
21. Contesting borders in the ‘age of migration’: progressive border activism in the US and Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Cross-border movements have reached a historic peak in the ‘age of migration’ (Castles et al., 2014, p. 1). In response, various countries in the so-called Global North have, particularly since the 1980s, reacted with tightened immigration policies (de Genova, 2002; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016), including stricter border controls, increased deportations, and the widespread encampment of asylum seekers (Agier, 2011; Boswell, 2003; de Genova, 2017; Schuster, 2004). Furthermore, recent years have witnessed an intensified selection and differentiation of migrants into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving,’ ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate,’ and ultimately ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ (Gibney, 2014; Neumayer, 2005). Today, the decisive determinant for survival, access to basic services, and the protection of human rights is the ‘birthright lottery’ (Shachar, 2009, p. 1). ‘[C]itizenship laws assigning political membership by birthright play a crucial role in the distribution of basic social conditions and life opportunities on a global scale’ (ibid., p. 3) or in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, the ability to freely cross borders ‘has become the most powerful and most coveted stratifying factor’ (Bauman, 1998, p. 9). To draw attention to the violence of borders and the marginalization of ‘non-citizens,’ migrant rights movements have gradually emerged in various countries in North America and Europe from the late 1970s onward (Giugni & Passy, 2001; Monforte, 2014; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016; Steinhilper, 2021; Zepeda-Millán, 2017). Imogen Tyler and Katarzyna Marciniak speak of ‘an explosion’ (Tyler & Marciniak, 2013, p. 143) of migrant rights activism in the last two decades, making it one of the most prominent progressive movements of our times.

Despite this increasing empirical and societal relevance, the scholarly reflection on migrant rights activism has only recently grown. So far, the literatures emerging on the issue in the US and Europe have rarely interacted with each other and have developed distinct foci. Against this background, and as scholars located on both sides of the Atlantic, in this chapter, we compare migrant rights activism in these two regions of the Global North. More specifically, we focus on *progressive border activism* as one of its central variants.

Research on borders has illustrated the emergence of complex and diffused ‘borderzones’ reaching far beyond the geographical lines separating national territories (Squire, 2010). Our comparison maps the variety of borderzones in the US and Europe, including their unique symbolic, social, and material qualities and the distinct forms of activism that have emerged in response (see also Monforte & Steinhilper, 2023).

While the term *border activism* as such could also be associated with *regressive*, right-wing exclusionary practices such as the Identitarian movement’s campaign ‘Defend Europe’

or the ‘Patriots for America’ militia group patrolling the US-Mexican border, *progressive* border activism challenges fatal border policies, advocates universal human rights, and fights global inequalities. Progressive border activists provide humanitarian aid, make border violence against migrants visible, and raise public awareness. As we will show, the repertoires of contention as well as the beliefs, values, and discursive frames that guide these activists are heterogeneous and differ in the United States and Europe. Next to these context specificities, however, the analysis reveals parallels in progressive border activism, thereby reflecting global inequalities that manifest in the exclusionary and violent nature of borders.

To unpack our argument, the chapter is structured as follows: we start with the North American context and carve out the geography, policies, and laws of US borders, followed by an empirical overview of the types of border activism employed by migrant rights movements in this region. We subsequently mirror the analysis of contested borders for the European context. Both regional analyses of border activism not only map the empirical contours of the respective fields of activism but also show how scholars have theoretically engaged with the issue. In a final synthesis, we note similarities and differences in the forms of border activism in the two regions and at the potential bridges between scholarship on contested borders in the US and Europe. The chapter thereby not only seeks to contribute to the advancement of scholarly inquiry but also to a ‘public sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005) on the role and challenges of migrant rights activism more broadly.

PROGRESSIVE BORDER ACTIVISM IN THE US

Fortress America

The number of undocumented migrants entering the United States began to noticeably increase during the 1970s due to the 1964 termination of the US-Mexico guestworker agreement, known as the ‘Bracero Program,’ and the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. Together, these events facilitated the criminalization of Mexican migration by closing one of the major legal routes Mexicans had to formally enter the country and, for the first time, putting a cap on Western Hemisphere migration while continuing to recruit and use hundreds of thousands of now ‘illegalized’ Mexican laborers (de Genova, 2004; Ngai, 2005). It was during this period, and in the context of a slumping economy and energy crisis, that nativist sentiments began to rise across the US, and Richard Nixon became the first president to propose building a physical barrier along the country’s entire southern border (Grandin, 2019). However, it was President Bill Clinton who – under public and Congressional Republican pressure – oversaw what was, up until then, the largest degree of border militarization in US history.

