On borders and power: A theoretical framework

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On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework

David Newman*

Introduction

Border studies have come a long way during the past decade. From the study of the hard territorial line separating states within the international system, the contemporary study of borders focuses on the process of bordering, through which territories and peoples are respectively included or excluded within a hierarchical network of groups, affiliations and identities (Welchman 1996; Newman & Paasi 1998; Newman 2000; 2002a; Kolossov & O’Loughlin 1998; Van Houtum 2000). The lines which are borders are as flexible as they were once thought to be rigid, reflecting new territorial and aspatial patterns of human behavior. While modern technologies, particularly cyberspace, have made the barrier role of borders redundant in some areas, they have also served to create new sets of borders and boundaries, enclosing groups with common identities and interests who are dispersed throughout the globe, lacking any form of territorial compactness or contiguity.

This paper raises the question whether it is possible to develop a theory of bordering which will encompass the diverse types of border and boundary experience. I have previously argued that the only way to create a common language between the different disciplinary languages (including geographers, political scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, economists and others) is to create a common set of theoretical constructs and frameworks which can be used as a generalized explanatory model for understanding changing border/boundary phenomenon (Newman 2003). In essence, this paper reiterates a question asked long ago in one of the classic studies of international boundaries, namely how are boundaries (borders) to be redefined in the settings of contemporary time and place (Jones 1959).

Others have argued that any such attempt to create a single analytical framework is doomed to failure. The study of borders is so diverse, both in terms of the geographic and spatial scales (ranging from the global to the local, and from the State to the urban neighborhood) and in terms of the type of borders being discussed (from the hard geographic, to the social and cultural, and from the concrete visible boundaries to the

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perceived and imagined) that it would not be possible to create a single set of explanatory variables. Instead, they argue, it is sufficient to encourage the multi-disciplinary nature of boundary studies, bringing together theoreticians and practitioners from a range of disciplines, exchanging ideas, complementing each others understanding of the boundary phenomenon, and broadening the horizons for future research and practice.

**Borders as Institutions**

Part of the transformation in border studies has been the recognition that borders are institutions, as contrasted to simply lines in the sand or on the map (Paasi 1998). Like all institutions they have their own set of internal rules which govern their behavior, much of which becomes self-perpetuating and resistant to change. Border institutions govern the extent of inclusion and exclusion, the degree of permeability, the laws governing trans-boundary movement—exit from one side of the border and entry into the other side.

The essence of a border is to separate the “self” from the “other.” As such, one of the major functions of a border is to act as a barrier, “protecting” the “us insiders” from the “them outsiders” (Oomen 1995; Sibley 1995). They prevent the entry of undesired elements—be they people, goods, arms, drugs and—albeit to a much lesser extent than in the past—information. The determination of just what can and cannot move beyond the border is a function of how the power elites of a given society or country view the border as an institution which protects those who are on the “inside” or are “here” from the (perceived) negative impact of those who have been excluded and are on the “outside” or are “there.” The protection function takes on many forms—at the primordial level protecting the citizens of a country from invasion by foreign armies or from the inflow of illegal weapons across the border. The barrier function of borders also protects those inside from other “harmful” elements, such as drugs, migrant labor, competition in the market place and so on. Cultural borders offer protection against infiltration of values which are not compatible with the hegemonic practices of the majority, be they social and economic status, religious affiliation and/or residential homogeneity.

But borders are equally there to be crossed. From the moment they are established, there are always groups who have an interest in finding ways to move beyond the barrier. They may be seeking jobs, visiting family and friends from whom they have been cut off, smuggling goods, drugs or weapons. But crossing the border does not always bring the expected benefits. The grass is not always greener on the other side, especially when one doesn’t have the necessary documents, work permits, language proficiency, or is captured by the authorities in a round up of illegal immigrants.

Since institutions are self perpetuating and resistant to change, it often requires an increase in levels of trans-boundary interaction on the ground for the norms and regulations to undergo any formal process of change. Most border studies have focused on the government imposed status of the border and its associated management mechanisms. This is partly because of the control function which is attributed to state territoriality, a function which can only be implemented through government practices when there are clearly defined borders which determine the parameters within which policies of control are shaped (Taylor 1994; Häkli 2001). The “end of territorial absolutism” means an end to the absolute control exercised by the State through practices of fixed
territoriality. Thus governments are reluctant to relinquish control of the borders unless there is pressure from outside (globalization) or from below (localization). To study borders as dynamic institutions, it is therefore important to study the “bottom up” process of change, emanating from the daily practices of ordinary people living in the borderland region, as much as the traditional “top down” approach which focuses solely on the role of institutional actors, notably—but not only—governments (Kaplan & Häkli 2002).

