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Europe and the Biopolitical Schism. Material and Symbolic Boundaries of the EU Border Regime

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Europe and the Biopolitical Schism. Material and Symbolic Boundaries of the EU Border Regime

Schindel, Estela.

Abstract

Practices of EU border enforcement push unwanted migrants and refugees into zones of exposure to increased environmental risks. This operation is consistent with a simultaneous displacement of unwanted non-European travelers to the realm of 'nature' in collective imaginaries. The main claim of this paper is that European borders are thus being produced, both materially and symbolically, along the fault line 'culture'/'technology' and 'nature,' where illegalized travelers trying to enter the continent are perceived as less technologically developed and therefore less compatible with Western civilization. This operation reproduces and reinforces a deeply racialized vision of the non-European 'others.' As a consequence, certain subjectivities are enabled, fostered, or produced but also contested and disputed along the European borders, while the 'border struggles' are displaced into an allegedly neutral terrain. This analysis draws theoretically on the work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Bruno Latour. It is based empirically on a discursive analysis of the corporate material distributed by Frontex and by companies that produce technology for border surveillance and control, as well as on interviews and observations conducted in the Greek-Turkish sea border area between 2013 and 2016. The paper is part of a larger research project about practices, materialities, and discourses involved in the EU border regime and it aims to contribute to the broader field of critical European Studies.

Keywords: Europe; EU; Borders; Biopolitics; Technology; Nature/Culture

Zusammenfassung

Die Praktiken der EU-Grenzüberwachung und -kontrolle drängen unerwünschte Migrant*innen und Geflüchtete in Zonen, in denen sie erhöhten Umweltrisiken ausgesetzt sind. Dies steht im Einklang mit der gleichzeitigen Verdrängung unerwünschter nicht-europäischer Reisender in den Bereich der „Natur“ in kollektiven Imaginären. Die Hauptthese des Papers lautet, dass auf diese Weise europäische Grenzen – sowohl materiell als auch symbolisch – entlang der Bruchlinie „Kultur“/„Technologie“ und „Natur“ produziert werden, wodurch illegalisierte Reisende, die versuchen nach Europa einzureisen, als weniger technologisch entwickelt und daher weniger „kompatibel“ mit der westlichen Zivilisation wahrgenommen werden. Dies reproduziert und verstärkt ein zutiefst rassifiziertes Bild der außereuropäischen „Anderen“. Infolgedessen werden bestimmte Subjektivitäten entlang der europäischen Grenzen ermöglicht, gefördert oder produziert, aber auch angefochten und umkämpft, während die „border struggles“ in ein angeblich neutrales Terrain verlagert werden. Diese Analyse stützt sich theoretisch auf die Arbeiten von Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben und Bruno Latour. Sie basiert empirisch auf einer diskursiven Analyse der Materialien und Firmeninformationen, die von Frontex und von Unternehmen, die Technologien für die Grenzüberwachung und -kontrolle herstellen, publiziert wurden sowie auf Interviews und Beobachtungen, die zwischen 2013 und 2016 im griechisch-türkischen Meeresgrenzgebiet durchgeführt wurden. Der Artikel ist Teil eines größeren Forschungsprojekts über Praktiken, Materialitäten und Diskurse des EU-Grenzregimes und versteht sich als Beitrag zum breiteren Feld der kritischen Europastudien.

Schlagworte: Europa; EU; Grenzen; Biopolitik; Technologie; Natur/Kultur

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1. Introduction

In June 2016, the artist collective Zentrum für politische Schönheit (ZfS, Center for Political Beauty) carried out an action meant to call attention to the ongoing death of migrants in the Mediterranean sea, suggesting an analogy between how these deaths are permitted—and therefore decided—by European politicians and how Roman emperors used to decide the fate of gladiators with a simple thumbs-down gesture, condemning them to be eaten alive by lions. The action received well-deserved criticism for, among other things, contributing to a certain spectacularization of the EU borders and for the sheer tastelessness of inviting refugees to voluntarily submit to being eaten by wild tigers before an audience in a cage in Berlin-Mitte.¹ Aside from these and other aspects of the performance that were deemed problematic, however, the action pointed to a core question that haunts the complex migration-refugee-asylum theme in Europe: Why can't refugees actually come to Europe by plane? The alleged naivety of the question—the ZfS graphics put the question directly in the mouth of a child asking its mother—conveys a radical paradox in early twenty-first century Europe: the simultaneous existence of airplanes and other transportation technologies and the massive numbers of persons dying by drowning or from other forms of exposure to the elements on their way to the continent.

That it is precisely the use of sophisticated technologies of border surveillance and control that pushes unwanted migrants² and refugees into zones of exposure to environmental risks may at first seem paradoxical. It is, however, entirely consistent with a simultaneous displacement of unwanted non-European travelers into the realm of nature in collective imaginaries. The main claim of this paper is that the European borders are being materially and symbolically constructed as boundaries between civilized areas of technological superiority and zones of exposure to the elements, continuous and contiguous with what we consider 'nature.' This operation assumes and at the same time reproduces a deeply racialized construction of non-European 'others,' while also de-historicizing and depoliticizing the global movements that give rise to irregular border crossings in the first place.

The discussion presented in this paper is part of a larger, multi-site research project that examines the discourses, policies, and practices involved in EU border surveillance and control and in the border crossings into the Schengen area. The study focuses on the definitions and values at stake in the European border regime, taking as a point of departure and historical framework the establishment and activities of the EU border agency Frontex. The

¹ The notion of "border spectacle" has been put forward by, among others, Nicholas De Genova et al. (2014).

² Even though they designate different situations and motivations, for style reasons persons in clandestine transit to Europe are indistinctly referred to throughout this paper as 'illegalized' or 'unwanted' 'travelers,' 'refugees,' 'migrants,' or 'border crossers.' The use of the term 'illegalized' instead of 'illegal' aims at making explicit the societal phenomenon that renders certain border crossers as 'illegal.' The term stresses that their condition of 'illegality' is not inherent but produced by certain visa and border regimes, which close off all legal channels for applying for asylum or migration. Border crossers are therefore being labelled as 'illegal' before they have the chance to legally claim their status as refugees (Weber & Pickering 2011; Bauder 2013).

aim is to understand what underlying assumptions and values inform the discourses and practices of border-making and to inquire about the production of subjectivities in this context. While focusing on the very materiality of border crossings and the practices of border surveillance and control, the aim is to interpret them from a cultural sociological perspective in terms of meanings and subjectivities: Who is crossing the European borders and how? What knowledges, technologies, and discourses are being mobilized? What constructions of alterity and what thresholds in the definition of the human are being constructed and contested? An evaluation of the material collected so far reveals that the material-symbolic operation discussed here can be observed in all three settings where EU border practices are being investigated, corresponding respectively to sea, land, and air borders.³

While this research is related to highly topical questions about EU border, migration, and asylum regimes, the inquiry is located at the intersection between those fields and critical European Studies. Rather than taking the European border regime as a case study for issues of borders and migration, the goal is to offer an empirically informed, cultural sociological hermeneutical analysis of contemporary

positions and assumptions regarding European-ness and alterity on the basis of the practices and discourses mobilized at the EU borders. The paper thus aims at contributing to understanding contemporary European societies and cultures by taking the findings at the European borders as an object of inquiry: What might an informed observation of the EU borders reveal about Europe today?

