

Notes on Elspeth Guild, *Understanding security and migration in the twenty-first century*, CEPS, 21 October 2009

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### 1. 'Critical Migration studies'

A valuable new concept with new potential for understanding the European reality.

Defined as 'The process of deconstructing the state's claim in the face of resistance by individuals' (p. 11).

Orientation of the work: a critique of state-centric understandings of migration.

This is an important approach, however one might add that the 'critical' must mean critical to the concept at large, not only to the state based concept.

Most notably what we see in something called 'critical migration studies' is a fusion of security and migration. The concept-pair becomes a concept of its own. A certain security and migration are inseparably linked.

('Security is henceforth unthinkable without migration and migration unthinkable without security'.)

There are a number of axes along which this link is changing.

Brief commentary on **7 concerns**:

(1) The state;

- (2) The question of the object of migration studies;
- (3) Time and the temporality of migration insecurity;
- (4) Normativity;
- (5) Migration and the security imaginary;
- (6) Multiple insecurities and 'security claims';
- (7) Porosity of categories and borders.

*Point of contention:* the analysis of the individual.

### **1.1. The state**

The state's role in migration and security is rapidly changing.

First, attention needs to be drawn to the complex and composite nature of state's security, complicating the assumption that the state can be understood as a simple object of security.

Second, the importance of non-state objects of security needs to be better conceptualized, that is, security that is related to that of state security but not identical to it.

These objects can be divided into two kinds: on the one hand, individuals and sub-state groups, and, on the other, trans-state entities.

### **1.2. The object of migration studies**

The object of migration studies is beyond migration studies.

Guild has the courage to stake the claim to a new field of studies.

She identifies migration studies, positions it relative to a number of other fields (of course, most notably studies), and suggests what might belong to it.

This is good categorical science.

The real interest and originality however lies in the observation that also migration studies, even as it is constituting itself, is unsure of itself.

This is both its promise and its curse.

The forces at work in migration studies, its origins and sources, its objects and referents, its aims and ambitions, either come from outside of migration studies, or direct themselves outside of migration studies.

Like any healthy and coherent field of studies, migration studies is self-critical, self-referential and self-aware to the point of threatening itself.

The migration-security nexus revolves around a logic of otherness, of inside-ness and outside-ness, inclusion and exclusion, classification and porosity of classifications.

It overlaps with questions of identity and belonging whose structures and effects mirror us all, migrants or not.

In this sense, 'we are all migrants'. There is something structuring, determining, about the conceptualizing of migration debate.

### **1.3. Time and the temporality of threat**

Thinking migration security requires a kind of mutation of time, a time warp.

Guild's book title refers to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yet the referent of migration studies (like that of security studies) lies outside of the present, outside of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The ills, dangers and insecurities of migration stem from a trace of the past and they indicate the fears of the future.

#### **1.4. Normativity**

There is a certain kind of value linkage to be associated with migration.

It seems impossible to hold an entirely objective or scientific posture toward it.

Not only does the politicization of migration issues often link directly to our deep sense of value. It seems inescapable.

Migration studies flies in an unusual tight orbit with the value positions of the society toward whom it is migration.

On the one hand migration is always relative: it is determined and defined by the legal categories that specify and regulate the official inclusion and exclusion in the polity, be it a nation-state, community, Schengen, EU or other.

On the other hand, there is a drive to essentialize or absolutize a certainty set of identity based values.

Who we are seems clear. The *rightness* of upholding seems to emit from our self-understanding as sovereign.

Modern sovereign subjectivity, the subjectivity of the sovereign is a kind of guarantee for the self.

Migration represents a kind of sovereign insecurity in the sense that it threatens the identity of the 'we' that constitutes the sovereign populus.

### **1.5. Migration and the security imaginary.**

A primary impetus for migration perception and policy is a construction of insecurity.

Migration is lived as insecurity.

It is impossible in effect to think migration without security (or insecurity)

Migration is inseparable from a certain politics of fear.

The political force of the discourse of migration is not identical to the legal and bureaucratic categories that are the object of migrations studies. The one does not map onto the other.

