SORTING MACHINES

The Reinvention of the Border in the 21st Century

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Translated by Nicola Barfoot

polity

Originally published in German as *Sortiermaschinen: Die Neuerfindung der Grenze im 21. Jahrhundert* ©Verlag C. H. Beck oHG, München 2021

Excerpt from *Refugee Conversations* ©Bertolt Brecht, 2016, Methuen Drama, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

This English edition ©Polity Press, 2023

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
111 River Street
Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5434-8
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5435-5 (paperback)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022934728

Typeset in 11 on 13pt Sabon
by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NL
Printed and bound in the UK by TJ International Limited

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The passport is the noblest part of a human being. Nor does it come into the world in such a simple way as a human being. A human being can come about anywhere, in the most irresponsible manner and with no proper reason at all, but not a passport. That's why a passport will always be honoured, if it's a good one, whereas a person can be as good as you like, and still no one takes any notice.

Bertold Brecht[1]

[1] Bertold Brecht, excerpt from *Refugee Conversations*, trans. Romy Fursland, ed. and intro. by Tom Kuhn © Bertolt Brecht, 2016, Methuen Drama, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing plc., p. 8.

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Acknowledgements

This book is intended to inspire debate about territorial borders and border control in the age of globalization. It is compact and concise, focusing on the essentials, but it also draws on my own research projects and on broader research contexts in which I have been active in recent years. Among other things, it uses data collected and analysed within the framework of a project which I led at the University of Bremen (2007–14): 'From the Container to the Open State? Border Regime Changes and the Mobility of Persons', in the DFG Collaborative Research Centre 597, 'Transformations of the State'. In the context of this project, we primarily explored changing border policies in liberal states and developed a dataset on global changes in visa waivers. Fabian Gülzau, Lena Laube, Sonja Wrobel, Christof Roos and Heike Brabandt contributed significantly to this study. Since 2018, I have been leading a project in Berlin, 'Die Grenzen der Welt. Prozesse von De- und Rebordering in globaler Perspektive' ('The Borders of the World: Processes of Debordering and Rebordering from a Global Perspective'). This is based in Collaborative Research Centre 1265, 'Re-Figuration of Spaces', funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

(DFG, German Research Foundation; project number 290045248). Here the focus is on the infrastructures of territorial borders. For this project we have developed a dataset containing all land borders worldwide and typologizing their border architectures. We are also conducting more in-depth case studies on four fortified borders: between Serbia and Hungary, the US and Mexico, Morocco and Algeria, and India and Pakistan. Fabian Gülzau and Kristina Korte are responsible for the implementation of the project and the empirical survey, and I would like to thank them for their many stimulating contributions. I am also grateful to be able to include findings from the project in this book. Special thanks go to my colleagues from the research unit 'Borders' – in particular Jessica Gienow-Hecht, Gülay Çağlar, Jürgen Gerhards, Christian Volk and Gwendolyn Sasse – for many sustained discussions on the 'border question'. The research unit is part of the Cluster of Excellence 'Contestations of the Liberal Script' (EXC 2055, Project-ID: 390715649), funded by the DFG under Germany's Excellence Strategy. The research unit also supported the translation of the book into English. Friederike Kuntz and Julian Heide provided me with astute comments and suggestions for improving the manuscript; Michael Zürn gave in-depth feedback, encouraging me to repeatedly sharpen and clarify my argument; Jan-Werner Müller, Sebastian Conrad and Tanja Börzel asked questions that challenged me to keep thinking. Katja Kerstiens closely checked and corrected the manuscript. It goes without saying that none of the people mentioned above is responsible for possible misinterpretations or incomplete lines of argument. The Mercator Stiftung supported me with a Mercator Senior Fellowship, without which I would have been unable to write this book. Many thanks go to Wolfgang Rohe, Michael Schwarz and the staff of the Stiftung. I would also

like to thank my German publisher, C. H. Beck, for accepting the book in their Edition Mercator series. My editor, Matthias Hansl, took a keen interest in the book and provided excellent support and advice.

1

Borders Are Back!

The dramatic images from the Greek-Turkish border that flickered across our television screens in spring 2020 could hardly have packed a greater punch: buses carrying thousands of refugees across Turkey to the border, Turkish security forces herding people towards the border, wretched encampments with washing hung out to dry, Greek border police hectically putting up concrete barriers and rolling out barbed wire, stun grenades flaring and tall heavy-duty fans blowing clouds of tear gas over to the Turkish side of the border. Cut to John F. Kennedy Airport, New York, at almost exactly the same time. Hundreds of passengers stood for hours, crammed into narrow passageways, waiting to be allowed into the US. The requirements for entry into the US had been tightened overnight because of rising numbers of Covid-19 infections, resulting in chaotic scenes. Ad hoc orders to question incoming travellers and take their temperatures led to massive delays and bottlenecks, which the airport was not equipped to cope with. People were pushed together into tightly packed, slow-moving queues. Commentators spoke of a human petri dish, offering ideal conditions for the spread of the virus.

