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Guest Editorial

Borders, above all?

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The 'Arab Spring' of 2011 proved an unfortunate test for the European Union, throwing into stark relief all of the EU's contradictions in dealing with its southern neighbours and, especially, the EU's difficulties in formulating a coherent geopolitical vision for the Mediterranean. What these events revealed was the predominance, still, of European national interests (and fears) and the preference, still, for national solutions to the securing of national borders. While the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy Catherine Ashton appealed to the three M's' of 'money, market access, and mobility' to help lay the ground for a paradigm shift in the EU's relations with the Mediterranean (2011a, 2011b), it was, rather, the question of (national) migration management that came to determine the terms of the debate – and it was very much 'national' solutions that came to the fore, as a number of Member States decided to suspend the Schengen agreement.

As Tunisians, Egyptians and later Libyans took to the streets, various newspaper editorials noted that European governments' principal concern appeared to lie in keeping these newly awakened masses 'within their borders' (see El Pais, 2011; Le Monde, 2011) and, above all, in preventing this 'mess' from spilling unto European shores. 'Flood' metaphors were frequently evoked. As the situation in Libya precipitated, Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini issued a communiqué announcing that Italy feared a wave of between 200 and 300,000 migrants fleeing the unrest: in his phrasing, 'a biblical exodus of apocalyptic proportions'. Frattini's words were quickly echoed by European Commission officials who spoke of a possible 1.5 million migrants ready to leave the North African country.

Such fears were driven by 'a shocking geographical realization', as an editorial in Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* put it: that the southern shore 'is very close. It is practically here' (Diamanti 2011). Too close, despite all the attempts of the previous years to transform the Mediterranean into a tightly sealed wall – and to keep the southern neighbours 'as far away as possible'. The securitisation of 'EU'rope's southern borders has become a fundamental EU priority. For instance, the European Neighbourhood Programme, launched in 2003 with the aim of fostering 'stability and peace' at the Union's external borders by creating a 'ring of friends', increasingly has moved to an explicitly security-led agenda. Migration control in particular has become a key priority of the ENP, with 'EU'rope's neighbours increasingly called upon to act as 'EU'rope's policemen (see Guild 2010, and the special section of Geopolitics, 2011). Henk van Houtum (2010) has described this new 'buffer zone geopolitics' as the progressive 'installation of a *cordon sanitaire*' at the borders of the Union.

It is a *cordon sanitaire* whose main aim it has been to keep dangerous flows (of irregular migrants or other un-wanteds) from even approaching the borders of the Union, with increasing emphasis on the 'off-shoring' and 'out-sourcing' of EU border management (Bigo & Tsoukala, 2008; van Houtum & Pijpers, 2007). The 'de-bordering' and externalisation of 'EU'rope's borders has been different from similar developments in North America, however, if only because the EU's 'border-work' has been implemented thus far through a fluid assemblage of agreements and actors, with considerable slippage between the bordering practices of Member States and what is done 'on behalf' of the Union.

The Libyan case is illustrative in highlighting the ambiguity between EU policies, the role of Member States, and tasks assigned to 'third states' in regulating migration flows to the EU. Although no formal EU agreements had ever been stipulated with Libya in this matter, over the past years the Gaddafi regime had become, as *Paris Match* aptly put it, '*Le douanier de l'Europe*' – Europe's border-guard – thanks to a series of bi-lateral agreements signed since 2007 with the Italian state, creating joint maritime patrols on the Libyan coasts and providing surveillance equipment for the monitoring of Libya's land and sea borders. These agreements were further strengthened in May of 2009 when, on the heels of an anti-immigration crusade by the Berlusconi government, the Italian parliament approved legislation that authorised the direct deportation of migrants through a new 'push-back' policy: migrants intercepted in international waters by Italian vessels could now be taken to Libya directly, before assessing their rights/claims to asylum. Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) condemned the policy, noting that it gravely undermined access to asylum for individuals potentially in need of international protection, the returns procedures proved a resounding success. The UNHCR estimated that there had been a 90% drop in arrivals on Italian shores from over 37,000 in 2008 – before the policy went into practice – to just 4300 in 2010. Those 'pushed-back' were left to either face the brutal conditions of Libya's detention centres, where forced labour, rapes and beatings were common place (as numerous UNHCR and Amnesty International (2010) reports have documented), or were most often deported directly to their countries of origin, regardless of their conditions or right to asylum in the EU.

