

# Humanitarianism and Securitisation: Contradictions in State Responses to Migration

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## Humanitarianism and Securitisation: Contradictions in State Responses to Migration

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In the past decades, increasingly restrictive, securitised, and militarised border regimes have rendered transnational migration a riskier and deadlier endeavour for migrants worldwide (Williams, 2015). Assemblages of non-governmental organisations and volunteers have therefore emerged in borderlands to mitigate the corporeal repercussions of states' border enforcements, leading to the 'birth of the humanitarian border' (Walters, 2011, p.145). Humanitarianism, which traditionally upholds 'the preservation of life and the alleviating of suffering as the highest value of action' (Fassin, 2011), is deployed by non-state actors to denounce the violence of borders (Dembour & Kelly, 2011), challenge infringements to migrants' rights (Williams, 2016), and expose the securitisation of migration in hostile political and media discourses (Moreno-Lax, 2018). Simultaneously, however, the same humanitarian principles have been increasingly embraced by liberal democracies (Aas & Gundhus, 2015). Within their politics and governance, state actors are progressively utilising 'moral sentiments' of compassion, assistance, and empathy, which has led to the parallel development of the 'humanitarian government' (Fassin, 2011).

While seemingly mutually contradictory, these inhumane/humane state commitments have oftentimes been enacted simultaneously in contemporary migration debates. Only recently, the UK's Home Secretary Priti Patel promised to deliver both in her proposed *New Plan for Immigration* (Home Office, 2021). The Plan will allegedly 'save lives' (p.35) yet 'target people smugglers' (p.17), 'protect the lives of those they endanger' (p.5) yet 'speed up the removal of serious criminals' (p.32), and 'support refugees fleeing peril' (p.2) yet make it harder to obtain refugee status (p.33). This peculiar co-existence of securitisation, which contributes to the precariousness of migrants' lives (Williams, 2015), with the progressive integration of humanitarian ideals in migration governance appears inherently paradoxical, incoherent, and incompatible.

How are securitisation and humanitarianism able to coexist in states' responses to migration? In this paper, I demonstrate these purported state commitments as not only entwined but also somewhat contingent upon each other. I do so by tracing how the re-problematisation of border fatalities from a 'security crisis' into a 'humanitarian crisis' enables states to obscure and deflect their responsibility onto smuggling networks, thus giving way for the framing of border enforcements and border agencies as necessary for preserving life and alleviating suffering. By presenting repressive border enforcements as caring and lifesaving, I then argue that states' securitising agenda can continue and be ever expanded, while enabling them to secure themselves against denunciations on humanitarian grounds and reinforcing the territorialised logic of rights and sovereignty of border regimes.

Migrants have been dying in attempts to cross borders for years (Steinhilper & Gruijters, 2018). Yet, contemporary liberal democracies' predominant response to the suffering of migrants has long been the 'governing of indifference' (Basaran, 2015). Deeming migrants to be abandonable 'bare life', states commonly sanctioned rescue attempts or ignored individuals in distress at sea (Williams, 2016). This inaction in the face of migrant border vulnerability and fatality merged with the securitisation of migration in media, political, and public discourse (Moreno-Lax, 2018). Through recourse to the images and discourses forming the 'border spectacle' (De Genova, 2013) and to emotions of fear, anxiety, and hate (Sirriyeh, 2018), state actors framed, or encouraged a perception of, migration as a national security 'crisis' and migrants as undesirable and 'illegal' threats or criminals (Philo, Briant, & Donald, 2013). Framing migration in this way has meant that, until recently, restrictive border enforcement policies were wholly justified as

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necessary for protecting Western countries from a migrant 'invasion', and thus presented as in the best interest of national citizens (Huymans, 2006).

It is only recently that state actors have begun qualifying border fatalities as a humanitarian concern (Williams, 2016). Indeed, the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck, the 2015 large-scale loss of lives in the Mediterranean Sea, and the mediated drowning of Alan Kurdi have resulted in a shift from the 'pure' securitising logic of states' responses to migration to the beginning of the 'humanitarian turn' (Cuttitta, 2014). Mounting criticism from human rights organisations and politicians towards 'Fortress Europe' (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017), growing media attention to the violence of borderlands, and public calls for a more 'compassionate and humane' response to the loss of lives at borders prompted a shift in political discourse on immigration (Sirriyeh, 2018, p.12). Accordingly, states moved away from sheer dismissal and securitisation to the progressive characterisation of migrant border fatalities as a 'humanitarian crisis' and the incorporation of a discourse of compassion (ibid., 2018). Fassin's (2011) 'humanitarian government' thus extended into the realm of migration governance.

