

Natasha King, *No Borders: The Politics of Immigration Control and Resistance*

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“Imagine a society like a ripped sheet, each hole being a space of freedom destined to grow larger. As long as it is being pierced, those who find themselves caught in the material will not choke. They will be able to choose to migrate [...] We need to push these walls” (anonymous interview: 159). The metaphor used by this interviewee offers a good visual explanation of the aim and direction of the No Borders movement, which Natasha King brilliantly explains in her book. The author is an English scholar with a PhD in political science from the University of Nottingham who focuses on the struggle for the freedom of movement and has conducted extensive research on the topic around Europe, specifically in Calais, France, and Athens, Greece.

This work is the result of years of academic practice in the migration field and various forms of activism in the No Borders movement. This particular combination makes the author capable of presenting a complete overview of the No Borders movement, as she is capable of employing both a solid theoretical background and her practical experience as an activist participating in the migrants’ struggle to cross borders. This book takes its place in the narrow range of works on the No Borders movement, which includes Sarah Stroup’s book *Borders among Activists: International NGOs in the United States, Great Britain and France* by Sarah S. Stroup, and an article by Andrew Burrige entitled *Youth on the line and the No Borders movement*. These publications are relatively recent, as they reflect the rise of a movement that began only in the last decade of the 20th century.

The leitmotif of the book, and of the No Borders movement as a whole, is the dilemma of rejecting the state while also being forced to engage with it at some level. The No Borders movement should not be conceived as monolithic. It is in fact highly heterogeneous, and the different groups can sometimes have contradictory stances on issues. Nevertheless, the aforementioned dilemma is one that all the different movements composing the spectrum share, even if to a different extent. What a No Borders politics tries to debunk is the legitimacy of border controls and therefore the legitimacy of the nation-state. At the same time, people trying to cross and activists are demanding rights from the state, the same entity that denies these rights in the first place. This paradox is perceived and dealt with in different ways according to the aims and philosophy of the movement. So how can one resist borders in a social reality where borders are the norm? The answer to this question is articulated in different chapters that explore both the theories and praxis of No Borders politics. As the author explains, “critical resistance is about doing and imagining, practice and theory. Yet to set theory apart from each other can rob critical resistance of its power” (8). After an introductory chapter explaining the methodology, the scope and the definition of key terms, King lays out the theoretical foundations of the movement as a whole, while differentiating among the approaches of the specific groups she has

encountered during her time as an activist and scholar. She focuses on the two main approaches of contemporary critical migration studies: the autonomy of migration and acts of citizenship approaches. Both of them adopt the perspective of mobility, rather than control, as a starting point, but while the autonomy of migration relies on the complete rebuttal of the state, the other is characterized by hybridity. This means that the aim of acts of citizenship is to work within the system and change it, gain control of the access to political membership and let the “excluded” transform and reinvent the concept of citizenship and its inclusivity. In summary, a No Borders politics is a negotiation between autonomous practices that seek to escape the state and representational practices that seek to transform it.

Although these two tendencies seem somewhat incompatible, the author argues that in practice this blend of tactics manages to create successful spaces of autonomy articulated in intentional collective struggles. This is further explained in two case studies: Athens and Calais. In the first case, she analyses the anti-racist left (namely the Network for Support to Migrants and Refugees), the anti-authoritarian movement and ‘The 300’, a migrant led struggle for regularization. The first two are part of a broader struggle against capitalism and racism, and are highly influenced by Marxist ideological concepts. The latter is an umbrella term for various collectivities – movements inspired by anarchist principles such as autonomy, non-domination, direct democracy, and mutual aid. The second case study focuses on the struggle for mobility in Calais, exploring spaces of autonomy such as the Jungle and the concept of collaborative community-building through examples such as a squatted apartment in Rue Victor Hugo.

The closing chapter offers further reflections on No Borders politics both in theory and in practice.

The starting point of this book stems from a “simple thought” shared by the author, in which many people interested in human mobility, both academics and laics, will probably recognize themselves: why are some granted the freedom to move while others are not? This leads one to question the very basis of the system we live in, and fantasize about a reality where everybody has the right to travel, an alternative way of being “that creates or has the potential to create supportive, collaborative and non-dominating communities of people of different backgrounds” (7).

This standpoint is reflected in the use of critical language throughout the book, in an attempt to challenge the expressions that help to reproduce the inequalities this movement is trying to eradicate.

