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From Security-Space to Time-Race: Reimagining Borders and Migration in Global Politics

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In an apparent departure from responses to the so-called 2015 “migration” crisis, Ukrainians displaced by the war have been welcomed relatively unbureaucratically by European states. Yet, despite this, they are positioned as a problem to be solved, a disruption to the normal order and state system. This article asks what this problematization of “migrants” reveals about the dominant system of thought that assigns people to place and how it might be possible to think beyond its limits. It starts by demonstrating that the “security-space” imaginary both excludes and relies upon highly problematic, concealed assumptions about time and race. It shows how questions of time and race continually haunt and disrupt the seemingly coherent and indomitable “security-space” way of thinking. Following a strategy of deconstruction, the article arrives at the counter-intuitive conclusion that this dominant problematization of migration is temporal and structured by a relation to the future. Building on existing critical literature produced by scholars of Geopolitics, International Relations, and International Political Sociology, it offers an alternative imaginary, “time-race,” which opens up new ground for reimagining borders and migration to overcome reproducing the never-ending cycle of “migration crises,” to which there is apparently no alternative.

En contradiction apparente par rapport aux réponses à la « crise migratoire » de 2015, l’accueil des Ukrainiens déplacés à cause de la guerre s’est déroulé avec relativement peu de bureaucratie dans les États européens. Pourtant, on les considère comme un problème à résoudre, une perturbation de l’ordre normal et du système statique. Cet article s’interroge sur ce que laisse transparaître cette problématisation des « migrants » au sujet du système de pensée dominant qui attribue une place aux gens, et sur les possibilités de dépassement de ses limites. D’abord, il démontre que l’imaginaire « espace-sécurité » exclut des hypothèses


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dissimulées et extrêmement problématiques quant au temps et à la race tout en en dépendant. Il montre que les questions de temps et de race ob-sèdent et perturbent constamment le mode de pensée « espace-sécurité », a priori cohérent et invincible. En suivant une stratégie de déconstruction, l’article arrive à une conclusion contre-intuitive : cette problématisation dominante de la migration est temporelle et structurée par une relation avec le futur. En se fondant sur les littératures critiques existantes des chercheurs en géopolitique, relations internationales et sociologie poli-tique internationale, il propose un autre imaginaire, « race-temps », qui offre de nouvelles possibilités de repenser les frontières et la migration. Ainsi, l’on éviterait de reproduire l’éternel cycle de « crises migratoires », auquel il n’y aurait apparemment aucune alternative.

Los ucranianos desplazados por la guerra han sido recibidos de forma rela-tivamente poco burocrática por los Estados europeos, lo que supone un aparente alejamiento de las respuestas a la llamada crisis “migratoria” de 2015. Sin embargo, y a pesar de esto, se encuentran posicionados como un problema a resolver, una alteración del orden normal y del Estado-sistema. En este artículo nos preguntamos qué es lo que revela esta pro-bлемatización de los «migrantes» sobre el sistema de pensamiento domi-nante, el cual asigna un lugar a las personas, y cómo podría ser posible pensar más allá de sus límites. El artículo comienza demontando que el imaginario «seguridad-espacio» excluye y se basa en supuestos alta-mente problemáticos y ocultos relacionados con el tiempo y con la raza. A continuación, demuestra cómo las cuestiones del tiempo y la raza acechan y perturban continuamente la forma de pensar, aparentemente coherente e inmodable, del imaginario “seguridad-espacio.” El artículo sigue una estrategia de deconstrucción y llega a la conclusión contraintuitiva de que esta problematización dominante de la migración es temporal y que está estructurada por una relación con el futuro. Partiendo de la base de la literatura crítica existente, producida por estudiosos de la Geopolítica, las Relaciones Internacionales y la Sociología Política Internacional, el artículo ofrece un imaginario alternativo, «tiempo-raz», que abre un nuevo camino para reimaginar las fronteras y la migración con el fin de intentar superar la reproducción del ciclo interminable de “crisis migrato-rías” para el que, aparentemente, no existe alternativa.

Introduction
On February 24, 2022, Russia’s land, sea, and air invasion of Ukraine catapulted asylum and migration to the center of government agendas in Europe once again. The return of war to the continent and the displacement of more than six million Ukrainian nationals have foregrounded enduring questions about the relationship between population displacement and borders, territory, and sovereignty. Europe’s responses to new arrivals associated with the Ukraine war, when considered against the background of the so-called “2015 migration crisis,” illuminate these questions in new and challenging ways. They demand a fresh look at how we think about borders and migration in global politics.

Especially since the 2015 “migration crisis,” European governmental efforts had been focused on developing a deterrent border security agenda aimed at prevent-ing migration to Europe of anyone other than those considered especially eco-nomically desirable due to their skills, wealth, or kinship (Crawley et al. 2017; Vaughan-Williams 2021; Mavelli 2022). Aside from the fleeting—if not unproblematic (Zehfuss 2021)—Wilkommenskultur, the reception of people escaping violence, conflict, and persecution in sub-Saharan Africa across “central” and “eastern” mi-gratory routes was characterized by a hostile set of preventative measures associated
with *A European Agenda on Migration* (Squire et al. 2021). By contrast, the plight of Ukrainian women and children fleeing war in 2022 apparently changed governmental perceptions of the problem and the parameters of possible policy response. Countries like Poland and Denmark, which have otherwise been keen to prevent refugees from arriving, actively welcomed Ukrainians, even if the UK continued and even enhanced its exclusionary policies. Indeed, it is striking that Ukrainians have been welcomed relatively unbureaucratically by EU member states, providing them with a better starting point than many people the world over who flee conflict or other unsustainable living conditions.

