BOOK REVIEW

Bordering Beyond State Boundaries


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In *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* Nick Vaughan-Williams explores a new theoretical approach to border studies. While the majority of contemporary debate is restricted to an argument based on the presence or absence of State borders, Vaughan-Williams attempts to introduce a biopolitical understanding of bordering which challenges the relevance of this argument. Vaughan-Williams suggests that bordering is no longer restricted to the territorial boundaries of the Nation-State. This review essay critically engages Vaughan-Williams’ theoretical innovations and their philosophical origins.

*If the atlas appears as an incessant work of re-composing of the world, it is first of all because the world itself does not cease to undergo decomposition upon decomposition.*

— Georges Didi-Huberman, *ATLAS: How to carry the world on one’s back?* (Didi-Huberman 2010)

The perceived impact of globalization has generated debate about the importance of borders in contemporary political interactions. Most commonly scholars argue that borders dividing Nation-States are becoming obsolete, or alternatively, that they are constant and necessary despite the impact of transnational forces. An emerging critical literature seeks to challenge the closure of this debate around the binary distinction between strong and weak borders. This review essay will critique one such work, *Border Politics: The Limits of*
Sovereign Power by Nick Vaughan-Williams, in order to explore new ways of understanding the bordering process.

Critical approaches tend to avoid treating borders as a stable reality. Étienne Balibar indicates that ‘to define or identify in general is nothing more than the creation of a border’ (2005, p. 77). Therefore, we may regard the border not as the territorial separation between two political identities but rather the point where one entity differs from another. The process of continually defining and identifying borders points to an ever changing and unstable reality. Borders should be studied not by their ‘appearance’ but rather by an ‘appearing’ or ‘bordering’ process (Deleuze 2008, p. 22). It is during this ‘appearing’ process that a phenomenon acquires retrospectively the sense of being there (Foucault 2009, p. 79). Michel Foucault maintains that bodies, couples, races, species or borders are never completely closed off. Rather it is through their constant redefining that they are given sense (2009, p. 83).

Hence borders should not be taken as an assumption that can be simply described as absent or present. Any analysis should concentrate on how continual practices bring them into existence. As such, bordering is not restricted to the territorial separation understood as the limit of the Nation-State. A common critical argument is that borders have not disappeared, rather they are being found at sites that Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams state are ‘increasingly ephemeral and/or impalpable: electronic, non-visible, and located in zones that defy straightforwardly territorial logic’ (2009, p. 583). In Border Politics Vaughan-Williams attempts to defy territorial logic in his reworking of the border concept, claiming that borders are no longer at the territorial border by focusing on the bordering process. Nevertheless, his efforts achieve mixed results as they appear to narrow analysis exclusively to state power whilst excluding other possible border sites. This essay will discuss the limitations of Vaughan-Williams’ work and propose alternative ways of understanding the bordering process.

The theoretical innovation central to Vaughan-Williams’ thesis is based heavily on Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy (Cf. Agamben 1998, 2005). Agamben builds upon Foucault’s biopower thesis (Cf. Foucault 1998, 2007). He alters Foucault’s concept of modern sovereignty, as the ability to make life live or leave it to die, by arguing that this inclusion/exclusion of biological life is the original practice of sovereign power (Vaughan-Williams 2009, p. 98). Agamben’s theoretical work argues that the originary separation in Ancient Greek thought between zoé (the biological fact of living) and bios (politically qualified life) has become increasingly indistinguishable in modern society (Vaughan-Williams 2009, p. 97). Sovereign power generates a confused state where zoé can be taken as bios and vice versa. The individual in this confused state is exposed as ‘bare life’ to be categorized by the whim of sovereign decision (Vaughan-Williams 2009, p. 103). In this blurred state or ‘state of exception’, the
sovereign power is necessary as a law founding decision of inclusion and exclusion to fill the legal vacuum. Agamben implies that the existence of citizenship and political institutions depends on a discriminatory law founding violence (Vaughan-Williams 2009, p. 99). ‘Bare life’ is the founding element which is simultaneously included and excluded in the system, creating the appearance of unity, yet relying on the excluded other to give it meaning. The idea that the implementation of law is a constant bordering decision is the key element which Vaughan-Williams discusses. However, whilst Vaughan-Williams offers a detailed and accurate reading of Agamben, he spends far too little time interacting with critical interpretations which will be discussed later in this essay.

