

Book Review: Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move by Reece Jones

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*In **Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move**, Reece Jones argues that the deaths of people attempting to cross international borders are indicative of the violence integral to border regimes that not only have devastating consequences for human lives, but also the wider environment. This is an ambitious book that reveals much about the harm caused by borders, yet Alex Sager questions whether this singular view neglects their complexity, including consideration of which borders could potentially help to engender a more just world.*

***Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*. Reece Jones. Verso. 2016.**

Find this book: 

When he saw the Greek Coast Guard, the Turkish fisherman who agreed to take the thirteen Syrian refugees to Chios panicked and turned back toward Turkey. To stop them, the Coast Guard [opened fire](#) on the boat, stray bullets striking nineteen-year-old Rawan and her father-in-law Adnan Akil in the lower back. A third Syrian refugee, Amjad A., was shot in the shoulder. The Coast Guard boarded, and one of the officers beat the fisherman with the butt of his pistol before handcuffing him. Rawan, Akil and Amjad spent two weeks in a Greek hospital before being released with the bullets still in their bodies. All three eventually received asylum. Greek Courts absolved the Coast Guard of any responsibility for the shooting on the grounds that they were stopping an armed smuggler, despite witnesses denying that the fisherman was armed.

[The Intercept's](#) investigation revealed multiple shootings, supporting Reece Jones's contention about the violence of border control in *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*. This work builds on Jones's 2012 book, [Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India and Israel](#), which analysed the rise in border walls and securitisation post-9/11.

The first three chapters of *Violent Borders* range across the European Union, the US-Mexico border, the West Bank, Australia, the India-Bangladesh border and the Bangladesh-Myanmar (Burma) border, the latter of which excludes Rohingya refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [4226 migrants](#) have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean in 2016 (as of 8 November). The US border wall pushes migrants back into the Arizona desert, resulting in [over 3000 deaths](#) since 1999. Human rights advocates have documented many cases of Indian and Bangladeshi security forces [arbitrarily detaining, torturing and killing](#) migrants with impunity. Despite government campaigns that blame smugglers for the mistreatment and death of migrants, many scholars have argued that the root cause is the [militarisation of border controls](#), which closes legal and safe paths for applying for asylum and working abroad. These chapters are grim and infuriating reading that should give pause to anyone who advocates maintaining or strengthening border controls.

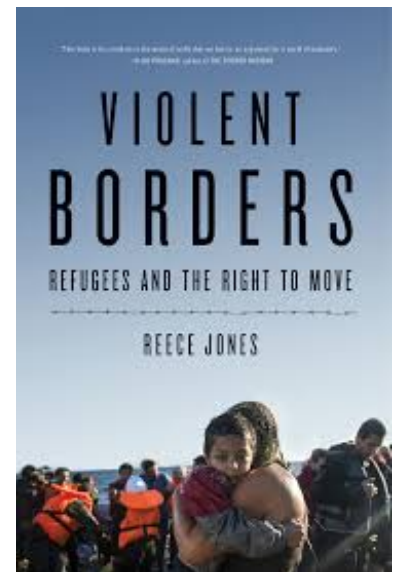




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However, Jones's overall thesis is more ambitious: he condemns not just the rise of new and increasingly lethal security practices, but borders themselves. *Violent Border's* subtitle, 'Refugees and the Right to Move', is therefore misleading. Not only is his subject matter migrants more generally (with no special attention paid to refugees), but his ambitions also extend beyond analysing the violence that border regimes inflict on these subjects. Instead, he wishes to condemn border controls that prevent workers from moving, to criticise the role of national borders in obstructing efforts to mitigate climate change and to demonstrate how the enclosure of the ocean commons through the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention gives individual states the power to deplete resources.

Jones's central claim is that borders, far from being barriers protecting societies, produce violence (5). To support his analysis, Jones identifies five types of violence: first, overt violence; second, 'the use of force or power – threatened or actual – that increases the chances of injury, death, or deprivation'; third, threats of violence that limit access to land or resources; fourth, collective, structural violence 'that deprives the poor of access to wealth and opportunities through the enclosure of resources and the bordering of states'; and fifth, harm to the environment, including the creation of separate jurisdictions that impede action on climate change (9).

This taxonomy mixes types of violence (e.g. overt vs threatened) with different functions of violence (e.g. restricting access to resources or opportunities) and subjects of violence (e.g. humans or the environment). Jones's case for the first and second types of violent borders is compelling, but his case for the third, fourth and fifth types is less convincing. To show that border controls play a major role in maintaining global inequalities – a view shared by many [political philosophers](#) and [economists](#) – he surveys the history of the enclosure of the commons, most particularly in England, that forced workers off the land and into factories (94-102), as well as the rise of the nation-state and the legal regime of identity documents that aids in restricting movement (74). In his view, border controls have allowed corporations to manipulate national regulations as part of a global race to the bottom in wages and labour standards (122). He also contends that these discontinuities are responsible for the loss of manufacturing jobs from the United States and Europe through outsourcing (129). His culprit is open borders for corporations and capital, combined with closed borders for people.

Unfortunately, Jones has little interest in sifting through the evidence to support complex claims about how restrictions on the movement of people, business and capital affect working conditions, wages and development.

Instead, he uses the death of 1129 people in Bangladesh's tragic [Rana Plaza collapse](#) on 24 April 2013 as a symbol of the evils of a regime in which workers cannot freely cross borders to seek opportunities (119). This symbol has more emotive than evidentiary force – there were many reasons for the Rana Plaza's collapse, but the most significant one may very well be the Bangladeshi state's inability to enforce its own safety regulations.

Borders come in many forms, some violent, some central to human flourishing. Jones's fifth form of violence – harm to the environment – illustrates this. The question is not about whether to have borders or not, but how they should be regulated, where they should be located and who should have authority. This is true regardless of the regulations and property rights we favour. As Elinor Ostrom showed in her [analysis](#) of common-pool resource regimes, one criterion for successful management of the commons is clearly defined boundaries. Maintaining trust and reciprocity and stewarding common resources require the ability to exclude not only meddling government officials, but also outsiders wishing for a share.

The overriding category of 'violent borders' blinds Jones to the complexities of borders and their effects. He lacks a clear account of when borders are morally objectionable and what types of exclusion and regulation are justifiable in different circumstances. In many places, *Violent Borders* seems inclined toward anarchism and the rejection of state coercion – at least for the movement of people. But in the case of labour standards, Jones complains that the failure to regulate the mobility of commerce and capital has prevented states from setting wages and enforcing labor standards. In doing so, he is advocating another type of coercive border control that may have its own adverse effects on the global poor. *Violent Borders* tells us a great deal about the harms caused by borders. It is less helpful in providing guidance on the borders we should endorse for a more just world.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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