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**Sorting machines: Reinvention of the border in the 21st century**, by Steffen Mau, translated by Nicola Barfoot. Cambridge: Polity, 2023, 174 pp. £15.39 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5095-5435-5

In his new border and migration studies book, *Sorting Machines: Reinvention of the Border in the 21st Century*, Steffen Mau seeks to recontextualise the persistent narrative within globalisation discourse in which the ‘opening of borders is seen as inevitable’ (p. 32). To illustrate, consider two influential texts on globalisation from recent decades. Kenichi Ohmae’s (1989) *Harvard Business Review* essay ‘Managing in a Borderless World’, later to become a perennial bestselling book on corporate management, imagines an integrated global economy changing consumer expectations because ‘we now know—directly—how people elsewhere live. We now travel abroad’. Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Thomas Friedman’s (2007) bestseller, *The world is flat*, reflecting on the fall of communism occurring when Ohmae published his essay, tells readers ‘there were no walls. Young Americans could think about traveling ... to more countries than any American generation before them. Indeed, they could travel as far as their imaginations and wallets could take them’ (p. 608). However, according to Mau, modern borders are not disappearing but have been reproduced and reconstituted in forms both traditional and novel to constrain this supposed permeability. The result is a complex of sorting processes which facilitate the flows of privileged classes (such as Ohmae’s Japanese and Friedman’s U.S. Americans) while limiting the flows of migrants designated as undesirable. The substance of Mau’s thesis is that rather than a project of creating a frictionless, egalitarian movement of people across borders, globalisation is marked by a prerogative of ‘division: it grants mobility to some, but denies it to others, and it uses the border to sort different groups’ (p. 26).

Mau’s work reflects a long trend in globalisation scholarship which notes how personal mobility is far more constrained and managed than that of information, goods, and capital. As early as 2000, Cohn (2000) wrote how ‘the cross-border movement of people is one area where there is often a more generalized negative societal reaction to globalization. Although many states and societal groups support freer trade and capital flows, they are far more resistant to the freer movement of people’ (p. 143). Indeed, the power of *Sorting Machines* is not its

theory that globalisation features what Mau calls ‘unmistakable trends of closure, border selectivity and control’ (p. 35) but in its exquisite charting of the manifold ways in which the traditional concepts of borders and border functions have been discarded or reiterated to make the globalisation of personal mobility less a process of integration and more a process of stratification. This charting is the central accomplishment of the work.

Mau briskly and concisely brings readers through the layers of border control. He appropriately begins with borders’ historical conceptualisation as ‘spatial-physical’ efforts to ‘define countries’ external boundaries ... [and] homogenize societies internally’ (p. 16), which already indicates nations’ desire for a preferred composition of the population. From that classic vision of borders, Mau then addresses the ‘debordering’ discourse exemplified by Ohmae and Friedman. Rather than a one-sided trend towards a borderless planet, Mau finds a ‘dialectic of globalization’ which features an exponential increase in personal mobility (primarily by those of the Global North) occurring simultaneously to processes of ‘closing and hardening borders, territorial exclusion and intensified control’ (p. 36). Within this context, Mau quantitatively argues that globalisation both provokes and is enabled by ‘an inflationary revival of walled or fortified borders’ which saw the emergence of more fortified borders since 2000 than from 1950–1999 (p. 40), most of which are predicated on ‘differences in political, cultural and economic respects’ (p. 49), as well as ‘needs-based management ... [of] domestic labour markets’ (p. 68). These are ‘filtering’ borders which function as ‘instruments and place of social sorting and risk classification’ (p. 65). Mau places the emergence of macroterritorialisation (e.g. the European Schengen Zone) not as evidence of debordering but as shifting of ‘political and social costs’ to nations on the external edge of the debordered region. This shift of costs necessitates local changes in economic, cultural, and, especially, mobility relationships between the nations straddling the periphery of macroterritories (p. 116). It also changes where a nation’s border can be described as beginning. For example, with respect to mobility, the external borders of the European Schengen Zone can be properly described as the functional border of Germany.

The most fascinating parts of Mau’s work are found in his exploration of how the revived interest in borders manifest technologically, spatially, and biologically. States employ ‘smart borders’, comprising ‘a whole arsenal of different technological possibilities, such as databases, algorithmic risk analyses, biometric identification, automated control, sensor technologies, track and trace procedures, video and audio surveillance, thermal imaging, etc.’ (p. 84). Here Mau condenses the technological elaboration of what Chouliaraki and Georgiou refer to as the ‘targeting [of] individual bodies, identities and affect (finger or face recognition, lie detection) ... [not] by force of punishment, whether corporeal or emotional, but by force of micro-interventions’ against migrants and geographies of perceived risk (2022, p. 9). While not nearly as comprehensive an investigation as Chouliaraki and Georgiou’s inquiry into the contemporary ‘Digital Border’, the reader is left with a clear sense of the level of personal intrusion the modern system of border management presents to individuals.

The intrusiveness of border activities is not borne by individuals alone. Mau illustrates the extent to which the border policies of most OECD countries ‘now [operate] globally and transnationally . . . [Borders are now] visible and invisible, geographically fixed and flexible, physical and virtual, permanent and occasional, national and international, regional and global’ (p. 133). Borders are in a sum, increasingly outsourced. This reality is recounted as a method for nations to subvert their own liberal asylum policies by building further hindrances to the migrant’s ability to reach a border and apply for legal protections. Mau’s uses the example of the European Union’s ‘Migration Partnership Framework’ initiative in Niger to illustrate the extraterritorialisation of border control beyond national borders or even those of macroterritories’ peripheries. The Niger example demonstrates how the border policies of OECD nations impose upon and reorganising local personal mobility policy, in this case, Niger’s participation in the Economic Community of West African States open border schemes (p. 127).



*Sorting machines* neatly condenses and overviews the broader range of border studies issues. It lends itself tremendously as a strong text for a lay reader with an interest in global migration or, especially, for an introductory-level migration studies or globalisation studies course. The book’s condensed quality and relatively quick 135 pages (sans front and back matter) make it quite valuable for those purposes but also leave the text somewhat incomplete. I find myself wishing Mau made more of the racist and socioeconomic and culture prejudices which frame the criteria driving border policy and efforts. For example, while clearly inferred throughout, only three explicit mentions of the racial dimensions of migration policy appear in the text. Therefore, to make a more comprehensive study of border issues, Mau’s book could be read alongside works which delve deeper into the various categories of inquiry he addresses. But all in all, *Sorting machines* is compelling and eminently readable work that excellently articulates the realities and socioeconomic and cultural dynamics shaping contemporary border activities.

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