The Bordering Process

It is the process of bordering, rather than the border line per se, that has universal significance in the ordering of society. All borders share a common function to the extent that they include some and exclude many others. This is as true of the hard territorial line which determines the shape and size of the territorial compartments within which people play out their daily lives, as it is the social, religious, cultural, ethnic and cyber boundaries which reflect the groups to which people belong and affiliate and, for many, determine their various identities (Morley & Robbins 1995; Shapiro & Alker 1996; Paasi 1996; Wilson & Donnan 1998). With the exception of territorial compartmentalization, the bordering process does not have to create inclusion or exclusion continguities. Belonging to virtual groups and cyber affiliations expresses a global pattern of inclusion, whose boundaries are neither visible or contiguous, but exist by virtue of the nature of belonging to a common interest group, sharing specific values, social status and identities.

Borders create difference. The existence of borders enables us to maintain some sort of order, both within the spaces and groups which are thus encompassed, as well as between “our” compartment and that of the “other” groups and spaces which are part of a broader system of global ordering (Albert et al. 2001; Van Houtum & Naerssen 2002). Territorial borders performed this function under the Westphalian state system, where the principle of Uti Possidetis ensured the maintenance of inter-state order through the mutual recognition/acceptance of territorial integrity and, hence, the notion of territorial sovereignty (Castellino & Allen 2003). The process of territorial ordering was imposed upon the political landscape by the power elites of the time, just as it was implemented during the era of decolonization, and just as it is today by those groups which determine the values and codes which enable some to be members, while others have to remain outside. Thus the bordering process creates order through the construction of difference, whereby “others” are expected to respect the rights of the self, if only because they desire their own rights to be respected in the same way, or because the nature of power relations is such that they have no alternative. The Groucho Marx notion of borders, namely that we do not desire to belong to groups which don’t want us as members in the first place, is the exception rather than the rule. Most of us aspire to cross borders into the forbidden, and often invisible, spaces on the other side of the wall, although at one and the same time we do not want the “others” to cross the boundaries into our own recognizable and familiar world. Difference is okay if we determine the rules of belonging. It is unacceptable, if it is determined by someone else.

By creating “otherness,” we create separate identities through the maintenance of the border. The location of the boundary may change through time, as some groups or territories expand and others decline, but they will always demarcate the parameters within which identities are conceived, perceived, perpetuated and reshaped.
Whatever the form of reterritorialization which takes place, territory remains an important dimension of identity (Forsberg 1996; Kaplan 1999). The loss of sovereignty does not mean the loss of territoriality—regionalization at both the pan-State and intra-state levels takes on new forms of territorial organization of power and, by association, new forms and contours of the borders encompassing these spaces (Agnew 1994; Brenner 1999). Territorial restructuring is constantly taking place as new power containers take the place of the state. Space and, by association, borders undergo constant reification (Kemp 2000; Forsberg 2003). Neither should we forget that the hard territorial lines of inter-state boundaries still engender a great deal of conflict, although much of this conflict is focused as much on issues of identity and historical construction of “homeland” spaces, as it is on positional and resource disputes (Dzurek 1999; Newman 2004).

A recent Belgian film, entitled “The Wall” demonstrates, somewhat absurdly, the bordering process and the way in which barriers can be created to reflect existing differences and socially constructed territorial identities, creating walls, barriers, division and conflict where a single functional space existed. In the film, linguistic difference is socially constructed into political belonging, through which each excludes the other, despite the fact that normal patterns of daily behavior and interaction (such as Flemish and French speakers eating and gossiping in the chip wagon) had taken place with few problems. This is in direct contrast to the notion of “nationalism without walls” (Gwyn 1995) where, it is argued, socially constructed difference continues to exist in spite of borders. This is a problematic notion, relating to the permeability, rather than actual existence, of the border. Nationalism is contingent upon borders, and the extent to which such borders enable movement and interaction with the “other” should be a key feature of the border research agenda.

Towards A Research Agenda for the Study of Borders?