By communicating their purported concern for migrants through invoking a human-rights-friendly discourse, state actors identify the smuggling and trafficking trade as the cause of the 'humanitarian crisis'. From 2015, the language deployed by governmental elites to describe the mounting death toll in border spaces became largely alarming and affective, characterising it as a 'terrible tragedy' (European Commission, 2015) of 'needless suffering' for 'vulnerable' migrants (Foreign Secretary Statement, 2015). This portrayal of migrants as weak and disempowered victims 'at risk' reflects the move away from their securitising portrayal as 'a risk' to border security (Aradau, 2004). While sometimes framed as the result of natural and uncontrollable forces such as the dangers of the sea, the cause of migrant victimhood in border regions is overwhelmingly identified by governmental elites as being smugglers and traffickers (Williams, 2011).

Instead of recognising the distinction between the two, state actors present both types of individuals as exploitative and profit-driven (Williams, 2016). This discursive conflation between smugglers and traffickers obscures significant differences in the degree of agency that migrants can exercise in organising their border crossings, instead emphasising their purported naivety and vulnerability.

By identifying smugglers/traffickers as the target of their 'humanitarian' outrage in political discourse, state actors strategically displace responsibility for migrant border deaths and injuries away from the bona fide systemic and securitised causes. Indeed, the 'humanitarian' tragedy in borderlands is, in actuality, the consequence of states' repressive border policies as much as that of 'callous' people smugglers. Along with increasingly securitised and militarised borders, it is the closure of safe and regular channels of transnational migration since the 1990s that has rendered migrants' journeys more precarious by funnelling them into dangerous routes (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). Visa restrictions and border controls are thus the reason that migrants necessitate the use of human smuggling networks to 'safely' and covertly cross borders (ibid., 2017). Hence, by advancing a narrative of border fatalities as a 'humanitarian' issue and transferring culpability to smugglers, state actors strategically invisibilise the 'structural violence' of border policies, policies that push migrants into deadly terrain, cause or amplify suffering and create the crisis in the first place (Weber & Pickering, 2011, p.94).

In deploying this purported humanitarianism, governmental actors engage in a form of 'interpretive denial' (Cohen, 2001, p.7). Indeed, because of public outcry, they can no longer deny that migrants are dying or suffering on their journey. Thus, instead, they cleanse themselves of guilt by shifting the blame onto smuggling 'evildoers'. By absolving themselves of blame through framing border fatalities within the context of smuggling, state actors are able to present pre-existing repressive border control measures as protective and benevolent.

Since the pronouncement of a 'humanitarian crisis' in 2015, 'preventing the loss of lives' and 'saving lives at sea' have become key purported objectives in migration policy documents (Council of the European Union, 2015). To this end, however, governmental elites have argued that 'the most compassionate thing you can do is to stop the boats' and target smugglers to avoid migrants falling prey to their 'criminality' (The Guardian, 2015). As such, deterrence policies, which aim to prevent prospective migrants from leaving their country of origin in the first place, are framed as necessary life-saving devices (Carling & Hernandez-Carretero, 2011). Similarly, surveillance and detection

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practices at sea are presented as facilitating the rescue of migrants in distress, and thus as protective measures (ibid., 2011). It is therefore clear that the goal of state actors remains the reduction of migration to uphold state sovereignty and national security, and interdiction the tool to attain it. Instead of transforming practices on the ground to make border crossings safer for migrants, what changes is merely the way that state actors present pre-existing border controls: as humanitarian, benign, and carried out in the interest of protecting the 'vulnerable', rather than protecting national borders (Moreno-Lax, 2018). By deploying humanitarianism in a manner that does not contradict fundamental assumptions and objectives of securitising practices, migrant safety and border security are purportedly reconciled and discursively presented as mutually attainable (Williams, 2016).

In casting border controls as the humanitarian solution to border fatalities, rather than the cause, state actors are able to enforce, justify, and legitimise further repressive policies against migrants. Whilst humanitarianism is traditionally associated with acts guided by 'an altruistic desire to provide life-saving relief' and the principle of 'do more good than harm' (Barnett & Weiss, 2008, p.1), it is co-opted and repurposed by state actors to rationalise their border enforcement efforts. For instance, instead of reviewing the violent border controls that led to Abdulfatah Hamdallah's recent death in his attempt to cross the Channel, Priti Patel, after characterising his death as a 'tragic loss' (Richards, 2020), instrumentalised the tragedy to justify the militarisation of the Channel. She tweeted 'this horrendous incident serves as a brutal reminder of the abhorrent criminal gangs and people smugglers who exploit vulnerable people' (ibid., 2020). Following the mediatised death, the UK Government appointed a 'Clandestine Channel Threat Commander' assigned with making the Channel crossing 'unviable for small boats' in the name of care for migrants (Home Office, 2020). Hence, as Pallister-Wilkins (2018, p.995) argues, humanitarianism's traditional concern with 'care for distant Others' has been re-appropriated by state actors into caring by 'keeping Others distant'.

