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A Europe obsessed by its borders: The political meaning of senseless migration policies

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*(<https://britaineurope.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/fence.jpg>) In recent weeks, Europe's borders, and the individuals trying to cross them, have rarely been out of the news. Whilst EU member states are struggling to reach agreement on how to deal with the crisis, thousands are moving across Europe in search of asylum. **Denis Duez**, Director of the European Studies Institute at the Université Saint-Louis in Brussels, reflects on how political borders are created, and points to fundamental flaws in a migration policy that operates chiefly through border controls.*

This is a revised version of an article that appeared in French in La Revue Nouvelle (<http://www.revuenouvelle.be/L-Europe-obsedee-par-ses-frontieres-Production>), June-July 2014

In his autobiography published in 1942, Stefan Zweig wrote that 'perhaps nothing more graphically illustrates the monstrous relapse the world suffered after the First World War than the restriction on personal freedom of movement and civil rights. Before 1914, [there were] no permits, no visas, nothing to give you trouble; the borders that today [...] are a tangled fence of red tape were then nothing but symbolic lines on the map, and you crossed them as unthinkingly as you can cross the meridian in Greenwich' (Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (trans. Anthea Bell) p.436).

Zweig's memoirs, which were sent to his editor on the eve of his suicide, are an ode to a European culture which is in part imagined, written by a man broken by the experience of exile and war. Zweig's vision of pre-war Europe as being both open and cosmopolitan may seem naïve in that it describes only one reality, that of the European elite, aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The memoirs do however serve as a reminder that the travel and ID documents of today have not always existed. They also remind us that, as with travel documents, borders are neither self-evident nor natural. Borders have always been political creations. They define the boundary that separates two different orders of sovereignty. They also tell a story, the story of the Self and the Other.

On the eve of the 2009 European elections, the European Parliament launched a campaign in the press to communicate various complex issues into twenty or so clear alternatives which were supposed to 'speak' to European citizens who seemed indifferent to the affairs of the union. One of the questions asked: 'How open should our borders be?' (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+IM-PRESS+20090320FCS52246+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN#title2>). In the French version of the text (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=FR&type=IM-PRESS&reference=20090320FCS52246#title2>), the Parliament set out the terms of the debate thus: '...there are always two ways to consider the issue of migration. Some believe that immigration is an economic and cultural opportunity for the European Union. Others think that immigration, and in particular illegal immigration, has negative consequences for member states'.

By presenting two opposing viewpoints, the Parliament did nothing to improve an already difficult debate: borders are either open or closed, a free-for-all or strictly controlled. By framing the debate in this way, the Parliament depicts the EU as an entity that is threatened, a victim of migrants. It presents a worrying image of migrant populations moving *en masse* towards European states, to profit from their wealth and social welfare systems. In the context of an economic crisis, where migrants are seen to compete with European citizens for access to jobs and to certain social goods, this type of language produces powerful political and social effects, as can be seen by the successive dramas at the borders of Europe.

This discourse conflates the issue of irregular migration with that of border control: we are told that we can tackle irregular immigration by tightening controls at EU borders. Policies to achieve this have ranged from more restrictive visa policies to automatic surveillance systems at maritime borders (EUROSUR) and the creation of Frontex, the Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union.

At the moment, politicians claim that this political strategy is necessary and unavoidable, not least because better maritime surveillance is needed for effective sea rescue missions. This does not however seem very convincing. Above all, it feeds the political myth that it is indeed possible to have effective controls of the exterior borders of the EU. Must politicians be reminded that the only historic experiences of effectively locking state borders were in East Germany and North Korea? Even if these examples were mainly about keeping their own populations in (as is the case in North Korea) rather than keeping others out, is it really a model for democratic states? Must we also be reminded that the majority of irregular migrants in the EU entered legally and then became clandestine, usually by overstaying their visa or by not respecting the conditions of a fixed-term stay, which puts into perspective the potential impact of a strategy focused exclusively on border surveillance? Finally, must we be reminded that our experiences, be it as Europeans or North Americans, show us that border control (whilst perhaps effective at a local level) almost always fails at a global level? Border controls do not stop the influx, they only move it elsewhere.

European policy for managing irregular immigration is problematic in three ways. First, it is globally ineffective in the sense that it does not respond to the phenomenon of overstayers in a coherent manner, no more than it does respond to irregular border crossings at a European level. Secondly, far from increasing security in the EU as is claimed by its supporters, this policy is counter-productive. It encourages the development of smuggling networks as well as underground economies based on the economic exploitation of migrants. Finally, this policy is particularly dangerous for migrants or refugees who are prepared to take ever-increasing risks to achieve their dreams of a better life in Europe.

By asking questions about its outer borders and how to control them, the EU is also questioning the symbolic borders that define the conditions for belonging to a political community. Far from being a reaction to protect a threatened pre-existing political community, the politics of borders instead contributes to the creation of a link, or perhaps even of a sort of European identity, where one does not yet exist. In other words, by identifying a common threat, that of irregular immigrants exploiting jobs or benefits, the politics of borders provides Europeans with way to self-identify along the lines of Us versus Them. Irregular immigrants become the embodiment of the Other which helps to create a community of European united as a community of insecurity.

Even the European Commission, which is usually among the supporters of reopening legal channels for migration, wrote in 2002 that the European Union's external borders are also a place where a common security identity is asserted (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52002DC0233&from=FR>). The EU's external borders therefore become the place we Europeans are confronted by the Other. They also become the legal no man's land depicted by Balibar or Arendt, where the use of violence is acceptable in order to preserve (democratic) order within.

Today, the anguished and anguishing image of out of control immigration has not lost its power – in fact quite the opposite, as shown by the electoral success of populist anti-immigration discourse in the 2014 European elections. This summer's death toll in the Mediterranean has made 2015 the deadliest year for migrants trying to get to Europe. Images of uncontrollable flows of migrants 'overwhelming' Europe have returned to the very heart of political debate. They keep triggering ever more restrictive – and intrinsically flawed – responses to the migration crisis. Some clarity and, dare I say, humanity urgently need to be introduced into these debates. However, my experience of more than 10 years of research on this topic does not leave me with much optimism. Let's hope that the future proves me wrong because this is not just about the boundaries of the Union, but also about the boundaries of democracy.

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Note: The views expressed in this post are those of the author, and not of the UCL European Institute, nor of UCL.

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