

Alison Mountz

Seeking Asylum: Human Smuggling and Bureaucracy at the Border. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 264 p.

The last decade has given rise to an extensive and interdisciplinary body of literature addressing the securitization of migration. The particular contribution of Alison Mountz's book, which fits neatly into this area of scholarship, is its project of bringing a critical geographical focus to the regulation of unauthorized migration flows. Mountz maps contemporary migration policy with a persistent and careful eye to the geography of these policies and to the relationship between the regulation of migration and the manipulation of physical space. At a time when the business of border control is narrated as unquestionably related to (if not determinative of) the safety of the state, there is great value in Mountz's project of locating in time and place "what states do in their interventions into human migration" and in the daily pursuit of border security (p. xiv).

The focal point for Mountz's research is how the Canadian state regulates transnational migration and, specifically, the response of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to one event: the Canadian government's interception of four boats, carrying 599 Chinese nationals, off the coast of British Columbia in 1999. Mountz carries out her investigation using a range of traditional qualitative research methods, including a detailed ethnography of the daily work of CIC at its Regional Headquarters in Vancouver, a series of semi-structured interviews with governmental and non-governmental actors, and archival research into CIC's departmental documents.

Following Giorgio Agamben, Mountz analyses the role played by narratives of crisis and emergency in characterizing human migration as extraordinary, dangerous, and in need of an exceptional response, "rather than as an ongoing global phenomenon for which immigration departments should prepare" (p. 91). Mountz adds to the immense existing theoretical work addressing the relationship of crisis, sovereignty, and exceptionalism through her focus on the unique geographic and visual elements of these crises as they play out in the Canadian context. She argues throughout the book that states chiefly exploit visibility and geography in denying migrants access to asylum policies and fundamental rights.

The book's content falls clearly into two parts. Chapters 1 to 3 detail Mountz's ethnography of CIC. They record bureaucratic practices such as the formulation of "policy on the fly"; the reclassification of physical space; and the constant interaction between CIC and the media to explore how states create the "crisis" of human smuggling. The remaining chapters are devoted to addressing the consequences of these "crises," including the shift in discourse surrounding asylum seekers from humanitarianism and human rights to criminality, security, and the "bogus refugee" (chapter 4); the international trend of creating legally ambiguous zones that render migrants "stateless by geographical design" (chapter 5); and an examination

of how exclusionary state practices reverberate through the lives of migrants whose immigration status is precarious (chapter 6).

One of the great strengths of this book is the extensive ethnographic data it records and analyses, exposing “the daily practices of the transnational state” (p. 53). Mountz’s sustained observation of CIC contributes a healthy dose of empirical knowledge to a field of scholarship frequently characterized by sweeping, generalized claims and a focus on the rhetorical content of border regulation. For example, during her fieldwork Mountz observed that poring over and responding to media reports was not only how CIC managers and its director general *started* their day but sometimes how they spent their entire day during the “summer of the boats” (p. 69). This observation readily conveys the “degree to which the daily operations of the bureaucracy were geared to interface with the media” and how these practices work to produce the hyper-visibility of boat arrivals (p. 80).

At times, the data presented could have benefitted from greater contextualization and self-reflection on the part of the author regarding her position as an interviewer and a participant-observer of CIC. For example, it would have been helpful to know what questions were asked to elicit certain interview responses. Relatedly, at certain points Mountz does not address how her position as a scholar may have influenced CIC employees, who likely felt themselves under the scrutiny of the academic gaze. For the most part, however, Mountz skilfully negotiates the difficulties that come with a reliance on ethnographic and interview data. She neatly explicates such difficulties when she writes that there is no truth to be discovered in interviews, “only a series of narratives that people tell, performances offered at specific moments for specific reasons” (p. 88), and that ethnographers must pay closer attention to the discrepancies between what civil servants say and what they do (p. 112).

Through this book, in line with her argument that written policies “tell only partial stories” (p. 35), Mountz documents the gap between policy and practice in the daily production of sovereignty and security, challenging the monolithic narratives that frame discussions about migration control. The richness of Mountz’s empirical research sits alongside her ability to critique the particularized practices of CIC with reference to broader international policies and trends. Significantly, by bringing Mountz’s perspective as a critical geographer to bear on the contemporary regulation of migration, *Seeking Asylum* not only facilitates a greater understanding of the geography of securitizing discourses but simultaneously acts as a compelling argument in favour of the interdisciplinary work done at the interface of geography and law and of the value of continually seeking to understand the relationships among law, legal narratives, and physical space.

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