Mobilising Sovereignty: The Violence Inherent in Border Securitisation on the English Channel

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INTRODUCTION

Spatial processes of state sovereignty have been commonly identified as an influential force behind violent practices of border security (see Torpey, 1998; Fassin, 2011; Brown, 2010). The European refugee "crisis" of the past decade showcased the extent to which European states would go in order to remain in sovereign control. Processes of border securitisation and reworkings of nationhood became the prime methodology through which states tactically applied their claims to sovereignty in order to manage flows of human movement (Jones et al., 2017).

Within the context of European migration flow management, Britain has always perceived itself to have the geographical "convenience" of being an island nation (Virdee & McGeever, 2016). The Brexit myth of the "island retreat" (ibid., p. 1807) showcased how Brits believed their maritime borders held the power to keep refugees at bay. When refugees increasingly started crossing the water between Northern France and the UK in the winter of 2018 (Maggs, 2020), Britain was then also quick in its response—further securitisation and offshoring of its borders. Whilst security responses of southern border-zones such as Greece and the Mediterranean sea have been subjected to large amounts of critical research, there has been less academic attention for the English Channel crossings (Davies et al., 2021).

This article will examine how the British state mobilises sovereignty to legitimise the violence inherent in its heightened border security. Sovereignty is generally defined as the source of supreme authority within the exercise of power (Bryant, 2018) and theories of sovereignty often locate this authority within state apparatus and the terrorisation of the nation (Bonilla, 2012). This article will first showcase how modern states rely on sovereignty’s geopolitical ability to border a population, rendering those outside into a state of exception in which their lives become regarded as meaningless (Agamben, 1998). Then, following De León (2015), this article will argue that border-zones are rendered into spaces of exception through which sovereign states can abdicate their responsibility over the committed violence.

THE CHANNEL CROSSINGS: BRITISH SOVEREIGN ANXIETIES

While 2016 was the year in which the number of globally displaced people reached the highest point ever recorded (Ramsay, 2017), it was also the year in which the number of Brits-voted to leave the European Union (EU). Britain has historically had strong attachments to parliamentary sovereignty (Auer, 2017), which despite internal resistance resulted in 2016’s national investment in insularity (Jacobs, 2020).

Brexit is often explained as a direct response to public anxieties concerning the loss of sovereignty to transnational organisations such as the EU and NATO (see Maggs, 2020; Auer, 2017). However, research by Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) found that, within citizen decision-making, this perceived loss of sovereignty had become inherently attached to concerns of public immigration. British media became increasingly anti-immigrant between 2011 and 2016. Brexit discourses only amplified this by emphasising “an ‘out of control’ ‘growth’ and ‘soaring’, ‘rocketing’, and ‘stamping’ ‘influx’ of immigrants, involving ‘swamping’ to ‘crisis point’ the UK’s ‘crowded isle’” (Gavin, 2018, p. 836). In this manner, the EU and immigrants were both framed as threats to British sovereignty from "across the water" (Davies et al., 2021, p. 2316). Departing from this understanding, it is not necessarily a surprise that refugees who crossed said water were immediately regarded as being a threat (Maggs, 2020).
Occupying small vessels, such as rubber boats and dinghies, refugees increasingly attempted to cross the Dover Strait—the narrowest part of the English Channel and a popular industrial shipping lane (Maggs, 2020). Whilst most migrants headed towards the UK hide away on ground vehicles (Jacobs, 2020), the state responded heavily to the relatively small number of people crossing the Channel and immediately started fortifying border infrastructure (Davies et al., 2021). In 2020, when a combination of Brexit and COVID-19 related border stops coincided with construction on the port of Calais, opportunities for migrants to stow away on lorry vehicles were significantly limited (Walsh, 2022). Channel crossing went up fourfold and unfortunately showcased the deadly consequences of the recent border work: Britain’s border-zone deaths rose to 300 (Davies et al., 2021).

Before further exploring the violence inherent within the British increased border security, we must first examine border control as an expression of population control that showcases the role of the state as “ultimate arbiter of who is or is not deserving of safety” (Maggs, 2020, p. 80). The following section will explore the state’s monopolisation of movement in the name of sovereignty and how this racialised practice places excluded individuals in states of exception.

