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## Refusing and Resisting Borders

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

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Natasha King's *No Borders* is an exploration of how people refuse borders and oppose border controls, rooted in her activism and fieldwork in Athens and in Calais. It takes as axioms that no one is illegal and that it is necessary to construct autonomous spaces outside the state. *No Borders* is an impressive, eclectic, partisan attempt to construct a no borders philosophy and practice. Like Harsha Walia's important *Undoing Border Imperialism*,<sup>1</sup> it draws on anarchist thought, continental philosophy, and the voices of migrants and their allies. Though it is unlikely to convert many people not already committed to no borders, it is a powerful and challenging example of how activist research can inform political philosophy.

Much discussion of immigration assumes (often implicitly) that border controls are natural, timeless, and realistic.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, King begins with the observation that border regimes are productive<sup>3</sup>: states produce illegal immigration through laws and policies that are neither natural nor inevitable. It is these laws and policies that make unauthorized migration and movement problematic, not migration itself. King rejects the possibility that state coercion can be legitimately used to prevent and regulate movement. Instead, her no borders politics is anarchist: the state is 'the practice of certain *forms* of social relation that are based upon relations of hierarchy and domination.'<sup>4</sup>

An anarchist politics of immigration faces two major obstacles. The first obstacle is how to think about politics while rejecting the legitimacy of the state. Activities such as voting and lobbying political representatives are largely off the table. Even protest is suspect insofar as it seeks to engage political authorities and to change policies. The second obstacle is how to conceive of

1 Harsha Walia, *Undoing border imperialism* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2013).

2 Natasha King, *No Borders: The Politics of Immigration Control and Resistance* (London: Zed Books, 2016), p. 1.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

political action by people defined as non-members by their lack of citizenship and legal inequality.

King is acutely aware of these dilemmas, asking ‘how to refuse the state while also engaging with it.’<sup>5</sup> She gives the example of visiting people held in detention centers and advocating for better conditions. Activists engaging with the authorities to improve detention center conditions risk legitimizing detention.<sup>6</sup> At the same, refusing to do so fails to address injustice.

King distinguishes ‘refusal’ from ‘resistance’ – refusal seeks not to directly oppose the state, but to carve out spaces outside of state power.<sup>7</sup> In her view, a no border politics is ‘first and foremost a refusal of the border.’<sup>8</sup> Her understanding of activism includes intentional actions that seek to transform or escape the state.<sup>9</sup> Activism need not be intentional – on her account, migrants who move clandestinely are engaged in activism in their refusal to be constrained by borders.

To support refusal, King draws on the autonomy of migration approach that adopts the standpoint of migration rather than the standpoint of control,<sup>10</sup> seeing ‘human agency [as] a *creative* force that is expressed through flight that *precedes* any form of control or domination.’<sup>11</sup> This approach employs what James C. Scott calls ‘infra-politics’ – ‘the undramatic, everyday and mundane acts of quiet evasion’<sup>12</sup> King reflects on the ‘huge number of everyday acts of non-subordination and quiet evasions carried out by people who refuse to allow borders to stop them from moving.’<sup>13</sup> She sees these actions as refusing to reproduce the social world and instead ‘*prefiguring* the social world we want to live in.’<sup>14</sup>

For resistance, King employs Jacques Rancière’s notion of disagreement.<sup>15</sup> Illegalized immigrants are distinguished by their non-status in the political community. Disagreement is a practice in which people who have been excluded express their equality by asserting their humanity, making the inequality visible. King buttresses disagreement with the concept of ‘acts of citizenship’ (45) in which people excluded from politics such as illegalized immigrants act

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5 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 39; 42-5.

as political subjects, demanding recognition and challenging the boundaries of political inclusion.

King supports her theoretical observations with fieldwork and activism. In Athens, her major example of resistance and disagreement is the forty-four day hunger strike by 300 North African men ('The 300') demanding mass regularization. The 300 succeeded in forcing the Greek government to engage with them as if they were citizens and in moving the political agenda away from mass deportation.<sup>16</sup> As a result, The 300 won indefinite leave to remain and to work in Greece, as well as to travel back to their countries.

In Calais, King's exemplar for the autonomy of migration approach is a squat on rue Victor Hugo occupied by Calais Migrant Solidarity activists from September 2013 to May 2014.<sup>17</sup> Anarchists often respond to accusations of utopianism by pointing to spaces that operate according to anarchist principles. Victor Hugo was an experiment in creating a community of autonomy and equality in circumstances of oppression and inequality. It was designated a safe space for women, children, and other vulnerable people.

King is keenly aware of the complexities and contradictions of the no borders approach. Borders cannot simply be negated, they need to be negotiated. This sometimes involves constructing and imposing new borders.<sup>18</sup> In Victor Hugo, this involved white, male European activists with papers preventing some undocumented black African men from accessing the space.<sup>19</sup> The attempt to avoid domination based on gender reaffirmed domination based on race.

These complexities and contradictions bring us to the major lacuna in an anarchist ethics of immigration. 'No borders' is a slogan for opposing certain types of borders, rather than an attempt to abolish borders altogether. Some borders are morally repugnant and arbitrary – no borders activists reject violent forms of exclusion mandated by the state. Others are necessary for human life. Borders allow for intimate relationships and the fair distribution of resources. They can be more or less porous and exclusion can be more or less violent. Unfortunately, no borders theorists currently lack an adequate theory of what makes borders just or unjust.<sup>20</sup>

King herself is torn between resistance, which engages the state and in some cases leads to significant victories, and refusal, which is more consistent with

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> I take up these themes in more detail in Alex Sager, *Toward a Cosmopolitan Ethics of Mobility: The Migrant's-Eye View of the World* (New York, NY: Springer Science & Business Media, 2018).

her anarchist convictions. She admits that migrants who refuse borders do not usually see themselves as taking a political stance nor do they wish to live in spaces outside of the reach of the state.<sup>21</sup> Most of them would like nothing more than full membership in a state where they can live their lives free from overt violence.

Nonetheless, in a world in which the prospects for resistance to migration restrictions are somber, *No Borders* provides a crucial meditation on the struggle for migrant justice, the possibilities of radical political action, and the role of theory in clarifying and guiding our practice.

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<sup>21</sup> King (2016), pp. 130-1.