Review

The politics of borders: Sovereignty, security, and the citizen after 9/11

Matthew Longo
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Humans have been making borders for a long time, but only recently does it seem that borders are absolutely everywhere. Contemporary border politics is a constant topic of political conflict, media attention, and popular opinion in specific ways it has not been before. How did we get here? Matthew Longo's book answers this question.

The Politics of Borders offers one of the clearest and most synthetic histories of US border politics since 9/11 that I have read. I love that the book begins immediately with the big moves. In particular, the aim of the book is to track three main 'epochal shifts' that have occurred in US border politics since 9/11 and show how these have affected global border politics (p. 5). It is worth mentioning these briefly.

First, after 9/11, border security and national security stopped being considered discrete domains. The USA PATRIOT Act, the Department of Homeland Security, and other laws and institutions made immigration and national security identical administrative projects. The effect was that immigrants became potential terrorists. The second shift was that the US felt it could no longer deal with international terrorism by itself but needed international cooperation from other states and private contractors to manufacture, assemble, and staff huge new securitization projects. Third, and relatedly, sovereign countries would need to share domestic intelligence and immigration information to combat the global movement of people. Security firms and big data companies would need to be contracted to collect, sort, and store huge amounts of biometric data.

Huge amounts of political power and money were put behind these projects. Without a doubt one can easily see how the scholarly and popular literature on US (and international) border politics has hovered tightly around these three axes. Longo's chapters on these main events stick tightly to the most important events and their consequences. This is an impressive feat because so much has been written on them, it is easy to be overwhelmed. I found them valuable and clarifying.

Based on these big events, I think the reader will find the two main theses of Longo's book instantly compelling – or at least I did. However, I suspect, normative reactions to them may vary. The first thesis, about heterogenous sovereignty, claims that the rise of national/international securitization projects is compromising the structure of sovereignty. The more sovereign states rely on cooperation with other states and private companies for their intelligence and technologies, the more sovereignty becomes increasingly heterogenous. The second thesis, on neo-imperialism, proposes that heterogenous co-bordering efforts may become new structures of neo-imperial domination, in which more powerful countries are able to offload securitization onto less powerful ones and make more efficient use of information and technologies – thus shifting the movement of people.

I find these two 'speculative' theses not only strongly compelling but also not overly speculative at all. This is what is happening. US–Mexico border security is a multibillion-dollar business, of which Longo provides valuable empirical evidence. Politicians are making decisions based on more data than can be made use of and interpreted by heterogeneous international and national groups. There is an enormous disjunct between politicians, academics, and private security companies. Politicians use fear to support more security, academics show how this security has failed and damaged lives, and security companies are just interested in lobbying politicians to buy the next upgrades – and the cycle repeats.

Heterogeneity is an understatement. It is a total mess – and the capitalists are winning. For evidence of Longo's second thesis, we need look no further back than yesterday to see that the US is using neo-imperial co-bordering techniques to have Mexico handle the migrant caravan of refugees. The US is and has been effectively enforcing its borders inside Mexico, and the consequences have been devastatingly brutal.

In terms of methodology, I wish more border scholars would use Longo's. He begins from the simple premise that 'borders define states' – their relation is co-constitutive (p. 1). This is an empirical and materialist intuition, which I share, and that theories of sovereignty all too frequently ignore when they focus on so-called 'sovereign decisions' and executive power. Sovereign theory thus leads them to the false conclusion that sovereignty is currently 'waning' after 9/11.

However, if we take seriously the material, architectural, technological, and geographical conditions of bordering, then we see that sovereignty always has been heterogenous to itself, and post-9/11, we are simply looking at a more heterogeneous assemblage than before, I believe. The conclusion of heterogeneity, however, requires significant empirical work that Longo puts in and that many other theorists do not. He is right to emphasize the heterodox nature of his approach, which allows theory to emerge from history and empirical study rather than just applying theory to the data.

All good books raise questions to the reader. My first question is about the 'epochal shift' of 9/11. I am in full agreement that 9/11 had immediate and relatively sudden consequences that are worth noting, but I am not convinced that there ever was any pure sovereignty that was not deeply compromised by its material, ecological, and historical conditions – and thus heterogenous before 9/11. In other words, rather than a sudden epochal shift after 9/11, I think a longer historical view shows that the modern state, at least since the French Revolution, was becoming increasingly rationalistic, liberal, economic, and calculating about its possibilities and limitations. Here, we get the first modern passports, census, and data collection, which Longo also notes. I cannot reproduce the history given by Michel Foucault in his lectures on *Security*, *Territory*, *Population*, and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (which Longo also cites) but they do give me pause: Is the increasing heterogeneity of state sovereignty a change in kind or is it really a change in degree, specifically related to the rise of biopower and capitalism? Given the book's Foucauldian influence, the language of 'epochal shifts' seems not quite consistent with Longo's method and history chapter.

This brings me to my second question: Why does not the rise of neoliberalism play a larger part in the story of contemporary border politics here? I do not mean to suggest that Longo ignores this (far from it) but just that I would have expected to find a deeper treatment of neoliberalism and biopower in a book which is about the rise of post-9/11 securitization. These are major themes in critical security studies. The rise of big security data is ideologically justified through fearmongering, but this begs the question of what real economic interests are behind it. But Longo's focus is on sovereignty. Similarly, the criminalization of immigrants is justified by fear tactics and racism (merging with terrorism), but given that these are false fears, the next question is why do it? And who is benefiting? I think the answer is something like global primitive accumulation through strategic criminalization, but I am not sure what Longo would think about this larger structural question.

My third question is about historical method. Longo emphasizes the importance of empirical work and the border as a material structure with a history, but when he writes his lovely history of Western borders in Chapter 1, it feels like that method is suspended in favor of a series of quotes about what people thought and said about borders. That is fine, and I was impressed with how much historical ground the book covers in only a chapter, but I did sense a disjunct between his historical method and his contemporary method that was not explained.

It is unfair to ask a single chapter on the history of the border to do more, especially since Longo's commendable history goes back much farther than 90 percent of border theories. Nonetheless, I have to note that starting the history of the border with classical Greece without any qualification or justification does raise some issues for Longo's position that 'borders define states' (p. 1). Do borders *only* define *states*? What are the material historical conditions for the border to define a

state? I worry that these kinds of histories make states look like natural and necessary historical developments and that borders are just narrowly understood as 'state-borders.' Of course this is not a unique issue to *The Politics of Borders*, but for some reason it is our default to start the history of everything with classical Greece. I worry that doing so makes it look like borders and states always go hand in hand, which they do not. The bordered Greek city state, for example, simply assumes what it is trying to explain: namely, the historical emergence of the state itself as a product of the bordering practices that precede and produce it.

This is a well-written and carefully researched book that I will definitely use in my class on the political philosophy of migration. It is historical and empirical in method but absolutely contemporary in its consequences. It is analytic and prophetic at the same time, since we are likely to see more of the same consequences happening now in the future: the increasing heterogeneity (or neoliberalization) of sovereignty and its neo-imperial hegemony over human movement.

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