

Interview Series: “Global Deportation and Detention Regimes”

Organized by Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin

Interview with Tom Kemp

In this interview, we spoke with Thomas Kemp on detention and deportation in the UK context. The interview touches upon the historical background of detention and deportation regulations and practices in the post-Brexit UK as well as ways to challenge them. Tom discusses not only the possibilities to engage in migration politics in the UK today, but also the limits that are imposed upon activist horizons. Besides these limitations, we also talked about the new ways to open up activist futures through post-representational and abolitionist organizing against the detention and deportation regime.

Tom Kemp is a writer and organizer based in Nottingham, UK. He has organized with solidarity and political education groups, including [Abolitionist Futures](#), [Solidarity Detainee Support](#) and the [Detained Voices](#) collective. He works as a researcher at the University of Nottingham writing on the politics of organizing against border enforcement and the oversight of criminal justice detention and imprisonment. His publications include *Activism and the Detention of Migrants* (Routledge, 2024) and “[The Cruel Optimism of International Prison Regulation](#)”.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: First of all, thank you for taking the time to be with us and talking about your work and activism, rather than spending the day walking around Istanbul. To begin, we’d like to ask: who counts as “the migrant” in the UK today? Who are the people affected by border enforcement, detention, and deportation? And what kind of figure does the far right imagine or target when it speaks against migrants? There is no need to think in terms of specific nationalities—rather, could you describe this as a broader social and political figure?

Tom Kemp: The British border enforcement as we know it today has developed historically over the 20th century with moments of notable acceleration in the 1900s, 1960s/1970s and 1990s. One could see that as a coherent and logical ramping up of detention, deportation, and surveillance capabilities into a fully formed border system. But at each stage, the escalation of the border has been in response to different controversies that have been mobilized by the far right and the right wing around different groups of people. So, the object of border control has always been differently constructed and in order to motivate and to legitimize the expansion of various forms of policing. In the 1960s, it was commonwealth citizens from India and the Caribbean that were seen to be disrupting race relations. Prior to that, in the 1900s, it was Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe who were fleeing persecution and were said to be creating crime and poverty in London. Later on in the 1990s, it was the figure of the “bogus asylum seeker” that became the folk devil in the moral panic of border control.

There is always a particular kind of controversy that is able to be leveraged against migrants. And it’s a feature of nationality law and citizenship law that there are always going to be people in the United Kingdom that are illegitimate or undocumented. So there can always be a sense of uncontrolledness around migration around the border. And then also because the means of legitimately migrating to the UK have been closed down, people who need to move will always find illegitimate ways of moving. Therefore, there’s an easy way of saying the border is uncontrolled: “We need new technologies, we need new militarization, we need new crimes to deal with this new wave of illegitimate, uncontrolled migration.” The contemporary one is the small boat crossings across the Channel between France and the UK, which is a very small proportion of total migration. There’s the kind of weird feature of the post-Brexit time: a large escalation in legal migration to the UK at the same time there is this kind of a rise in illegalized migration, which is still quite small in terms of numbers but significant in terms of the news agenda.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Thanks for giving us that background. We also know that there are movements in the UK actively challenging this constellation of

border regimes. We will come to those movements in a moment, but first we'd like to ask about how you understand "the political" in your book titled *Activism and the Detention of Migrants*. What is the central dilemma in contemporary politics that you identify? How do you define and describe this dilemma, and in what ways does it limit or constrain the development of political movements today?

