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The “Schengen turn” as the reshaping of the French-Italian border: the critical convergence of the geography of border controls with capitalist dynamics (1990s-2000s)

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The “Schengen turn” as the reshaping of the French-Italian border: the critical convergence of the geography of border controls with capitalist dynamics (1990s-2000s)

On the 1st of January 1993, border controls at the French-Italian border were officially “abolished” in the framework of the Schengen area. However, the border didn’t disappear; rather, its geography adjusted to the evolution of the capitalist logics of the European market, creating a hierarchized borderzone where “boundaries and scales intersect to fuel further expansion of (...) the frontiers of capital” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 321). The article draws on the fields of critical border studies and radical geography to show the critical convergence of capitalist dynamics and border police practices in the French-Italian border zone. This has been reflected in the local production of transport infrastructures enabling high-speed cross-border circulation at the expense of local roads and practices. Moreover, the evolution from “fixed” border control to “random and mobile” identity checks led to the creation of a police targeting system that selects passengers on the basis of a social-racial profiling. After the Schengen agreements, the French-Italian border became a mobile device allowing the accumulation of capital through the selection of “legitimate travelers” and the control of “illegal migrants”. It enacted locally the “polarization of mobility” (Bauman, 1998) that occurred at a global scale at the turn of the 21st century.

Keywords: Schengen area; French-Italian border; border control; social-racial profiling; spatial-fix; frontiers of capital

Introduction

When I started my fieldwork in the French border towns of Briançon and Menton in 2021, I asked the local residents, who were actively engaged in supporting migrants, about the situation at the border in the 1990s. They all had a similar reaction of surprise to my question, noting that after the “opening of the border” in 1993, “nobody mentioned the migration issue.” They also recalled that before the reinstatement of border controls in 2015, the border police seldom checked people crossing the border. The local recollection of illegal border crossings at the French-Italian border primarily focuses on Italian migration up to the 1950s and Jewish refugees during the Second World War. From that period until the numerous arrivals of migrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa in the 2010s, there might as well have been a gap in history, as if “nothing was happening” at the French-Italian border. This feeling is reinforced by academic research: While historians have documented the history of illegal migration and

border controls from the late 19th century to the 1960s (see, among others, Gastaut 1996; Hanus 2012; Khalifa 2017; Proglia 2021; Rinauro 2012; Tombaccini-Villefranche 1999), the more recent period hasn't been explored. The 2015 reintroduction of migration controls by France at its border with Italy suddenly drew renewed attention to this region. This led to a surge in studies on the “rebordering” of the French-Italian border since 2015 and its violent impact on people on the move (see, among others, Amigoni et al. 2021; Bonnin 2021; Del Biaggio, Giannetto, and Noûs 2020; Selek and Trucco 2020; Tazzioli 2021; Torre 2023). However, focusing on recent developments tends to overlook the long-term perspective of the bordering process.

Contrary to the view that the French-Italian border underwent a debordering process that started with its opening in 1993 and was followed by a sudden rebordering in 2015, I argue that border controls have always remained in place, albeit reshaped by the implementation of the Schengen agreements. Studying the reconfiguration of the geography of border control in the 1990s reveals the historical and spatial continuities that have shaped current practices of migration control at the French-Italian border, as well as the social and racial dynamics intertwined with them.

The Schengen agreements in 1985 and their subsequent enactment in 1993¹ embody the ideal of a “Europe without borders.” Locally, at the French-Italian border, the “disappearance” of the border was presented as a shocking and radical transformation that would disrupt daily life in border towns. In 1992, this issue regularly made headlines in local newspapers with

¹ The Schengen Agreement was signed by five countries, including France, in June 1985. Italy signed the convention implementing the agreement in November 1990. Systematic border controls within the Schengen area ceased on 1 January 1993.

phrases like “*Farewell, border!*”² “*Custom agents without borders,*”³ “*Menton: the end of a border,*”⁴ “*The shattered border,*”⁵ etc. Both locally and internationally, this narrative fostered the belief that the internal Schengen borders would simply disappear. The “scene of the disappearance” of border controls (Guénebeaud, 2017, p. 169) was marked by the dismantling of border posts and the abandonment of gendarmerie barracks along the French-Italian border. Officially, the border between France and Italy was abolished on 1 January 1993. In practice, “fixed and systematic” border police controls were gradually phased out between 31 December 1992 and 31 March 1998⁶ and replaced by “mobile and random” controls, as specified by the orders given to French border police officers after 1993⁷. This article will demonstrate that police controls at the French-Italian border were never fully removed; instead, the local implementation of the Schengen agreements led to a reconfiguration of the geography of police work in the border region, on both the French and Italian sides. Thus, the narrative of free movement within the Schengen zone masked the reality that internal Schengen borders, at the end of the 20th century, became instruments of a global regime that differentiated the right to mobility based on social class and nationality.

This reconfiguration of the border should be understood in the context of the spatial development of a European market, which rendered traditional “fixed” border controls outdated. The establishment of the Schengen area played an important role in linking the

² Sergio Benedetti, “Farewell, border!”, article in Nice-Matin, 30 July 1992, available in the municipal archives of Menton.

³ P.H. “Custom agents without borders”, Nice-Matin (date unknown), available in the municipal archives of Menton.

⁴ Jean-Charles Pierson, Nice-Matin, 6 November 1992, available in the municipal archives of Menton.

⁵ Unknown author, Nice-Matin, 1 January 1993, available in the municipal archives of Menton.

⁶ SCI Menton, DDCILEC des Alpes-Maritimes, “Note de service du 24/10/1997,” 2683W385, Archives Départementales des Alpes-Maritimes.

⁷ Source: Ministry of Interior, French Border police. SCI Menton, DDCILEC des Alpes-Maritimes, “Note de service du 24/10/1997”, 2683W385, Archives of Alpes-Maritimes (ADAM).

French-Italian border region to global economic markets, especially in tourism. These two phenomena (i.e., the spatial evolution of border control and the local impact of globalization) led to a new hierarchization of space, mobility, and individuals at the local scale, entailing a (re)production of social dominance based on class, nationality, and race. This creation of inequalities can be interpreted as the development of a “border zone” at the French-Italian border in the early 1990s, conceptualized by Mezzadra and Neilson as “specific places in which boundaries and scales intersect to fuel further expansion of (...) the frontiers of capital” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, p. 321). This approach focusing on the economic factors that reshape the geography of borders has never been previously applied in studying migration control at the French-Italian border, with research mainly focusing on political factors. By adopting this materialist perspective, this article aims to broaden the empirical understanding of the French-Italian border zone. Moreover, examining the period of the Schengen area’s local construction sheds new light on how police practices are influenced by capitalist dynamics, leading to the local (re)production of social and racial inequalities. By providing a local-scale perspective on the French-Italian border, this article contributes to the theoretical reflection in critical border studies on the relationship between the capitalist conquest of space and migration control practices.

