



## SINGLE BOOK REVIEWS

---

### Culture and Politics in the Study of Europe's Schengen Borders

REVIEW BY THOMAS M. WILSON

*Binghamton University, State University of New York*

*Cultures of Border Control: Schengen and the Evolution of European Frontiers.* By Ruben Zaiotti. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 263 pp., \$30.00 paperback (ISBN-13: 978-0-226-97787-4).

For many years, I worked in a British university in an academic unit with a planned and distinct interdisciplinary environment, with scholars who, while subject specialists, sought to test the limits of their disciplines, to design curricula and research that approached the European Union in novel ways. This Institute of European Studies was in the main staffed by scholars of politics, international relations, international political economy, law, and anthropology. I was in fact the sole anthropologist, and I was both impressed and heartened by the many ways in which my colleagues used the ideas, theories, methodologies, and literatures of diverse scholarly approaches to ask and answer questions that could not be satisfactorily crafted through the use of one subject's toolkit. In our collective view, the European Union (EU) and its predecessor intergovernmental and supranational manifestations were so dynamic, so novel, and so much a product of the contemporary that they constituted a political-economic-social-cultural system without precedent and blueprint. As the eminent French political anthropologist Marc Abèlés has labeled it, the EU is an unidentified political object, and as such, it tests the limits of the possible in terms of new political and economic forms. We mixed bag of social scientists, whether consciously or unconsciously, sought the tools to identify as much as we might of that object, and to understand the myriad ways it seemed to transform itself from year to year.

Ruben Zaiotti's thought-provoking and model-bending book, *Cultures of Border Control*, is written in the same vein that we attempted to mine years ago in that interdisciplinary Institute, where one of the increasingly important but consistently vexing problems was that offered by "culture." This concept, which reflected to many of us so much that was integral to the development of European integration and Europeanization, had risen in importance worldwide due to globalization theories, the sharp growth in cultural studies, the increasing importance of issues of culture and identity in all manner and form of politics and society, and the post-Maastricht competence in culture which the EU had taken on itself. As a result, culture began to figure prominently in so much we did in research and in the classroom. But some of my colleagues had difficulty seeing culture as anything more or less than an independent or dependent variable, and some were unable to see it in any terms other than in ways they thought were new, important, and very much contributory to theories of constructivism.

Zaiotti's book would go a long way to show some of my past colleagues a way forward. His analysis escapes the trap of culture as constructivism by offering perspectives on border control which focus on culture as the practices of policy, that states and the EU have adopted to deal with the changing nature of internal and external national and EU borders. Zaiotti shows how a flexible analyst can successfully accomplish historical scholarship, develop models in political studies, and utilize ideas drawn from philosophy, sociology, international studies, and anthropology, to offer clear and pragmatic strategies for the study of EU organizations, policies, and practices. His book, which is a welcome contribution to the comparative social science of EU integration, policing, and security studies in Europe, and border studies more generally, not only sets new guidelines for the study of the Schengen agreement on internal and external borders, and its subsequent policy evolution with the EU; it also establishes new standards for the political study of culture at the heart of the EU object.

Zaiotti's thesis is persuasive. The events of the last 20 years have put contradictory pressures on nation states, on the one hand, to open up their borders to accommodate new forces for freer trade, citizen, and migrant mobility, and the greater movement of capital, ideas, labor, and goods, but, on the other hand, to strengthen borders against unwanted people and goods, such as terrorists, drugs, and illegal migrants (and in this discussion, Zaiotti makes masterful use of Margaret Thatcher and the role the Iron Lady played in the discourses on nations and borders in Europe). These pressures on states have resulted in sometimes convergent but sometimes contradictory border control policies in Europe. Zaiotti's compelling assertion is that to understand the evolution of border controls in the EU, one must study border controls as policy, and such policy domains may be best studied from an evolutionary and cultural perspective. His analytical model entails the identification and historical tracking of border practices, within national, transnational, and supranational frames of reference, to trace how various policy models, which he labels as "cultures," came into being, were negotiated and selected, then became dominant.

His book offers finely tuned renditions of three major security border models, each of which could have become the model one for the EU, but only one eventually did. In detailing that success story, where the "Schengen" culture of border control eventually outlasted the alternative "Brussels" and "Westphalian" models, Zaiotti demonstrates the ways in which the EU itself evolves as a system, a mix of policy cultures, and a set of rapidly changing practices. He also presents a portrait of how the Schengen zone, which started as an agreement between a few countries outside the formal jurisdiction of the EU, has today become a central program within the EU and a core motif in worldwide studies of border security and control.

While Zaiotti deserves great praise for his erudition and engaging writing style, some irksome issues linger. While Zaiotti offers clear definitions of his main concepts, such as "culture," "pragmatism," and "evolution," it is surprising that he does not offer equal treatment of how those concepts have been employed in other studies of the EU and its policy domains, borders, and cultures of practice. Missing prominently in this book are references to the many works which have constructed wide and deep literatures in the anthropology and sociology of EU integration and borders. Of particular relevance in those literatures is the debate over Europeanization, which at the very least would have helped contextualize the oft-repeated assertion by Zaiotti that culture is an excellent way to understand policy domains in practice. Evolution as a concept also needs a longer temporal dimension unless one wishes to court the strengths and weaknesses encountered by sociobiology. And the study of culture, as Zaiotti admits in one short section, may be best approached through participatory observation. In that same approach, the meanings people attach to their practices figure

prominently, but in this book, Zaiotti offers little data on what these cultures and practices meant to people who were instrumental in their success and failure. But these are perhaps the concerns of a critic who has not left enough of his disciplinary baggage behind him. Suffice to say that Zaiotti's *Cultures of Border Control* sets a high standard for the identification and analysis of how culture and politics intersect in the changing dimensions of state and EU border controls, a standard that merits its reading by scholars of security, border, and EU studies.