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Realising «Fortress Europe»: «Managing» migrants and refugees at the borders of Greece

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REALISING “FORTRESS EUROPE”:
“MANAGING” MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES
AT THE BORDERS OF GREECE

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the emergence of a migration regime in the making at the South-eastern borders of Europe with special reference to Greece and the role of FRONTEX as the new European border guard often acting in lieu of the state. Using a bio-political approach, we consider practices of human rights violations at the Greek reception centres in Evros and identify the actors involved in policing the borders. The key question is that of accountability: who guards the guards guarding Europe's borders?

Keywords: FRONTEX, migration regime, migration management, asylum seekers, refugees

INTRODUCTION

Outside the village of Sidero, not far from the town of Soufli, there is a burial ground for migrants who die trying to cross the Greek-Turkish borders. Approximately 40 people lost their lives trying to cross the borders during the first 7 months of 2010.¹ The normal procedure is to transfer the bodies to the University Hospital of Alexandroupolis for the coroner's examination. Recently, a DNA test has also been introduced so that the bodies can be identified, numbered and classified and eventual identification may be possible in the future by relatives. The international network “Welcome2Europe” has launched a campaign accusing the Greek authorities of

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1. <http://w2eu.net/2010/08/09/mass-grave-of-refugees-in-evros-uncovered/>

creating mass graves to dispose of the bodies. Although there is disagreement concerning the existence of this mass grave, the fact remains that there is a violation of the right to life and dignity in the case of these people who are seeking protection. One of the ironies here is that the activity of burying the dead is allocated to the Mufti (Muslim religious representative) of Evros who is responsible for maintaining hygienic conditions and guaranteeing a Muslim burial on the assumption that the majority of the “illegal migrants” are Muslims. Eyewitness reports suggest that the examination of the bodies in terms of religious identification is minimal which leads one to wonder whether these people become islamized upon death. It is important to stress that this “forcible islamisation after death” is not so much an intentional expansion of the religious constituency by Muslim authorities as a default practice. According to a human rights report, once the bodies are identified they are placed in a body bag and handed over to the undertaker (Hellenic League for Human Rights 2011).² Each body bag carries the protocol number of the file of the deceased, written in a permanent marker pen. This way each body can be linked to the DNA sample and the other personal data gathered during the autopsy. The undertaker takes the bodies to Sidero. The report notes that “all unidentified deceased immigrants are considered Muslims for practical reasons”. Thus, they are all buried in the de facto cemetery in Sidero according to Muslim ritual. The Mufti takes care of the burial, i.e. the digging of the grave and wrapping of the corpse in special cloth, as prescribed by Islamic tradition. This type of burial practice is not always possible since a large number of immigrants also die at sea. The sea borders at the Aegean islands (e.g. Mytilini, Chios, Samos) allow for additional failed immigration cases that are found at sea or through their relics disclosing evidence of people who did not survive the journey and drowned en route to Europe (Welcome2Europe, 2012).

The topic of death and dying is not novel to anthropological research. However, there is insufficient emphasis and documentation of how people deal with dying, particularly in extreme conditions of survival, such as refugee camps, flight, refuge and exile. A notable exception is the Harrell-Bond and Wilson paper (1990) that addresses the urgency of the issue under extreme conditions of survival unattended by aid and health providers. The urgency of the issue for “irregular” migrants attempting to cross the borders of the Evros region has been noted by many human rights observ-

2. Hellenic League for Human Rights, ‘Report on the Muslim immigrants’ cemetery in Evros’, <http://www.hlhr.gr/detailsen.php?id=586>

ers.³ Particularly for anthropologists, there is a need to illustrate the significance of burial and mourning within the forced migrant communities in which they work. Coping with dying for those who survive the experience of forced migration is an important provision scarcely appreciated by relief agencies and support groups (e.g. Harrell-Bond and K. Wilson, 1990; Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 1995).

