

## Review - Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move

Written by Umut Ozguc

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UMUT OZGUC, JUN 20 2017

### ***Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move***

**By Reece Jones**

**London: Verso, 2016**

The border is one of the most pressing ethical and political questions of our time. Over the last two decades, 60,000 people have been recorded as either missing or dead along migration routes (IOM, 2016). In 2016 alone, the International Organisation for Migration (2016) reported approximately 4,000 refugee deaths in the Mediterranean and 6,000 worldwide. In the wake of this human tragedy, states have engaged in an orchestrated effort to propagate a narrative of securitisation and frame the contemporary political condition as a 'crisis' of sovereign borders. The hardening of borders through building walls and fences and also through the introduction of increased bureaucratic regulations are now common practices of states that seek to contain this so-called 'mobility crisis'.

*Violent Borders* offers a critical review of such violent constructions of contemporary border politics. The central premise of the book is that borders are inherently violent constructs. Reece Jones problematises the essentialised view of bounded territories perceived as idealised constitutive and regulatory elements of the modern state system. He argues, in a Foucauldian manner, that the border is a governmental technology that is used to create, discipline and contain an orderly population inside a bounded territory. This governmental technology, however, is not innocent and not a 'natural part of the human world' (5). Rather, it is a politically constructed institution whose very existence produces and preserves the violence that it seeks to prevent.

Jones convincingly shows us throughout the book how the hardening of borders through various security practices produce binary categories of inside/outside, self/other, poor/rich, citizen/non-citizen and friend/enemy. He examines how these binary categories come into being through bordering practices. Borders, Jones writes, 'are not a representation of pre-existing differences between peoples and places; they create those differences' (166). It is this performative function of the border that constitutes its inherent violence. The construction of such differences are the fundamental sources of racism, nationalism and groupism that exclude certain populations from the global mobility regime. To put it differently, the central premise of *Violent Borders* is to explore the construction and the operation of what Bryan Turner (2007) refers to as 'enclave societies': the creation of a smooth mobility regime for trusted bodies and an 'immobility regime' for undesirable migrants, refugees and other aliens, who are made subjects of different modes of sequestration, exclusion and imprisonment.

Jones presents a complex and multidimensional reading of the concept of violence. Drawing upon the work of Johan Galtung, Jones argues that the violence manifests itself in direct and structural forms. These two different forms of violence, however, are not exclusive of one another; they sustain each other. Jones argues that there may not be evidence of direct (overt) violence. Yet, the violence can still be rooted in the 'structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life changes' (8). The geo-biopolitical practices that create and sustain borders are the sources of the visible and invisible, direct and indirect, collective and structural forms of violence entrenched in every institution of the modern Westphalian state and the contemporary global mobility regime.

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Jones demonstrates the inherently violent nature of the border through many examples. This is, in fact, one of the main strengths of the book, which travels across different times and geographies to demonstrate how juridical, administrative, social, economic and political operations of the border inflict harm on people and destroy ecosystems. In order to shed light on the shifts and the continuities in the construction of bounded territories, Jones also takes a historical approach to some of the case studies that he examines. In doing so, he challenges what Liam O'Down (2010) calls the 'epochal thinking' in border studies that fails to recognise 'the past in the present'. The historical discussion of the Enclosure Movement in Britain and the colonisation of oceans and non-European territories makes the central argument of the book more compelling.

The first half of the book deals with the global migration crisis and the ways in which certain population groups are excluded from the global mobility regime and exposed to different forms of violence. The contemporary criminalisation of the movement and the militarisation of the border are examined in the context of the European Union's external borders, the transformation of the US-Mexico border, the Wall in the West Bank, the enclosures built along India's border with Bangladesh, and Australia's offshore refugee detention network. Jones makes a convincing argument that such practices dispute the narratives of globalisation. In contemporary politics, the border constitutes a space where the state re-articulates and expands its sovereign power in order to capture the movement of the non-citizen who is deemed threatening and dangerous. The criminalisation of movement, deportation of undocumented migrants, construction of walls and fences, and institutionalisation of detention camps are no longer exceptional conventions of statecraft. In all these spaces, asylum seekers, migrants and refugees are subjected to the routine use of state violence and the normalised practices of discipline and control. It is such permanent normalisation of violence that makes the border the most contested site of sovereign power.

The second half of the book explores the proliferation of borders: the fragmented nature of the border that operates within the territory of the state and at sea. In examining different types of boundaries such as the enclosure of private property and natural resources, Jones shows that the border is not only a line separating two sovereign entities, but a global technology that creates conditions for the exploitation of labour and the extraction of the earth's common natural resources. The discussion of the slave-like working conditions in Bangladesh, the global restrictions imposed on the movement of the poor, and the territorialisation of the oceans in the form of exclusive economic zones demonstrates the ways in which the border creates and preserves inequality between the rich and the poor. In this context, the final chapter deals with the question of how such conditions of inequality also disrupt eco-systems. Jones surveys the role of the border in damaging the environment, and he brings forth the 'non-human' dimension of the territorialisation of earth into the analysis. The final chapter examines how the enclosure of commons is in fact 'the tragedy of resource destruction, which occurs when the enclosure of resources is combined with the ideology of extractivism' (147). The territorialisation of common lands and oceans gives the sovereign an exclusive right to exploit natural resources and it limits the global solutions to tackle climate change. Consequently, in the age of anthropocene, Jones invites us to rethink the role of the Westphalian system and its associated regime of capitalist forms of production and 'enclosed extractivism' in perpetuating the effects of climate change.

I read *Violent Borders* as a political manifesto. It is a timely wake-up call to revisit one of the most taken for granted institutions of modern politics: the border. Jones refuses to accept the contemporary violent conditions of borders. His concluding argument is bold: violent borders are not natural, they are not our final destiny. An alternative world is possible. This alternative, however, only begins with a radical redefinition of the nation state and its territorial borders. Jones ends the book with some proposals for the creation of his conception of an alternative world: he calls for a global movement against borders, and suggests the development of global laws for fair and humane working conditions and the genuine implementation of social safety nets for the poor and the environment. In short, *Violent Borders* invites us to rethink movement not as a privilege, but as a right for everyone.

*Violent Borders* is an engaging book that makes an empirical contribution to border studies. It is an essential read for students and scholars of political geography and International Relations. The narrative is enriched with Jones's fieldwork observations and real-life stories of those who are suppressed by the contemporary operation of borders. Jones does not retreat into narrow theoretical or conceptual discussions. With such accessible language, the book also speaks to a general audience with an interest in contemporary politics.

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### **About the author:**

Umut Ozguc has a PhD in International Relations and Politics. Her research interests are international political sociology, spatial theory, and critical border and security studies. In particular, she is interested in contemporary wall politics, the global mobility regime, the Israel/Palestine conflict and Australia's offshore detention network. She is currently teaching International Relations at the Australian National University.