



BOOK REVIEW

Leonie Ansems de Vries (2026). *Politics of exhaustion: border violence and struggles over movement*. Bristol University Press.

Shaista & Naushaba

Politics of Exhaustion: Border Violence and Struggles over Movement by Leonie Ansems de Vries is an intellectually rigorous contribution to scholarship on migration, political theory and border studies. The book entails shifting the concept of the border from episodic violence to infrastructures of sustained attrition. Conceptualizing “exhaustion as politics, violence and struggle, thus enriching existing conceptualizations of violence, of struggle and of politics” (p. 8), the author argues that exhaustion is not only an emotional consequence of migration regimes, but has a calculated effect. And this effect is created and used to control mobility, build and destabilize subjectivities and is subtly undermined by political opposition.

The analytical notion of “governance through exhaustion” underpins the framework presented in this insightful book. Based on detailed ethnographic data collected from Calais, Dunkirk and the United Kingdom’s asylum policy, the author shows that the processes of bordering take various shapes. Not only can bordering be performed by simply enforcing policies, but it can also be achieved through repetition, deferral, dispersal and deprivation. These include the demolition of shelters, denying access to hygiene, preventing humanitarian aid and creating legal insecurity; all of which become tools used in the systematic oppression designed to ensure that survival is only possible through violence. The key theoretical contribution of this book is its ability to weave together the research on slow violence (Rob Nixon), debilitation (Jasbir Puar), and structural/epistemic violence. In the work of Ansems de Vries, these ideas are combined with the emphasis being placed on exhaustion.

Exhaustion is an approach that helps to question border practices and the way they are enforced by states. It cannot be just termed as a means of movement or

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stoppage for migrants, but also entails a sense of exhaustion of psychological, intellectual and emotional capacities of the person on the move. Most importantly, in using the concept of exhaustion, the author does not use exhaustion metaphorically, but instead focuses on empirical evidence of the life of refugees who live with constant uncertainty and hostility from border officials.

What stands out about the book empirically is that it pays particular attention to the informal settlements in northern France. The “Jungle” as it is sometimes called is reconstructed not only as an emergency humanitarian space but also as an intricate socio-spatial space of improvisation, collective existence and precariousness. What French authorities call a ‘zero-anchor point’ approach to dismantling mosques, schools, kitchens and markets emerges in the midst of extreme instability. The systemic thwarting of the formation of durable infrastructure is an example of a shift from territory to environmentalised modes of governance, in which survival is an object of intervention.

The book clearly draws a line between direct and indirect violence, which is a crucial distinction. Police raids and evictions are visible but are interwoven within other more subtle and insidious processes of attrition. This can manifest itself in the withholding of waste collecting services and the criminalisation of aid and the deliberate creation of inhospitable environments. This focus links in with the ongoing debate on ‘slow violence’, though Ansems de Vries takes this analysis further by outlining how exhaustion is a productive political process that fractures solidarities, weakens organisational capacity and forces constant adaptation. The struggle for survival is a day to day aspect of refugeeness. Ansems de Vries poignantly says that “migrant struggles often involve smaller cracks that both disrupt and feed into prevailing orders and epistemologies, that is, migrants become something other than a modern political subject without adding up to a new ‘vision’ of politics” (p. 20.) Among the strengths of the book is its focus on the lack of representation of the migrants in a passive sense. Instead, it centres on relationality, creativity and resistance that emerge within constraints.

Routine activities such as consuming food, engaging in informal learning, watching the sky or creating origami birds are discussed as affective and political practices that continue the subjectivity. In particular, a Sri Lankan torture survivor, Janahan’s story is worth recollecting in which how he spent time in detention, learning origami as he had to spend eight years in legal limbo in the UK before he was granted refugee status. During this period, he learnt it as a hobby which soon became a therapy as it distracted him from his painful experiences (p. 69). While these acts are not an abatement of structural violence, yet they are an expression of the vitality of life in and against structural violence. The focus on temporality: waiting, repetition and interruption bring an

analytical depth, and highlights not only how exhaustion is created geographically but also stretched and distorted in terms of time.

The work is methodologically distinctive. Participatory and collaborative methodology used by Ansems de Vries is the kind that dismantles hierarchical relations inherent in knowledge production. It may be noted that using such techniques as photographic and filming practices, walking interviews and storytelling projects is considered an innovative approach to knowledge creation. The reference to the “Migrant Voices” program and collaboration with the Migration Museum in London offers another illustration of how the concept of representation can also be fraught, particularly from the perspectives of ethics related to visibility, vulnerability and agency. The author is mindful of the ambivalence of these approaches, since they may free participants to act effectively, but they can also put them at risk in unfavourable political settings.

The book is a welcome intervention in the engagement between the repressive contemporary border regime and longer histories of colonialism, racialisation and dispossession. Migration control is embedded in a broader landscape of inequality that is characterized by uneven migration and a highly racialized landscape of migration. For example, the UK’s Windrush scandal is an example of the illegality that can be manufactured within systems of documentation/bureaucracy for people who have long legal residency. In this place, exhaustion is created through administrative repetition as well as evidence requirements and suspicion of the institutions. This results in a state violence that is as much about paperwork.

Another significant aspect of the book is its focus on disability studies and ableism, which remains an understudied aspect of structural violence (p.101). Building on the work of Erevelles and Minear, the author demonstrates the interactions between migration regimes and austerity politics in the creation of “excess” populations considered unproductive or a burden. This exhaustion is then redefined as both a physical state and a normative evaluation of whose lives are considered sustainable or valuable. The intersectional analysis that further develops the critique of current governance also exposes assumptions about productivity, ability and value that can be found in it.

Theoretically, the book tries to bring out the connections between affect, materiality and geopolitics in a highly ambitious fashion. While exhaustion affects not only the bodies but also goes around in infrastructures, institutions and environment. For example, the process by which Calais was turned into a “renatured” bird preserve should not be viewed as one of restoration but of erasure, as the migrants’ history is erased from the scene. In this ecologizing of border governance, which the author calls ‘eco-coloniality,’ bordering activities are capable of penetrating beyond space and into environmental management and landscape production.

The book is analytically dense. But this does not diminish its lucidity of ethnographic encounters that highlight analytical claims. The emotional dimension of living in precarity is demonstrated in the depictions of communal dining and undirected interaction. And Ansems de Vries is right in underlining “the political significance of everyday practices that bring people together and foster affective relations and communities of solidarity, friendship and care, as well as the importance of play, to counter the politics of exhaustion” (p. 114) . This ensures that the discussion does not become purely theoretical, but remains connected with people’s everyday reality. But it is also a source of certain tension for the book’s broad theoretical coverage. The connection between slow violence, post-colonial theory, disability studies, affect theory and participatory methodology can sometimes become too theoretical. However, this may also be its greatest strength since a wider scope allows one to grasp the complexity of the process under study. As Ansems de Vries convincingly shows, exhaustion is not something that can be comprehended under one discipline.

Politics of Exhaustion is a significant addition to current scholarship in the fields of borders and migration. It re-focuses the conversation from exaggerated acts of violence and instead focuses on the gradual and silent ways in which life can be controlled and degraded. In conceptualizing exhaustion as a mode of governance and place of struggle, Ansems de Vries opens new lines of thinking about resistance, endurance and relational life in the context of inequality. The book is both theoretically sophisticated and empirically robust and also morally committed.