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Borders as infrastructure: the technopolitics of border control

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Borders as infrastructure: the technopolitics of border control

by Huub Dijstelbloem, Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, 2021, 288 pp., \$ 55.00 Paperback, ISBN: 9780262542883

Grazia Tona

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BOOK REVIEW

Borders as infrastructure: the technopolitics of border control, by Huub Dijstelbloem, Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, 2021, 288 pp., \$ 55.00
Paperback, ISBN: 9780262542883

In the summer of 2021, Dijstelbloem's *Borders as Infrastructure: The Technopolitics of Border Control* was released as part of the MIT Infrastructures Series. The same year marked a well-advanced phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the global population has experienced the presence of boundaries and the restriction of movement. The health emergency, however, has brought to light a deep-rooted, highly technological system to govern human mobility: an apparatus that, so far, has operated on selected groups of travelers, as the policies and strategies of migration control testify. Dijstelbloem dissects the material forms and operative mechanisms of this apparatus and makes the border the main character of the book.

Grounding the study on the migratory movements toward Europe that occurred between 2014 and 2016, the complex relationships that link materiality, mediation and movement are brought to the fore to observe the border's performative capacities. Materiality and technology in Dijstelbloem's work refer to tools, networks and technical aspects related to the control of mobility, as well as the processes through which those instruments are designed, produced and managed. In other words, their politics is at stake. Through the concept of mediation, the author examines the way technologies, political ideas and knowledge are negotiated and circulate through borders, rendering them vehicles for power. Materiality, mediation and movement constitute the basis of what he calls technopolitics: the dynamic entanglement of politics and technology.

The concept of technopolitics is set out in the first chapter and introduces an understanding of the relationship between borders and mobility that goes beyond mere regulatory functions. It examines borders themselves as vehicles, through which political ideas, control, organization, coordination and technologies move. By unfolding technopolitical relations, *Borders as Infrastructure* enters into conversation with the critical scholarship that explores the link between borders and motion. Interesting connections, for instance, can be found with the theory of "kinopolitics" (Nail 2016) and the concept of "viapolitics" (Walters 2015).

After clarifying the focus and terminology of the book in chapter one, the second chapter is dedicated to the analysis of borders as infrastructure. In particular, four characteristics specify the infrastructural functioning. These include the capacity to connect multiple spatial scales, select and differentiate groups of people, manage regimes of vision and enact movement. By examining borders as infrastructure, the author retraces the recent developments of Europe's borders in terms of complex technological relations (involving constructions, objects, networks, systems of information), agents (employees, officers, technical experts) and institutions. The interaction of these elements and actors results in the emergence of tensions, on which the infrastructure can perform mediations, or "infrastructural compromises", as a hybrid and ambiguous mode of operation. The infrastructural understanding does not only encompass the relational capacity of the border but also emphasizes its material dimension through the

concept of morphology. This consists of studying the way political ideas assume a concrete form and how, via their manifestations, ideas themselves are affected and evolve. In other words, morphology investigates how “the materiality and spatiality of borders shape the technopolitics of movement” (57). To better understand this concept, chapter three turns to the theories of Bruno Latour and Peter Sloterdijk. The works of both philosophers serve as a theoretical framework, in which the relationship linking border politics and the socio-technical world can be inscribed.

The first three chapters, mainly characterized by a theoretical imprint, conclude what could be considered the first part of the book. The following chapters offer instead an in-depth analysis of specific morphological manifestations of the border, through the empirical study of three selected cases. These include the design of Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands, the deployment of Erosur and the implementation of the hotspot system in the Aegean Sea and, lastly, the interplay of humanitarian and securitarian work on the Greek islands of Chios and Lesbos. The case studies discuss the functioning of borders’ infrastructural compromise on different scales of action, shifting from the airport’s architecture to the geography of land and sea, until reaching the small scale of migrant bodies and objects. Through processes of mediation, ambiguous spaces of operation emerge, where human and non-human elements are entangled. Such spaces constitute the ground on which the author displays the enmeshing of security and care, visibility and invisibility, mobility and containment in their dynamic negotiation and rearrangement.

An additional form of compromise is finally laid out in chapter seven, showing how modes of monitoring and visualizing the border may affect border infrastructures themselves. The author critically reflects on the way visual representations act as material-technological machines, through which objects, images and pictures circulate. The mediations discussed in the book lead to the conclusive conceptualization of Europe as an “extreme infrastructure” in chapter eight. Here, the term “extreme” is used to indicate the progressive intensification of a normal situation, in which selection processes push inclusion and exclusion to the limit and create the conditions for new states of exception.

In the growing academic attention to borders that generates a manifold of discourses, disciplinary lenses and case studies, the unique contribution of this book lies in its capacity of connection. Dijstelbloem carefully weaves and thickens the tangle of ideologies, policies, actors, objects and spaces, in which borders materialize as infrastructures. Pleasantly readable and accessible online, the book has the potential to start a dialogue with disciplines less involved (but certainly competent) in the border debate, such as those of technology and design. The reading is particularly recommended for scholars interested in the material and spatial dimension of borders, as well as in the interaction between the non-human and the political. If criticism has to be leveled at the book, it may be found in the centrality of Europe both in its theoretical and empirical perspectives. Yet, the present traces of colonial history, the international division of labor and ever-increasing economic disparities call for the urgency to pay attention to the global ramification of border infrastructures. Taking seriously the author’s intention to consider European borders as a starting point, it would be worth testing the concept of technopolitics on a wider geography and exploring which other political ideas travel through borders, originating unexpected mediations.

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