This border buildup included the tripling of the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s (INS) budget and a dramatic increase in the number of Border Patrol agents and high-tech military weapons and equipment used to bolster and expand the country’s physical and ‘virtual’ borders (Andreas, 2000; Longo, 2018). Enacted through measures such as the infamous ‘Operation Gatekeeper,’ was a new strategy for border policing called ‘prevention through deterrence’ (PTD) (Nevins, 2010). PTD’s goal was to thwart undocumented immigration by purposely putting the lives of crossing migrants in ‘mortal danger’ through establishing border fortifications designed to funnel migrants away from urban areas and into ‘rugged mountains and brutal deserts’ (Herweck & Nicol, 2018, p. 13). The policy seems to have failed.

Rather than decline, the number of undocumented immigrants in the US skyrocketed from 5.7 million in 1995 to 11.1 million in 2005 (Pew Research, 2019). Indeed, statistical studies show that from the early 1990s to the present, the escalation in border militarization has not led to less clandestine migration (Wong, 2017, p. 168). What it has led to is a steep rise in migrant fatalities.

Border militarization deflected rather than deterred undocumented migration from its primary – and previously relatively easy to enter – destination of California into neighboring states with more arduous terrains to traverse (Massey et al., 2003). As Fan (2008) describes, 'In Arizona border regions, winter, spring, and summer became a kind of death watch, with upward-ticking body counts from migrants dying of heat and thirst in the desert or ... freezing in the high mountains' (p. 708). Official government statistics support these claims. The annual number of known migrant casualties on the border increased from 171 in 1994 – the year PTD was announced – to an average of 460 during President Trump's first three years in office (IOM, 2020; Rosenblum, 2012, p. 33). Recent Border Patrol figures show that from 1998 through 2019, over 7,800 dead migrant bodies were discovered along the US-Mexico divide, an average of about 355 a year (US Customs and Border Protections, 2020). However, the agency notoriously undercounts these human remains by failing to include bodies found by local authorities and non-governmental organizations (General Accounting Office, 2006; Ortega, 2018). Although it is impossible to get an accurate calculation, scholars and investigative reports estimate that the number of migrant deaths may be 300 percent higher than the Border Patrol contends (O'Dell et al., 2017; Weber & Pickering, 2011, p. 1), meaning that the figure could be well over 20,000.

Thus, while border militarization has failed to deter unauthorized migration to the United States, it has undoubtedly succeeded in making crossing the country's southern boundary more deadly. In response to these government-facilitated fatalities, a small movement of American humanitarian aid organizations and activists has developed to challenge the state's lethal border policies and to attempt to save migrant lives.

'Politicized Spirituality'

Although being religious is not required to participate, progressive border activism in the US is primarily a 'faith-based' movement founded and guided by Judeo-Christian ethics and Catholic social teachings 'that emphasize that the causes of migration are embedded in structural injustices that must be resolved: poverty, market imbalances, and political strife' (Hagan, 2008, pp. 89, 104; Hoover, 2016; Morones, 2015). For example, while the American government continuously labels their actions 'illegal' (Cook, 2011), border activists – who commonly refer to themselves as 'humanitarians' or 'humanitarian workers' – justify their efforts as abiding by the laws of a 'higher authority.' Based on moral grounds, they refuse to stand silent and accept borders that lead to the deaths of thousands of men, women, and children (Menjívar, 2006, pp. 116–117). Their 'politicized spirituality' (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004, p. 135) contends that it is 'morally incumbent upon them' to act (Elcioglu, 2020, p. 156) and views their 'standing up to state violence and forging solidarity' with migrants as 'bearing witness' (Russo, 2018, p. 4). Their religious beliefs provide 'them with a moral blueprint for criticizing unjust government border policies' directed toward Mexicans and Central Americans (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004, p. 147). Below, we catalogue some of the tactics

and strategies these progressive border activists use to contest America's deadly southern boundary.