This research was conducted within the framework of my doctoral thesis in geography and focuses on the evolving geography of border control at the French-Italian border since the establishment of the Schengen area. The field research lasted five months, from November 2022 to March 2023. During this time, I conducted 10 interviews with French and Italian border police and customs officers in the towns of Menton and Ventimiglia, all of whom have been serving since the 1990s. I also examined the archives the French prefecture and the French Border Police (Menton border area) at the Archives Départementales des Alpes-Maritimes (covering a period from 1983 to 2001). I selected a small part of the statistical data

from these archives for quantitative and cartographic (GIS) processing. I also used local press archives (*Nice-Matin* and *Dauphiné Libéré* newspaper⁸), audiovisual archives (France 3, 1990-2005⁹), and the archives of the SNCF Alpes-Maritimes CGT union, which I analyzed with a quantitative approach.

Furthermore, I was interested in local perceptions of the evolution of the geography of border control and, therefore, selected six towns located near the French-Italian border: Menton, Ventimiglia, Montgenèvre, Clavière, Bardonecchia, and Modane. I interviewed the current or former mayors of Bardonecchia, Montgenèvre, Clavière, and Modane. I then carried out 30 semi-structured interviews with residents of these border towns. These interviews were facilitated by maps of the border region to trace the evolution of migration control locations over time. The perspective of transporters was gleaned through three interviews with drivers on the Cannes–Ventimiglia cross-border SNCF railway line. All interviewees had been living and working in the area before the “opening of the borders” in 1993. I augmented this methodology with an interview with H., a former Sudanese refugee (now a French citizen) who illegally crossed the French-Italian border in 1996.

Critical convergence of capitalist dynamics and border police practices in the French-Italian border zone

In this article, I mainly draw on two different fields of research: critical border studies and radical geography. Since the 1990s, critical border studies have advocated for analyzing borders through a constructivist lens. This approach, which avoids essentializing borders,

⁸ Press archives are available for consultation at the Menton Municipal archives; additionally, I accessed René Siestrunck’s private archives.

⁹ Accessible on the French National Audiovisual Institute’s website.

understands them as a process, focusing on the diverse aspects of “bordering, ordering, and othering” (Houtum et Naerssen 2002). It explores the multiple locations where the border is produced, showing that borders, far from being reduced to lines on a map, rather take the shape of dots, networks, infrastructures and even bodies. This field also examines “borderwork” and identifies the various actors playing a role in the material production of borders. In this article, I focus on border police guards and customs agents, who play a key role in the “bordering” process through their daily practices of control (Bigo 2014), as studied by Casella Colombeau at the French-Italian border (Casella Colombeau 2013). Emerging in the context of globalization and the proliferation of borders and security discourses in the late 1990s, critical border studies have led many academics, following (Balibar 2022, pp. 181-193), to present contemporary borders as “being everywhere” and frame them as “deterritorialized” or even dematerialized. This approach led some scholars to overlook the forms of control that have persisted at the borders of national territories. It has also influenced those studying the Schengen area’s establishment, with claims that the Schengen agreements resulted in the “de-linking of borders from territory” (Guild 2003, p. 103). By contrast, I argue that the French-Italian border has undergone a process of re-territorialization with the creation of the Schengen area. The border now lies at the heart of an infrastructure network that facilitates the circulation of goods and people. The border also operates in a tridimensional, textured and sensory space: following Billé *et al.*’s approach, I analyze the French-Italian border as a “voluminous” device, entangled with diverse “materialities [and] scales” (Billé 2020). Rather than being represented by a small border post or checkpoint at every crossing between Italy and France, control takes place in the form of mobile patrols, both in the mountainous and urban environments of the localities near the border. Since 1993, these patrols have been “deployed almost exclusively where flows of people are expected, often aligning with network nodes and hubs” (Bonnin 2021 pp. 73-91).

Critical border studies have also stressed that globalization, contrary to homogenizing living conditions and eliminating barriers to mobility, has intensified inequalities in living standards and access to freedom of movement. Zygmunt Bauman (2011) showed that globalization has led to segregation, separation, and exclusion in space. He describes this as follows: “The integration and the division, the globalization and the territorialization, are mutually complementary processes. More precisely, they are two sides of the same process: the global redistribution of sovereignty, power, and freedom of acting.” Bauman calls this dichotomy “globalization for some, localization for others,” “a process of worldwide restratification,” and the “polarization of mobility.” Citizens of states dominating the global economy, mainly former colonial and imperial powers, have gained increased access to free movement and shorter travel times, while others, especially citizens of economically destabilized countries resulting from global processes of dispossession, remained “rooted in the local.” While international tourists enjoy access to globalized space worldwide and can feel welcome everywhere (Bauman 1998), the global border regime has created new categories of global “undesirables” whose international mobility is increasingly criminalized, making every place inhospitable to them. Building on Bauman’s global-scale analysis, I will show that the French-Italian border is a critical site for observing this “polarization of mobility” at the local scale. In the 1990s, the opening of the tourism market to international clients enabled free movement within the border zone for certain nationalities and social groups, while simultaneously increasing controls on “illegal” immigrants from the Global South. Different criteria, especially social representations of financial wealth and racial assumptions about the country of origin, influence police behavior toward travelers at the border. This led to an individualization of the border-crossing experience, a phenomenon Amilhat-Szary (2015) refers to as “borderities.” These elements allow us to analyze the border work as a « spatial ordering » of space, marking and materializing social hierarchies through the fragmentation of

space and the production of flexible barriers between social classes and nationalities. Thus, the new geography of the French-Italian border after 1993 appears as a set of socio-spatial boundaries articulated in a larger space constituted by the border zone.

