

# Deconstructing Border Theory: a New Way of Thinking about European Borders

Books review – essay

Vaughan-Williams, N. 2015. *Europe's Border Crisis: Biopolitical Security and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 192. ISBN: 9780198747024

Vaughan-Williams, N. and Lundborg T. *New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations: A Radical Intertextual Approach*. *Review of International Studies*, 2015, 41(1), p. 3–25  
Peoples C. and Vaughan-Williams, N. 2014. *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 236. ISBN-13: 978-0415841849, ISBN-10: 0415841844

Vaughan-Williams, N. *Border Politics. The Limits of Sovereign Power*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. p. 208. ISBN 9780748637324

In the past year the renewed attention to borders was extended to the practice of book titling. The present era of growing globalization and European border crisis integrates sociological, political and philosophical analyses. The questions of migration and borders are at the core of critical, radical geography and other social sciences. Borders and border regions are particularly revealing places for social research. Border is a place, territory where “past” and “future” are permanently clashed. The “past” was never simply there to begin with, and the “future” is not what will unfold, but “past” and “future” are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through the world’s ongoing intra-activity. History suggests that borders and borderlands are the territory where a possibility to “repair” the “now” situation exists.

The ongoing European refugee crisis is an example of “diffraction” which in reality is not only a concentration of current wars and conflicts, but also represents the long history of injustice, political and social mistakes. It atomized into a chaotic series of border

confrontations and diplomatic disputes, prompting the European Union to warn that the concept of European unity was at risk. Border controls appear to negate the most visible achievement of European integration. The present state is totalizing the discourse on illegal immigrants as the incomprehensible alien, radically and absolute Other. Today we observe a paradoxical situation where humanitarian practices often lead to lethal border conditions.

A new way of thinking about Europe’s borders challenged necessity of a provocative and timely reflection on the debate of border security and migration management in Europe. All of that immediately found a response in researching literature which offers critical perspectives on current migration policies, detention and deportation, border controls during recent years.

Nick Vaughan-Williams is a researcher who during the last years tries to revise such important definitions as dehumanization, refugees, border security and control, migration management though biopolitical paradigm.

He engages in theoretical discussion of border reinterpretation and deconstruction in nowadays global politics. But first of all, he “focuses upon one particular type of border: the concept of the border of the state” and these borders “are inherent to logics of inside and outside, practices of inclusion and exclusion, and questions about identity and difference”<sup>1</sup>. Following John Agnew, he adds that the “modern geopolitical imaginary”, state borders are taken to be territorial markers of the limits of sovereign political authority and jurisdiction, and located at the geographical outer edge of the polity. Vaughan-Williams uses metaphor “compass” for explanation such state’s functions as orients the convergence of people with a given territory, the feeling of belonging to a common history, nationality, identity, language, culture and frames dominant notions of who and where the ‘enemy’ of the state is.

His books “Border Politics. The Limits of Sovereign Power” (2009), “Critical Security Studies: An Introduction” (with, C. Peoples, 2014), “Europe’s Border Crisis: Biopolitical Security and Beyond” (2015), “Everyday Security Threats: Perceptions, Experiences, Consequences” (with D. Stevens, 2016) and many articles on the same subject offer new perspectives and combine a distinctive and original interpretation of the main facets of biopolitical theory with an analysis of EU border security policies.<sup>2</sup> All together this

provides new resources for radical thought and activity.

In one of his first books “Border Politics. The Limits of Sovereign Power”, Vaughan-Williams explains own motivation to write about borders as is not only framed by what has hitherto remained unsaid about borders but also stems from a dissatisfaction from unreflective usage of the concept of the border of the state in diverse claims about global politics. He disagrees with debate which excludes the possibility that the concept of the border of the state has undergone transformation and with focus on whether borders between states are merely ‘present’ or ‘absent’ is blind to dynamics in political practices<sup>3</sup>.

