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# NO BORDERS

THE POLITICS OF  
IMMIGRATION CONTROL  
AND RESISTANCE

NATASHA KING

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**NO BORDERS**



### **More Praise for *No Borders***

'A gift to all of us who yearn for relevant theory to help us take more effective action, this is an inspiring call to join communities around the world and work for the full realization of human rights rooted in the values of solidarity and the inherent worth and dignity of all.'

Chris Crass, author of *Towards Collective Liberation*

'Borders have failed to contain a world in motion or offer a just settlement for millions of people. What is politics in the wake of this double failure? With its focus on new forms of social movement and political action, *No Borders* will prove vital reading for anyone seeking answers.'

William Walters, Carleton University



### **About the author**

Natasha has been involved in a lot of different expressions of the struggle for the freedom of movement, in the UK, Calais and elsewhere.

Natasha would like to call herself an author but isn't sure if you can do that after finishing your first book. She hopes this will be the first of many.

Natasha has a PhD in politics from the University of Nottingham, Centre for Social and Global Justice. She is from the south of England and is based in Nottingham. Right now she is travelling around Europe exploring different kinds of autonomous communities.



# **NO BORDERS**

THE POLITICS OF IMMIGRATION  
CONTROL AND RESISTANCE

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And as capital retreats deeper and deeper into cyberspace, or into disembodiment, leaving behind itself the empty shells of spectacular control, our complexity of anti-authoritarian and autonomist tendencies will begin to see the re-appearance of the Social.

Hakim Bey (2009)

Maybe this whole situation will just work itself out

Artwork in the Calais jungle, Banksy (2015)



# INTRODUCTION

## Locating the issue

I started writing this on the same day that reports came in of up to seven hundred people drowning in the Mediterranean Sea after an overloaded boat carrying people from Libya to Italy capsized (Kingsley 2015). This disaster was sadly not a one-off. The spring of 2015 shone a light on what was called a humanitarian crisis that, by the middle of May, had resulted in the deaths of more than 1,800 people (Di Giacomo 2015). I'm sitting here almost one year later and all the figures from 2015 are being outdone by those of this year. More people crossing clandestinely, more people dying.<sup>1</sup>

The figures were horrific, but this crisis didn't begin NOW. People had been clandestinely crossing the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa or the Aegean Sea from Turkey since the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> This was the same struggle that had been going on for more than two decades, just on an unprecedented scale. The mainstream story was effectively the same: an apocalypse, with those on the boats signalling the presence of a vast horde of people just waiting for their chance to cross to Europe; of victims recruited by 'merciless' smugglers, the solution largely lying in 'combating illegal migration' through more controls. In this way, the 'human crisis' that was a problem for migrants became presented as a 'migrant crisis' that was a problem for European governments.

The ironic presentation of certain kinds of travellers (the ones European states claim not to want<sup>3</sup>) as victims of circumstance before they reach Europe and criminals set on stealing our resources after they arrive still dominates. What this discourse smuggles in unnoticed is the sense that border controls are somehow natural, timeless and realistic. What this discourse passes over, too, is how the controls that are deemed so necessary to stem the flow of unwanted migrants actually *create* the problem of 'illegal' migration.

We live in a world where the movement of the global poor is increasingly seen as a problem and restricted (Balibar 2002; Menz 2008;

Snyder 2005). In recent years in Europe we have seen the introduction of biometric passports, the expansion in the use of immigration imprisonment, and recent investigations into the use of military drones along Europe's external borders (Fotiadis and Ciobanu 2013; Statewatch 2012). None of this is a 'natural' state of affairs. Borders are a function of states. They produce territories (countries) by delimiting and securing spaces and their contents/populations (Agnew 1994). They produce an inside and an outside, insiders and outsiders, and establish a system to control whose movement is acceptable and whose is not. They create categories (the migrant worker, the skilled migrant worker, the asylum seeker, the refugee ...) and, through the process of categorization, create groups of people who carry a label of non-status (the illegal immigrant) (DeGenova 2002). Within this, migrant illegality is a (non-)status that's produced by the regime of control and conferred on an individual when their movement is seen as problematic (Squire 2011). The border regime is *productive*. It produces human illegality, even though people might use such legal loopholes for their benefit too (Ruhs and Anderson 2007; Squire 2011). As Anne McNevin says in relation to 'irregular' migration, 'without reference to the state as bounded and territorialized the notion of irregular migration would cease to be meaningful; what would irregular migration look like if there were no borders, as such, to cross?' (McNevin 2009: 70).

