

Review - Border Walls

Written by Karthika Sasikumar

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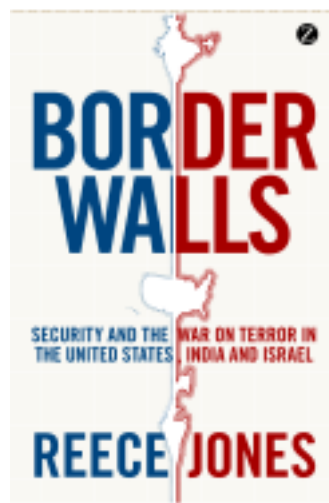
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KARTHIKA SASIKUMAR, AUG 1 2012

Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India, and Israel

By: Reece Jones

London and New York: Zed Books, 2012.



Since 2000, approximately twenty-five border walls have gone up, or been fortified around the world (p.10). While most of these were not erected by democracies, the process of border fortification is especially problematic for the prominent democracies that Reece Jones studies in this book –India, Israel and the United States. With imagination and erudition, Jones investigates the fundamental tensions between democratic ideals and the brute realities of the enforcement of state power on the ground.

The first tension he unearths is between democracy's commitment to law-governed enforcement and the challenges of demarcating a border. This is especially obvious in the case of the southern border of the United States. On the one hand, frustrated residents inveigh against a state that it perceives as abandoning them to immigrant inflows; on the other, individuals marked as 'inferior' or 'alien' by their appearance, language, or identity papers complain of victimization by state agents. This phenomenon is also seen in the other two cases considered. On the border between India and Bangladesh, marginal cultivators are dependent on the whims of guards to access their fields. In Israel, the government claimed that it was obliged to deny citizenship to non-Jewish children born and raised in the country, to avoid giving incentives to illegal migrants (p.177).

The second tension is between the need for control of the specific geographical border and the expansion of border security to encompass all aspects of national life. In many ways, the border has 'moved' to our homes. If the mere presence of undocumented aliens on the street is threatening, then each citizen is a border enforcement agent, tasked with reporting transgression. Jones uses the term "fuzzy frontier" to describe this phenomenon.

Jones then shows how the modern state reconciles these tensions by drawing on Foucauldian ideas of

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“governmentality.” It is only because these border walls are related to anterior and ongoing processes of deep and wide governance that democratic publics accept them. He insists that borders are not only about control, but also about legitimation, and the (re)-creation of the state itself: “Although modern states represent the linkages between their territory and their sovereign authority as fixed and inviolable, it is more often fragile and must be vigorously reiterated and patrolled” (p.143). It is precisely this production of identity that will have long-term ramifications for democratic legitimacy. With continued pervasive ‘othering’ of Mexicans/Muslims/refugees/poor people, we begin to accept the denial of rights to these categories, and eventually run the risk of giving up more of our rights to the government in the name of security. By comparing three very different countries, Jones shows that this problem is not restricted to any nationality or political party.

In the first chapter Jones lays out his theoretical framework, aimed at denaturalizing the idea of the border. Jones chooses one border site in each country. He also focuses on policies in the last decade, contending that it was a departure from the immediate post-Cold War period which saw a progressive erasure of borders. I am not convinced by this reading as the very construction of a liberal capitalist world required stronger barriers against those who were not ready to be admitted –as demonstrated in the expansion of the European Union in the 1990s.

In Chapters Two through Four, he describes the processes of border demarcation and enforcement in his three cases. Here Jones relies on the methodology of discourse analysis, parsing the utterances of both ordinary people and leaders to draw attention to underlying themes and motives. The next three chapters draw more on his interviews and participant observation during his fieldwork in the three sites of Texas, the India-Bangladesh border, and the West Bank. This section of the book makes the themes discussed earlier come alive in concrete terms. For instance, Jones reports the words of a community organizer discussing cross-border migrant workers (p.109):

So that worker went from a visitor, to a guest worker, to an illegal, to potential threat. That same worker; nothing changed with the worker. What changed was the conceptualization of that worker. So then you get to 9/11, which formalized it. From then on everyone who crossed the border was a potential threat...So I think we went through a scaling process of how to regulate our borders but also how we label people.

This testimony perfectly captures the gist of Jones’ argument about the ultimate arbitrariness and productive power of borders.

It must be noted that the author is not very sympathetic to the state’s perspective and views events through the lens of human security. For instance, he expresses concern that large-scale projects in India and Israel to assign identity cards and numbers to citizens will intensify state surveillance and control (p.174). Another way of viewing this same development would visualize these technologies as resources for individuals, activists and lawyers to contest allegations and secure basic services.

Reece Jones has written a provocative and timely book that will be of interest to anthropologists, geographers, political scientists and social activists, among others. His use of multiple methods and attention to important political issues are worthy of emulation by other scholars.

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