

Border abolitionism as method

Alison Mountz, *The Death of Asylum: Hidden Geographies of the Enforcement Archipelago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). 304pp., £81.00 hb., £20.27 pb., 978 0 81669 710 6 hb., 978 0 81669 711 3 pb.

The implementation of the EU Pact on Migration in September 2020 has marked a further step in the sheer politics of migration containment that the European Union has been enforcing for two decades: accelerated asylum procedures, migrants' detention upon landing, multiplication of bilateral agreements with third-countries and 'solidarity in deportation procedures' among member states are some of the legal stratagems that the Pact envisions to render migrants' journeys more dangerous and to obstruct their access to asylum. And yet, this is far from being only a European history. As Alison Mountz poignantly illustrates in her new book *The Death of Asylum*, the history of the exclusionary politics of migration is a global history and therefore needs to be investigated by intertwining different geographies of containment and beginning from multiple starting points. In the book, Mountz traces back border offshoring politics to the late 1970s, going against the grain of the presentism which characterises discourses on the 'refugee crisis'.

Such a genealogy of externalisation and containment enables also a foregrounding of partial continuities between different forms of confinement, which have targeted not only those racialised as 'migrants' but also other unruly subjectivities. This genealogy is intertwined with the history of the deterioration of asylum and of its externalisation: indeed, this latter 'began at sea in the Caribbean in the early 1980s, when the United States intercepted, detained and returned Haitian and Cuban nationals'. In fact, asylum offshoring is constitutive of the broader politics of border externalisation. The US interceptions of Haitians in the late 1970s; the Golden Venture vessel in 1993, which rescued close to New York with 286 Chinese migrants on board; the Australian Tampa incident in 2001 and the subsequent Pacific Solution adopted by the Australian government; Frontex deployment on the Canary Islands to block African migrants and vessels that was pushed-back to Libya by the Italian authorities in 2007-2009 – these episodes that Mountz takes into account are landmarks of what today has been

consolidated as a politics of migration containment.

Retracing this scattered genealogy enables constructing a collective memory of the politics of containment whose structural violence tends to get lost in the time-frame of 'the crisis'. Maintaining a memory of the heterogeneous biopolitical and spatial tactics deployed by states for pushing back, diverting and disrupting migrations, might also help in tracing the political legacies of migrant struggles. There is no archive of the collective struggles for movement and practices of solidarity that occurred in response to the structural violence of what international agencies and states defined as 'migration management': the temporariness of these struggles and their exposure to states' evictions contribute to their invisibilisation. In fact, they are the object of a proactive politics of neglect that tries to erase traces of emergent collective formations. Thus, building an archive of migrant struggles starting from what Ann Laura Stoler terms their 'piecemeal partiality' is a key epistemic-political task for countering the violent erasures of racialising bordering practices. Migrants' presence cannot be fully erased, and they keep 'haunting the international state system as ghostly figures out of place'. Nevertheless, the story of the border regime and of what Vicki Squire has described as the 'exclusionary politics of asylum' is also a story of their repeated permutations: borders, Mountz interestingly notices, today function as islands and, we could add, as hotspots. That is, borders are mobile and multiply far beyond the national frontiers, following migrants everywhere to the point that 'migrants are detained en route'. Arguing that the border works as an island means also highlighting that its function is not only to divide and create barriers, but also to contain, confine and isolate migrants and, together, to preventively illegalise those who are deemed to be ineligible for international protection.

The progressive deterioration of asylum, according to Mountz, is culminating today in the social, political and ontological death of asylum. In this regard, it might be added that the shrinking of international protection goes

together with the shrinking of the figure of the refugee: if in 2015 Syrian migrants represented (as I have discussed elsewhere) the ‘yardstick of humanitarianism’ and were depicted as the ‘good refugees’, five years later even ‘genuine refugees’ are hampered from accessing rights and are criminalised as ‘undeserving’. More broadly, migration policies and laws are now oriented to preventing migrants who can become refugees. Yet, at the same time it is worth noticing that the politics of asylum has been exclusionary since its inception, predicated upon hierarchies of violence and driven by racialising criteria.

