



# **‘No Borders’ as a Critical Politics of Mobility and Migration**

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Geographers have contributed diverse and critical analyses of the complexities and often contradictory nature of immigration controls concerned with irregular forms of migration, like Martin (this issue). Through these studies we have come to know a great deal about the contemporary global condition of border management/control and migration policing, as well as its proliferation far beyond the physical location of nation-state borders. However in conducting my research regarding border crossing related deaths, particularly within the Mexico-U.S. borderlands and at the external borders of the European Union, I have struggled to find academic work that also critically questions the legitimacy of the existence of such controls in regards to irregular migration, or indeed presents alternatives to these. For me, it is the work of Joseph Nevins—in this instance regarding deaths and abuses of migrants at the Mexico-U.S. border—that has brought this in to stark contrast (cf. Burridge, 2009):

[I]t is imperative to engage in a critical dialogue about the factors that give rise to the fatalities [of migrants]. I assert that by not calling for an end to boundary enforcement as it relates to immigration or by legitimating such enforcement, the authors are resigning themselves to migrant deaths—albeit in smaller numbers than are currently occurring



if what they advocate in terms of remedial measures were to be put in place (Nevins 2003, 172).

While those encountering migration controls may not always face life and death situations as Nevins refers to here, it is the critical questioning of *legitimacy*, and the desire to move beyond 'remedial measures', advocated within a no borders politics of mobility, that I wish to promote within critical political geography. Although a no borders politics has been developing within transnational migrant solidarity movements over the past decade and a half (Allred, 2003; Sharma, 2003; Walters, 2006; Gill, 2009; Burrige, 2010), little engagement or advancement of such a politics has been seen in academic circles, particularly within Geography. As Prokkola (this issue, 14) discusses in relation to discourse, similarly there is a need to develop "methodological tools that are sensitive to the particular everyday situations and sites" where irregular migration and controls aimed at halting this form of mobility meet. Such tools can allow us to better comprehend what Vicki Squire (2010, 2) describes as the "processes of securitization and criminalization, which inscribe exclusionary distinctions between 'desirable' and 'undesirable'" forms of migration, and to question why these processes are so durable and prolific. Importantly a no borders analytic may help in developing alternative conceptualizations of responses to irregular mobility vis-à-vis nation-state territoriality and sovereignty.

The 2003 (Vol.2, No.2) special issue of *ACME* on 'Borders and Immigration' is perhaps the most substantial engagement with an 'open borders' debate in Geography, though it has led to little further discussion within the discipline. The special issue centered upon a paper from Harald Bauder regarding Canadian immigration regulation, followed by a series of responses. Drawing upon the work of liberal theorists, Bauder (2003, 167) argues that the principle of nationality often outweighs the principle of humanity—that human equality is applicable only within boundaries of the state, but not beyond. Importantly he presents the challenge to geographers to "critically examine political boundaries and to imagine these boundaries and their purposes in new ways". As Preston (2003, 186) more modestly states in response to Bauder, "Geographical analysis that draws attention to the contradictions inherent in selective and exclusionary immigration policies has the potential to reduce social inequality." Nick Megoran's (2005, 641) preceding intervention within *Antipode* has taken a similar line to Bauder's, asserting that current immigration controls in Western states:

[A]re the unfortunate heritage of a reprehensible chapter of twentieth century politics. It is imperative that geographers, with their sensitivity to complex histories of space, flows, exclusion, and the politics of identity, play a part in the struggles to close that chapter by ending immigration controls.

Noting both the open borders focus of the *ACME* special issue and Megoran's contribution, Henk van Houtum and Roos Pijpers' (2007, 291) *Antipode*

paper returns to the issue of legitimacy in border management and policing. They question the ‘sacrosanct’ nature of immigration controls, while lamenting the fact that “policies concerning immigration and asylum have only become more restrictive as well as ‘deeply political’ in recent years” (ibid., 294). In 2009, a similar commentary in *Antipode* by van Houtum and Freerk Boedeltje (2009, 229) argued that the legitimation of one group of ‘travelers’ (tourists) over another (migrants), as a response to the fear of the unknowable, has resulted in the violation of a “just moral border regime”, and ultimately results in the significant levels of deaths of migrants witnessed at the peripheries of the EU (see also van Houtum, 2010).