What are the main areas of border related research which deserve attention? For as long as the study of boundaries was synonymous with the lines separating the sovereign territory of states in the international system, the focus of research was geographical. As our understanding of boundaries has taken on new forms and scales of analysis, so too the study of the bordering phenomenon has become multi-disciplinary, with sociologists, political scientists, historians, international lawyers and anthropologists taking an active part in the expanding discourse. But like many multi-disciplinary discourses, the language, semantics and meanings of the border have experienced difficulties in fusing into a single set of recognizable parameters and concepts. Crossing the language barrier of the borders between academic disciplines and practitioners is often harder than the trans-boundary movement which is increasingly taking place across the borders between states and regions (Becher 1989; Bourdieu 1991; Newman 1999).

A research agenda for border studies can be divided into two broad categories. First, there is the delineation of new concepts and ideas relating to boundaries which were not part of the traditional study of boundaries—in particular, notions of inclusion and exclusion, non-geographic boundaries, the management of boundaries as institutions and the means through which trans-boundary movement may take place. Secondly, is the use of concepts taken from the traditional study of boundaries and which, rather than be discarded, can be redefined and used as relevant concepts for the study of contemporary borders and border institutions thus providing these concepts with
new meaning—such as, the historic evolution of borders, notions of borderlands and frontiers, as well as the complex processes determining the demarcation and delineation of borders. While the focus of the discussion in this paper is on the political—power elements of borders/boundaries, the bordering process as such deals with all types of borders—economic, socio-cultural, environmental and so on. Implicitly, these types of border also relate to power relations and, as such, the agenda discussed below is as relevant for them as it is for the traditional political boundaries which separate territories and State control mechanisms.

Boundary Demarcation

The process through which borders are demarcated and delineated is critical to our understanding of how borders are managed and the extent to which they are more or less permeable to movement. By demarcation however, we do not only mean the cartographic plotting of lines and points of coordination, but also the rules and regulations which determine the existence of difference in the first place and, by association the borders within which such difference is enclosed. Determining just what and who is excluded or included by the creation of a boundary is an integral part of this process. The location of the points at which movement becomes more difficult or, in some cases, is prevented altogether is part of a process which is not limited to the hard fixed lines of a territorial border. As in the case of geographical boundaries, there are no “natural” borders as such—all borders are social constructions, delimited and demarcated by people. Nevertheless, there are specific benchmarks which are more convenient for the determination of cut-off points as they require less physical delimitation on the part of the border managers. In geographic regions, these may be mountain ridges, rivers or deserts, in municipal areas these may be major transportation arteries, rail lines, public buildings etc., while in society, these may be certain age groups (school leaving age, pension age), specific definitions of what constitutes a religious group (born to a mother of the same faith, practicing the ritual, conversion) or economic status (unemployed for a certain period of time, homeless) and so on. We use these predetermined criteria as convenient places for locating the border—creating a cut-off point—and, as such, often fall into the trap of the ecological fallacy by including some who should be excluded, while excluding others who should be part of the group or the area.

A research agenda should focus on the parameters that are used for the demarcation of these boundaries. The convenience of using existing criteria should not be underestimated even when this is weighed against some of the inefficiencies which may arise out of the demarcation of a boundary which is not a perfect fit with functional characteristics. Few borders—be they geographic or social—are perfect fits—it is the understanding that the functional and the territorial lines rarely fit that makes the study of border dynamics so interesting (Albert 1998). It is precisely around the imperfect fit that much of the borderland dynamics takes place—some trying to get out, others trying to gain entrance, with the “top-down” institutional dynamics responding very slowly to the “bottom-up” people dynamics. Moreover, using the “convenience” criteria often constitutes the factor underlying border contestation and, as such, is rightly critiqued for its deterministic approach—one which continues to be used by policy makers and border managers alike. The use of the term “demarcation” is traditionalist. But rather
than being dismissed as irrelevant, it requires rethinking in terms of the diverse factors which bring borders into being.

Boundary Management

If the major focus of past research into borders was concerned with the way in which they were demarcated and delimited, it is the management of the border regime which is of greater importance today. This both reflects, and determines, the nature of trans-boundary interaction, ranging from closed and sealed borders to permeable and porous borders enabling freedom of movement from one category to another. Many State boundaries are increasingly open to movement of goods, people, capital, information, as well as environmental spillovers and externalities. The formalities through which borders are controlled and administered enable movement to take place, while at the informal level cooperation grows up between the residents on each side of the border line. Where States (or groups) desire to maintain closed borders, the management procedures are more rigid and barrier oriented. Borders become more permeable as the management procedures ease their restrictions, allowing for an increase in the informal nature of trans-boundary cooperation and interaction.

