
Review Essay

Border Studies

Europe's border crisis: biopolitical security and beyond

Nick Vaughan-Williams

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015, 178 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0198747024

Theory of the Border

Thomas Nail

Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, 275 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0190618650

Contemporary Political Theory (2019) **18**, S61–S66. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0146-7>; published online 18 September 2017

The two books under review seek to advance the theoretical dimension of the border studies literature. They respond to debates emerging in this field of inquiry since the early 1990s. The field is structured by competing claims about whether the new phase of economic globalisation after the Cold War has either heralded the advent of a 'borderless' world or the entrenchment and proliferation of borders. Scholars aim to make sense of transformations in the way the movement of capitals, goods and persons are being controlled and examine what trends such as the offshoring, outsourcing or externalisation of control should mean for our understanding of state power and its spatiality. Last but not least, the literature seeks to account for the changing subjectivation of the persons (refugees, tourists, migrants, workers) who cross borders today. Both volumes start from a similar observation, namely that discussions on borders can no longer rely on the classical understanding of the border as the limit of the sovereign state and as the territorial line that divides and circumscribes political communities and authority. The authors also agree that addressing this change in thinking about borders requires further conceptual elaboration.

Nail grounds his *Theory of the Border (ToB)* in a twofold move whereby: (1) a theory of the border requires 'a reinterpretation of society itself as a process of movement and circulation' (p. 21), a move that calls for ontological primacy to be given to social motion rather than fixity or stasis, and (2) the border is conceived as a primary social process rather than a by-product of state and society (the border produces, rather than is being produced by, state and society). This move forms the



basis for Nail's project of advancing the methodology of border studies through the development of a 'critical limology' (see esp. pp. 10–13). Vaughan-Williams' *Europe's Border Crisis (EBC)*, by contrast, operates more safely within the framework of biopolitics, which he considers as the predominant 'paradigm' informing 'critical' border studies today (pp. 7–9).

Nail's core ontological move is encapsulated in the terminology of 'kinopolitics', the elaboration of which is at the heart of the first part of the book. Kinopolitics is not simply the study of the politics of movement within society or the state apparatus, but rather the study of politics and society *as* 'regimes of motion' (p. 24). In placing kinopolitics front and centre and giving ontological priority to motion, *ToB* builds on the 'mobility turn' driven by John Urry's social-theoretical work (2000). It is this ontological commitment that (as the author notes on p. 13 and at several points throughout the book) makes *ToB* the clear sequel to Nail's earlier volume, *The Figure of the Migrant*. With the ontological primacy of motion over stasis comes a specific analysis of society and politics in terms of flows, junctions (situations of stasis and occurrences where flows are redirected into a loop, the city being a 'political junction', p. 28) and circulation (the ways in which flows become regulated through bifurcations and loops; circulation consists of several junctions or smaller sets of junctions, circuits). It is against this primacy of social motion that Nail's definition of the border as 'a process of social division' (p. 2) should be understood. The key point here is that, contrary to conventional ideas, the border is not about the blocking of motion and the absolute division of political space, but rather 'an active process of bifurcation that does not simply divide once and for all, but continuously redirects flows of people and things across or away from itself' (p. 4). What follows from this is that the border is a constant process of circulation and recirculation, which is not the result of the ordering of political and social space (into communities, cities or states) but what produces political and social space instead.

This central idea is explored first through a 'historical limology' (Part II), consisting in the examination of four distinct and historically located 'border regimes' (the fence, the wall, the cell and the checkpoint), which takes the reader from the neolithic to the twenty-first century. The second, substantial part of the book proposes a kinopolitical reading of the contemporary Mexico-US border, organised according to the same typology of border regimes. For reasons of space I cannot fully reconstruct here all border regimes and aspects of the historical and contemporary analyses developed in *ToB*, but some key points stand out. The *fence* (Chapter 2) is a centripetal kinetic regime whereby flows are accumulated, protected and maintained in a set of social containers. The *wall* (Chapter 3) is centrifugal, in that it redirects the accumulation of flows in a central point achieved by fencing the periphery to enable control by a centralised power. The *cell* (Chapter 4) is tensional, involving the enclosure and linkage of individuals in multiple chains of political authority: this is *ToB*'s way of accounting for 'the social kinetics of