Tom Kemp: I think the first thing to say about dilemma is that it's not an abstract and intellectual dilemma where you have to stop acting and talking and intervening in the world before acting. It's one that you work through acting with others. It would be a mistake to just stop and then think and intervene. It's something you work through and think through. So maybe a better way of describing it is like a constitutive tension within activist work that you're constantly navigating, tentatively experimenting with, sometimes more decisively intervening in. And so the dilemma that I describe in the book is the kind of representational politics dilemma. Because people are imprisoned in detention and are in many ways kind of stopped from acting politically or invisibilized by being detained and punished. One of the main ways that activists can feel like they can intervene effectively and legitimately is by engaging in a representational politics where one mediates between people who are imprisoned and disenfranchised and centers of state power or public power in the courts, in political government and the public at large. And the main ways that we do that, they're kind of predominant ways in which representational politics happens: through legal advocacy, political casework in NGOs, political campaigning where NGOs or activists decide what the campaign is going to be and public awareness campaigns.

These are kind of self-evidently useful sometimes in making change. However, it's useful to understand the constitutive limitations of representational politics. In order to be effective, they have to convince an audience. They have to translate the complex historical and social circumstances of people in detention and translate them into terms that are recognizable and accepted by the people that you are trying to persuade—whether that's into immigration law or trying to convince political actors to adopt certain

causes. I think this often limits the political horizons of your activist project. For example, in articulating the demands or the needs of people in detention or people subject to border control in terms of immigration and asylum law necessarily is to try and articulate their rights and needs into a regime of recognition which is designed to exclude and erase their rights and their recognition as people. And similarly, campaigns for reform often have to be articulated in ways which appeal to the interests of the political, the government or something. So they often take the form of “you can achieve the ends that you want to achieve in more humane ways or in more effective and cost-free ways”. And they inherently accept the political imperatives of deportation or of border control and don’t challenge the fundamental ideas. That’s one way: the limiting of political horizons is one way in which politics often falters.

The other way is that it often creates or enacts kinds of political communities which reestablish differences between migrants or people on the move and citizen activists. That is obviously the object that anti-border activism is trying to eradicate and remove. So, it establishes these differences in power because representative politics works on the idea that you have to form knowledge about people in detention, knowledge about their history, knowledge about their needs and demands and you communicate that via these activist intermediaries to central power, to the government or to other places. The active role of that is in the citizen part; they use their expertise, their knowledge, to enact their work. And people in detention are rendered sort of passive legitimizers of the work of citizen activists and NGOs. So, the constitutive dilemma is that representation feels like the only way to engage in politics of detention, but it also has these limitations and consequences that activists of all kinds are all trying to navigate that tension. That’s one dilemma that I talk about in the book. I think there are other dilemmas on which we could speak.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Are the dilemmas of representation you’re describing specific to detention politics, or do they also apply more broadly to migration solidarity politics? For example, in many contexts, when political engagement is

considered too risky for migrants, citizens often use their own privileges to organize or amplify migrants' voices—this might well raise similar dilemmas. How can we think about moving beyond the constitutive tension of representational anti-border politics?

Tom Kemp: I think it has broader application and arises in the border movement, also in other liberation movements. It just becomes more acute in the detention context because detained people are actually so invisibilized and so unable to act politically because they're in detention. But I think it happens. It's certainly a wider issue, a wider thing that people navigate. So to answer the second question: I think activists are engaging in what, in the book, I call the "post-representative politics". This is not a practice of trying to escape representation. It's still saying that we have to choose what kinds of issues and people we work with and respond to and how we articulate our demands. It's always engaging with those questions. I don't think you can escape choices about who you work with, what kinds of claims you're making. It's not trying to escape representation, but it's trying to seek other ways of engaging in that representational problem. And specifically, it's seeking ways of more collaboratively working with the political agency of people in detention and people who are targeted by border controls more generally.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Do you have any concrete examples from the movement?

