

Interview - Reece Jones

Written by E-International Relations

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Reece Jones is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Hawai'i and the author of *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*, *Placing the Border in Everyday Life* (edited with Corey Johnson), and *Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India, and Israel*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

My two primary fields, political geography and border studies, have both grown substantially in the past twenty years as states and borders have come to be seen as not simply containers for social and political processes but rather constitutive of the practice and performance of sovereignty and power over land, resources, and people. The recent public attention to borders and migration has mirrored the increase in the number of scholars conducting critical research in these fields.

The most exciting development for me is to see a number of scholars moving beyond descriptive studies of how borders work and instead writing about what alternatives there might be to borders and the state. In the past few years several important books have come out that question the legitimacy of borders and look toward a future when the idea that a group of people can restrict the movement of other people begins to look anachronistic.

Some of the key contributions in the open borders and no borders literature are Joseph Carens' *The Ethics of Immigration* (2013), Harsha Walia's *Undoing Border Imperialism* (2013), Harald Bauder's *Migration, Borders, Freedom* (2016), and Natasha King's *No Borders: the Politics of Immigration Control and Resistance* (2016).

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My undergraduate degree was in biology so when I began graduate school in geography I knew very little theory about nationalism, states, and power. I could charitably have been called 'a blank slate' or, uncharitably, 'quite naïve.' Thinking back to those early years of reading, there are two scholars whose work changed the way I thought about the world.

The first is Rogers Brubaker, whose work on social categorization and particularly on nation and ethnicity, helped me to think critically about identity. For Brubaker, these categories are not essential and eternal, but rather ideas that can be conjured into being through group making narratives and practices. His work helped me to see that these categories are real, but only to the extent that people believe that they are. They are not existing 'groups,' but perspectives on the world that are marshalled for doing.

The second major influence for me was James C. Scott's work on the state. All of his books are great, but *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) dismantles the historical narrative that states bring civilization to non-state peoples. The book demonstrates that many people living outside early states had previously lived in the state but fled to live a life without conscription, slavery, taxation, famine, and disease. A number of scholars have quibbled with the specifics of some his case studies, but the overarching revision of the history of the state is crucial.

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In your book *Violent Borders* you argue that borders are inherently violent. Can you explain this and the type of violence that stems from the presence of borders?

The overt violence of border guards and border security infrastructure is only one aspect of the violence borders inflict on people and on the environment. In the book (pp. 9-10) I expand on the other forms of violence found at borders, such as:

- The use of force or power—threatened or actual—that increases the chances of injury, death, or deprivation. For example, the construction of walls and the deployment of thousands of additional Border Patrol agents at the US-Mexico border has prevented easy crossings in urban areas like El Paso and San Diego and funneled migrants to harsh and dangerous deserts where thousands of people have died.
- The threat of violence which is necessary to limit access to land or to a resource through an enclosure. For instance, the threat of punishment for trespassing on private land or of arrest for not possessing the proper identity papers.
- The violence borders do to the economic wellbeing of people around the world. This is a collective, structural violence that deprives the poor from access to wealth and opportunities through the enclosure of resources and the bordering of states.
- The damage borders do to the environment of the earth. There is direct harm to the landscape through the construction of walls, the deployment of security personnel, and the use of surveillance technologies. Moreover, borders create separate jurisdictions that allow the ideology of resource extraction to become pervasive by preventing uniform environmental regulations. By allowing each country to put the well-being of the people inside its borders before the well-being of the world as a whole, borders fracture the regulation of the environment and prevent meaningful action to combat climate change.

These other forms of violence at borders are not as obvious as migrant deaths, but they are a direct outcome of a political system seeking to control access to resources and limit movement around the world. Taken together, borders should be seen as inherently violent and engendering a systematic violence to people and the environment.

Have borders always been inherently violent?

Yes.

Do you think that the media portrayal of the migration crisis and border issues has been accurate/fair?

The issue of border deaths has been around for over fifteen years so I am pleased to see that it has finally been recognized as a significant story in the media. However, the media coverage is inadequate for several reasons. First, the media emphasizes refugees over other people on the move which delegitimizes movement and creates the false impression that if the war in Syria was ended, the migration crisis would also end. The second problem with the coverage is that it emphasizes the impact on Europe, although less than fifteen percent of refugees globally are in Europe. Instead, countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Pakistan are hosting the most refugees but are barely mentioned in the coverage. Third, the media consistently places the blame for deaths on smugglers and human traffickers without acknowledging that if states did not have walls and hardened borders, the smugglers would not be necessary. The root cause of border deaths are restrictive migration policies that do not provide a system for safe passage for people on the move.

You consider the European Union to be the world's deadliest border. Why is this the case?

The borders of the EU are the deadliest in terms of the number of deaths in the last few years, which is due to a combination of EU policy and physical geography. Through December 1, 2016 there had been 6198 reported deaths at borders globally this year (which is already the highest number ever). Over 75% of those deaths, 4699 people,

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happened at the edges of the EU. The short term policy problem is that even as the number of people displaced by conflict has increased to 65 million people according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the EU has not moved to accept an appropriate number of refugees for resettlement (nor has the US or Japan). The result has been asylum seekers languishing in camps for years or decades waiting for resettlement. To avoid that, many people opted to simply travel directly to Europe and apply for asylum there. As easier routes through the Balkans have been closed down with fences and strict policing, the only option for many people on the move is to travel through Libya to take a boat in the Mediterranean. The sea crossing is perilous, compared to land routes at many other borders, which has resulted in the staggering number of deaths. However, in *Violent Borders* I argue that we should not get too focused on the short term policy issues around refugees, because it obscures the larger and longer term issue of the role borders play in protecting the privileges of wealthy states by limiting the right to move for the majority of the people in the world.

You call the US-Mexico border a ‘militarised zone.’ How does the management of this border differ from others?

The US-Mexico border is not that different from many other borders, but the militarization of the practice of border policing is particularly visible there. The substantial increases in funding for border security and for security infrastructure demonstrates clearly how the border has become a key sector for the military technology and armaments industry to repurpose their wares for security uses.

Are violent borders generally those of wealthier states?

The problem emerges from the idea that states have the right to limit movement at their borders, which applies to all states equally. The violence of borders is sometimes more evident at the edges of wealthy states because they have the resources to invest in security infrastructure and they are more attuned to protecting privileges by restricting the movement of the poor across their borders. However, one of the most violent borders in the world is the India-Bangladesh border where the Indian Border Security Force has killed over 1000 Bangladeshi citizens in the past fifteen years.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of political geography or international politics?

Pick a topic that is important to you but also has a real impact on other people’s lives. Don’t be afraid to think big, but always include local field research in order to situate your arguments in empirical data. Start publishing now.

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This interview was conducted by Jane Kirkpatrick. Jane is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.