

## **Beyond ambivalence and certitude**

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*Policing the Borders Within* is an insightful, granular account of the enmeshing of policing and immigration enforcement. It is based on a rich, detailed ethnographic study of the work and sensibilities of immigration and police officers in the UK. It draws widely on post-colonial theorizing on borders and territorial exclusion, and offers a grounded contribution to our understanding of contemporary border control and its effects. It is a path-breaking study of 'local' policing in a world transformed by mass migration that is 'no longer legible through conventional police categories and technologies' (p. 5). The book deserves a wide-readership.

Since my task is to contribute to a symposium not to author a stand-alone review (I cannot anyway do justice to the book's richness in a short review), I am spared the usual obligations of careful summary in favour of selecting themes that warrant further reflection. Some such themes – for instance, the value of magic as a concept to understand state power, or the extent to which migration control resembles police work – I leave to others, or to another day. Instead, I focus on two issues that are central to Aliverti's analysis, as well as resonating with wider literature in border criminologies (a field, I should say, to which I relate as a keen observer rather active participant). One has to do with the moral ambivalence felt by those engaged in the 'dirty work' of border control and expulsion of the unwanted. What is the character of that ambivalence? What are its possibilities? The second has to do with the position of certitude from which this ambivalence is identified (a position one encounters frequently in border criminologies), and the attendant claim that the whole enterprise of border control is futile and illegitimate – a destined-to-fail effort to hoard Northern privilege in world of global fluidity and inequality. The doubt, it appears, is to be found among those embroiled in the nasty business of border coercion; the certainty among those analysing it.

Aliverti characterises immigration enforcement as 'DIY policing'. It is informal, personalised and negotiated. It is what one police informant called 'a bit of a dark art' (p. 96), working in opaque and arbitrary ways to 'suddenly banish problems and people' (p. 212). It is also a practice that many (though by no means all) immigration and police officers experience as morally troubling. Aliverti assembles ample evidence of the forms that this disquiet takes, whether it's not disclosing their work to friends, having their tasks questioned as cruel by those subject to them, being unsettled by their proximity to human suffering, or made aware of their luck and privilege in a world of global poverty and violent conflict. Her claim is that officers are ambivalent because their daily work raises 'deep ethical questions concerning the state's prerogative to enforce rules based on the lottery of birthplace' (p. 5). She also argues that this troubled and burdened relation to their work – 'discernible through moments of doubt, reckoning, silence and emotional discomfort' (p. 215) – offers a critical resource, 'a powerful space for critique from within' (p. 216).

Aliverti's findings chime with those of other border criminologists who have unearthed cognate unease among immigration detention staff (Bosworth 2013) and frontier police (Franko 2020). So it is worth dwelling a little on – and with – this ambivalence. The shared

claim is that moral disquiet is an ‘inherent part’ (Franko 2020: 190) of working in the deeply-contested world of border control (Aliverti, p.215), and that these sentiments provide the seeds of resistance to harsh border regimes (Franko 2020: 191). But how peculiar to border policing is moral discomfort? And what exactly is its unredeemed promise? There are reasons to doubt that ambivalence is unique to border police agents, or that it flows solely from the dubious legitimacy of migration control. Cognate sentiments have long been found among police and prison officers (de Camargo 2019; Eriksson 2021), as well as those working in private security (Hansen Löfstrand et al. 2015). What seems common to these institutional practices is not simply the wielding of coercion. They are all also domains of ‘dirty’ work involving unpleasant tasks undertaken on behalf of a seemingly ungrateful populace that remains ignorant of the daily realities of the job. These roles also share a tragic quality: practitioners are called upon to manage symptoms of structural injustices the causes of which lie far beyond their reach. Given this, it is not at all clear where the critical purchase of border control agents’ ambivalence is supposed to lie. Might they be a source of active obstruction, as Franko suggests (2020: 191)? Can they serve as potential allies ‘on the inside’ in humanizing or dismantling the border control enterprise? Aliverti doesn’t really say. It seems clear that the magicians of border policing are disenchanting with their magic; it is less obvious what they, or anyone else, might do with that disenchantment.

One purpose this evident disquiet does, however, serve is underscoring the position of certitude from which the ambivalence of border police is detected and analysed. It is a result, Aliverti makes clear, of exercising power ‘under conditions of fractured legitimacy and deep moral and political contestation and polarization’ (p. 215).<sup>1</sup> Here Aliverti expounds a set of propositions about the status and legitimacy of migration control that advance in important ways lines of argument that one encounters elsewhere in work on border criminologies.

The first claim is that border policing is ‘increasingly futile’— a hopeless search for ‘safety and purity’ within defended borders (p. 2). It rests, Aliverti contends, on a fantasy of ‘complete and perfect security’ (p. 183) – a bordered order – in a world a deep global inequalities. It seeks to protect distinct boundaries of national identification and belonging in a ‘post-colonial and globalized world, marked by fluidity, syncretism and hybridity’ (p. 212). It asserts independence and disconnection in an ‘interdependent and connected world’ (p. 215). In each respect, the promise is illusory and destined to remain out of reach. It also ensnares states in ‘the very evils they are trying to suppress’ (p. 2). One immigration officer expressed the resulting feelings of frustration and impotence in the following terms: ‘We are losing the battle, we can’t win this battle’. The conclusion Aliverti draws is that is a profound mistake to keep on battling. There is clearly some merit in this conclusion. Border policing is a futile - or at least tragic – effort to coercively manage the symptomatic effects of global inequalities and racial injustice. But the futility charge can also sometimes seem like an

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<sup>1</sup> In a cognate vein, Franko (2020: 34) suggests that the unease expressed by European frontier police flows from the recognition that the work of deportation clashes with Europe’s stated liberal and human rights commitments.

attempt to settle a political argument (in favour of humanized, or open, or no borders) with what is in effect an ontological proposition (that mobility is part of the human condition, and mass migration inevitable). In the absence of further exploration and justification, the charge risks looking like a sleight of hand. We tend not to say that things are futile when the goal being pursued is difficult to accomplish but valued (a carbon-zero economy, eradicating violence against women).

