

An Activist Scholar's Approach to Theorizing No Borders

Natasha Basu

Krisis 39 (1): 115-118.

Review of

Natasha King (2016) *No Borders: The Politics of Immigration Control and Resistance*.
London: Zed Books, 196 pp.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.39.1.39120>

Licence

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
License (Attribution Non Commercial 3.0) (CC
BY-NC 3.0). © 2019 The author(s).

An Activist Scholar's Approach to Theorizing No Borders
Natasha Basu

Review of: Natasha King (2016) *No Borders: The Politics of Immigration Control and Resistance*. London: Zed Books, 196 pp.

In the past few years, the word “crisis” has attached itself to migration. There is a migration or refugee “crisis” going on, and it is somehow understood as a “crisis” for Europe and all the other receiving countries that must deal with this problem. But what about the “crisis” that migrants, those struggling to stay alive, are facing? During the last couple of years, the ‘jungle’ of Calais has been bulldozed, the EU has made an agreement with Turkey to send Syrian asylum seekers who reach Greece illegally to Turkey, and the United States government has been detaining the children of families that illegally cross the border into the US in what can be described as cages. Sanctuary towns across the United States are telling undocumented students to proceed with caution before enrolling in community colleges, as they may leave a paper trail that will enable the immigration authorities to find them. The “crisis” continues to shift geographies, and has gone from being highly visible to scattered here and there. It is against this backdrop that Natasha King’s *No Borders* emerges as a timely and necessary contribution to the way we think about migration, borders and resistance.

This book, arising from her PhD thesis, is motivated by King’s “desire to create scholarship that’s directly relevant to existing struggles against the border now, and a research method that embedded me in those struggles and that used my experiences of activism as a subject of study” (King 2016, 9). This approach highlights the urgency of the work while establishing an innovative approach to research. King develops much of her theoretical foundation by drawing upon the works of Étienne Balibar, Nicholas DeGenova and Alessandro Mezzadra. By drawing from what could be characterized as radical migration and border literature, she effectively establishes her stance as someone who understands the border as productive, in the sense that the border produces violent notions of “illegality” and constructs a particular reality that is by no means natural. King’s focus is resistance to the border, and she understands illegal border crossing, as well as acts such as hunger strikes that occur in detention centers, as a “refusal” of the border. She emphasizes that one of the central issues or dilemmas which guides her research and the book is: “how to refuse the state while also engaging with it” (King 2016, 5). For King, “this book is not really about migration at all, but about a certain way of being that’s other to the system” (King 2016, 7). In this stance, she opens space for tying migrant activism with anarchist theorizing.

King opens the book by introducing us to the realities faced by people migrating to Europe; those escaping war, famine, and other forms of violent oppression continue to face extremely adverse conditions, where they are sometimes held indeterminately in detention centers, or die during the course of their journeys. She then proceeds to explain migrant activism as grounded in the idea that migration can be a social movement composed of “people who move as active participants in the construction of reality, not simply as people reacting to economic or social factors” (King 2016, 29). Examples of such activist movements include the *Sans Papiers* movement in France, *No One is Illegal* in Canada, or *We Are Here* in the Netherlands. By engaging in acts such as protests on the streets, sit-ins, or seeking legal advice, the groups act as citizens although they do not have the requisite legal status. Migrant activism thus presents challenges to how we understand the relationship between citizen, state, and resistance.

Making her standpoint clear as an activist scholar, King establishes this project as political in nature. It also sheds light on the possibility of a type of academic work that is often underrepresented in academic research on migration. In the end, it is King's first-hand experience, her interviews and nuanced understanding of life and modes of resistance in Calais and Athens, that is the strength of this book. Her honest assessment of the shortcomings of openly protesting in Athens and Calais, or of the schisms that form within movements, for example, is refreshing and significant. In Athens, the struggle to keep the assemblies composed of anarchist and migrant activist alliances was difficult. She states "Collectives were poorly represented, turnout poor and decision-making slow" (94). These insights form an important part of King's research methodology.

This research methodology appears to be distinct from ethnographic research because it does not rely upon a standpoint of a distant observer who seeks to understand certain cultural or political practices. Her involvement as a participant in the cause that she is describing, and making a case for, might lead one to call this type of work action research. One could indeed call it action research because of how King uses the "data" she collects (experiences of migrant activists and others) in order to try to help the cause. But unlike action research, she does not emphasize solving the problem per se. King appears to be more interested in elaborating on the multiple dimensions of the problem without proposing a clear solution. In a way, the solution seems quite clear: do away with the borders. At the same time, the alternative to a global system without national borders is not fully elaborated. Thus, her research occupies a middle ground between action research and critical theorizing.

Having established both the context and the methodology, King argues that for her, "a no borders politics is an anarchist politics" (18), a politics that seeks escape from the state. She sees the freedom of movement, black power and gender liberation all as struggles for autonomy. Her autonomy of migration approach is one that is rooted in Post-Marxist theories as expressed in the *Autonomia* tradition. This tradition has its roots in the anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movements which emerged during the 1970s in Italy. Amid revolts in factories and at

universities in Italy, a particular strain of Marxism known as *operaismo* or *workerism* was developed by the left-wing intellectuals of the time. *Autonomia* was both radical as a movement and as a theory. Building from this theoretical and social movement lineage, King conceptualizes autonomy of migration as "a way of looking at mobility that takes seriously the agency of people who move" (29). Autonomy of migration focuses on the ways that people organize and strategize while on the move, and how these methods become acts of resistance.