Repertoires of Contention

From water drops to desert camps

While in Europe the Mediterranean Sea has come to be associated with migrant deaths, in the deserts of the US-Mexico borderlands, water is equated with life and is the primary focus of progressive border activism. In response to the increased number of migrants dying along the country's southern boundary during the late 1990s, activists in California began leaving one-gallon jugs of water throughout the desert and mountains along the border with hopes that thirsty migrants would come across them (Morones, 2015; van Ham, 2011, p. 63). By 2001, because border militarization had deflected a significant amount of unauthorized migration toward Arizona – where fatalities increased substantially – local humanitarians learned about and modified the latter 'water drop' tactic by creating full-on 'water stations' that utilized refillable 58-gallon barrels (van Ham, 2011, p. 64). As of today, the organization Humane Borders alone has had over 15,000 volunteers help them operate more than 100 water stations (on both sides of the border) that are outfitted with food, first-aid kits, clothes, chlorine capsules, and 30-foot-tall poles with blue flags on top so migrants can see the water stations from afar (Elcioglu, 2020, p. 158; van Ham, 2011, pp. 65–66; Walsh, 2013, p. 975).

Because neither water drops nor stations are 'enough to make a dent in the number of migrant deaths,' progressive border activists have expanded their repertoire. Rather than solely hope migrants find the water jugs and tanks put out for them, humanitarian aid volunteers, such as those in the group known as the Samaritans, hike or use four-wheel-drive vehicles to go into the deadly desert looking for crossing migrants to provide water, medical aid, and/or food (Cook, 2011; Hagan, 2008, p. 101). Motivated by the belief that an 'around-the-clock, non-violent, physical humanitarian presence ... [is] the single most effective response to the tragic crisis,' activists from the organization No More Deaths go even further by setting up year-round encampments (Walsh, 2010, p. 122). According to Hagan (2008), this biblically inspired 'Ark of the Covenant strategy' is exhibited by placing moveable camps throughout the desert (p. 101). Staying for month-long shifts, volunteers use these camps as home bases for daily scouting expeditions where they hike into remote parts of the borderlands to leave water, clothes, blankets, food, and provide medical care to migrants they may encounter (Johnson, 2015, p. 1254). In this way, humanitarian workers see their actions as taking 'the sanctuary of church into the deserts' (Hagan, 2008, p. 108).

It is not uncommon, while out on their patrols, for progressive border activists to come across migrant remains. The locations of these and other fatalities have in turn informed their strategies and tactics. Using data on migrant deaths gathered by the Border Patrol, Mexican Consulate, and the Pima County morgue, activists use GIS software to create maps with vital information, including: '(1) details concerning terrain, cell phone coverage, and locations of border fencing; (2) colour-coded symbols signifying the locations of water stations, Border Patrol rescue beacons and recent fatalities; and (3) three black, concentric rings demonstrating the distance one can expect to cover on foot in one to three days' (Walsh, 2010, p. 119). Over 70,000 of these topographical maps have been distributed in migrant-sending communities throughout Mexico and Central America (van Ham, 2011, p. 65; Walsh, 2013, p. 977). Organizations like the Colibrí Center also collect DNA data from families of missing migrants

in order to help identify the bodies of lost loved ones. Activists have even created a 'missing persons hotline' to help connect relatives with the bodies of deceased migrants and send out search and rescue teams when they believe there is a chance that migrants lost in the desert or mountains may still be alive (Elcioglu, 2020, p. 181). Most Americans have no clue that this 'land of open graves' (de León, 2017) exists on their southern border, let alone about the policies passed by both political parties that have created this crisis. As such, another focus of progressive border activism is attempting to bring public attention to this underreported tragedy.

