

# MIGRATION AND RACIST STATE VIOLENCE: INTRODUCTION

*Monish Bhatia and Ronit Lentin*

At least 27 people lost their lives [in English Channel drownings] . . . Yes, people should come here legally and the system must be fair, but the main issue is this: crossing the Channel in small boats is extremely dangerous and yesterday was the moment that many of us had feared for many years . . . What happened yesterday was a dreadful shock. It was not a surprise but it is also a reminder of how vulnerable people are put at peril when in the hands of criminal gangs . . . This requires co-ordinated international effort and I have been in constant contact with my counterparts from France, Poland, Austria, Belgium, Italy, and Greece . . . The government's New Plan for Immigration, which will be put into law through the Nationality and Borders Bill is a longer-term solution that will address many of these underlying factors to deterring illegal migration and addressing underlying pull factors into the UK's asylum system.

(Home Secretary Priti Patel's Speech on Channel Deaths, 25 November 2021)<sup>1</sup>

The twenty-first century has witnessed a rampant expansion of migration control practices. External and physical borders have dramatically proliferated, and so have internal and everyday borders. Western states have deployed a virulent and divisive rhetoric, and have consistently othered people deemed as unwanted surplus populations. By focusing on the illegality of entry and the means by which people seek to enter the country, governments are able to dehumanize and criminalize migrants, rendering them non-existent and expendable, and the use of terms such as "illegal" and "bogus" form the official vocabulary. Pickering (2005: 52–81) calls this a "spectacle of refugee deviancy" whereby language rules amplify refugee deviance and obfuscate state illegality, deviance and violence directed against the group. She argues that language rules ensure that the violent intent of the state against undocumented migrants and people seeking asylum is brutally clear. At the same time governments are launching instructions on how to disguise the reality of immigration control with lies, concealment and euphemisms

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(as apparent in the above quote). Similarly, Grewcock (2009:17) argues that utilizing such deviance in relation to the state's treatment of refugees and undocumented migrants is both "apposite and confronting given the deviant character bestowed by the state." Discourses of deviancy have become discourses of legitimation and are constantly repeated so as to justify repressive and aggressive state responses couched in the language of common-sense and allegedly justified solutions to what is construed as the "problem of immigration."

Two decades ago, Green and Grewcock (2002) attempted to reverse the traditional understanding of the state as protector and punisher of crimes, and showed the ways in which states engage in wholesale victimization, criminalization, punishment and repression of migrants. They argue that despite the overwhelming investment in border control and security, states' responses to irregular immigration are not a law enforcement issue but rather an issue of state identity. They are about

the cultivation of a hegemonic European character built upon principles of exclusion. The excluded are reconstructed as threats to that character/identity and their demonisation . . . justifies increasingly punitive, covert and extra-legal measures of deterrence. The construction of the new European state is thus being formed on the basis of state sanctioned criminal behaviour.

(Green and Grewcock 2002: 99)

Although, as Lentin (2014: 69–104) argues, mainstream sociological research into migration, ethnicity and minorities "elides, neglects, or denies the role of race in the construction of the boundaries of Europeanness," understanding the contemporary (and deviant) state responses to migration must involve taking the race-migration nexus on board. Race in this context is not about biology or cultural classification but rather, as argued by Weheliye (2014: 4), about "racializing assemblages" that are a set of "socio-political processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite humans and non-humans." Weheliye cites Wilson Gilmore (2002: 261) who defines racism as not resting on phenotype or culture, but as "the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death," and who asks "what, then, is racism if not the political exploitation and (re)production of race?"

Furthermore, states' responses to illegalized migration cannot be fully understood without contextualizing it within what Rodriguez (2018) calls, following Quijano's (2008) concept "the coloniality of power," "the coloniality of migration." While Europe expanded its economic, political, legal and cultural control over colonized territories and through settler colonial-migration until the middle of the twentieth century, in the public discourse this European history of migration is forgotten. Instead, and despite the fact that Europeans had been migrating as labourers and refugees to North America throughout the nineteenth

century, migration has been considered a new issue, first appearing in post-1945 western societies or brought to Europe by post-1970s globalization.