The argument draws theoretically on Bruno Latour's critique of what he terms the "Moderns" separation between nature, society, and discourse, on the one hand, and on Michel Foucault's and Giorgio Agamben's considerations about biopolitics as a technology of power aimed at the political production of biological life, on the other. The biopolitical approach provides a strong theoretical-conceptual reference for the analysis. However, "bare life" will be understood here as a processual, socially contested field rather than as a univocal or essentialized state of being. The study combines this biopolitical framing with Bruno Latour's characterization of the Moderns as producing an asymmetry and a separation between themselves and other, "anthropological cultures" (the "Great Divide"). The material gathered so far points to the persistent validity of the fault-line 'culture'/'technology' and

³ In the case of sea borders, the research is based empirically on material collected during fieldwork at the Greek-Turkish maritime border zone between 2013 and 2016. Micro-sociological observations, semi-structured interviews, and conversations were conducted on the Greek islands Lesbos (2013 and 2014), Chios and Samos (2015), and Kos and Leros (2016), as well as on the Turkish coast around Ayvalık (2014) and Bodrum (2016). Altogether I spoke with more than seventy persons, including members of Frontex, the Hellenic Coast Guard, the Turkish Coast Guard, international organizations, and NGOs active in the field, as well as with activists, politicians, journalists, the local population, and persons in transit. The observations included visits to ships, ports, local government sites, registration centers for persons in transit, activist and NGO offices, and the coastal areas affected by the illegalized crossings. The land borders are being studied on the base of the Spanish exclaves of Melilla and Ceuta, as well as their Moroccan surroundings. The first fieldwork stay in Melilla and Nador was conducted in 2017. For the air borders, the research focuses on biometric border controls at international airports that serve as entry to the EU.

‘nature’ in contemporary discourses and practices put forward in—and sometimes in the name of—the European Union. The dispute along this fault-line takes place both materially and symbolically at the EU borders and reveals underlying Eurocentric assumptions (Latour 1993) that, although refuted by scholars, are still being enacted and reproduced through the EU border regime. In Latour’s (1993) interpretation, what characterizes the Modern is a “double ontological distinction”: The first is the separation between humans and non-humans; the second, the division between anthropological cultures—those in which society, culture, and nature are imbricated and hybrid—and Modern cultures which distinguish between ‘nature’ and ‘society,’ thus constructing their own (Western) culture as radically different from the others. The Moderns, according to Latour’s critique, define themselves as if the West were not a culture among others but rather one radically separated from the rest. The separation of natural from social-cultural is viewed as an exclusive feature of the Western moderns, while all other “anthropological” cultures are conceived of and studied in terms of the entanglements of technologies, beliefs, and discourses.

The main claim here is that this separation is being reproduced through practices and discourses mobilized by the EU border regime. Both entangled with and overlapping geopolitical borders, a symbolical boundary produces the non-European ‘others’ in a material and symbolic realm of technological inferiority, as closer to and contiguous with what is constructed as ‘nature.’ This operation—which politically transforms unwanted travelers into what Agamben (1998) calls bare life (a biological existence on the threshold of deprivation of all legal or political status)—is reinforced by technologies and discourses that differentially target border crossers either as individualized citizens or as an

undifferentiated and threatening organic presence. As a consequence, certain subjectivities are enabled, fostered, or produced as well as contested and disputed along European borders, while “border struggles” (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013) are displaced to the allegedly neutral terrain of ‘nature’.

This production of unwanted non-European migrants, as belonging to such an anthropological realm, is combined in my analysis with the categories that Agamben (1998) uses to explain the political production of ‘biological life.’ Based on the ancient Greek terms for ‘life,’ the Italian philosopher distinguishes between the qualified life of a citizen with rights (*bios*) and mere biological existence (*zoe*). Following these concepts, I claim that border enforcement discourses and practices displace illegalized migrants to a zone of bare life, where they are left alone with their biological subsistence and deprived of the rights of qualified citizenship. This is a sphere that is neither *zoe* nor *bios*, but the form of life produced in a zone of indistinction between the two of them. In this zone, ‘natural’ or ‘biological’ existence can be materially, politically, and symbolically produced at any time. A person who has fallen into this zone becomes an existence without civic value, exposed to a death without cultural, legal, or religious inscription. For Agamben, the condition of bare life implies a form of abandonment to the power of the sovereign. In this case, however, the sovereign power’s agency has been displaced into nature. The illegalized migrant is thus abandoned and exposed to the force of the elements by means of the political production of a zone of mere biological survival, a zone of direct contact with environmental or physiological processes. Such processes, as I aim to show, take place materially and symbolically along the EU borders. While for Agamben (1998) the juridical-political structure where the bio-political relation between sovereign power and

bare life takes place is the concentration camp, diverse studies have shown how this structure can and should be considered also in relation to borders and mobility (Salter 2008, Vaughan-Williams 2009 and 2012).

In the following, the production of illegalized migrants will be explored along material, political, and symbolic axes that manifest themselves through 1) the political creation of zones of environmental or physiological exposure and 2) the discursive and narrative construction of illegalized migrants as continuous and contiguous with nature. Following the conceptualization of borders as de-localized

sites of struggle and contestation (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013), the scission between nature and culture is conceived here as a contingent, processual, and always contested one. Putting the emphasis on the political production of bare life in the person of unwanted border crossers, as I will argue, does not mean to ignore or neglect the border crossers' agency or capacity to resist. Rather, the aim is to reflect on the terrain into which these crossings and the concomitant material and symbolic disputes are being displaced.⁴

2. Culture, Nature and the Biopolitical Border

Beyond their political and institutional character, borders are considered here as spaces where not only a material frontier between geopolitical units gets enacted but also symbolic and cultural boundaries get drawn (and disputed) according to Western assumptions about nature and culture. Borders have been traditionally associated with the sovereign state, as dispositives that delimit the national identity of individuals and relate them to citizenship and nationality. Much traditional scholarship follows this so-called Westphalian conception of a state as limited to its territory, with borders appearing as clear lines separating one state from

another and assigning to each their unique area of sovereignty, territory, and jurisdiction (Anderson 1996, Prescott 1987). In recent years, debates among authors who, on one side, dismiss the importance of borders in the age of globalization—positing their disappearance—and those who, on the other, point to a strengthening of the principle of territoriality and the increased securitization of borders have resulted in a broad acknowledgement of borders' changing character. Borders are no longer seen as merely fixed physical areas demarcating territories but increasingly as complex political, social, and discursive constructs that cannot be treated as