Raising awareness

Social movements often aim to change the 'hearts and minds' of the public in hopes of gaining their support, drawing new recruits, and putting external pressure on government officials to bring about the demands activists desire (Ayoub, 2016; Gamson, 2004; Lee, 2002). Public awareness is especially vital for issues that lack sufficient media attention. Publicizing the suffering of migrants due to US border policies is one of the ways activists seek to bring attention to their cause. To illustrate, the first public protest over border deaths in Arizona occurred in 2000 and was not a call for water stations, but a mass candlelight prayer vigil. These vigils have become a weekly event where local residents gather to bring attention to the severity of the issue by publicly praying for and memorializing those who die attempting to cross the brutal desert (van Ham, 2011, pp. 62, 132). Similarly, activists organize an annual event called Posada Sin Fronteras [Posada Without Borders]. A *posada* is a traditional Mexican-Catholic 'procession that reenacts Joseph and Mary's search for shelter in Bethlehem' (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004, p. 134). Posada Sin Fronteras readapts the traditional *posada* procession to publicly 'commemorate the plight of migrant families traveling from the south to the north in what has become one of the most dangerous border regions in the world' (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004, p. 143).

Another tactic local humanitarians use to promote awareness about border deaths through the highlighting of migrant suffering is an annual event called the 'Migrant Trail.' During this action, participants spend about a week walking 75 miles in the scorching desert to symbolically reenact what migrants endure when they clandestinely cross the border. The walk is 'a way to honor the deceased and draw attention to an unquestionably *moral* atrocity' (Russo, 2018, p. 49; emphasis in the original). Russo (2014) explicates that viewed 'through a Judeo-Christian framework,' the 'bodily discomfort' of walking the migrant trail 'can be understood as redemptive suffering under-taken on behalf of the oppressed' (p. 69). While the event itself fails to draw much media attention, participants – who come from all across the country – are expected to share their experiences with others once they return home, demonstrating a commitment to making the humanitarian crisis on the border more visible by 'testifying' to 'the conditions of the aggravated' (Russo, 2018, p. 2).

Border 'immersion trips' are an additional way activists attempt to gain supporters and publicize the injustices that occur along the US-Mexico boundary (Cunningham, 2001). Groups like BorderLinks offer 'experiential learning' programs where mostly students and members of faith-based organizations go to the border to learn about militarization policies, their effects, and the root causes of Latin American migration. As Menjívar (2006) explains, 'these educational trips allow participants to examine' firsthand 'the macrostructural forces that shape contemporary migratory flows.' Through discussions with individual migrants, government officials and advocates, as well as 'field trips' to places such as deserts and migrant shelters, participants gain a unique understanding of how US policies 'have affected the lives

of the poor who live south and north of the border and have compelled them to migrate' (p. 112). According to Adler (2019), organizations like BorderLinks believe 'direct, face-to-face engagement is the preferred way to understand and empathize with the suffering of others,' which has the potential to spur participants of these programs into future action (p. 13).

There are several other ways progressive activists try to bring attention to the issue of and attempt to prevent migrant deaths along the US-Mexico border. Among other actions, they document and write reports about human rights abuses committed by Border Patrol agents and right-wing vigilantes, hold annual marches and rallies, lobby elected officials, perform public political theater skits, distribute 'Know Your Rights' cards in migrant countries of origin, and launch legal campaigns to challenge the government's attempts to criminalize their humanitarian aid work (Elcioglu, 2020, pp. 165–167; Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004, p. 144; Ybarra, 2007). Nevertheless, as described above, in their attempts to 'take death out of the immigration equation' (Cook, 2011, p. 573) the primary repertoire of these activists consists of providing life-saving water, food, and medical attention to clandestine migrants.

PROGRESSIVE BORDER ACTIVISM IN EUROPE

Fortress Europe

Until the 1970s, migration was neither an issue of European integration policy, nor a widely contested topic at the national level. In those parts of Europe that witnessed a time of economic upturn in the two decades after the end of World War II, national economies thirsted for cheap labor. Accordingly, governments in Northern and Western Europe, including Germany, France, and the Netherlands, in this period actively attracted hundreds of thousands of migrants as a foreign workforce, leading to a rapid growth in the foreign population (Geddes, 2000; Geddes & Scholten, 2016). Yet, this type of immigration for economic reasons remained hardly politicized since it was erroneously considered a temporary phenomenon (Huysmans, 2000). The second group of immigrants, political refugees from the communist East, were furthermore ideologically opportune and considered as proof of Western capitalist superiority (Oltmer & Bade, 2005). Countries in the European South, including Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, were at that time predominantly occupied with emigration of the workforce to the European North. The economic downturn in the early 1970s introduced fundamental changes and led to the first series of immigration policy restrictions. As a result of barriers to labor migration, the number of asylum applications and cases of family reunification rose, fueling in some countries heated debates around migration and asylum. Quickly the discourse around migration shifted from one associated with economic growth to one increasingly linked to insecurity and destabilization (Huysmans, 2000). Eventually, the late 1980s and 1990s witnessed hostile debates around (forced) migration in various European countries, culminating in French Minister of the Interior Charles Pasqua advocating for 'zero immigration' and the German parliament curtailing the right to asylum.

