The Cobra Effect: "Fighting" Migration Gets Europe Nowhere

An interview with Ruben Andersson
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Since 2015, the EU has ramped up its crisis narrative on migration, treating it a security issue to be dealt with. We spoke to University of Oxford anthropologist Ruben Andersson about the evolution of Western migration policy since the end of the Cold War and how the outsourcing of the "fight against migration" to countries of origin has proved counterproductive, fanning the flames of instability. In targeting threats "out there" to protect Europe, the EU is blatantly misdiagnosing the problem; what's needed is a systemic approach which factors in the West's own role in feeding these dangers, as well as alternative narratives based on hope rather than fear.

Green European Journal: Your new book, *No Go World*, pursued the topic of your first book, _Illegality Inc._, which focused on what has become a central topic of political discussion: migration. What do you make of developments over the last few years?

Ruben Andersson: My first book is based on research carried out almost a decade ago on the Spanish-African borders. Politically the situation is much more difficult now than it was back then, and much more visible in high politics and the media. But already then, certain kinds of migration by land or sea were being depicted as an emergency hitting European shores, with the same "crisis" narrative and the same security response. Since 2015 the phenomenon has gained political importance and the European Union as a whole is now putting very harsh border security operations in place and buttressing the crisis narrative at the highest level.

The new strategic agenda for the EU issued in June prioritises the effective control of its borders. Its underlying language is that of securitising migration, presenting it among potential crisis sources for the next five years. It also states that cooperation with African states on migration should continue and be deepened. But this framework is exactly where some of the most serious problems have arisen in recent years, as the example of Libya shows. The EU's framing of migration leaves little space for other ways of talking about human movement that would actually help to put into perspective what after all – barring the one-off record year 2015 – is a fairly small number of migrants coming across the Mediterranean relative to other migration flows in the EU.

So rather than opening up to "human movement" or "mobility", has the political narrative around migration been turned into fear mongering as you describe in your new book, *No Go World*?

The term "migrant" has become highly problematic and comes with a whole host of negative connotations, of course not new but certainly reinforced. It has engulfed other terminology, not just mobility, but asylum, refuge, and the duty to protect people fleeing persecution under the Geneva Convention. Anyone coming across the Mediterranean seems to be an economic migrant, looking to invade Europe. People travelling via this high-risk route follow extremely difficult paths that can include repression and targeting by violent groups in Libya. Their complex situations are not neatly encapsulated by a single term.

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overtaken and inhibited, counteracted by security measures.*

A deeper logic of complementarity is also at play here: the European Union has created a space of free movement within the EU, and so it needs to strengthen its border protections against non-European migration to safeguard that space. That dichotomy is built into the way the EU has institutionalised its migration and border regime since the 1990s.

That security discourse has implications for the EU's external relations, for example in African countries. It can inhibit some positive measures around mobility and development in these regions.

Part of the solution is to look outside of the EU. Mobility narratives, be they about free movement across African countries through the African Union or the existing visa-free region of ECOWAS in West Africa, are often put forward in their discussions with the EU. But they don't get the attention they deserve from policymakers, let alone from the media. The vast majority of migration in sub-Saharan Africa takes place within the region (75 per cent). Whereas several years ago there was still a recognition – at least among practitioners – that a positive dynamic was emerging, European donors increasingly just pay lip service to their partners regarding the benefits of mobility within Africa.

Since 2015, enabling and positive narratives are being overtaken and inhibited, counteracted by security measures. In practice that means using development aid to fund border security measures, build border posts, provide vehicles for patrols to fight migration, and so on. I've seen it in Senegal and Mali over the last decade and it is happening on a much bigger scale today with countries like Niger. The impact on regional mobility of these security measures shouldn't be overplayed: people have moved across these colonial-era borders for a very long time, and communities exist across borders. But overall this security trend is certainly making mobility easier to exploit for border police, who can increase bribe-taking and arbitrary crackdowns on legitimate travel.

Many in the EU call for clearer and more protected EU borders for Schengen. It is as if borders are needed to protect "us" from "them". Where does this need come from?

The EU disavows its linkage to its colonial history. But Europe and its recent history rest on drawing borderlines between what is Europe and what is not, which takes us back to colonial-era power relations. Any drawing of a borderline is a statement of sovereign power, of control, towards your domestic audience and towards the other. It is based on old myths about safeguarding ourselves from threats and is a way – a negative and unsustainable one if you ask me – to establish an "identity", the idea that we need an "other" to define ourselves. Border politics, certainly since the inception of Schengen, plays out at a highly symbolic level in the EU. Since the end of the Cold War, in Europe as in the US, migration has replaced military rivalry as the threat to fight at the border.