The second contention is that border policing is contested, polarized and lacking in legitimacy, a state practice erected on 'shaky foundations' (p. 126). Immigration enforcement is, Aliverti argues, 'implicated in the protection of a specific, partisan, and exclusionary order which is highly contentious' (p. 71). By attempting to secure such an order – one 'premised on territorial exclusion and the enforcement of the privilege of birthright' – the state 'undermines its own legitimacy and authority' (p. 218). It is plainly true that border control is contentious. Across the globe borders have become the site of what Franko (2020: 5) calls a 'clash of moralities': between humanitarian and securitized conceptions of migration, and national and cosmopolitan framings of justice. Partisans assemble on both sides of these divides. But such contestation may be less of an indicator of fragility, and deep illegitimacy, than of the high and emotive character of the stakes. Contention alone is not sufficient to make a state bureaucracy 'incomplete, incoherent and fragile' (p. 216). To assert that border policing lacks support is to gloss over the question of why the nation-state commands such emotional legitimacy (Anderson 2006) and remain incurious as to why a (bordered?) sense of place/home seems to matter to people in ways that may not reduce to xenophobia or privilege-hoarding. In the absence of greater attention to these questions, claims about the illegitimacy of border policing can start to look more like wishful thinking than grounded sociology.

Aliverti's third argument is less of a claim, more of an implication, or suggestion. This too is shared with much of the wider border criminologies literature. It has to do with alternative futures. Aliverti's analysis of the futility and fragility of border policing rests not only on the idea that it is some kind of legacy practice, shoring-up a bordered world that is no longer viable. It also serves as a critique of prosperous, Northern democracies whose wealth – and the citizenship privileges of their members<sup>2</sup> – depends on the economic exclusion and political subordination of the Global South, and the coercive defence of these privileges from those

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<sup>2</sup> It is striking that Aliverti always refers to citizenship enjoyed by members within national boundaries as a 'privilege'. So too does Franko (2020: 178) who calls it a 'global regulatory technique' that is inherited at birth and serves to sustain global inequality. This take on citizenship clearly opens important new questions about global inequalities and the ways in which border control protects them. It also calls to attention the practices of colonial extraction that enabled these privileges. But the term 'privilege' nonetheless seems partial, and can strike a tin-eared note. It overlooks the long political and social struggles that produced citizenship recognition and rights for the poor and excluded within nation-states. To term the hard-won and still-fragile outcomes of these struggles 'privilege' is to overlook important dimensions of the history and lived experience of citizenship acquisition and retention. It also hints at the idea that the citizenship of members is the problem, something that might need to be undone because it rests of the exclusion of the world's poorest who are locked out of the enjoyment of such benefits.

fleeing violent conflict, oppression, or climate disruption, or simply seeking better life prospects. The failings of border policing are hereby treated as an opportunity ‘to think anew our political and economic institutions, to take stock of global interdependence and its implications for livelihoods, and foster new forms of conviviality’ (p. 218). In the same spirit, Franko (2020: 177) argues that European frontier policing rests on a vision of territorial exclusion, and the priority of national community as the frame for justice, that is ‘implausible, empirically untenable and normatively unsatisfying’. She too suggests that the critique of border control offers a ‘glimpse of an alternative normative and ethical landscape’ (2020: 165).

But what is that ‘alternative’? How would the world need to be re-ordered, and what would that world have to look like, in order for the violence of border control to be abated, or disappear? Aliverti’s study raises these questions, but without addressing them. Perhaps it is unfair to expect her to have done so. This is a work of closely-observed ethnography, not of political theory. The social analysis and critique of injustice does not depend on having a fully worked out theory of justice (Sen 2009). She is also not alone: the wider field of border criminologies is far more attuned to the exposure and critique of state-produced harm, than it is to the elaboration of alternative political visions.<sup>3</sup> It is worth though asking what that alternative plausible world would entail. Is it a world of humanized borders where migration is managed outside the police/penal paradigm with little or no resort to coercion? Is it a world of open borders, or one in which borders have been abolished? What does the eradication of Northern privilege and racial injustice mean for how we think about political community and institutionally enact democratic governance? Would anything of value be lost if we re-frame justice beyond the nation-state?

It is a credit to Aliverti’s excellent book that her fine-grained analysis of the everyday violence of border policing, and the moral toll it takes on those who enact it, draws readers towards these large questions about the condition and prospects of our world. It may also be that one can best acknowledge that ambivalence by moving beyond the certainty that bordered nation-states are a moral disaster and attending more closely to some hard political questions about how we might do justice differently.

## References

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<sup>3</sup> As Ochoa Espejo (2020: 9) observes: ‘When it comes to tackling *normative* questions of border control and placement, the sound is mostly of crickets chirping in the silence’ (emphasis in original). There are a few notable exceptions among border criminologists (e.g., Weber 2015; Bradley and de Noronha 2021). There is also an extensive literature in political theory on the related but more general question of migration (see, for example, Fine and Ypi 2016).

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