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# Problematizing Europe's Borders in the Context of the Recent Refugee Crisis

## **Cover Page Footnote**

I'd simply like to thank Dr Erzsébet Strausz, Dr Marijn Nieuwenhuis, and Dr Julia Welland for their invaluable support, guidance, and teaching throughout my time at Warwick.

## **PROBLEMATIZING EUROPE'S BORDERS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RECENT REFUGEE CRISIS**

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### **Abstract**

The fundamental problem of Europe's borders is how a bounded social reality is to be organized, primarily meaning who is to be included and who is to be excluded. The present refugee crisis has only served to expose and intensify this *raison d'être* of borders as exclusionary mechanisms which carry great political, economic, and symbolic weight, frequently much to the detriment of those excluded by them. Primarily drawing from the international political sociological work of Didier Bigo and affiliated scholars, I present a theoretical paper coupled with relevant empirical examples to present a critique of the exclusionary modes of operation of Europe's borders and the techniques that enable them. Exploring the constitution of Europe's borders as technologically-enabled to decouple from the conventional spatial groundings of borders, I analyze the relationality between the logics, objectives and functions of Europe's borders in relation to the dominant discursive framing of refugees and migrants in the context of the recent migrant crisis in Europe. I hold that this tragic event has not suddenly created new problems for Europe's borders, immigration, and asylum systems, but simply exposed the multiple failures of the control and management practices inbuilt in the EU's border regime.

### **Introduction**

The problems of Europe's borders are relative to the lived experience that heavily determines one's relation to them. The desired configuration, operation, and objectives of the border are dependent on the spatial and cultural position of the actor who engages with them. Borders, while now again proliferating in their significance, have always been an important organizer of interstate and intrastate social reality (Delanty, 2006: 183). The fundamental

problem that concerns borders, and not just those of Europe,<sup>1</sup> is that various individuals and groups hold a diverse spectrum of views on how a given bounded societal reality is to be organized, primarily regarding who is to be included and who is to be excluded (Newman, 2003: 14). The present refugee crisis has only served to expose and intensify this *raison d'être* of borders as exclusionary mechanisms which carry great political, economic, and symbolic weight, frequently to the detriment of those excluded by them. In this article I present a critique of the exclusionary modes of operation of Europe's borders and the techniques that enable them.

My analysis draws on a range of literature including critical migration and security studies (De Genova, 2002; Delanty, 2006; Newman, 2003; O'Dowd, 2002; Rumford, 2006, 2007; Walters, 2002), surveillance studies (Ajana, 2012; Fuchs, 2013; Gandy, 2012; Jenkins, 2012) and, most prominently, the international political sociological research of Didier Bigo and affiliated scholars (Bigo, 2001; 2002; 2005; 2008; Bigo & Guild, 2005a; 2005b; Ceyhan, 2005; Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002; Tsoukala, 2005).

I assert that the arrangement of Europe's collective societal reality is based upon the contested, multi-sited construction of fear, anxiety, and prejudice. This social and geographical anxiety, heavily orchestrated by an overarching "governmentality of unease," feeds into the guiding security framework of the bordering practices of the European Union (EU) and its member states (Bigo & Guild, 2005a: 4). A series of noxious discourses propagated by "managers of unease," media outlets, and the general public all underpin the logic of the EU's border regime that construct the migrant as a source of risk along socio-economic, securitarian, and identity axes. It is these discourses that contribute to the formation of the legitimizing framework for the exclusionary practices of the EU. The tragic events of the current refugee crisis have not suddenly created new problems for Europe's borders, immigration, and asylum systems, but simply exposed the multiple failures of the control and management practices inbuilt in the EU's border regime.

The structure of this paper includes three main sections, the first of which introduces the complexity of Europe's border in a digital age, examining the 'ferromagnetic' property of Europe's border regime. In the second section I examine the range of discourses that contribute to the securitization of the migrant along the basis of three principles; socio-economic, securitarian,

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, I roughly conflate Europe with the European Union. Not in a geographic sense, but on the basis that the destination countries for an overwhelming percentage of the refugees are EU member states. (BBC News, 2016, see chart two).

and identity. In the third section I demonstrate the problematic functioning of Europe's border regime, roughly demarcated across technical and social-cultural lines. The paper concludes with a summary of key findings.

