

BEYOND GEOGRAPHIC BORDERS

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A Review of *The Irregularization of Migration in Contemporary Europe: Detention, Deportation, Drowning*

Edited by Yolande Jansen, Robin Celikates, and Joost de Bloois
(London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014), 262 pages.

Few would argue that suffering and death in hostile border regions, under-equipped detention facilities, or unsafe working and living conditions are anything other than tragic consequences of failing immigration systems around the world. But, as Julien Jeandesboz argues in *The Irregularization of Migration in Contemporary Europe*, exploitation, abuse, and even death of undocumented immigrants can be convincingly described as inherent features of systematic domination rather than a failure of order in Europe's immigration system¹. *The Irregularization of Migration in Contemporary Europe* is edited by University of Amsterdam professors Yolande Jansen, Robin Celikates, and Joost de Bloois, and draws together contributions by academics from a variety of social science disciplines to examine the implications of the Eurozone immigration regime. The authors examine the European approach to immigration in recent decades as one that has proliferated and strengthened, rather than dissolved, national borders. As Nicholas De Genova asserts in the book's opening sentence, "[i]f there were no borders, there would be no migrants—only mobility."² Consequently, the authors treat the establishment and maintenance of borders in Europe not as a building of barriers but as the active creation and shaping of an identity for immigrants (both current and prospective) as a class of people. Rather than a thin line occupying the geographic limit of national frontiers, the book presents the border as an ever-present division between citizen and outsider, which manifests itself in the form of restrictions on access to legal protections, the domestic enforcement apparatus throughout Europe, and the web of physical and electronic deterrents deployed throughout the Mediterranean Sea.

Central to the volume's argument is that, while the Schengen Agreement of 1985 led to the ostensible dissolution of most intra-European borders, the net effect has been to deepen the Eurozone's borders well into northern Europe while spreading them southward into North Africa. The authors paint a picture of a series of European borders that separate planes of existence rather than geographic spaces. The Mediterranean Sea is offered as a depressing example of this division. As Didier Bigo describes it, Europeans enjoy a Mediterranean of leisure, well-regulated commerce, and safe travel. By contrast, the Mediterranean of the immigrant is offered as a frightening borderland of suffering and frequently lethal dangers.³

The “left-to-die boat” of 2011, writes Sandro Mezzadra, is just one example of the stark difference in reality and accepted maritime practice on the Mediterranean when it comes to migrant vessels. In a body of water crowded with merchant and military vessels, the Libyan refugee boat drifted alone without food or water for fourteen days, cordoned off from those who might have otherwise assisted the distressed ship by a system of bordering that separates migrants from travelers. In addition to those who failed to respond to the ship’s distress signals, the plight of its passengers was ignored by “aircraft that had flown over them... a military helicopter which had provided them with a few packets of biscuits and bottles of water and a military ship which had failed to provide any assistance whatsoever.”⁴ When the ship finally landed back on the Libyan coast, all but nine of the seventy-two passengers had died.⁵


“[W]hy, in the Mediterranean Sea, do the captains of fishing boats and other vessels not rescue these people as the law of the sea demands?” wonders Bigo. Relying on work by Tugba Basaran, he leans toward the explanation that European authorities have instilled a fear that potential “Good Samaritans” will be treated as smugglers upon arrival on European shores.⁶ In this sense, “The death toll is the result not of the danger of the Mediterranean Sea but of the willingness to ‘prevent’ at all costs, to use technologies of surveillance in the name of ‘protection’ as well as surveillance and deterrence.”⁷