He analyzes such conclusions in contemporary border studies in where it is possible to radicalize meaning of border. First of all, it is Étienne Balibar ideas about borders in

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- Vaughan-Williams, N. The Generalised Biopolitical Border? Re-conceptualising the Limits of Sovereign Power, *Review of International Studies*, 2009, 35/4, p. 729–749; Vaughan-Williams, N. The UK Border Security Continuum: Virtual Biopolitics and the Simulation of the Sovereign Ban, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2010, 28, p. 1071–1083; Lundborg T., Vaughan-Williams, N. Resilience, Critical Infrastructure, and Molecular Security: The Excess of “Life” in Biopolitics, *International Political Sociology*, 2011, 5/4, p. 367–383; Minca C., Vaughan-Williams, N. Carl Schmitt and the Concept of the Border, *Geopolitics*, 2012, 17/4, p. 756–772; Lundborg T., Vaughan-Williams, N. New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations: A Radical Intertextual Approach, *Review of International Studies*, 2015, 41/1, p. 3–25; Brassett J., Vaughan-Williams, N. Security and the Performative Politics of Resilience: Critical Infrastructure Protection and Humanitarian Emergency Preparedness, *Security Dialogue*, 2015, 46/1, p. 32–50.
- 3 Vaughan-Williams N. Border Politics. The Limits of Sovereign Power”, p. 5–6.

1 Vaughan-Williams, N. *Border Politics. The Limits of Sovereign Power*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009, p. 1.

2 Vaughan-Williams, N. Borderwork Beyond Inside/Outside? Frontex, the Citizen-Detective and the War on Terror, *Space and Polity*, 2008, 12/1, p. 63–79; Vaughan-Williams, N. Borders, Territory, Law, *International Political Sociology*, 2008, 4/2, p. 322–338;

contemporary political life as is not necessarily where they are supposed to be according to the modern geopolitical imaginary. Using metaphor “the vacillation of borders” Balibar added that the vacillation of borders is not conflated with their disappearance, On the contrary, borders are being “multiplied and reduced in their localization, no longer the shores of politics but the space of the political itself. As such, he implies the need to think more imaginatively, and perhaps even outside the modern geopolitical imaginary, to begin to grasp what is going on in global politics. Vaughan-Williams agrees with Balibar’s paradoxical formulation that “borders are no longer at the border”. For him, Balibar is certainly not alone and his border reconceptualization approach possible to find in R. B. J. Walker, Achille Mbembe and Eyal Weizman works. “Moreover, albeit in different ways and contexts, many other writers have made equivalent claims about the need for alternative border imaginaries in the study of global politics”<sup>4</sup>. This book responds to the challenge issued by Balibar, and others to develop alternative border imaginaries. For Vaughan-Williams, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are particularly close because they all critically question both the logic and practice of borders in a general sense. His research interest is concentrated on how they together seek to consider the relationship between the concept of the state border and how it is possible to apply for understanding of practices of sovereignty, violence and biopower in political life in XXI century.

He uses idea about “the move from a

geopolitical to a biopolitical horizon of thinking” inspired by Foucault and Agamben, for development of the concept of the “generalized biopolitical border” and for a more pluralized and radicalized view about place of borders in nowadays political life. The map of book is organized into five chapters each of them show the examples of bordering practices and demonstrates the importance of developing new ways of identifying and interrogating borders.

Book explore how this alternative frame might entail new forms of border practice and theory. He warns against such way of thinking when “the concept of the generalized biopolitical border runs the risk of foisting the same problematic sense of form, shape, and coherence on ‘global politics’ as a totality in the same way that the concept of the border of the state has done”<sup>5</sup>.

The map of “Europe’s Border Crisis: Biopolitical Security and Beyond” book is organized into six chapters that explain such important subjects as European border crisis, biopolitical, thanatopolitical and zoopolitical border paradigms and nowadays reconceptualization of the border as an immune system in the condition of mass migration. The last chapter is devoted to the definition “an affirmative border” and its biopolitical imaginary. At the same time, each chapter draws on a different biopolitical key to technologies of power and explore the insights and limits of the biopolitical paradigm on the border. He explains how poststructuralists might help us understand the biopolitical bordering practices. The author uses this critical resources for rethinking new context of the relationship

4 *Ibid*, p. 7–8.

5 *Ibid*, p. 11.

between borders, security and sovereign power. The key ideas of Agamben, Derrida, Esposito and Foucault, he uses for the explanation of the process of dehumanization and animalization of migrants. He wrote: "I argue that the animalisation of 'irregular' migrants constitutes a specific spatial technology of power that neither Foucaultian biopolitics nor Agambenian thanatopolitics – two prominent frames mobilized within critical approaches to border security and migration – can adequately grasp"<sup>6</sup>. For him, Esposito's "the affirmative border politics" is a very important definition which attempts to find solution "the violent potentiality of biopolitical bordering practices"<sup>7</sup>. From other side, he agrees with Esposito that it is attempt to accept fact that "the essential failure of human rights, their inability to restore the broken connection between rights and life, does not take place in spite of the affirmation of the ideology of the person but rather because of it"<sup>8</sup>. Vaughan-Williams does not offer to negate borders but proposes to use the notion of "autoimmunity" as a "border concept" which makes "the border as a porous figure, which maintains an inside/outside distinction"<sup>9</sup>.