Vaughan-Williams follows Agamben’s thought to create a new concept regarding the bordering process: the ‘generalised biopolitical border’. This term implies that bordering is a process of inclusion and exclusion of ‘bare life’ in the political order. The sovereign decision is constantly at work to create reason, in a zone of indistinction or ‘camp’ that is not necessarily restricted to any particular territory (2009, p. 112). As the sovereign decision is not restricted territorially, Vaughan-Williams argues that camps of exception exist both inside and outside the traditional state (2009, p. 116). Therefore, the ‘generalised biopolitical border’ refers to a sort of global archipelago, where sovereign power produces ‘bare life’ through decisions of inclusion and exclusion on a global scale (2009, p. 116). These bordering practices occur at different sites that may come in the form of offshore borders that stop unwanted individuals, e-bordering or practices that exclude individuals inside particular Nation-States. To demonstrate his thesis Vaughan-Williams uses an example that demonstrates how sovereign power secures the political community by raising interior biopolitical borders against perceived dangers. The production of Jean Charles De Menezes as ‘bare life’ through his profiling and shooting in London’s tube as a perceived terrorist threat serves as a clear illustration (2009, p. 120).

Vaughan-Williams argues that the strength of understanding bordering as a ‘generalized biopolitical border’ is that it undoes the clear distinction between domestic and international political ordering. The political order is not a stable reality and is in constant reproduction through the suspension of law in the state of exception (2009, p. 132). The relationship between border and subject is blurred as borders and citizens are continually being defined through the categorization of ‘bare life’ (2009, p. 134). As a result the logic of a territorial separation between friend and enemy is thrown into disarray (2009, p. 135). Depending on sovereign decision, friend can be turned instantly into enemy or vice versa. However, it must be taken into account that while this concept succeeds in destabilizing traditional notions of territory, it is founded upon a number of problematic assumptions, the most restrictive of which is the apparent restriction of bordering to the exercise of sovereign power.
Before exploring some of the limitations of Agamben’s thought that Vaughan-Williams adopts, this essay will underline the methodological shortcomings of his approach. Vaughan-Williams readily accepts Agamben’s analysis and simply applies it to the bordering process. In this regard one should always be sceptical of the worth of following or applying an idea to our subject matter. The use of thinkers as a toolbox or ‘IKEA of ideas’ to combine and mix in different combinations hampers critical analysis as it restricts our thinking (Pardo 2007, p. 15). There is no specific combination of ideas which will lead to a revelation of solutions for the analytical problems faced. Ideas emerge in a certain context which their expropriation and reapplication distorts. Application in a restrictive area such as International Relations distorts and restricts the ability for critical thought. For example, in the case of Agamben effective solutions can be found to problems which he has developed in his own work. However, in adopting these solutions thought is restricted to believing that his interpretation of ‘bare life’ is correct.

Vaughan-Williams, in following Agamben, limits his analysis by avoiding cultural, economic and linguistic bordering. He explicitly states that the main aim of his work is to shift analysis of borders from geopolitics to biopolitics (2009, p. 65). Yet, we may interpret this as the promotion of an Agambenean methodology rather than biopolitics per se. This becomes evident in the third chapter which seemingly traces the evolution of biopolitical thought. Vaughan-Williams reveals the limitations of applying earlier works to finally conclude that Agamben is most suited to explaining the bordering process. His evident focus on Agamben is reflected in his insufficient understanding of other texts. For example, Vaughan-Williams concludes that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s ‘Empire’ thesis can be placed within the debate of absence/presence of borders (2009, p. 91). However, in doing so Vaughan-Williams fails to see that ‘Empire’ is not a territorial space in which borders are absent. Actually, Hardt and Negri suggest that it is a non-territorial space under biopolitical sovereignty. Their understanding of biopower differs from Vaughan-Williams’ as it implies a specific logic of ‘governmentality’ based on a dominant internalized notion of right and civilization (Hardt & Negri 2001, p. 11). ‘Empire’ is more a global space of capitalist exploitation than a borderless world. As such Hardt and Negri clearly state that modern sovereignty and other spheres reappear within this global space (2001, p. 39). Hence, contrary to Vaughan-Williams, Hardt and Negri’s thesis reveals that inequalities and bordering along cultural, linguistic and economic lines plays an important role in the contemporary world (2001, p. 336).