The current blatant politics of containment is not (only) made of negative operations, which consist in states’ inaction and in the withdrawal of humanitarian support: it is enacted through multiple interventions on the part of both state and non-state actors which deploy political technologies that work to obstruct migrants’ access to the refugee system. Hence, more than just taking stock of the death of asylum as such, there is a need to scrutinise the multifarious legal, biopolitical and spatial tactics devised for harming migrants, and undoing their infrastructures of liveability (as Jasbir Puar has shown).



In other words, what Mountz defines as the death of asylum is ultimately symptomatic of the political and legal architecture of the border regime which is proactively oriented to hinder migrants' access to international protection, rights and humanitarian support. In this sense, we can turn from an analysis of the death of asylum towards an inquiry into the what I call the dismantling of asylum and of the spaces of refuge. Mobile infrastructures of deterrence have been put in place to prevent migrants from reaching Europe, from building living spaces and from pursuing their desires. Migrants are injured and hampered through spatial confinement and temporal borders: the stolen life of migration that Shahram Khosravi has identified is one of the most harmful effects that migration laws and policies generate for people seeking asylum.

The Death of Asylum pushes us to reflect on which political spaces can be built and opened up in the face of such a politics of containment and of the destitution of refugees it creates. The book invites us not to stop the laborious work of critique by documenting the shrinking of the asylum system. Nor, I add, can we limit our analyt-

ical work to reporting that, despite everything, migrants resist and engage in acts of refusal. Which transformative political-epistemological approach to the politics of migration can we envision? And how can we tackle border violence, even in its most invisible forms, without reifying 'migration' as a self-standing field of analysis? Mountz's insights into migrants' carceral archipelago and the heterogenous modes of confinement can be a starting point for gesturing towards border abolitionism as a method. Ruth Gilmore's conception of an abolitionist geography 'as an antagonistic contradiction of carceral geographies' can be productively put to work as an analytical lens for rethinking a critique of migration governmentality. Border abolitionist as a method pays attention to the interlocking racialising mechanisms that sustain modes of differential confinement and exploitation. Unlike NoBorders perspectives that assume the image of borders as discrete sites and as the main targets of action, an abolitionist approach challenges the very distinction between deserving and undeserving refugees, dismantling the very logics of racialised confinement and captivity.

Martina Tazzioli

Return of the conjuncture

Vittorio Morfino and Peter D. Thomas, eds, *The Government of Time: Theories of Multiple Temporality in the Marxist Tradition* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017). 306pp., £91.00 hb., 978 9 00429 119 5

A sense of impending collapse is a fixture of the present. Signs abound of the limits of a worldview of infinite accumulation in a finite world. These contradictions are not only apparent in economic and epidemiological charts; they can be felt viscerally in quotidian life. In this illuminating volume, Vittorio Morfino and Peter D. Thomas bring together voices that explore temporality and the underappreciated prospect of its multiplicity. The chapters challenge the monolithic time of the neoliberal present, shedding light on fractures along its surface. *The Government of Time* deserves praise as a compendium of theories of multiple temporality, serving as a primer as well as a series of provocative interventions that could rejuvenate historical materialist theory and politics. These interventions substantiate the ontological contemporaneity

of times in the plural, precariously woven together in a *conjuncture*, over and against a taken-for-granted static temporal background.

Historical materialism embodies the effort to develop a methodology of persuasively scientific and grounded social analysis. Marx and historical materialists after him have therefore refined the theoretical armoury of critical political economy in line with this aim. This could be why, as Massimiliano Tomba observes, Marx did not draw up a 'passe-partout historical philosophical theory' at a level of abstraction, and devoted more attention to political economy. We can nevertheless observe intimations towards such a theory across Marx's invocations of the temporal rifts dotting the European social landscape. Following these reflections, we find a Marx that