### **Understanding the Borders of Europe**

In an age of "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000), the borders of Europe are no longer simple physical demarcations of territory. Instead, they liquefy and stretch inside and beyond the conventional perimeter of a state's territory. Borders function across multiple axes (cultural, political, and economic) and fluctuate in thickness and visibility in accordance to the positionality of the those engaging with them (Paasi 2009). The borders of Europe are somewhat paradoxical entities, for some they are becoming ever more permeable and invisible, facilitating the neoliberal desire for fluidity in the circulation of capital, services, and people, but for others they have proliferated in number and location, acting as thicker, harder limits on movement, citizenship claims, and access to other internally-bounded societal realities (Delanty, 2006: 189-90). The globalizing "demise of territoriality" is accompanied with redoubled efforts by the state and its intelligence, security, and military apparatuses to strengthen the border while retaining the flexibility beget by globalizing forces (Walters, 2002: 561-2). Such is the extent of the diffusion of borders, decoupled from traditional understandings of spatiality, that they now come to subsume and function across entire countries (Rumford, 2006: 156). Benefit agencies, for instance, now serve additionally as immigration-status checkpoints, supplementing a regime of border control that extends beyond and below the traditional border (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002: 35).

The key structural factor in managing the flows of movement is the technologies of surveillance which permit identification (biometrics, data collection), sorting, and, eventually, exclusion on the basis of perceived desirability (Bigo, 2005: 49). These databases of identifying information gathered through various surveillance apparatuses are increasingly networked together, allowing data to flow liberally and invisibly between governmental agencies, bodies, and even private companies to further the precision and efficient filtration of individuals deemed as too "risky" for inclusion (Bigo, 2005: 88). The increasingly porous border of the EU has entailed a greater emphasis placed on wide assemblages of surveillance systems and biometric technologies to ensure the future security of society and the state by acting in the present (Bigo, 2005: 70, 89). Through the ban-opticon, technologies of surveillance at the spatially diffuse border are rendered productive through the

execution of a pre-emptive logic of exclusion which rests upon “upon the construction of profiles that frame who is “abnormal,” and upon... [the] normalization of social groups whose behaviors are monitored for their present and their future” (Bigo & Tsoukala, 2008: 2). Defining the identity of individuals, sorting them into desirable and undesirable subjects, and subsequently erecting impediments on movement and restrictions on entry, either prior to the travel of the migrant or after crossing, characterizes Europe’s omnipresent ‘ferromagnetic shape-memory’ border. The constitution of the border, its effects, location, and interaction with individuals completely differ dependent on these categories. It is the management of people, the constitutive components to social reality, that have become the guiding objective of borders, not territory (Bigo, 2001: 111).

The uncoupling of the exclusionary functions of the border to a fixed spatiality is best understood through the operation of the Schengen area. The freedom of some is maintained through the exclusion of others (Bigo & Guild, 2005a: 3). The functioning of the Schengen area requires the presence of surveillance, classification and exclusionary mechanisms to identify and (pre-emptively) remove those who are perceived as threats to the EU, be it socially or economically, for the benefit of non-risky peoples who are essentially unencumbered by the very same borders. As such, given the variability of Europe’s borders, the popular claim of a “Fortress Europe” appear misleading. Instead, Europe’s borders are “ferromagnetic.” Through the operation of the networked surveillant assemblage, the scope and tightness of which is relationality dependent on the “magnetic” triggers of undesirability that are tripped and who tripped them (Rumford, 2007: 331). These modular, dynamic borders are diffused throughout society, interconnected between various administrative, intelligence, and private entities, and manage human mobility with a nuance not possible with the static, hard borders of old (Rumford, 2007: 331). In addition to being spatially transient, the borders of Europe are also temporally fluid, periodically dissolving and resolidifying in response to a given socioeconomic or political context (Rumford, 2007: 331; Guild, et al., 2015: 5). The refugee crisis is one such pertinent example of the resolidification of Europe’s borders. This hardening does not occur in isolation to other events, of course, but is significantly shaped by the popular rhetoric and discourses of political and securitarian expertise, discursive frames that speak through the language of fear, threat and securitization. If we indeed understand borders as facilitators of an idealized social reality, the strengthening of borders can only be understood in relation to a threat to this normative reality. I suggest that it is primarily through performative discourse that the identities of mi-

grants and refugees are constructed as sources of risk and thus are liable to be excluded through the ferromagnetic borders of Europe (Bigo, 2002: 63).