To define the “border zone”, I draw on the analyses of Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013), who offer an interpretation of borders through concepts developed by radical geographers like David Harvey. They suggest that “borders play a key role in the production of time and space within the spaces of globalized capitalism.” Mezzadra and Neilson view contemporary borders as the result of two processes: the political production of territoriality (mostly by nation-states) and the “expanding frontiers of capital.” Harvey shows that the State’s spatial logic (i.e., administrating fixed territorial entities clearly defined by borders), contrasts with that of capital, which is characterized by continuous spatial expansion for resource accumulation. This expansion constantly seeks to overcome spatial and temporal constraints through scale restructuring, merging, and transfers. Despite these contradictory dynamics, Mezzadra and Neilson show that border zones are places of a “crystallization of tensions, conflicts and struggle marking the emerging articulations of territorial borders and frontiers of capital” (p. 321). By using border control to continually reshape labor mobility, managing the contradiction between free movement and blockade, and redefining populations to-be-controlled or stopped, borders become “specific places in which rescaling and restructuring operate to fuel the expansion of frontiers of capital.” Therefore, border zones serve as both “spaces of exception” that can act as “laboratories for the production and articulation of new norms” and spaces characterized by profound heterogeneity (p. 318). The creation of the Schengen area is materially intertwined with globalization through the production, for instance, of new infrastructures to reduce travel times. Far from being a coincidence, the convergence of these two phenomena reflects the alignment of evolving border control practices with the new dynamics of global capitalism at the end of the 20th century.

Harvey describes one method of using border zone spaces for capital accumulation as the “spatio-temporal fix” (2005, pp. 110-121): a solution for capitalism to resolve its internal crises by reallocating surplus capital across time and space to defer the realization of value. This strategy can materialize, for example, in “investment in infrastructure and the transport and communication industries” (p. 90). In the second half of the 19th century, European powers seeking “spatio-temporal fixes” during industrialization constructed an international railway network linking them to their colonies in the south and east of the Mediterranean. These infrastructures simultaneously facilitated the movement of travelers, raw materials, and goods across the European space. Extensive tunnel and railway projects were constructed to cross the Alps at the French-Italian border, including the Menton–Ventimiglia railroad, the Mont Blanc Tunnel, and the Fréjus Tunnel. They entailed the fast development of a cosmopolitan tourism industry in the Alps and the Riviera, led predominantly by the aristocracy and upper middle classes from Europe and North America, especially from countries like Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The historical and geographical link between military territorial control, the construction of transport infrastructures, and the rise of tourism flows from Northern Europe to Mediterranean regions illustrates historian Michel Pierre’s assertion that “tourism is the ultimate stage of colonialism” (Pierre 2016).

After the Second World War, tourism in France and Italy evolved into mass tourism. In France, paid holidays, access to private cars, and trade union advocacy for a “right to nature” made winter sports accessible to a broader segment of the French population. As a result, the Riviera and the Montgenèvre-Clavière ski resorts, situated in the French-Italian border region, drew an ever-increasing influx of tourist travelers, as well as seasonal and permanent labor migrants. The systematic vehicle control at the border became problematic from an economic

point of view, as it led to long queues at border crossings¹⁰. This had negative consequences for the development of local tourism, affecting the flow of tourist traffic and the visual and acoustic appeal of the landscape. In addition, the rising dominance of truck transport over rail created major disturbances in the congested border towns of Modane, Menton, Clavière, and Montgenèvre. Toward the end of the 20th century, these shifts in the movement of capital, goods, and people across Europe prompted governments to modify their border control policies.

Two strategies were used to resolve this tension. The first was the creation of new transport, crossing, and accommodation infrastructures as a spatio-temporal fix to streamline the circulation of capital on a European scale. As a result, between the 1970s and 1980s, substantial new infrastructures were developed to “decongest” the border and ease traffic congestion. As had been the case a century earlier, the establishment of a European market at the end of the 20th century relied on the material production of Alpine crossing infrastructures. In 1973, the A8 freeway linked France and Italy via Menton and Ventimiglia; the same year, the “seaside” road was constructed at Menton, with a new border crossing (Pont Saint-Ludovic); the Fréjus Road Tunnel opened in 1981 and was connected via freeway to Susa on the Italian side in 1987. This infrastructure facilitated “the relentless race to reduce or eliminate spatial barriers, coupled with the relentless acceleration of the [movement] of capital” in line with the capitalist need to “reduce the cost and time of movement” (Harvey 2005, pp. 80-91).

The second strategy involved the spatial reconfiguration of police and customs practices in border control. Casella Colombeau (2013, pp. 109-111) shows that between the 1950s and 1970s, French border police lobbies tried to convince the government of the unproductiveness of fixed controls, ensured by barriers and a police and customs presence at border posts on all

¹⁰ Interviews with local residents of Menton (December 2022) and Montgenèvre, as well as the mayor of Clavière (February 2023).

routes. In the 1980s, border police executives participating in the working groups responsible for negotiating the Schengen agreements pleaded for mobile control strategies. They also negotiated conditions for maintaining a border police presence, arguing the need to “compensate” for the “security deficit” that would result from opening internal borders (Casella Colombeau, 2013, p. 205).

The historical examination of the French-Italian border reveals that the border serves primarily as an instrument for regulating circulation within the capitalist economy. This regulation involves both the spatial production of crossing infrastructures tailored to the flow of traffic and the reconfiguration of police control at the border. The measures to abolish “fixed controls” at the Schengen area’s internal borders can be seen as part of a broader transformation of border areas in the era of globalization and of the reconfiguration of the geography of capitalism on a European scale at the end of the 20th century.

Therefore, studying the key period of the implementation of the Schengen area offers insights into how economic and infrastructural transformations were interwoven with border police practices, transforming the geography of the border and leading to new inequalities in the border zone.

The paradoxes of the “open border”: attracting international consumers, hindering local mobility

Between 1993 and the early 2000s, as “fixed and systematic” police controls at the French-Italian border were phased out, the border zone underwent a globalization of tourist flows. In this border region, new high-speed transport routes and the freedom of movement acquired in 1993 for European citizens facilitated this trend of the internationalization of travelers on a local scale. Early in the 2000s, tourists from France and Italy were still by far the main visitors to the towns along the French-Italian border. However, the establishment of a shuttle link from

the resort to Turin airport, a fast road between Susa and Clavière, and the Paris–Turin high-speed train line at Oulx significantly boosted the popularity of the Montgenèvre resort among international tour operators. These agencies now organize trips for foreign visitors from across Europe (Belgium, UK, Sweden, Denmark) and further afield (Israel, China, Australia).