In regard to Agamben’s thought, a particularly strong line of criticism takes issue with how a society of reason—and hence its borders—is created through force alone. This line maintains that in his quest to go beyond modernist thinking, Agamben becomes embroiled in an esoteric world of mythological beginnings. José Luis Pardo argues that any imagined scenario about the foundation of society, such as Agamben’s ‘state of exception’, is a myth (1998-1999, p. 183).
Therefore, the creation of a legal system through the suspension of law in a 'state of exception' presumes a mythical order of events where a social state is forced upon nature (1998-1999, p. 163). In his analysis Pardo identifies two types of power, Potentia or natural power and Potestas or power through rights and obligations. According to Agamben, the natural Potentia of the sovereign is what founds the Potestas and therefore any sovereign state is founded upon unjustifiable prepolitical violence (1998-1999, p. 164). The inclusion and exclusion of ‘bare life’ in the polis becomes problematic as it is revealed that it is dependent on the belief in this hidden originary myth. It reduces bordering to a violent discriminatory process with no possibility for the creation of meaning by democratic means. This is largely due to the context of Carl Schmitt’s definition of sovereign power that Agamben relies upon. One should take into account that Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty explicitly sought to eliminate differences between democratic and dictatorial government (Pardo 1998-1999, p. 165). His thinking reflects a period of nostalgia for archaic sovereignty amidst a crisis of belief in civil accords after the First World War (Pardo 1998-1999, p. 166). Following such ideas based on a specific interpretation of sovereign power creates severe limitations when it comes to thinking about bordering processes of non-State identities.

As a result of following Agamben, Vaughan-Williams’ description of the process in which entities emerge is extremely problematic. This essay will contrast the political society formed through originary violence that creates law, as described in Vaughan-Williams’ account, and identities that arise through a continual unwritten agreement. It will propose that when identities are open to being agreed upon, inclusion does not necessarily lead to exclusion. Agamben, on the other hand, rejects such a notion as his conception of law leads him to believe that this is the case. As a result, his proposals for change are based on practices which render the exclusionary politics of sovereign power inoperative. He suggests the creation of minority politics, ‘whatever being’, in which the system is dismantled by division rather than a universal communal principle (Vaughan-Williams 2009, p. 138). As a result of such resistance, conventional political categories become impossible due to multiplicity of difference (Vaughan-Williams 2009, p. 139). With no lines to demarcate different identities and discriminate between them, exclusion becomes impossible (Vaughan-Williams 2009, p. 141). In other words, to counteract a discriminatory bordering process, the solution would involve an extreme shift in favour of particularity over universality. This essay will refute this claim and suggest that the creation of reason and hence the creation of borders is in part due to an involuntary process of identification, meaning that the dismantling of identities in such a way would simply lead to reconfigurations.

At this point it is useful to consider Jacques Rancière’s understanding of politics which differs from Agamben’s. Rancière reconfigures the vacuum of political activity within biopower by differentiating between ‘police’ understood as the ordering of bodies (2010, p. 43) and
‘politics’ as the introduction of contingency in the ordering process by those excluded. Through political action, their existence is recognized as they willingly enter into a conversation in disagreement with the ordering process (Manning 2004, p 62). In addition, Pardo offers a reading of the foundational myth of society as the continual creation of contractual reason. Pardo borrows the Aristotelian terminology lògos or rationality and phoné, human animality, which he relates to political and natural life. Whilst phoné has an implicit sense that is open to a plentitude of possible meanings, logós creates explicit meaning generated by an agreement between speakers in a conversation on equal terms (1998-1999, p. 178). It is this explicit creation that sustains a deliberately constituted public community (1998-1999, pp. 178-9). In this sense, there is a clear difference between a society based on agreement and one created through the imposition of power. Pardo echoes Deleuze's idea that whilst god exists, law is perpetually delegitimized as the sovereign does as he wishes. This changes within a law based society, where any call to an exception is simply a perverse and fictitious strategy to put oneself above law (1998-1999, p. 194). Pardo argues that peace and society are not the product of any exceptional occurrence, rather they come about through a mutual agreement (1998-1999, p. 184). Similarly, one may argue that there are no natural borders yet they come into existence not simply as a result of their imposition, but also because of constant agreement upon their existence. As borders must be accepted in order to have effect, a political act may alter bordering by contesting its discriminatory nature.