feudalism...defined...by the linked rotation and tensional power of the feudal suzerain among innumerable layers of subinfeudation' (p. 90). The checkpoint (Chapters 5–6), finally, is the most modern border regime. Where the cell operates through enclosure and linkage, the border regime of the checkpoint is concerned with ensuring the equilibrium between relatively larger social flows through redirection and redistribution: the border is deployable 'at any point whatever through society' (p. 111) rather than at the edges of territory or in privileged cell-like sites. On the basis of this historical limology, *ToB* lastly endeavours to provide a study of the contemporary US-Mexico border (Part III). This is where Nail makes the case that the defining feature of contemporary borders is their standing as 'complex hybrids of all previously existing border regimes' (p. 165).

Unlike Nail, Vaughan-Williams starts from tensions within the biopolitical frame of analysis in critical border studies. The field, he argues, has negotiated the shift away from a classical, geopolitical understanding of borders to a biopolitical one. This means border security is conceived of as 'the *enhancement* of mobility and circulation of populations in order to create new opportunities to sift and cancel out perceived risks within the population' (p. 7, emphasis in original). There is an immediate connection here to Nail's project, insofar as biopolitical concerns with enhancement and equilibrium are the heart of the 'kinolimological problem' that *ToB* presents as the driving factor behind the emergence of the 'checkpoint border' in the seventeenth century (p. 111). *EBC* argues that scholarship drawing on the biopolitical 'paradigm'¹ is distributed between two opposing poles (pp. 7–9). Drawing on Agamben's discussion of sovereign power and sovereign ban, the first, 'thanatopolitical' pole emphasises the 'negative' potential for violence in the biopolitical focus on enhancement. The second pole contests this outlook as too exclusively focused on sovereign power and control, and foregrounds borders as sites of ambivalence rather than just banishment and bare life (see e.g. Squire, 2011). They are loci of political struggle that enable the expression of agency on the part of migrants and refugees, and the concomitant emergence of new political subjectivities (see among others the influential book of Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). For Vaughan-Williams, the apparent irreconcilability between the two poles constitutes a conceptual crisis. The crisis is all the more acute, he diagnoses, as European border control, which forms the empirical background to the otherwise theoretical focus of *EBC*, is progressively harnessing humanitarian claims and practices for security purposes, thus defusing the usual critiques of security, couched as they are in the language of rights and freedoms.

The way out of these 'crises' – of both concepts and critique – is to define (and seize) a new theoretical middle ground. This strategy relies on two interlocking moves: first, a methodological focus on the 'encounter', that is 'the mutually constitutive field of interaction between policymakers, border security authorities, and 'irregular' migrants' (p. 11); second, the progressive displacement of theoretical discussions away from biopolitics proper through a series of revisions.



In contrast to the predominant focus on border security as the enhancement of mobility presented in Chapter 2, a thanapolitical outlook is required to draw attention to the more lethal dimension of biopolitical borders that have materialised so dramatically in the Mediterranean and the Sahara over the last few years (Chapter 3). *EBC* proposes a re-examination of Agamben's take on biopolitics and how it has been mobilised in border studies, away from the figures of the camp and *homo sacer* proper and more squarely focused on their articulation in relation to the notion of sovereign ban. This move supplements the more passive Foucauldian notion of 'letting die' to underscore that lethality in the encounter between migrants and European border control is the outcome of a series of 'quasi-decisions' or 'performative acts' undertaken by EU authorities (p. 65). Chapter 4 extends the revision of biopolitics and thanatopolitics by examining the dynamics of dehumanisation and animalisation that structure encounters between migrants and the European border control, especially in the context of detention practices. This is done under the heading of 'zoopolitics', which is used to convey the idea that, far from being a contradiction with humanitarian reason, animalisation is its 'condition of possibility' (p. 85) and a specific technology of power. *EBC* develops the notion of the 'zoopolitical border' in connection with Agamben's understanding of the sovereign ban, amended by Derrida's analysis of sovereignty as positing first and foremost animality as 'the other against which reason is defined' (p. 88). In othering and excluding the animal, however, sovereign power itself works in a bestial way. Zoopolitical bordering aligns with humanitarianism insofar as, similarly to how animals are treated in a zoo, it allows not only for containment and detention, but also for generating knowledge and monitoring the health of a target population (pp. 91–92). *EBC* follows up on this 'puzzle' of health in Chapter 5 to unfold what is arguably its key move, namely the revision of biopolitical border accounts and the incorporating of both thanapolitical and zoopolitical accounts, through an exploration of Esposito's concept of immunisation. As a result of the progressive, historical intertwining of juridical and medical understandings, immunity for Esposito is a key feature of contemporary biopolitics, as well as the political technology within which biopolitics functions as *both* the enhancement of life and its destruction. For Vaughan-Williams it is also 'the basis of an explanation' for the seemingly contradictory combination of bio-, thanato- and zoopolitics in European border security (p. 105). In Esposito's account, the potential for auto-immune crisis is always contained in immunisation, when protection (here of the body politic) becomes its own risk and biopolitics experience a thanatopolitical/zoopolitical drift (pp. 107–109). As such, the 'border crisis' can be interpreted as an auto-immune crisis, an excess tied to the very practices of controlling European borders: thus, the apparent tension between humanitarian and security logics be reconciled.

