

# Ruben Andersson's *Illegality, Inc.* (2014) A review

Veit Schwab

With *Illegality, Inc.*, Ruben Andersson presents a fascinating analysis of what he calls “illegality industry” — “the system in which illegal migration is both controlled and produced — its configuration, its workings, and its often distressing consequences” (12). In this industry, “illegality is not just produced; it is also productive. As a ‘problem’ to be solved, it sparks new security ‘solutions’, NGO projects, professional networks, activist campaigns, and journalistic and academic engagements that might otherwise remain unfunded and ignored” (274). On a staggering journey across Euro-African borderlands, the author takes us to the front and back rooms of this industry, to its air-conditioned command centres and shady street corners, to the current hot spots and long forgotten arenas of the spectacle of ‘illegality’, in the midst of which migrant ‘illegality’ is constituted, reworked, and contested.

In his ethnographic study, the author skilfully balances the trade-off between breadth and depth by including a complex terrain of different sites and actors involved in the workings of this industry: the (re-)production and valorisation of ‘illegality’. What is referred to as “extended field site” (284) in a rather short appended note on method to emphasise the networked character of the illegality industry is stretching from the borderlands of Senegal, Mali, and Morocco, across the fences surrounding Spain’s North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, to the distant headquarters of the Spanish Guardia Civil in Madrid or Frontex in Warsaw. While connected through transversal relations, each local context is marked by a specific configuration of actors and particular modalities of illegalisation. That way, relations of solidarity, repression, compassion and complicity between an already complex set of actors are continuously reconfigured — often moving in unexpected, even absurd directions.

If the resulting picture is confusing at times, this is not the fault of the author but reflects the properties of the European border regime. Almost stretching the grasp of multi-sited research to an extreme, Andersson successfully navigates this complexity and skilfully integrates in a convincing and accessible narrative the sheer number of spatial, temporal, and social relations that contribute to or are affected by the *business of bordering* Europe.

The book is organised into three main parts, each of which scrutinises a different modality of illegalisation. The first part — *Borderlands* — is focuses on the effects of externalisation and development. The reader meets Mohammadou and other members of a repatriate organisation in Senegal, who end up being “content providers” for tales of illegality (chapter 1). While their personal experiences of migration are woven into a counter-migration narrative, others cream off the promised compensation in the form of development aid and visas — if it arrives at all. One is allowed a rare glimpse into the inner sanctum of the securitisation of migration, the control rooms and the mental world of those “who stare at screens” (chapter 2). The author shows how the technologized management of Europe’s borders relies on the social construction of risk, which is both providing its modus operandi and a suitable narrative to legitimise a self-perpetuating business. Against the background of what he aptly calls “the double securitization of migration”, “(...) risk is not just the anticipation of danger; it is also the source of potential profits” (79). Stepping out of the air-conditioned offices, Andersson confronts us with the brutal effects of the externalised border regime in the western Sahel (chapter 3). Here, “(...) the illegal migrant emerges not just as a discursive but above all as an embodied figure while approaching the external E.U. border: he is alternately a hounded pitied prey and a ghostlike, prohibited presence” (130).

In *Crossings*, the second part (and chapter 4) of the book, the author analyses the “double border spectacle” that unfolds at the fences of Ceuta and Melilla, and around rescue operations at the shores of the Canary Islands. Based on Nicholas De Genova’s reading of Guy Debord’s theory of the spectacle, the author shows how practices of bordering rely on a visual economy that privilege a certain imagery of migration (and control), and frame it as its essential, commercially exploitable reality. That way, the hypervisibility of migrants in the humanitarian frame of sea rescue operations and their tabooed presence at the fences, along with the subject positions of rescuable “huddle” and frightening “horde” can be qualified as two acts of the same spectacle (170). Relying on a specific framing of ‘illegality’, different modalities of control (humanitarianism vs. militarisation) and catering towards distinct audiences (the general public vs. the European funders), both logics of bordering are not