In addition to national migration policymaking, the process of European integration has, since the 1980s, added an additional layer. In this phase, the economically spirited plans to facilitate intra-European, cross-border mobility of goods and services were increasingly accompanied by a *securitization* of migration discourses. The intergovernmental Schengen process in the 1980s was crucial in this regard since it foreshadowed the logic of linking the

'downgrading of internal frontier control to the necessity of strengthening external border controls' (Huysmans, 2000, p. 759). Still, outside the institutional framework of the European Communities, Schengen became a 'laboratory for the definition of new measures for migration controls [...] and the priority given to control policies has indeed created the framework of a "fortress Europe"' (Monforte, 2014, p. 6). The Dublin Convention, attributing the responsibility for the examination of asylum applications to the country where a person first enters European territory, became another cornerstone of a *Europeanized* migration policy focusing on the discouragement of immigration and the construction of the borders of Europe. Combined with carrier sanctions for private companies, readmission agreements, and financial benefits for governments outside European territory in exchange for emigration control, both national governments and intergovernmental efforts in Europe furthermore pushed for an *externalization* (Lavenex, 2006) of border control. The European border agency Frontex, created in 2004 (Neal, 2009), eventually became the symbol of these parallel and partly intersecting trends of Europeanization, securitization, and externalization of European migration policy. The consequences of tightened border controls at the EU's external borders in Southern and Eastern Europe were manifold: foremost, they were fatal, with a rising death toll of migrants attempting to reach Europe on more and more dangerous routes, particularly across the Mediterranean (Last et al., 2017; Steinhilper & Gruijters, 2018). Furthermore, they concentrated responsibility for migrant reception in economically fragile countries at the European periphery. In countries such as Germany, which are without a European external border, the construction of the European border regime led to a (temporary) decrease in asylum applications. The 'long summer of migration' in 2015 constituted another critical juncture, as it led to a fragmentation of European migration governance, with the German government voluntarily suspending the Dublin regulation to allow refugees to continue their journey, and other countries increasing the fortification of European external borders and the reintroduction of border controls within the Schengen area.

A Heterogenous Field of Action

Given the multilayered, national, and supranational migration governance in Europe, a plethora of organizations and movements advocating for more liberal, open, or even no borders have emerged. Similar to the US, early migrant rights movements in Europe were often embedded in religious circles rooted in Christian values of compassion, but also in a radical left milieu inspired by Marxist ideologies (Monforte, 2014; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016). With the proliferation of migrant rights activism in recent years, however, the social and ideological base has strongly diversified, particularly since the upsurge of activism during the long summer of migration in 2015 (della Porta, 2018). Nowadays, the broad range of progressive border activists contesting 'Fortress Europe' ranges from Christian initiatives at the European shores providing first aid and church asylum; to human rights organizations such as Medico International or SOS Méditerranée; to broad movements such as 'Seebrücke' (sea bridge), an alliance of progressive civil society actors and local municipalities in Germany; to actors from the radical and autonomous left, such as the 'no border' network. Instead of providing an exhaustive portrait of progressive border activism in Europe, we single out distinct types of action from this broad range of actors and their repertoires of contention, which range from a predominantly humanitarian impetus of direct intervention in border zones with the aim of

saving lives or alleviating suffering to contentious action exposing the lethal effects of borders and governmental policies (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022).

