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Cultures of Border Control: Schengen & the Evolution of European Frontiers

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Book review

Ruben Zaiotti

Cultures of Border Control: Schengen & the Evolution of European Frontiers

Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

263 pp., US\$30.00 paperback (ISBN 978-0-22697787-4), US\$90.00 hardback (ISBN 978-0-22697786-7)

Cultures of Border Control by Ruben Zaiotti is a highly topical book on the evolving new cultures of border management and control in the European Union (EU) and the Schengen context. Although there is a rich literature on international borders, and particularly on European borders and border regions, surprisingly little has been written about the institutionalization of the Schengen border. *Cultures of Border Control* therefore makes a welcomed contribution to the recent interdisciplinary discussion of border control and policy, seeking answers to such questions as how the new 'post-national common sense' regarding borders has emerged, how European governments have collectively relinquished their sovereignty in such a sensitive issue as border controls and why the Schengen culture was selected in preference to any other alternative.

Zaiotti provides a detailed chronological analysis of the political process of constructing 'Schengenland', starting from the early years and continuing up to latter-day developments, in which we can see that internal security has

become one objective of EU foreign policy and protection of the region's borders has become internationalized. Border policy and control defines what and who can belong to the EU. Although the main focus is on Europe, Zaiotti also devotes one chapter to the evolution of the new 'Washington culture of border control' in North America.

The shift from Westphalia to the Schengen culture of border control is often understood as a result of a negotiated compromise among European governments, a 'logical response' to common problems such as increasing illegal migration and the threat of a terrorist attack. According to Zaiotti the 'logical response' thesis provides only a partial explanation. In *Cultures of Border Control* he employs a cultural evolutionary approach to show how Schengen was possible only because decision-makers had acquired a new post-national understanding, or normative background, regarding borders and their control. Cultural evolutionary theory and the examination of phases in cultural selection (p. 36) is not very popular in current border studies, where borders are increasingly approached through the concepts of bordering, performance, networking and mobility (see, e.g. Johnson et al. 2011). *Cultures of Border Control* does not aim to contribute to this recent discussion of the conceptualization of borders; rather it provides a sophisticated historical analysis of the Schengen border policy and affirms that it is not possible to understand recent bordering

2 Book review

practices and performances apart from the historical and contextual processes that have led to them, in this case apart from nationalization and Europeanization. By shifting the focus to contextual and situational features it is possible to gain an understanding of how political shifts take place as policy stakeholders' normative ideas change.

The important thing that we learn from *Cultures of Border Control* is that the Schengen borders cannot be taken for granted. Political borders are 'ever-evolving'; they are not fixed or eternal lines on the political map of the world. The 'Schengen approach' to border control was not a foregone conclusion but was selected during a relatively long decision process. The idea of Schengen—the abolition of border checks between the member states of the European Community at that time (Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg)—was first introduced in 1984 and the agreement was signed in the town of Schengen a year later, in 1985. It was not until 1995, however, that the Schengen border control system was really put into place, since when new countries have acceded to Schengen in the course of EU enlargement. Zaiotti shows how the Schengen initiative developed in parallel with the Brussels initiative, a supranational mode of border control in which the authority would have been the European Community. Schengen was preferred because the European states were

not willing to assign full control of their national borders to the European Commission. Selection of the Schengen culture of border control meant that the member states still had the authority to control the external borders of their territory and the main responsibility for doing so. The best practices for achieving security in Europe are constantly being renegotiated as the member states experience internal and external pressures.

Cultures of Border Control can be recommended to all academics, professionals and politicians who seek an in-depth understanding of Schengen policy and of the new approaches and strategies by which governments seek to respond to contradictory spatialities at borders: the global circulation of capital on the one hand, and increased demands for cast-iron territorial security on the other hand.

Reference

Johnson, C., Jones, R., Paasi, A., Amoore, L., Mountz, A., Salter, A. and Rumford, C. (2011) Interventions on rethinking 'the border' in border studies, *Political Geography* 30: 61–69.

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