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# **Borders as Infrastructure**

## **The Technopolitics of Border Control**

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## Preface

### **Borders on the Intersection of States, Technology, and Politics**

At this time, borders of all kinds are emerging around the world in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes this disease, has leaped across national boundaries, gripping populations and paralyzing social and economic activities. Where the virus appears, an unrelenting trail of victims follows. Countries, regions, cities, and villages are in lockdown, semilockdown, so-called intelligent lockdown, and less intelligent lockdown. People are in quarantine or isolation. While the virus seems to travel unrestrained, human mobility is governed by models, social distancing rules, and technical applications to prevent contamination. Borders are reappearing as new boundaries are spreading as rapidly as the virus itself. Although this book focuses primarily on borders in relation to human migration, I hope that its technopolitical and morphological analysis will also offer a valuable perspective for understanding the development of other kinds of borders and the mobility of other entities.

For anyone interested in the relationship among states, technology, and politics, and in questions concerning the inclusion and exclusion of persons, borders are almost inescapable. Coming from a philosophy of science and technology and a science and technology studies background, I became interested in the changing nature of borders around 2005. My interest intensified after a dramatic event that fueled my concerns and my curiosity. On the night of October 27, 2005, a fire broke out in the detention center in Amsterdam's Schiphol International Airport. Eleven detainees perished in the tragedy. Schiphol's detention center is at the airport's original location, in Schiphol East. When an individual arrives at the airport and

is deemed not to have the right to stay, he or she will be held at this center as an irregular migrant, most likely awaiting repatriation.

This disaster and the subsequent investigation by the Dutch Safety Board triggered my interest in the tensions among globalization, technological development, and the ways that states select different sorts of persons. It appeared to me, and to many others, that a strange paradox had arisen in Europe: whereas more and more refined technologies such as iris scans at airports were being introduced to facilitate traveling and connect security to service, migrants were increasingly failing to reach their destinations, forced into taking risky routes or ending up in the shadow zones of Europe.

My investigation of the new technologies used in border control began shortly thereafter. Working for the Rathenau Institute, an organization that encourages public debate and advises the Dutch parliament on issues of science and technology, I analyzed the rise of technologies in migration policy: databases, fingerprinting, speech recognition technology, X-rays to determine the age of minors, deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) tests to determine family relationships, and the like. In the following years, working at the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam, my interest expanded to the politics of borders or, more precisely, the *technopolitics* of borders. Through my research projects, I became increasingly involved in various international networks of researchers.

Europe's borders are my point of departure to address contemporary geopolitical and humanitarian questions. Borders mark conflicts over international orders. Borders can turn places, routes, and territories into "zones of death." The seas between Africa and Europe have claimed thousands of fatalities—individuals who sought to reach a destination but were not considered regular travelers (e.g., because they were ineligible for a visa) and were thus barred from taking a safer route. But although borders are inextricably linked to all sorts of people on the move, it is not the people but the borders themselves that are the main characters in this book. My interest in Europe's borders is twofold. I explore the technopolitical dimension of borders, using particular approaches and concepts derived from science and technology studies and the philosophy of technology. I also use the analysis of borders to further explore and elaborate the concept of "technopolitics" itself.

The research that I undertook for this book coincided with an unprecedented episode in European border politics. Although developments

concerning the borders of Europe, the application of technology, and the externalization of controls have been underway for some time, they came to a head during the so-called migrant crisis or refugee crisis—a period that continues but reached its peak in 2014–2016.

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam generously provided me with the time required to conduct the studies and fieldwork that form the basis of this book. I am extremely grateful to the editors of the MIT Infrastructures series, Geoffrey Bowker and Paul Edwards, and Justin Kehoe of the MIT Press for their enthusiasm, support, and guidance. The comments of anonymous reviewers were invaluable in improving the manuscript at the various stages. It is a huge privilege as an author to use all these comments to refine a book while developing my own voice.

A special thanks goes to Henk Wildschut, who gave generous permission to use a selection of his impressive photos on migration, camps, borders, and border controls in Europe for this book. His photos serve as the cover and return as chapter openers throughout the book. Wildschut's photographs of borders and migration are well known, and his work is exhibited around the world.<sup>2</sup> In January 2020, *The New Yorker* published his work on gardens that migrants make in refugee camps.<sup>3</sup> His projects on borders and migration resulted in 2010 in the book *Shelter* and the film *4.57 Minutes Back Home*, and other works followed, including the books *Ville de Calais* in 2017 and *Rooted* in 2019. His work has received prestigious awards, including the Dutch Doc Award in 2010, the Arles Prix du Livre in 2017 and the Netherlands Photo Book prize in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Without wanting to compare myself to his work, there is a certain similarity in the way in which his photos and this book depict borders. Like his work, the book pays attention to people and migrants of all sorts, but it is particularly interested in the various moves that borders themselves make. His work exactly represents the border situations that the book is about, without romanticizing or dramatizing them.