⁴ This perspective allows me to overcome an alleged contradiction between those critical scholars who emphasize the agency and unmanageability of transmigrants (the “autonomy of migration” approach) and the mainstream scholarship that, on the contrary, focuses on state policies and sees the adjustments of migratory routes as the result of these alone. Neither focusing on policy analysis nor putting a unilateral emphasis on the practices and agency of the persons on the move, the goal here is to scrutinize the very terrain on which the practices of both converge and get contested and, from there, to interpret their meaning.

objects or phenomena but must instead be considered as socially produced (Johnson et al. 2011). A significant shift in border and borderland studies across the social sciences over the past two decades attests to their changing nature. Terms such as *borderland*, *(re)bordering*, *borderscape*, *borderwork*, *borderity*, and *tidemark* have been used to refer to the redeployment and dislocation of borders in our times (Anzaldúa 1987, Amilhat Szary & Giraut 2015, Balibar 2009, Brambilla 2014, Green 2018, Van Houtum & Van Naerssen 2002, Rumford 2008). Rather than considering them as static divisions located at the outer limit of the territory, scholarship has tended instead toward an articulation of borders as mobile, temporal, and shifting processes, regarding them not as fixed ‘facts’ but as unstable constructions that are embedded in everyday practices, geographically dislocated, and constantly contested (Salter 2013, Parker et al. 2009).

Borders are thus neither simply disappearing or re-enforced; they are now believed to be rather continuously reasserted and remade. Borders have come to be understood as more of a process, of selective bordering and de-bordering, partially detached

What do we mean by ‘nature’?

The scholarly literature on borders has pointed out a shift in border studies, from a geopolitical to a biopolitical horizon of analysis, some studies referring to a “generalized biopolitical border” (Vaughan-Williams 2012) or to a “humanitarian border” (Walters 2011). Some works have also engaged with the ways in which geography is being used to inhibit and undermine spaces of asylum, particularly on islands, thereby utilizing geography in the project of deterrence politics, an operation that Alison Mountz (2013) calls “neo-refoulement.”

from geopolitical boundaries, discontinuous, and ubiquitous, thus destabilizing classical notions of sovereignty and territory (Balibar 2002, Bigo 2000, Paasi et al. 2018). The image of the fortress or the wall is therefore misleading—even if barrier devices like fences are still being built: borders are rather devices that select and filter and consequently require to be analyzed with a more complex and dynamic language (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). For Mezzadra and Neilson borders have become “battlefields,” sites of “border struggles,” crossed by conflicts and mobile power relations that work through heterogeneous processes of differential inclusion. These authors stress the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and proliferation of borders in the contemporary world, as well as the importance of thinking them both as key sites of contestation and as arenas for the production of subjectivity. This text aims at contributing to that conversation by observing the production of and dispute over subjectivities along the fault line ‘nature’/‘culture’ in two different settings: the sea border crossings to Europe between Turkey and the Greek islands and the representation of border crossings in the corporate material of the industry of technology for border surveillance and control.

However, the complex ways in which biological, geographical, and environmental factors—here framed as ‘nature’—are entangled with the EU border regime and the productive role they play in shaping border struggles still need to be adequately conceptualized.

In Western sciences, nature has long been conceived of as the opposite of culture or civilization. The distinction between the ‘human’ and a ‘nature’ that is ‘nonhuman’ has been asserted since the

Renaissance, when humans radically withdrew themselves from nature and created a system explicitly devoid of human participation and barred from the realm of history (Evernden 1992, Ferkiss 1993, Jonas 1982). This separation was predicated on a strict exemption, one that excluded properties found in humans from the domain of nature: thus nature was conceived as “a world devoid of the properties we associate with humans—in short, devoid of subjectivity” (Evernden 1992, 50). However, the presumption that wilderness exists somewhere ‘out there’ awaiting discovery is itself the product of culture’s framing. Already Karl Marx remarked that nature did not exist as such until humans began to work on it, not simply subduing nature through technology but creating what we now think of as nature in the first place (Ferkiss 1993, 106). The very concept of the human, for Agamben (2004), is the product of an “anthropological machine” that relentlessly drives us apart from the continuum of organic life, on account of our capacity for self-knowledge. The epistemic separation between biological and social realms has in recent decades become the object of further scholarly assessment. Their strict separation has been replaced by conceptualizations such as *networks*, *hybrids*, *imbroglios*, or *entanglements* of humans and non-humans (Latour 1993). Critical anthropologists have drawn attention to the politics of knowledge that sets modern science and enlightened scientists apart from nature, rendering humans both superior and external to it. The notion of a nature, conceived of as a domain of objects subject to autonomous laws and forming a background against which human activities take place, has been radically refuted (Ingold 2013, Descola 2013). There is no longer any valid universal, unique, transhistorical definition of what ‘nature’ is, but only ideas about “natures-cultures” in conjunction (Latour 1993, 105). Nature is not seen as a given, preexistent

realm which is prior or external to culture and society anymore, but as a constructed notion that has evolved throughout the course of history, a notion that is moreover subject to social and political constraints. Therefore, what we understand as nature cannot be separated from the discourses and imaginaries prevailing in a given society; rather, the way in which a certain society establishes the boundary between nature and culture expresses the hegemonic assumptions and values prevalent in that society. For Latour (1993), Western science is actually characterized by two Great Divides: the division between nature and culture/society and the internal partition that set the “Moderns” themselves apart from the premodern or anthropological cultures. In order to become “symmetrical,” anthropology would need to overhaul those divides.

Nevertheless, in spite of such scholarly refutation of the division culture/nature, the Moderns worldview, as Latour has characterized it, is still productive and continues to inform policies and practices of border-making in the EU. As I aim to show in the following, those “divides” are active and productive in EU border surveillance and control—starting with the asylum and visa regimes that prevent migrants from legally entering Europe and continuing with the surveillance and deterrence measures that produce unwanted border crossers as bare life. The emphasis on this production of illegalized migrants as beings that are close to ‘nature’ does not mean to (symbolically) displace them to a state of pure passivity or victimhood. On the contrary, as I will point out later in this paper, margins for agency and resistance are always created, even under extreme conditions. The aim here is rather to point out the axis ‘high technology’/‘nature’ as a faultline along which practices and meanings get negotiated and border struggles take place.