contradictory, but complementary. However, the spectacle is haunted by its own excess: Where “[n]o single story triumphs” (170), the border spectacle always already bears the conditions for its contestation and subversion. Sometimes, as in the powerful story of Amadou who masterfully climbs the fence (186f), crossings take a silent “backstage entrance”. In other cases, they disturbingly fit the mould that is carved out through practices of militarisation. Against the background of mass-crossings involving the adaptation of military tactics, the author even talks about a “shared militarism” (169): “As border controls and discourses have become militarized (. . .), so has migrant praxis in a play of reflection and mimesis ricocheting from forest hideouts on the Moroccan-Algerian border to the control rooms of Madrid and Rabat” (158). It takes some time to digest this diagnosis — and while one might agree with it or not, the analytical approach in this chapter constitutes one of the most intriguing contributions of the book: On a basic level, the author offers a convincing and exemplary analysis of the relation between discursive and material practices of bordering. The concept of “feedback loops” (14; 280), mediating between the media spectacle around migration and the worlds of policy making and security firms is especially promising and awaits further application. But above all, Andersson’s take on the border spectacle is so compelling because it manages to address the discursive and material overdetermination of migration and control, without glossing over its inherent complexities, power relations, and apparent contradictions.

The third and last part of the book focuses on *Confrontations*. In chapter 5 and 6, the author looks at forms of individual and collective political action. Contesting the conditions of the everyday life in and around the camps of Ceuta and Melilla, questioning the ambiguous position of the camps’ social workers and resisting against their classification along the lines of race, conduct or nationality, migrants’ struggles are contained by a further refinement of these mechanisms. In this part of the book, the author is drawing a rather grim picture of the struggles of migration, which is somewhat at odds with the more appreciative accounts that presently circulate in the field of Critical Migration Studies (see for example this issue of movements). This stance peaks in the analysis of a transnational protest march from Bamako to the World Social Forum of 2011 in Dakar (chapter 7). “In taking as their rallying points the illegal migrant and the Euro-African border”, he argues, “the activists joined the police, the aid world, and the media in making these twin specters increasingly real”. For him, “[t]his was the tragedy of solidarity: the opposition to the illegality industry could take place only on the ‘factory floor’ of this industry itself” (270).

This brings me to a few critical remarks. Leaving aside the questions whether this assessment, as well as the condensed analysis do justice to the specific protest at stake, or whether it might have made sense to resort to frameworks developed in Critical Migration Studies instead of adopting the rather schematic gaze of Social Movement Studies (260), the mechanics of Andersson's argument both challenge his own perspective, and point to a larger problematic. Assuming that practices of contestation and critique cannot escape the logics of the spectacle, the same applies to the critique of critique. If we accept Debord's later diagnosis of an "integrated spectacle" that "permeates all reality" (see the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*), and take Andersson's reflexive positioning as "the anthropologist who (...) is already 'native' to the industry he writes about" (287) seriously, some consequences result for our academic/activist practice. Against the background of the present study, we may ask whether the critical use of the concept of 'illegality' runs danger of being detached from its context and recuperated by the spectacle that is the very object of its critique. In other words: If the author re-articulates 'illegality' for the purpose of critique, in what respect is this different from similar practices of re-articulation or appropriation that are in the focus of his criticism? How can we deal with relations of complicity and conflicts of interest, similar to those that are addressed by the author, when he positions himself as "a colleague and 'accomplice' of sorts for migrants, reporters, police, and aid workers" (287), or admits to "feel increasingly awkward in this delicate balance act between [his] police and activist contacts (...)" (268) during the protest march? He continues: "(...) but it is impossible to act the role of bystander: there are no neutral onlookers except for us and a few itinerant sunglass vendors". While Andersson's argument is sometimes marked by a strange polyphony between critical partiality and echoes of the spectacle's promise of 'neutrality', the answer for Debord and the Situationist International seems all too easy: "Est récupéré qui veut bien" (*IS revue* 012) — we're only recuperated, if we want to. But how could a refusal of complicity with the 'integrated' border spectacle look like?

Andersson's *Illegality, Inc.* is a highly valuable resource for a collective discussion of this problematic. He enriches the field of Critical Migration and Border Studies with a timely, thought-provoking and highly creative contribution. Combining profound ethnographic analysis with a refreshing writing style, the book lives up to the promises of public anthropology and successfully proves that analytical depth and accessibility are not mutually exclusive.

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## **Empfohlene Zitierweise**

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