THE RACIALISED ORDER OF MOBILITY

Where globalisation has advanced the global circulation of goods and services, the transnational circulation of people seems to have become increasingly restricted (Fassin, 2011). Population control is one of the main prerogatives of the sovereign state (Joppke, 1997) and the regulating of movement can be said to define what a state’s territorial integrity, sovereignty, and citizenship look like (Bryant, 2018). As the modern state system considers sovereignty its most fundamental principle, border control in times of globalisation becomes a key concern (Connelly, 2006). Historically, state efforts to regulate population led to the creation of systems of identification through which persons are included or excluded from citizenship (Torpey, 1998). These systems were based on a naturalised identity between people and place (Malkki, 1992) and were crucial in sovereign states’ monopolisation of the authority over restricting movement (Torpey, 1998). Individuals within these now global systems were rendered dependent on their national identity which, whilst inescapable, greatly shapes one’s access to the world.

Through this framework of identity, states decide who is a rightful citizen and therefore a subject to their sovereignty. Those who are deemed to not belong are rendered outside of the law into what Agamben (1998) famously theorised as a state of exception. This state of being happens when sovereign authorities suspend the legal protections usually given to individuals whilst simultaneously subjecting them to state power (ibid.). Left to the authority of the law but placed firmly outside of it, they are rendered to bare life (Bryant, 2018). In the context of mobility, individuals attempting to cross the sovereign’s border without the right identification become excluded from society and placed outside the protections of citizenship. They are rendered invisible, stuck between places and statues (Lentin, 2016), and are at the mercy of the sovereign state who can choose to dispose of surplus bare life with impunity (Lentin, 2016). Through this framework of devaluing persons into bare life, sovereign states justify the containing and deporting of refugees.

However, following Lentin’s (2016) argument that Agamben’s theory is rather Eurocentric in its disregard of race, I find differential access to mobility to rest upon more than nationality (Fassin, 2011). It often coincides with a racialised world order in what Besteman (2019) describes as militarised global apartheid. According to this theory, race and mobility are considered the primary variables to which sovereignty’s discourses of security and militarisation respond. This is visible in how national discourses of risk create the racialised other, a foreign figure whose presence is framed as posing a threat to both the physical citizen (coincidently often racialised as White) and state sovereignty (Pope, 2017). This figure is regarded as a danger to national security and is therefore required to be contained (Jacobs, 2020). The amplification of this othering framework in security discourses is then also what justifies the placing of displaced persons into the state of exception (Pope, 2017). Agamben (1998) himself also observed this trend, finding that the declaring of a state of exception has gradually been replaced by security paradigms functioning as a governance technique.

The British security paradigm surrounding the Channel crossings follows these racialised frameworks. Arguing that border governance draws on “ongoing racialized hierarchies of human value” (Davies et al., 2021, p. 2509), Davies and colleagues (2021) compare British state responses to historic English Channel crossings (such as those of the Dutch in World War II) to the Channel crossings of Middle Eastern refugees and observed how, ever since the 1990s, the public perception of crossings shifted from a humanitarian phenomenon to a threatening one. This shift paralleled the change in nationalities of those crossing, suggesting that discourses of security arise along racialised lines. The work of Emma Jacobs (2020) locates a similar pattern through finding that British media and state discourses of risk and security frame and criminalise Middle Eastern refugees as a racialised threat that justifies harsh border politics. Within British security responses, racialisation thus emerges as a defining factor.

THE VIOLENCE IN SEA SECURITY

The state’s response to contemporary Channel crossings was to move British border defence both into the sea and into Europe by applying a wide variety of securitisation techniques. This section will outline three of these strategies and the violence inherent within them.

Fortifying

Whilst the Channel already serves as a natural barrier between France and Britain, the increased presence of crossings resulted in border-zone walling regardless. In particular Calais and Dunkirk, common departure points for refugees, have been subjected to increased fortification designed to keep migrants from crossing. The current assemblages of “walls, razor wire and a panopoly of sophisticated surveillance technologies” (Maggs, 2020, p. 81) around the Channel were then also partly realised through British funds.