The time for me to spend researching this book was made possible by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy and the University of Amsterdam. An Open Society Foundations grant (OR2014–16667) supported my research on Greece and the United States. The fieldwork in Greece, partly in inspiring cooperation with Rogier van Reekum, would not have been possible without the support of Ermioni Frezouli, Vasiliki Makrygianni, and Aristotle Tympas. On Chios and Lesbos, Ermioni Frezouli

helped to organize, conduct, transcribe, and translate my interviews; her work was invaluable.

My visiting scholarship at the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego, was cordially hosted by Kelly Gates and Chandra Mukerji. I owe a big thanks to Jill Marie Holslin and Norma Iglesias-Prieto for showing me around the US-Mexico border, and to Ricardo Dominguez for discussing the meaning of countersurveillance.

I also had the immense pleasure of working with Marieke de Goede, Jasper van der Kist, Annalisa Pelizza, Willem Schinkel, Lieke van der Veer, and William Walters in launching research projects, interpreting findings, and working on journal articles. At the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy, I hugely enjoyed the inspiring conversations on Europe, migration, borders, and technologies that I had with Ernst Hirsch Ballin, Frans Brom, Emina Ćerimović, Corien Prins, and Mathieu Segers. With Dennis Broeders, I enjoyed many enriching and formative years that resulted in several joint publications. At the University of Amsterdam, it was a great pleasure to discuss borders, migration, security, and technologies with my colleagues Rocco Bellanova, Luiza Bialasiewicz, Robin Celikates, Beste Isleyen, Yolande Jansen, Barak Kalir, Beate Roessler, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins. Takeo David Hymans was of great support in editing the text.

Over the course of the project, as well as long before, it was wonderful to be able to share all my worries, progress and setbacks with my beloved life partner, Esther Miedema. Her question in the final stretch—“What did you actually want to say when you started writing the book?”—was the push I needed. Completing this book also means that I finally have to seriously consider the question of our boys, Manu and Luca (now twelve and nine years old), of whether I am finally going to write a children’s book.

Across the research projects, paper presentations, lectures, workshops, writings, and coffee meetings, I benefited greatly from the comments, suggestions, interest, and support of numerous colleagues working on politics and technologies. I would like to thank Louise Amoore, Mark Brown, Vasilis Galis, Georgios Glouftsiou, Charles Heller, Henk van Houtum, Bernd Kasparek, Koen Leurs, Debbie Lisle, Matthew Longo, Donna Mehos, Simon Noori, Jan Hendrik Passoth, Lorenzo Pezzani, Sandra Ponzanesi, Nicholas Rowland, Katerina Rozakou, Mark Salter, Kevin Smets, Thomas Spijkerboer, Jeroen Stout, Linnet Taylor, Peter-Paul Verbeek, Gerard de Vries, and Sally Wyatt. For their support in organizing several workshops and meetings,

I would like to thank the Department of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, the Amsterdam Centre for Globalization Studies, ACCESS EUROPE, and the Netherlands Graduate Research School of Science, Technology, and Modern Culture.

## Plan of the Book

I hope that this book succeeds in navigating borders and their various concepts without falling into the trap of demarcating their boundaries too easily. Rather than closure, I aim to keep alive controversies about the political meanings and epistemological and ontological status of borders so as to be able to follow their movements. The book begins in chapter 1 by arguing that Europe's borders have become a different sort of entity. Rather than being demarcations of territory and expressions of sovereignty and jurisdiction, Europe's borders increasingly act as vehicles for politics. I begin with a concrete example of the mobile border and the tensions between migration routes, border controls, and Europe's migration policies in the mountain region between Italy and France. Through this discussion, I introduce the book's main themes, topics, and recurring concepts, most notably those of "mediation," "technopolitics," and "peramorphic politics." The notion of "peramorphic politics" derives from *peras*, the Greek word for "boundary," while *morphic* originates from *morphe* (meaning "shape" or "form"). The chapter ends with an explanation of the methodology and the book's focus on Europe, borders, and human mobility.

