

# Dijstelbloem's Borders as Infrastructure: The Technopolitics of Border Control

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## Book Review

Review of Dijstelbloem, Huub. 2021. *Borders as Infrastructure: The Technopolitics of Border Control*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

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*Borders as Infrastructure: The Technopolitics of Border Control* tackles a subject that has captured at least some of the major headlines over the past forty years—borders and border control—and applies a novel perspective to these often written and reported about topics. Author Huub Dijstelbloem begins his study with a series of declarative statements: Borders are more than simple boundaries. They are phenomena that operate in political and geographical realms of sovereignty, authority, and jurisdiction with legal, technical, and economic overtones (93). Finally, and most notably, Dijstelbloem writes that borders are, “vehicles for power, control, organization and technology that can serve as instruments of state power, networks to organize international human mobility or worldviews to order reality” (173).

While there is a growing and rich body of literature available on border control and technopolitics, Dijstelbloem’s book builds upon the research of Dennis Broeders (2011), Raphael Bossong and Helena Carrapico (2016), Bernd Kasperek (2016), Julien Jeandesboz (2016), Paul Trauttmansdorff (2016), and William Walters (2020), and makes an admirable contribution with this deep study. In this work, he bridges science, society, and policymaking through the prism of technopolitics, i.e., the use of technology to embody and advance political goals. Dijstelbloem is able to show that border control technologies function through instruments that include cameras, databases, fingerprinting, visual representations, fences, walls, and monitoring instruments used in border control. He posits that science and technology studies is inseparable from politics and policy; borders mold politics and political entities in certain ways (55). In this way, borders act, select, and converge based on state authority, technology, and human movement (176), reaffirming the phrase, “*toute chose est une société* (“everything is a society”).

Dijstelbloem refuses to reduce Europe’s border, border controls, and migration management to a simple form of surveillance. He favors accommodating a range of policies and practices that lead to different technopolitical configurations (170–171). Those with interests in science, sociology, policy, and public affairs would likely appreciate how Dijstelbloem bridges seemingly disparate fields into an innovative and coherent argument. A noted professor from the University of Amsterdam who also penned *European Variations as a Key to Cooperation* in 2020 (Hirsch et al. 2020), a laudable work that analyzes the benefits of a lasting variation between the member states in the European Union, Dijstelbloem appears comfortable and even welcoming of disparity and complexity. Case in point: in *Borders as Infrastructure*, he argues that borders and border control are best situated as moving phenomena that impact our understanding of territory,

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authority, surveillance, sovereignty, and jurisdiction. Throughout the book, he touches on these themes again and again.

Essential to Dijstelbloem's study is the so-called migrant crisis of 2014–2016. More than one million refugees and migrants, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, and the Balkans, fled to Europe during this time to request asylum, an unprecedented figure since World War II. The emergence of borders across landscapes and seascapes were inextricably linked to the crush of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Europe at this time (94–96). Dijstelbloem provides readers with several examples to illustrate this point. There's the French-Italian border, the site where, in 2018, three-hundred so-called irregular migrants gathered to protest the militarization of the French border. This came after the summer of 2015 when the French government reintroduced border checks to prevent irregular border crossings. The bottleneck that arose tragically led to a massive loss of life, with migrants drowning in the Roja River, getting hit by cars, or being electrocuted on top of trains (2). Dijstelbloem also highlights other examples from this period. There's the Farmakonisi case from the Greek Aegina Sea in 2014. This was when eleven refugees, including eight children, died when their boat capsized. His inclusion of the young Nigerian who fled from Italy but died atop a train on the border with France is poignant and disquieting. The devastating image of Aydin Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015, comes to mind when reading *Borders as Infrastructure*. Kurdi and his family were Syrian refugees trying to reach Europe. Photographs of his lifeless body awash on the shore in Turkey went viral immediately. Kurdi became a symbol of all refugee children fleeing to Europe and the West for safety (Walsh 2015).