I started with this dramatic description of cross-border reality to emphasise the notion of the “border”⁴ and its maintenance, which has become a major European preoccupation.⁵ There is a novel type of interdisciplinary literature that addresses issues of international border crossings and the global governance of mobility/immobility, understood both as a “world in motion” (Inda and Rosaldo 2007) and a “world in detention” where migrants are contained so that the idea of migration as a form of “globalization from below” (Hall 2006) becomes a threat and predicament for the very actors it seeks to promote. In this literature (eg. Sassen, 2007; Bigo and Guild, 2005), which focuses on the tension between the rhetoric of mobility and the containment practices of immobility, the need for a deconstruction of the so-called “borderless world” depicted in the tourist literature becomes evident.

Drawing from these accounts, the purpose of this paper is to introduce another key institutional actor in the maintenance of the south-eastern European border, namely the European Agency FRONTEX. The presence of FRONTEX reinforces the imagery of the European Union as a ‘gated community’, a concept analysed as the “Two-faced border and immigration regime in the EU” (van Houtoum and Pijpers, 2007: 291). The authors cogently articulate the inherent paradox of the European Union’s immigration regime including the manifest duplicity between those that are within, i.e. EU citizens, and those that remain in the periphery, i.e. the migrants as outsiders. Using Jacques Lacan’s concept of “fear of discomfort” as a kind of uneasiness that stems from the perception of being overwhelmed by nameless masses of Others who undermine the sense of security and personal welfare private citizens opt for (van Houtoum and Pijpers, 2007: 297). The

3. *op. cit.* 1,2.

4. The actual length of the Greek-Turkish border is 90 km (Syri 2010).

5. A recent map produced by Migreurop network (<http://www.migreurop.org/IMG/pdf/carte-en.pdf>) of detention camps of foreigners which cover the territory from North Africa, the Balkans and most major cities in Central Europe points to the institutional attempts to undermine global mobility and the institutionalisation of immobility since people in camps cannot move. These are new phenomena of technologies of mobility control that are in opposition to the whole idea of a globalising world described as a world in motion.

general apprehension and anxiety vis-à-vis the unknown Others, the immigrants, symbolises, according to this psychoanalytic reading, the fear of emptiness given that the Other, as a scapegoat, threatens to unveil individual emptiness (Lacan, 2004). Even if these feelings are not experienced as such on the individual level, there is little doubt that the political imagination that mobilises the imagery of invading hordes and hungry masses impacts on the way daily life within state borders is experienced as a major threat.

FRONTEX AS A EUROPEAN BORDERGUARD ACTING IN LIMINAL TERRITORIES

The concept of “liminality” is an anthropological classic. Extensively analysed by Mary Douglas in *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (2002), it is a term used to define refugees and other excluded “Others” in the context of status transformation and ambiguous positioning in terms of “betwixt” and “between”. For people crossing international borders, this liminality is normally identified in terms of status vis-à-vis their antecedent and subsequent status; neither of them are clear. The category of “illegal migrants” has been invented by host societies in order to single out the irregular character of official documents required by States in order to cross borders (e.g. passports, visas, personal documents). The criminalisation of lack of documents was an accepted state practice throughout the 20th century. “Fortress Europe” is a summary term referring to the securitisation of Europe’s external borders. The introduction of a specialised intergovernmental EU body to safeguard EU borders is the *par excellence* example of the conceptualisation of the idea of an “enemy from the outside”. The concept of “enemy”, however, is never sufficiently elaborated in this terrorism generated discourse. In “Illegal migration: What can we know and what can we explain? Analyzing the case of Germany”, Heckmann (2011) suggests that deciphering legal and illegal migration is no easy matter. He presents two images, both taking place at night. Image one: “*a group of illegal migrants from Moldavia is sneaking through the bushes led by a villager from the Czech border village trying to cross the border to get into Germany. The goal of these ‘illegal immigrants’ is to work in the shadow economy. They are spotted by a night vision camera of the border police, arrested and questioned. Some are sent back, others are brought into court*”. Image two: “*one imagines a group of Romanians sitting on their bus seats presenting their passports to the border control controllers and being allowed into the country. Yet, the particular group*