This means that migration law cannot entirely regulate the threat or fear that emerges from the practice or application of migration law.

There is always a control issue, slippage between what is understood as migration, the migrant, migration policy—and what generates political reaction to it, (and what is in turn generated by virtue of political reaction<sup>9</sup>).

### **1.6. Multiple insecurities and 'security claims' (p. 20)**

We hear often of the way in which migration can have a negative impact on the security of host societies, how it can introduce economic competition and undermine job security for nationals, how it can be associated with particular health risks, how it can have implications for security where it involves criminal activities, how it can affect national identity, and how it can be associated with the rise of xenophobia and discrimination.

But the need for security also challenges migrants in a variety of ways.

First, insecurity is a motivation for migration. It is often one form or another of insecurity that motivates the movement of migrants provoking them to internal displacement or to sometimes risky trips to other countries.

Second, there is insecurity in migration. Many migrants face insecurity in the course of their migrations. This is particularly the case for irregular migrants. Greater risks are being taken by people trying to move illegally from poorer to richer parts of the world, for example crossing the Mexico-United States border or the Mediterranean from North Africa to Southern Europe. A specific category of irregular migrants for whom this is often the case includes the victims of migrant smugglers and human traffickers. Another category of concern in this context includes those who become stranded in transit countries.

Third, there is insecurity in destination countries. Some migrants are also insecure in their destination countries. This is particularly the case of irregular migrants who work illegally and are often subject to exploitation. The victims of human trafficking—and important migrant group—are not free to decide on the activities in which they engage. They are often forced into low-paid, insecure and degrading work from which they may find it impossible to escape and for which they receive trivial or no compensation. More generally, many migrants, including those living and working in a regular manner, experience marginalization or discrimination.

### **1.7. Porosity of categories and borders**

The challenge raised by migration studies is that the regulation of migration escapes the legal field and becomes the object of bureaucratic controls.

But where legal regulations fail, bureaucratic regulation—for better or worse—can succeed.

Thus the porosity of borders can be and indeed is varied through different forms of resistance to entry and free movement.

This can range from the opening hours of consulates to the fees for visas, the location of embassies, the procedures of filtering etc.

## **2. Point of contention: the predominance of the individual**

One of the pillars of the book is a concern for the disaggregation of the individual from 'a flow or stock of people'.

The individual is a primary focus.

The book claims a movement from state-individual.

It announces as one of its primary aims the 'individual' and his or her movement.

I wonder if this point of departure doesn't prevent us from capturing the actual movement of migration thinking and may even preclude a true critical migration studies.

I am tempted to suggest that migration has a collectivizing imaginary force that not only erases or occludes the individuality of the individual, but actually does its work by replacing or transforming the individuality of the individual.

The political imaginary applied by authorities of migration functions poorly on the individual level. (Both in terms of handling the large flows of individuals in practical terms, definitional and categorical terms, but also in terms of handling the imagined migration.)

On the contrary, the inseparability of migration and security emerges from a certain retreat of the individual.

The individual—understood in the classical Enlightenment political conception of the individual, understood as the concentration of rights and responsibilities, the seat of political subjectivity and the primary subject of the liberal state—is no longer the primary referent of either security or migration.

On the contrary, the new way of regarding migration-as-security is better characterized as *biopolitical*: It is precisely a refocusing of politics away from the individual, the individual's experience and intrinsic right to the 'security of person' (Paragraph 13 of UDHR) and onto the population.

Not only are individual rights put into play by the conflict of rights regimes (states versus the international).

The annihilation of political Identity or citizenship is often a strategy.

'Undocumented migrant' is a new and problematic legal category.

What are the political rights (as opposed to human rights) of those without political identity?

Citizenship is itself problematic and contested, both conceptually and relative to migrants.

Groups are more prominent than before, managing organizing according to ethnicity, religion, and culture. We distribute risks relative to religious orientation.

Migration as security threat, migrants as security threats and the complexity of the migration-security nexus are all threats in their own rights.