Book review essay

The Mediterranean and its migrants: porous policy for a porous border

CLAIRE SPENCER

Borderlands: towards an anthropology of the cosmopolitan condition. By Michel Agier. Cambridge: Polity. 2016. 208pp. £50.00. ISBN 978 0 74569 679 9. Available as e-book.

Crimes of peace: Mediterranean migrations at the world's deadliest border. By Maurizio Albahari. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2015. 288pp. £54.00. ISBN 978 0 81224 747 3. Available as e-book.

Illegality, Inc.: clandestine migration and the business of bordering Europe. By Ruben Andersson. Oakland: University of California Press. 2014. 416pp. £70.00. ISBN 978 0 52028 251 3. Available as e-book.

L'âge des migrations. By Hervé Le Bras. Paris: Éditions Autrement. 2017. 150pp. Pb.: £14.80. ISBN 978 2 74674 463 9. Available as e-book.

No borders: the politics of immigration control and resistance. By Natasha King. London: Zed. 2016. 208pp. £70.00. ISBN 978 1 78360 468 5. Available as e-book.

Migrant, refugee, smuggler, saviour. By Peter Tinti and Tuesday Reitano. London: Hurst. 2016. 272pp. £16.50. ISBN 978 1 84904 680 0.

When Elizabeth Monroe researched and wrote *The Mediterranean in politics* in the mid-1930s, while on leave from the Information Department at Chatham House, she introduced the topic by writing that the Mediterranean's 'chief products are still the corn and wine and oil of the *Bible*. In politics, its significance has been that of a passage, or a megaphone, or a knuckle-duster. It has always been the route to somewhere, or the string which, when pulled, reveals that its other end is in India, Vladivostok, the Middle Danube or Mosul. You cannot write on it without also writing on imperial policy, Moslem policy, European policy'.[1]

She also wrote of the difficulty of writing about a 'Mediterranean policy' since 'the subject is limitless and unmanageable because for years the Mediterranean has always been a means and—except to Italy—never an end'. In other words, and

[1] Elizabeth Monroe, *The Mediterranean in politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), ch. 1: 'The powers that really matter'.

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apart from historical assertions of political control and state power projection of the type Monroe's study goes on to examine, the Mediterranean has always been a transitory space connecting conflicts, people, parts of empires and trade. Ahead of the outbreak of the Second World War, a year after her work was published, Monroe's main focus was on the consequences of Italy's Mussolini-era *mare nostrum* policy. The term ('our sea' in Latin) has subsequently been employed in an entirely different context from that of the 1930s, to denote the Italian-led search and rescue mission that preceded the increase in international involvement from early 2015 in salvaging and attempting to deter people from embarking on the perilous sea voyage from the southern shores of the Mediterranean to Europe.

At least three of the books reviewed here focus on the incoherence of the various policing, monitoring and humanitarian missions currently crowding the Mediterranean Sea and its shores (above all the EU-led Frontex 'Triton' mission and the NATO-led surveillance and monitoring 'Operation Sea Guardian'); Maurizio Albahari's *Crimes of peace* illustrates this through a case-study approach of the migration routes in and around Italy, to call on 'EU policymakers, Frontex leaders and agents, and EU member states' militaries … to clarify, to themselves and to their constituencies, whether they monitor and patrol the Mediterranean to deter migration, to rescue people, or to intercept and deport them to countries of origin and transit' (p. 176). From Albahari's and others' accounts, the situation has self-evidently been a muddle of all three.

The official picture is complicated by the increasingly active, and indeed proactive, role of a whole series of non-state actors, whose various roles Ruben Andersson charts 'from Dakar to Warsaw' as an industry that is as productive and self-sustaining for state actors and their contractors as it is for the smugglers, traffickers, researchers (among whom he counts himself) and, critically, the media. Trans-Mediterranean migration, seen as a public spectacle, Andersson writes, 'is the creative push-pull that makes the media a supreme accomplice in the illegality industry; without the cameras there would simply be no emergency' (*Illegality, Inc.*, p. 276). Andersson also echoes the concerns expressed by Peter Tinti and Tuesday Reitano that 'policies predicated on deterrence—building higher walls, criminalizing migration through overzealous returns, cracking down on smugglers, increasing fines and sentences—not only tend to cause more problems than they solve, but they often exacerbate the very problems they are meant to ameliorate' (*Migrant, refugee, smuggler, saviour*, p. 259).