Migration, in this context, is constructed as not having any roots in Europe as the epicentre of global migration. Rodriguez (2018) argues that within the conjuncture of the colonial legacy the construction of the racialized other is wrapped in a racist vocabulary, drawing on a racist imaginary combined with new forms of governing the racialized other through migration controls. Following W. E. B. Dubois (2007), who argued that modern societies are constituted through racialization, Rodriguez traces racism as exported from fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European colonization and the occupation of territories, and argues that racisms have shaped modernity and that racism was not just exported to the colonies but existed within the fabric of European societies prior to colonization. Racism is the very foundation of European modernity and it is in this entanglement that migration emerged in the nineteenth century as a modern nation-state colonial tool of governing the population in racial, ethnic, national, religious and cultural terms. Migration, Rodriguez further argues, due to religious persecution, poverty and epidemics, has been a consistent feature of European history; however, it was not until the late nineteenth century that migration became central in the regulation and control of the nation and its others. According to Rodriguez (2018), migration regulation ensures that the Other of the nation/Europe/the Occident is reconfigured in racial terms. The logic generated in this context constructs and produces objects to be governed through restrictions, management devices and administrative categories such as “asylum seeker,” “bogus” migrant or “illegal” migrant (see also El-Enany 2020). Contemporary migration and border controls are colonial mutations and they inflict strategic and deliberate violence on poor individuals, and particularly on migrants constructed as “illegal,” “bogus” and “undeserving.”

States resorting to violence against illegalized migrants is the focus of this special issue of the *State Crime* journal. The articles take on the challenging task of theorizing and understanding migration control policies and practices through using racist state violence. The contributions come from various jurisdictions including Greece–Turkey, the UK, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Israel. It is worth noting that although contributions focus mostly on state violence and migration controls in the global north, namely Europe and Israel, similar state responses are also prevalent in the United States (e.g. Walia 2021; De Genova 2021), Australia (e.g. Boochani 2018; Giannacopoulos and Loughnan 2020), India (Bhatia 2021; Mehta 2021) and throughout the global south. Contributors in this collection come from various disciplines—sociology, criminology, anthropology, and media and social studies—but the articles, while addressing a spectrum of issues, all focus on the single theme of racist state violence.

The collection begins with an article by **Lena Karamanidou and Bernd Kasperek**, who draw attention to the Greek–Turkish land border spectacle in the region of Evros. In March 2020 the Turkish government “opened” the border with

Greece. Several people seeking sanctuary and safety attempted border crossing, to which the Greek government responded with violence and aggression. This included the police and the army using tear gas, stun grenades, plastic bullets and even live ammunition, resulting in at least two deaths and many more injuries. People were apprehended and “pushed back” (meaning extra-legal returns). Drawing on qualitative research including fieldwork, interviews and document analysis, the authors focus on the practice of pushbacks as an enduring feature of the local border regime. They present a sharp analysis of this practice and its inherently violent character rooted in processes of colonialism, racism, nationalism and global capitalism. Pushbacks, as they emphasize, do not constitute an aberration of a supposedly non-violent, post-national practice of border management, but are rather a representative of the inherent racist state violence.

This is followed by an article by **Monish Bhatia and Jon Burnett**, who discuss the internal border controls and immigration enforcement—more specifically, immigration raids in contemporary Britain. The raids operate at the centre of a symbiotic process of “rolling back” and “rolling out” the state, and through convergences of criminalization and immigration control. Despite being ineffective in facilitating removals, raids have continued to operate. Bhatia and Burnett argue that removal has never been the core function of raids, but it is rather to instil fear and inflict harm on poor migrant communities. The article situates immigration raids within a broader analysis of immigration control and as a particular form of state strategy. It utilizes ethnographic data to shed light on how the racist violence of immigration raids is manifested, lived, experienced and resisted. The article ends with a reflection on the growing resistance to raids, immigration enforcement and borders more broadly, and highlights the 2021 Glasgow Kenmure Street protests in 2021 organized by the Anti-Raids Network.