While the suggestion by some European politicians and parts of the media that the situation is wholly new, requiring extraordinary measures, has become prominent, the events highlight persistent structural constraints and inequalities. The problems facing Ukrainians leaving their country are not “over” if they manage to escape the immediate violence of the war; rather, they must find a state willing to permit them to enter and then organize their lives around limitations it imposes. Their comparatively favorable reception across the EU to date prompts questions about the extent to which this is because they are racially coded as white. Yet, Ukrainians outside of Ukraine are, as with Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, and others from North and Sub-Saharan Africa displaced in 2015, considered “out of place” by “host” societies, a situation EU member states may be willing to support temporarily but not indefinitely. Thus, like all “migrants,” Ukrainians have become a “problem” to be “solved.” Their presence in the EU is seen as the result of a disruption of the normal order in which people live where they belong, that is, of something unforeseen and novel. And yet we have been here before, with multiple so-called “migration crises” in global politics. What does this problematization of “migrants” reveal about the dominant system of thought that gives rise to the notion that everyone has and must be in their “proper” place? And how might it be possible to think beyond the limits of this system of thought and break the impasse constituted by diagnoses of “migration crises?”

In this conceptually driven article, we argue that the dominant frame within which borders and migration are typically understood—across media, political, and academic discourse—constitutes a highly problematic, exclusionary, and exhausted imaginary in which the spatialized and securitized state system takes precedence. Throughout, we are using the central concept of “imaginary.” According to Charles Taylor (2004:115), social imaginaries refer to the dominant ways in which societies make sense of themselves: “a kind of repertory [. . .] including the ensemble of practices [people at a given time] can make sense of.” We identify the “security-space” imaginary—one in which social life is spatialized into bordered sovereign territorial nation-states and the security of that entity becomes prioritized as a governmental objective—as the predominant frame of understanding in which Western accounts of contemporary political life make sense of human mobility. While there is no shortage of critiques of what we problematize as the “security-space” imaginary (Walker 1993; Agnew 1994; Huysmans 1998; Brown 2010), the extant literature produced by critical scholars of International Relations (IR) and Geopolitics is weaker on how it might be possible to move beyond this frame. We suggest that this is partly because these earlier critiques, while seminal, pay less attention to the dilemmas, entanglements, and violence experienced by the “people” who are produced by and positioned within that imaginary; alternative conceptual resources are required to think beyond “security-space.” Recently, work associated with International Political Sociology (IPS) in general and Critical Border and Migration Studies in particular has begun to address this lacuna by foregrounding the experiences of people on the move, which is made possible by taking seriously questions of time and race in the (re)production of political subjectivity. Yet, we find that existing research in that interdisciplinary literature, while important in “bringing people back in,” is ul-
timately limited in its implications for rethinking the dominant system of thought; it leaves the space-security imaginary and its underpinning system of thought intact. A further step is necessary.

Following a strategy of deconstruction inspired by the work of Jacques Derrida, we step back from existing debates to reinterrogate that dominant system of thought and reconsider what is at stake in thinking outside it. We demonstrate that the “security-space” imaginary both excludes and relies upon highly problematic assumptions about time and race, which are concealed by that imaginary. Despite these exclusions and concealments, we show how questions of time and race continually haunt and disrupt the seemingly coherent and indomitable “security-space” way of thinking. By recovering these assumptions and foregrounding the disruptive work that time and race perform, we argue that a basis for moving beyond “security-space” is already contained within that imaginary. More than noting the significance of time and race, Derrida’s work demands that we pay closer attention to the becoming of political subjectivity in time, the ways in which time produces racialized hierarchies of subjectivity, and the work that the future does as an ethico-political relation. Our reading of Derrida arrives at the counter-intuitive conclusion that the dominant problematization of migration is temporal and structured by this relation to the future, an insight that has implications for any attempt to rethink the system of thought that conditions the possibility for and reproduces the never-ending cycle of “migration crises,” to which there is apparently no alternative. We call this alternative imaginary “time-race,” which opens new ground for reimagining borders and migration in global politics.

Security-space

We are all familiar with maps showing the political division of the globe into territorial states with, for the most part, (apparently) clear borders between them. These maps are a powerful part and reflection of shared modern Western ways of thinking about the global state system, revolving around borders, territory, and sovereignty. Even though they do not normally show people, these maps depict what we call the dominant “space-security” imaginary that assigns special rights to people considered to be in the right place: “at home” (see also Zehfuss forthcoming). Within this imaginary, everyone is supposed to belong somewhere—to the country that they are “from.” This is their “proper place” in the world (Nyers 2019: 7; Hindess 2000).

The idea that people naturally belong to particular sovereign territorially bounded states is so powerful and persistent that we do not often examine it (Billig 1995). It is worth briefly exploring how we got here and what it means to maintain this social imaginary.

Taylor (2004) outlines the concept of “social imaginary” to develop an account of Western modernity’s self-understanding. He uses this device to refer in broad terms to the ways in which “ordinary people” “imagine” their social surroundings (Taylor 2004: 23). An “imaginary” can be expressed via social theories, but also cultural repositories of knowledge such as “images, stories, and legends” (Taylor 2004: 23). Importantly, whereas theories are known and understood by a relatively small population, the social imaginaries that they express and are part of are “shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society” (Taylor 2004: 23). It is that shared dimension—the context in which the practices of a society make sense—that is central to Taylor’s understanding of imaginaries as social. In this understanding, imaginaries are both “factual” and “normative” in that they combine “a sense of how things usually go” with “how they ought to go” (Taylor 2004: 24).

While the idea—captured in the “security-space” imaginary—that everyone belongs to a particular state and therefore has a “home” conferring special rights bundled up as citizenship may appear unproblematic, perhaps even benign, the corollary of providing, as Patricia Hill Collins puts it, a “sanctuaries for group members”
(Collins 1998: 67), is a lack of protection for non-members. The idea that everyone has a proper place underpins not only their putative inclusion into one state but also their presumptive exclusion from all others as a reflection of the norm of internal authority among and between states. Put differently, the apparently inclusionary function of citizenship relies on exclusion (Bhambra 2015). Modern citizenship has been described as a “conspiracy against the foreigner” (Hindess 2000: 1490). States explicitly and deliberately discriminate against non-citizens for the asserted benefit of citizens (Balibar 1998). While doing so passes for “a common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor 2004: 23), it is worth pausing to reflect that states that subscribe to human rights and that have passed equality legislation at the same time routinely treat people as less worthy of support and protection on the grounds of their citizenship. Although each state configures the terms of this exclusion in particular ways, the principle itself is inscribed into the sovereign state system. Noting the failure of the UN Charter to recognize their situation, Nandita Sharma (2020: 16) therefore argues that it inscribes hostility to migrants in that system.