He identifies two opposing approaches in nowadays border research: one that represent Giorgio Agamben which understand the growth of repressive tools as a necessary and result of state power; the other – Antonio Negri, which sees the autonomy of the

migrants themselves as priority. The motto: "Escape comes first", opens way to the theory about always porous borders and people, that are very determined and ready to find a way. Border policies, sometime successful or sometime not, are attempts to respond to the ongoing European refugee crisis. From the view of Vaughan-Williams, analyzing this problem, we do not find binary alternatives, one of which we will trust. Using the metaphor of "an immune system", he explains that a state, same as human being organism, can protect and defend yourself. At the same time, "more attention needs to be given to the 'negative' dimensions that expose 'irregular' populations to dehumanization and death"<sup>10</sup>.

His conclusion that "too much protection or too little protection will lead to an autoimmune crisis" is right but difficult for realization. Today "properly calibrated" proportion is far from perfect and more similar to a number of actions contradict each other.

He asks difficult questions, which have no simple answers: must biopolitical border security practice always result in death or/and dehumanization? Is a more affirmative approach to border possible within biopolitical frame?<sup>11</sup>

Vaughan-Williams, whose academic research on borders and migration argues for a new way of seeing the problem, articulates such affirmative politics of border that encounter between self and other does not take the exclusionary and violent forms as opposed to what today we observe around us. Drawing on biopolitical paradigms in contemporary political philosophy, he

6 Vaughan-Williams, N. 2015. *Europe's Border Crisis: Biopolitical Security and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 4.

7 *Ibid*, p. 122.

8 Esposito, R. (2012). *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 5.

9 Vaughan-Williams, N. 2015. *Europe's Border Crisis: Biopolitical Security and Beyond*, p. 139–141.

10 *Ibid*, p. 12.

11 *Ibid*, p. 14.

finds keys for interpreting current dynamics within immigration policies and its antinomy consequences.

The problem of humanitarianism and biopolitical border security in Europe Vaughan-Williams

discussed in his article "We are not animals! Humanitarian border security and zoopolitical spaces in EUrope".<sup>12</sup> The article is about development of alternative border imaginaries apposite to the complexities of bordering practices in global politics. This article is possible to be divided on two parts: first is about nowadays border security reality, EU legislative attempts to react on that, humanitarian activity NGOs, second, the theoretic elaboration of the post-biopolitical paradigm.

Vaughan-Williams separated critical and radical scholars who describe and write about border. Critical scholars have sought to move beyond debates about the continued importance or likely obsolescence of state borders under conditions of globalization by tracing the changing nature and location of EUrope's borders and the exploration of how Derrida's zoopolitical treatment of the relationship between biopolitics, sovereignty and the human/animal distinction. In fact, he focusses on how the zoopolitical logic identified by Derrida operates the application of human rights, and the citizen as the 'proper' human subject in spaces of animalization across EUrope. From his view, the neoliberalisation of border security and migration management and the emphasis on the well-being of 'irregular' populations

closely associated with what Michel Foucault paradigmatically referred as biopolitics. Vaughan-Williams concludes:

"A difference between the 'rhetoric' of humanitarian policies and the 'reality' of dehumanizing practices "should be explain in categories of alternative critical philosophical resources is increasingly pressing because many of the conventional grounds for critiquing border violence found in academic and non-academic literatures that focus on an abstract and idealized human subject – human rights, humanitarianism, and 'migrant-centredness' – have already been coopted by authorities complicit in that violence. Building upon these observations, I argue that the animalisation of 'irregular' migrants constitutes a specific spatial technology of power that neither Foucaultian biopolitics nor Agambenian thanatopolitics – two prominent frames mobilized within critical approaches to border security and migration – can adequately grasp"<sup>13</sup>.

