

Challenging borders: a critical perspective on the relationship between state, territory, citizenship and identity: introduction

Laine, Jussi P.; Casaglia, Anna

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Challenging borders: a critical perspective on the relationship between state, territory, citizenship and identity

Introduction

JUSSI P. LAINE and ANNA CASAGLIA

In 2015, as the EU started to face the social and political challenge of managing the “refugee crisis” and maintaining internal coherence, and several nation states’ governments were closing their borders, de facto impeding the movement of thousands of refugees mainly fleeing the conflict in Syria, we began the discussion that gave rise to this special issue. The “return of geopolitics”, the EU crisis, and the consequent rise of nationalist thought, have all created pressures at borders and placed human encounters with state sovereignty under intense scrutiny. Despite the complexities of the current era and its multiple, often intertwined, phenomena manifesting themselves at borders, the debate that has emerged has not only been largely reactive, but also remarkably simplistic. The media and governmental bodies, as well as many academics, have painted a somewhat simplified picture of the ongoing turbulent situation, reducing borders to mere frontlines protecting whatever it is they enclose from a perceived threat from the other side, and establishing inflexible social-spatial imaginaries depicting who is welcome and who is not.

Our aim has been to explore, in times of multiple crises, the complexity of borders, by balancing the picture with a critical re-reading and seeking to understand them as resources, in terms of cross-border cooperation, the everyday negotiation of borders by local actors, the exercise of power, and the management of conflict. The aim of this collection is to shed light especially on the tensions between national understandings in terms of demarcations based on ethnicity, citizenship, language, and socio-cultural characteristics,

etc., and the broader supranational/transnational understandings which address borders as areas of contact (and, to an extent, transition) between civilisations and religious and cultural spheres. Challenging the very concept of borders entails a re-discussion of the way in which states, territories, citizenship, and identity relate to each other, by looking at border areas and the interweaving of the different scales and actors at work. Focusing on the European context, and taking into consideration borders of and within the EU, the contributions address original analytical, theoretical, and methodological ways of understanding borders as tools for framing social and political action and their impact at various spatial levels of socio-cultural, spatial, political, and economic configurations and interaction.

This introductory note draws on the premise that we have witnessed an apparent and even growing disjuncture between the increasing complexity and differentiation of borders, and the simplicity and lack of imagination with which they continue to be treated (VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2012, p. 7). The nature of borders is changing, as are their strategic, economic, and cultural implications. To better interpret the broad socio-political transformations and the present-day geopolitical reality, we suggest that a nuanced and critical understanding of borders as resources and as potential elements of political innovation is needed. This is done not to discount the proven endurance and appeal of political borders, nor to close our eyes to the all too apparent rise of nationalist thought and the related struggles to reinforce political communities

and territorial identities. Rather, we seek to shed light on the fact that even political borders are not only political per se, but come with subtler socio-cultural processes and practices, the connective potential of which continues to challenge the border’s capacity to divide.

It cannot be ignored that the politics of the line endures (WALKER 2010), but borders are now generally understood as multifaceted, dynamic social institutions rather than solely as formal political markers of sovereignty. We are witnessing the emergence of complementary forms of border that depart from the norms of territorial linearity by becoming embedded into flows that can travel and be monitored continuously across space. Borders do not simply exist, but are ceaselessly both contested and maintained by diverse processes and practices not only by the state but also as a result of everyday forms of transnationalism, border-crossing, border-negotiating, and networking (LAINE 2016a). By exploring the complexity and interplay of these diverse, often antagonistic, processes, we arrive at a somewhat multifarious understanding of borders as something very concrete and fixed, yet also at the same time abstract and fluid.

The differences and differentials borders maintain can generate opportunities and foster mobility (SPIERINGS & VAN DER VELDE 2013), making them a resource (SOHN 2014) for those able to exploit them. Increased cross-border mobility does not therefore suggest the disappearance of borders, but may in fact do precisely the opposite. As van HOUTUM and EKER (2015) imply, the closed

or open character of the border largely depends on human interaction and interpretation, whereby the border itself creates room for reinterpretation. They suggest that instead of seeing the border as a terminus, it should be taken as the departure point for a new development. Borders protect and exclude, but they also create opportunities. Borders are thus not automatically peripheral, in the margins of various aspects of life, but they offer opportunities that can create innovation and prosperity. The reality of the border therefore permits itself to be reformed or transformed, a process in which the borderland can serve as a vehicle for new interpretations (Ibid.).