In the “space-security” imaginary, the supposedly natural alignment between people and place is often presented as simply the outcome of the principle of state sovereignty, signaling that it cannot feasibly be changed (Anderson 1996). As contemporary notions of state sovereignty are territorialized, reflected in the norm of territorial integrity (Elden 2006), determining who may enter and remain on their territory has become a central function of state sovereignty (Torpey 2000). Although states adopt their own policies for managing non-citizens’ access, that they treat their citizens differently from foreigners is a “structural requirement of the modern state system,” which enables governance by dividing the world into “territorially based national populations” (Hindess 2000: 1494). This has ideological as well as infrastructural consequences. Ideologically, non-citizen access is produced as an “optional extra,” something that states should be able to control and, if they wish, limit (Bulley 2023). We will return to this point. Infrastructurally, maintaining this supposedly natural state takes an incredible amount of effort and financial investment (Jones 2016). There is an irony in the extraordinary resources expended to create and secure borders to enforce what is presented as a natural alignment between persons and territory.

Such infrastructure is necessary because, although the apparently natural alignment between people and place strongly resonates with “common sense” understandings of the world, it does not come about automatically. On the contrary, the idea that people are normally in their “proper place” is constantly challenged (Squire 2010). The regular presence of people who are “out of place” unsettles a system that positions them as a marginal and perhaps transient problem. Refugees, in particular, have always constituted an embarrassment to the imaginary of the state system (Dillon 1999; Soguk 1999; Hindess 2000) because construing a state as home asserts it not just as a person’s origin, but as a place of safety.1 Refugees have had to be absorbed into the system of thought as an exception requiring special legislation—the 1951 Refugee Convention—that serves to confirm the rule: where a state fails to protect its citizens, others should step in. The imaginary also produces other “misfits” whose “proper place” is difficult to determine, indeed remains indeterminate: those who have no citizenship (typically known as “stateless”); have more than one citizenship; or have the “wrong” citizenship without ever having crossed a border. They have to be dismissed as marginal so as to obscure the challenge they pose to this spatial imaginary with its putatively natural alignment of population and territory.

Borders are thus central to the supposedly natural alignment between people and place (Vaughan-Williams 2009); they are intrinsic to the modern sovereigntist

1 Of course, home is not necessarily a safe place, but it is ideologically positioned as such.
“inside/outside” way of separating the “domestic” from the “international” (Walker 1993); they sustain divisions that enable the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983); and they structure and emplace notions of “home,” “belonging,” and “identity” (Billig 1995). As such, borders perform a political function in constituting and upholding the state system, and yet this work is depoliticized by the security-space imaginary.

Post-foundational thinkers draw a distinction between “politics” and “the political”; the former refers narrowly to elections, political administration, and day-to-day decision-making within the established polity; the latter refers in a broader sense to the establishment of that order and the determination of what counts as “politics” (Edkins 1999; see also Dikeç 2005). In the first sense, the politics of border security may refer to the management of people’s mobility within the constituted state system characterized by sovereign territorial division. In the second sense, borders are political in that they condition the possibility of—and their maintenance helps to secure—that division, which in turn categorizes, emplaces, and fixes people according to accidents of birth. By repoliticizing the “onto-political” (Connolly 1993) work that borders perform in this way, the contingency of the state system is foregrounded, the founding violence of the sovereign order is revealed, and the link between people and place is denaturalized.

The dominant imaginary in which people and place are aligned is one in which concepts of space and security are privileged. The problem of the underlying spatialization of this imaginary has long been critiqued in the critical IR and geopolitics literature. As R.B.J. Walker has argued, the assumption of the sovereign state as a spatial container with identifiable and inviolable edges is not neutral or natural, but based on historically constructed principles of homogeneity, infinitude, and invariability of space associated with Euclidean geometry (Walker 1993: 180). As John Agnew outlined, this state-centric account of the spatiality of power—which he famously called the “territorial trap”—erases the contingency and contested nature of state sovereignty and treats the “coercive power of territorial states for granted as a fixed feature of the modern world order” (Agnew 1994: 60).

At the heart of this spatialized imaginary is the concept of security paradigmatically defined in terms of state survival. In modern cultural traditions, security is understood fundamentally as “a strategy constituting and mediating our relation to death” (Huysmans 1998: 233). The alignment of the inside/outside of the modern sovereign territorial state with the friend/enemy distinction has given rise in traditional security thinking to the exteriorization of threat to that which lies beyond the state. Here, the security of the border of the state is associated with various desires and fantasies that lie either side of it: the “dangerous alien” as a threatening other emanating from the outside; the need for “containment and protection” inside the state; the “impermeability” of sovereign space; and the preservation of “innocence and civilization” (Brown 2010). Against this backdrop, the arrival of the stranger at the outer edge of sovereign state territory is an historic phenomenon that has often elicited a common response: the creation of an “ambience of insecurity,” the closure of borders as a “reflex,” and the entrenchedness of “the providential shield preventing awesome catastrophes from being visited” (Bauman 2016: 28). Invoking the very notion of a sovereign community that is endangered by people on the move coded as strangers and therefore as threatening to the territorial integrity of the state serves to reinstate the ideal of that community as a sovereign political entity. For this reason, the dominant “space-security” imaginary in which borders and migration have been—and continue to be—understood has the potential to be a never-ending cycle of (in)securitization in which encounters with strangeness stimulates the desire for evermore repressive measures (Vaughan-Williams 2021).
Timing Space

The dominant space-security imaginary (re)produces an apparently fixed spatialization of the world. Its logic requires us to put time to one side. The idea that the world is made up of territorially separate sovereign states focuses on an apparently timeless present, bypassing questions about how the current configuration has come about and may therefore change again. That is, it excludes the question of its own violent becoming and authorization. Work on neglected histories, especially those of colonization, challenges this naturalization. Genealogies of key concepts draw our attention to how this is about more than that things change over time (and that we may have forgotten this). It is about how we conceptualize global politics, about what we can think, and whose position is legitimized. It is about the limits of our political imagination.