The same is as true of the crossing of borders between cultural and religious groups as it is the crossing from one State to another. The nature of border management procedures and the extent to which they determine the level of informal trans-boundary contact or, vice versa, the extent to which they are affected by and reflect the grass roots trans-boundary interaction, is an area of study which has been insufficiently explored to date and should figure prominently on a border research agenda. One of the most difficult borders to cross in this respect are those which encompass religious affiliations and beliefs. For the believer, the visas and points of entry are determined by a divine being, albeit interpreted and implemented by mere mortals.

Transition Zones and Borderlands

The notion of the political frontier has traditionally been associated with the area around the border separating States from each other (House 1980; Prescott 1987; Martinez 1994). Frontier has been translated into notions of “borderland” and has come to reflect the sphere of activity which is directly affected by the existence of a border (Rumley & Minghi 1991). In territorial terms, it means the area in closest geographic proximity to the State border within which spatial development is affected by the existence of the boundary. Policies within the frontier zone raise crucial questions concerning citizenship, identity, political loyalty and the ends of states (Anderson 1996). Where borders are closed and rigid, this can mean different social and economic spaces on each side of a fence or a wall, despite their physical proximity. Where borders are open with few restrictions on movement from one side to the other, this enables the development of trans-boundary regions, many of which may reflect a form of spatial or social transition from one core area to another. Border studies should focus on the nature of trans-boundary regions and transition zones and the way in which the impact of the border is gradually diminished within these zones. The crossing of State borders by European workers and even school children on a daily, unrestricted, basis is as much an indication of an integrated borderland and transition zone, as is the act of intermarriage between members of different cultural and religious groups (Schack 2001). Borders
create opportunities for passage, for crossing over and hybridization processes which occur in what have been termed as “transitional spaces” (Heifetz-Yahav 2002). Hybridization takes place in contact zones, where people from different groups or territories begin to cross borders and where they experience processes of mutual adaptation negotiated through daily working relations with each other. The crossing of the border enables differences to be reconciled as part of a more diverse and multi-cultural landscape, although it does not mean that difference is negated altogether. Instead, it assumes that difference does not have to be enclosed by exclusive lines of separation and borders which are barriers.

It has been argued that trans-boundary cooperation in the EU will eventually create a common open space (Van Houtum 2002). The notion of a “borderless” world, even in Western Europe where the significance of traditional state boundaries has decreased, flies in the face of reality. Transition zones, through which old boundaries run but within which cooperation and interaction increases, is the closest we have come to creating borderless interactivity zones. While the notion of “borderland” assumes the existence, and impact, of a border on the human landscape, the notion of “transition zone” assumes the opening, if not removal, of the border so that it ceases to have any sort of impact. The creation of trans-boundary regions goes a long way to transforming a borderland into a transition zone, replacing the barrier impact of a border with an interface where contact takes place. Doors and bridges can be as apt a metaphor for borders as are walls and barriers (Van Houtum 2002), but neither should it be forgotten that while walls can be knocked down as quickly as they are constructed, so too doors can be slammed shut as easily as they are opened.

The transition zone is not found only in the geographical area next to the boundary. Migration creates transition zones and borderland spaces in the territorial heart of the “other” polity (Van der Wusten 2002). The inner city areas of large cities are a form of transition zone or borderland where a great deal of hybridization takes place. Ethnic ghettos reflect the dual and contrasting processes of border closing or opening between groups desiring to maintain their cultural difference (exclusion) while, at one and the same time the mixing of cultures in tenement blocks brought together by their migration experience, their poverty and their common desire to succeed in a new ecumene (inclusion) reflect the simultaneous opening of the border at another point on the complex cultural continuum. Different types of border exist within the same space—borders separating the new migrant groups from the “home” groups who determine to what extent the new groups will be included within the existing and established ecumene, as well as borders separating each new group from the other—some of which are maintained voluntarily in an effort to retain difference in an alien world, others of which are removed as part of the common cause to undergo a process of integration into the new polity. A border research agenda should focus on this hierarchical nature of these boundaries—why some groups are prepared to cross one border but not another. It should also deal with the forces of hybridization in the transition zones or borderlands and how these forces are sometimes the result of internal pressures of change, or externally imposed processes of institutional exclusion.