3. Sea Border Crossings to Europe: Bare Life and Desert Islands

It has been demonstrated that dissuasive measures, no matter how harsh, do not deter potential immigrants from trying to cross the border. Deterrence is not only ineffective but also highly lethal, since most migrants or refugees, instead of being dissuaded, will risk undertaking travel in ever more precarious conditions and by way of longer and more dangerous routes (Mountz 2013, Nevins 2002). This has been the case for decades in the desert at the US-Mexican border, at least since so-called “Operation Gatekeeper” was implemented by Washington in the 1990s, which reinforced securitization measures, including the erection of a wall. This operation, however, did not succeed in deterring migrants but forced them to find alternative routes through the desert, where they were exposed to death by ‘natural’ factors.⁵ In Europe, most border-related deaths are also related to an increased exposure to the elements, such as extreme temperatures or dangerous seas, to physiological collapse, or to a combination of the two, such as drowning, dehydration, asphyxia, or hypothermia. Just like with the desert terrain between Mexico and the US and the physical forces at play there, the maritime and insular conditions at the Aegean sea border are used as a “moral alibi” (Doty 2011) that allow border enforcement authorities to displace responsibility for these deaths.

What in Western eyes may seem like open, borderless spaces—deserts, mountains, seas—become active agents in the practices of border enforcement and border crossing. The ways in which allegedly ‘natural’ factors are imbricated in the long chains of causes that lead to border-related deaths needs therefore to be disentangled and exposed (Schindel 2018b). Interviews and observations carried out at the Turkish-Greek maritime border zone provide a closer, detailed view of the practices and logistics involved in such crossings, as well as their entanglement with elements which are often attributed to the realm of ‘nature.’

In the Lesbos area, trips between the two coasts may take roughly an hour and a half by ferry, an hour by catamaran, and even less by speedboat. However, when I conducted fieldwork there, migrants used to need much longer to cover the same area, sometimes up to twice as long, and some may spend up to 12 hours on the water trying to reach the European shore—either because they were seeking out less patrolled coasts, trying to elude successive Greek and Turkish border control vessels that would have pushed them back, or they just got lost. Their dinghy boats were rarely in good condition and often they had to return to Turkey due to mechanical problems. The patrols, the sea itself, and the condition of the

⁵ The role of non-human actors in geopolitical processes, and specifically in the context of border enforcement, has been assessed in the case of deserts, rivers, and animals at the US-Mexican border by several authors (see Sundberg 2011; Doty 2011; Squire 2014). Juanita Sundberg cites abundant evidence of “the deterrence function ascribed to nature” by scholars and shows how US border enforcement has admittedly relied on “geography itself” as a deterrent, treating “rivers, mountains, and deserts as objects of geopolitical calculation and instruments of enforcement” (Sundberg 2011, p. 323). Roxanne Lynn Doty has claimed that the “raw physicality” of environments like the desert is mobilized by social and political powers in ways that occlude their own machinations, thus presenting border-related deaths as the result of “natural causes” rather than policy-related (Doty 2011, 607).

dinghies certainly played a relevant role, but these were not the only factors influencing the border crossings.⁶ Several other variables were involved in the logistics of the crossings, as is demonstrated by the itemized price lists of the services offered by facilitators.⁷

The cost of clandestine border crossing is partially determined by the geographical distance between the Turkish coast and the destination island, the currents and the roughness at that precise zone of the Aegean, the seasonal weather and the intensity of the wind, as well as the various topographical conditions at points of both departure and arrival. Among those variables, for instance, are the topography of the island where the travelers will disembark and the distance that the newly arrived will need to walk—exhausted and wet—to the nearest police station in order to ask for the papers that will allow them to continue on their journey. Trips to Lesbos may be less expensive because the island is large and the migrants will need to walk a long way in order to reach the main city. The ease or difficulty of disembarking is another factor: the crossing to Samos—the closest Greek island to the Asian continent, only two kilometers from the Turkish coast—is actually riskier than others because of the rocky profile of the coast, where travelers often remain trapped, unable to travel any further, or get lost in the wilderness before finding a road. This makes Samos a cheaper destination in the offers of the

facilitating networks than, for instance, the ride from Çeşme to the soft beaches of Chios, where arrival is relatively smooth and the main road lies nearby. Oceanographic, geographical, topographical, and meteorological factors, together with the technological aspects concerning the shape and structure of the boats, are all included in the calculations and strategies both of migrants, coast guards, and trafficking networks, whose prices are calculated according to the strain, duration, and risk of the route.

Turkish fishermen in the area of Ayvalık, where boats headed to Lesbos depart, tell stories about patrol forces and traffickers abandoning refugees on remote beaches or deserted islands. They report having seen such refugees in the dark on their overcrowded inflatable boats, asking the direction to Greece, or running around on those deserted islands. The fishermen's accounts and the refugees' testimonies report cases of survival in the open, sleeping on wet ground, burning grass to attract attention, getting sick from eating wild fruit, or drinking collectively the milk of a breast-feeding mother. Scenes like these evoke an archaic imaginary about the wilderness, as a state of exposure and vulnerability from which modern dreams of progress had promised to emancipate humans. The modern project of a world wherein scientific knowledge and technology would free us from the constraints of the elements collapses before

⁶ The Hellenic Coast Guard has been denounced for intercepting migrants' boats, breaking or removing their motors and oars, beating the male passengers, and throwing the travelers' personal belongings and life jackets into the water before finally leaving them in this condition in Turkish waters (AI 2013, Pro-Asyl 2013, and several testimonies collected myself).

⁷ The terms facilitators, smugglers, and traffickers, used to refer to the persons providing transport services to the illegalized border crossers, are not equivalent and imply different interpretations of their task. For style reasons, however, they are being used in undifferentiated form throughout this paper.

accounts like these. Refugees are being displaced precisely into the realm of survival in the wild, which in turn is precisely the condition from which the Moderns believed they would be redeemed. Material and symbolic displacement of non-European others into such zones, I argue, thus reproduces their displacement into a zone of 'bare,' 'natural' life.

This is not to say that illegalized border crossers are merely victims or passive sufferers of deterrence and surveillance policies. On the contrary, as it has been argued extensively by authors writing from the autonomy of migration approach, it is the inventiveness of their practices and their resilience which lead border enforcement authorities and policy-makers to adapt to their new resources and routes.⁸ The aim here is not to discuss whether the accent should be set on the movement or on

the control, but rather to reflect on the terrain into which border struggles are being displaced when migrants are pushed into zones of exposure to bio-politically created environmental risks—once the visa and asylum regimes have prevented them from taking safe channels of entry. It is as if, in order to cross into Europe, migrants were forced to traverse a sort of 'state of nature,' a condition outside political and technological protection, exposed not only to the harshness of border guards and the arbitrariness of trafficking networks but also to the inclemency of 'natural' forces. As if passing through a pre-civilized condition were assumed to be an entry tax or an initiation ritual and thus, following Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), an instance of production of subjectivity in the context of global border struggles.