The conceptual vanishing trick that hides time (or turns it into space) has been memorably identified by Walker (1993: 4), who bemoaned the “fixing of temporality in spatial categories,” and Agnew (1994: 77), who criticized the “methodological assumption of “timeless space””. Kimberly Hutchings (2008: 11–12) has drawn out that assumptions about temporality “were of crucial importance” despite the apparent preoccupation with spatiality. Examining their logics, she argues that theories of Politics and IR, across apparently large intellectual differences, are “haunted by the idea that politics is fundamentally associated with the project of controlling time” and with “creating a different kind of time” (Hutchings 2008: 154). The key problem she diagnoses is that the specific temporality of the Western experience is universalized. These important contributions have highlighted that time and space are invariably interrelated and political in the post-foundational understanding of that term referred to above.

Strikingly, these diagnoses of the conceptual limitations of thinking global politics in terms of space, without acknowledging time, invoke an imaginary that seems unpeopled. For Hutchings, the point is to better account for those marginalized by the universalization of Western experience by bringing in feminist and postcolonial thinking, but she nevertheless stays firmly in the abstract realm of concepts and logics. As a result, this range of work, while seminal, has diagnosed but not displaced an imaginary that treats space and its relation to people as given, albeit problematic. It identifies problematic structures and the conditions of possibility they engender but has less to say about the contingency of people within them.

Conceptual approaches associated with the interdisciplinary fields of Critical Border Studies, Critical Migration Studies, and IPS are better placed to take note of “people.” They have begun in various, albeit quite limited, ways to tackle the temporality of spatialization in relation to the social construction of borders (Little 2015). While this field is diverse and contested, it has developed a time-based critique of static and ahistorical treatments of borders as if they were natural and immutable “lines in the sand” (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009). It is possible to identify several main themes in extant explorations of time and borders. Building on earlier histories of the role of frontiers in the evolution of the international states-system (Anderson 1996), recent scholarship has sought to rehistoricize state borders: as violent outcomes of “a broader system that seeks to preserve privilege and opportunity for some by restricting access to resources and movement for others” (Jones 2016: 5); as “relics” of European colonialism that seeks to maintain a “global apartheid” (Hage 2016: 44); and as “symbolic and material manifestations of the deadly afterlife of colonialism” (Davies et al. 2021: 2322).

In this literature, time features by foregrounding the contested histories of borders, which, in turn, highlights their violent origins, their changeability over time, and their contingency in the absence of any natural basis. By treating the border as a verb rather than as a noun, analyses of “bordering practices” (Vaughan-Williams 2009), “border work” (Rumford 2008), “border as method” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013),
and/or “(de/re)bordering” (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019) have rendered visible the social processes that make, remake, and/or undo “the border” (see also Newman and Paasi 1998; Amilhat Szary and Giraut 2015). Here time is introduced via an emphasis on the performativity of borders and the constant multiple efforts required to (re)produce them through the repetition of acts that bring them into being. Related sociological work focuses on the role of mobility in co-producing borders (Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Sheller 2018). Nail (2016) offers the most sustained treatment of this theme by rethinking borders from the perspective of movement. He argues that borders are “not simply a static membrane or space through which flows of people move,” but rather “the mobile cutting blades of society” (2016: 7).

From Nail’s perspective, different border technologies imply various kinds of motion: the fence creates “centripetal flows” to produce a “territorial border power” (2016: 47); the wall “bounds the social motion of political life” (2016: 65); the cell “divides human life into individual lives” (2016: 88); and the checkpoint may be deployed anywhere in society to “secure circulation” (2016: 111). Borders are framed as dynamic phenomena because they are located in and operate through time.

The more scholarship in Critical Border and Migration Studies has recognized temporality, the more it has focused on people and their experiences. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that people live and are governed in time. Highlighting the work that different temporalities perform in enabling and contesting different kinds of bordering practices has become especially prominent in critical analyses of migrants’ experiences and testimonies aligned with the conceptual and methodological concerns of IPS: Cwerner (2001) highlights the disciplining effect of governmental practices that place control over time beyond migrants’ reach; Fortier (2021) and McNevin (2020, 2022) examine time as a technique of control that legitimizes exclusion in the present through the promise of inclusion in the future; Squire et al. (2021: 109) explore the embodied logics of “stuckness” as part of the migratory experience; and Ibañez Tirado (2019) examines the productive potentialities of “waiting,” to give several prominent examples. Baas and Yeoh (2019: 166) characterize the thrust of research on “critical temporalities within migrant mobilities” as showing that “temporality is the product of both the transnationality of migrants’ lives as well as the realities of the structures and systems that they are a part of.” This work builds upon work examining the conceptual relationship between political logics of temporality and bordering practices. Notions of temporal bordering—the use of time by diverse actors to attempt to control (im)mobility—are most explicit in Foucaultian studies of preemptive and anticipatory forms of border security associated with governmental efforts to deter “irregularized” mobility at source and turn unknowable/ungovernable risk into knowable/governable risk (Amoore 2006; Vaughan-Williams 2009). A similar line of analysis is discernible in critical discussions of emergency humanitarianism and the production of border and/or migration “crises” as supposedly exceptional moments in time, which dehistoricize and depoliticize the present to treat the mass death of people on the move as “sudden and unpredictable” rather than the outcome of persistent structural inequalities (Ticktin 2016: 262). Time is positioned as a political technology of power that produces subjects in particular ways with political effects.

In these varying accounts, time is treated as an important but overlooked factor that needs to be brought into the mix alongside space when analyzing borders and migration in contemporary global politics, rather than anything more fundamental. This recovery achieves a more “balanced” approach and is an important corrective to the traditional privileging of the spatialization of politics and its associated ahistoricism, but it does not transform our thinking as reflected in the dominant space-security imaginary. For Little (2015: 434), the problematic of “complex
temporality” is an inescapable condition under which efforts to govern migration must take place. While recognizing this reveals the radical contingency of borders, it does not fundamentally challenge the normative assumption of their constitutive role (2015: 434). In Nail’s work (2016), temporality is significant because borders and migration are both about movement, not because temporality is a significant dimension of life and politics; although migration introduces temporality to our political imaginary, this reinforces dominant understandings of the state system as spatially settled and as disrupted by the exception of people’s movement. The same limitation is arguably characteristic of sociological and ethnographic treatments of migratory experiences (Squire et al 2021); these bring multiple lived temporalities to the foreground, which, despite being an analytical move of considerable political significance, is one that leaves the dominant spatialized inside/outside way of thinking intact. Nevertheless, the problem of time is not just that life happens and things change. Time is always already part of our conceptualizations of global politics, whether acknowledged or not. Little (2022: 4) therefore seeks to understand the “temporality of political processes” more generally, although he focuses on understanding the “melancholic disquiet about contemporary politics.” He argues that an “alternative understanding of temporality” is required to reorient ourselves “towards political action and change” (Little 2022: 5) and proposes to focus on “the lived experience of time” (Little 2022: 6). While this resonates with what we are concerned with, we think that more is at stake than “the movement of time in politics” being “controversial” (Little 2022: 7).