The need for a new enemy…

My book begins by correcting the frequent misconception that after 9/11 everything changed and that global jihadism became the new enemy. These trends predate 9/11 by a decade. The post-Cold War decade of the 1990s was full of media figures like Robert Kaplan churning out texts on the world's "coming anarchy", sending the message that strategic dangers of criminal anarchy emanating from poorer parts of the world were now the principal threat. This was a compelling message for the US military vis-a-vis the decolonised, post-Cold War world, and it appealed to the Clinton administration. Suddenly the desired globalised world also became one of dark and uncontrolled monsters in the form of transnational threats: organised crime, illegal migration, and terrorist

groups, such as Al-Qaeda (itself a consequence of US support for the Taliban in the 1980s). It is telling that while Bill Clinton celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall, he was building the first rudimentary walls on the US-Mexico border against migration. That same decade the border fences of Ceuta and Melilla, between Spain and Morocco, were put up with EU funding.

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9/11 reinforced this strategic military role of the US. The gargantuan Department of Homeland Security was created with its key priorities as fighting terrorists and terrorist weapons, and preventing them crossing the US-Mexico border. In more recent years Europe has latched onto this type of narrative and conceptualised the border as the point at which our supposedly vulnerable societies are protected. Compared to the Cold War, this narrative is a shift back to an earlier set of practices, more familiar in colonial times, of controlling populations across vast territories. Ideas setting a global "functioning Core" against a "disconnected Gap", popularised by a Pentagon strategist around the time of the Iraq invasion, fed this narrative. In other words, a divided map of the world was drawn depending on whether countries were connected or not to the globalised world. The West was going to spread the gospel of capitalist democracy by force, as seen in Iraq with disastrous results. Distance rather than connection was growing. It was no longer a case of trying to bring everyone on board, rather of containing threats outside the "core".

You investigate border control practices. What's happening there?

The EU now subcontracts migration controls. This comes from Spain's experience more than a decade ago of outsourcing its "fight against migration" to West African countries. These countries have no interest *per se* in fighting migration. They depend on remittances and receive no long-term benefit from fighting migration. But they are paid to do the difficult dirty work of containing, controlling, and cracking down on migration before people leave African shores. A whole economy of border and ministry officials lives off this funding. There is a parallel with the war on terror: local forces do the dangerous work, while keeping Western personnel safe and sound at a distance.

Libya is a case in point. In the post-Gaddafi era, the head of the EU border assistance mission to the country had no real personnel – certainly no one with the right experience of post-conflict situations – and no clear counterparts on the Libyan side. They were told not to take risks and to do their job remotely. They never visited southern Libya and were holed up in hotels and compounds in Tripoli. In the end the whole border assistance mission evacuated by land to Tunisia. Some of its staff worked remotely from Malta, and even from their home countries in Europe, trying somehow to train and monitor the border situation in Libya via a phone connection and the internet. As the head of the mission told me in an interview, it was pretty much mission impossible. The farce has today turned into a tragedy with various European initiatives to use militia forces to control migration.

Has the "ring of friends" that former Commission President Romano Prodi underlined envisioned in the early 2000s turned into a "ring of enemies" then? Have the EU's own actions backfired – the "Cobra effect" as you call it?

The Cobra effect refers to an anecdote of the British in India who put a price on the cobra heads, paying the locals to rid them of this threat. A perverse economy of growing cobras supposedly ensued; in the end, the attempt to

combat them only made their presence grow exponentially. I saw the perverse dynamics that exist between the EU, its member states, and partner regimes in conflict-hit Mali, where local actors were all well aware that to get the ear of European donors you had to invoke some kind of threat.

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Essentially a narrative and market based on fear comes to replace a more positive collaboration around mobility, trade, and development initiatives. The Malian president said once that Mali is a dam and if it breaks Europe will be flooded. He knew exactly what he was playing on to ensure that Europe keeps up its funding. In neighbouring Niger, the government claimed huge funds to halt migration towards Libya and the Mediterranean from the EU's development fund. Colonel Gaddafi was an expert at exploiting this narrative to claim billions for preventing Europe from "turning black". That negative spiral is taking hold, something which is rarely realised on the European level. The short termism in this fantasy of "fighting migration" by delegating and creating buffer zones over there in Libya, Morocco or Turkey creates feedback loops where the counterpart can stir up the threat for political ends. The donors, by offering political concessions and strengthening these countries' security apparatuses, risk not just triggering this spiral, but also generating domestic instability with disastrous consequences, as seen in Libya and Niger.

