

[Niebuhr on Vaughan-Williams, 'Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power'](#)

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Nick Vaughan-Williams. *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. ix + 190 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-3732-4.

Reviewed by Robert Niebuhr **Published on** H-World (December, 2013) **Commissioned by** Aaron D. Whelchel

A Bridge between Theory and Practice?

In a thorough review of current literature on borders and sovereignty, Nick Vaughan-Williams attempts to engage the reader and foster critical thinking about this increasingly salient topic in international relations. The author notes that changing norms have implications for how states will adapt or perhaps rewrite altogether laws and international treaties. Indeed, what does it mean to have a border today in terms of immigration, security, or the extraction and distribution of resources? Moreover, how can states or other actors project influence throughout the world given our changing realities from the past to the present? States have always exercised irresistible power over weaker neighbors, but has the post-Cold War era perhaps exasperated the issue? Preemptive strikes, the use of drones (for intelligence gathering and for targeted assassination), and the complex, ever-evolving border security regime continue to change the dynamic of politics. Fantastic developments in technology have encouraged the blurring of borders and altered how we wage war. Because of the contentious nature of this theme, the text by Vaughn-Williams is timely and expertly raises a host of interesting questions. He convincingly encourages us to reconsider the political notions of borders and statehood that we have relied on since the Peace of Westphalia.

Vaughan-Williams presents his study in a logical, well-written, and clear manner. As a reader, I never lost track of the prose nor felt that the author was glossing over information. While the introduction makes the case for correcting a gap in the literature, the first chapter introduces concrete examples, such as the British border doctrine, Frontex, and the issues surrounding Guantanamo. Each successive chapter then turns to theory and harkens back to the significance of questioning the current practices raised in the introduction.

In the remainder of the volume--which largely abandons the case studies in chapter 1 for theory--the text seems to lose its balance. As the globe deals with specific issues, such as security in the post-9/11 world, countries (or associated countries, in a case like that of the European Union) are increasingly trying to restrict entry of peoples they deem threatening. Likewise, while chapter 1 discusses how the Guantanamo facility has implications for growing limitations on civil rights, sovereignty, and the rule of law, the reader is left questioning how other aspects of the War on Terror have influenced American and international legal systems. Targeted drone strikes and the practice of using offshore military bases to house detainees, conduct interviews, or store sensitive intelligence raises important and startling questions relating to extraterritoriality, the right to counsel, and the concept of innocent until proven guilty. Rather than delve into an analysis of such issues--which

would have provided the reader with immediate real-world comparisons--this book compiles the most significant contemporary theories by the likes of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Carl Schmitt, and G. Agambem.

Despite the lack of specific cases to ground the theories, this text does effectively present the significant theoretical work about how we can rethink borders and sovereignty. It might not be appropriate for classroom reading with the possible exception of a graduate seminar; in a graduate class, students could benefit from the solid theoretical review presented here and use that information as a point of departure for further case-study analysis. This is true for the field of international relations specifically, but also for world history where the book would be useful in courses with a political or contemporary focus.

While it does not appear that the author's goal was to devise a new definition of "sovereignty," the overt reliance on presenting theories frames the work as an extended and comprehensive historiography or literature review. The first chapter, with its description of specific cases, piques the reader's interest, but the subsequent theoretical chapters only hint back to the cases. Rather than presenting a unified theory or set of prescriptions, the author leaves only a series of questions for the reader to consider. An absence of a set of recommendations or concrete proposals at the end of the text may leave many disappointed. This is not to say that the book lacks solid and thought-provoking ideas; there are many, including when the author cites such scholars as Judith Butler, cautioning us over surveying our fellow denizens. Because governments are asking so-called good citizens to be on the lookout for suspicious behavior, there exists a real danger of "a potential license for prejudicial perception" (p. 167). If we follow Butler's logic to the extreme, we can see how such issues as sovereignty fall by the wayside in the name of security or safety. While the text is a valuable synthesis of current theory, forging a strong and definitive set of conclusions, or, alternatively, including more case studies alongside theory, would have allowed readers to apply theories to specific events and issues.

Overall, this informative volume serves to bring any reader up to date regarding some of the present issues connected with sovereignty and the changing definitions, at least in practice, of sovereignty since Westphalia. The author is correct that, in light of experiences since the War on Terror began, we should reevaluate what sovereignty means. Much of the literature he cites informs our ability to make intelligent judgments on where to take our thinking. Yet many readers will ask for a bit more analysis in addition to the sound review of relevant literature. Therefore, as a theoretical piece this hits the mark but perhaps in a way that restricts its audience to interested scholars and graduate-level seminar students.

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