For us, the key point is that acknowledging time and its contingency unsettles the “security-space” imaginary and therefore the system of thought on which the production of migration relies. We need time to think migration, but once we think time the problem of migration can no longer be posed since it requires the exclusion of time from the security-space imaginary on which it relies. As we set out earlier, the “security-space” imaginary assigns people to place. This appears straightforward, but is it? The idea, to be sure, is that the German population belongs to Germany, the Brazilians to Brazil, and so on. But who is “the German population”? Is it—as the spatial imaginary appears to suggest—people living on the territory of the German state? In one sense, it is: the state claims authority over this population. However, legally and affectively, only citizens are constituted as being in their “proper place.” Put differently, people are constituted as “carrying space” via, not least, citizenship. It is for this reason that the movement of people becomes the problem of migration: the problem of what to do with people who do not automatically have the right to live where they live, the people whose inclusion requires work and appears to be optional. The “security-space” imaginary invokes a system of bordering that produces the assignation of population to territory, which therefore constitutes movement across international borders as a potential problem.

Time has to be set aside to make the “security-space” imaginary work on its own terms: the map that carves up territory and assigns people to their proper place is static and presented as inviolable by the norm of “territorial integrity.” Questions not just about how we got here but about what happens in relation to this imaginary over time must be sidelined. Yet to think of migration as a problem, a particular kind of time is required: a time that keeps that carving up at rest but marks “migrants” with the time of movement.

This has a significant effect that becomes visible when we trace how the ostensibly spatial imaginary relies on time. People identified as migrants can only be so because they are marked with the past; they carry, as it were, “the trace” of the past (see also Zehfuss 2024). This trace produces hierarchies of subjectivity. Scholarship exploring the structure of the colonial relation and the production of race has already charted how ostensibly “past” relations of oppression and exploitation continue into and haunt the present (Bhambra 2015; see also Jabri 2013). This can be understood as a problem of time. After all, the imaginative exclusion of the
post-colonial subject as the racialized Other relies on the failure to acknowledge them as coeval (Fabian 2002) and situating them outside of, if perhaps on the road to, modernity (Chakrabarty 2008). Mills (2015) therefore foregrounds the impact of thinking in terms of a White European time that inscribes racialized structures of inequality. It is this move to problematize the racialized underpinnings of the space-security imaginary to which the discussion now turns.

**Racing Space**

A growing body of interdisciplinary literature—which has developed in parallel to rather than in conversation with that on borders and time—has sought to examine the intrinsic connections between borders and race, particularly, though not exclusively, in the context of contemporary migration governance.

This important work has, inter alia, critiqued the marginalization of race in Critical Border and Migration research (Moffette and Walters 2018), highlighted the structural connection between historical practices of racialization and the manifestation of borders within the state (Balibar 1991; De Genova 2017; Anderson 2019; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019), interrogated “left-liberal” interventions that extend “grief and care to the dead stranger” as a “colonial and patronising fantasy of the white man’s burden” (Danewid 2017), and recovered the voices and experiences of racialized post-colonial subjects “on the move” (Squire et al. 2021).

Beyond these existing studies, however, our argument is that the dominant “security-space” imaginary is fundamentally dependent upon and yet excludes and conceals the work that race—or, more precisely—racialized assumptions perform. Here, following Yuval-Davis et al. (2017: 1048), “racialization” is used to refer to a “discourse and practice which constructs immutable boundaries between collectivities which is used to naturalise fixed hierarchical power relations between them.” In the same way that the dominant “security-space” imaginary is grounded in notions of time, we argue that it is only made possible with reference to notions of racial hierarchy, which nevertheless remain obscured. We also argue that these two exclusions are intertwined.

To unpack the racialized assumptions on which the “security-space” imaginary is reliant and reproduces, it is necessary to recognize the historical contingency of the concept of the border of the state as a colonial technology of control—understood as “a form of violent domination over the mobilities of racialized others” (Sheller 2018: 50). Here, Nail’s (2016, 2) argument that the concept of “the border” refers to a material “process of social division” is helpful; it serves as an important reminder that the concept of the border of the nation-state is a particular modern Western manifestation of that process.

Despite the extent of displacement and migration at the time of its establishment (Sharma 2020: 16), the UN Charter, which codifies the connection between people and place through the right to national self-determination, fails to account for the rights of those “out of place.” It acknowledges the potential need for realignment through national liberation movements, however, making the system look less natural than it might appear.

For Hage (2016), nation-state borders are relics of the classical colonial era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when European colonizers drew arbitrary lines across what were once continuous lands to divide exploited resources and regulate flows of people and goods between Europe and the colonies (Hage 2016: 44; see also Jones 2016). The sovereign territorial state and modern capitalist system were “secured through limiting the mobilities of racialized others” (Sheller 2018: 50). As Mayblin (2017) has shown, within the context of the British Empire borders operated via forms of racialized hierarchy, rather than territorially. The right to asylum was originally based on racial discrimination between European and non-European subjects: at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the notion that all people
are equal was rejected by representatives of the British Empire; the 1951 Geneva Convention defined refugees narrowly as displaced Europeans. This restriction to the category of refugee was removed only in 1967 because “Britain and the other colonial powers did not view colonized subjects to be fully entitled to—or even ready for—human rights” (Davies et al. 2021). At its inception, therefore, the legitimate refugee was coded as white, something that reverberates to this day.