A few weeks after the disaster in the Mediterranean, I was in Calais, in a self-organized camp of people trying to cross to the UK. Sitting in a friend's house in the camp drinking tea together, we talked about how the number of people living there had swelled in recent weeks from a thousand or so to double that. All these new arrivals had put pressure on those already living there. My friend's group had doubled to around thirty, forming an ordered unit of people combining their resources and labour in order to feed and look after each other. Many of these new arrivals were those people who had made the headlines weeks before. Their boat-crossing had been just a fragment of their journeys. Now they waited in Calais for their chance to reach the UK and make a happy ending to what were often years-long journeys.

I mention this because this book is not really about border controls, but about how people find ways to practise the freedom of movement despite such controls. It's a book about practices for free movement, against the border. Because border controls are and have always been

resisted (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Anderson et al. 2012). March 2015 saw simultaneous hunger strikes in eight detention prisons across the UK, accompanied by a similar wave of solidarity actions. In June that year, a camp of people trying to cross was joined by solidarity activists to form a No Border camp in Ventimiglia, on the Italian side of the border with France. The camp lasted for a further three months. These are just a few examples of the ways that people denied the freedom of movement, and those in solidarity with them, have taken action.

And then there are all the people who keep on moving without permission. Because to only pay attention to visible and organized activities 'is to see only the smoke rising from the volcano' (Holloway 2002: 159; see also Grelet 2001). Beneath that smoke is a huge number of everyday acts of non-subordination and quiet evasions carried out by people who refuse to allow borders to stop them from moving (cf. Anderson et al. 2012; Hess 2003; Karakayali and Tsianos 2012; Mezzadra 2004a, 2011; Mezzadra and Neilsen 2003; Mitropoulos 2007; Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Rodriguez 1996). As the scholar-activists who came together around the 'Migrations and Militant Research' workshops attest, the term 'migration struggles' encapsulates both organized struggles by migrants and those in solidarity with them, *and* daily strategies of refusal (because simply to be present where you are prohibited from being becomes an act of resistance, regardless of whether it's recognized as such or not) (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015). Calais is a testament to how most of the people crossing the Mediterranean in boats continue their journeys, often beneath the gaze of media or governments or us.<sup>4</sup>

Paying attention to these practices doesn't mean being blind to the operations and consequences of control. I have already talked about how people travelling without permission die in their efforts to cross borders. They are routinely and indefinitely imprisoned if they make it to Europe. They face numerous ways that limit their lives and bar their access to society should they manage to remain (in the UK this means no legal access to work or free healthcare, and living with the continual risk of detention and deportation). Such things produce violent and traumatizing effects. The development of mental illness after arrival is common, as is self-harm and suicide (Athwal and Bourne 2007; Cohen 2008). Yet without discounting all this, even under intense restrictions, *acts of liberation still happen.*



People protest together and affirm that ‘No-One is Illegal!’; others mount hunger strikes that contest their detention; others maintain safer houses where travellers can stay; still others pass on information about the safest routes and means of passage. All these activities reflect a *refusal* to be denied the freedom of movement in different ways. These practices form part of the movement against borders, or the no border movement, and this movement is diverse.

Thinking of no borders as a refusal brings into focus how the legitimacy of border controls is also questioned, and hence the legitimacy of the nation-state. People move for a variety of reasons. I can’t imagine anyone ever moves in order to challenge the state, and I’m not suggesting that every act of migration is an act of liberation. But, in the act of moving without permission, or in actively contesting controls that limit their lives, people refuse the border and oppose the state *at that moment*. The struggle for the freedom of movement is this refusal of the border. I label this a no borders politics and explore what it is as a concept in Chapter 1.

