

Alison Mountz, *Seeking Asylum: Human Smuggling and Bureaucracy at the Border*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN: 2010, xxxiii, xxxiii, 209p., ISBN: 978-0-8166-6538-9 (paper)

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Dr. Alison Mountz is Associate Professor of Geography and Canada Research Chair in Global Migration Studies, in the Balsillie School for International Affairs, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. Mountz' most recent book *Seeking Asylum* (2010) is the culmination of several years of work regarding migration and states' efforts to control transnational mobility.

Taking as its opening case, *Seeking Asylum* considers the event of the arrival of a boat carrying asylum seekers to the coast of British Columbia, Canada in 1999 from Fujian province in China. Mountz deftly demonstrates the role of both the state and the media in creating a crisis, drawing upon the visibility of boats to present a threat to the general public, while actively criminalizing those on board. Mountz argues that while states may at times appear elusive they are both locatable and knowable. More specifically, they are comprised of individuals who are frequently forced to operate in a reactive and ad hoc manner, responding to crises, both real and perceived, as shown in the case of a boat arrival to British Columbia. In turn, these supposedly exceptional crises are often used to implement increasingly restrictive measures, furthering the securitization of migration.

One of the most important contributions Mountz makes is in sharing her relatively unique ethnographic approaches to studying the statecraft of policing and detaining asylum seekers and migrant communities. One example is through the practice of "studying up," where Mountz spent several months within the offices of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), exploring the "grounded daily practices" of government employees, particularly in "constructing the border." This is a particularly insightful and helpful study in demonstrating the largely mundane day-to-day operations that often lead to exceptional policies and practices of policing migrants and securing borders.

While the Canadian states' response to boats carrying asylum seekers forms the opening section to the book, Mountz also considers several other critical spaces of control employed by states to protect their borders, including airports, detention centers, and the offices of bureaucrats tasked with responding to migrant arrivals. Most important are the use of "extra-territorial" spaces such as islands and camps. This externalization of border controls – and indeed of the border itself – effectively distances potential asylum seekers from ever setting foot on the sovereign territory of a destination state. Most importantly, as Mountz illustrates, these extra-territorial policing and detention practices have a direct impact upon the fundamental rights of asylum seekers, keeping them at arm's

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length from legal measures and human rights protections that can allow asylum seekers to lodge claims. Offshore detention and processing, as in the case of Australia, keeps refugees and asylum seekers isolated, placing them in an ambiguous and often stateless position. Meanwhile “front-end” controls – such as placing immigration agents in foreign countries’ airports – aim to stop these populations from even beginning their journey. Contrasted with the use of the visibility of boats to create crises, these extra-territorial measures in turn keep migrants and asylum seekers largely invisible from the public eye.

At its heart then, *Seeking Asylum* is concerned with territory and nation state sovereignty. Mountz asserts that there is a need for social scientists to understand the changing nature of sovereignty and its contradictions, while recognizing that the state is a transnational actor that often operates well beyond its official territorial boundaries. Through the manipulation and production of particular geographies, states are able to control and police migration within and beyond their sovereign territory. The “archipelago of enforcement controls” – islands and remote sites to create exclusionary geographies – are employed increasingly by states as spatial responses and fixes to the movement of people.

A particular strength of *Seeking Asylum* is its comparative and transnational focus, taking Australia, the U.S., Canada and the EU within its scope. Mountz expertly shows both the differences and commonalities between states in their response to human mobility, recognizing importantly that individual state responses cannot be considered within a vacuum. Through various ethnographic methods employed, Mountz illustrates clearly that states do not act alone, and typically learn from each other.

Seeking Asylum is a highly relevant book for those concerned with the use of detention as a means for controlling transnational mobility and as a geopolitical strategy deployed by states seeking to “protect their borders.” While this will be of most interest to geographers, scholars across the social sciences, as well as critical legal studies, whose interests are in migration, will find this book invaluable. Earlier chapters could also stand alone as case studies for those teaching qualitative and ethnographic methods courses.

While some of Mountz’ case studies draw upon events from the late 1990s, *Seeking Asylum* remains highly relevant and informative to current “crises” taking place across the globe. The Australian government’s current and continuing impasse over whether to process migrants and asylum seekers “offshore” and it’s recent efforts to construct the “Malaysian solution,” and Italy’s continuation of its “friendship agreement” with the new Libyan authorities to take returned migrants, amongst many other examples, speak clearly to ongoing efforts of extra-territorial practices in the control of human mobility.

I would like to have seen a chapter dedicated specifically to the social movements engaged in the battles against the ongoing criminalization of asylum seekers and migrant communities, and the continuing use of isolating practices of off-shore detention. Mountz refers to these movements throughout the book, providing several interesting and exciting examples of how groups are organizing to work in solidarity with those in detention, however, these remain largely unexplored. Second, and related, I was eager to hear what alternatives to the current global practices of deterrence,

interdiction, incarceration, and deportation by nation states are possible – too often do I find discussions which take us to the brink of exploring and developing real, grounded alternatives and ways forward, only to stop there. This is something sorely missing in academic writing, and which I strongly believe that Mountz could contribute greatly to. I look forward to seeing these discussions of “alternative geographies” (p.169) come to light in future migration studies.