Risk, rescue and production of subjectivity

By being pushed into a realm of mere survival, the life of irregular border crossers is taken beyond the threshold of animalization (Agamben 1998), into a zone of sheer biological existence, but one that has been politically produced. Push-back operations that force unwanted migrants to drift at sea, thus increasing their exposure to 'nature,' allow shipwrecks and deaths at sea to be presented as events without agents, obscuring their political character behind the alleged neutrality of environmental

factors, which in turn permit border enforcement and policy-makers to avoid accountability (Schindel 2018b). Following Michel Foucault's (2003) conception of bio-power, people who are blocked at those border areas are exposed to death not as a consequence of direct killing but rather as a consequence of a power that manifests itself through the faculty of *making live* and *letting die*.⁹ It is not death by direct agency but death through abandonment to the elements, once unwanted border crossers have

⁸ The autonomy of migration approach emphasizes the intrinsic right and will of migrants to move, before and beyond the migratory policies aimed at controlling their movement. Among the most prolific authors working from this perspective in the German speaking sphere are Sabine Hess, Vassilis Tsianos, and Bernd Kasperek.

⁹ The case of the so called 'left-to-die-boat', when 63 people died of hunger and thirst in an area of the Mediterranean that was heavily monitored by military and commercial ships can be seen as a precedent of a pattern that can be found elsewhere: the apparent lack of agency for deaths that were caused by 'abandonment' to the elements and being left to their own fate (Heller et al., 2014).

been forced into a zone of production of bare life. Insofar as restrictive immigration policies and asylum regimes limit their possibility of entering Europe as citizens through regular border crossing points, these travelers are left with the option of embarking into the open and, in the best case, being found and saved as *mere human beings*. It is thus not as rights-bearing citizens but as biological objects in need of humanitarian protection that these travelers are produced when rescued or assisted.

For this reason, a simultaneous focus on the securitization of the borders and the humanitarian approach toward migrants is not contradictory, as is often suggested by some media constructions. Rather, these operations are in solidarity with each other: both serve to construct irregular border crossers as mere carriers of bare life, whether to be deterred or to be rescued. In both cases what is being produced is a zone of unprotected survival, as distinguished from the qualified life of a citizen in possession of rights.

The political creation of bare life, however, is not unilateral, nor does it remain undisputed. Agamben's characterization of bare life designates a threshold: the distinction between a qualified life and a pure biological existence should therefore not be taken as a binary opposition between two extreme and fixed categories but rather as poles on a field of tension among a range of stratified and contested statuses. Nor should the figures associated with bare life be considered as lacking agency, even if their strategies and actions take place in what seem to be paradoxical ways. In the wake of the securitization of the Aegean, illegalized migrants

trying to reach Greece from Turkey by sea used to be provided by the traffickers with a knife and the instructions to puncture their dinghies themselves if they came within sight of a border patrol ship, in order to turn their situation into a sea emergency. Instead of pushing them back to Turkish waters, the border guards would then be obliged to rescue them and bring them ashore. That migrants would put themselves in an even greater danger in order to be saved and brought ashore is a paradox that can be seen either as a criminal act or as a "survival strategy."¹⁰ The interest of this practice here, though, does not lie in its possible effectiveness or its moral implications but precisely in its meaning for the political and cultural definition of European borders today. What does it mean to put one's own life at stake in order to be admitted into Europe through a rescue operation? What sort of border is being created with this action and what definition of both Europe and border crossing underlies it?

Migrants who destroy their own boats in order to turn their crossing into a "distress at sea" operation and be rescued onto European soil are using their own survival as a token of exchange, once the legal channels of application for entry to the EU have been closed. Pushed into bare life, they choose to play this precarious condition in their own favor. Like a prisoner on hunger strike, they are investing the only value they have left: their biological existence. By radicalizing their vulnerability, they put at stake their own lives or physical integrity. The creation of spaces of bare life may thus be seen not only as a biopolitical strategy of the powerful but also as a condition that can be instrumentalized and resignified in terms of resistance and challenge. The

¹⁰ As this practice was characterized, respectively, in the words of a Lesbos politician and those of a German-Greek activist. For a further explanation of how "paradoxical agency" is meant in this context, see Schindel 2017.

self-destruction of the boats reveals how the condition of bare life to which illegalized travelers are being driven is not devoid of agency but can be used and negotiated as an advantage in the context of the radical risk of sea border crossings. At the same time, these gestures illustrate the extent to which the European borders are being produced as an axis along which bare life is both constructed and disputed.

To analyze the border struggles in these terms thus does not mean to reproduce a binary alignment between technology/culture on one side and bare life/nature on the other, as if these were two stable

and univocal categories; nor does it mean to ascribe mere helplessness and vulnerability to migrants. The goal here is rather to expose the symbolic operations that may still be informing policies, practices, and discourses of EU border management and the imaginaries they contribute to shaping. The puncturing of the boats points to the core of what is currently under dispute in the last instance at the European sea borders—namely, the displacement of unwanted border crossers into a zone of exposure to ‘nature’ or bare life. This operation, as will be discussed in the following, is consistent with discursive constructions of the irregular border crossers as beings that are contiguous with nature.

4. Digital and Geographical Borders: Who is the Subject Crossing?

The discourses attached to the technological products used for border surveillance and control reveal a parallel operation whereby illegalized migrants are constructed as continuous or contiguous with ‘nature.’ The focus in what follows is not on the projects or policies of governmental institutions but on the discourses and characterizations provided by the industry itself. It is not an analysis of factual technologies in a positivistic sense but an attempt at reading the technologies—and the narratives attached to them—as modes of describing the way Europe is coping with the undocumented border crossings, as well as an attempt at identifying their underlying definitions. These discourses express a certain logic that reproduces on a symbolic level the

material displacement of illegalized travelers into a realm of ‘nature’ and the subsequent production of a biopolitical cleavage: on the one side, the celebratory association of Europe with modern civilization and culture, involving a highly technologized condition, and on the other, the non-European, anthropological beings who are perceived instead as closer to ‘nature.’¹¹

Technology is not neutral but always shaped by the historical, social, and political conditions in which it is created. Technological artifacts can thus provide information about the values which are hegemonic in a certain historical context, as well as about the social imaginaries that permeated their

¹¹ The analysis in this chapter is based on contributions to and materials gathered at two meetings held for the industry and the community of border enforcement that were organized by Frontex: the Workshop on Innovation in Border Control (Uppsala, August 2013) and the European Day for Border Guards (Warsaw, May 2013), as well as several meetings of the biometrics industry hosted by the Biometrics Institute and the group SMI between 2014 and 2016. For a more detailed analysis and complete references, see Schindel 2016.