The Channel itself has also been subjected to militarisation through increased coastal patrols (including three navy warships), surveillance drones, and the appointment of a Clandestine Channel Threat Commander whose primary job description is to intercept Channel crossings and turn them around (Davies et al., 2021). Though not officially considered a pushback, as not to violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, British maritime controls seemingly aim to prevent Channel crossings from entering their area of jurisdiction (Davies et al., 2021).

The work of Brown (2010) examines how the fortifying of borders compounds the problems they attempt to address. After finding that walling practices do not decrease one-directional migration, Brown described walls as blocking safe ways of passage and therefore forcing those in danger of the right identification become from entering their area of jurisdiction (Davies et al., 2021). Brown described walls as blocking safe ways of passage and therefore forcing those in danger of the right identification become from entering their area of jurisdiction. The work of Brown (2010) examines how the fortifying of borders compounds the problems they attempt to address. After finding that walling practices do not decrease one-directional migration, Brown described walls as blocking safe ways of passage and therefore forcing those in danger of the right identification become from entering their area of jurisdiction.
am exploring every avenue to accelerate their removal” (Home Office, 2022, para. 9). In addition to directly inflicting harm upon crossing individuals, the criminalisation of undocumented crossings also functions as a vehicle through which the state can abdicate responsibility over the safety of Channel crossers.

**Offshoring**
Fitting in the larger European trend of extending borders into neighbouring countries (Besteman, 2019), the UK Home Office’s security responses engage in the outsourcing and offshoring of immigration. Ranging from detaining refugees on disputed oil rigs to deporting refugees overseas to places such as Rwanda (Davies et al., 2021), these strategies aim to keep asylum seekers from reaching British soil. Through limiting territorial entrance, states avoid potentially costly obligations (Torpey, 1998) and bypass asylum requests by simply keeping refugees physically separated from their legal realm.

Besteman (2019) finds the process of outsourcing immigration to reproduce the division between the Global North (racialised as White) and South (racialised as non-White). The 2020 UK Home Committee Affairs meetings illustrate this when a so-called humanitarian desire “to house and look after these people remotely” showcased the UK’s reliance on their high position in the global world order: “shouldn’t civilised countries be really supporting governments such as those in Lebanon and Turkey to provide civilised environments for people?” (Home Affairs Committee, 2020 in Davies et al., 2021, p. 2319)

**Violent trends**
Visible within all three of these UK strategies of border sovereignty are two trends often noted within the problematising of displaced persons. First, the locating of the problem in the people fleeing instead of in the political situations that led to their fleeing (Malkki, 1992). Second, these security tactics all result in the elimination of safe migration routes, therefore leaving riskier Channel routes as the only option for those seeking entry to the UK (Jacobs, 2020). These trends illustrate how within migration politics, Europe’s moral compass has been lost (Costello, 2015).

**CONTESTED WATERS: THE CHANNEL AS A ZONE OF EXCEPTION**
As previously argued, the sovereign capacity of states to define who is outside the law and therefore can be killed with impunity (Bryant, 2018) has rendered Channel crossers into a state of exception. De León (2015) expands Agamben’s (1998) argument that border-zones have become spaces of exception: “locations where an individual’s rights and protections under law can be stripped away upon entrance” (De León, 2015, p. 27). This section will explore how the Channel is rendered into such a space of exception that serves to manage racialised populations.

Oceans are sites of contested power and sovereignty, especially waters like the English Channel that function as direct borders between countries. For these countries, and especially for island nations, the water becomes a physical and symbolic expression of the inside/outside paradigm (Jacobs, 2020). For the UK specifically, the centrality of maritime travel and war in their imperial history has made the sea a symbol of British nationalism (Davies et al., 2021). The sudden presence of migrants crossing the Channel was therefore quickly perceived as a direct threat to both British identity and sovereignty.