However, this internationalization did not lead to greater social diversity among those living and moving in the border area. On the contrary, the border zone has undergone social homogenization favoring the upper classes of Western and Northern Europe. Some local residents note that the Montgenèvre municipality strategically sought to attract wealthier clientele, as evidenced by the construction of four- and five-star hotels, golf courses, and a spa. This pivot away from social tourism gradually transformed local urbanization. A former mayor of Montgenèvre recalls: “I used to meet with British operators and discuss with them with a pencil, plans, what they needed... [and] now the Danes, and the British, who got to know the resort [through tour operators], buy (...) their own apartment to rent out or lend to friends. They know the system. They fly from London, Manchester, and they land in Milan or Turin... They leave London in the morning and are skiing on the slopes of Montgenèvre by the evening!”

In Menton, on the Mediterranean coast, the opening of the border also triggered a surge in foreign real estate investment, initially driven by Italian buyers. Menton residents described in interviews how the city felt “invaded” in the early 1990s by wealthy Italians seeking a second home in “the first city in France after the border.” This influx led to a spike in real estate prices. The 2000s saw further arrivals of Belgian and British nationals drawn by the environment, the tourist facilities, and the exotic location between France and Italy and in search of second homes. The mobility of international capital, facilitated by the new opportunities offered by the European Union, led to a wave of gentrification, making real estate unaffordable for some locals, especially in the border district of Garavan in Menton. Therefore, the removal of barriers to the movement of people and capital, along with the construction of fast-traffic infrastructures

across Europe, transformed the towns and villages along the French-Italian border, creating new local barriers of class and nationality.

A second effect of this infrastructure development was the dominance of fast roadways designed for international traffic over local cross-border traffic. This was the case with the Fréjus Road Tunnel, built in 1981, which became unaffordable for everyday travel. At the time of its construction, local authorities did not secure preferential rates for the inhabitants of their communes. “When they built the tunnel,” recalls the mayor of Modane, “there were still very simple and easy connections through the train shuttle (...) People from Modane used to go to Bardonecchia (the neighboring Italian town) for pizza.” This train ran every half-hour between Modane and Bardonecchia and could also transport vehicles. However, as rail traffic declined in favor of road traffic, the shuttle ceased operations in 1981, which, according to the mayor, “marked the end of relations between residents on both sides of the border.” In the 2000s, the cross-border train link disappeared during construction work and was not reinstated due to unprofitability. Today, only the fast train (TGV) and the highway provide a direct link between Bardonecchia and Modane, with no preferential fares for cross-border workers or local residents. According to some residents interviewed in both towns, the “paradox of Schengen” is that the French-Italian border, which had always been a place of passage, closed for them just as it was opening up to Europe. Notably, this closure resulted not from a direct political decision but from a series of indirect economic processes, which nevertheless had material consequences for the mobility of local residents.

In every border town I studied, the residents I interviewed expressed that before 1993, although the border was controlled, being “a local” made daily crossings easy thanks to personal connections with the police and customs officers, who were also locals. All the residents I met agreed that the “opening” of the French-Italian border in the 1990s did not positively impact their cross-border mobility practices. Some felt that the frequency of their cross-border journeys

stayed the same, while others observed a decrease. In the 1970s and 1980s, activities like shopping in Italy, visiting bars there, or using swimming pools in France were all part of daily life. After 1993, although residents enjoyed complete freedom of movement, the primary obstacle to cross-border travel was no longer police control. Instead, it was the economic impacts of the Schengen agreements, which had led to new spatial inequalities.

Therefore, the new “freedom of movement” in the early 1990s created a local hierarchy of mobilities, placing local border populations in an ambiguous situation. As European citizens, they could easily access distant destinations across Europe, but at certain points along the French-Italian border, local cross-border mobility was complicated by the privatization of transport infrastructures.

Adapting the geography of border and migration control to the “Schengen spirit”

In the years leading up to the implementation of the Schengen agreements, local media reflected police concerns about the potential impact of border police withdrawal on the safety of citizens. Customs and border police aimed to “reassure” the public that their activities would not cease but simply become more mobile. A local newspaper article in 1987 stated, “What will customs do tomorrow? It will adapt to the new conditions of the single market. Its workforce will be redeployed and modified. (...) Mobility, technical skills, and availability will be the mainstays of its organization.”¹¹ To compensate for what was seen as a “security deficit” at the border, the action of controlling goods and people was separated from the physical border location (Casella Colombeau, 2013, p. 199).

¹¹ *Nice-Matin*, “La douane, perspective 1992, des missions appelées à s’affirmer de plus en plus,” article signed S. T., 1987. Archives Municipales de Menton, filename “Douanes.”

An episode in 1996 clearly illustrates this change in mentality and control practices at the French-Italian border following the implementation of the Schengen agreements: The number of border police officers was reduced. In the Roya Valley, the Italian officers could no longer man the border posts around the clock. A memo from the French border police (*“Police aux frontières”* or “PAF”) in Breil-sur-Roya lamented that “at the end of their shift, [Italian police officers] lower a barrier that is locked, blocking traffic until 7 a.m. (...) at the Fanghetto and Olivetta border posts.” This barrier faced considerable opposition: The valley’s residents, representatives, and the media campaigned for its removal, and it was “frequently broken by illegal immigrants who wanted to use this route at night.” French police officers criticized the “anachronistic” Italian model of control, contrasting it with their own approach, better aligned with the new Schengen rules, in a sector “daily patrolled by gendarmerie, customs, and the PAF.” This episode shows how the Schengen agreements redefined “good” and “bad” border control practices. Contrary to the fixed barrier, perceived as a symbol of closure, mobile vehicle patrols became the preferred method of control, deemed just as effective in controlling “illegal” immigration and aligning with the Schengen Convention’s goal of free movement.