By directing their outrage towards 'foreign' smugglers and justifying repressive border policies as 'best practice in terms of humanity', state actors are able to cast themselves as the legitimate and moral 'saviours' of migrants portrayed as victims in need of protection (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015, p.65). Traditionally, humanitarianism at sea has been undertaken by depoliticised and independent actors, with the sole purpose of assisting individuals in need (Doty, 2011). However, states increasingly criminalise non-governmental forms of assistance by presenting them as facilitating the entry of migrants and thus likening them to smugglers (Williams, 2016). Search and rescue operations are therefore increasingly delivered and monopolised by border agencies such as Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, and the US Border Patrol (Doty, 2011). While previously solely tasked with securitising the border, state agencies like Frontex have institutionalised and operationalised a new purported commitment to 'the protection of human life', to be fulfilled alongside 'facing the problem of illegal immigration' (Aas & Gundhus, 2015). Accordingly, Pallister-Wilkins (2015) notes the recent incorporation of humanitarian principles in Frontex's official policies, as well as in the way it presents itself publicly. To fulfil its purported 'migrant-centred' approach, Frontex erected a 'fundamental rights officer' position, a consultation on human rights matters, a complaint mechanism to report violations committed by the agency and trained its staff on asylum and the rights of refugees (ibid., 2015). In addition, Williams (2011) finds that US Border Patrol promotional videos frame border patrol officers as chivalrous and civilised men who 'venture into dangerous paths, placing themselves in harm's way to save the lives of illegal immigrants' (p.422).

This 'saviour' portrayal in border agencies' communications is sharply contrasted with that of the smugglers. They are dehumanised as any motivation they have beyond profit-seeking is obscured and are portrayed through gendered and racialised representations as dangerous uncivilised non-Western criminal men (ibid., 2011). In their public communications, border agencies often legitimise their presence by arguing that their absence would result in more fatalities (Williams, 2015). Hence, not only do state actors obscure their responsibility in migrant vulnerability and the formation of smuggling networks but they also then produce themselves as the sole and legitimate dispensers of humanitarian aid with an exclusive claim to 'care' in borderlands. This begs the question of whether Walters' (2011) 'humanitarian border' is coming to an end, as state actors are increasingly tasking themselves with mitigating the corporeal repercussions of their own border enforcements.

Yet, having to balance ensuring migrant welfare while simultaneously restricting migrant mobility means that, in practice, Frontex delivers a form of 'limited humanitarianism' (Waerp, 2019). Pallister-Wilkins (2015) describes how migrants discovered by Frontex border patrols in Evros are provided with water and blankets, 'life-saving' supplies,

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only to be arrested and sent to a detention centre when they eventually attempt the border crossing. Similarly, Williams (2015) notes how the US Border Patrol has become responsible for administering medical treatment to injured or sick migrants, despite its officers having little medical training. Officers thus provide migrants in border regions with minimal life-saving aid, keeping them alive long enough to deport them. In enacting this form of 'minimalist' humanitarian intervention, which merely preserves the biological life of migrants, it is clear that border agents' objective is facilitating migrants' apprehension, detention, and deportation (Cuttita, 2014). In this way, Vaughan-Williams (2015, p.119) likens the tension between securitisation and humanitarianism to an auto-immune illness of the body, as 'although border security may appear to preserve life via humanitarian practices, it also threatens the same life it is supposed to protect'.

Additionally, while border agencies cast themselves as 'protectors of human life' (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015, p.65), they remain complicit and practically involved in deeply inhumane practices that negate human life. For instance, US border patrols routinely employ the practice of 'dusting', through which they chase and scatter border crossers from each other and from smugglers by flying a helicopter low to the ground (NMD, 2011). Once isolated, and with fewer options for assistance because of the criminalisation of non-governmental organisations in borderlands, migrants have an increased risk of dying (Williams, 2016). Similarly, a new report by The Guardian revealed that Frontex assisted European countries in illegally pushing back 40.000 migrants in search of asylum since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Tondo, 2021). 2.000 migrant deaths are linked to these illegal practices, along with accounts of individuals being brutally beaten, robbed, stripped bare at borders or deserted at sea (ibid., 2021). Thus, despite deploying humanitarianism and the need to alleviate suffering in their migration discourse, state actors cause further harm to migrants and contribute to making borders a 'site of suffering and death' (Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2016, as cited in Waerp, 2019, p.4). In preventing individuals in search of safety from reaching European borders, they also breach the non-refoulement principle and negate their responsibility to uphold the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees (Waerp, 2019).