Tom Kemp: Yeah, for sure. It's trying to work, as far as is possible, towards a more horizontalist politics, whilst acknowledging that horizontal politics is impossible. It's a necessary but impossible thing to work with. And it's experimenting tentatively and forming practices around, trying to build communities and relationships and things from that level. So, in the book I talk about three forms of post-representational politics. One is protests which don't try and go march in the city center or something, but are going to detention centers themselves and orienting themselves to people inside (detention). That uses the form of a protest in quite practical ways. It's a way of forming connections,

getting in touch with people that go outside of the normal gatekeepers that surround detention, which are usually NGOs or the detention center itself or who are more conservative about what they feel they're able to do. It's also a way of using those connections to share knowledge about how to survive detention or resist deportation, to share contacts with solidarity groups so that people can feel like they're connected and valued in community with others and to share political analyses of what detention is and how to contest what we're doing and talk and engage with people inside about their view of what detention is. It's not a one-way learning about, adopting what people inside are saying about detention, but it's a communicative thing about saying this is how we understand detention. How do you understand what's going on? And in that way, forming a kind of dialogue about what's going on. So, it's a detention process, using noise, using banners, not in a kind of demonstrating to the state about what's going on, but using those things to create communities, illegitimate communities, ones that the state doesn't want and building from them.

The second one was detention visiting; more radical forms of detention visiting which set up individual relationships between activists on the outside and people in detention. The boundaries of those relationships are typically more open-ended and are worked out more. So maybe it's useful to contrast them with certain conservative forms of detention visiting which are like "your role is to prevent, to support them [detainees] and then to help them with casework and to tie them into caseworks". There are certain forms of visiting where "you shouldn't share your number", where you're not allowed to engage in protests outside of detention. Your role is to befriend, is to support people in this moment and then your job is done. Whereas the more open-ended, more relational detention organizing are important in showing people, activists what it is to be detained because these kind of rules or boundaries... When I was doing this work, I thought that they shielded a little bit from more political engagement. If you've got a set role as you go in there, you're shielded from the view, the powerlessness of what it's like to work out, how to navigate this system. I think because you've got to go in, you've got to be

nice to someone and then you leave. Whereas these are very much connected with the political engagements.

Another form is the Detained Voices Project, which came out of detention visiting and the protests. It is more like a testimony collecting and process amplification project which had a practice of talking to people on the phone in immigration detention and writing down their experience and their demands or their needs in the words that they wanted to in a very open-ended way. Like not saying anything about, leaving the way they wanted to express their concerns and their demands to them, and publishing them on a blog and on Twitter and on these things. Basically, that was it.

I guess what was interesting about this was that it's a form of representation. It's a way of communicating the reality of things inside detention to an audience outside of detention. But I think it's a post-representative project not only because it was quite a relational process of forming trust and forming solidarity with an individual over the phone, but it also linked people acting in detention with solidarity movements outside of detention and enabled communication and coordination between people inside and outside. And by making political action within detention more visible, it made more political action in detention more possible.

There's a more political opportunity created if you're doing sit-ins or yard occupation or go on a hunger strike or other things that you can do in detention. They are going to be heard by people and are responded to with support, solidarity, protest, legal support that you can tie in when you're more visible. So, in that way you're changing the conditions of detention by making it more visible and more responsive to people outside. All these things, these three forms of post-representational politics, they're all quite uncertain about what their outcome is. They're a kind of direct intervention in the space of detention, but they don't have a necessarily direct political aim. You're in some way giving yourself over to what happens through the process of engaging with people and seeing what kind of political opportunities emerge through the process of forming connections. And in some ways, that's giving up on agency. For example, a lot of the protests that happen in detention are not ones that the abolitionists, political organizers

necessarily would have supported or would have crafted themselves. They often had reformists goals or articulated distinctions between refugees and economic migrants or criminals and non-criminals. But I think, those were things that were worked out, those were things that were in conversation and were done in solidarity. So, it wasn't a kind of purist politics. And even though these were local individual organizing that took a lot of effort, there were times when historical circumstances align such that these were able to make interventions in wider political discussions. There were hunger strikes or certain actions of people inside that connected with decision making in political parties and things that have a wider significance. So it's like you're creating networks that are on the one hand enabling people to survive and are very tuned in to the evolving manifestations of the border. But on the other hand, you're also creating networks which can respond and intervene when the opportunity arises. It's a preparatory kind of politics.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: We actually want to take a step back and try to understand the context in which this detention happens. We want to hear more about how detention is discussed or promoted or challenged in mainstream politics. So how is it going in the UK?