There is an apparent need to be critical of the time-honoured idea that borders take the form of a mere line and that they are the property of the state, located at its outer edges (PARKER & VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2012). When borders are represented merely as lines, SALTER (2012) notes, their analysis easily becomes fixated with its opposing sides, rather than with the system in which it can have meaning. To better grasp this meaning we must assume a more nuanced and holistic approach to the contemporary context that allows us to explore the various new ways and locations in which borders are constructed, as well as the diverse types of actor involved in this process. A situated, historical, and multifaceted perspective in a border analysis, we suggest, may reveal evidence of common border histories and help us to rethink borders in terms of resource, openness, and cooperation. Transcending conventional borders – both of the map and of the mind – also forces us to challenge our own understanding of the often unquestioned unity between the concepts of state, territory, citizenship, and identity.

Borders remain inescapably as historically formed markers of spheres of power. From this perspective they can be deemed as products of competing projects of establishing power over territories and groups of people. At the same time, however, borders are constantly reconstructed and maintained as frames of social and

political action, strategies of challenge, survival, and the related patterns of identification and identity politics, as well as symbolic social and cultural lines of inclusion, encounter, difference, and contestation. These meanings are based both on collective, contested, and contradictory historical narratives and individual identity construction, but also different levels of practice, be it in the realm of memory and imagination, political discourse and geopolitics, or in practices enacting borders in the functional realm of administration (KOLOSSOV et al. 2012; ANDERSEN, KLATT & SANDBERG 2012).

The increased velocity and volatility of globalisation have shaken the previously stable border concept, but the globalised world is far from a borderless world (LAINE 2016a, p. 470). While globalisation has certainly caused the institutional crumbling of borders, compaction of cross-border social relations, increased interdependence and cross-border activities, and the intensification of flows, the scalar model of identity and society remains primarily anchored in national space both at theoretical and popular levels (e. g. EDENSOR 2002; LAINE 2016a). States continue to play a dominant role where migration is concerned, setting out legislation, making decisions about admissibility, and providing settlement services (MOUNTZ 2010). Indeed, an over-emphasis on the novelty of globalisation's contemporary forms and an incapacity to recognise the distinctiveness of contemporary state borders deceptively discount the "extent to which we continue to live in a 'world of diverse states'" (O'DOWD 2010, pp. 1032–1034).

Both states and borders are, however, relentlessly reworked. There is both a "retreat" of the state and a "re-articulation of state sovereignty" (JONES & JOHNSON 2016), which inescapably also bring about changes in the nature of its borders. State borders are continuously reconstructed and effectively utilised as markers of social-political organisation. Although the interdependence and processes of globalisation have complicated the picture, the continuous (re)

construction of borders based on forms of social-political organisation and processes of nation-building remains a central problem in border studies. As PAASI (2012, p. 2307) maintains, understanding borders is still inherently an issue of understanding how states function and how borders can be exploited to both mobilise and fix territory, security, identities, emotions and memories, and various forms of national socialisation. The state-centred perspective neither condones nor reifies the state as historically inevitable but rather as historically contingent (KOLOSSOV et al. 2012).

Geographical borders continue to function as physical manifestations of state power, but they also serve as symbolic and mental representations of statehood to citizen and non-citizen alike. While the nation state has undoubtedly endured the pressures of globalisation, the exclusively state-oriented approach with a focus on interstate relations serves only to confirm the already existing political borders. It is thus necessary to broaden the scope to include more regionalised and localised narratives. As some borders are removed, it does not necessarily follow that the border no longer has an impact on the daily life practices of the people residing close to the border (NEWMAN 2011). In trying to determine the actions and behaviour of people at and within national borders, the borders themselves are no longer merely seen as territorial lines at a certain place in space but as symbols of processes of social binding and exclusion that are both constructed or produced in society.

The nation state is not fading, but it is hardly the *only* conception of space to be applied in explaining human interaction. A conscious effort has thus been made to "decentre the border" from its anchorage in the apparatus of the state and to problematise it as a taken-for-granted entity (PARKER & VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2012, pp. 728–729). Globalisation does not erase borders, but it does deteriorate some of their constitutive functions. We are witnessing substantial changes in the geographical imagination from rigid, fixed, and unchanging borders towards

a more polyvalent perspective that also acknowledges the relational nature of space. Reconceptualising borders as a set of performances injects movement, dynamism, and fluidity into the study of what are otherwise often taken to be static entities (PARKER & VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2012). Such fluidity of movement along global networks takes little account of fixed borders if and when the network requires greater (or lower) intensity of movement in any particular direction. Accordingly, classical dichotomies typical of the territorial world of nation states have been overcome by understandings of borders embedded in new spatialities.