The Channel has, through the security strategies outlined above, become a site of militarisation against the bare lives that are seeking UK entrance. This has transformed the water into a space of exception, where human rights are suspended in the name of security (De León, 2015). These spaces are created in the service of protecting the Global North from the mobility of the Global South (Besteman, 2019) and to justify the offshoring and punishing of those racialised as threats (Davies et al., 2021). The border-zone as a space of exception in that way becomes an “empty” geography to circumvent the inconveniences of asylum law (ibid., p. 2320) in which sovereign states can avoid responsibility over the violence and death inflicted upon those crossing. Engaging in a form of necropolitics (see Mbembe, 2006), the British state can abdicate any responsibility over border crosser deaths because of the exceptional status (lack of British citizenship) of the persons (De León, 2015).

The creation of the Channel as a space of exception can therefore be considered a work of disentanglement and disenchantment. It allows for the state to abdicate any responsibility over its expressions of violence, hence becoming a form of violence on its own (Appel, 2012).

**CONCLUSION**
This article has explored how sovereignty has granted states the power to control and restrict global movement, through the creation of systems of identification and the bordering of populations. Following Besteman (2019), this bordering has been explained as consistent with the racialised world order that separates the Global North from the Global South. The combination of this system of identification and the creation of the racialised other as a threat to state sovereignty (see Jacobs, 2020) has been argued to be the key factor in the placing of displaced people in a state of exception. By outlining several security strategies—fortifying, criminalising and offshoring—this essay showcased how securitisation both directly inflicts violence upon the bodies of the displaced whilst also inflicting violence by eliminating safe migrant routes.

Furthermore, the spatial dimension of exceptionalism was explored through explaining how the British state mobilised their sovereignty in order to render the English Channel into a space of exception. Upon entry, Channel crossers are placed outside the law and devalued to a status in which their lives have no meaning. This allows for the British state to abdicate any responsibility over the deadly violence inflicted upon those persons who saw no other option for a safe life than to cross the English Channel. In this way, spatial mobilisations of state sovereignty continue to reproduce the racialised global world order.

**NOTES**
1. With “crisis”, this article references the widespread use of crisis terminology in European media coverage of increased flows of refugees. See Choudhriaki and Stolic (2007) for an analysis of this phenomenon. This article distances itself from regarding those fleeing persecution as a problem in any shape or form and only uses the word “crisis” when referring to European media coverage.
On the immunitarian paradigm: Protecting the geo-body from infectious Others

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Driessen, in the above article, convincingly describes how fortification and the bordering of nation-states, such as the geographically isolated United Kingdom, have often served to render migrants as threats, casting them into “spaces of exception”. Whilst Driessen focuses particularly on the inherent violence that entails from this border securitisation, here, I want to further engage the process of “othering”, through different but strikingly similar ethnographies. By concentrating on the imagination of the nation-state as a body itself, I will explore the various ways in which both immunological and “othering” discourses have revealed the nature of nation-states and their formation, reification, and, oftentimes, breakdown.

Introduction
The nation-state has long enjoyed an anthropocentric imagining: from Plato’s Republic to descriptions of τῆς πόλεως σῶμα [the body of the state] in Ancient Greek literature to various orations describing the “head” as the ruler and political conflicts and civil wars being likened to biological diseases (Brock, 2013, pp. 69–71). Today, the “body-politic” is often used in legal and national policies, statements, and more implicitly (although far more pertinently, I shall argue) in public discourse and ideology—oftentimes deployed in tension with fiction and objective science (Haraway, 1989). Conceiving the nation-state as a body with its own border(s), “head”, an immune system, and self-imagining projects has, as I will demonstrate through ethnographic descriptions, afforded both the nation-state and its citizenry a way of imagining themselves and their duties towards one another (Anderson, 1991).