origin. While clearly less programmatic than the documents and papers produced by governmental institutions and think tanks, the words used by industry representatives to describe their own products may reveal underlying assumptions which can be read as highly ideological, even if—or precisely because—they are not framed as political. With the exception of texts that are explicitly oriented by politics or policies, corporate narratives are not aimed at legitimating themselves nor are they constrained by the limitations of political discourse, which is often the result of carefully weighed negotiations

A double axis

Technologies of surveillance and control can be roughly divided between those involved in monitoring to detect intrusions or anomalies at the EU external borders, on one side, and those intended to check the identity of the traveler at established border control points, on the other. In both cases the body itself, as bare biological indicator, is increasingly being taken as the measure and reference. In the different settings, however, this body is produced in different, specific ways. The logic of the devices used in each case respectively expresses a certain understanding of the border scenario and reveals a particular underlying definition of what is considered ‘human.’ In both cases there is a profound intimacy between technology and biology; but in some cases, as we will see, technology addresses the border crosser as a citizen and in other cases as bare life.

According to Gonzalez-Fuster and Gutwirth (2011), the external borders of the EU are being developed through a “double axis”: one axis consists of the creation of databases primarily designed to provide access to information about third-country

and consensus. Corporate advertising discourse can instead address in a more direct fashion hidden fears and deep imaginaries, which may be ridden with shameful impulses or prejudices. Therefore, when promoting their devices, the industry defines its aims in ways that express very concrete definitions and valorizations of the border, as well as concrete definitions of who is crossing and who is patrolling it. As I aim to show, those definitions reproduce the symbolic and material operation described above.

nationals at official border crossing points or other instances of control once inside the EU—the so called “digital borders” (Brouwer 2008)—and the other axis is deployed along the physical borders themselves, where technology is instead targeted at patrolling and controlling movement on a territory. The first group of technologies are supposed to make crossing through Border Control Points faster and smoother, especially for travelers who are not under suspicion. The patrolling of the European periphery along the blue and green borders is, on the other hand, aimed at dissuasion and tied to the very concrete materiality of the geographical boundaries. For Gonzalez-Fuster and Gutwirth (2011), the former revolves around the *who* (is entering the EU) and focuses on personal data, while the latter concentrate on *what* is happening, without relating it to identified or identifiable individuals. Following Agamben’s distinction mentioned above, I would add that the first group of technologies serves the individualization and verification of the data of a citizen (*bios*), while the latter are oriented toward the detection and interception of a vaguely defined threat registered as the presence of biological life

(*zoe*). This separation produces and reproduces a racialized cleavage between the concrete, discrete individuals who are enabled to move swiftly through the controls that rely on digitalized data, and those who are the object of surveillance at the geographical borders and, as such, targeted as an undifferentiated organic mass. Border crossings are supposed to become easier for welcome travelers but harsher and, crucially, more materially 'solid' for unwanted border crossers.

Technologies of Automated Border Crossing (ABC), which can be used by EU citizens at major international airports, serve to make the border crossing process faster and smoother for what in the language of border enforcement are called 'bona fide' or 'legitimate' travelers. For them, border crossings should become easier and more comfortable without compromising security, since experts expect a continuous growth in passenger traffic at European airports. The industry tries to keep up with the pace of change in global air traffic with the design of devices aimed at speeding up the access to control. They refer to "user friendly, self-explanatory gates (which) enable people to perform fully automated border crossing or access control in a smart and rapid way," thus "facilitating and optimizing processes" in order to "make airports and airlines more welcoming and attractive to passengers" in the increasingly competitive market of commercial air transportation.¹²

While tools like these are meant to be applied at official border control points and are directed toward an individualized person, in open border

zones the technology is oriented toward recognizing intrusions into large surfaces of land or water. In the first case it is about verifying and inscribing individuals: life is recognized, registered, systematized. Although technology draws on biometrical indicators, its goal is to trace back the person to a digitalized register of citizens and visas. Outside the border crossing points, on the other hand, the technologies are intended for the monitoring of open areas where trespassers are registered in terms of biological indicators, as signals or impulses to be detected, perceived, and intercepted. If, in the first case, border crossers are targeted as individualized and produced as identified or at least identifiable subjects, in the second, border trespassing is conceived as an abstract invasion and the indicator is the presence of undifferentiated organic life, where only the physical traces of biological existence gets registered: temperature is measured by thermal cameras; radars, sensors, and cameras capture movements; carbon dioxide sensors detect breath. This is, again, a slippage from the bios of an individual whose inscription as a citizen can be traced, into an indeterminate threat in the form of a biological presence, *zoe*.

¹² These and the quotes from the following section are taken from corporate material gathered at the conferences mentioned above. Among them there are brochures from the companies Ericsson, Thales, ESRI, ECS, GMV Groupe and Radiobarrier.

Detecting the intruder

The characterizations of this second group of technologies provided by the companies that produce them follow a pattern whereby the detection of “invasions” and “trespassing” are depicted as a double threat, posed simultaneously by intruders and by the environment, suggesting somehow that the two belong together. The product descriptions present the everyday tasks of border guards as a challenge, given the “dangerous environment” in which they work to “protect the state borders from people violating the law (smugglers or illegal immigrants),” with all threats presented as elements in a single series. Irregular immigration, illegal or criminal activity, and topographical or environmental factors belong here to one and the same category of challenges and hardships posed by the surveillance of border areas. Devices may promise “solutions” for the prevention of “illegal crossing of the State border, human trafficking, smuggling, and other trans-border crimes” (sic), thus implying irregular border trespassing and criminal activities are part of the same category. In order to prevent that, the “integrated systems” on sale offer night vision goggles, infra-red cameras, land surveillance radars, or simply “a vast number of sensors, thermal imaging cameras, radars, specially equipped mobile vehicles, etc., to be used for surveillance and alarm generation in case of illegal state border trespassing.” When explaining their target, for instance, the corporate material refers to the “complex geographical terrain, hard access to specific places, weather conditions, combined with the huge number of people

trying to cross illegally the state border and to enter into the European Union,” all of them named in the same sentence and again as part of the same series. These examples of offers by the surveillance industry promise to deliver “a thorough understanding of threat, environmental conditions, and operational issues” in “any weather,” “ensuring robust partnerships and knowledge of local constraints (terrain, climatic conditions, organization of security forces, threats, operational procedures, etc.),” and they repeatedly confuse and merge the different kinds of challenges, advertising their products as protection “against terrorism, organized crime, natural disasters, and infrastructure incidents.”

