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Book review: Europe's border crisis: biopolitical security and beyond

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

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With migration at the top of the European agenda, this book comes at a timely moment to think critically about the issues at stakes. Nick Vaughan-Williams, professor of International Security at the University of Warwick, provides here an analysis of the 'crisis' of European borders in relation with the migration 'crisis' that has been developing over the past few years on the Mediterranean shore and now the Balkans. The author develops an admirable synthesis of current debates on biopolitical security, migration and borders in Europe, and attempts to overcome some of the challenges associated both with biopolitical theory and current policy thinking on borders.

Vaughan-Williams builds upon two decades of research on the merging of humanitarianism and security (here, reinforced border surveillance) by asking 'why do European humanitarian border security practices often expose the very "irregular" migrants they are supposed to protect to dehumanization and death'? He convincingly insists on the necessity to take both dimension into account, and not reduce this problem to a lack of implementation. He suggests that the tension lies within the policies themselves, torn between humanitarian norms, human right values and the countries' claims to protect their territory and societies, as reflected by the dual focus of Frontex, tasked with protecting both EU's borders as well as migrants seeking to cross them.

The book develops a refined analysis of borders, their multiple meanings and current 'crisis'. The 'conceptual crisis' of the border is presented as a result of the uncertainty or their location and materialization with the externalization of border control and decentring of borders (although historically, this is nothing new). Also, as suggests the author, borders do not stop at territories, border crossings and barbed wires; they are contested fields, that extend right into migrants' bodies. The chapters address biopolitical borders (that manage the bodies of 'irregular' migrants), thanatopolitical borders (or how borders 'let migrants die', if not, actively send them back to death), zoopolitical borders (policies that seek to de-humanize migrants through degrading treatments) and immunitary borders (the attempt to ensure the immunity of countries and bodies through health measures and migrants triage).

The main strength of the book lies in its ability to engage in-depth with biopolitical theory, and overcome some of its limits. Following Foucault, the author argues for a biopolitical analysis of borders that pays attention to the relationship between government and populations, rather than territory. He also builds upon Agamben's analysis of the sovereign power and the constitutive violence of the juridical-political order. He points out to a theoretical 'crisis' resulting from the tensions between these criticisms and the other positive pole that insists on the struggle over life. The author remains cautious in his analysis and engages a subtle discussion with both supporters and critiques of these theories. He is careful in particular to acknowledge the agency of migrants as political subjects, with an ability to act

within the constraints of these systems – even though his views remain overarching at times. The notion of a crisis of the ‘humanitarian critique’ raises interesting and relevant points, but mostly delves into debates that have already been put forward, in particular by the anthropological tradition, and more recently Didier Fassin. The final chapter of the book attempts to overcome the deadlocks of the biopolitical security paradigm and the current conceptualisation of borders, through an analysis of “affirmative borders”, borrowing philosophical analysis of ‘auto-immunity’ from the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito. Here probably lies the main interest of the book, revealing the ability of the author to bring philosophical theory in IR and encourage a renewed thinking of borders in Europe – which does not seem to be the way current policies are taking (except maybe for Merkel’s ‘willkommenskultur’ put forward during the Fall 2015).

The sophisticated theoretical framework impresses by its mastery of the literature, even though at times, the writing overuses academic jargon, at the risk of speaking only to border and migration studies communities. Although the author uses extensively NGOs reports containing interviews with migrants as well as detailed reports on the activities of Frontex in the Mediterranean Sea, some chapters are particularly dry. This does not diminish the quality of the theoretical discussion, but one may still wonder about the risks of over-generalization given the thin empirical basis of some the arguments (in particular for the chapter on immunitary borders). In addition, the recent events bring to light the limits of the security apparatus: with more than one million migrants entering the European Union in 2015 (about four times more than in 2014, the largest number since World War Two), the ability of technological systems and security measures to operate control over the flux of migrants appears limited, and suggests the necessity to take more into account their failing, or rather the articulation between the biopolitical apparatus and their bricolage, failures, and what politics emerge from this. The analysis also disregards the varying and conflicting positions of countries within the EU and the political game between countries to shift the burden of the refugees.

Another theme that would have deserved a better attention is the one of the crisis that runs throughout the book (crisis of borders, humanitarian crises, conceptual crises, etc.) but merely serves as a qualifier, without much critical reflection on its use. For example, the idea of conceptual crises helps clarify theoretical issues, but lack of agreement within social sciences does not constitute a crisis *per se*, it is rather the norm. Also, in retrospect, one could argue that until 2014, borders continued to operate, whereas the crisis now appears more obvious in the sense that borders do not function in the way they are supposed to – clearly more people make it to the EU than Frontex can send back (at least until the recent agreement with Turkey). And what is the meaning of a crisis when this situation has been going on already for more than a decade? This calls more generally for a better analysis of what means crisis in the current European Union context.