is using false documents which would put their entry in jeopardy. Their intention is not tourism, but to work illegally in Germany; so, like the Moldavians, they share the aim of working in the shadow economy". This comparison is instructive in that both groups of individuals are labelled "illegals". Yet, typically, there is an important difference between the two groups: Moldavians need visas to travel to Germany, while Romanians no longer do, since they are members of the EU. What makes these two groups of "illegal migrants" illegal? Hecknann focuses on an analysis of "undocumented migration" insisting that while it is easy to use the term, it is methodologically difficult to classify all forms of "undocumented migrants or migration" as illegal. The salient feature of the first image is the activity of human smuggling. In the second case, while there is no smuggling, one can imagine that migrants who travel by bus belong to the subcategory of those illegally crossing a national border because their documents are not authentic, but were bought in the black market. Hecknann's argument has methodological import because it focuses on the basic forms of "illegal migration" and distinguishes between different practices of "legality" and "intention". He uses it to argue against the possibility of arriving at a reliable form of quantifying the phenomenon of illegal migration which is at the heart of the European policy of "Fortress Europe".

If one compares the elaborate policies practiced under state socialism based on the idea of "finding the enemy within" that allowed for large scale forced migrations and the criminalisation of lives and families on the basis of this threat to the collectivity, the development of highly sophisticated technologies used at the border against border crossers may intimate the similarities between the two sets of institutions both of which are predicated on a Foucauldian conceptualisation of the "Panopticon". The surveillance practices used by FRONTEX include infra-red cameras, high definition scanning machines, and video monitoring, which become means for surveillance and control. The question that emerges is what is done with the information collected by these technologies of power? Central information services like Eurodac⁶ regularly stock information through fingerprinting and profiling of individuals in the interest of safeguarding the Dublin II regulation which includes the obligation of returning asylum seekers to the first country of asylum application. In the case of Greece, which is one of the entry points to Europe, this regulation has raised a

6. Eurodac is the European fingerprint database for identifying asylum seekers and irregular border-crossers, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurodac>

number of difficulties because conditions of detention and asylum procedures have been considered particularly inhumane and made other EU states reluctant to return asylum seekers to Greece (PRO ASYL 2008). Ironically, by comparison to public discourse in other western countries, as for example the UK where under Michael Howard's conservative leadership migrants and asylum seekers were linked to terrorism, in the case of Greece the threat is based on the conditions of survival of the migrants themselves! (i.e., Greece is not a safe country for asylum seekers). The fact that in public perception migrants and asylum seekers are seen as a potential threat to the livelihoods of local people is part of a rightwing rhetoric that is acquiring public support as used by populist politicians. As a result, Greece belongs to the general trend of European public culture exhibiting a continuing rise of xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric. The latter is predicated on the construction of migrants and asylum seekers as threats to the local peoples' economic security. Yet, data from economic geography focusing on the impact of Albanians, Bulgarians, Romanians and others on the Greek labour rural market show that rather than being a problem, the presence of these migrant workers has provided a solution to longstanding problems of economic restructuring and demographic crisis of the rural population which are rooted in the social rejection by younger generations of life and work in rural areas. The presence of these migrants has allowed for increased opportunities for families to find other types of employment (Kasimis, Papadopoulos and Zacoboulou, 2003). A similar argument has been made by Baldwin-Edwards, whose research is based on a comparative sociological assessment of the impact of Albanian labour migration to Greece. Longitudinal research shows that despite public perceptions about Albanians as a threat to "the Greek way of life", recent assessments find them as "necessitus strangers" acknowledged by Greek society as a positive force for Greece's economic development during the late 20th and early 21st century (Baldwin-Edwards and Apostolatou, 2008).

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE QUEST FOR SECURITY THROUGH DIVERSE SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES

While the quest for security may be considered a fundamental human need, in all human sciences the epistemological allocation of adequate literature within any single discipline is not easy, as different disciplines have developed their own distinct academic traditions to address the issue.