These other ways of being, i.e. alternatives to the state, can be found in the ‘mobile commons’, a realm of activity that allows people to pursue freedom of movement and is made of ‘the innumerable uncoordinated but cooperative actions of mobile people that contribute to its making’ (34). One example of a mobile commons is the Jungle in Calais, where despite the harsh conditions, migrants willing to cross the English Channel create communities of mutual support, shared knowledge, and transnational relations of care. Other examples of mobile commons are

presented throughout the book and help the reader understand that 'alternatives to the state' are not just utopian dreams, but the reality of entire communities based on the principles of equality, non-hierarchy and autonomy.

Nevertheless, these alternatives to the state are rarely entirely autonomous, as the author herself admits. Most of the time, these experiments imply some sort of engagement with the state, often in the form of antagonism or struggle for recognition and representation. Other ways of being outside the state do happen all the time, but these alternatives are always small-scale experiments that have no large-scale application. The Jungle in Calais is a clear example of this: on the one hand, it constitutes a practice of autonomy, but on the other, these people are trying to cross the English Channel to land in a nation-state and be integrated into the system (find a job, obtain regularization and so on).

This shows that the No Borders movement (especially the sub-movements with anarchist tendencies), and therefore the author, cannot suggest a cohesive and comprehensive alternative to the State, a theory that can be applied at a global scale. What type of alternative political organization can be contemplated? How to transition from a nation-state paradigm to another? These questions are yet to be answered.

Moreover, the strict rebuttal of the state and allegiance to pure anarchistic ideas are often carried out by activists who enjoy the privileges of being a citizen (usually white, straight, young and able-bodied citizens). Paradoxically, these activists execute actions to undermine a type of state oppression that only affects those who cannot/do not have the willingness to participate in these actions. This weakness is pointed out by Hakim Bey and reported in the final chapter of the book: "The anarchist 'movement' today virtually contains no Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans or children [...] even though *in theory* such genuinely oppressed groups stand to gain the most from any anti-authoritarian revolt. Might it be that anarchism offers no concrete program whereby the truly deprived might fulfill (or at least struggle realistically to fulfill) real needs and desires?" (143).

Despite the fact that the writer explicitly points out that her objective is not to provide a prescriptive politics, but rather an "anti-mass politics", as it needs to be small and discreet, this approach can indeed be problematic. Admitting that escaping the state and creating 'other ways of being' will always remain a marginal practice means not taking into account that the vast majority of people whose faith is influenced or dictated by the state will be left out of the process. Bearing in mind that the nation-state will not cease to exist in the near future, refusing to engage with it is probably not the most pragmatic solution to the tangible problems of those who desire a better life elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the No Borders movement is a spectrum of diverse practices, rather than a single bloc expressing one collective identity: "In no case can it be said that one practice has provided 'all the answers' to how we can refuse the border and the state [...] a politics that aims to do this doesn't exist as a 'pure' or complete politics. It's

a current that flows through many practices and exceeds each of them" (147). What a No Borders politics stand for is, first and foremost, an orientation towards autonomy and recognition of people's freedom of movement. This is carried out through various practices, that include visible practices that strive for the transformation of the system, which still implies challenging the legitimacy of the nation-state and its ability to control political membership.

Transformative actions such as acts of citizenship can disrupt the norms and logics of the dominant social reality, while also having a greater impact on the lives of the politically excluded and bringing "new liberated subjectivities into being" (46). It is indeed important to consider the actions of those who challenge the border control and the state, reaffirming their freedom to move, as political. Doing so challenges the widely accepted understanding of the political as intentional, because the refusal of the border is an unintended effect. Migrants don't come to places like Calais or Athens to make a political statement, they do it because they are on the move. This lack of intentionality makes it hard to see their actions as political through the lens of mainstream media. Furthermore, no collective demand or collective identity can be found in the No Borders struggle: "the autonomy of migration is faithful in itself and its diversity" (130). The autonomy of migration lacks the features we often associate to politics, but recognizing these practices as political is of paramount importance in order to acknowledge the agency of migrants and stop portraying them as passive victims.

In conclusion, *No Borders, The Politics of Immigration Control and Resistance* is a brilliant account of radical acts of autonomy, and it succeeds in narrating the agency of those on the move and their invisible daily struggles that not only challenge the border control executed by the state, but also reshape concepts such as citizenship and political membership. It offers a good insight into these practices of autonomy and challenges the reader to question the system we live in, stressing that "the action to bring about the end of borders implies not separation, but inclusion ... what we want is democracy and inclusion of all – not in a nation, a state or an identity that always presupposes exclusion – but in a life in common" (126).

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