The body at war
Immunology, as a practice, has a shorter history but one which undoubtedly was and still is involved in the imaginative and iconic construction of the state and its “symbolic and material difference[s]” [within]” (Haraway, 1989, p. 4). Indeed, immunology as a continually developing field also has employed much political and nation-state language. I start with the latter point. The body in this literature has been understood as: a regulative and communicative network with a complex interior and recognising the distinct separation between the body (self) and outside (Schindler, 1991, p. 1); a police state with white blood cells acting as the immune system’s infantry that recognise and exterminate “foreign” intruders (Nilsson et al., 1987, p. 24; Koshland, 1990, p. 1273); a democratically decentralised biological system where there is no central organ, but instead multiple constituent parts that learn, adapt, and cooperate (when things go well) through their networks of information and relations (Jaret, 1986, p. 709); and at war, continuously fighting and defending. Indeed, it seems that, if we were to observe the immune system, there would be “no peaceful scene” (Nilsson et al., 1987, p. 105). Interestingly, the very fact that the early discovery of the human body’s symbiotic, and indeed life-sustaining, relationship with the bacteria that coexist within us has rarely, if ever, been deployed in public discourse to try to unite and emphasise the importance of differences—imagining the state as a “harmonious life unit” (Fleck, 1935/2008)—demonstrates acutely how the body-at-war and “self”-sustaining projects have been more convenient and powerful ideologies to apply to the nation-state. In any case, let us turn to particular ethnographies that may further illuminate the intertwined ideologies between biomedical and immunological discourse and state-building and state-sustaining efforts.

Pure beginnings
Take the 1901 formation of the Commonwealth of Australia that unified six colonies of the British Empire (Bashford, 2004, p. 116), imagined as a pure and new island-nation with an astute attention on its border control. Such fertile land—one that boasted its smallpox-free body—was quickly understood to be vulnerable to contamination. In defining the nation’s geo-body, therefore, its border would need not only to attend to its more immediate physical contour, delineating itself from the sea and other land countries, but also in order to classify and regulate its population (Winichakul, 1994, p. 17). This necessarily became a national project. Visiting ships—particularly from the Dutch East Indies, Singapore, and China (Bashford, 2004, p. 131)—that docked at the ports of Darwin and Queensland were detained and quarantined if suspected of being infectious.

Such health strategies, perhaps unsurprisingly, resulted in discourses of “hygiene” being marred with racialised undertones, imagining its clean geo-body against a “dirty” and biologically threatening Asia (ibid., pp. 123–126). The mutuality of immunological/pathological renderings and securitisation of borders results in a general conflation of national and medico-legal borders. Let us turn to contemporary Australia and the rise of the Australian Defence League (ADL; Gillespie, 2020); this time, however, I will introduce more nuance into exactly how immunity, defence of the nation, and community are imagined and enacted.

Boosting the immune system
Starting in and modelled on England’s (EDL), the ADL is a far-right ethnic nationalist and self-proclaimed “paramilitary” group. In 2005, local news articles described an incident in which a riot of 5,000 broke out after a “Lebanese youth” (ibid., p. 1000) was said to have assaulted patrolling lifesavers on Cronulla Beach, southwest Sydney. The violence was said to include indiscriminate attacks on anyone of “ethnic appearance” (NSW Police, 2006, p. 7, cited in Gillespie, 2020). Notably, the lexical choice of “ethnic appearance” by the news article (and extrapolating to wider ADL discourse) is implicated of there being a “pure” Australian that is “non-ethnic” in appearance, suggesting an ethnic and racial neutrality. Let us take a closer look at how exactly these narratives of purity and threat to the body-politic play out in the ADL.

Gillespie engages Anderson, Hage, and Esposito as key theorists in this engagement, problematising and synthesising each. I now take these each in turn. Anderson (1991) and his staple work, Imagined Communities, describes how individuals within a communion understand themselves as being grounded in their belonging to the nation-state, tied to each other in “deep, horizontal comradeship” (p. 7). They must simultaneously construct this imagined communion and imagined Other that sets itself against a negative definition of the self (i.e., to be A is to not be B, C, …). Australian nationalists, then, should be concerned with “fortifying national borders, halting immigration, and preserving so-called national values” (Gillespie, 2020, p. 997) that would notably continue to induce intragroup cohesion and intergroup cultural classification/demarcation. These political projects are the most likely motivators that interlocutors will recount but, for Gillespie, “[the ADL] are focused on constructing and enjoying themselves as the privileged national subjects who get to do the nation’s defending” in which the ADLs (self-)perceived function reifies “the more the nation is threatened” (ibid., p. 997). This parochialisles Hage’s (2004) concept of “paranoid nationalism”. Namely, Hage argues that when individuals or groups become fixated on the idea that the nation is under threat, they do not sustain an enjoyable
or fulfilled life within that state, clouding their lives with xenophobia and/or “homophobia” (the fear of likeness). In this case, however, this paranoia is exactly what fuels the Defence League.