From the very description of their tasks, it becomes clear that these gadgets are not aimed at targeting subjects but at detecting hidden threats camouflaged within the landscape. Particularly suggestive is the manner in which border crossers are referred to en masse and under the same category as topographical, geographical, and meteorological constraints. ‘Nature’ is depicted as an environment full of potential threats, a space where ‘intruders’ may, like animals, emerge.¹³ The possible concrete consequence of this surveillance technology at the border—namely, the diversion of unwanted travelers into further, riskier areas in their endeavors to cross the border—is never mentioned. The fear, the mud, the cold, the subjective experience which potential crossers may face, all remain unseen. The narratives underlying these descriptions convey a common

¹³ See the animation clip from the company Radiobarrier at <http://www.radiobarrier.com/border-surveillance-1/> (last accessed April 28, 2019).

structure organized along a simple sequence: monitoring → risk-alert → threat-detection → communication to central → interception. The story ends necessarily at the interception of the intrusion, without going into any detail about the outcome of the episode and the consequences for the individuals involved. When they are depicted, the ‘intruders’ are always male and young. Social, cultural, or political framings are rare, as is any information about the possible motivations for trespassing. In the few instances when this material presents visual references to illegalized migration, the visual depictions resort to clichéd pictures of fragile boats populated with African men or persons about to drown in the sea, presented without any explanation or reference to the context in which the photo was taken.

In the industry’s brochures, an image of aseptic surveillance, thoroughness, and sophistication is combined with a rhetoric that presents the technological products as agents of their own. The presentation of the gadgets themselves follows in most cases a syntactic structure where the agent is practically missing. The only subjects of the actions are either the company who developed the product or the artefacts themselves, but their properties and capabilities are formulated in the passive voice. The concrete actions involved are mentioned in a soft gerund form or directly substantivized. There are almost no conjugated verbs, as if there were no actions. Everything is stabilized in the grammatical form of substantives. Through these rhetorical operations, technology is presented as atemporal and neutral, with little or no historical anchoring

and, especially, without agency. This conveys a sort of ‘automation’ of the specialized gadget, as if the actions were performed by themselves. As Bruno Latour put it, though, it is not “a Boeing 747” who flies, it is airlines—or societies—who fly (Latour 2002, 236). Technological instruments are part of an entanglement of social, discursive, scientific, symbolic, and affective aspects which the Western worldview tends to single out and hold apart. However, in the material analyzed here, technology operates as if in a void and is presented as apolitical and value-free. In this way, these corporate discourses legitimate an understanding of the borders and its conflicts which, on the contrary, does carry in itself certain values, political framings, and ideological assumptions. Thus, this material provides (involuntarily) rich information about the underlying definitions of border crossing and the actors and environment involved.

This depiction of border crossings as ahistorical, extra-social ‘intrusions’ is indeed compatible with the vocabulary and approaches used by Frontex itself. In its Risk Analysis Reports, the EU border agency evaluates its own activity using the “detection of illegal border crossings” as its basic unit of measurement. The effectivity of border protection is reported as a decrease in the number of “detections.” Also perceived here more as an undetermined biological threat than as concrete individuals, this treatment of illegalized travelers matches Foucault’s (2003) characterization of state racism’s biopolitics: they do not represent a concrete enemy but a potential risk to the population that is characterized in

¹⁴ This creation of a sort of biologicized danger is reproduced when local authorities complain about the diseases and epidemics the migrants allegedly bring along—even though doctors active in the field attest that most health conditions they present are directly related to the conditions of their travel and are therefore also politically produced.

biological terms.¹⁴ When analyzing “risk,” Frontex’s reports refer to “seasonal” tendencies which, like the weather, have neither agent nor cause. The reports also use terms such as “migratory traffic,” “flows,” low or high (migratory) “pressure,” or “seasonal tendencies,” as if describing physical or meteorological phenomena that exist outside of history or politics. The “intruder,” again, is defined as a biological threat rather than as a historically

situated individual whose actions take place in the context of certain political, economic, or social constraints. Like in the corporate material described above, the “intrusion” is characterized as an ahistorical, apolitical phenomenon and presented as continuous and contiguous with the dangers of the elements.

The challenge of biometrics

The two types of technologies characterized above, those targeting the individual and those aimed at detecting an undifferentiated living mass, convey differentiated approaches to—and underlying definitions of—the persons crossing the border. However, the different types shouldn’t be understood here as constituting two fixed, stable, and radically separated realms. In fact, both politicians and technology providers are working toward an increasing conflation of instruments targeted at digital and geographical borders, and their growing entanglement presents an additional challenge for border studies. Policy-makers and security companies highlight the value of gathering and combining data proceeding from various types of sensors and mobile devices and linking it with big databases in order to validate that information in real time. Information originating from diverse sources scattered geographically on the ground and in the

air or sea and communicated via radars, cameras, or drones should be able to interact with larger databanks. The aim of border enforcement authorities is to centralize, combine, and operationalize information dispersed throughout existing data systems, making them interoperable.¹⁵ This means, precisely, connecting the detection of a signal in an open environment to some repository of big data. Information retrieved in the ‘open’ shall be linked to big data hubs, operated either by Frontex or the EU member states.

Some scholars express concern about the possible conflation of both approaches, since the coupling of the information systems with the technologies deployed at the geographical borders raises legal issues related to personal data and the right to privacy (Gonzalez-Fuster and Gutwirth 2011). Tsianos and Kuster’s (2016a) analysis of EURODAC points

¹⁵ The various systems of control and surveillance already in existence, in development, or in planning, such as Eurodac, the Visa Information System (VIS), the Schengen Information System (SIS) I and II, and the False and Authentic Documents European Image Archiving System (FADO), EUROSUR, the Entry-Exit System (EES) and a Registered Traveller Programme (RTP), should be able to link and share data with each other from any remote border control point so that some officers at the external border have access to a certain degree of information about each individual (see Tsianos/Kuster 2016b). Even if the European Agency for Large-scale IT Systems (EU-LISA) stated its aim of maintaining complete separation of data in the different systems under its administration (EURODAC, VIS and SIS II), an extended interoperability of systems seems to be on the horizon for the authorities involved.

to an intensification in border control within the Schengen territory, in contrast to the operations along the external border: the biometric capture of individualized data at the first access point is aimed at a growing digitalization of border control which will render “the mobile and volatile bodies of migrants machine-readable” through their fingerprints. A system that has been designated as a “surveillant assemblage” operates by “abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows” that are then “reassembled into distinct ‘data doubles’” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 606).

While acknowledging the complexity of this tendency toward greater entanglements of ‘geographical’ and ‘digital’ borders, discerning between

the two of them analytically, as I have done in this section, allows us to reflect on how the border crossings themselves are defined and framed and on the material and symbolic boundaries that each of them conveys. Stressing the particularities of each mode sheds light on the differential ways in which border crossers get constructed.¹⁶ Racialized constructions of the subjects who are crossing the border could be leading toward the emergence and consolidation of new ways of cataloguing the human, indicating a new paradigm in which not all bodies are ‘read’ in the same way nor granted the same prerogatives. By placing the criteria for assessment of the travelers’ ‘true identity’ in their very bodies, biometric controls are pushing border struggles into the realm of the biological, which thus becomes another field of contestation (Scheel 2013).