Borders can turn places, routes, and territories into “zones of death” (4–5). Each anecdote seems more devastating than the previous. Then, readers learn of the totality. The German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* published a list of the 33,293 lives lost on November 9, 2017, the anniversary commemorating Kristallnacht in 1938 when Germans unleashed a series of pogroms against Jews without intervention from authorities (44). Dijstelbloem isn't making a subtle point here, and no moment sears readers quite like this one.

As Dijstelbloem points out, Europe's fixation with borders predates the so-called migrant crisis but has intensified in recent years. He draws upon examples from the mundane to the extraordinary, i.e., airports, surveillance systems, and humanitarian borders to illustrate this (70). Consider the fingerprinting machines in Aegean reception centers that are connected to the European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database (Eurodac). He also highlights the asylum applications under the Dublin Regulation (173) and the European Surveillance System, operational for more a decade and still active on the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios, as defining examples of European border technopolitics (174). Readers are not left to imagine these borders. At the end of each chapter, Dijstelbloem includes a photo of a border somewhere in Europe. These photos provide readers with useful visuals associated with border security and border infrastructure. The photo of the watchtower in Bulgaria is interesting because the photo reminds readers that borders exist with Romania to the north, the Black Sea to the east, Serbia and North Macedonia to the west, and Greece and Turkey to the south. Another photo of a Bulgarian surveillance team monitoring the border through their computers demonstrates the complexity of border security. Each chapter provides a different angle of border technopolitics, but the photo shot at a train station in Hungary, with numerous armed guards standing outside, is haunting for its simplicity.

For those craving a book on big data, *Borders as Infrastructure* is not it. Dijstelbloem relies on qualitative methods, i.e., interviews with authorities and representatives of local and international non-government organizations and grassroots organizations (127). *Borders as Infrastructure* is not an edited volume with distinct voices, either. Dijstelbloem's steady voice ripples through each of the eight chapters, filling pages with theoretical description, deductive reasoning, and human stories in a step-by-step way. He employs thick description to analyze the experiences of migrants on the borders. Since many of the issues Dijstelbloem brings up can be seen through the lenses of “migration,” “security,” and “surveillance,” the book may attract those in comparative studies, human rights, security studies, area studies, and international affairs. It may also attract law students. Dijstelbloem does not explicitly use the term “cybersecurity,” but its presence is accounted for in nearly every chapter. Many cybersecurity technologies—and how they are

employed—easily crossover into this domain. Students of cybersecurity are likely to find a treasure in this book.

Dijstelbloem draws in numerous examples of migrants striving to cross the border, but their individual voices are absent from the text. This is a drawback of the study. Dijstelbloem misses an opportunity to further humanize borders through the stories and experiences of migrants who have passed through Europe's borders. This was impossible, obviously, in some cases, but supplying readers with such voices would have added to the richness of the work.

Authors may be tempted to take a global view of border and border control, but Dijstelbloem remains faithful to Europe and the European Union. This approach appears intentional; Europe provides a unique setting to study borders. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the drawing back of the Iron Curtain, and the reunification of East and West Germany appeared to herald the coming of a borderless world that would see Europe prosper (29). Open markets, the spread of liberal democracy, the expansion of the EU and, along with it, open borders through the Schengen Area—an expanse of European countries that came into force with the signing of an agreement among Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg to join Germany and France to abolish national borders—invigorated this hope.

Despite the prevailing view that Europe would abandon the Cold War, that has not been the case. A host of border control policies and technologies monitor and control the movement of people. Examples that Dijstelbloem highlights include the emergence of new migration routes, the rise of new borders and border patrols, surveillance by local and state authorities, the rise of migrant solidarity groups and anti-migration activism, and renewed border controls. These efforts indicate tension among the member states of the European Union and within Europe. Europe still has walls, temporary and permanent, nearly thirty-five years after the Berlin Wall collapsed, with perhaps the firmest ones in our minds.

*Borders as Infrastructure* is written simply and convincingly. The details and argument are elegantly constructed, and Dijstelbloem writes a haunting piece that leaves the reader—as any good book would—pining to know what happens next. One can imagine many in Europe, and elsewhere, wondering the same. No doubt this issue will continue to find its way into the headlines.

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