Autoimmunity
Similarly, Gillespie also problematises Esposito’s (2012) dichotomy between “community” and “immunity”. For Esposito, the continual emphasis on defending a “community” from infections (i.e., threats, the Other, etc.) or general hyper-defense in “lethal doses” (Vaughan-Williams, 2015), leads to more anxiety and constraints within the state, resulting in an “autoimmune” crisis. Again, these may not be so opposed for the ADL; indeed, discourses of immunity may serve the opposite function by actively working to sustain specific communities, including those of (defence) nationalists (Gillespie, 2020, p. 1005). What is important here—and we might map this onto autoimmune discourses, too—is that these nationalist groups have forged their own identity and belonging, particularly one that is perceived and embodied as “stronger” than that of the state’s affordance (ibid., p. 998). The immune system becomes blind—with its sort of “imagined immunity”—when targeting and attacking cells, even those that belong to the body itself. Hage and Esposito offer interesting perspectives—viz. over-defense can often cause one’s own compromise—but these do not fully hold for the ADL who are motivated and glued together by the very sense of paranoia which, in turn, does compromise the nation itself.

Comorbidity
Having explored how epidemiological, biomedical, body-centred discourses shape national beginnings, rhetorics, imaginings, and even subgroup formations who dedicate themselves (paradoxically and with oftentimes opposite effects) to the state’s maintenance, I turn to another example. This concerns the growing nationalist populist discourses in Italy, particularly in times of both a national and global crisis (namely, COVID-19; Casaglia et al., 2020). Claudio Minca writes specifically about the border populism that is currently ubiquitous in Italian populist politics, particularly the North where much of the right-wing party (Lega) reside (ibid.). Senator Matteo Salvini, leader of Lega, was not an exception to but a propagator of such populist narratives, discourses, and imaginaries that called upon biomedical knowledge on immunity to position its border politics as one that concerned keeping alien bodies outside given their being “potential vectors of actual contagious disease” (ibid., p. 6)—a “self-fencing” of sorts (Vinca & Rijke, 2018, p. 83). No truer is this than in the context of the global coronavirus pandemic, disrupting both individual lives and nation-states socially and economically at the beginning of 2020. What is interesting here, however, is that once Italy became “infected” and thus its borders traversed—indeed, Italy was the first country in Europe to be affected—the public recognised the threat from within. Not only were Italians themselves often discriminated against (a practice Italian populism knows all too well) but the fragility and fickle populist promises (particularly the “immunitarian imperative”) of border politics fell flat on its face (p. 7). This left a “reversal of perspective … [that] caused a frenzy of inconsistent reactions on the part of the few populist voices left” (ibid.). Thus, we might not only analyse the virus itself as being a geopolitical actor that does not discriminate, but one that cuts across the body-politic and brings with it a potential to reformulate political consciousness.

Conclusion
To recapitulate, looking at Australia, it is clear that the national boundary was initially imagined and constructed as “a site of medico–legal border control and quarantine”, created and creating itself “constitutorially, physically, administratively, spatially, … and racially” (Bashford, 2004, p. 136). A body-politic’s national values, sentiments, and ideologies when threatened (i.e., “ethnic persons” assimilating an Australian) can be further upheld and reinstated by its immune system(s) (e.g., the ADL) which, when overwhelmed with their own sense of belonging and security, in turn welded by a shared paranoia of a compromised country, cause a crisis of autoimmunity. Recourse to the body and immunological discourses can nonetheless have serious effects on the nation-state—less be said on Hitler’s self-referential title of “Doctor of the Germans”. Lastly, when an invisible geopolitical agent enters and attacks indiscriminately with an ineffectual, populist “head” as its commander, its citizenry may come to distrust the (populist) promises of the body-politic.

Within this discussion, then, I have attempted to present how these immunological and “othering” discourses may reveal the nature of the state in three critical stages: (1) formation, (2) maintenance or sustaining, and (3) hypocrisy and potential for breakdown.

Article references
Commentary references