Tom Kemp: I guess for the government, detention is a necessary feature of the border enforcement of deterrence and of the practicalities of deporting people. So, it's a necessity and it's one that is rationalized and seen as administrative function rather than as a punitive function. It's saying "people need to be moved around and detention facilitates that". There are various consequences of it being seen as an administrative institution rather than as a punitive one. One being that there are some legal safeguards that occur in criminal procedure that do not apply in cases of migrant detention. For example, there's no judicial check on detention. It's an executive function. There's no time limit in the UK on detention so people can be detained [for an indefinite period of time]. You don't know when you're going to be released. So one of the main ways in which detention is problematized by mainstream, liberal anti-detention movements is

through seeing it as a kind of illegitimate prison, one that targets innocent people, one that doesn't have the liberal safeguards that prison does, also one that doesn't work well to deliver the end of deportation, one that's unnecessary in order to fulfill the demands of border enforcement. So they would say, "you might want to remove people but it's much better to have people in the community where you can build trust and where their appeals and legal processes can be done more fairly, so that when their legal claims are unsuccessful, people accept the outcome and therefore will leave voluntarily". So, they say detention is not a good way because...

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Let's encourage people to "self-deportation"?

Tom Kemp: This kind of thing. "It's not humanitarian, it doesn't have safeguards, it's not useful to do in that way." They don't criticize or problematize the border at all. They're just saying this isn't a good way of enacting borders or delivering your end.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: How about public reaction?

Tom Kemp: There have been controversies made of particular detention centers. That has been some of the most successful periods of mass mobilization around detention, have been through making certain detention centers seem like controversies. But often that's making a certain institution into a problem for the state rather than challenging the broader system. It also has been most successful in the realm of women's detention and children's detention. The detention center Yarl's Wood, which was the only UK detention center for women, was the site of mass mobilization in 2016-2018. And that was in some ways an incredible moment where there was a real coalition built between the women's and feminist movement and the anti-border movement which made Yarl's Wood into a problem for the government, and centered the ways that border control functions as a form of gendered violence, which was obviously a good thing.

But it's harder to present the detention of Black men as a problem or to say that Black men can be vulnerable to violence or vulnerable to detention. At a similar time, there was a media-led exposé of violence and violence within a men's detention center called Brook House. This led to a judicial inquiry and recommendations which I think achieved very little. But also, as far as I could tell it had very little public and political cut-through that the campaign around Yarl's Wood achieved. I think that speaks to the anti-detention movement's limitations in its inability to challenge systems of imprisonment because of its reliance on concepts of vulnerability and innocence which are harder to mobilize when speaking about racialized and criminalized men. So I think in the success of the campaign around Yarl's Wood, we also see the movement's weakness: although it successfully temporarily closed down Yarl's Wood, it barely changed how the detention system functions. Yarl's Wood now holds predominantly male detainees and they detain women elsewhere.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Given these challenges around mobilization and systemic change, how do you see border struggles connecting with other movements—such as anti-militarization, labor, or feminist movements—to push for justice more broadly?

Tom Kemp: I guess if we return back to the other kind of dilemmas or questions I have about how to engage in border politics, one is the question of scale. The activism that I discussed before and the things I'm most familiar with is organizing very low level, creating interpersonal communities with people targeted by borders. And I think that is a necessary part of radical activism and one that needs to be integrated to other parts. I think that you can also think about how activism is doing the work of connecting particular communities, neighborhoods, and organizations with the struggle against detention and deportation, like integrating unions or neighborhood strategies of resisting immigration raids. And then there's kind of the national picture about how we think of borders as emanating out of national politics. There's an idea that if we're thinking about

why the UK border has become more intensified, often people say “it’s because of British citizens feeling low status as a result of the decline of Empire. And people are experiencing economic precarity and economic stagnation because of the financial crash and austerity need an ‘other’ to punish into a scapegoat”. And so that produces what happens. But then this explanation falls down when you think of borders as a global project which is happening everywhere and requires a kind of international response or international imagination about how the world needs to change.

