



The Omnipresence of Mobile Borders

Review by Amrita DasGupta

HUBB DIJSTELBLOEM, 2021, *Borders as Infrastructure: The Technopolitics of Border Control*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 285pp., ISBN 9780262542883.

Being born and brought up in a family of 1947 India-Pakistan Partition survivors, I have always been curious about borders, their existence, manifestations, shapes, and workings. The exodus in the wake of the fracture of India and Pakistan took place across proposed (invisible) colonial borders that would require decades to manifest physically. Still the migrant families that crossed these invisible borders to find shelter in either Hindu majority India or Muslim majority Pakistan, both on land and sea, faced the immeasurable consequences of lost home and hearth, of lost identity in a (to be formed) new country. Hubb Dijstelbloem's new book, *Borders as Infrastructure: The Technopolitics of Border Control* attempts to answer such questions. Using technopolitical and morphological analysis, Dijstelbloem studies the different kinds of European borders (on air, land, sea) in relation to human migration.

To map the “materiality and movability of borders and border politics” (57) the author extracts scholarly support from Bruno Latour and Peter Sloterdijk's concepts of “mediation”— the intermingling of human, technologies, and nature (59), and “peramorphic politics”— the interaction between border and politics (58), respectively. It helps Dijstelbloem comprehend the “morphological notions of technopolitics” (57). The objective of the book is to problematize the “ontic” and the “ontological” understandings of the border (10): in the anthropological sense “ontic” views technology as an instrument whereas “ontological” highlights the human-technology relationship. In this case, Dijstelbloem explains how these ideas relate to “peramorphic politics”— the shape of the boundary affected and produced by politics (ix). However, in so doing, he exposes the absence of the desirable borderless world which seemed achievable with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989

and reunification of the East and West Germany. He argues that despite the Schengen Agreement, Europe monitors and controls movement of its residents through walls and border checks between member states which became globally evident during the 2014-2016 migrant crisis. Such that he proposes “something else has changed—namely, the borders themselves” (4) where “everything becomes a border or is perceived as such” (5). To explain further, Dijstelbloem defines the soft, hard, visible, invisible, concrete, abstract, material, and ideational borders as moveable. Such movements are not only caused by shifting and redrawing of state boundaries but are also made mobile through “kinopolitics” where, with the help of technology, the borders move with the migrants: iris scans in airports, biometrics at land and port boundaries (7). The increase in surveillance and its direct impact hinder the movement of migrants, forcing people to take risky routes to reach their destinations.

The book, comprising of eight chapters ending with a focused section on changing/emergent borders owing to COVID-19, was born out of the author’s interest to understand the influence of technological developments on the creation of global tensions in the backdrop of the death of eleven detainees held at the detention center in Amsterdam’s Schiphol’s International Airport, in Schiphol East (the detainees had fallen prey to a fire breakout on October 27th, 2005). Nonetheless, during his research period the role of border politics in the 2014-2016 refugee crisis creation added nuance to his project.

Borders continue to be a compound issue in academic study and political debates. To effectively communicate ideas that where writings and theoretical frameworks employed in the book fall short, Dijstelbloem engages with ethnographic photography. He places a selected few photographs from Henk Wildschut’s collection of European migration, camps, and border controls at the end of each chapter. It clearly identifies the focus of the book: borders. The use of original photographs allows the presentation of the anthropological observations from the field. It not only enhances insight but also compels the readers to think through an image as if it were complex evidence.

The book evaluates the proposed concepts in association with the infrastructural developments of the European borders that began from the mid 1890s. The function of the border institutes and border technologies (Frontex Agency, European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database, Schengen Information System, Visa Information System) as border infrastructures that allows the border to move is detailed by analyzing the difference it exercises in

documenting and surveilling migrants and travelers (27). Thus, the book tries to highlight how various infrastructural additions to the border multiplies its ability to exist in any place where there might be a migrant.

The author provides precise examples of the real-life functions of the border infrastructures from the field: First, he deals with the European airspace which shapes the European Union's global border by passing decisions about curtailment and permission of movements of people who want to access the airport. Here, the class of "kinetic elites" are allowed to move but the movement of others is obstructed (82). The decisions are "mediated" through infrastructural functions as design, detection, and detention. Second, he is attentive to the creation of seascapes as borders in Europe. This he says was fueled by the alarming escalation in the numbers of undocumented migrants leading to security concern in the Greek Aegean Islands in 2014-2016. Such a condition was forced by the Syrian war in which the migrants arrived in Europe by crossing the sea while the land borders remained strictly closed. Dijstelbloem, diagnoses the effect of closed borders and the purpose of the consequent initiation of the European Surveillance System on both land and sea by conducting in-person interviews in Athens during which he asked his interviewees about their perspective on marking Chios and Lesbos as a critical space termed "hotspot" (165). Though the author talks about several issues in the context of "infrastructural investigations," they never lose sight of the necessity of "humanitarian borders" as an alternative to "extreme infrastructures" (179). The author increases the value of the book by delving into an intelligent enquiry of the contemporary border functionalities during the pandemic. He ends the book with a section titled "Coda" where he relates the workings of the border infrastructures with virus transmission and human mobility.

This book is a detailed study on borders becoming mobile and is an important read for scholars that take interest in border manifestations, border technologies, and its workings in relation to legal and illegal migrations. The book, however, leaves much scope for discussions around people-centric policy building to negotiate with the inhumane undertakings resulting from the infrastructural growth of the borders. At the same time, the theoretical framework that the book builds on can also be applicable to the studies of border functionalities outside Europe.

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