Borders are now commonly understood as multifaceted social institutions rather than solely as formal political markers of sovereignty. Borders are in flux, but rather than from one form to another, they are becoming increasingly multiple. They must be understood as complex and multidimensional, yet dynamic, entities that have different symbolic and material forms, functions, and locations. Borders have migrated from being mere nation-state lines and have become much more diffused throughout society (e. g. BALIBAR 2002), they look different depending on where one views them from (SIDAWAY 2015), and are more porous for some than for others (SALTER 2003). Borderlands and borderlines remain significant, if not increasingly so, yet at the same time a series of new locations has emerged as key sites to understand the practice of sovereignty through borderwork (JONES et al 2017, p. 1).

For these reasons, scholars of “Critical Border Studies” have sought to problematise the traditional “line in the sand” (PARKER & VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2012, p. 728) approach in their call for more “alternative border imaginaries” (ANDERSEN, KRAMSCH & SANDBERG 2015). Borders mean different things to different people. They are not substantive but structural entities, and as such they can generate different effects in different circumstances; borders can enclose as well as relate, facilitate, and divide, and function equally

well in encouraging and hindering movement (PILIAVSKY 2013).

At the same time, borders themselves are products of a social and political negotiation of space; they frame social and political action and are re- and deconstructed through institutional and discursive practices at different levels and by different actors. Borders are not given, but are made, remade, and unmade. As such they are products, but also processes, ceaselessly practised, performed, produced, and reproduced through various bordering practices. This understanding allows us to transform the border from something that merely exists in an objective, unmediated way into a site of investigation, and to move the analytical frame from the state to the border itself, as RUMFORD (2012) advises.

Borders continue to matter, and perhaps increasingly so, precisely because they exist and exert influence not only in the realms of political discourse, geopolitics, or administration, but also in the realms of imagination, memory, identity, and the ontological notions of self. Borders have clearly broken out from their earlier peripherality, as national and international politics have brought them to the forefront of our news media. This has moved borders from the margins to the centre of the political sphere. They have become important spaces where questions of identity, belonging, political conflict, and societal transformation are discussed and acted out. In RUMFORD’S (2012) terms seeing like a border does not necessarily mean identifying with the subaltern, the dispossessed, the downtrodden, or the marginal.

As the brief discussion above is intended to demonstrate, the concept of border has become unseeingly broad and multifaceted. While this has certainly been needed, if the ever more complex phenomena of the contemporary era are to be better understood, such an expansive understanding of borders will also obscure, as JOHNSON et al. (2011, p. 61) point out, what a border actually is. SALTER (2012, p. 749) even claims that the concept’s fluidity has resulted in borders

losing some of their constitutive function to create distinctions between insides and outsides. If borders are indeed everywhere, as BALIBAR and his followers advocate, can everything be a border? In our attempt to reconceptualise borders we have found ourselves in the midst of a dizzying array of practices and venues located within and beyond the European space (ANDERSEN, KRAMSCH & SANDBERG 2015, p. 461). In performing borders, we continue to multiply them, and precisely for this reason there seems to be no limit to what actually constitutes a border; every space can be a border space, as GALLI (2010) argues. In attempting to confine the conceptual frame, we agree that borders are indeed multiple, but argue that they have various spatial and temporal locations which are not the same for all.

Accordingly, we agree with PARKER and VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS (2012, p. 729), who suggest that the way forward for the field of border studies should be sought in an attempt to develop tools to identify and interrogate not merely what and where borders are, but also how they function in different settings, with what consequences, and for whose benefit. Although it now seems even more difficult than previously to arrive at a single comprehensive metatheory on borders, there are, however, ways to proceed which may help us better understand borders universally. We need to challenge the idealistic and often unquestioned linkage between the concepts of, inter alia, state, territory, citizenship, and identity, because, while they all have their borders, they seldom coincide.

Borders are not just a by-product, but, as MEZZADRA and NEILSON (2013, p. vii) assert, they possess a productive power of their own, thus playing a strategic role in the fabrication of the world. Accordingly, RUMFORD (2011, p. 67; 2012) proposes that instead of “seeing like a state”, as described earlier by SCOTT (1998), border scholars should dispense with an exclusive nation-state frame and move towards “seeing like a border”; i.e., disaggregate the state and the border to conceptualise the multiple actors and sites of what

he calls “borderwork”. With his broader call for multiperspectival border studies, RUMFORD (2012) provides a non-state-centric approach to borders and bordering that is sensitive to the multiplicity of borders which exist, as well as to the range of actors who create them.