At the same time, she acknowledges that practices of living outside the state go back much farther, drawing on anthropological work by David Graeber. Indeed, in certain parts of the book, she draws from Graeber's anthropological works to confirm that many of these theories and practices, many of the constructs that she is referring to, are not Eurocentric and "are as old as humanity" (150). While it is a great step to acknowledge that anarchism does not necessarily have Eurocentric roots, it would have been more effective to actually provide examples, or maybe use someone other than Graeber as the authority.

From the beginning to the end of the book King makes it clear that if there is one theoretical framework that she finds useful for understanding and advancing the No Borders mission, it is the anarchist view. She explains that No Borders can be understood as "collaboration between people with broadly anarchist views and people who practice autonomy by moving without permission" (72). King's placement of the anarchist movements as natural allies to the No Borders movement is logical because she is drawing on what she actually observed. In both the Athens and Calais contexts it was often self-proclaimed anarchist groups that came to the aid of migrant activists. The Calais Migrant Solidarity group, for example, included citizens who were choosing to live in the jungles in order to participate in the "mobile commons" (109).

Theoretically, however, King's placement of the anarchist movements as natural allies to the No Borders movement can feel a bit forced, as becomes clear from some of the dilemmas presented in the chapters on Calais and Athens. It is clear from the accounts that King provides of migrant solidarity groups that alliances

between migrants and anarchist groups tend to be problematic due to power differences, and divergences in ultimate aims. When describing the solidarities between anti-fascist groups and migrant activist groups in Athens, King explains how, at times, the anti-fascist groups have come to the conclusion that the migrant struggle is simply not the same as the anti-fascist struggle. For anarchists who completely reject the state, the “legal and rights-based dimensions” of the migrant struggle are too complex for them to get involved in. King writes “for many within the movement, this lack of a coherent or consistent ‘stance’ on or engagement with migration issues has amounted to a failure to stand alongside migrants in their struggles for their rights” (66). Even if anarchists and migrants both value autonomy, is that really enough to tie migrant resistance to an anarchist lens? While King at one point describes the jungle as a “beautiful place” (109) where the idea of the mobile commons was able to really exist despite the atrocious conditions, it is clear that the main aim of the migrants is to get out of there. As she explains, “No Borders politics doesn’t articulate a ‘we’ very easily” (149) and this lack of “we” makes it difficult to conceptualize the anarchist-driven movements with migrant activists who are often seeking the refuge and rights that come with being granted entry into a state.

King aims to develop an anarchism that is beyond Eurocentrism, but it is not clear that she is able to do that in this book. Her theoretical foundations are European. She is relying on Marxism and the Italian Autonomia, and perhaps if she drew from non-European work it would make sense to try to see anarchism as transcending Eurocentricity. There are traditions outside the European context that interpret anarchism and Marxism through a post-colonial lens that could be helpful here. For example, the works of Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral and Wole Soyinka, or even the anarcho-pacifism often attributed to Gandhi or Buddhist philosophy, could be instructive to look into. However, in the book, the very non-European experiences of migrants are conjoined with anarchism, as it is understood in European philosophy.

King explains that what underlies the “crisis” she witnessed in Calais and Athens is a much larger problem with the “system.” She makes it clear that the state is a

central part of that system, and is bound to the oppressive forces of capitalism and post-colonial racism. In fact, it is neoliberal capitalism, the various private and public institutions that make up the border regime, along with a particular logic that determines the way we think about the border and migration, that keep the “system” going. Although King does not provide us with a succinct, clear definition of the “system” she is challenging, her analysis of the various logics and institutions that make up the system does compel one to ask, why is the state so necessary? Why are we unable to think beyond the state? King argues that it is precisely our inability to think beyond the state, to think beyond capitalism, that helps to sustain this “system.”

Throughout the book, King makes a point of acknowledging the intersectionality of her approach. She describes how in Greece “race and migration are deeply intertwined, such that any person of color in the country is also an immigrant, both in the minds of citizens and in legal terms” (87). Throughout the book she also highlights the gendered complexities within migrant activist groups. These are important insights that are strengthened by the fact that King witnessed these dynamics and problems firsthand. One cannot expect to move forward in theorizing the border, migration, or the activism surrounding it, without taking these intersections into account. This is surely one of King’s strengths.

All in all, this book serves an important purpose for those of us who want to understand how migration challenges the system. It presents us with a survey of those who write about migration and the border, and goes further by providing firsthand knowledge of how migrant activism occurs and develops in the oppressive conditions of Athens and Calais. It challenges the reader to think about how we understand resistance and solidarity. We want to help, but as we see, it is not as straightforward as living alongside migrants in the jungle. It is a great foundational text for anyone interested in thinking about the border in a way that moves beyond convention. King insists that the “crisis” is not really over or resolved; she reminds us that it is something that has existed and continues to exist because it is rooted in something much greater than the border itself.

Biography**Natasha Basu**

Natasha Basu is currently completing her PhD within the project *Transformations of Civil Disobedience*, under the supervision of Dr. Robin Celikates and Prof. dr. Beate Roessler. Her thesis seeks to critically rethink civil disobedience against the backdrop of political and economic globalization. In particular, it explores how predominant understandings of the “civil” in civil disobedience do not fully consider the experiences of certain marginalized groups and thereby inflict a type of hermeneutical injustice. In her research she uses a conceptual lens that combines feminist, migration, critical race theory, and postcolonial theories. Some of the cases that she has examined include: the civil disobedience campaigns of Martin Luther King and Gandhi, citizen-smuggling in the case of unauthorized migration, and cases of feminist disobedience such as Pussy Riot, Seed/Water Satyagraha and the women only Umoja Village. She is a member of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, the Dutch Research School of Philosophy, and the Amsterdam Center for Globalization Studies. Prior to starting her PhD, she completed a MSc in Global Politics at the London School of Economics, with a focus on global civil society, and gender and globalization.