing or dehumanizing them.

The final chapter turns to exploring “what it might mean to develop a more affirmative border politics”, which requires first tackling “head-on the violent potentiality of biopolitical

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bordering practices” (p.122), and then recognizing that “the essential failure of human rights, their inability to restore the broken connection between rights and life, does not take place in spite of the affirmation of the ideology of the person but rather because of it” (Esposito 2012: 5). The author shows that, in concrete terms, Esposito’s work “gestures towards the need to recalibrate the border as an immune system, so that Europe is once again able to confront—and allow itself to be confronted by—those whom it otherwise seeks to immunize itself against” (p.136). But Esposito’s work has its own limits, of which Vaughan-Williams is well aware, and it doesn’t always help “to think in more concrete terms about how an affirmative border politics would work with rather than negate borders” (p.139). In order to move forward towards a more affirmative biopolitical border imaginary, and following the pioneering work of Papadopoulos et al. (2008) on the governance of porosity, Vaughan-Williams proposes to use the notion of “autoimmunity” as a “border concept” (p.141) and to reconceptualize “the border as a porous figure, which maintains an inside/outside distinction while allowing for the ‘inside’ to open up to the ‘outside’” (p.139).

This sharp political diagnosis could have probably been strengthened, or at least nourished by more empirical work on border practices. The vignettes used at the beginning of various chapters are striking, notably the one on the military helicopter and vessel—probably from the NATO forces—which didn’t rescue a boat adrift with 72 passengers, amongst whom 63 died in the following days (p.45-46), or the one on the municipal zoo in Tripoli transformed in a migrant processing centre (p.70-71). More case studies like these would help readers to better understand both the realities of what is happening and the concrete lessons to be drawn from this forceful theoretical analysis. In the same way, more historical perspectives could also have led to a more in-depth reflection on the notion of crisis—a notion that, as well as figuring prominently in the book title, underpins most contemporary migration policies in Europe and popular understandings of events. Especially because the simple act of naming a situation as a “crisis” is already making a political statement, and the first step towards “governing” the situation. A final and more general concern: one might still wonder what the author’s philosophical *tour de force* might really imply for “concrete political action that puts a halt to the violent methods by which ‘irregular’ migrants are (re)produced both as security threats and as lives to be saved for the purposes of humanitarian governance” (p.149). As

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Marx wrote in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845): “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” 170 years later, the world still needs changing, while social scientists might have taken on the role of philosophers. Yet we do need to explore different ways of thinking about these issues, and social science can have a real impact on migration policies. This is the aim and the belief of the author, whose motivation for his study has been “to offer alternative diagnoses in the hope that this might lead to new and potentially more affirmative lines of enquiries for political judgement and action” (p.149). Let us hope that it will reach its goal and help to stop the violent and supposedly antinomic consequences of European migration policies. Despite these minor concerns, the remarkable and innovative work of Nick Vaughan-Williams certainly constitutes a step forward in migration and border studies.

References

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