Reading the two books together certainly illuminates their respective merits and limits. *ToB*'s proposal to fundamentally overhaul border studies by shifting their



ontological grounding towards social motion cuts through some of the rather more baroque theoretical feuds in this field of inquiry. The book responds to ‘a growing frustration that the singular empirical study of specific borders lacks any larger implications, concepts, or framework outside its own parochial study’ (p. 10). Against the background of Nail’s bold move, *EBC*’s attempt to define and seize the middle ground between competing theoretical poles within biopolitical accounts of contemporary borders comes across as a labour of ornamentation, signalled by the multiplication of prefixes opposed to the term politics throughout (from ‘bio-’ to ‘thanato-’ and ‘zoo-’, ending with ‘immuno-’ and ‘(post)bio-’). This kind of writing may at times be frustrating to anyone outside the somewhat narrow confines of biopolitical scholarship on borders. In a way, *EBC* falls victim to the current scholarly popularity of the problem of space in which it wishes to make an intervention, where detailed analyses of humanitarian border work now abound (see, for example, Pallister-Wilkins, 2017), driving other contributions into increasingly intricate theoretical elaboration. By contrast, Nail’s kinopolitical account (notwithstanding the introduction of yet another prefixed kind of politics) offers a cleaner slate to work on, though its association with *EBC* underscores some limits. First, its ambitious historical limology is at times a rather risky enterprise compared to Vaughan-Williams’ safer concern with very contemporary and minute developments in European border control practices. What *EBC* works to challenge is the modern (Western) border imaginary shaped from the nineteenth century onwards. In contrast, *ToB* applies the terminologies associated with this modern imaginary to century-old developments, such as the use of the clearly modern notion of ‘checkpoint’ to capture the transformation of border regimes from the seventeenth century onwards (pp. 110–137), or of ‘national security’, an invention of the early Cold War to interpret border developments related to the invention of the nation from the seventeenth to the twentieth century (pp. 143–155). *ToB* acknowledges this issue as being ‘a kind of conceptual future anterior’ (p. 14), but the problem of ahistorical or retrospective analysis remains one of its key limits. Second, while *EBC* is concerned with articulation (how do we conceptually articulate European border security practices in order to bring under the same framework seemingly intractable contradictions?), *ToB* works by accumulation. The conceptual history it tells is one of progressive, growing complexity in social kinetics. The last chapter (10) hints at the fact that the checkpoint is the ‘dominant regime today across numerous geographical contexts’ (p. 202), but how it comes to orchestrate coexisting border regimes (the fence, the wall, the cell) is less compellingly exposed.

In sum, the two books offer their readers alternative strategies for advancing theoretical discussions in border studies. While *EBC* treads (relatively) familiar grounds and works incrementally, *ToB* demands a fundamental revision of ontological commitments that may well be excessive for some readers. It nonetheless deserves a thorough discussion (more thorough, certainly, than this



review allows), despite and especially because of some of its more controversial features, as this work has the potential to significantly refresh border studies.

Note

- 1 This term would warrant a separate discussion given that it is at odds with Foucauldian analysis. As *EBC* itself notes (p. 98) biopolitics for Foucault refers to a specific problematisation of the relation between life and politics, rather than what social and political theory normally understands by 'paradigm'.

References

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