Chapter 2 brings this conceptual discussion to the borders of Europe. It offers a technopolitical account of Europe's borders since the mid-1980s and describes the development of the European Union's borders as the rise of an infrastructure. Borders as infrastructure have four crucial characteristics. First, border infrastructures connect large-scale networks with local situations and manifestations of borders. Second, border infrastructures select among migrants and other travelers in particular ways, not just by including or excluding them but by organizing specific forms of selection and circulation. Third, borders can be visible or invisible; there is a particular interplay between vision and action. Fourth, border infrastructures are often themselves movable entities. These characteristics all have organizing functions in the European Union's coordination of its internal and external borders. The chapter analyzes the emergence of particular border

institutions, such as the Frontex agency, and the rise of border technologies such as the databases European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database (Eurodac), Schengen Information System (SIS) and Visa Information System (VIS), and follows the movements of the European Union's externalization of border control. Border infrastructures and their agents, institutions, and technologies appear to be laboratories that organize movement, arising out of all kinds of compromises between politics and technologies.

Chapter 3 delves deeper into the notion of the border as infrastructure by developing a morphological account of technopolitics. It reads the *Spheres* trilogy of Peter Sloterdijk through the lens of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory so as to engage with the morphology of politics. From this vantage point, borders are not only instruments of political decision-making, but vehicles of political thought and action. Borders do not just transport materialities and information systems; they also transfer political ideas and techniques. Although I question whether Latour and Sloterdijk have arrived at anything approaching a "political theory," their respective analyses are crucial for understanding the material form of politics and the way that politics, technologies, and materialities interact. Based on the ontology, spherology, and political theology of Latour and Sloterdijk, I further elaborate on the concept of peramorphic politics—a morphological technopolitical account of how borders and politics give and receive shape.

Next, to identify the morphological particularities of Europe's emerging border infrastructures, chapters 4, 5, and 6 analyze specific manifestations of Europe's borders as they bear on so-called mixed movements or mixed migration from outside Europe. Whereas chapter 2 gave an overview of the actors, institutions, and technologies that make up Europe's border infrastructures, chapters 4, 5, and 6 examine specific situations where these border infrastructures unfold.

Chapter 4 continues the examination of the morphological shape of technopolitics at Amsterdam's Schiphol International Airport. It studies the intermingling of design, detection, and detention at the airport by investigating their linkages and infrastructural compromises. Airports are focal points in the organization of human mobility, as well as places of restriction and selection that aim to manage and control international migration. These aims are pursued with all kinds of devices and architectural trajectories that enable smooth passenger flow, as well as security, border control, and migration management.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the infrastructural compromises that emerged during the so-called migrant crisis of 2014–2016 on the Greek Aegean Islands of Chios and Lesbos. They address how actors, institutions, and technologies concerned with care and control combined, or failed to combine, border security and humanitarianism. I discuss processes of bordering from surveillance at sea to the migrant shelters on Lesbos and Chios. The two chapters, which contain detailed descriptions of the various practices of the mobile border, deepen current discussions about technopolitics in border, migration, and security studies. Chapter 5 engages with the European Surveillance Program (EUROSUR) and the European Union’s hotspot approach, focusing on how situational awareness and interoperability result in a patchwork of instruments, organizations, and interventions. Chapter 6 describes the intermingling of the provision of care and control at the emerging humanitarian border and how its material components can be said to travel.

Chapter 7 turns to the infrastructural investigations of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), volunteers, activists, and artists to open up the politics of the border. It describes their visual initiatives as well as media coverage, in the process advancing the notion of a visual cacophony—a “cacorama”—to characterize the visual politics of opening up border events. The discussion elaborates on technopolitics under the conditions of secrecy as migration and international security become increasingly entangled, with the movement of political thought and action via borders complicating accountability. Spatially and temporally dispersed border infrastructures are not clear-cut outcomes of political decision-making. Only with hindsight, after an event has occurred, will its consequences be open to public discussion.

Chapter 8 presents the conclusions of the book. It revisits the morphological notion of technopolitics as they bear on the four characteristics of border infrastructures identified in the preceding chapters. I return to the notion of peramorphic politics to describe the ongoing multiplication, transformation, and hybridization of borders and how Europe itself can be seen as a boundary project—as an infrastructural state with movable borders that organize mobility. In the final analysis, Europe’s current relationship with borders renders borders—and Europe itself—as an extreme infrastructure obsessed with boundaries and limits.

The book ends with a coda on the relationship between borders and COVID-19.





Calais fence 1, July 2015.  
*Source:* Henk Wildschut.



Calais fence 2, July 2015.  
*Source:* Henk Wildschut.



Calais fence 3, August 2015.  
*Source:* Henk Wildschut.



Calais fence 4, December 2015.  
*Source:* Henk Wildschut.