The so-called "securitization" framework is an approach developed as a theoretical position by the Copenhagen School. The School's securitization theory is prominent as an alternative understanding to the concept of "security" in security studies which has heretofore been the province of international relations. The innovative aspect of the Copenhagen School is its emphasis on the notion of "security" as a "speech act". It holds that there are no security issues in themselves, but only in the linguistic activity of certain actors: "the securitizing actors". "*Security is not an interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance itself is an act. By saying it, something is done*" (Burzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998). Using J. L. Austin's "speech act" theory, the Copenhagen School aims at de-mythologizing international security studies through a "linguistic turn" in international relations to de-mythologize security studies, which was the stronghold of political scientists during the Cold War period.

The success of securitization of immigration in the political realm

Didier Bigo's work has been called a post-structural approach to security. Bigo (2002) does not see the root of the problem in practices like the propaganda of extreme right-wing political parties, racism, a rhetoric convincing people of the danger that immigrants pose, or "speech acts" by various state/societal actors, although he recognizes that all these contribute to the securitization of immigration. His hypothesis is that the securitization of immigration is based on a combination of different ideas, situations, and practices. These are "our conception of the state as a body or a container for the polity", the fear of politicians "about losing their symbolic control over the territorial boundaries", "the habitus of the security professionals" and "the 'unease' that some citizens who feel discarded suffer because they cannot cope with the uncertainty of everyday life" (Bigo 2002:1).

For Bigo, the policies that construct and treat immigrants as a threat ("policies of denial, of active forgetting") are fundamentally based on the conception of the state "as a body or container of the polity" by the lead actors that produce security discourses.

Thus, citizens are conceived as "nationals" and this conception is based on an opposition with "foreigners" – consequently, migrants also. So, immigrants are seen as the outsiders that threaten the 'homogeneity' of state and society. The concept of sovereignty, of clear cut borders and of security, have structured our thoughts in such a way that we visualize the state as a "body" that contains the national identity, that is different from other

polities, and that is the only possible political order that can exist and guarantee security. Bigo mentions that this way of thinking is often forgotten or neglected by scientists and urges that “sovereignty and security cannot be conceived merely as analytical tools of social reality; they must be seen as categories demanding genealogical analysis and linked to a particular way of governing” (Bigo, 2002: 3).

Politicians participate in and reproduce the “sovereignty myth” of the state because it gives meaning to their existence, their understanding of the political and social world and their own struggles, and because they fear “losing their symbolic control over territorial boundaries” (especially in today’s environment of globalised capitalism). The political game and spectacle becomes the scene where politicians compete and construct situations as problems – thus they distance themselves from other politicians and the solution they offer about how to manage these problems justifies their authority. Labeling immigration as a problem or a threat is a similar process. They see in immigration a “penetration” of the state and presuppose it can be controlled. Having the right to control, they have the right to define the status of people – “legal” or “illegal”. But because immigration flows cannot really be controlled entirely (“the impossibility of managing millions of decisions taken by individuals”) and immigrants eventually find their way in the state (or the EU as a supranational polity) they are seen by the politicians as enemies, as the opposite of “good citizens”, as persons who break the law and mock their will (Bigo, 2002: 3-4).

Security professionals, on the other hand, define and determine the “threats” and the “risks” – in contrast to others – “amateurs” – they “know” because they are professionals. Utilizing Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, Bigo sees the creation of a “*security field*” by the security professionals. They utilize secrecy and technology and share “a specific ‘sense of the game’”. They include specialists (e.g. customs, police, intelligence agents, bankers, suppliers of technology) that have “security” as their subject and by “doing” security and defining and assessing the risks and the threats that produce fear and “insecurity” in European societies they have become the “managers of unease”. In today’s Europe, where the Soviet Union is no longer the enemy, new enemies are needed for the military and security organizations to continue to function and the concept of the “internal security of the EU” has been gradually created. For these professionals, the ‘immigrant’ is the new enemy and is first of all seen as a target for the new technologies to be tested and used and only secondarily as a danger to “a boundary they need to protect (a polity, a group, a supposed identity)” (Bigo, 2002: 7-8).