This bordering, argues Huub van Baar, extends deep into the heart of the mainland and goes beyond the legalistic “othering” of non-citizens. Van Baar offers European leaders’ treatment of Roma and Sinti populations holding European citizenship as an example of how the re-bordering of the Eurozone has built up divisions along lines that are more complicated than birthplace or national origin in order to distinguish between Europeans and people who simply reside in Europe. Van Baar recounts efforts by the French under the Sarkozy government to profile and criminalize Sinti and Roma populations who were seen as over-indulging in the privilege of free movement offered to European Union (EU) citizens.⁸ Carefully worded warnings circulated by Belgian federal police about “itinerant bands of offenders,” are laden with language that matches historic stereotypes of Sinti and Roma groups.⁹ These warnings echo the fearful tone of a quote from a Dutch deputy minister’s letter offered elsewhere in the book by Juan M. Amaya-Castro, which begins by touting the necessity of border enforcement to protect “vulnerable” immigrant populations before drifting into a warning that this vulnerability practically ensures these groups will descend into criminality.¹⁰

Another running theme throughout the book is that rather than serving to remove unlawful immigrants or prevent them from entering, the Eurozone’s bordering efforts have succeeded in entrenching undocumented immigrants within

European society. A small fraction of undocumented immigrants in Europe are deported.¹¹ But the looming threat of deportation for the unprosecuted majority creates a set of limitations that preclude social advancement for those living in its shadow. Jansen describes undocumented migration as a “form of incorporation” into European society. This incorporation, however, leaves undocumented immigrants “free, unprotected, [and] rightless.” Or, as Jansen more succinctly describes it, immigrants suffer from the “unfreedom of deportability.”¹²

The net effect of this bordering and incorporation, the authors argue, is to institute a neocolonial reality both in Europe and the nations closest to its borders. Within Europe, a global division of labor is reconstituted in the form of seasonal work regimes and domestic workers.¹³ In North Africa, this neocolonialism can be seen in the proliferation of detention centers, as well as cooperation agreements between Europe and emigrant nations in the detainment and deportation of undocumented immigrants. Sonja Buckel offers the use of a Mauritanian fish factory to house detained immigrants as a concise example of the extent of this hierarchical relationship. In this case, Mauritanian fishing has been pushed out of the market by Europeans operating through fee-based licensing.¹⁴ Fish processing, by consequence, has left the Mauritanian coast, and poverty remains widespread. Immigrants using Mauritania as a staging ground to flee the impoverished developing world for Europe are then detained in the ruins of the abandoned factory by the Spanish Guardia Civil (Spain’s Civil Guard) before being deported to their countries of origin.¹⁵

The focus of *The Irregularization of Migration in Contemporary Europe* is far more about the results of the EU’s immigration policies than their causes. As such, the book devotes little attention to commonly cited drivers of immigration policy, such as real or imagined threats to security or economic stability. Rather than accepting or directly confronting the validity of the former, the authors tend to sidestep the issue entirely, treating the results and drivers of immigration policy as one in the same. The volume, however, offers important insights for anyone concerned with the challenges to assimilation in European society for immigrant groups. The book challenges the conception of borders as singular lines separating geographic areas, instead defining them as bureaucratic, cultural, and legal barriers that do little to restrict movement but are nonetheless remarkably successful at entrenching class distinctions. It also raises the question of why the freedom of movement—unlike political, religious, and economic freedoms—is rarely championed by the affluent world as an inherent human right. 

NOTES

¹ Julien Jeandesboz, “EU Border Control: Violence, Capture and Apparatus,” in *The Irregularization of*

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Migration in Contemporary Europe: Detention, Deportation, Drowning, ed. Yolande Jansen, Robin Celikates, Joost de Bloois, (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014), 87–102.

- ² Ibid., 3.
- ³ Bigo, *ibid.*, 57
- ⁴ Mezzadra, *ibid.*, 126.
- ⁵ Ibid., 110.
- ⁶ Bigo, *ibid.*, 67.
- ⁷ Ibid., 69.
- ⁸ Ibid., 76.
- ⁹ Ibid., 75.
- ¹⁰ Amaya-Castro, *ibid.*, 159.
- ¹¹ Jansen, Celikates, de Bloois, *ibid.*, xiii.
- ¹² Jansen, *ibid.*, 18.
- ¹³ Karakayali, trans. Simran Sodhi, *Ibid.*, 34.
- ¹⁴ Buckel, *ibid.*, 143.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.