It is easy to forget that migration, refugees and the seemingly massive and uncontrollable movement of people across the Mediterranean is only of relatively recent concern to policy-makers. Until the mid-1970s, for example, the access of North African workers to French labour markets was, if not entirely uncontrolled, based on demand and supply rather than on the elaborate systems of visas, residency and work permits that now prevail. For the most part, European governments have deemed the uncontrolled (for which read 'irregular', 'undocumented', 'clandestine', etc.) movement of people across the Mediterranean as 'illegal' for the best part of 40 years. The onus is on individuals to prove who and what they are.

As a number of the books reviewed here describe, the assumption of guilt until innocence is proven is at the heart of much of the intrusive and sceptical inhumanity that accompanies the official treatment of young men, women and children who arrive unaccompanied and without papers in Europe. Even as refugees, a status also requiring proof, there is no guarantee for individuals and family groups, who arrive via the back channels of Europe, of a safe passage nor of a safe haven once on European soil. Many are detained, or live in limbo, indefinitely, with a set of political consequences that Michel Agier explores in depth in *Borderlands*, which he posits as a new global category of stateless 'banal cosmopolitans': the victims, and yet also the agents, of an as yet unthought-through, but likely to be enduring product of globalization.

Yet intrinsic to the conclusions of these volumes is that we are essentially looking at the wrong people for the source of the growing anxiety in Europe over uncontrolled migration. Despite the continuing debate over the rights and wrongs of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to allow over a million Syrian refugees to settle in Germany in 2015, the numbers of those arriving via the Mediterranean, in relative and overall terms, are paltry. By far the largest influx of 'irregular' migrants into Europe arises from those who entered the European space legally (via tourist or student visas) and have overstayed. One reason why Andersson shifts his initial research ambition from the migrants themselves towards the spectacle and 'industry of illegality' surrounding them is precisely this concern that 'it has long been clear to migration scholars that such movements towards Europe are tiny relative to other means of unauthorized entry and residence' (*Illegality, Inc.*, p. 5).

The acceleration of Europe's migration policy incoherence dates back to the end of the Cold War, and the recognition that 'international migration has come to be seen as one of the most pressing issues facing Europe in the 1990s', to cite the book cover summary of Sarah Collinson's *Europe and international migration* written for Chatham House in 1993.[2] By then, the concern was more global than local to Europe's Mediterranean backyard, although Collinson went on to write a more geopolitically focused study on migration within the context of the Euro-Mediterranean policy initiative proposed by the then European Community in 1995.[3] This was itself in large part drawn up to respond to the South–North migration pressures evident by the mid-1990s.[4] If resolving the issue was a European headache then, nearly 25 years later it still is, but with significant amplifications.

The scale of what is now depicted as a multicausal 'refugee plus illegal migrant crisis' has its roots in a series of interrelated issues that all of the volumes reviewed here examine from different perspectives and in ways that go beyond the confines

[2] Sarah Collinson, *Europe and international migration* (London: Pinter Publishers for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1993).

[3] Sarah Collinson, 'Shore to shore: the politics of migration in Euro-Maghreb relations' (London: Chatham House, 1996).