The argument he advances underlines the fact that borders cannot be properly understood from a single privileged vantage point, and that bordering processes can be interpreted differently from different perspectives. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, framing borders as sites of “cultural encounter” (see ROVISCO 2013) is crucial here, for it accords not only with the idea that territories are relational spaces (AMIN et al. 2003; POPESCU 2014) but also that borders are diffused throughout society and constructed by a wide range of actors (RUMFORD 2012).

NEWMAN (2010, p. 777) argues convincingly that territory constitutes a trap, especially if we view the spatial ordering of society through the limited paradigm of the fixed and the absolute. However, if we can break out of it, we may better understand contemporary territorial ordering and re-ordering through the multifocality of spatial complexity. Even if the trapdoor is now open and the territory has escaped from the (perceived) fences that have surrounded much of its analysis, the construct remains and has become only more significant (Ibid.). The apparent move from geopolitically “closed” to more open state territories (MOISIO & PAASI 2013, p. 256) allows us to broaden the scope of our analysis and rethink and transform taken-for-granted spatial formations. There is an increasing disaggregation between the territory and function of state borders (PARKER & ADLER-NISSEN 2012), and the “container-box” model of the nation state should be seen as an idealisation, the empirical accuracy of which should be called into question (GIELIS & VAN HOUTUM 2012). To better understand contemporary territorial ordering and re-ordering through the multifocality of spatial complexity we must break out of the territorial trap.

The enduring state-centric projection largely ignores the fact that we have recently witnessed a remarkable change in geographical imagination towards a more polyvalent perspective, which acknowledges the relational nature of space (POPESCU 2014) and also, therefore, the emergence of complementary forms of border that depart from the norms of territorial linearity (LAINE 2016b). The suggested spatial diffusion of the border transcends the normative Cartesian understandings of territory and makes the classic outside-inside border-based territorial distinction obsolete, because the spatial “outsiders” can be physically inside the flow belt as the dynamic spatial relations between actors are brought to the fore (ALLEN 2011; AMILHAT-SZARY & GIRAUT 2015; BIGO 2001). This is to say that people and places have become increasingly connected across space following a “portal-like logic” that folds them into each other, in contrast to the preceding socio-spatial interaction largely mediated via territorial proximity and distance decay (POPESCU 2017, p. 4).

Such an understanding clearly contradicts the geographical idea of territorial exceptionality and the reduction of borders to frontlines, as classical geopolitics has tended to suggest. Even more importantly, it has the potential to free our thinking and awareness from the confines of the past and to allow us to consider an alternative and complementary cross-border politics based on societal needs and new conversations about interaction, communication, and exchange beyond the confines of territory. If we look beyond the mere return of realpolitik and the simplistic view it projects, we can appreciate the subtler processes taking place that have accelerated the proliferation of actors involved in political processes and the types of activities they are engaged in, thus opening new possibilities for the organisation of interaction across international borders (LAINE 2016a/b; POPESCU 2017).

To balance the current era’s increasingly realistic notions that have very much returned rebordering to the agenda, the

articles in this issue remind us that borders also come with connective potential. As SALTER (2012, p. 747) suggests, in contrast to the border as division, focusing on the suture – the practices of at once knitting together, separating, and distinguishing multiple insides from multiple outsides and the resultant site of rupture and repair – allows us to contingently define the dual functions of the border as tentative separation and as incomplete unification.

The collection provides a diverse picture of theoretical and case-study analysis of borders and borderscapes which helps us better understand the contemporary geopolitical reality and challenge the very concept of borders. The issue includes contributions describing borders as resources and areas of contact, especially relating to territorial transformation in border areas, cross-border cooperation, and locally successful adaptation to processes of border transformation, as well as analysis of symbolic meanings attached to borders and their discursive construction.

Based on fieldwork conducted on the French-Spanish border, Matteo Berzi addresses the issue of cross-border cooperation as a territorial strategy for the development of border regions, proposing an analysis of the border that encompasses its role as a producer of relationships, site-specific policies, and strategies. The author applies the territorial approach to the study of two different areas on the French-Spanish border, showing that the constitution of a border milieu is the result of historical connections, institutional involvement at different scales, and community based initiatives. Focusing on different areas of the same border, Roser Pastor Saberi, Margarida Castañer i Vivas and Diego Varga Linde investigate how the border can alter the landscape, showing that a territory’s functions change according to borders’ political transformations. Her analysis considers land use and land cover databases over almost sixty years, and shows the effect of de-bordering processes on the evolution of the urban landscape. The article shows

how the effects of globalisation and the opening of borders, combined with local territorial strategies, affect the landscape dynamics of the French-Spanish border.