While there are other examples, both in Geography and elsewhere that have addressed an open borders politics, the above papers demonstrate some of the most explicit engagement of this concept within critical political geography. However they are perhaps notable in their stopping short of developing what such an analytic of open or no borders might consist of. I therefore want to discuss what might specifically constitute a no borders politics of mobility, its necessity, and what we as geographers might contribute. It is by no means exhaustive, but points to some key works, theories, and debates for a progressive politics of mobility and migration that questions the very legitimacy and existence of border controls.

Returning to Nevins’ earlier statement, a challenge that a no borders politics of mobility puts forth is to contest the existence, purpose, and outcomes of borders, controls, detention centers, and other processes that lead to both coercive mobility and *immobility*. This includes recognition of the often closely related worlds of criminal incarceration and immigrant detention (Burrige, 2009; Loyd et al., 2012). In particular, it considers the vested interest and often complex interrelations within industries engaged in incarceration, border militarization, government lobbying and law making (Andrijasevic, 2010a; Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010; Bialasiewicz, 2012; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2012); what has been referred to as the *Migrant Industrial Complex*. As Loyd et al. (2012, 11) state, “...a no-borders politics opposes and seeks to dismantle the complex array of public and private companies, organizations, and agencies involved in controlling the mobility of people between and within nation-states”.

In contrast to much academic work, and often conservative positions of NGOs and migrant rights organizations, a no borders stance avoids then the call to *improve* or reform immigration controls and detention. It recognizes that such efforts or ‘successes’ typically result in the further criminalization and punishment of one group over another, and in the ongoing legitimation of these systems (Anderson et al., 2012; see also Flynn, 2012). The intention then is not to seek reforms, but rather to call for the abolition of migration controls, detention centers and other punitive measures that punish mobility and create precarity (Hayter, 2001). It is an explicit recognition that immigration policies and controls typically do not succeed in deterring migrants and halting mobility, or in creating safety either for citizens or non-citizens. Instead, they more willingly seek to ensure that

those in an irregular position are restricted in their access to rights and protections (Sharma, 2003). Importantly, it asserts that these practices of border militarization, mass imprisonment, immigrant detention and deportation—and more broadly, state violence—maintain a system of global apartheid “preserving the wealth and resources of the north from those displaced from the south” (Rygiel, 2011, 3; Sharma, 2003; Andrijasevic and Walters, 2010). Drawing upon the earlier work of Joseph Carens (1987), van Houtum (2010, 973) refers to this as a “global apartheid geopolitics”, in which the EU and other Western nations discriminate through human blacklisting, based on the “lottery of birth”.

A no borders politics contests the notion that ‘legitimate’ asylum seekers and migrants who work hard and avoid records are not criminals, while others who do not fit in to these models are the *real* criminals. In this sense a no borders politics does not seek to fight for the benefits of one group at the expense of another (Escobar, 2008; Squire 2010). Such a politics recognizes that practices of *differential criminalization*, in which certain individuals and groups are singled out for harsher punishments, results in more precarious situations for all (BurrIDGE, 2009). Specifically, it resists the privileging of one group of migrants (e.g. ‘hard workers’, ‘productive families’) over another (e.g. ‘foreign national prisoners’), often seen as the ‘acceptable face of deportation’ (Anderson et al., 2012, 81). Elsewhere, with Jenna Loyd (Loyd and BurrIDGE, 2007) and Matt Mitchelson (Loyd et al., 2010), we have noted the divisive outcomes of certain rights groups’ and migrant’s claims that they are not criminals, but instead hard workers, while the *real* criminals are ‘over there’. A no borders approach then, affirms the right of all to move freely, rather than to support increasingly punitive measures against certain populations while claiming rights for others: it is the development and use of laws and controls that creates illegality, rather than mobility itself (De Genova, 2003; Bibler Coutin, 2005; Squire 2010). However, while a no borders politics promotes the right to mobility, it must also necessarily recognize the right to remain, acknowledging the processes and effects of coerced mobility (Loyd et al., 2012, 10). As Gill (2009, 115) has found, there is often a “common assumption that mobility is intrinsically desirable or pleasurable”, yet the desire for mobility is often in response to demands of global labor markets that may actually facilitate exploitation.