Both scenes are emblematic of the blocking and sorting effect of borders: borders stop people, push them

back, lock them out, act as filters. Thanks to scenes like these, borders have made a dramatic return to our consciousness in recent years. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, many people succumbed all too readily to the illusion that we were living in an age of opening barriers, expanding mobility and increasingly permeable borders. In 2009, 'border' – along with 'paternoster lift', 'cheese on sticks' and 'tape recorder' – even made it into the *Lexikon der verschwundenen Dinge* (Dictionary of Forgotten Things),[1] as if it were something that belonged in a museum. Berlin, as the city once divided by the Iron Curtain, is especially symbolic of the end of a world structured by closed borders. One of the demands made in autumn 1989 was that 'The Wall must go'; today, the border strip is nothing more than a tourist attraction.

At first glance there seems to be much to confirm this view of borders as a relic of the past. Trend data show that cross-border transactions and movements have risen enormously in the past three decades and even before that.[2] Borders are crossed more and more frequently, their compartmentalizing character seems to have softened and they are perceived as increasingly permeable. This applies not only to communication via the internet, trade and production chains, finance flows, and the dissemination of information and cultural goods, but also to the various forms of human mobility with which this book is concerned. More and more often, for an ever larger group of people, leaving the inner space of the nation-state is becoming an increasingly self-evident step; crossing and recrossing the border seems like the normal state of affairs. In analyses of these changes in the 1990s and 2000s, hypotheses about 'vanishing borders'[3] or the 'borderless world'[4] – all of them conjuring up obsolescent or increasingly porous borders – were not figments of the academic imagination, but often-evoked and much-quoted tags, which

seemed to encapsulate major trends. Here, globalization was regarded as a powerful driving force, with a near irresistible capacity to open, or in some cases break down, borders.

In social theories from the same period, disembedding from place-bound contexts and the deterritorialization of social relations were even identified as crucial elements in the development of modernity.[5] The theory was that we were no longer shackled to a single place, but extended our social relations over great distances, constantly crossing borders and striding around the globe in our seven-league boots. A few decades earlier, a period spent abroad had still been viewed as an 'exotic' exception; now cross-border social, family, romantic and employment relationships and transnational CVs had become routine and normal.[6] Processes of deterritorialization, denationalization and transnationalization took centre stage; clinging to what was limited, national and immobile was seen as backward-looking, since it ignored the powerful dynamic opening up previously closed and contained societies. There was even talk of an 'atopian society', where territorial limitations were radically abolished; some saw the 'world society' appearing on the horizon.[7] It seemed that nothing stood in the way of global interaction – or at least nothing in which borders played a major role.

Although this view may not have been an optical illusion, it overemphasized the debordering character of globalization and produced a one-sided image. And while an increase in 'border traffic' is often taken as evidence that a border has become more permeable or has ceased to function, this is by no means an obvious conclusion. Perhaps the focus on the dissolution of borders is partly to do with the specific way that 'frequent travellers'[8] – the group responsible for the majority of border crossings – experience the world. For this group – i.e., those who are able and authorized

to travel – globalization mostly means opening, debordering and greater opportunities for mobility. The most prominent proponents of the discourse of globalization are undoubtedly part of this highly mobile group, able to popularize their theses on podiums in Boston, Cape Town and Seoul. People who are allowed to travel themselves, and whose mobility is scarcely restricted by borders, may be inclined to generalize from their own experiences and to underestimate contrary developments. Perhaps this is a *déformation professionnelle* on the part of conference tourists? But then again, this is probably not the place for such speculations.

It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that experiences of border crossing are limited to a small number of privileged groups – on the contrary, they extend far beyond these groups and are global in scale. And yet the experience of crossing borders quickly, smoothly, comfortably and without hindrance is by no means a ubiquitous phenomenon. For a large part – the majority! – of the world's population, the everyday experience of borders is one of exclusion, denial of mobility, and obstruction; of being on the outside, of rebordering. It is still the case that borders are the place where, in the words of the pioneering sociologist Georg Simmel, the 'merciless separation of space' ('das unbarmherzige Auseinander des Raumes')[9] becomes most obvious. At borders, critical processes of social division take place.[10] Even in the global society, we live in parcels of territory, and borders take on functions of filtering, separation and circulation management. They are not just places where checks are undertaken: many groups are turned back at borders. The situation at the Greek-Turkish border, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is certainly not an isolated case.