President Trump recently attacked four US Congresswomen saying they "should go back and help fix the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came." Your book explains how the two parallel stories of the politics of fear and economies of risk have become intertwined. How does that lead to a 'No Go World'?

Trump is an interesting case because he is very fearful. There are lots of journalistic reports and biographic observations about his phobias and fear of contact, even of touching buttons in an elevator. It is the idea of keeping away from risk and building a wall around your persona as you move through the world. His Twitter attacks have rightly been accused of racism; but we should also note that they reactivate an existing imaginary of the dangerous disconnected gap, the margins of our world maps which we need to keep at a distance. This usage of fear as tool – a "geo-pathology" – is present in the far right and the Trump administration, but has also been picked up by more mainstream political institutions, as with the European Union strategic agenda's framing of migration.

Trump's obsessive hand-washing is perhaps an extreme example of how "risk management" today affects all aspects of our lives. I see it myself in university risk protocols for going anywhere in Mali on fieldwork, and we see it in bunkered-up international interventions. The idea is to keep risk away, which often involves transferring it to others. Looking back at colonial times may help in understanding how the emotional politics of fear and the economies of risk work in tandem. There was an attempt to conquer and dominate lands far away from the colonial core and a simultaneous picturing of these places as dangerous and full of threats. The objective was to contain the risks on the margins of empire by using proxy forces and colonial buffer zones.

This mix of risk and fear is played out in the Mediterranean too, isn't it? You experienced first-hand what you describe as a cordon sanitaire, a quasi-epidemiological fear of the "other", in places such as Lampedusa and Lesbos.

The language of contagion and infection is part of our border politics today. In the Mediterranean it is there in

practice, drawing a cordon sanitaire around "our" waters. In 2015, well before the recent crackdowns in Italy, all rescued people on Lampedusa had scabies checks carried out in port, and rescuers greeted them in bio-hazard suits. There is a disease-ridden imagery of people coming across the border. At one time some people were saying that migrants would bring Ebola, even when there is very little risk of that medically speaking.

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What we don't realise is that we ourselves – powerful Western nation states and their electorates – are part of the problem. Danger is systemic, not geographic, and it is not bound to certain people. Western and other powerful states have staged security operations that are part and parcel of what generates this danger in the first place. Look at the NATO intervention in Libya. It not only caused chaos, conflict, and displacement on a huge scale, but had a knock-on effect across the Sahel region, including in Mali. In diagnosing certain parts of the world as the source of dangers, we misdiagnose the problem.

How do you respond to those who insist that there are real risks out there, that terrorists exist and that Europe needs to protect itself?

I don't think that there are no dangers to deal with. But powerful Western interveners and politicians today emphasise, frame, and map these dangers as if they were somebody else's problem. We must treat these dangers in a systemic manner, on a global level that accounts for "our" own role as donor states and interveners. It can start by accounting for the full costs of the security interventions we are seeing today. Right now, politicians get away with framing the "success" of fighting migration over a short time span. But, if one looks at all the actors, the blowback effects, the ways threats are being stoked and worsened over time, a much more complex picture appears.

That can be a starting point for coalitions based on a different way of thinking that accounts for these risks and presents alternatives. This is not a pipe dream; in the debate on climate change, business as usual is now challenged across the board. Industries have long polluted waters and the environment while their risks have been exported to someone else, but these practices are increasingly being accounted for, at least on paper. Another example of this more holistic shift can be seen in the war on drugs. Certain governments and coalitions have clamoured for a different approach given all the damage that the "war" caused in their territories. Learning from these examples and applying them to border security and the war on terror would move us to a more holistic model that recognises the damage that powerful interveners cause.

The narrative around migration also needs to shift away from threat and emergency towards a much more positive set of parameters. Perhaps the solution partly lies in going to some of those origin countries and seeing the narratives emerging there, with the African Union and African states often having very different takes. We need alternative narratives, which is often where politics fails. The story of fear and risk has become ever more entrenched, and we urgently need to counter with stories of hope and genuine protection.

Ruben Andersson is an anthropologist working on migration, borders and security with a focus on the West African Sahel and southern Europe. His books include *No Go World: How fear is redrawing our maps and infecting our politics* (University of California Press: 2019) and *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine migration and the business of bordering Europe* (University of California Press: 2014).