[4] I was present myself at the launch of the 'Barcelona process' or, as it was officially named, the 'Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Initiative', in 1995, the aim of which was only half-jokingly summarized for me by a French diplomat as 'assistance caricative pour les fixer chez eux' ('charitable assistance to keep them at home').

of the Mediterranean. Yet a critique of European responses to a set of ill-defined and badly understood phenomena is present in all of these texts, even if they have not been written, as in the case of *Illegality, Inc*, in direct response to the upsurge from 2015 in human tragedy from loss of life through drowning in the Mediterranean and the resulting media, humanitarian and political responses to the crisis. The details of the European Union's struggle to accommodate the seemingly sudden influx of refugees from the Syrian conflict, along with the associated debates about the status of others (from Africa, Asia and central Asia) and the refusal of a number of EU member states to accept the quotas that Brussels sought to impose on them, are well examined elsewhere.[5] What these volumes seek to do is to dig deeper: into the conceptual, legal and statistical morass that dominates public debate on the 'refugee-cum-migrant' crisis and into the realities of the experience of the people engaged in moving from one place to the next, along with the media coverage and the industries of smugglers, traffickers and humanitarians that have grown up along the way.

One striking aspect of these reflections is that it is also relatively recently that the Mediterranean space has begun to be thought of as a border region rather than a transit zone. The imposition of hard frontiers in place of the previous soft ones—or rather the division between people who pass effortlessly across frontiers they barely register are there and those whose only recourse is to keep moving through subterfuge and a life of clandestinity—is an entirely modern construction. Yet the legal and political assumptions and frameworks underpinning this state of affairs are muddy in the extreme, despite the assertions of governments to the contrary. In the detail of the accounts of individual trajectories and associated barriers along the way, officials almost seem to be making it up as they go along, as for example when challenged by Albahari to explain why some people are detained and others not.

In turn, the apparent strength, and recent strengthening, of border control regimes belie the fragility of their conceptualization and even geographical location. This proves to be particularly pertinent in respect of where lines of sovereign responsibility and control (a core theme of Albahari's work) are drawn within and on and across in the Mediterranean basin. In turn, this has produced a minefield of theoretical, practical and operational inconsistencies in international migration policy over the past 40 years, explored at length in *Borderlands* and *Crimes of peace*. The efforts of European policy-makers have yet to reconcile their stated national and collective interests and policies in respect of migration with anything resembling a long-term strategy towards a wide array of people on the move. The default position has been to securitize frontiers and designated border zones, with social and political consequences that do not make for very palatable reading when reflected back on the normative values that the European Union is supposed to defend and represent.

[5] See, *inter alia*, the reports and analyses of the Migration Policy Institute since 2015, http://www.migrationpolicy.org/topics/immigration-policy-law; and Chatham House's work (with the Overseas Development Institute) on the refugee crisis, https://www.chathamhouse.org/research/refugee-crisis. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 5 June 2017.)

One of the paradoxes at the core of a policy that seeks to control and curtail the 'illegal' variants of migration is the extent to which the liberal world of democratic Europe can and does coexist in close spatial proximity to the clandestine world inhabited by various categories of migrants. Agier evokes this situation in the opening lines of *Borderlands*: contrasting the insouciance of the clients of an upmarket gym in Greece, enjoying a clear view through their plate glass window at the scene of a group of Afghans waiting for a bus to take them to their next destination, all taking place under the passive gaze of the local police. Each has a role to play, argues Agier, but each also lives in an entirely different universe from the other. In Tinti and Reitano's more detailed study of the migrant–smuggler relationship in different contexts from West Africa, through the Sahel to Egypt, Libya and Turkey and within the Schengen zone of Europe itself, specific contexts determine whether different actors—local police, border guards and smugglers—are oppressors or facilitators, sometimes predictably, sometimes not. It is for the individual migrant to devise and assess each situation in advance, and have a plan B and a lot of patience when things go wrong. Some sit out detention en route to Europe for years, invisible to European policy-makers until they emerge in the vicinity of the Mediterranean: Albahari recounts the story of an Afghan Hazara, Ali, who eventually reached Italy after eight years in transit.