Importantly, a no borders politics does not see the state as a legitimate primary protector of migrants and asylum seekers. Anti-trafficking campaigns for example, typically led by governments of Western states, often through collaboration with police and border management agencies, present governments as concerned agents of migrants’ and asylum seekers’ welfare. As Anderson et al. (2012, 78) contest, “borders are increasingly being presented as points of humanitarian intervention [...] But migrants are not naturally vulnerable; rather *the state* is deeply implicated in constructing vulnerability through immigration controls and practices” (original emphasis; Rodríguez, 1996). Smugglers and traffickers commonly provide the scapegoat for governments as being responsible

for creating vulnerability for migrants (Weber, 2010). A no borders politics, instead, recognizes the inherent role of governments in generating the need for such services and in forcing migrants to take increasingly dangerous routes in order to enter another country (Andrijasevic, 2010b). This perspective challenges explicitly the belief “that borders and prisons create safety, security, and order” (Loyd et al., 2012, 3). As Gill (2009, 116), in his study of No Borders movements warns however, there is a need to avoid a ‘state centrism’ in focusing upon the state as the sole agent in border controls, which “risks diverting attention away from the generic social xenophobia, racism, and hostility towards migrants that is still common in Western democracies”. It is necessary that such an analytic considers the diversity of agents and methods involved in producing irregularity, both through official means and more mundane practices (Squire, 2010).

Following the events of the Arab Spring, and subsequent migrations from North Africa towards Europe, a report by the Parliamentary Assembly Council of Europe (PACE) noted that “2011 set a record for being one of the deadliest years for boat people in the Mediterranean”, with more than 1500 people perishing (Strik, 2012, 5). This seemingly extreme example is rather more indicative of continuing global trends for migrants and asylum seekers across the globe, and reminds us of the poignancy of Nevins’ earlier call to academics. Bauder’s (2003, 168) suggestion that “it is possible, perhaps even necessary, for geographers to rethink the current system of regulating the international movement of people” also bares weight in light of the ongoing situation irregular migrants and asylum seekers face across the globe. Taking this level of analysis allows us to see “the ways in which citizenship, incapacitation, and punishment work together, within and across national boundaries, to legally consign entire groups of people to precarious futures and premature deaths” (Loyd et al., 2012, 4).

As authors such as Anderson et al. (2009, 2012) and Cohen (2006) argue, a no borders standpoint is not necessarily utopian, but rather can be seen as a practical and everyday politics. Understanding, challenging, and dismantling immigration and border controls, and the wider Migration Industrial Complex, is something being undertaken daily by migrants, activists and academics at various sites and scales, in recognition that such forms of coercive mobility and immobility are not long-term solutions to broader socio-economic and political problems. An abolitionist politics surrounding migration controls may not appeal to all involved in political geography or be a project they would wish to take on. Such a stance is likely to open difficult and often contradictory discussions without clear answers. As Gill’s (2009) analysis of a no borders ideology shows, there is also the risk of further legitimating a conservative position that promotes unfettered mobility as a means to exploiting persons for their labor while affording little rights. Developing a truly progressive politics of mobility through a no borders analytic requires a careful, but also critical, debate within political geography.

Certain facts prevail however: first, both the movement, as well as the loss of life, of irregular migrants since the beginning of this century has been at historic

levels (Fekete, 2003; Rubio-Goldsmith et al., 2006; Strik, 2011). Second, construction of militarized border walls (Brown, 2010; Dear, 2013), and spaces of detention and incarceration (Loyd et al. 2012), are proliferating rather than declining, while levels of deportations by Western democracies continue at unprecedented levels (see for example Wessler, 2012). There is a need then to understand this expansion of laws, technologies, and infrastructure that seek to hinder mobility and produce irregularity: to detain, incarcerate, and deport. A no borders analytic can help in doing this, but also in pushing us to consider and develop alternative formulations in support of people's need to move (or stay put), and in creating truly safe communities. Parker and Vaughan-Williams' (2012) recent effort to define and develop a 'critical border studies' (or CBS) is a necessary step within political geography. Their call for "exploring alternative border imaginaries" (ibid., 728) to better understand "what and where borders are and how they function" (ibid., 729) is of significant importance, but there is a need within a CBS for these imaginaries to also critically consider alternatives to borders, policing and incarceration as tools of coercive mobility and immobility.

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