Repertoires of Contention

Direct assistance: from rescue hotlines to mobile soup kitchens

Ten thousand humans lost their lives attempting to reach Europe in the last two decades alone (Steinhilper & Gruijters, 2018), making the Mediterranean the most lethal border worldwide. While the attention to migrant deaths and border violence at the European periphery has increased in recent years, border deaths had long before been a reality for local communities, e.g., on the Canary Islands in Spain, Lampedusa in Italy, or on the Greek Aegean islands. In response, local residents and fishermen became involved in the direct assistance of migrants in distress at sea or upon arrival on the shores of Europe. Furthermore, migrants who had made the crossing created networks of self-help to assist those attempting to reach Europe. Father Zerai, once a refugee from Ethiopia himself, was one of the pioneers offering a hotline for migrants in distress at sea since the early 2000s (Schwartz, 2014). With the increasing salience of migration and border violence, the Mediterranean border space has also attracted activists and NGOs traveling to the frontiers of Europe. Building upon Zerai's work, activists from all over Europe have set up the 'Alarm Phone' as a direct intervention of 'escape aid' (Stierl, 2016b). In response to the increases in Mediterranean migration and the loss of life during the hazardous passage from 2014 onward, Mediterranean border activism has increased. Amongst others, a 'fleet of Mediterranean border humanitarians' (Stierl, 2018, p. 704) involving established NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières alongside newly created organizations (e.g., Sea Watch or Jugend Rettet) started to roam the waters. Far from homogeneous, the fleet assembled organizations with different agendas (Stierl, 2018), yet all aiming at the immediate rescue of human lives at sea. The organization Sea Watch eventually mobilized funds to operate the civilian monitoring aircraft *Moonbird* as an additional tool to avoid the loss of human lives at the European Mediterranean borders. These civilian interventions in the external border space have received fierce opposition, including those actors without an overtly political agenda and a clear adherence to the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. Search and rescue activities as a particular type of border activism have become strongly criminalized discursively and met with drastic sanctions, including criminal investigations against captains and the seizure of rescue ships (Cusumano, 2019; Heller & Pezzani, 2017).

In addition to assistance at sea, initiatives of direct assistance have also emerged in other border zones. During the long summer of migration, border activism involving local residents and transnational activists mushroomed at the points of first entry into EU territory, particularly in Italy and Greece, and then spread 'from border to border' (Zamponi, 2018, p. 99) across the Balkans, where governments erected new barriers against human mobility (della Porta, 2018). Organizations such as No Name Kitchen, No Border Kitchen, and InterEuropean Human Aid Association, born in this phase of unprecedented activation in migrant support, have offered mobile humanitarian assistance for migrants who were denied the continuation of their journey. They intervene in those spaces from which state authorities have deliberately withdrawn as a strategy of deterrence. The Schengen system and the resulting emergence of the borders of Europe have concentrated border struggles at the European periphery, yet border controls have also not disappeared within Europe. The UK has never joined the Schengen system, making the Calais region and the so-called 'jungle' informal camp an illustration of

the continuing borders within Europe. Furthermore, governments in various parts of Europe have reinstated border controls, e.g., at the borders between France and Italy, justified with the fight against terrorism and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the fight against the spread of the virus (Shachar, 2020; Stierl & Mezzadra, 2020). Accordingly, border activists have turned their attention to these areas. At the French-Italian border, local residents have started mountain patrols and shelters to assist migrants trying to cross through the Alps to reach France (Pescinski, 2021), providing hiking boots, a warm meal, and orientation in a hostile natural environment. 'Welcome to Europe' offers information in multiple languages to assist migrants in navigating to or through Europe. Furthermore, during the pandemic, activists in Europe and the US have broadened their repertoire of humanitarian aid by providing masks and other sanitary products.

Exposing borders: from no border camps to a 'sea bridge'

A second major area of border activism has focused on political awareness of the widespread existence of bordering practices and their consequences for unwanted migrants' lives. By being physically present at border sites, activists have sought to identify borders with the 'aim to transform the materiality (by making it visible) and representation of border politics (contesting its definition as a tool of "protection")' (Monforte, 2016). Groups such as Migreurop or No Border construct collective actions that target border controls specifically (whether physically through their direct location at states' border sites or symbolically through their contentious representation of bordering policies) (Monforte, 2016). In the framework of the 'no border movement,' activists have, since the late 1990s, organized camps at national borders, at deportation detention facilities, and at the Frontex headquarters in Warsaw (Anderson et al., 2012). In this tradition, the 'Welcome to Europe network' launched the 'boat for people' campaign in the Mediterranean, which 'was envisioned as an intervention at sea with a fleet of vessels that would possibly enforce encounters with European coastguards or Frontex in order to monitor their activities' (Stierl, 2016a, p. 176).

