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## Review – Vernacular Border Security

Written by Ben Rosher

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# Review – Vernacular Border Security

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BEN ROSHER, FEB 10 2022

### ***Vernacular Border Security: Citizens' Narratives of Europe's 'Migration Crisis'***

**By Nick Vaughan-Williams**

**Oxford University Press, 2021**

Situating his investigation in the context of the so-called 2015 'migration crisis' and the subsequent discourses of "taking back control of borders" among various European polities, in *Vernacular Border Security* (2021) Nick Vaughan-Williams asks a simple yet overlooked question – "Why is it that the intensification of EU border security appears to have heightened rather than diminished border anxieties among EU citizens?" (p.3). Ultimately, Vaughan-Williams' goal is to open up space for alternative policy responses to challenges posed by migration that have been foreclosed by the dominance of securitising frames, and use citizen vernaculars to "render visible actually existing alternative ways of living with strangers" (p.4).

Briefly, vernacular security studies have developed primarily from the anthropological work of Bubandt (2005) and gained traction among scholars working in critical security, border, migration, and citizenship studies (see for example: Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2017); Gillespie et al. (2010); Gillespie and O'Loughlin (2009); Jarvis (2019); Jarvis and Lister (2013); Löffmann and Vaughan-Williams (2018); Rumford (2013); Vaughan-Williams and Stevens (2016)). In particular, it is Bubandt's (2005, p. 276) observation that elite security discourses and practices are variously "accommodated and undermined" by "local universes" with their own security conceptualisations and requirements, that has inspired the vernacular turn as a bottom-up approach that "speaks *with* rather than *for* 'ordinary' people" (Jarvis and Lister, 2013, p. 158, italics in original), and is interested in "how diverse publics conceptualise security in navigating daily life and the political implications of that activity" (p.9).

Vaughan-Williams begins his investigation by tracing the construction of the dual security and humanitarian 'crisis' narratives and practices deployed by the EU Commission, and their respective deconstructions in the critical security, border, and migration literatures, opening up spaces of contestation and ambiguity. These spaces are further probed through an astute critical evaluation of elite claims, generally based on public opinion data, that increased border controls are "not only justified but *demand*ed by EU citizens" (p.60, italics in original).

From setting out the context within which tougher EU-wide border controls have been justified, Vaughan-Williams attends to the second dimension of his motivating puzzle by sketching "pen portraits" of select EU states in order to elucidate how post-truth narratives and populist calls to "take back control" have continued to stoke border anxieties among European populations even in the face of increased border controls (pp.72-90). The pen portraits briefly consider populist discourses in Germany, Spain, Greece and in particular the UK and Hungary. Vaughan-Williams gives detailed attention to the foundational role that migration and border control played in the UK during the 2016 EU referendum, specifically the role of Nigel Farage and his "breaking point" poster; and to Viktor Orbán's construction of razor wire fences along Hungary's borders with Serbia and Croatia, withdrawal from the Dublin Regulation and Common European Asylum System in the latter half of 2015, and his poster campaigns claiming that "The Paris attacks have been committed by immigrants" (pp.72-7, 86-90).

Having situated his research puzzle, the paradox of increased border controls coinciding with increased border anxieties, Vaughan-Williams turns to the core of his analysis – exploring vernacular narratives of EU citizens, their

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border anxieties, and how diverse publics reinforce and/or disrupt elite narratives of increased border control that are being deployed in their name.

Vaughan-Williams develops a vernacular approach to the study of border security that seeks to clarify the role of *narrative* in vernacular securities by drawing on Rancière (2004) to distinguish vernacular narratives as those that have the potential to disrupt the police (dominant political) order, and situating subjects within these narratives through the *discursive positioning* of Davies and Harré (1990) in order that that conversations between ‘ordinary’ people can be “analysed *politically*” (p.15, italics in original).

Methodologically, Vaughan-Williams follows what has become the standard approach to studies of vernacular security, conducting focus groups of diverse publics to gain insights into intersubjective constructions of (in)security (Jarvis and Lister, 2013; Löffmann and Vaughan-Williams, 2018; Vaughan-Williams, 2021; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2016), and supersedes it by conducting 24 focus groups involving 179 participants over a two-year period in 11 cities across 5 states (Germany, Greece, Hungary, Spain, and the UK).