Given the breadth of approaches—from social anthropology to conceptual examinations of the underpinnings and practical consequences for those whose destiny and identity are increasingly determined by borders—the insights offered in these works serve collectively to highlight the poverty of European public policy debates based almost entirely on net migration figures (which hide multiple conflated sins) as well as the unavoidably human and emotional nature of the cruelties that border regimes inflict on real people. Two very undesirable outcomes of this are the rise in criminality and the commercial exploitation of migrants, along with the recent increase in reports of a new 'slave trade' arising along established routes from Africa and into Europe.[6] On the conceptual front, most of the authors here agree that, at some level, the vocabulary used to denote population movements is not only deceptive, but reflects negative connotations according to usage and context and presupposes a set of assumptions that themselves need unpicking and re-evaluating.

To a large extent, even the facts—or rather received wisdoms—are deceptive, as Hervé Le Bras's useful volume, *L'âge des migrations*, outlines with a series of illustrative charts and diagrams. Starting by comparing the nature of most historical migration to the situation today—unsurprisingly, the majority of people moved within reachable proximity of their societies of origin in previous eras—Le Bras charts how, until very recently, the majority of population movements have been limited in geographical scope (namely, the same national groups of workers and students overwhelmingly went to a small number of destinations, often driven by

[6] See, for example, Christina Lamb's report '"I would tell any girls back home, don't come to Europe": Becky, 16' in *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 12 Feb. 2017, detailing how child migrants from Africa are trafficked into prostitution and slavery in Europe, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-would-tell-any-girls-back-home-dont-come-to-europe-becky-solomon-16-v0jf2l5lh.

pre-existing links, above all colonial) and were hierarchical in terms of the replacement and exchange of specific professions (such as medical staff from Europe and the US being substituted by professionals from another set of nations). They have sustained jobs and services rather than overwhelmed recipient communities.[7] He is particularly critical of national statistics used by politicians to illustrate ever increasing inward migration flows without also factoring in birth and death rates in the overall population. By his own calculations, most of the ageing and infecund populations of the European Union will need to accept an extra 410 million migrants just to sustain the current workforce by 2050 (p. 108). Even when adjusted to reflect a wide difference in national needs, this argument is unlikely to gain traction in current policy debates on inward migration to Europe.

Most of Le Bras's recent examples are drawn from France, where his real target audience lies. In this respect, he highlights a public debate dominated by images of the 'poor of Africa' arriving in France in ever greater numbers, when in reality, most inward migrants to France have attained higher levels of educational achievement than their French counterparts. When first- and second-generation migrant children's educational achievements are adjusted for class, they also surpass their French counterparts in the attainment of educational qualifications. He does not shy away from positing racism as a core reason for much of the conflation between migrants and those who are French citizens by birth, albeit of African or North African descent, in assessing mixed marriages and family reunion figures, but he also glides over how to deal with what is clearly discrimination against first-, second- and third-generation migrants in gaining jobs, when equally or better qualified than their '*français de souche*' counterparts. He also has little to say about how public policy might counter the social tensions that public debate of the kind sponsored by the Front National provokes over migration. His aim is rather to demonstrate exactly where and how popular misapprehensions over the nature of legal migration arise, and with an occasional overtly condemnatory sleight of hand, he succeeds in doing this in a well-illustrated and thought-provoking fashion.

The grey area, of course, lies in the much more emotive topic of 'illegality', which the other volumes situate as central to their arguments. For the social anthropologists Andersson, Albahari, Tinti and Reitano, the individual case-studies and contextual details they relate are all indicative of the all-but-closed opportunities for people to move without the means to pay and engage with a growing army of facilitators and middle men (and women). Tinti and Reitano also reflect on the wide variety of individuals and networks involved in moving people across the African Sahara and Sahel region and emphasize the heroic behaviour of some by

[7] In an attempt to test this out, I sought out the most recent migrant statistics (May 2017) of the UK's Office for National Statistics to examine the numbers and origins of those in receipt of work visas for the UK to year-end 2016. Of the 163,783 work visas granted, 91,797 (56%) were granted to professionals (Tier 2 [skilled] visas), of which 58% were to Indian nationals, followed by 10% to US citizens. 'The information technology sector sponsored 42% of skilled work visa applications, followed by professional, scientific and technical activities (18%) and financial and insurance activities (12%)'. See UK Office for National Statistics, 'Migration Statistics Quarterly Report: May 2017', https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/may2017.

including them in the title of their work: 'Migrant, refugee, smuggler, saviour'. As they point out, the term smuggler should be used with greater caution than the term 'trafficker'—given that some smugglers are genuinely well intentioned and even risk their own security in delivering their charges to their destinations (p. 5).