With these points in mind, the main question this book asks is, *how do we refuse borders?*

## **Reflections on the dilemmas of refusing the border**

Thinking of the struggle for the freedom of movement as moments when people refuse the border and oppose the state – either intentionally or unintentionally – poses a challenge. Migration is an issue so deeply shaped and inscribed by the state. As Aaron Zolberg suggests, the very definition of migration – as movement across territorial borders – presupposes the existence of the state (Zolberg 1981). We may refuse the border and oppose the state, but too often it’s also the state that we have to appeal to if we want to secure greater freedoms. We demand rights from the state, when it’s the state that denies us rights in the first place (cf. Arendt 1973 [1951]). This paradox creates a dilemma for any struggle that opposes the state. It’s a dilemma that comes up time and again in grassroots struggles of all kinds, and can be better illustrated in the case of no border struggles through a few examples.

In the UK a common way of showing solidarity with the struggle for the freedom of movement is to visit people held in detention prisons. It’s a way of offering practical and emotional support to the imprisoned, and showing that they’re not forgotten just because the state tries to hide them away. Groups have held numerous demos

outside such prisons, while the inmates have held hunger strikes and demonstrations and taken direct action from the inside. Both have strengthened each other. Visiting people in detention is also a way of better understanding the lived experiences of those directly affected by border controls. It's the basis for taking further action against such places. In numerous cases, access to information about 'life inside' has led visitors' groups to make complaints and publish information about poor treatment, which has resulted in improvements. This has positive effects for those who are subject to imprisonment, but it undermines any aim to end immigration detention altogether, because it suggests that the problem can be solved through better treatment, and not the end of detention itself. As the state improves its immigration prisons, it has more legitimacy in refuting claims that imprisonment is against our dignity and humanity. Ultimately, detainee visitors' groups end up struggling with the idea that, while they oppose detention, what they do *also* reinforces the idea that immigration detention is legitimate.

In Greece the struggle for the freedom of movement has led to three campaigns for the mass regularization of illegalized people in the country. In each case people have debated how legalization effectively reinforces the state's right to decide. Regularization amnesties are time limited, with conditions that disqualify large sections of the illegalized population. They often pave the way for harsher migration policies too (Nyers 2010). As such, such amnesties refine and redefine the regime of control, even as they bring about real material improvements for many at that time (DeGenova 2002). Resistance to the border always seems faced with the dilemma of how to refuse the state while also engaging with it. I think this is the main dilemma of any kind of politics that seeks to refuse the state, and I return to this dilemma time and again throughout this book.

People and groups adopt different strategies to negotiate this dilemma. This can lead to conflicts between those who resist in different ways. Some resist by engaging with the state in order to secure further freedoms. People launch campaigns that demand regularization, or that demonstrate that our cities are places of sanctuary (cf. Cissé 1996; Squire and Bagelman 2012). For others, however, the very fact that such freedoms are controlled by the state *is* the site of struggle. Such differences can be a dynamic force that generates diversity in our resistance. But such differences become problematic when they are seen as absolute, incompatible and insurmountable. They risk weakening

such struggles at a time when it is more urgent than ever to mount a forceful collective and diverse resistance against the steady infestation of border controls throughout our social world. How to enact a radical politics when so constrained by the state? How to find common ground when our aims sometimes appear like opposites?

This dilemma leads me to modify my question: *How do we resist borders, in a current reality in which borders proliferate?*

## On method

**Who's writing?** This book is my attempt to understand a certain kind of struggle against the border regime, and it came about because of my own involvement in this struggle. How I came to write this book and to ask these questions is the result of an evolution in my own thinking around how migration affects me and how I want to live my life.

Ten years ago I worked for a refugee rights organization that (among many other things) lobbied government for positive changes to the refugee regime in the UK. We demanded an end to the detention of children, and at best got assurances that safeguards would be put in place to protect their welfare while in detention. We demanded an end to the destitution of refused asylum seekers, a situation that people at the end of the asylum process *still* face. We reserved our energy for refugees, but said nothing about all the other people who arrived without permission. We didn't go there, and I put that decision and distinction out of my mind. I remember we always said that we weren't a political organization, but a humanitarian one. That statement seems naïve to me now.

Lobbying didn't bring anything like the kind of changes I had in mind. It felt like dreaming small. And the uncomfortable feeling I got from focusing only on the rights of refugees never really went away. I left that organization and found myself involved in more grassroots projects supporting travellers of different kinds. I started to think, why was it that refugees were legitimate travellers but others weren't? If everybody had the right to travel, then maybe the system that prohibited that was wrong. Looking back now, that thought process seems naïve too. But we're not taught to question the very basis of the system that we live in. It was a very simple thought, but it took me a long while to reach it.