So the idea that the process of globalization is essentially one of dissolution of borders is simplistic, and in my view misleading. Even under conditions of

globalization – particularly under these conditions, in fact – border regimes enforce territorial control and selectivity; they are powerful 'sorting machines' of the globalized world. There is therefore no real scientific justification for associating or equating globalization with porous or disappearing borders, rather than seeing it as a complex, inherently contradictory process. This default setting has turned blind spots into a scientific programme and suppressed any contradictory developments. These developments can only be deciphered if we cease to consider globalization solely in terms of cross-border transactions or flows. Instead we need to take a much more comprehensive view, seeing it as a relatedness that extends beyond the nation-state and the national society.[11] Globalization is not just about crossing borders; it is about modes of interdependence that include the hardening of borders, the denial of mobility, and border selectivity. The question to ask about globalization is not just how 'old borders' are opening or disappearing, but how borders are changing, and what 'logic of sorting' is in operation at the 'new borders'. Under conditions of extensive, indeed massive flows of mobility, borders are designed to allow only the desired mobility, and to control and, if need be, prevent unwanted mobility. In such an understanding of globalization, opening and closing belong together; to grasp the dialectic core of globalization and give it sharper conceptual definition, we can even speak of a globalization of opening and a globalization of closing. These are two sides of the same coin.

It is a widespread misunderstanding to reduce the new forms of closing that are constitutive of globalization to mere (ideologically motivated) anti-globalization. In fact, the reverse is true: because globalization exists, borders become more important, are gradually upgraded, and are used as sorting machines. The closure and control of borders is therefore not only

compatible with globalization, but an integral part of it and a prerequisite for opening. To re-emphasize this point: globalization does not cause borders to disappear, but induces and constantly enforces closing, selectivity and the intensification of control. Of course, insistence on border functions can also manifest itself as anti-globalization. In most cases, however, it is a facet of globalization itself, forms of closing in the service of globalization. In globalization, opening and closing go hand in hand. One indication of this is the unwillingness of those advocating closure to restrict their own mobility privileges and the benefits they derive from open borders.

The Covid crisis was a shock, especially for Western societies, catapulted from a situation of freedom of movement and high mobility to a state of stasis and interrupted mobility. When the dramatic images from Wuhan first reached us in January 2020, they were extremely disturbing: roadblocks; police officers taking aim with thermometers as if they were guns; people shut into their apartments, calling out words of encouragement to each other; soldiers patrolling the street; closed railway stations, bus stations and airports. Just a few weeks later, many civil liberties and fundamental rights that we had seen as unassailable were also restricted in the 'West'. No event since the Second World War has so dramatically altered the political geography, causing states in all continents to close their borders and access routes overnight. With the exception of a handful of countries, nearly all UN member states took measures to close their borders in order to stop the spread of the virus. These included entry bans, the construction of fences and barriers, border checks, the interruption of international air travel, visa restrictions, demands for health information, and quarantine rules. Within a short space of time, populations were territorially fixed and separated from each other. Overnight, the highly

mobile global society became a society of inmates, locked into national compartments.

Such a dramatic, worldwide closure of borders is undoubtedly exceptional; this is why it strikes at the heart of our collective self-image. It brings to the surface something that remains concealed in normal conditions: the state as a specific ensemble of territoriality, authority and control, which can use its extensive rights of intervention to structure social relations and forms of movement, and which permits or prevents mobility and residence. This reveals the fact that the nation-state – despite all prophecies of doom – still has substantial powers to separate spaces and suppress mobility with its border policies. The state is not just a supernumerary of globalization, a weak, powerless actor that can only gaze passively at the phenomenon of border crossing. On the contrary: its power, often concealed and withheld, has emerged unmistakably in the pandemic. It has reinforced the element of territorial control in spectacular fashion, and made the most of its capacity to isolate itself and others. The political concept behind this policy of closure was one central to the notion of sovereignty – the idea of defence against external (and internal) dangers.

Now this close connection between the state and its borders does not only come into being when epidemics break out; it is actually always with us. So the Covid crisis does not roll back globalization; it reveals – perhaps surprisingly for some – its otherwise obscured and overlooked flip side. There is hardly any other area of politics where we find so many different and sometimes contradictory developments occurring simultaneously: opening and closing, the dissolution and reinforcement of borders, the easing and intensification of control, mobilization and immobilization. To precisely observe this ambiguous development, however, we need to move away from the conventional