Some police officers in my research recalled that in the late 1990s, they were asked to “act out the disappearance” of controls (Guénebeaud 2017, p. 169) at the French-Italian border. According to a PAF executive: “We were told that barriers were a cliché, so in one day we had to get companies to dismantle them. We were told to remove all signs signifying the border, including ‘police halt’ signs... We could only keep the flags. They said we shouldn’t give the impression that we intended to control people.”¹²

The abandonment of border posts was initially seen as a radical shift for those in border control, who “overnight”¹³ could no longer conduct checks for more than six hours at a time at

¹² Interview with a PAF executive in Menton, January 2023

¹³ Interviews with border customs officers in Menton, December 2022

a single post. However, it soon became apparent that the police and customs authorities could return to the border in the event of a crisis. The PAF executive added: “When I arrived in 2000, we were at the end of the acceptance process. People realized it wasn’t the end of the world, and borders hadn’t disappeared. Just because you’re free doesn’t mean you’re not controlled.”¹⁴ Finally, the possibility of deviating from fixed border posts was sometimes seen as a relief for agents. A customs officer in Menton noted: “Now, in Saint-Ludovic or Saint-Louis, we can follow a vehicle that we’ve let through but are suspicious of – something we couldn’t do before.” There was a significant reduction in the number of control personnel at France’s internal European borders. Among the customs guards, 300 jobs were cut, and over 1,020 were redeployed to other locations; in the PAF, the decrease was smaller and more gradual, with only 168 job cuts at internal borders between 1990 and 1992 (see Casella Colombeau 2013, p. 309). The decrease in police and customs staff at the border meant it was no longer feasible to monitor all border points simultaneously. Police border control work underwent a process of neoliberal management in the early 2000s. To be “cost-efficient,” the strategy shifted to selecting the most “profitable” locations in terms of the number of arrests. This focus on the profitability of controls is clearly demonstrated in the 2001 French Railway Brigade’s weekly reports, which documented a daily “irregularity rate” among inspected travelers, fluctuating between 10% and 20%¹⁵. According to the customs officers I interviewed, they were asked to prioritize controls on routes that “yield the most” arrests or seizures of illegal goods¹⁶. As the prefecture urged customs officers to “[refocus] on major traffic,” the freeway emerged as a regional police hub. As one customs officer remarked, “After ’93, [the motorway toll at] La Turbie became the border.”¹⁷ Conversely, smaller mountain roads were neglected for several years. Another

¹⁴ Interview with a PAF executive in Menton, January 2023

¹⁵ Archives de la Direction départementale de la PAF (2001), versement : Préfecture des Alpes-Maritimes, cabinet du Préfet. Cote: 1444W580. Archives Départementales des Alpes-Maritimes

¹⁶ Interview with a retired border customs officer in the Menton brigade, December 2022.

¹⁷ Interview with a border customs officer in the Menton brigade, December 2022.

customs officer observed: “Mountains aren’t cost-effective; there’s hardly anything passing through there.” As a result, the new geography of migration controls created a hierarchy of routes and types of mobility, categorizing them by different categories of users based on their local or international origins. All border town residents interviewed for this research (who mainly use small roads to cross the border) reported feeling exempt from controls at border crossings since 1 January 1993¹⁸. This perception may explain why they felt that border controls effectively ceased from 1993 until 2015, while in reality, the border police’s selective roadway focus shaped the perception that the border had disappeared.

The following maps, based on qualitative and quantitative information from the PAF archives (Menton/French Riviera sector), show the clear evolution in the geography of the border between the 1980s and the 2000s.

¹⁸ Interviews with residents of Menton, January 2023.

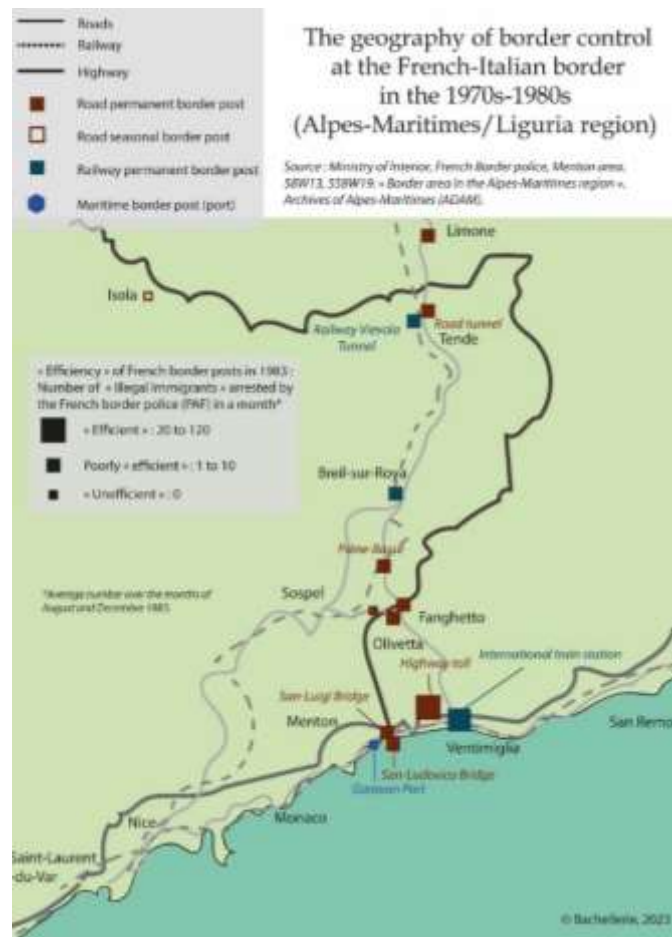


Figure 1¹⁹ – The geography of border controls at the French-Italian border (Menton sector) in the 1970s–1980s

¹⁹ All the figures were elaborated by the author.



Figure 2 – The evolution of the geography of border controls at the French-Italian border (Menton sector) in the 1970s–1980s and after 1993

From being a series of fixed locations (manifested in border posts) along the borderline, the border evolved into a network of mobile patrols and checkpoints in a much broader border zone, which comprised not only the “Schengen zone,” where mobile and random identity checks are allowed within a 20-kilometer radius of the border, but also the entire Alpes-Maritimes *département*. Aligning with international transport infrastructure, the police became mobile along the entire railroad line and were able to carry out checks at stations as far as Cannes (66 km from the border).