5. The Boundary Culture/Nature: A Stage for Border Struggles

Along the EU borders, not only concrete crossings are at stake but symbolic and cultural meanings as well. The material analyzed above illustrates how the deployment of technology at the EU borders assumes and reproduces a boundary between Europe as a modern, civilized, highly technologized realm, while at the same time pushing unwanted travelers, both symbolically and materially, into a zone of proximity with ‘nature.’ Europe’s own hegemonic self-definition is revealed to be grounded

in a Eurocentric substrate that permanently distances the Moderns from the realm of ‘nature’ and its constraints. The material displacement of migrants into a zone of exposure to the elements, or bare life, is complemented by discourses that construct migration as on a continuum with the realm of nature, in opposition to and separate from Europe as a technologically developed world. These discourses thus reproduce the Moderns’ defining gesture: one that allocates the non-Western

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, preliminary analysis of the processes of subjectification involved in biometric border controls suggest a similar and convergent operation in which some bodies are produced as closer to ‘biology,’ while others are produced as more compatible with biometric technology. Critics have called attention to the racialized effects of biometric technologies, which have been programmed with a normative notion of the ‘body’ in mind: a normative production whereby certain ethnic and demographic groups are more likely than others to produce the so-called “failure to enroll.” These bodies, consistent with the analysis presented here, are less compatible with advanced technologies than others (see Schindel 2018a).

'other' along a continuum with nature, meanwhile placing themselves within the sphere of legitimate scientific knowledge and value-free technology. This deeply racialized separation, which is typical of modernity, is what Latour (1993) calls the Great Divide. Although the Eurocentric assumptions underlying this dualism between 'nature' and 'culture' has been the object of extensive scholarly refutation, it still seems to be active and productive in the logics that inform the practices and discourses of border surveillance and control.

The paradoxical dynamics of immigration that expose an increasing number of persons to the forces of 'nature' demand that we rethink the role and meaning of technological devices and the definitions of the human which they imply. Whether a *bona fide* traveler passing smoothly through an automated border control that checks her biometrical data, or a potential 'intruder' detected by sensors or thermal cameras, every technology expresses a certain definition of the border scenario and reveals a particular underlying definition of what is 'human.'

Not so bare a life: smart phones, tablets, agency

Only a few years ago, border guards and authorities stationed at the Greek islands would express their surprise at finding migrants carrying state of the art tablets and smart phones, or at discovering they were active and savvy on digital social networks. As if the condition of being in transit were incompatible with the use of high-tech, such comments only reiterate a symbolic displacement of irregular border crossers into a pre- or extra-technological zone. Indeed, the border struggle is often played out in terms of the access one does or does not have to such technologies, which are becoming highly relevant in supporting migrants on the move. Like those refugees in the camp at Calais who accepted the local residents' offers to charge their cell phones or connect through their wifi networks for free, there is an apparent contrast between high connectivity and the exposure and risks of a life in the open. It may be no coincidence, after all, that camps in Calais or Igoumenitsa bear names such as "jungle" or "mountain." The fact that border crossers travel equipped with smart or satellite phones and

GPS, or that they rely on information circulating on social media, does not contradict the point I am making here but rather underlines the importance of the cleavage exposure/technology as a faultline of conflict and a stage where border struggles play out.

Just a few hours after his arrival on the island of Chios, in October 2015, a Syrian physician escaping civil war in his country related to me the traumatizing circumstances of his sea crossing from Turkey. On the sea, the group he was travelling with had been intercepted by a patrol crew who destroyed the motor of their dinghy boat. They then started to use their oars, but when shortly thereafter those too got broken they had no choice but to row with their bare hands. Although they had GPS and the cell phone signal was strong, because they were propelling the boat with their hands they were moving so slowly that they couldn't see on the display whether they were moving in the right direction or not. It was only after several hours that they realized they were

approaching Greece. There was a logistical incompatibility between the means with which they were equipped for travel and the violent downgrade to their pre-technological condition. Hence, when the patrol crew broke the boat's motor, they were not only trying to prevent or complicate the travelers' way to Greece; the attack was also a way of displacing them into a terrain of technological inferiority—which, in the Eurocentric construction of modernity, means pre-modern, closer to nature, less civilized. Not only were their plans to reach Europe, but also their subjectivity was being targeted with that action. Like when uniformed patrols would steal the mobile phones of migrants and throw them into the sea—there have been reports of this happening systematically in the Aegean—these are ways of simultaneously humiliating migrants and complicating the logistics of their travel, pushing them both symbolically and materially into a pre-technological state.¹⁷

Since 2015 there have been continuous transformations in the pattern of sea border patrol, especially along the Central Mediterranean route. The introduction of civil vessels aimed at providing Search and Rescue (SAR) to migrants on the high seas is changing the configuration of the European maritime borderscapes. As Paolo Cuttitta (2017) has shown, far from being a naturalized, neutral space, the sea thus becomes a field for agency and activism, a site not only where lives are rescued but also where the supposedly extra-political realm of the sea becomes re-politicized. What once seemed

to be external to society and politics, such as the contingencies of navigation on the high seas where certain travelers are put at the mercy of the environment and the elements, turns out to be a highly political and contested space.

It has been suggested that a *bio-political schism* between the global South and the global North is currently being produced by the border regime, in the form of the exposure of certain populations to an increasing risk of death (Buckel and Wissel 2010, Weber and Pickering 2011). This paper argues that this schism also relies on—and reproduces—a continuous cleavage between the realm of technology and civilization on the one hand, and immediate exposure to the constraints of the elements on the other. The biopolitical boundary between the qualified existence of a citizen and bare biological life should alert us to the terrain into which migrants attempting to enter the EU border regime are being pushed: one of survival, of confrontation with the forces of 'nature,' where a symbolic boundary and the production of subjectivities are also at stake (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). However, the production of this schism should be not understood as a deterministic, uncontested, or unilateral operation exercised by the powerful but as the terrain of an ongoing battle played out along border zones. Nor should the condition associated with bare life be seen as if deprived of agency or margin for contestation; rather, it is an elastic dimension in which movements and meanings are and will always be negotiated anew.

¹⁷ Shortly before they reached the island of Chios, the group was seen and escorted to the coast by a ship from the Hellenic Coast Guard. Some travelers state that this was the same boat and the same crew that had intercepted and attacked them in the night. Such a practice would indeed be perfectly compatible with the pattern mentioned above that simultaneously dissuades and rescues, since both rely on—and produce—bare life.

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