

**Hall, Alexandra. 2012. *Border Watch. Cultures of Immigration, Detention and Control (Anthropology, Culture and Society Series)*. London: Pluto Press. vii + 199 pp. Pb.: £17.50. ISBN: 9780745327242.**

The so-called Locksdon, is an immigration removal centre (IRC) that always smells the same way: disinfectant, bleach, institution; the book *Border Watch: Cultures of Immigration, Detention and Control* is the result of one year of ethnographic studies conducted inside of it, started by Alexandra Hall in 2002.

Through an acute and well-structured examination of everyday life and daily practices of the immigration detention system and mostly through a dispassionate and attentive observation of those who act professionally inside of it, dealing with detainees, i.e. the Locksdon's officers, the author cleverly shows us how detention is a governmental and symbolic place or non-place where undesirability is managed and controlled.

In Hall's words: 'detention crystallises the problematic relationship between certain kinds of movement and projects of security. I am concerned with security as a social and cultural category, expressed and experienced within daily life in the IRC' (p.5). The officers' self-presentation and re-presentation in everyday life, with its speeches, tones, inner workings and clichés, makes hierarchies and divisions clearer. Using words through their banal decisions, taken within discretionary judgements, they suspend the normal regime in favour of punitive and retaliatory action. It is in the banal encounters between officers and detainees that the national boundary between inclusion and exclusion emerges. The language then, as a first practice of power reproduction.

Alexandra Hall argues that the legal and arbitrary system that governs and organizes (read as to lock in and to confine) mobility is an "experimental machine" and detention is one of the ways through which the security State "writes itself", defending territorial borders and saving national identity. In fact, on the basis of liberal principles, States act in an authoritarian way.

The book consists of six chapters. Each stands independently but is linked to the others with great explanatory pragmatism and with constant references to interdisciplinary literature on detention, control, defiance from across the social sciences. The biopolitical frame on the background of the whole book is undeniable (let us say indispensable).

In the second chapter, *Visual Practice and Secure Regime*, Alexandra Hall introduces the phenomenon of "bodywatching", as a special way in which each detainee becomes only a body, a bare life. Each detainee's singularity turns into the unidentified throng. Detainees become indistinguishable: one "body" among many others. They are dragged under the panoptical gaze of observation and control. For example, the incitement to use the prison's uniform (Chapter 4), which is not an obligation, means to make men equivalent, a stigmatic action upon the body which is crucial to visual serialisation and training. And suspicion is often the dominant attitude of the regime's staff.

In a male officer's words: 'These people [detainees] could be anyone. We have no idea who they are and what they are doing here .... Once they're here they just give a name, and we have no way of knowing who they are. Immigration don't know' (p. 28). So, the practice of "bodywatching", as a set of embodied visual habits, put into practice

by the “layers of the body”, which constantly “read” the detainee’s body as a site ‘where intent and proclivity could be discerned ahead of time, and where control could be inscribed’ (p. 29).

The fourth chapter is even more fascinating, ‘Compliance and Defence: Contesting the regime’ in which Hall analyses the body as a space of resistance, rebellion, struggle. Both time and space are the places where discipline is eluded by detainees through those clever tactics of refusing the demands made to them by the Locksdon regime. In this sense, for example, refusing food is a significant method to protest against the secure but humane detention regime.

The act of “taking subjectivity” done by the detainees, subverting the idea of “victimlike refugee” (p. 111), is the enactment of political equality and a concrete act of citizenship. Unlike a rhetoric that often labels them as undisciplined criminals, illegal outsiders or guests with obligations and moral indebtedness, through their bodies, the detainees can become political subjects, demanding to be heard, refusing to be ignored, repudiating the norms of afternoon regime, seizing the initiatives, claiming their rights (the right to protest, firstly), seeking to be recognised as ‘something other than bodies to be administered’ (p. 110).

In the last chapter “Ethics and Encounters”, Locksdon opens, however, some little and fragile spaces of humanity, in the sense of ‘unmediated recognition and generous actions without calculation’ (p. 151). The episodes described, such as the one involving a receptionist who decided to break protocol by allowing a man to call his girlfriend, or another one in which Tom tried to save a detainee from committing suicide, are qualitatively different kind of engagements. Using Hall’s words ‘the shared witnessing of the man’s death produced in detainee and officer alike a disturbed sense of being in the detention centre, once were previous certainties and entrenched judgements one another fell away’ (p. 155). In this last moment of pure violence, they share a deep sense of common humanity through the deletion of role barriers.

The value of Border Watch is the highlight that all those Western and liberal practices, splurged by democratic States, create a “wasted lives” control system. Under the law (the 1971 Immigration Act), detention is a crucial and necessary part of a robust national border.

So Locksdon is a border zone and Border Watch discusses the life of this ‘thickened space’, offering critical sparks and deep reflections. If freedom of movement is a real European value, and if we want to understand why people who have not committed a crime, nor have been sentenced in court, are detained, then this book is a starting point and a useful tool to attempt an answer.

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