In this article he appeals to Jacques Derrida's (2009) lectures published posthumously "The Beast and the Sovereign" in which he developed the notion of the 'zoopolitical border'. Derrida through emphasizing the performative production of zoopolitical place (detention centers), shows necessity to develop alternative border imaginaries apposite to the complexities of bordering practices in global politics. Vaughan-Williams cites a number of narratives from source of such organizations as Pro Asyl, Human Rights Watch in which "like animal" leitmotif feels very strong. He analyses Agamben short essay "We Refugees" (1994)

12 Vaughan-Williams, N. "We are not animals! Humanitarian border security and zoopolitical spaces in Europe". *Political Geography*, 2015, Volume 45. p. 1–10.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

and “The Open: Man and Animal” (2004) and comes to the conclusion:

“Agamben’s account is potentially helpful for understanding the need for political analysts to better understand not only the politics of bordering practices, but also the ways in which certain borders enable other borders to be (re)drawn and (re)produced and at the same time. Agamben’s discussion of the human/animal distinction and the anthropological machine begins to address the issue of what is at stake in the contemporary animalization of ‘irregular’ migrants in the context of contemporary spaces of detention across Europe”<sup>14</sup>.

New materialism approach is one of the most important for Vaughan-Williams. He uses it as a method in the study of contemporary political life. The article (with co-author Tom Lundborg) “New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis and International Relations: A Radical Inter-Textual Approach” (2015) as usually he starts with two questions: “What do the insights of the ‘New Materialisms’ turn mean for theorists of discourse in International Relations (IR)? Does the New Materialisms literature offer a satisfactory response to the limits of prior conceptions of discourse or is there a need to find other critical resources apposite to this task?”<sup>15</sup> The summing his answer on these questions possible to distinguish such conclusions:

- IR’s own genealogy as a discipline has made it especially vulnerable to aspects of the New Materialist critique

- this vulnerability is most acute in the context of debates about status of discourse and its meaning to IR discourse analysis, which have questioned the traditional realist focus on material factors by drawing attention to the politics of language, representation, and meaning practices
- IR discourse analysts have taken language or occasionally images as their objects of study and left the question of materiality unproblematic
- new materialism constitutes a major ontological project, which not only questions the prevalent linguistic bias in certain quarters of IR, but also calls for a wholesale re-evaluation of the anthropocentrism
- pushing the limits of the current debate, this extended perspective on discourse ultimately assigns equal weight to linguistic and material dimensions as part of a radical inter-textuality
- authors show that two key thinkers associated with poststructuralism: Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are not dismissive or neglectful of matter or ‘ontology’. For them Foucault’s treatment of disciplinary power and Derrida’s notion of the generalized text, there are inseparability for language and matter. Pushing the limits of the current debate, this extended perspective on discourse ultimately assigns equal weight to linguistic and material dimensions as part of a radical inter-textuality.

The merit of this article is a new vision and an alternative reading Foucault and Derrida works as poststructuralist thinkers who negotiate, problematize, and ultimately deconstruct the language/materiality binary.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Vaughan-Williams, N. and Lundborg T. New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations: A Radical Intertextual Approach. *Review of International Studies*, 2015, 41(1) (January), p. 2.

The continuation of this idea authors found in Lene Hansen's book *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (2006) in which "she establishing a prior distinction between materiality on the one hand and the role of language and representation on the other: "It is only through the construction in language that "things" – objects, subjects, states, living beings, and material structures – are given meaning and endowed with a particular identity"<sup>16</sup>. The New Materialisms turn is a mark that "things condition the possibility of human interactions, shape political communities, and influence behaviors and outcomes – indeed, matter cannot be divorced from the 'we' it in part constitutes"<sup>17</sup>. The thing or matter is not understood as the dead, inert, passive matter of the mechanist, but rather as a materialization that contains its own energies and forces of transformation. For Vaughan-Williams central idea is an attempt

to reconceptualise agency in contemporary political life. He gives explanation of Derrida position about materiality and adds that for him never language or materiality exist in isolation. For him both elements are sutured into each other such that we cannot separate them or even speak of them as being straightforwardly inter-related. Vaughan-Williams underlines that Derrida was far from being locked inside a world of linguistics but focused on the violent zoopolitical architectures of late modern capitalism which is central to the international politics of human rights, human security, and humanitarianism.

This last article "New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis..." returns us to a possibility to "repair" the "now" existing situation by a new way of thinking about European mass migration crisis, border and territory. I am sure that a new way of thinking about European borders and Nick Vaughan-Williams attempt to deconstruct nowadays border theory can warn caution against momentary decisions, unjustified optimistic promises, xenophobia and violence.

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16 Hansen, L. 2006. *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, p. 18.

17 Coole, D. Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41:3 (2013), pp. 451–469, p. 452.

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