### **The Construction of the Migrant as Enemy**

Through the dispositif of the ban-opticon surveillance techniques profile and categorize migratory flows on the basis of “desirability.” The exchange of fears and beliefs between a “transnational field of professionals in the management of unease” including politicians, the military, police and border forces, private security corporations, as well as the (sensationalist) media, formulate a climate of fear and risk through which contemporary bordering practices are made intelligible and legitimate (Bigo, 2002: 63-4).

Tsoukala identifies three primary axes that construct the migrant as an enemy:

- 1) The socio-economic principle heavily associates immigration as contributing to unemployment, economic decline, strains on national resources such as housing, health care and education, perceived as welfare cheats, and as causing urban and social deterioration (2005: 163).
- 2) The securitarian principle connects a range of security issues with immigration, from petty delinquency to organized crime (particularly drug trafficking [Derrida, 1995]), and, most pertinently, fundamentalist extremism and terrorism (Tsoukala, 2005: 163).
- 3) 3) The identity principle links migratory flows with a threatening erosion of homogeneous national or supranational identity and other ‘undesirable’ changes in the demographics of nations across Europe (2005: 163-4).

These three interrelated principles underpin a “discourse of fear” which heightens the existential anxieties of European “identity, security and well-being.” (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002: 22, 21)

The November 2015 Paris attacks, Charlie Hebdo shooting, and other recent incidents have further inflamed sentiments conducive to this discourse of fear (Guild, et al., 2015: 13). As Europe’s border become more porous, the “traditional certainty of boundaries” is eroded and the identity of the existential, external threat has merged with the internal (Bigo, 2002: 76). The Möbius ribbon of (in)security has entailed, under the logic of risk avoidance, the stereotyping of those who can be considered a source of unease. As such, both internal and external (in)securities are increasingly attributed to the “enemy within,” the ontological actuality of which is projected onto the crim-

inogenic migrant who traverses the Möbius ribbon (Bigo, 2001: 112). Of course, given the heterogeneity of the societies of the EU's member states, the exact discursive representation applied to migratory flows will differ in each country. Generally speaking, France, for example, constructs the "migrant image as that of a religious fanatic," in Germany the image is of "a revolutionary and deviant," and in the United Kingdom it depicts migrants as "rioters" with no "decent social behavior." (Bigo, 2002: 70). I take note here to highlight the generalizations of these rhetorics as well as their liability to change in accordance with recent global and local developments.

These discourses of fear contribute to the securitization of migration through the privileging of certain criminogenic factors, most of which are based heavily on appearance and nationality (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002: 28). The multifaceted threat posed by migratory flows simultaneously demands and legitimizes practices of profiling, risk analysis, statistical discrimination, categorization, and pre-emptive action (Bigo, 2002: 65-6). It is through these functions that the ferromagnetic borders are able to ensnare those defined as a source of risk. This is done using information gathered through programs such as, among others, Echelon and EUROSUR (Bigo, 2002: 75), as well as various private companies and software providers, couching the contentious, racial politics of Europe's bordering practices under a logic of existential urgency and the authority of the statistic (Bigo, 2005: 89, 2008: 12).

### **The Borders of Europe and the Refugee Crisis**

#### **THE TECHNICAL DIMENSION**

The mechanisms of border control, regardless of the spatiality or temporality, imbue an objective of filtering between the desirable and undesirable (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002: 31). Functioning under the appearance of a neutral and objective system, the lived-experience and context of individuals is frequently silenced by the legitimate statistical discrimination of politically-defined "criminogenic" factors of nationality, religion, appearance, wealth, and documentation status (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002: 25). The refugee crisis highlights the importance of considering the varied, rich individual stories and experiences of migratory flows carry prior to systematically and automatically categorizing large groups of people on the basis of quantifiable data only. Far from compassion, the function of the border, as seen through the dispositif of the ban-opticon, attempts to master an impending and inevitable "chaotic future" through a litany of technologies of surveillance and manage-