**Ronit Lentin**’s article sheds light on Ireland’s asylum policies of dispersal and accommodation in Direct Provision (DP) asylum centres. Asylum applicants are arbitrarily assigned to a DP centre and are often arbitrarily moved from one centre to another. These centres are operated by for-profit private companies, who have been granted over €1.6 billion of government contracts to date, constituting them as Ireland’s “asylum industrial complex.” Lentin explores the dire conditions in the DP system that are due to the racialization of asylum seekers and which result in mental health breakdown, physical health problems, isolation, exclusion and other issues. She presents a careful and theoretically dense analysis to argue that the DP system is a space of non-being in which people seeking asylum are confined, rendered vulnerable and subjected to racist state violence. The article concludes by an analysis of the conditions in DP centres during the Covid-19 pandemic and of the desperate resistance strategies engaged in by asylum seekers, including hunger strikes.

The next three articles focus on the European south. **Barak Kalir**'s article, drawing on fieldwork, including five months of ethnographic research at a police deportation unit in Madrid (Spain), discusses the death of Mame Mbaye, a 35-year-old migrant from Senegal who lived on a street in the centre of Madrid for 12 years. The exact circumstances of his death remain disputed: the Spanish police maintain he was found lying on the sidewalk having suffered a fatal cardiac arrest, while eyewitnesses claim that he was chased by several police agents who caused his collapse and death. An autopsy established cardiac failure as the formal cause of death, mentioning the heart condition from which Mbaye had suffered for years, and for which he received no medical treatment (as illegalized migrants in Spain are excluded from the healthcare system). Kalir argues for understanding violence against "racialized and illegalized migrants in western states not only instrumentally in the service of racial capitalism but also ideologically in sanctioning racial cruelty for the broader promotion and dissemination of racialism" (p. 73).

Similarly, **Júlia Garraio, Olga Solovova and Sofia José Santos** analyse the death of a Ukrainian national called Ihor Homenyuk, who was killed after sustaining abuse and torture while in the "care" of the Foreigners and Borders Office in Lisbon airport in Portugal. The authors conduct an in-depth analysis of the Portuguese media to understand how violence at the border, Portuguese imaginaries regarding Eastern European migrants and understandings of racism shaped the killing as a case of police brutality as opposed to a racist crime. Garraio, Solovova and Santos note that debates generated by Homenyuk's death did not trigger a wider discussion of the experiences of Ukrainian and other Eastern European immigrants in Portugal, nor of Portuguese policies of immigration and the role of borders in the creation of global hierarchies. The debate rather focused on "us," and how to improve "our" institutions and scrutinize "our" representatives. Thus, while visible, the state's (racist) violence was rendered invisible.

In the penultimate article, **Corina Tulbure** examines how shaming is used as an essential tool of un-belonging, and a mechanism of controlling and disciplining bodies that presumably transcends logics and costs of the painful infliction of violence. Drawing on data collected from several periods of fieldwork conducted in Romania and Spain, the author analyses how everyday borders aim to produce exploitable and exposed workers, and perceptions of un-belonging by shaming state practices. Tulbure argues that shame is part of Europe's border governance, acting as a bordering effect, separating bodies, subjectivities, and territories, but also raising temporary barriers between one's memory and one's present. Shame is a practice of state institutions, an instrument of emotional harm and a way of translating laws and migration regulations into lived experiences.

The last article by **Maayan Ravid** focuses on the Israeli state and its treatment of Eritrean and Sudanese refugees. The article examines the state migration

policies within the context of racialized social relations originating from colonial ideologies. The article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers between 2018 and 2020, including in-depth interviews with 28 asylum seekers and participant observations at the Holot facility visitation area and in south Tel Aviv neighbourhoods where most asylum seekers live. By using the concept of racialized structural violence, Ravid argues that migration policies and practices produce injurious outcomes for African people seeking asylum in Israel, including the attempt to prevent them from entering, disregarding individual asylum applications, detaining them in Holot and forcing them to live in impoverished urban neighbourhoods in Tel Aviv and elsewhere. In the conclusion she argues that the social, political and physical exclusion of “African non-Jewish non-citizens reflects the emboldening of Jewish whiteness in the state” (p. 143).

## Note

1. Available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretarys-speech-on-channel-drownings> (accessed 4 May 2022).

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