Perceiving the Border

Borders may be as much perceived as they are concrete and tangible phenomena in the landscape. Borders may be perceived by people in places where no physical
boundary exists. Equally, physical boundaries may be ignored in places where people perceive them as being irrelevant in their daily lives and cross them at ease with little, or no, restrictions to trans-boundary movement. The study of borders has been opened up to include the representations, images and narratives that people have of the lines that separate them from others. The stronger the barrier function of the border, the more powerful the imagined, the more abstract the narrative of what is perceived as lying on the other side.

Perceptions of borders usually focus on what exists on the other “invisible” side of the line of separation. Borders exist in our mind by virtue of the fear we have of the unknown of the “there” and which, in turn, causes us to stay on our side of the border in the “here.” Where we seek to escape from our own territory or group affiliation, our perceptions of the other side are positive, believing that the grass is always greener on the other side. Just as our fears of the threats emanating from the other side of a sealed border are not always played out in reality, so too the grass does not always end up being greener or the sun brighter on the other side of the border that we wish to cross.

The physical elements of the border landscape go a long way to strengthening or reducing the perception of difference that we envisage across the border. The construction of a concrete wall does not only symbolize the barrier function of the border but it also prevents us from seeing what is taking place on the other side of the border. As such, the other side becomes invisible and unknown. The removal of the wall or the fence does not only symbolize the coming together of peoples or groups which were previously prevented from being in contact with each other, but also changes our perception of the border, or borderland, from that of a barrier to an interface, and from a no-mans land to a transition zone. Changes in perceptions of the “other” are generally a “bottom-up,” rather than “top-down,” process, brought about by increased interaction and movement by the borderlanders themselves. Perceptions which emphasize notions of difference, mutual fear and threat are, more often than not, socially constructed from the center, with walls and fences constituting the mechanism through which difference is perpetuated.

One way to have a deeper understanding of boundary perceptions is to focus on border narratives and the way in which borders are represented through a variety of images, ranging from the real life landscapes and practices, to literature, media, art, maps, stamps, lyrics etc. The notion of difference, of the walls that separate, figure prominently in all of these popular representations. They are part of the socialization process through which the images of “us” and “them” become part of the cultural, social and political imaginations (Paasi 1996; 2002; Kemp 2000; Forsberg 2003). Their authors and creators use them as a means of reflecting existing differences, strengthening the notion of border.

Boundary Opening and Removal

Relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which borders are opened or may be removed altogether. The opening of borders in Western Europe was not simply a political decision which resulted from economic union. The process was accompanied by the coming together of nations and peoples who had formerly been antagonistic towards each other. The road from perceived hatred and fear to a situation in which borderland residents commute on a daily basis to a neighboring country, or allow their children to be educated in a different cultural milieu, was a gradual one, during which
time information about, and familiarity with, the other, increased. The removal of economic tariffs was but one, relatively insignificant, element within this broader cultural dimension of boundary opening.

What happens to the residents of the borderland when the boundary is removed? The process through which boundaries are opened, visa restrictions and movement is eased, can be a traumatic event for some borderlanders, especially if they grew up to fear the unknown and the invisible on the other side. Passing through the boundary for the first time in one’s life, or even more traumatically for the first time after having been cut off from the other side for a period of thirty or forty years, brings the perceived boundary into line with the tangible reality. Berliners, Nicosians and Jerusalemites all experienced the brutal division of their cities by concrete walls and patrolled fences, only to see these same walls topple (Jerusalem in 1967, Berlin in 1990) or imperceptibly open (Nicosia in 2003).

The narrative of the border crossing is one which is accompanied by curiosity tinged with fear and uncertainty. How has the “other” side changed since they last saw it? Where are the houses, the shops and the open spaces which they remembered from childhood, or about which their parents and grandparents continually told them? More often than not, the reality is vastly different to that which is remembered or perceived, resulting in disappointment and, in some cases, frustration that the “other” has unilaterally changed the spatial, social and human landscapes. The recent opening of the boundary dividing the island of Cyprus led to a trans-boundary movement of almost a third of the island’s population within the space of a few days to visit, search and attempt to rediscover the homes and landscapes they left behind less than thirty years previously.