This publicly oriented aim to bear witness to systematic human rights violations committed in the liminal spaces between national borders has also become part of the repertoire of many organizations, offering direct assistance combined with advocacy and documentation of violence at borders. One of these early efforts to expose border violence was UNITED, a journalist collective which compiled a database on border deaths in Europe, long before national or international government agencies had become engaged in such activities. In countries without a European external border, activists have mobilized for safe passages to Europe as an alternative to the perilous journeys of unauthorized border crossings (Schwartz & Steinhilper, 2021). In Germany, the campaign 'Seebrücke' (sea bridge) mobilized hundreds of thousands of protesters to the streets from 2018 onward to bring the harsh realities of the external European borders to the center of the continent. Many of these distinct forms of border activism have been increasingly connected to transnational 'corridors of solidarity "from the sea to the cities",' enacting an alternative to the European migration policy of closure and delegation of responsibility to the EU's Southern and Eastern periphery (Ataç et al., 2021, p. 13). During the pandemic, the #leavenoonebehind campaign orchestrated by Seebrücke has brought public attention back to the situation of refugees by pointing at the increased risk of exposure in crowded refugee camps at the external borders. When Russia attacked Ukraine in March 2022, border activism proliferated once again, this time predominantly heralded by the media and politicians in the Western world (Gall, 2022).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This unexhaustive sketch of border activism in the US and in Europe showed a broad repertoire of action guided by a similar impetus of humanitarian aid and by the common desire to expose the deadly nature of global borders for those on the wrong side of the ‘birthright lottery.’ The commonality of goals subsumes all these forms of action under the umbrella of border activism, but the underlying motives are diverse. While progressive activism at the US-Mexican border is strongly rooted in Christian faith, the range of border activism in Europe is highly heterogeneous, including, for instance, a stronger presence of the anti-racist left. Overall, this heterogeneity of underlying motives results in varying degrees of questioning the very existence of borders (Heller et al., 2018). While activist groups that predominantly resort to a humanitarian framing often refrain from a more profound critique of national borders, others – especially from the radical left – have embedded their direct assistance into a broader ‘no border’ politics aimed at demasking border violence in a tradition of ‘abolitionism’ (Stierl, 2016b, p. 562).

Progressive border activists in the US and in Europe have been subject to criticism from both the right and the left. While the former upholds the integrity of state borders or dismisses immigration in general, the latter problematizes the motives and strategies of border activists, thereby challenging the very label of *progressiveness*. For the US, scholars have noted that most activists tend to be middle-class and white (Elcioglu, 2020, p. 40; van Ham, 2011, p. 77) and for both contexts, that their rhetoric can sometimes promote a patronizing ‘politics of pity’ (Adler, 2019, p. 11; see similarly Stierl, 2018). Furthermore, critics have argued that border activists are driven by either pure ‘fantasy,’ since their ‘attempts to mitigate the cost of life’ are said to be ‘ineffective’ (Fan, 2008, p. 701), or by their ‘white guilt,’ which results from the fact that, as activists based in the ‘First World,’ they benefit from the worldwide inequalities that force migrants to flee the Global South (Elcioglu, 2020, p. 11). Critics from the left have furthermore revitalized a long-standing problematization of humanitarian action (Fassin, 2012) and argued that a humanitarian focus on migrant suffering hides the structural nature of deprivation, depoliticizes the issue, and thus contributes to the perpetuation of existing power relations (Heller et al., 2018; Stierl, 2018). In the US, moreover, the importance of religious motives spurred suspicion from the secular left and arguments that their overt Christianity may dissuade potential supporters from joining their efforts. Acknowledging the complexities of politically racialized migrant allyship (Cappiali, 2017), we believe that border activism should, nonetheless, be seen as progressive for both symbolic and material reasons.