Moreover, to align with the Schengen Convention’s goal of the free movement of goods and people, the geographical reorganization of the border in 1993 moved forward on two fronts: extending into French territory and integrating into the heart of transport infrastructures, as well

as into towns and villages. While border posts used to be located at the edges of border towns, the new random and mobile control points were now to be found in town centers and along the main communication routes (railroads, freeways, toll booths), even blending into urban architecture (railway stations, Menton city center, Sospel town hall, residential districts of Nice–West, construction sites, restaurants), and modes of transport (along railroads, in buses, in train carriages)²⁰. This new geography of control was part of a global trend at the turn of the 21st century, as “War on Terror” rhetoric prompted the proliferation of security measures in all areas of everyday life, creating a multitude of checkpoints in urban infrastructures (Graham 2011, p. 15). By including the entire Alpes-Maritimes *département* in the PAF’s jurisdiction, illegal foreigners present on French territory also became a “clientele” of the PAF (Casella Colombeau 2013, p. 303). In this way, foreigners who were routinely checked by the municipal police could now be referred to the PAF for an identity check. For example, according to documents found at the PAF archives, this happened to an Albanian national who was subject to a roadside check by the Roquebrune municipal police and then sent to the border post in Menton, where he was charged with aiding the entry of illegal aliens²¹. Thus, the expansion of the border into a wider “border zone” facilitated increased collaboration between police forces, leading to different local mobility experiences for residents based on their legal status, even if they never crossed the border but remained in their hometowns.

²⁰ Archives de la Direction départementale de la PAF (2001), versement : Préfecture des Alpes-Maritimes, cabinet du Préfet. Cote: 1444W580. Archives Départementales des Alpes-Maritimes

²¹ “Note d’information, interpellation d’un passeur albanais”, SPAF de Menton, Flash-information du 16/10/2001, Archives de la Direction départementale de la PAF (2001), versement : Préfecture des Alpes-Maritimes, cabinet du Préfet. Cote: 1444W581. Archives Départementales des Alpes-Maritimes

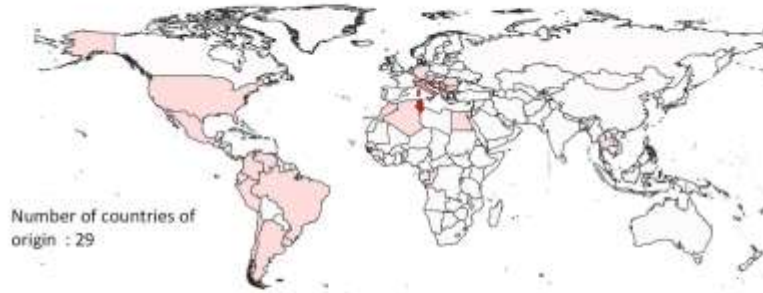
Social and racial targeting of “illegal” migrants: a mobile geography of violence

Although the Schengen agreements resulted in a substantial reduction of customs and PAF personnel at the border, the archives of the Menton PAF reveal a continuous increase in the number of people arrested at the French-Italian border. The average number of monthly arrests in the Menton and Roya sectors (French Riviera) escalated from 290 immigrants in 1983 to 505 in 1992 and 633 in 1995²². This demonstrates that border control remained highly operational during the 1990s. Cartographic analysis of data from the PAF archives shows a process of internationalization among the arrested travelers in the Menton and Roya sectors. While in 1983, the arrested foreigners already hailed from all continents, the number of countries of origin more than doubled between 1983 and 1995. A comparison of the two maps shows an increase in the diversity of nationalities of those arrested over this period. This change reflects the internationalization of travelers crossing the border zone, a local effect of globalization. However, the evolution in the countries of origin of the arrested individuals reveals that, by 1995, most originated from Asia and Africa, indicating a specific focus of police activity on some nationalities.

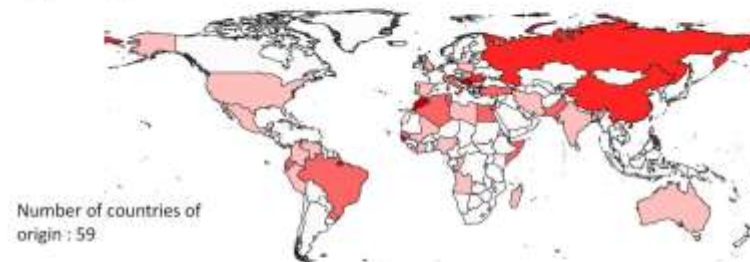
²² This average number was calculated based on the August and December data for each year mentioned.

Countries of origin of « illegal » foreigners arrested at the French-Italian border by the French border police in Menton area (French Riviera)

Map 1—August and December 1983



Map 2—August and December 1995



Number of nationals arrested by the PAF of Menton



Source :

French Ministry of Interior, general direction of national police, SCT Menton to CILEC Nice, statistics office. "Weekly reports, 1987, 1990, 1992, 1995". 1932H356. Department Archives of Alpes-Maritimes (ADAM). French Ministry of Interior, Border Police, PAF Menton. "Statistics, daily reports, 1982-1983". 558W19, ADAM.

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Basemap : public.opendatasoft / QGIS

Figure 3 – Countries of origin of “illegal foreigners” arrested at the French-Italian border by the French border police in the Menton area (French Riviera)

This profiling strategy can be understood as an application of one of the priorities set by French authorities in the late 1970s: to identify “fake tourists” or “so-called tourists” at the borders (Casella Colombeau 2013, p. 139). This strategy was not a blanket suspicion of all tourists but targeted foreigners who benefited from extended rights of movement thanks to historical relations between France and their countries of origin – that is to say, nationals from former French colonies. The authorities were concerned that individuals entering France on a tourist visa would circumvent the law and remain on the territory as irregular immigrants. This idea led border police officers to differentiate between tourists from nationalities deemed a “migratory risk” and those who were not. This resulted in many arrests of foreigners, as well

as French citizens of foreign origin, who claimed (whether truthfully or not) to be in the area for tourism purposes. For instance, a French citizen of Chinese descent was arrested on 2 February 1996 in the border village of Olivetta in the Roya Valley while driving a vehicle carrying a Chinese couple without identity documents and was prosecuted for facilitating the entry of illegal immigrants. To defend himself, he claimed he had flown to Nice to visit the French Riviera for the holidays, rented a car to explore the region between Menton and San Remo, and met the couple by chance in Ventimiglia, who asked him for a lift back to Nice. However, the PAF did not focus solely on tourists: The archives reveal the arrests of asylum seekers, craftsmen, and unemployed individuals from North Africa or Eastern Europe, each with personal reasons for traveling to Italy. An Italian border police officer recalls: “After 1990, we were patrolling the paths in both directions, mostly to France but also to Italy. At that time, many Moroccans and Tunisians were moving from France to Italy. From Italy to France, it was mainly Pakistanis and Senegalese.”