And I think that again, it’s not something where you have to pick the scale at which you want to frame how you act, but it’s about how we speak across these scales, certain opportunities, certain moments. It’s about organizing at different levels. In the UK, I think at the moment it feels like the national level is an important opportunity. There’s the rise of a far-right threat in the Reform Party, which, although I’m not sure it will be ultimately successful, is directing everything that the Labour Party does in terms of how it is advancing and expanding border surveillance and detention, deportation, militarization, all these things. And there is a real need for an organized left, an organized political party kind of left that can offer a different counterhegemonic project that includes radical rejection of a border control implicitly. But that speaks not only to the rights of people on the move, but also addresses people’s concerns around precarity, around economic stagnation, values, all kinds of people. I guess the other way of saying this kind of dilemma is like whether responding to the violence and injustices of border control require us to go zoom in on the conditions, on what happens within detention institutions, the experiences of people in detention and the people who work in detention and deportation in institutions, which I think academic border studies or border criminology tends to do.

It’s like what, what really goes on in the micro or on the systemic level within the border institutions, or in order to understand why the border is evolving in this particular way, whether we need to step back away from the border and understand it through its entanglement with other kinds of social forces that we need to understand and engage with. I’m interested even on the level of national discourse how raising the profile of

migration and of the border helps border struggles. I think when the border becomes more salient in the news or more talked about, I wonder if people are more likely to think that there should be a harsher response or a more legalized and criminalized response to the border. And I wonder if making the border less of a spectacle and less of a concern and shifting the conversation towards other kinds of economic and social justice is better way of engaging in the national conversation.

What I'm interested in is thinking about how border struggles can really interrelate and connect the struggles of border violence and border justice to anti-militarization movements, to movements for housing, movements for gender violence and the feminist movement, and others. And how to do that in more practical ways that connect actual people together and actual organizations together rather than saying that just in the abstract.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Do you see anything like that on the horizon in the UK's politics?

Tom Kemp: Yeah! There is a lot of work going on that is trying integrate migration struggles into broad social and political movements. Labor organizing, I think, is going to be key. Unionization amongst the gig economy (Uber drivers, delivery drivers, all this kind of thing and other kind of informal labor sites, care sites) is organizing. There are housing campaigns that center on conditions of asylum seekers but seek to advance the housing rights of all. But I guess it relates to Palestine organizing, the way in which immigration law is usually used to target the Palestinian activists. Building solidarity and shared understanding through interrelated struggles is a really important task.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Why is it so difficult to move beyond seeing migrants merely as victims of rights violations and to recognize them instead as part of a shared political struggle?

Tom Kemp: I think it speaks to the limitations of the rhetorical framework of migrant rights. To say that the thing that is wrong with borders is that it infringes upon individual rights of migrants or subjects them into inhumane conditions. Because the rights framework is a kind of individualist model that presents migrants as subjects of sympathy in a way that is distinct from the sympathy that we should owe to everyone. It kind of connects them. And I think the reason for the prevalence of that rights framework in migration politics is in some way because of the lack of power that migrants have within society. Whereas workers have a right to strike, they have a way of engaging in politics, which is about power. There is a limitation in the migration field about where does the assertion of rights come from? I think we need to move more towards a kind of coalitional politics which is why building solidarity and building these networks of relationality are important? Because people gain value through their power, through their interaction and organization with other people.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: That really brings out the limits of the right framework and why coalitional politics are so important—thank you so much for sharing your thoughts.