But the underlying reality remains the same, along with the consequences: were it not for the obstacles put in the path of so many people forced to escape from impossible situations or deluded by false promises, the scale of the challenge would not have reached its current extent. Thanks to closed borders and the choice of European states to use preventive measures as the main tool for managing migration, the original and relatively autonomous movement of people is now intermixed with coercion and exploitation by a set of extremely well-remunerated mafia-like organizations. As one route closes, another opens, along with the active recruitment of would-be migrants by unscrupulous traffickers in West Africa, including even individuals who have jobs and careers at home and who would not be otherwise tempted to seek an escape route to Europe.

Many, and in fact the majority of migrants, of course never reach Europe, but their determination to try, and try again, leads a number of authors to paint their role as survivors and adventurers more than as the victims of the systems they encounter on the way. The value of the detailed histories related by Andersson, Tinti and Reitano lies in how the authors link cause to effect in the trajectories of individuals to a much bigger picture of the compounded self-interest of many in maintaining the status quo. Much of this detail was unknown until the meticulous and painstaking research of the kind undertaken in these accounts emerged, and Andersson won the British Sociological Association's Ethnography Award in 2015 for his work. Knowing how we arrived where we are now is invaluable to reflecting on how abnormal the current situation is, as well as the extent to which the absurdities described in these accounts are intentionally hidden from the mainstream view in the oversimplifications of public debate. The context is nevertheless evolving, with the new horrors of slavery, organized prostitution rings and the psychological and financial extortion inflicted on migrants now coming to the fore in media coverage. The outsourcing of European security to third parties in Africa, following the EU's deal with Turkey, is also a relatively recent development, but one which has been tried before and largely failed.[8]

Not all the volumes here either attempt or intend to present clear policy solutions to this continually evolving situation. Tinti and Reitano argue for a more 'end result' approach to disrupting the activities of smugglers, where the prosecution of 'mid-level and controlling members of smuggling groups' would have a deterrent effect if it led to serious penalties through the seizure of their assets and profits (p. 266). They adopt a more critical stance towards militarized approaches to border security 'which have a tendency to go hand in hand with human rights abuses' (p. 269). Diplomatic solutions are also deemed 'beyond

[8] More than a decade ago, the European Union proposed establishing internment camps for migrants in Gaddafi's Libya; see Claire Spencer, 'The Mediterranean matters—more than before', *The World Today*, March 2001, and 'Europe—asylum and migration: limiting the flow', *The World Today*, Feb. 2005.

counter-productive' when Europeans only engage with central state authorities in situations 'where the politics of identity and marginalization are the dominant force' in the local and cross-border smuggling industry (p. 272).

The outlier in policy terms of these books is a radical one: Natasha King's *No borders* details the growth of the grassroots movements, mostly situated in Europe, dedicated to the elimination or 'refusal' of borders completely. As an activist researcher herself, King's direct experience is of the now dismantled 'Jungle' camp at Calais, and of groups such as the '300 group' set up after 300 North Africans embarked on a hunger strike in protest at their detention in Athens and Thessaloniki in 2011. Her book draws on 'the tradition of anarchist scholars of social revolution' who seek to renegotiate the individual's relationship with the state. It is a view not bereft of a certain idealism, but interesting nonetheless for setting out a shockingly obvious proposition: without borders, hardly any of the human misery and elaborate and overlapping systems, regimes and flourishing industries now accompanying the otherwise simple process of transiting the Mediterranean Sea would exist.