The effectiveness of migration control, despite the drop in police numbers, can be attributed to the strategy of traveler profiling. The PAF’s archives show that controls were based on suspicions arising from the appearance or behavior of travelers²³. This profiling, driven by the desire to avoid checking all travelers, had both political and economic motivations. A PAF executive explains: “Schengen law prohibits systematic control, but in any case, it’s impractical to check everyone at [the toll booth at] La Turbie or all train passengers. At the Menton–Garavan station, we only have 2.5 minutes, so it’s impossible to check everyone. Firstly, we don’t have the manpower, and secondly, the authorities wouldn’t ask us to do it. [They

²³ Préfecture. Cabinet du préfet, 1444W580, Activités de la DDPAF Alpes-Maritimes (2001), ADAM; Direction départementale de la police aux frontières. - Service de la police aux frontières de Menton, 1932W369 (1996), ADAM

wouldn't] risk completely blocking the border, including for Italian commuting to work in Monaco or the average person going to buy cigarettes..."²⁴ An Italian border police officer views this change of practice as a direct result of the globalization of flows in the 1990s: "Before, when we had [fixed] border [controls], it was easier because there weren't as many people, and there were fewer tourists. It was 10% of the current flows crossing the border. If we still had controls as we used to have in Menton [in the 1980s], in one hour, you'd have a line stretching to Genoa."²⁵ According to him, in the current context, profiling is the only feasible method to continue borders controls: At the La Turbie pay toll on the motorway, "we have such limited space to conduct checks, we stand among fast-moving cars... So we check only one car out of every thousand! Either we check everybody, which is impossible, or we judge based on the face [of the people]."²⁶

Profiling at the border was applied to vehicles based on the types of passengers they were likely to carry. In the Hautes-Alpes, the Turin–Montgenèvre tourist shuttle, set up to link the resort with major European cities, and tourist coaches were no longer stopped at the border post, allowing them to circulate freely. By contrast, a TV broadcast (France 3 regional channel) on 12 January 1998 showed the PAF patrolling in 4x4s and snow scooters in the Clarée Valley, within the 20 km border zone defined by Schengen, in search of "illegal immigrants." The same approach was taken with trains. A train driver on the Cannes–Ventimiglia line recalls that in the 1990s, the police did not systematically stop trains but "were on the platform at Garavan, just two policemen who would walk along the platform, take a quick look into the windows, and if they saw anyone in particular, they might board and remove the person."²⁷

²⁴ Interview with a PAF executive in Menton, January 2023.

²⁵ Interview with an Italian border police officer in Ventimiglia, March 2023.

²⁶ *Idem.*

²⁷ Interview with a retired train driver of the Ventimiglia–Cannes line, December 2022.

As visa possession cannot be assessed “at a glance,” travelers were profiled based on their assumed geographical origin, discerned from their appearance. This approach effectively became a new form of racial profiling at the border, as suggested in a 1999 PAF memo: “On a mission to combat illegal immigration at the Nice SNCF station, we noticed several people in the hall speaking a foreign language, looking unsure and lost. Some elements led us to believe they were irregular Kosovars, so we decided to observe them (...) [then] proceed with [their] arrest.” H., a former Sudanese refugee (now a French citizen) who crossed the French-Italian border in 1996, also recalls racial profiling at the Menton–Garavan station: “Back then, the police didn’t board [the train]. When they walked on the platform, they’d only peer through the window to see whether there were any blacks or foreigners. And then they’d check the toilets from a distance. If it read ‘occupied,’ they’d enter (...). It was stressful; we were afraid we’d run into police [all the way] to Cannes.”²⁸

These targeted migration controls significantly hindered the movement of migrants. A local resident in Ventimiglia recalls that in the 1990s, migrants slept under the Roya Valley bridge, just like some do today: “They came from the Maghreb, Tunisia, Egypt. There were also Pakistanis, Senegalese, Cameroonians... In 1997, we had the Kurds. They spread out in the city but mostly stayed in the same place as today, on the banks of the Roya. It felt safer for them because it was harder for the police to come and arrest them in the ‘jungle.’ There was already a humanitarian issue in Ventimiglia.” The press archives also reveal that on many occasions, migrants from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa were arrested at the French-Italian border: In 1992, dozens of Kurds were stranded in the Italian towns of Ventimiglia and Bardonecchia²⁹ as they couldn’t cross the border; in 1998, families fleeing the war in the former

²⁸ Interview with H., Sudanese refugee, April 2022.

²⁹ Archives Départementales des Alpes-Maritimes, 1444W604

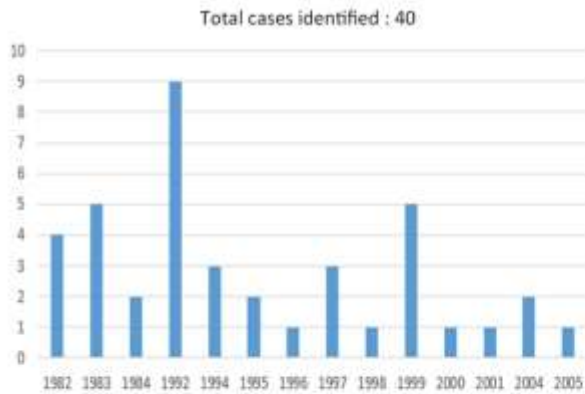
Yugoslavia were blocked at the Montgenèvre border in the Hautes-Alpes³⁰; and again in 1998, “hundreds of undocumented migrants, mainly from the Indian subcontinent and Egypt,” were stopped at the Modane border on the French side, hoping to go to Italy for regularization³¹.

These targeted controls resulted in systemic violence at the French-Italian border against specific nationalities of migrants. To avoid the closely watched main roads, people took dangerous alternate routes. The interviewed train conductors on the Ventimiglia–Nice regional line, all of whom recalled frequent train accidents involving migrants in the 1990s, as they walked along railroad tracks to avoid controls on the road or the train. At the time, migrant deaths at border crossings were not identified as a public issue by either the state or civil society, meaning archival documentation of these deaths is scarce. However, some cases were recorded in a file on work-related accidents on the train line between 1992 and 2005, compiled by the CGT railway workers’ union. Out of 56 train accident deaths listed in the file, 29 were identified as “undocumented migrants” (43%), 30 as “other” (44%), and 9 as “undetermined” (13%). This indicates that nearly half of those who died in train accidents in the border region could have been migrants. The following graphs, which cross-reference these cases with the rare cases recorded in the literature (see Gastaut 2020), show that migrants regularly died at the French-Italian border after taking dangerous routes to avoid police checks.