It is evident that there are no natural borders, yet everywhere they come into existence due to practices and processes of identification. Noel Parker offers a different way of thinking about borders as he does not restrict his analysis to the borders of the Nation-State. He studies the margin between entities that differentiate themselves through continual articulation. In this process, identities emerge when there is a perceived degree of sameness that can be differentiated from other identities. This is not restricted to territorial boundaries and state-centric notions, therefore identities and margins may appear at many different levels (2009, p. 18). In global politics international identities may form through the differentiation and identification of certain principles that are believed to characterize a certain identity (2009, p. 22). Likewise, in stating that identifying or defining is drawing a border, Balibar affirms that all discussions of borders depend upon defined identities that are ‘reductions of complexities’ (2005, p. 78). These ‘reductions of complexities’ arise through a process of identification which establishes certain norms of categorization. Its existence depends, in the case of the Nation-State, on the citizen who internalizes it as the norm and reference point of their identity, making it what Johan Gottlieb Fichte called an ‘internal border’ (cited in Balibar 2005, p. 80). Nevertheless, even when the border is internalized it is not completely stable. The process of identification is constant and borders continue to vacillate with the successive options that define them. Identification oscillates between two poles, the
undoing and infinite dispersion of identities and the reestablishment of identification with a new simplification of identity (Balibar 2005, p. 71).

Having clarified the underlying themes in Vaughan-Williams’ work it is possible to reconsider his text’s initial proclamation inspired by Balibar: that borders are no longer at the territorial border (Vaughan-Williams 2009, p. 6). The problems in the first section of the text, dedicated to exploring Balibar’s idea, are symptomatic of what will come. In this section, Vaughan-Williams analyzes three cases: the UK’s New Border Doctrine, the rise of FRONTEX (the EU’s integrated border security) and finally the USA’s use of Guantanamo Bay as an extralegal space. Whilst the examples discussed demonstrate innovative bordering practices, as is the case in the rest of his analysis, it is not clear whether they escape an inside/outside dichotomy, which divides an area where state power is in force and an external anarchy. Whilst Vaughan-Williams’ notion of borders is not static, the moving borders which he refers to seem to define the exercise of power by political units divided by thicker blurry borders (2009, p. 32). This does not completely capture the idea that Balibar wished to portray. Balibar argues that border experiences differ depending on the relationship that the individual has with the border (2005, p. 77). Seemingly, Vaughan-Williams changes the context of Balibar’s thinking or he fails to perceive the Marxist overtures that suggest that Balibar is referring to other dividing factors that are not at the border, such as class. Balibar has dedicated much study to analyzing exclusion in society (1992, p. 191). This is why Balibar emphasises that borders may be created at the edges of many differentiations, not simply the limits of state power, such as linguistic hierarchy, cultural recognition, the taking of economic or political decisions and efforts to control globalization (2005, p. 91).

Border Politics contributes to an important body of literature challenging accepted notions related to the definition of border. Nevertheless, its restricted focus and the limitations created by following Agamben hamper its overall impact. The challenge of reconfiguring political understanding beyond a State-centric approach proves to be extremely difficult. Vaughan-Williams’ work would have profited from a consideration of bordering on a wider scale to include the emergence of cultural, economic, religious and linguistic identities. Such an approach, considering the constant emergence of entities, would more aptly investigate the proliferation of bordering processes both inside and outside State boundaries.

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