Not only does it enable their positioning as legitimate rescuers but deploying moral sentiments to justify their securitising practices also serves state actors in enhancing their 'moral alibi' in the face of migrant deaths (Doty, 2011). Civil society entities and human rights groups denouncing border-related violence traditionally invoke humanitarianism when condemning the lack of humanity and compassion that state actors show to individuals crossing borders in search of safety (Doty, 2006). As such, by mobilising the same 'morally indisputable' claims of saving lives and alleviating suffering that are put against them, state actors outflank the traditional grounds on which they are held to account, despite their 'humanitarian' policies commonly violating human rights norms and rendering migrants' lives increasingly insecure (Williams, 2015). In addition, the seemingly benevolent and benign nature of these 'humanitarian' border controls makes it harder to render human rights abuses visible or the subject of discussion. Indeed, the appeal of this human rights discourse is that it is deemed powerful and effective in influencing contemporary politics, as it 'presents itself beyond politics' and thus appeals to both moral and practical concerns (Barnett & Weiss, 2011, p.4). As Pallister-Wilkins (2015, p.65) puts it, 'who, after all, is against saving lives?'. The merging of securitisation and humanitarianism further helps the reconciliation of heterogeneous political interests (Sirriyeh, 2018), appealing to both anti-immigration groups' security concerns and to pro-immigration groups' humanitarian concerns.

Finally, by mobilising moral sentiments towards 'vulnerable' migrants 'in need of protection', state actors reinforce the territorialised framework of rights and sovereignty of border regimes. The reductionist framing of migrants as vulnerable and naïve victims of smugglers, who should not have left on the journey in the first place, renders invisible the agency of migrants in elaborating coherent and informed migratory strategies (Pécoud, 2010). It further negates the complex historical, political, social, and economic factors that fuel migration, presenting it instead as a tragic 'game of fate' (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017). As such, and by portraying efforts to save and rescue migrants as benevolent and altruistic humanitarianism, state actors deny the legacy of ongoing practices of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and neo-liberalism and their relationship to asylum and migration (Sirriyeh, 2018). The compassionate discourse deployed strengthens the idea that states have no formal obligation, or political debt, to assist migrants. By framing their efforts as an act of generosity to suffering victims rather than a legal duty (Fassin, 2011), state actors symbolically negate migrants as rights-bearing subjects, in addition to often practically excluding them from the right to seek asylum through pushbacks and deterrence policies in the name of safety.

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By portraying alleged 'efforts' to curtail border fatalities as benevolent, the assumption that migrants are 'different' and less deserving than national citizens is reinforced. This ultimately legitimises the divide between 'us' and 'them', invokes a politics of pity (Boltanski, 1999), and gives fuel to the xenophobic sentiments prevailing in public debate and media coverage of migration (Sirriyeh, 2018). While humanitarianism is premised on the ideology that every individual deserves relief from suffering, when deployed by state actors it 'simultaneously upholds the territorialised framework of differential rights upon which border enforcement is based' (Williams, 2016, p.34).

Whilst it commonly 'presents itself as beyond politics' and as relieving human suffering (Barnett & Weiss, 2011, p.4), in this paper I have shown that, when co-opted and deployed by state actors, humanitarianism is far from benign or apolitical: it has very real and dangerous effects on the lives and rights of migrants. Rather than being mutually exclusive, humanitarianism buttresses securitisation in enforcing and delocalising the border and justifying symbolic and physical violence towards migrants. Indeed, using the discourse of 'caring', 'saving' and 'protecting' to frame their missions and their institutions enables state actors to legitimise repressive border interventions, spatially delocalise their exclusionary policies and practices, and monopolise the provision of care in borderlands. Not only that, but it also works to provide them with a 'moral alibi', covering up state actors' minimalist humanitarian interventions and inhumane practices that negate the lives of migrants, and upholding the assumption that migrants are undeserving, non-rights-bearing and 'other' to 'our' national community.

As a result, understanding contemporary border enforcements requires examining the increasingly entangled relationship between humanitarianism and securitisation in discourse, policies, and everyday border practices, as they function in tandem to create a more comprehensive and insidious border regime. As it becomes increasingly difficult to untwine the provision of care from states' securitised agendas, and the trust once afforded to humanitarianism as a direct opposition to repressive, hierarchical, and violent features of border controls is lessened, activists and scholars committed to more just border enforcement policies must continually question the invocation of humanitarian rhetoric within border enforcements, starting with Priti Patel's *New Plan for Immigration* (Home Office, 2021). Nevertheless, as long as the very agencies that enforce and protect borders are tasked with ensuring migrant safety, humanitarian interventions will be joined to exclusionary and unjust border efforts. A truly compassionate response would dismantle repressive border enforcements and instead provide safe routes for migration.

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