

BOOK REVIEW

Nick Vaughan-Williams, Vernacular Border Security: Citizens' Narratives of Europe's 'Migration Crisis' (Oxford University Press, 2021)

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Vernacular Border Security: Citizens' Narratives of Europe's 'Migration Crisis'

Nick VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS

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After the waters of the Mediterranean Sea washed the dead body of Alan Kurdi ashore in 2015, issues of migration, border security, and European Union (EU) migration policy gained more widespread interest. Although many scholars deal with the issue from different angles by focusing on the roles of different 'agents' and their roles in the politics of the EU's 2015 'migration crisis', *Vernacular Border Security: Citizens' Narratives of Europe's 'Migration Crisis'* argues that there is no comprehensive study analyzing the EU citizens itself (p. 4). Problematizing the passive recipient role given to the EU citizens, Nick Vaughan-Williams critically intervenes, problematizing contemporary scholarship's "propensity to speak *for*, rather than *to* (or, perhaps better, *with*) 'ordinary people'..."¹

Asking "[w]hy is it that the intensification of EU border security appears to have heightened rather than diminished border anxieties among EU citizens?" (p. 3), Vaughan-Williams highlights a theoretical and methodological shift in studying border security, one that juxtaposes 'top-down' elite narratives of border security with 'bottom-up' investigations of ordinary EU citizens' knowledge on the issue. Chapter 1 justifies this unique theoretical shift, namely the 'vernacular turn' in critical security studies. Connecting elite and vernacular narratives becomes a must if we are to transcend dominant securitizing narratives of migration and see alternative ways of 'living with' strangers (p. 3-4). Forming such a connection allows us to understand better the interconnected relationship between the macro-level of national border security and border anxieties at the micro-level of citizens. And, in the final analysis, it is important to see how these elite narratives are both reproduced and contested locally in citizens' everyday lives. Chapter 1 also contributes to vernacular security studies by conceptualizing 'vernacular narratives', which has been absent so far in the theoretical discussion (p.12).

1 Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, "Vernacular Securities and Their Study: A Qualitative Analysis and Research Agenda", *International Relations*, Vol. 27, No 2, 2013, p. 158.

Chapter 2 examines the production of the elitist narrative on the so-called EU migration crisis in 2015. After presenting the construction of the ‘crisis’ by governmental elites, the book deconstructs the story by reconceptualizing the term ‘crisis’ as “lived experiences” depending on Colin Hay’s work² (p. 48). Deconstruction shows that the narrative of the migration crisis frame depends on the governmental elites’ ahistorical, Euro-centric, and colonial mindset. It subjugates heterogeneous perspectives of EU citizens toward the issue. Moreover, although EU citizens were pivotal in producing this narrative, positioned as the threatened subject, their voices have been ignored in academic analyses (p.27). Therefore, Hay’s notion of crisis as lived experiences requires in-depth investigations of the vernacular knowledge on the issue (p. 48). The book, therefore, relies on an in-depth qualitative research program called ‘Border Narratives’, which was conducted between 2015 and 2017 in Germany, Greece, Hungary, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UK), and organized 24 focus groups with 179 EU citizens (p. 17).

Chapter 3 follows this premise and problematizes populist parties’ speaking on behalf of the people (p. 60) asking: “What is the relationship between EU ‘public opinion’ on migration and populist border politics?” (p. 61). It takes opinion poll data prepared and conducted by populist governments and shows how surveys designed by governments to ‘measure’ citizens’ attitudes toward the crisis might be manipulated. Results of surveys conducted in the German, Hungarian and UK contexts cannot be thought of as independent from both populist movements’ discourses and their post-truth visual campaigns toward migrants (p. 61). Arguing that surveys cannot be taken as unmediated and objective measurement techniques (p. 66) as they work within and reproduce the dominant securitizing narrative (p. 62), the chapter offers up the bottom-up vernacular shift as an opportunity to transcend this methodological elitism,³ which will help move beyond the dominant narrative.

With this aim, Chapter 4 changes the focus of study from elite narratives to the vernacular knowledge of migration (p. 97). It presents three themes undermining the elite crisis narrative by analyzing focus group interviews. First, vernacular knowledge problematizes the linear transmission of the story from the elite narrative to the people as passive recipients of that narrative (p. 97). Second, vernacular knowledge refutes elites’ claim that they know what people want and their so-called role, speaking on behalf of ‘the people’, by showing that the crisis is not merely a migration crisis but a complex constellation of crises (p. 97-98). Third, vernacular knowledge shows that EU citizens have “information gaps” on migration, resulting in widespread distrust of mainstream politicians and media (p. 98).

These citizen information gaps have pumped the belief of the ‘loss of control’ and fueled the populist claim of ‘taking back control’ despite the intensification of border security practices (p. 129-130). Chapter 5 thus investigates EU citizens’ border anxieties and ontological (in)security. The major finding of this chapter is that vernacular narratives of border security denote something different than the elite governmental conceptualization of

2 Colin Hay, “Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State: Interrogating the Process of Change”, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 1. No 3, 1999, p. 317-344.

3 Liam Stanley and Richard Jackson, “Introduction: Everyday Narratives in World Politics”, *Politics*, Vol. 36. No 3, 2016, p. 223-235.

the border – geographically defined and protected by high walls. It defines border security not in terms of constructing physical walls but “as a form of knowledge production,” which will be the solution to information gaps (Chapter 4) by forming “informational checkpoints” (p. 144) as a tool of biopolitical border security (p. 133-134). Border security, then, in terms of vernacular knowledge, is defined as “a series of legal and bureaucratic processes designed to gather knowledge about – rather than physically prevent- human (im)mobility [...]” (p. 141). This finding highlights the necessity to reconceptualize Laing-Giddens’s ontological (in) security paradigm, arguing that more bordering practices lead to less border anxiety (p. 22-23).

In conclusion, Chapter 6 shows how vernacular knowledge offers alternative ways of border security, which disrupts the elite narrative that is based on realist militarized border security (p. 167-168). Furthermore, it unveils the possibility of living with strangers (p. 169). It becomes possible when citizens, aware of the colonial past of their European identity, move beyond the logic of the innocent European citizen and thus have a certain degree of ‘ethic of strangeness’ (p. 169; 197).

In sum, the book offers a unique and timely contribution to the study of border security and the 2015 population movement across the Mediterranean Sea. Theoretically highlighting and justifying the ‘vernacular turn’ in critical security studies, the book seems to be one of the reference books for those studying vernacular security. However, advocates of vernacular security should broaden their methodological spectrum to include ordinary people’s diverse ways of expressing ideas and beliefs in the 21st century. Thus, it requires thinking about online and visual methods more.