Moving to twin cities on the German-Polish border, Siarhei Liubimau focuses on the landscape of the border and border regions, analysing the outcomes of spatial planning on the border and adding a socio-material perspective. His article presents an analysis of the consequences of cross-border cooperation on the built environment of the Neisse suburb of the Goerlitz-Zgorzelec border town. His work supports the view that cross-border activities indeed represent another important feature that helps to define borders as spaces of connection and to highlight the complexity of the various possible relationships they enable.

Tourist and economic shopping and their relationship to regional development are the main topic of the article by Maciej Smętkowski, Sarolta Németh and Heikki Eskelinen, who present a comparative study of the Finnish-Russian and the Polish-Ukrainian borders, identifying drivers for shopping tourism and cross-border activities. The authors show that asymmetries resulting from price differences establish various kinds of activity across borders, and they outline the difference between “genuine” shopping tourism and “petty trade” cross-border shopping. Their comparison of countries at the edges of the European Union demonstrates that cross-border tourism is an important resource for regional development that is vulnerable to geopolitical events, such as the consequences of the Ukrainian crisis on the Finnish-Russian border. Purely cross-border economic activities (petty trade) are considerably more influenced by fluctuations in economic conditions and they do not have the same impact on regional development.

Focusing on the same border, Jussi Laine and Martin van der Velde analyse the public discourse surrounding the border and the meanings attributed to it. Employing a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach, the authors cover twenty-five years of a Finnish national newspaper’s

coverage of the Karelia question, interestingly taking into consideration letters sent to the newspaper by Finnish citizens. The study highlights the symbolic meaning of (formerly) contested borderlands, where the myth of belonging detaches from territorial reality, and borders become irrelevant to the maintenance of identity, specifically the Karelian identity. Their article brings to the fore the more relational nature of space in suggesting that the understanding of Karelia is no longer necessarily tied to a specific territory, but is now approached from a more polyvalent perspective as a multifaceted construct open to personal reflections.

On the other hand, borders continue to demarcate space reaffirming differences, distance, and sometimes conflicts based on ethnicity, religion, and language. It is often the reproduction of the border, through discursive constructions, that gives it performative power. The collection also addresses borders as territorial and symbolic projects and deals with issues of sovereignty related to the demarcation of space and securitisation, as well as tensions between local, national, and supranational understandings and uses of the border. In analysing the wall that the Russian Border Service is building around the territory of South Ossetia, Edward Boyle presents an article on the affirmation of sovereignty through the construction of walls, at least at the discursive level, which highlights the relational character of sovereignty and the demarcation of territory as a performative state manifestation. The discursive construction around the borderisation of that unrecognised boundary, defined as the “little Berlin wall”, reveals the different scales around which the border acquires symbolic meaning, at both the local level, where people are prevented from crossing, to the supranational scale, where the discursive construction of the wall helps to reshape the regional geography of Europe, incorporating Georgia.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue underline that despite the contemporary climate that depicts borders increasingly as things that exclude and

divide, the connective potential of borders has not vanished, but merely been overshadowed by simplistic notions of borders accompanied by a regression into state-centric, populist thinking. In these times of multiple crises there is a need to explore our understanding and the forces that make, unmake, and remake borders. As borders are increasingly complex constructions, so must our approach to their study be.

Almost two years after the beginning of the collective work that has led to this special issue, the public debate continues to simplify border-related phenomena and to present borders as *lines in the sand* which divide people and cultures by virtue of territorial, political, and social distinctions. By contrast, the issue’s six articles shed light from their own perspectives on the tensions between the different scales of action and border interpretation. They seek to provide evidence that borders are multiple, different to different people and different activities, and in so doing to challenge the idealistic linkage between concepts of state, territory, citizenship, and identity that has for too long been inherently unquestioned.

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Assistant Professor Dr. Jussi P. Laine
 Dr. Anna Casaglia
 University of Eastern Finland
 Karelian Institute
 Yliopistokatu 2, Aurora (P.O.Box 111)
 FIN-80101 Joensuu
 Finland
jussi.laine@uef.fi
anna.casaglia@uef.fi