Legacies of colonial technologies of control shape the performance of contemporary migration “crises.” De Genova (2018) thus understands the 2015 migration crisis as a “racial crisis.” He highlights that “the vast majority of people from formerly colonized countries” are “pre-emptively illegalized” by the EU’s border regime (De Genova 2018: 1766). Europe’s racialization of “migrants” and their descendants produce Whiteness as European, enabling the association of black and brown bodies (on the move) with threat. The conflation of migration with crime, terrorism, and sexual violence serves to legitimate the distinction that enables it in the first place. What is concealed is not just the role colonialism and its persistent impact have in shaping patterns of migration today, but how the apparently neutral assignment of people to place serves to exclude the (racialized) majority from Europe (and other structurally advantaged spaces).

We started from the observation that people’s rights depend on whether they are citizens of the state they reside in. Citizens are privileged over those who are positioned as migrants, as having arrived from elsewhere. While the imaginary produces a binary between rightfully entitled citizens and migrants in need of authorization, in practice it is more complicated. There are obviously many different non-citizen categories that attract different rights and different valorizations in the discourse more generally (Mavelli 2022). In the UK, for example, both international students and asylum-seekers are limited in their right to work (though the latter much more severely), but the former are often portrayed positively for their economic power and contribution to universities, while the latter are hardly ever seen as anything other than a burden.

What is obscured by the “security-space” imaginary that assigns people to place, however, is that there are significant differences in what rights and benefits different citizenships confer to people. While people may have a place within the state system, what benefits are attached to this depends on where they live and on which citizenship they happen to have. If the fears that the world’s poor could all suddenly wish to move to wealthy countries located in the Global North are anything to go by, border controls explicitly serve to protect the existing unequal distribution of wealth globally. The possession of some passports also allows easier access to more countries than others, conferring additional material benefits. While borders are lethal (Jones 2016) for some, they facilitate the circulation and therefore the accumulation of wealth for those with privileged passports. That is, while the system presents itself as equitable inasmuch as every person is thought to belong to a state, its effects are profoundly unequal, even for those who do have citizenship.

The system of thought underpinning the “security-space” imaginary requires and normalizes discrimination against those produced as not in their “proper place,” those construed as “from elsewhere” (a classification that is not necessarily based on citizenship). This spatialization of global politics is a racialized hierarchy that privileges subjects produced as citizens from “here”—over those produced as migrants “from elsewhere.” It is a racialized hierarchy because, as postcolonial and anti-racist scholarship has established, the “here” in the dominant discourse of IR has historically been Europe and/or the Global North, whereas the “elsewhere” has been associated with the Global South. In turn, notions of whiteness, citizenship, and stasis have aligned in contradistinction with black/brownness, migration, and mobility (Malkki 1992). The association with mobility makes migrants suspect. Those who find themselves elsewhere have done something to be “out of place”
(see also Sharma 2020). This normalizes the racialized privileging of citizens over others.

Taken together, postcolonial and anti-racist scholarship significantly rethinks the state system and its impact as it reveals underlying and persistent power relations that are related to, but fail to align with, its spatialization. The state system does not just mark the relation between apparently fixed states but rather invokes the system of thought that enables and creates subjectivities named “citizen” and “migrant.” Put differently, this apparently dichotomous matrix of subjectification invokes a hierarchy that is simultaneously concealed. Citizens fit within the order of the system, whereas migrants disrupt it, structurally privileging the citizen over the migrant (who as the putative citizen of an “elsewhere state” appears to have equal rights, just not where they are). Postcolonial and anti-racist work elucidates how the hierarchies at work are not neutral, but rather racialized. Yet, like the work engaging with time and migration, much of it seems to leave in place the underlying system of thought that engenders these problematic relationships. It provides a powerful account of how the state system continues to function in a way that has profoundly unequal effects on people. Yet, our argument is that if we want to move beyond the limits of the security-space imaginary—and seemingly no end to perpetual “migration crises”—we need to go beyond this account to unsettle the system of thought that conditions its possibility.

Rethinking the System

Foregrounding time and race challenges the apparently straightforward duality of citizens from “here” vs. migrants from “elsewhere.” The “problem” of migration, as it is presented in the state-security imaginary, only exists because it is perfectly possible to be “here” and yet, simultaneously, (produced as) “from elsewhere.” Taking temporality seriously alerts us to the racial hierarchization created by the apparently timeless spatialization of thinking global politics via this dominant imaginary. We must therefore consider the chronopolitics of geopolitics (Klinke 2013). However, we think that there is more to it than simply adding time and race. The complexity of how subjects come to be construed as related to what is considered “here” requires us to question how the categories themselves come about and what this does.

Our thinking is inspired by the thought of Jacques Derrida. Drawing on his work as a reflection on time (Hodge 2007), it enables us to bring out two aspects in particular, which push the limits of existing efforts to rethink global politics in and through time: first, that time produces racialized hierarchies of subjectivity; and, second, that the future matters as an ethico-political relation. We argue that these insights provide conceptual resources not only to critique the space-security imaginary, but also to reimagine the contemporary politics of borders and migration (see also Edkins and Zehfuss 2005).

We started by outlining the dominant space-security imaginary and highlighting how it relies on excluding time. That is, time must be put to one side to make its categories work. And yet, time matters in this imaginary: time is necessary to tell the story of the state system, even while being presented as irrelevant through the focus on space. We noted a range of interdisciplinary work that brings time into consideration, and yet we remain dissatisfied with what most of these attempts can

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3Some of Derrida’s later work explicitly addresses questions of sovereignty and borders (Derrida 2003) and hospitality and democracy (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). Bulley’s authoritative treatment of hospitality and its repletion in IR—as “always a spatial and emotional practice in which power is employed to include and exclude, enforcing belonging and non-belonging”—also highlights how some of Derrida’s own thought and secondary engagements with it run the risk of recycling the security-space imaginary (see Bulley 2023). Our aim is instead to leverage Derrida’s earlier work on time to develop our own reading of the implications of deconstruction for critiquing and thinking beyond that imaginary.
offer. The issue is that this work—with the exception of some postcolonial and anti-racist thinking—attempts to add time to what is already established as the problem: migration, or the predicament of migrants, within the state system.