Within the conversations, Vaughan-Williams finds that border vernaculars are heterogenous; variously reinforcing, reframing, and rejecting crisis narratives. Particularly, Vaughan-Williams discerns two recurring themes that are integral to understanding why increased border controls are leading to heightened border anxieties among EU citizens. The first is that, for many participants, contra elite-narratives, migration was not the primary referent of crisis. Rather, a “constellation of crises” drawing in issues of identity and economic and demographic anxieties were more pertinent in their daily lives. The second, and I suggest most interesting, is that border anxieties are arising not specifically from increased migration or activity at the border, but from “information gaps” – an absence of knowledge about what is happening at EU and state borders, that has been actively produced through ‘post-truth’ crisis narratives by populist actors, and aided by a lack of trust in mainstream politicians and media, which feed feelings of a “loss of control” (pp.98, 122-130). In order to address these information gaps, participants make demands for “greater state investment in information-based forms of bordering” (p.144), challenging the dominant forms of deterrent bordering being deployed at EU and state levels.

The focus group contributions make *Vernacular Border Security* a richly detailed empirical work and worthy of recommendation on that basis alone. However, I would suggest that it is in theorising with and within vernaculars that Vaughan-Williams makes his most novel and compelling intervention. Vaughan-Williams brings ontological security theory and psycho-social perspectives on security *into* his investigation to make sense of the vernacular contributions, consistent with the idea of vernacular security as an approach that relies on its conceptual emptiness rather than a theory in its own right (Jarvis, 2019). Vaughan-Williams (p.145-158) argues that ontological security theory (Giddens, 1991; Laing, 2010 [1960]) lacks the ability to explain the border anxieties identified in the citizen vernaculars as increased bordering has not alleviated these insecurities among EU citizens. He goes on to suggest that the psycho-sociological approach of Brown (2010) supplements the shortcomings identified in ontological security theory, by recognising that increased bordering stimulates anxieties to “which further bordering appears to be the only solution”, thereby resolving the paradox of increased border controls leading to heightened border anxieties by noting that they are “tautological dynamics that feed off each other” (pp.158-165). However, Vaughan-Williams (p.169) observes that this diagnosis can only permit the reification of demands for increased border security. He suggests that Kristeva’s *ethic of strangeness* (1991) provides a way of “refusing the terms of existing debates and offers an alternative paradigm for living with others” (p.169); making politically visible the types of contestation to securitising narratives that have been practised across Europe through open borders protests, Willkommenskultur in Germany, and found in the focus group vernaculars wherein participants discussed their individual and collective experiences of helping and being helped by those who arrived in Europe during the so-called ‘migration crisis’.

The inevitable trade-off in conducting such a broad investigation is that the “pen portraits” that contextualise country cases are necessarily simplified. For example, while Nigel Farage was a central actor in the Brexit campaign, and the leave campaigns *did* employ securitising frames toward migration through the breaking point poster and the oft-repeated yet misleading claim that Turkey was soon to join the EU (Morris, 2019), securitisation was not the only frame used. In a similar move to the EU’s dual security/humanitarian framing of the ‘migration crisis’ (Squire et al.,

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2021; Vaughan-Williams, 2021), a contrasting *fairness* frame was deployed by the official Vote Leave campaign, who were targeting voters turned off by Leave.EU's openly hostile approach to immigration (Shipman, 2016). Vote Leave argued that a points-based immigration system would be "fairer, more humane, and better for the economy" (Vote Leave, 2016a) and would "stop discriminating on the basis of where you come from" (Vote Leave, 2016b). These contextual nuances could help in gaining a deeper understanding in how focus group participants construct their vernaculars.

These issues do not, however, compromise the vernacular approach Vaughan-Williams has developed. On the contrary, I suggest they should be taken as invitations to conduct more in-depth studies into each of the countries under analysis as well as countries outwith Europe (as Bubandt's original intention was to challenge Eurocentric understandings of security), and build on the vital work that has been started here. *Vernacular Border Security* is arguably the most conceptually and empirically ambitious contribution to the recent vernacular turn in critical security studies to date. It is not only an accomplished piece of research which should be of immense value to policymakers, but an agenda setting piece for critical border, security, and citizenship studies.

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### About the author:

Ben Rosher is a political sociologist and PhD candidate at Queen's University Belfast. His research is situated primarily in the field of critical border studies with a particular interest in bordering practices and vernacular approaches to understanding experiences of bordering, security, citizenship, and migration. His PhD research explores how “taking back control” of the Irish border after Brexit is, on the one hand, envisaged by the UK government and, on the other, how the border is being enacted and experienced by British, Irish, and EEA citizens in their daily lives. Ben is on Twitter @BenRosher.