In those circumstances, the words “immigration” and “immigrant” become catchwords used for many heterogeneous situations of movement and of people, and enter the political and social scene only as a political problem, a problem that threatens the state and its people:

The term immigrant is politically meaningful only in a discourse of “struggle against illegal immigrants,” or in a discourse of “regulation,” but in any case in a rhetoric of cultural nationalism creating citizenship by difference with these outsiders inside the state (Bigo 2002: 4).

Bigo suggests an extension of Michel Foucault’s work and building on the “*panopticon*”, he proposes the term “*ban-opticon*” in order to explain the form of governmentality of postmodern societies. It is a governmentality based on “misgivings and unrest” in order to justify its authority and reassure insecure citizens of its control. It is characterized by the securitization of immigration, restrictive rules and norms, practices of rejection and detention at the borders, and the strengthening of the “internal security” of the state against the welfare state. Thus, the ban-opticon uses the “technologies of surveillance [to] sort out who needs to be under surveillance and who is free of surveillance, because of his profile” (Bigo, 2002: 10). Thus, a “risk society” is formed in the EU that creates unease among its citizens, an unease that is in fact not psychological but structural, “framed by neoliberal discourses in which freedom is always associated at its limits with danger and (in)security” (Bigo, 2002: 1).

Viewing EU policies and the workings of FRONTEX through the eyes of Bigo’s theory affords us considerable insight. FRONTEX is an “intelligence-driven agency whose core activity is operations, the first stage of which is risk analysis” (FRONTEX 2011) and thus may be seen as a key actor in the practice of defining “threats” to EU security. One of the most important agencies in the EU’s “security field”, it works to survey, control and secure the external border of the Union. All this is done in the name of “freedom” (as in EU’s Area of Freedom, Security and Justice), a freedom of movement and of choices for EU citizens, but a freedom that can only be perceived in a context of banishment of the “undesired”. One of the critical points is the very construction of the “securitization” of migration which ironically for the original Copenhagen School has acquired magical power as an incantation; even the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has used the identification of security with migration issues to suggest a need for an EU immigration policy of securitization given that migration is considered to be a threat. Theoretically, such invocation of the

securitization framework suffers from an essential ambiguity between the crisis period for which there is a need for securitization and the post-crisis period during which there is no such need for adopting extraordinary border measures (building fences, increased patrolling, guards etc.). A similar point has been addressed by John Davis (1992) in his paper “The Anthropology of Suffering”. Davis’ methodologically and theoretically relevant point is to argue against two distinct types of anthropology: the “anthropology of maintenance” which deals with everyday normal conditions of survival, and the “anthropology of repair” which is meant to address crises and extraordinary situations. He shows the fallacy of this dichotomy since one of the key components of anthropology is to come to terms with the normalization of pain. Placing emphasis on the extraordinary nature of a crisis generates a psychology of mobilization without addressing the structural conditions of a particular crisis or the underlying mechanisms for its containment. Research on migration practices and border controls shows that security systems do not emerge for specific aims; rather, they are implemented because the available technology exists. The case of FRONTEX is a *par excellence* example of the mobilization of an existing technology in the face of a perceived enemy from “without”. These perceptions are characteristically used for public consumption, generating and mobilizing images of the external threat. Against this threat, an all powerful set of guards is supposed to provide protection to the citizens of the Member States. Social scientists from different disciplines, including economics, have been questioning the image and effectiveness of the “guardian” model. The image of the “guardian” derives from Plato’s model in the *Republic* where the Guardians or Rulers of the City-State are meant to safeguard the order of the ideal State. Plato’s message is based on a certain rational optimism; he assumes that it is necessary to trust the Guardians, arguing through Socrates’ persona that “it would be absurd for a Guardian to need a Guard”. This, however, is no longer absurd, since it is evident that the majority of modern-day social, economic, and political entities indeed require significant oversight of normal activities, including implementation of the rule of law and its enforcement. Interestingly, FRONTEX is explicitly accountable to no official body within the EU. The appeal to the Council of Ministers is equivalent to the Platonic notion of the rational hypothesis of the *Republic*, either the philosophers will become kings or the Kings philosophers. This rational hope, alas, was never realized.

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