This is not enough. The identification of migrants presupposes an already settled order that renders them as misaligned. Yet, thinking with Derrida, the categories that enable us to think in this way are only ever in the process of becoming. They are never complete. For Derrida, what we apprehend—that is, what we see as present—is only ever an effect of differences, shaped by traces of what is absent. There is, therefore, no sharp line between presence and absence. Thus, we must think in and with time. Derrida proposes to think not in terms of difference—the strict divisibility between binaries—but rather of what he calls *diﬀerence*. This captures, on the one hand, the idea of not being identical, being other. On the other hand, this means a “temporal or temporizing mediation or a defeat that suspends the accomplishment or fulﬁlment of “desire” or “will,” and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect” (Derrida 1982: 8). An opposition between two terms is not static but rather involves an ongoing “systematic play of differences”; a “spacing” that is always already temporalized (Derrida 1987: 27). This has two implications.

First, inasmuch as the problem of migration revolves around the performative identiﬁcation of particular people as migrants, this must be understood as part of a continuous systematic play of differences between “migrants” and their apparent opposite “citizens.” They are not in a ﬁxed relation, but rather in an ongoing (hierarchi- cal) dance where neither is complete without the other, and no one ever comes to be at rest or complete. The security-space imaginary operates by foreclosing this contingency and entrencing the citizen/migrant binary that comes to be a natural, inevitable fact, aligned with the inside/outside structure of the sovereign territorial state system. This foreclosure, however, remains haunted by the power of becoming evident to migration scholars through paying attention to people whose juridical-political status changes according to encounters with border security apparatuses and the performative application of different administrative categories.

Secondly, and fundamentally, Derrida’s thinking not only introduces time into the problematization of migration but rather refuges time itself. For if we cannot securely demarcate presence from absence, then the dominant conception of time informing the vast majority of existing scholarship comes to be impossible, namely linearity. The linear conception of time has, of course, come under much pressure from postcolonial and anti-racist thinking that renders it as parochially European (Chakrabarty 2008), hierarchizing (Fabian 2002), and ultimately racist (Mills 2015). These arguments are well taken and yet risk simply reinforcing the notion of diﬀerence between Europe and the rest (which this scholarship is, of course, alive to).

We are less interested here in proposing the “right” way of thinking time, but rather to point out that we need to do more than try and rethink the state system in the light of time and race (or multiple temporalities, as the postcolonial and anti-racist literatures highlight). The problem is of a diﬀerent order inasmuch as it cannot be thought outside of—prior to—any temporalization. Derrida’s challenge to the metaphysics of presence and therefore to linearity as organizing what is often referred to as “Western” thinking culminates in his complex discussions of the future.

Derrida recognizes that we often—mostly—think of the future as something that follows seamlessly from the present, a sort of future-present that we can plan for. Derrida opposes this to what he calls the “future to come.” This is the future beyond predictability, the arrival of the totally unexpected. This future to come is extraordinarily important for Derrida: it makes ethics and politics possible. To guard against it—to try and master or pre-empt the future (Diprose 2006: 442)—would be to foreclose the possibility of politics (or what we have referred to as “the political” above).
It is in this Derridean sense that we want to recover time for reimagining borders and migration in global politics; not just as an ever-present condition that makes their spatialization possible, but as an opening toward ethics and politics. While the security-space imaginary relies upon and perpetuates the fiction that modern subjects must be either citizens or migrants, determined by their spatial engagement and structural difference within the system of states, Derridean thought deconstructs the logic that makes this way of thinking possible. If the subject is a being in time that is never fully formed or complete, then not only is the citizen/migrant binary impossible to uphold in practice but it is the subject’s temporal relation to the openness of the future—the “future to come”—that produces their subjectivity.

The citizen-subject is a subject defined by its imagined relation to a future characterized by linear time within the sovereign territorial state, one in which progress and betterment are possible over the course of a lifetime. By contrast, the migrant is misaligned with this imaginary. On the one hand, this subject position is characterized by a recurring present; one in which the future is already foreclosed and destined to follow the programmatic rules of immigration policy. On the other hand, it is associated with the “real” future, the unpredictable ability of the future to come that disrupts the clarity of the citizens’ progression toward a discernible (and governable) future. The migrant thus exceeds easy categorization within the imaginary and disrupts the apparent clarity of the space-security imaginary. This subject position—one characterized by fundamental “undecidability” in Derridean terms (see also Zehfuss 2024)—unsettles the reassuring progression of linear time, which requires past, present, and future to smoothly follow on from each other. In prioritizing space—and associated concepts of borders, territory, and inside/outside—extant literatures entangled by the security-space imaginary have missed how the dominant problematization of migration is temporal and structured by this relation to the future. Drawing on Derrida’s thought enables us to highlight this blind spot in Critical Migration and Border Studies, but its emphasis on the futurity of the future—an openness to the Other—moves us beyond critique.

The unraveling of the security-space imaginary on its own terms provides an opening for reimagining migration and borders in global politics. If our thinking remains locked within a spatialized grid of intelligibility, then the animating distinctions of citizen/migrant, inside/outside, security/insecurity are reproduced, the racialized hierarchization of subjects is perpetuated, and the subject’s future is foreclosed, which recycles the grid. However, if, following Derrida, the starting point is recast as the radical openness of the subject’s becoming in time, then the grid is repoliticized as an unworkable artefact. An ethical-political reorientation to the future does not begin with static assumptions about hierarchies of self/other relations structured by spatialized and racialized notions about to what and/or whom we have obligations. Rather, thinking about these relations in time deconstructs these binaries and prompts us to begin instead by looking carefully at the specific implications of attempts to draw borders—and their attendant exclusions and hierarchies—in particular contexts. This makes it impossible to think of migrants as exceptional and misaligned, as all subject positions only ever emerge in relation and in their particularity.