Cyberspace and satellite television is another form of boundary opening, through which we become acquainted with the lifestyles of the “other,” groups and territories which had previously been located beyond the barrier of information and knowledge. It is in this way that globalization processes have helped open, in some cases totally remove, the borders separating territories and groups. By making the “other” appear normal, no different in their daily life patterns and concerns to those which affect the “self,” it then becomes easier to move beyond the borders and barriers which separate states and other spatial compartments. It is a case where familiarity does not breed contempt, but helps remove the constructed barriers of difference.

At the same time, we should not be naïve in thinking that the border opening process removes all barriers to movement and entry restrictions. Focusing on cross-border governance and cooperation as a “positive” (sic) value should not simply become a la mode (Van Houtum & Ernste 2001) because it does not always reflect reality. Best (2002) argues that while the discourse of “border transgression” has become dominant in Europe, the “flows, relations and positions that are incorporated through these (transgression) practices establish a field of differentiations and segmentations.” This raises questions concerning the extent to which the practices of border transgression actually challenge the existing power relations, simply moving the policies of state exclusion from a former (state) border to a new (EU) line of control (Best 2002; Strüver & Best 2002). Van der Wusten (2002) argues that the creation of intricate control mechanisms is an outcome of two contrary tendencies—the stated desire for border opening and increased movement on the one hand, with that of a desire to rigidly control labor migration, spurred on by security controls in the post 9/11 era (Anderson 2002). Borders continue to exercise a control function despite the border opening process. In
some places control is loosened, while in their new, often less visible locations, they may have the opposite effect—effectively tightening control.

Borders and Power Relations

The preceding comments suggest that any border research agenda should also deal with the basic question of “borders for whom?”. Who benefits and who loses from enclosing, or being enclosed by, others. This, in turn, raises questions of power relations. Who are the groups in society who desire borders and what are the decision making, and law enforcement, processes which enable certain groups, normally relatively small elites, to make these decisions? Who are the professional groups—planners, architects, cartographers and social workers to name but a few—who use their managerial skills to undertake the process of delimitation and border implementation? The significance of the social gatekeepers is particularly relevant, the process through which social and national gate keeping is put into practice through the creation of borders which, in turn, determine the extent of the administrative and control processes.

While globalization has not rendered our world to be totally sans frontiers, it has served to change the nature of power relations and their respective interests in determining who benefits from the maintenance and institutionalization of the bordering process and, conversely, who benefits from the removal and opening of borders? Those who benefited from maintaining tight economic tariffs or immigration restrictions in the past are not necessarily the losers when these institutional procedures and barrier functions are removed. The rich and powerful do not suddenly become poor and weak as a result of the easing of restrictions. Nor do the disenfranchised and poor suddenly become powerful. Global associations of States, economic cartels and social elites simply refocus these same groups around new centers of power. The basic global inequalities in our globalized world are not different to those which existed in our world of nation states. We do not understand enough about the groups and power elites in whose interest borders are institutionalized, who determine the extent to which they will be opened or closed, through which movement and interaction will be eased or restricted. This is an important part of a borders research agenda.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to set an agenda for border research by expanding the notion of border beyond its traditional territorial sense to include the many other notions of border which enclose groups and identities. We live within a world of hierarchical borders, each of which defines the diverse set of affiliations and identities to which we belong. Our ability to cross these borders is fraught with difficulty, although globalization provides us with some of the mechanisms which make that crossing process easier to negotiate. The perceptions, the management mechanisms and the semantics which we use should constitute a focus for a new generation of border studies which will take us well beyond the traditional description of territorial boundary delimitation and demarcation. Perhaps the most important question concerning borders is the extent to which they function as barriers to movement and interaction, or as an interface where meeting places and points of contact are created.
Border research then takes on an applied dimension, as we seek to discover, and promote, those mechanisms which enable borders to be opened, reducing the frictions and tensions of socially constructed difference. This is the desire to “overcome” borders through re-imagining them as places where people can meet, to overcome the social construction of spatial fixation (Van Houtum 2002). This is a major challenge of border research—to understand the functional impact and role of borders in a world which has become more spatially flexible, where territory and group affiliations and identities are undergoing a process of internal restructuring.

Borders shift and change but they do not disappear altogether. What we are left with is not the search for a common open space, but the search for a “good” border (Falah & Newman 1995; Williams 2003) and for coexistence in spite of the border (Galtung 1994). In such borderlands, interaction and cooperation will be facilitated, enabling difference to be valued rather than feared.

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