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## **POSTSCRIPT: ONGOING RESEARCH**

### **Lines in the Sand? Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies**

NOEL PARKER and NICK VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS ET AL.\*

The starting point of the ‘Lines in the Sand?’ programme is expressed in our title, the idea of lines in a shifting medium. The most common use of the expression today is to reject further concessions. The expression is intoned in political debate to argue that the other side has already been given too much ground, and that, as the speaker will then demand, ‘It is time to draw a line in the sand.’ There are puzzles about the origins of this expression – not least that the original biblical text (John 8:6) refers not to ‘sand’, but to ‘ground’. Those who use it seem, nonetheless, to lean on the majestic fixity in God himself drawing a line which no one dares to cross. Yet perhaps it is not by chance that the line in the expression has been relocated from the more solid medium of ‘ground’ to the shifting one of ‘sand’. For it is precisely that which must haunt our discussion of borders: the pathos of merely human acts to draw fixed and tangible territorial lines and to expect that no one will dare to cross them. What follows is a polemical memorandum that seeks to capture the open and wide-ranging discussions arising from workshops oriented around this core thematic. Our aim is to outline what we consider to be some of the most pressing questions and problems facing those engaged in the multi-disciplinary study of borders in contemporary political life.

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Our programme of discussion is inspired by the awareness that the relation between borders and territory is becoming ever more complex. Borders are not *only* found at territorially identifiable sites such as ports, airports, and other traditional 'border crossings'. Instead, they are increasingly ephemeral and/or impalpable: electronic, non-visible, and located in zones that defy a straightforwardly territorial logic. Examples include biometric identification to control movement and other technologies designed to track mobility such as social security data, records of financial transactions, spyware placing individuals in distinct groups of consumers, and the many other systems of surveillance. In this sense, as Etienne Balibar has put it, borders are 'vacillating . . . multiplied and reduced in their localisation . . . thinned out and doubled . . . no longer the shores of politics but . . . the space of the political itself'.<sup>1</sup> So, we argue that it is time to revisit the idea of the border in a very general sense, together with a host of cognates: territory, space, inside/outside, network, region, periphery, margin, limes, threshold and so on.

Yet in spite of what appears to be the increasing diffusion and complexity of 'the border', the study of borders arguably continues to privilege what Yosef Lapid has called a pervasive 'territorialist epistemology'.<sup>2</sup> This thought takes us further: in the direction of a series of theoretical/philosophical questions about what alternative epistemologies, and equally ontologies and methodologies, are called for by the changing nature of the border. The most immediate task for an approach to border studies that is to remain critically awake is to extrapolate new border concepts, logics, and imaginaries that capture the changing perspective on what borders are supposed to be and where they may be supposed to lie. Such concepts would be the fundamental plank of a critical border studies: that is to say, a border studies capable of illuminating the changing reality of borders; determining the associations between that and our broader spatial and governmental imaginaries; subjecting border-making practices to critical scrutiny; evaluating the ethical and political aspects of border regimes and control; and thus, finally, setting the study of 'the border', its cognates, and border-studies own research agenda in a self-critical light. A critical programme would contain the basis for comment upon border-making practices in a wide sense that includes environmental and urban planning, border-control, monitoring by state and non-state agents, and globalisation.

In recent years a critical shift has taken place in border studies and it is very much against the backdrop of the emergence of this literature that the present agenda can be located.<sup>3</sup> Seeking to build upon these advances, a number of promising entrance points were identified during our first round of unscripted discussions. These can be set out along three axes, which, though inevitably blurring into each other, are nevertheless to some extent analytically distinct: 1) epistemology, 2) ontology, 3) spatiality-temporality. In relation to each of these dimensions, it is possible to identify a number of

research questions, which, taken together, constitute what we consider to be a stimulating agenda for future critical work in border studies broadly conceived.

### 1. *Border epistemology*

- **The seductive charm of the border.** Jacques Derrida's work has shown us a notion of the border underpinning a significant part of our knowledge.<sup>4</sup> As Derrida argues, Western metaphysics has been conditioned by borders that it struggles to uphold even as it averts its gaze from the inevitably contingent, indeterminate character. It is contingency obscured by the violence that underpins and is expressed in the border. The juxtaposing of binary oppositions which borders legitimise posits, that is to say, the ground on which we can 'know' anything. This is the *epistemological* seduction of the idea of a border: a craving for the distinctions of borders, for the sense of certainty, comfort and security that they offer.
- **Is an alternative epistemology possible?** Can an epistemology be defined that is founded on uncertainty and able to sidestep the charm of the fixed border? How would we examine borders under such a dispensation, in which their fixity was precisely bracketed out? What critical resources are there for identifying an alternative epistemological register of this kind?
- **What alternative topologies can be described?** What alternative topologies are available to an inside/outside way of thinking? The privilege accorded in Western thought to binary oppositions has prioritised a particular spatial and temporal topology: that of inside/outside.<sup>5</sup> This framing, within which undecidability, indistinction and indeterminacy are obscured, has come to dominate our understandings of the concept of the border. So could some alternative topology disassociate the study of borders from the idea of territory? Conversely, to what extent is indeterminacy the very complement to the possibility of determination? Is it, alternatively, possible to conceive of 'the border' within a more relational understanding of difference? Topologies of the 'margin', the 'threshold' and 'limes' all figured in our discussions. How might these or others underpin alternative border imaginaries?
- **Theorising borders as experiences.** A rich tradition of empirical casework on particular border sites has not so far been cashed out in a theorisation of the phenomenological dimension of border studies. This prompts various questions: How do we experience border-crossing? Alternatively, what does it feel like to exist *as* a border – as, for example, unwelcome migrants and minority groups are forced to do? In what ways does a shift from a geopolitical to a biopolitical horizon enable different interrogation of border/body experiences? To what extent are border experiences determined by national and/or racial predicates?