For one, the very act of attempting to challenge – no matter how efficiently – fatal border policies declares that human mobility should never end in death. Border activism seeks to make violence against migrants visible and aims to highlight that this violence is the direct and deliberate result of border militarization policies (Cook, 2011, p. 583; Johnson, 2015, p. 1247). In doing so, border activists shame the Global North for its brutal migration enforcement measures and defy government authority in classifying undocumented migrants as criminals and their lives as dispensable (Walsh, 2013, pp. 980–981). Hence, their activism arguably undermines ‘prevention through deterrence’ strategies by making ‘illegal’ border crossing slightly more survivable.

The ‘humanitarian’ framing can be seen as strategically providing progressive border activists with cultural cover. According to Tarrow (2011), the success of movements often depends on the degree to which their tactics resonate with the ‘cultural understandings of the groups

they wish to appeal to' (p. 156). Since humanitarianism is usually associated with political neutrality (Cook, 2011, p. 566), this framing of 'moral urgency' (Elcioglu, 2020, p. 158) potentially resonates with the wider public on both sides of the Atlantic. In the US, moreover, the importance assigned to faith and Christian motives appeals to potential adherents in what is the most religiously Christian post-industrial nation in the world (Walsh, 2010, p. 127). In this fashion, actions such as candlelit prayer vigils, the Migrant Trail, and *Posada Sin Fronteras* can, at least symbolically for a few days or hours, 'make sacred what is otherwise a site' – the US-Mexico borderlands – 'of separation, surveillance, violence, and death' (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004, p. 154).

Materially, during times of crises when small pragmatic acts of aid can determine survival, saving 'lives deemed dispensable' is, in fact a radical political practice (Doty, 2006, p. 66; Spade, 2020, p. 8). Border activists will never prevent all casualties that result from border militarization and the perils of crossing oceans and deserts, but this is not how their effectiveness should be judged. As Doty (2006) asserts, while the significance of progressive border activism cannot be measured 'in the form of statistics,' it is 'certainly clear to those who have' received the water, food, clothes, or medical aid, 'wherever they may be' (p. 73). Thus, querying whether this 'humanitarianism' is motivated by 'fantasy and fetishes' (Fan, 2008, p. 701), or the 'conflictual identity' of being 'progressive, but privileged' (Elcioglu, 2020, pp. 10–11), may be the wrong questions to be asking. Perhaps what is more perplexing is not why these progressive border activists care enough about migrant deaths to take action, but why more of us don't.

Finally, border activism 'expands the sphere of politics' by contesting the notion that interactions with illegalized migrants are exclusively the domain of the police and other state agents (Elcioglu, 2020, p. 158; see similarly Russo, 2018, p. 20; van Ham, 2011, p. 68). This entails the possibility to 'shift from a humanitarianism that transforms forced migrants into recipients of aid, to a form of solidarity that allows more room for their socio-political subjectivities' (Vandevoordt, 2019, p. 264). In that sense, performative perspectives on citizenship argue that the legal institution determining access to and exclusion from rights is dynamic and constantly reenacted or challenged in 'acts of citizenship,' involving both citizens and non-citizens (Isin & Nielsen, 2008, p. 1). Those mobilizing in support of migrants 'not only facilitate the recognition and inclusion of non-citizens, but they also demonstrate practices, enable relations, and build institutions of solidarity that can potentially contribute to social cohesion and a redefinition of citizenship on a broader scale' (Schwenken & Schwiertz, 2020, p. 406). Certainly, types of border activism vary in their transgression and imagination of distinct political communities. Stierl has documented instances of commemoration and grief to be powerful moments in which boundaries of belonging are performatively challenged (Stierl, 2016a). If we follow Bauman and conceive of citizenship and mobility as the most 'powerful and most coveted stratifying factor' (Bauman, 1998), it comes as no surprise that the 'struggle over borders' (de Wilde et al., 2019) has become one of the crucial lines of political conflict, dividing advocates and opponents of cosmopolitanism. Since border activism challenges the dehumanization and exclusion of non-citizens and reinterprets borders as spaces of exclusion and violence, rather than protection, this field of activism constitutes an integral part of the progressive fight for global justice. Precisely because of its transformative potential, not only migrant mobility, but also all types of progressive border and migrant rights activism have increasingly come under attack in recent years (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021).

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