Our reading of Derrida thus foregrounds the inevitable incompleteness of the subject in time and begins by interrogating why certain borders are drawn, by whom, and with what implications. In the context of the war in Ukraine, for example, this means asking questions about how Ukrainians fleeing the war seemingly came to be rendered not as future-less or risky migrants, but rather as Europeans and therefore already potential citizens. Prima facie, Europe’s response to population displacement arising from the war in Ukraine appeared to signal a progressive shift in border security and migration policy. Disturbing questions emerge, however, when we consider
the simultaneity of the welcome extended toward Ukrainians and the exclusionary stance toward others framed as having arrived illegally. It seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is a politics of race involved. The contrasting response to the “migration crises” of 2015 and 2022 is not readily explicable in terms of geographical proximity: according to Google Earth, the distance from Brussels to Kiev is 1,844 km, whereas the distance from Brussels to Tripoli is 2,122 km—a difference of less than 300 km. The “proximity” between Ukrainians and Europeans is therefore better understood in racialized terms. If 2015 was produced as a “racialized” crisis facing Europe characterized by risky “black bodies” being repelled by deterrent security agendas (De Genova 2018) was performed as a differently racialized crisis centered on the protection of white bodies to be welcomed. On this view, the apparently differential governmental responses to 2015 and 2022 are logically consistent and reflective of a “global apartheid” that continues to characterize European border security and migration management (Hage 2016: 44).

When we engage more closely with the temporal terms on which the EU welcomed “Ukrainians” in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion, the response to population displacement in 2022 appears even more problematic. The relevant proposal for a “council implementing decision” that identified “a mass influx of displaced persons from Ukraine within the meaning of Article 5 of Council Directive 2001/55/EC”—a directive established in the aftermath of conflict in the former Yugoslavia in 2001 and not invoked in 2015—had the effect of “introducing temporary protection” (EU Commission 2022): it demarcated the welcome with reference to time. The convoluted title appearing on the first page makes clear that any permission granted is from the start envisaged as finite. The offer is one of temporary protection only. The beneficiaries of the directive may temporarily live and work within the EU, but they are envisaged as continuing to really belong to Ukraine. They will return, this assumes, when the current situation is over. The EU extends time-limited rights to people based on the “extraordinary and exceptional nature of the military invasion of Ukraine by Russia,” suggesting that somehow everything will go back to normal, that people will return to where they really belong after what is painted as a time-limited crisis.

This is unsurprising. States typically render any need for protection to be temporary (while expecting people to integrate as though permanent). Intriguingly, however, while the public perception seems to be that “Ukrainians” are the beneficiaries of this directive, it applies to Ukrainian as well as third-country nationals and stateless persons (legally) “residing in Ukraine who are displaced as of 24 February 2022” and their family members. That is, even Ukrainians have to fulfill a temporal requirement of residence in order to qualify. This seems sensible, as a Ukrainian not living in the country may be considered not to be under threat from the invasion. However, that is neither the point nor necessarily so: a Ukrainian legally resident elsewhere with a visa expiring after the start of the invasion seems not to be covered and thus not to have permission to be in the EU. They do not have the right past to be a deserving Ukrainians in the present. This framing makes sense only in light of the idea of crisis as temporary. The protection granted by the directive was only envisaged to be for one year, and “may be extended automatically by six monthly periods for a maximum of one year.” Thus, despite the apparently warm welcome and ostensibly progressive response when compared to 2015, there is no future envisaged for Ukrainians within the EU.

Conclusion

We have argued that the “security-space” imaginary has dominated how borders and migration have been “made sense of” in contemporary global politics (Taylor 2004). This imaginary is heavily dependent upon problematic assumptions about time and race, but these assumptions have been marginalized in order to stabilize, depoliti-
cize, and naturalize an apparently coherent—if deeply racialized—account; one in which the sedentary citizen-subject resides in their proper place at home within the territorial borders of the sovereign state (the norm) and is defined against the mobile migrant-subject who transgresses those borders and is produced as improperly out of place (the exception).

Stepping back from the 2015 and 2022 events that have been produced as “migration crises” facing Europe, we have explored how the category of “migrant” is only made possible and emerges as a problem against the backdrop of the dominant spatialized and securitized imaginary of global politics, underpinned by what Agnew (1994) called the “territorial trap.” People are performatively produced as “migrants” by crossing international borders idealized as thin lines between sovereign territorial nation-states. They are considered by this dominant regime of thought to be “out of place” and disrupt the order of people in their “proper place.” That is, the condition of being a migrant is inextricably tied to—and ultimately (re)produced by—the inside/outside spatialization of global politics (Walker 1993). Unlike the “known” and identifiable citizen “inside” the domestic sovereign space of the state, the migrant is a stranger who is risk-assessed as a potential threat from the anarchical “outside” and whose subjectivity is therefore securitized (Huysmans 1998; see also Kinnvall 2007). A person can of course move and indeed be forced to do so without reference to the spatialized imaginary of the state system—as in the case of internally displaced persons—but to become a “migrant,” in the common understanding of the term, requires something more; namely, to have crossed an international border or to find oneself in the jurisdiction of a state that is not one’s own.

While this seems to be an obviously and exclusively spatial issue, we have shown that a person who is produced as a migrant also comes to be out of place in time. Efforts to bring temporality into critical studies of borders and migration have begun to examine the significance of this insight. But these moves have largely worked within and thus reproduced—rather than displaced—the terms of the dominant space-security imaginary. Seeking alternative conceptual resources to think beyond this bind, we have turned to the thought of Derrida to examine how the spatialization is implicated in perpetuating a racialized imaginary in which the subjection of particular people appears natural. Tracing the implication of time has allowed us to show how the binaries involved in making this system work deconstruct on their own terms. If the line drawn between inside and outside is contingent, and even undecidable, then migrants are no longer people who are out of place, misaligned. They are rather, like citizens, people who contingently come to be emplaced over time. The politics of how people come to be included, through particular configurations of assumptions and regulations, is thus always in the making, toward a future that cannot be controlled. That is, it is not so much given by the state system than reproduced through ethico-political decisions shaped by the apparently timeless space-security imaginary.

Any social imaginary only ever reflects that “of a people at a given time” (Taylor 2004: 115), but, over time, Taylor argues, imaginaries evolve as new practices emerge that gradually change societies’ self-understanding. Drawing on Derridean deconstruction, we are not calling for the time-race imaginary as another new theoretical construct for rethinking borders and migration in global politics. We have argued that the dominant space-security imaginary already relies upon the time-race imaginary, but the former has subjugated the latter. The time-race imaginary shapes the lived experience of those deemed to be “out of place” according to the narrative of “migration crises”—the millions of Ukrainians, Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, and others displaced globally. By recovering that subjugated imaginary, we might begin to attack the predominance of the space-security imaginary and create the conditions for alternative forms of judgment and action.
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