Reaching that conclusion opened up a whole new world. I started to visit Calais and spend time with other people who came to that city and who identified in some way with the idea of the freedom of movement. We distributed clothes, tents, wood and building materials to people

who were stuck in that city trying to cross to the UK. We cooked food together, hung out, held parties, visited people in the detention prison there. Others opened squats where we and other people could rest. We lived together with people trying to cross. I went to my first No Borders camp in Brussels in 2009 and was blown away by how well 800 people managed to meet their needs inclusively, collectively and creatively in this wonderful temporary community. I have stayed involved in Calais, and through those experiences become connected to a vast network of people and places that continue to try to make those wonderful, collective, creative (and sometimes less temporary) communities. This thing I'm a part of, this movement, for want of a better word, feels fierce and loving. It feels like an intensity of living. It's a way of being that doesn't so much point out what's wrong with the system (although a lot of that happens too), but is other to it.

So in some sense, this book is not really about migration at all, but about a certain way of being that's other to the system; that creates or has the potential to create supportive, collaborative and non-dominating communities of people of different backgrounds. It includes anti-deportation campaigns, detention visitor projects, language clubs, No Borders camps and detention prison blockades, but it's also connected to the ways people create other communities more generally, from squatting and occupying land, to holding free parties. Migration is a point of orientation, but not the entirety of what I'm talking about here. I ask the questions I do and pose the dilemmas I do because these are issues I have come across time and again through my involvement in the struggle for the freedom of movement. And when I say 'we', I'm talking about all of us who share the feeling that the freedom of movement is everybody's freedom. It's from this standpoint that I talk. In asking these questions, I hope that we can better understand this practice, become more fierce and loving. Like Paul Chatterton, 'I want to galvanize dissent, normalize critique, and make radical alternatives seem like real possibilities for our times' (Chatterton 2008: 426).

**Activist research** I ask these questions and pose these dilemmas because I have a stake in this struggle. Being open about the stake you have makes for a very different kind of scholarship from any kind of 'objective' science, or even from the more subjective methods we find in the social sciences. Starting from the stake you have resonates with the idea of activist or militant scholarship (cf. Fuller and Kitchen

2004; Routledge 2004; Pickerill 2008). Activist scholarship comes out of *partisan* participation in struggle (Gordon 2012; Juris 2007). It exists to make interventions within those struggles and to strengthen them, which means working with and expressing explicit political and ideological intent (Fuller and Kitchen 2004). It comes about through long-term commitment to the struggle and those in it, and through critical engagement with what's going on in that struggle. It aims to be activist in process/method as well as in the knowledge it produces, and for that reason is often (indeed, probably should be) collaborative and reflective (Colectivo Situaciones 2007; Juris 2007). For me, activist research is partisan reflection on and through practice. It's something that people in social movements are doing all the time (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007).

**Praxis** The motive behind this book was a question: *How do we resist the border, in a current reality in which borders proliferate?* On the one hand, this question speaks to those struggles against the border that exist in the here and now (how can we resist?). On the other hand, it points to a possible future (is it possible to create a world free of borders?). No border struggles are utopian, to the extent that they always negotiate between an existing reality that's highly bordered, and a borderless future that appears to be always ahead of us. As one interviewee put it, 'We're always on a walk towards no borders ... It's a constant aspiration and tension' (interview, Anon. 4). It inherently involves changing the present by thinking beyond what is.

Yet this connection with what is also makes no border struggles incredibly realistic. A friend suggested that 'no borders is happening all the time, and that the time perspective for struggle is now ... that the time to live is now, with all its bitterness and defeats but also with its victories and joy' (interview, Anon. 9).

Critical resistance speaks to that intent to contest the status quo and bring about radical – utopian – social change (Hoy 2004). Put another way, critical resistance is about doing and imagining, practice and theory. Yet to set theory and practice apart from each other can rob critical resistance of its power. Theory detached from practice can create irrelevant abstraction. Practice without theory can create directionless action (hooks 1994).

Critical resistance, then, comes from the feedback loop between theory and practice. A word for this feedback loop is praxis. It's a