## 2. *Border ontology*

- **Borders as foundations.** How is some notion of ‘the border’ seemingly a fundamental element of any imagined world? The metaphor of drawing a line in the sand raises a series of questions about the connections between borders as foundational acts. But who, or what then makes borders? How is this ground both established and reproduced? How do borders function as a ground upon which entities are predicated? In what ways is the work that borders do as foundations linked to violence, force, and the deployment of a logic of exceptionalism *à la* Giorgio Agamben?<sup>6</sup> Is it possible to identify a new non- or de-territorial *nomos* of the earth *à la* Carl Schmitt?<sup>7</sup>
- **Alternative ontological registers.** What new descriptive ontologies might be constructed for thinking about the changing and indeterminate nature of borders as problematised above? Might concepts such as threshold, (en)folded the margin, the *soglia* (space in-between), and the ‘event’ (*à la* Alain Badiou) provide new ontologies for the border?

## 3. *The Space-Time of borders*

- **Border spatialities.** How do borders open/foreclose different political and ethical possibilities? How do different conceptions of space produced by alternative border imaginaries lead to different modes of theory/practice? What does it mean to transgress a border (e.g., in ‘illegal’ migration) and how does transgression produce the very border that is seemingly transgressed?
- **Border temporalities.** How do borders change? How do borders enable transformative practices? As foundations, how do borders (re)establish origins? What is the ‘time-print’ of the border? How do pre-emptive practices vis-à-vis what arises beyond the border, such as are characteristic of EU enlargement, globalisation and imperialism, disrupt/proliferate the familiar temporal registers within which borders have been conceptualised?
- **Marginality.** Centre–periphery and core–margin relations are enduring tropes in the experience of borders and border regions, so to consider the border in a space of marginality might reverse and reopen its meaning. Ask where and how the margin is located and one might conceive the margin as a locus of strategic potentiality/possibility, where the very possibility of transgression and resistance resides.

By way of cashing out some of the promise implicit in these research questions, the group has also begun to formulate a provisional range of research inquiries on, amongst other things: how borders create, or depend upon time frames; how the relations around urban centres are imagined; modelling system-closure and non-closure; the relationships between different disciplines’ approach to borders; the phenomenology of crossing, not (being able to undertake) crossing, or remaining upon the border; the

organisation of an 'off-shore' space of Europe; discourses' ambivalent challenge to/confirmation of the border; the genealogy of the border; the border and 'the political'; subjectivities and the border; and border violences.

Our agenda for border studies, whilst openly theoretical and philosophical in outlook, is driven by seismic changes in the nature and location of the border and their ethical-political implications. Hence, rather than treating the concept of the border as a territorially fixed, static, line (as paradigmatically depicted by Mercator's map), we begin thinking of it in terms of a series of *practices*. This move entails a more political, sociological, and actor-oriented outlook on how divisions between entities *appear*, or are *produced* and *sustained*. The shift in focus also brings a sense of the dynamism of borders and bordering *practices*, for both are increasingly mobile – just as are the goods, services and people that they seek to control. Furthermore, it frees the study of borders from the epistemological, ontological, and methodological shackles of an ultra-modernistic, 'territorialist' Western geopolitical imagination. On the one hand, there clearly remain examples of stubbornly territorial border sites in global politics (such as the US-Mexico border in domestic American politics, the straight lines on the African continent, and the sharpening outer edges of EU territory). On the other hand, by thinking within the ambit of the 'modern' geopolitical imagination that produced these lines in the first instance, border studies scholars run the risk of being blinkered to the proliferation and diversification of borders *outside* or *beyond* that imagination. Without problematising this imagination the danger is that the study of borders will therefore continue to lag behind the increasing spatial and temporal sophistication of bordering practices in global politics.

## NOTES

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2. Y. Lapid, 'Introduction: Identities, Borders, Orders: Nudging International Relations Theory in a New Direction', in M. Albert, D. Jacobson, and Y. Lapid (eds.), *Identities, Borders, Orders: Re-Thinking International Relations Theory* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2001) p. 8.

3. A comprehensive survey of this literature is beyond the scope of this deliberately short position piece. However, some examples symptomatic of the critical shift to which we refer include: L. Amoore, 'Biometric Borders: Governing Mobilities in the War on Terror', *Political Geography* 25 (2006) pp. 336–351; M. Coleman, 'A Geopolitics of Engagement: Neoliberalism, the War on Terrorism, and the Reconfiguration of US Immigration Enforcement', *Geopolitics* 12/4 (Oct. 2007) pp. 607–634; S. Elden, 'Contingent Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and the Sanctity of Borders', *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 26/1 (2006) pp. 11–24; H. Van Houtum, O. Kramsch, and W. Zierhofer (eds.), *B/ordering Space* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate 2005); D. Johnson and S. Michaelson (eds.), *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 1997); P. Kumar Rajaram and C. Grundy-Warr (eds.), *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2007); W. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000); D. Newman, 'Borders and Bordering: Towards an Interdisciplinary

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4. J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press 1976); J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1982); J. Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1988).

5. R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993).

6. G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998).

7. C. Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos Press 2001).