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In her analyses of migration and deportation flows between Libya and Italy, Rutvica Andrijasevic (2009, 2010) has argued that although it might be tempting to simply see this policy as part of a broader externalisation and 'out-sourcing' of EU border management, it would be more accurate to understand the Italian 'push-back' arrangements as 'a retraction of the right of asylum rather than its externalisation'. In the Libyan case, she suggests, we are dealing with something entirely different. Here, it is no longer the case (as for various 'partners' in the Eastern Neighbourhood, such as Moldova or the Ukraine) of the EU 'teaching' proper techniques and technologies of migration management and conducting border control 'at a distance'. Rather, we are dealing with the complete suspension of presumed common European norms and standards, with a single Member State creating policy in autonomous fashion (albeit presumably on behalf of 'EU'rope).

The most recent events have thrown this question into even starker relief in two distinct ways that are important for political geographers to consider. The first regards the question of common European values and norms and, in particular, the geopolitical representation of 'EU'rope as a 'force for good' in the world, whose internal values presumably drive its external conduct as well. As the Libyan 'revolution' began to turn increasingly violent, media attention focussed first on the efforts of various European states to 'get their people out', and subsequently on the tens of thousands of Egyptian and other 'guest workers' fleeing Libya through the Tunisian border. The fate of the hundreds of thousands of Libya's 'illegal' migrants remained invisible. And yet they were suddenly, tragically, rendered all-too-visible by the events unfolding: various migrant associations raised cries of alarm that refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa, many already in conditions of extreme duress, had now also become the target of the hunt for 'black mercenaries', as rumours circulated that Gaddafi was employing mercenaries from Chad and Niger to carry out the most brutal attacks (Al Jazeera, 2011).

Developing on Judith Butler's work on grievable and non-grievable lives, Maja Zehfuss (2009) writes about what she terms 'hierarchies of grief' and I believe the expression is useful in the current context as well. Rather than providing an opportunity for the EU to affirm itself as a 'normative' power, in a 'Neighbourhood' that has long been a privileged space of EU action, the events in Libya tragically confirmed the 'apartheid' of the border regime implemented by certain Member States and noted by van Houtum (2010) and others, with a clear hierarchy, a clear calculus of who was to be saved from Gaddafi's violence – and who was to be feared.

The second point regards the viability of a common EU approach to border and migration management that simply fell apart when faced with the arrival on European shores of 25,000 (mostly) young North African men. Just as the European Commission was calling for a new 'Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean' (2011a), highlighting especially the need for new 'mobility partnerships' with the states of the southern shore, Italy and France requested a temporary suspension of the Schengen agreement, repopulating their border posts along the Ventimiglia frontier in order to limit the massive influx of newly arrived migrants into France. The Franco-Italian move was quickly followed by Denmark which decided to reinstate random customs checks at its borders with Sweden and Germany. Although the European Commission quickly condemned such unilateral attempts to 're-nationalise' Schengen, an important breach had been opened.

The most recent literature on the evolving model of European 'border-work' has suggested that EU border control increasingly is envisioned as a 'problem of management', often deployed at a distance. Many excellent critical analyses have focussed, for example, on the constitutive role of technical norms, standards and regulations and 'particular ethicalized stylings of government' such as 'the partnership' and 'the dialogue' (see Andrijasevic & Walters, 2010; Levy 2011), also noting how such (geo)political technologies serve to extend 'EU'rope's influence into its various 'Neighbourhoods'. It is surprising, then, how easily such selective and 'scientific' management of mobility can collapse into simple closure, and how quickly attempts to elaborate a common – and humane – EU migration policy fall hostage to national fears. This has enormous implications for the future of the European project. As John Agnew (2008: 185) noted a few years back, 'the map image of the borders of the state still exercises a major influence on the territorial imagination of whose security is at stake – and who most threatens it'. For all the arguments regarding the de-bordering of 'EU'rope's borders (and their increasingly 'technical' nature), when push comes to shove, reclaiming hard national control over hard national borders still plays best to home audiences.

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