ment techniques (Bigo, 2002: 82). The inadequacy of this system, as so painfully demonstrated by the refugee crisis, demonstrates another crucial foundational problem of the functioning of Europe's borders: The absolute control of borders, especially in an age of increasing porosity, is impossible for a neoliberal regime to achieve (Bigo, 2005: 49). The pursuit of the impossible only serves to perpetuate the political misery of the destitute (Ceyhan, 2005: 217). This "will to mastery" (Bigo, 2002: 70) of populations, security, and freedom that drives the judgement professionals of security and of politics only serves to nourish discourses of fear and myths of national homogeneity. The inefficiency and impossibility of this objective, even with advanced surveillance technologies, paradoxically, perpetuates the functioning of this governmentality and its related dispositifs, rationalities, and technologies. Similar to how Foucault argues "devices intended to produce freedom...risk producing exactly the opposite" (2008: 69), the European regime of border security intends to produce security but only achieves the reproduction of unease. With the advent of ferromagnetic borders came the implicit acknowledgement that traditional borders were insufficient in stopping unwanted migratory flows (Broeders, 2007: 72).

The ubiquitous, diffuse ferromagnetic borderlands and the spatially-fixed borders of a state's perimeter function simultaneously and cooperatively out of a secret necessity (Rumford, 2006: 156; Bigo, 2005: 50). While the hard, visible borders of the EU are nodes of visible security and practical regulatory controls, their ability to satisfactorily prevent the movement of "undesirable migratory" flows has greatly diminished (Bigo, 2002: 65-7). The porosity of Europe's borders presents a Möbius ribbon of perceiving (in)security. The framing of desire for increased international flows, freedom and cooperation is counterbalanced by contradictory demands for control, management, and exclusion depending on the perception of the observer and the particular flow in question (Bigo, 2005: 53; Marin, 2011: 132). These practices of control, management, and exclusion are partial contributors to the "crisis" that the borders of Europe are currently experiencing due to their "technological-deterministic belief that crime and terrorism" can be prevented through the implementation of technology, rather than policy modification or a shift in public discourse (Gandy, 2012: 126; Jenkins, 2012: 160; Fuchs, 2013: 1329).

The intensification of Europe's borders through EUROSUR and various Frontex operations has not served to seal the borders, rather, as the refugee crisis has shown, it has simply led to the increase in criminalization of migratory flows resorting to increasingly dangerous alternative routes of entry (Spijkerboer 2007, Human Rights Watch 2015). The internal disagreements

between member states on the appropriate distribution of refugees admitted or smuggled into Europe demonstrates a typical predicament for the EU as a whole. National interests structure the behavior of states to such an extent that unanimous solutions are rendered difficult, if not impossible, to implement (Gross, 2015: 2). The present refugee crisis has exposed the internal tensions of Europe's regime to the world, so great are these strains that Gross asserts that "the present system is broke[n]." (2015: 2) The refugee crisis has spectacularly demonstrated that even these "new digital borders" cannot accomplish this task and that it is perhaps a change in mentalité that must occur instead of compounding faith in ever-more invasive digitizing, quantifying, and surveilling technologies.

Any proclamation of "failure" with regards to Europe's borders, however, ignores the vast political capital that such an event can yield for specific actors, agencies, and bureaucracies. The functional logic of risk installed in Europe's borders through a governmentality of unease that is enacted by a transnational field of experts can be seen as exemplified perfectly through the fear that the refugee crisis has sparked amongst the people of Europe. Migration has become a political technology to reaffirm cultural and political beliefs and the role of these managers of unease as providers of security and cultivators of political society (Bigo, 2002: 64). The reaction of a number of Schengen members to resurrect hard internal borders (Guild, et al. 2015), albeit temporarily, visibly reifies the negative formulation of migrants as dangerous and ultimately, unpredictable sources of future risk. This culture of fear further serves as an opportunity for security professionals to publicize their pro-active commitments towards this risk despite the fact that most "illegal" immigrants cross the hard borders of Europe legitimately through international airports and become "illegal" by staying beyond their visa validity period (Frontex, 2016). The functioning of these policies of control and migration management, regardless of their intended objectives, play a direct contribution to the tragedies that have unfolded in Europe and must be revised accordingly (Hess, et al. 2015).

## THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION

As the refugee crisis has poignantly demonstrated, the dynamics of borders are key components of social and political reality (Rumford, 2006: 155). The "crisis" of Europe's borders is structured as such through the use of discursive frames propagated by the various managers of unease (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016: 2). Metaphorical devices of water or insectile imagery serve to widen

the schisms between the self and the other and reinforce visions of criminality, depravity, and even the *homo sacer* (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016: 7). A particular consequence of the “migrant as enemy” is the amalgamation of all non-wealthy, non-business, and non-tourist migratory flows into an incredibly myopic generalization that depicts migrants as defined by Tsoukala’s “discourses of fear.” This also serves to further weaken the legal status and legitimacy of asylum seekers, blurring the complex dynamics of movement and smoothing the hostile discourses which call for their exclusion (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002: 23-4). This is coupled with the “socio-political production of migrant ‘illegality’”, through which asylum regimes systematically produce large amounts of “bogus” asylum seekers on the basis of overly stringent criteria. These definitional practices then eliminate chances of legitimate entry which can thus force, as the refugee crisis has demonstrated, would-be asylum seekers to attempt illegal entry (De Genova, 2013: 1180-1). This resultantly furthers the status of the migrant as a core economic/social/securitarian threat – “a social distribution of bad” (Bigo, 2002: 71).

These demonstrations of illegality are what De Genova calls “Border Spectacles,” a performance of extraordinary otherness which perpetuates the necessity of excluding migrants (De Genova, 2013: 1180-1). The widespread coverage of the refugee crisis is grounded in images of squalid camps, such as the “Jungle” in Calais (*The Guardian* 2016), or protesting behind fences (*The Washington Post* 2016), provide striking pictorial anchorage that explicitly promotes the forms of unease espoused by the “identity principle.” These images serve to evoke fear and othering as much as they do sympathy (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016: 6). Following Murray Edelman’s work on the political utility of constructing social spectacles (Edelman 1988), such graphic scenes of disarray and instability are attributed directly to be the characteristic of the migrant, rather than structural factors or influences from Western states. These media depictions fuel anxieties of European citizens who fear the “transformation” of their societal reality that mass migration will bring into a state that mirrors the scenes they view on television or read in the newspaper (Huysmans, 2000: 756). Again, this begets the importance of the alteration of perceptions that inform these bordering practices if substantive positive change is to occur in the handling of the refugee crisis.

The cultural function of Europe’s borders offers a means of artificially structuring an attempted homogenous European identity through othering, usually manifesting in the exclusionary discourses and constructions of racial otherness (Bigo, 2005: 60). It is through the lens of the refugee crisis that the internal contradictions of this method of formulating a cohesive European

identity is revealed. The extreme bordering measures and exclusionary discourses that have resonated from the European Union in attempt to prevent the corrosion of European culture, identity and cohesiveness have actually contributed to the its own social division and moral degradation. Far from unifying against a common threat, these techniques of power—the production and exclusion of difference—simultaneously serve an end contradictory to their original intention, resulting in rupturing the cohesiveness between member states and challenging the liberal ideological premises that the European Union, in its present form, was originally founded upon.

### Conclusion

To summarize, in this paper I have demonstrated, in section one, the modernization of the EU's border regime in an age of liquid modernity, defined as moving away from the management and control of territory towards one of flows and people. Various technologies have enabled the mobilization of the border, a “ferromagnetic” border, functioning in tandem with the harder borders of the perimeter of a territory. It is through the duality of Europe's borders, the shifting, fluid properties they now hold are made actionable through the categorization of individual and groups on the basis of opaque, algorithmically-determined categories of risk. A significant issue with the ferromagnetic borders of Europe can be understood through the discursive environment in which they are constructed. The plethora of threats and risk attributed to immigration has imbued the EU's border regime with a prejudice world view that it executes under the guise of statistical and computational rationality, necessity and neutrality. These complex categorizations are significantly informed through the production of discursive labels, socio-economic, securitarian, and identity, which are attached to migrants that produce a variety of criminogenic properties that discriminately function in pursuit of cultivating a desired bounded social reality. The relationality between these stigmatizing discourses and the ferromagnetic operation of Europe's borders are, in many ways, mutually co-constitutive.

If indeed, borders are integral to human behavior, the ongoing refugee crisis that Europe is experiencing demonstrates an urgent need for a border regime constructed upon ideals of compassion and logics of accommodating pro-action, rather than fear and exclusion. Normative research conducted on the topic of shifting the border regime of the EU would be a daunting task but a most desirable one. If positive reform to Europe's border regime is to be achieved, structural and institutional adjustments are not enough. The toxic

discourse that defines the migrant as enemy must be dissected, criticized, and resisted through the promotion of alternative understandings of the world beyond our own borders.

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