³⁰ Lionel Arce-Mensot, “L’exode des damnés de la guerre”, *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, personal archives of René Siestrunck

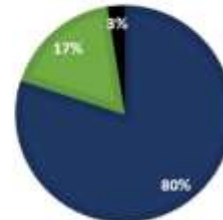
³¹ “Des centaines de sans-papiers interpellés à la frontière franco-italienne”, *Le Monde*, 14 November 1998, personal archives of René Siestrunck

Known cases of migrant person's deaths while attempting to cross the French-Italian border in the Alpes-Maritimes/Liguria region (1982-2005)



Known causes of migrant people's deaths

- Train accident (while walking on the train tracks) (32)
- Falling (in the mountainous area) (7)
- Gun shooting (police violence) (1)



Sources :
 Literature (Gastaut, 2020) - Press archives (Nice-Matin newspaper) -
 « Accidents, 1992-2005 » file from SHCT, Private archives of the CGT
 union of SNCF train workers (Alpes-Maritimes)

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Figure 4 – Data on migrant deaths at the French-Italian border (Liguria/French Riviera) between 1982 and 2005

Several researchers have used the concept of “weaponization” of the environment (Boyce, Chambers, et Launius 2019) to describe how US border control policies with Mexico since the 1990s have indirectly led to the deaths of thousands of migrants attempting to reach the USA by crossing the desert under dangerous conditions. Similarly, the archives of the CGT railway workers’ union suggest that, during the same time, at the French-Italian border, a similar phenomenon was taking place, albeit on a much smaller scale. The railway itself became “weaponized” through border control, endangering the lives of illegalized immigrants. It is noteworthy that the infrastructure built to allow faster and safer cross-border movement for international travelers was transformed into a deadly barrier for illegalized migrants.

The same violence occurred in the high mountains. H. recalls that some of his Sudanese friends who arrived in the 1990s “took risks” by “going up the mountain”: “Those who tried to cross on foot [got injured]. They were forced to use some rough paths, which led to fatigue. [They]

didn't know where to go..."³² Tazzioli (2021) notes that between 1994 and 2003, voluntary mountain rescue operations were carried out on the Bardonecchia side to help Polish, Moroccan, and Romanian migrants attempting to cross the border in perilous conditions. This "deadly escalation"³³ (Ritaine 2015) at the Franco-Italian border is not a recent phenomenon. The "Passo della morte," a mountain path bypassing the controlled Pont Saint-Louis road in Menton, had been the site of numerous fatalities during border crossings to escape fascist Italy since the 1920s and even until the 1960s. However, the fact that these deaths continued after the implementation of the Schengen agreements clearly shows that "Schengen" did not erase the border.

Moreover, the targeted aspect of border control rendered the violent consequences of police practices largely invisible to the local population and other travelers in the border zone. During my fieldwork, very few locals remembered hearing about any arrests or deaths linked to border crossings in the 1990s – unlike today, where such risky migrant roads are well-known. A Briançon social worker at an association supporting immigrant rights told me: "Before 2015, when I told people here that I was working with foreigners, they asked me what on earth I was doing because 'There aren't any foreigners here.' It really was invisible. Yet, I had a lot of work! (...) At that time, we never talked about migrants crossing the border." This local invisibility of migrants and border control can be seen as a result of the targeting strategy. While border control was once part of the common experience among local residents, new migration control practices have sharply divided the experience of the border zone into three groups: "locals," "legitimate" foreigners, and "irregular migrants."

³² Interview with H., former Sudanese refugee in France, April 2022.

³³ « escalade mortifère » in the original text.

Therefore, at the turn of the 21st century, the territorial border between Italy and France no longer merely separated French and Italian nationalities. In theory, it was supposed to distinguish European Union citizens from “others.” In practice, however, among foreigners, it created a division between globalized travelers from major tourist-origin countries (Western and Northern Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand)³⁴ and the main countries of origin for immigrants and refugees (Eastern Europe, South America, Asia, Africa). We could even say that the French-Italian border has become a mobile mechanism that locally manifests the categories of the “Global North” and the “Global South.” Rather than being merely geographical concepts, these notions define a positioning in the relations of domination between states, influenced by the uneven geographical development of capitalism and ties to colonial history (Besteman 2019). Through this process, we can see the recreation of multiple borders within the border zone defined by the Schengen agreements, hierarchizing individuals by (re)defining new subalternities and exposing those targeted by controls to violence.

Conclusion

The case study of the French-Italian border shows the local scale relevance of a “border zone” in studying the interconnections between the geography of capital and the geography of police border control practices – the “frontiers of capital” material borders, as Mezzadra and Neilson put it (Mezzadra et Neilson 2013). The evolution of border police practices was necessary in the context of developing a European market driven by increasing international flows of goods and people. The production of infrastructure and the facilitation of foreign real estate investment transformed the borderland space to accommodate an economy based on

³⁴ See the following reports : “Report Annual”, Osservatorio Turistico della Regione Liguria, 2015 ; “Les clientèles touristiques de la région Provence Alpes Côte d’Azur,” région PACA, printemps 2010-2015.

transportation and border crossings and to become an international tourist destination. For this development, border police practices adopted the “random and mobile” logic of the Schengen Convention, becoming adaptable to changing passenger flows. Instead of controlling all movement at the border, the police mission shifted toward targeting the most “profitable” vehicles and travelers and locations for customs and migration control without disturbing other travelers, which could risk upsetting the local economy.

By exploring the role of profiling as a police strategy, this article also shows the entanglement of targeted control practices, compatible with the logic of the European free market, with the (re)production of relations of social and racial domination. Specifically, police targeting of citizens from Asia, Africa, and East Europe leads to the creation of racialized categories of “undesirable migrants.” These citizens face heightened risks and life-threatening dangers as they cross the border area. Thus, local practices of targeting the French-Italian border zone producing new spatial hierarchies that mirror the unequal balance of global political and economic power. The differentiated global migration regime that emerged in the 1990s manifested not through a visible, militarized border at the French-Italian frontier but rather through daily, mundane practices of social-racial profiling by police agents, which are invisible to most of the population. This helps us understand that the dominant narrative of the “opening” or “disappearance” of internal Schengen borders in the 1990s actually masked the progressive formation of a border logic producing inequalities based on social-racial relations of domination, which climaxed recently with the reintroduction of systematic border controls at the French-Italian border in 2015.

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Figures

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