Border studies reanimated: going beyond the territorial-relational divide

‘Border’ has been a key category for social scientists since the 19th century when modern state- and nation-building processes began to intensify in Europe. It is well-known how Friedrich Ratzel and Carl Schmitt, for example, stressed the meaning of borders for ‘political balance’ (cf. Vaughan-Williams, 2011). One of the pioneers was sociologist Georg Simmel for whom "the boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially” (Simmel 1997, page 142). He discussed the roles of borders in social life and concluded: “By virtue of the fact that we have boundaries everywhere and always, so accordingly we are boundaries” (cited in Ethington, 2007, page 480). Tester (1993, page 9) condensed Simmel’s ideas as follows: “The boundaries make life meaningful… but the very meaningfulness of life as something with a location and most significantly a direction (i.e. life going as somewhere other than here), implies the flow of life over permanent boundaries”.

It was a sort of a paradox that the ‘border’ became quickly a catchword 100 years later, at the same time when the ideas of cosmopolitanism and post-national/denationalized world as well as the neoliberal rhetoric on a ‘borderless world’ appeared on agenda. New interest aroused after the implosion of the ideological line between the capitalist and socialist world at the turn of the 1990s; the event that gave rise to both new ethno-national borders and ethnic violence. New attention also reverberated with ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ views on globalization (Paasi, 2003). More than any other event, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA and the consequent ‘war on terror’ generated security-related border research where biopolitics, circulation and technologies became key issues (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008). Indeed, if Simmel once stated that ‘people are boundaries’, scholars have again noted how people become borders (Balibar, 1998) or how human bodies are key sites of borders in the current, biometrically managed world (Amoore, 2006). While only two of world’s total 29 major armed conflicts during 2001-2010 have been interstate (SIPRI 2011), a remarkable ‘hardening’ of state borders has simultaneously occurred around the world (Rosiére and Jones, 2012).

This commentary will problematize the concept of border in a situation where the social and political meanings of borders have been rethought not only in academia but also in the securitization of state and supra-state (like the EU) spaces and where bounded spaces still have a role to play in the mobilization of emotions, but also racism, xenophobia and ultimately violence. I
will look at first how the understanding of borders has altered and how relational thinking contests border studies. Secondly, I will take some conceptual steps towards a broader understanding of state borders that highlights both their porous and not-so-open qualities, thus also going beyond the territorial-relational divide.

**Contested borders**

Academic keywords are characteristically contested and the most vibrant of them escape static definitions. Geographers such as Prescott (1987) astutely defined the terminology of border studies: boundary was the abstract line that separated state territories, frontier was a zone category, and borders were the areas adjacent to a territory. Such characterizations were problematic in their straight-forward state-centrism and in anchoring the language of border studies to definite “artifacts on the ground” (Agnew, 2008). Consequently boundaries were seen as dividers, edges of power containers that, after being established, were relatively stable, and were often raised as ‘holy’ entities in state ideologies. Prescott’s three terms are used more or less as synonymously today and ‘border’ has gradually become the dominant keyword.

The current research themes of border scholars vary both thematically and in their theoretical, methodological and empirical orientation (Johnson et al., 2011; Wastl-Walter, 2011; Wilson & Donnan, 2012). Theoretical issues are occasionally raised explicitly on agenda (Brunett-Jailly, 2011; Bauder, 2011), but more often border seems to be a sort of “side-term” that resonates only implicitly when scholars scrutinize e.g. topics related to security, population and circulation (immigration, refugees) or cultural themes (multiculturalism, cultural hybridity) (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008; Wastl-Walter 2011; Wilson and Donnan, 2012). More often than not scholars accentuate the need to problematize the ‘flows of life’ across borders and how such flows are managed and governed at all scales, from human bodies to the global.

Likewise the assumptions related to borders, to their power and functions, and to the agencies impacting on borders and bordering are multiple. Contrary to the tradition borders are today rarely conceptualized as ‘separate’ socio-spatial entities. Further, rather than permanent elements borders are seen as historically contingent institutions that are constituted in and constitutive of the perpetual production and reproduction of territories. The inseparability of borders and territories does not imply that they should form ‘fixed bounded entities’, but rather are dispersed sets of power relations that are mobilized for various purposes.
One important change in research has been the abandonment of the view of borders as mere lines and of their location solely at the ‘edges’ of space. This has helped to challenge strictly territorial approaches and to advance alternative spatial imaginations which suggest that the key issue are not the ‘lines’ or ‘edges’ themselves, or even the events and processes occurring in these contexts, but non-mobile and mobile social practices and discourses where borders – as processes, sets of socio-cultural practices, symbols, institutions, and networks – are produced, reproduced and transcended. Questions have also been raised as to who is bordering, and how, where, and why this occurs in certain ways (Johnson et al., 2011).

Another challenge comes from relational thinking, which has long roots in social sciences. Emirbayer (1997) suggests that such thinking has given rise to a fundamental dilemma: ‘whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily of substances or in processes, in static “things” or in dynamic, unfolding relations’. Such dilemma has long roots in geography and has manifested itself in efforts to abandon container-based views on territory, region or place. While such views can be traced at least to the post-World War II situation, this issue emerged powerfully on agenda in the 1990s. Massey (1995), for example, argued in general terms that borders inevitably cut across some other social relations that constitute social space. Borders do not hence embody any ‘eternal truth of places’ but rather are drawn by diverse actors to serve particular purposes. Similarly the spaces that borders enclose are never culturally ‘pure’ (Massey, 1995), a point that has become increasingly critical around the world when political extremists claim such purity from state spaces.

What is the lesson of the relational approach to border studies? Possibly the key message is that ‘boundedness’ is a contextual-empirical rather than an ontological issue and this is critical when moving beyond the territorial-relational dualism. Cochrane and Ward (2012; cf. Paasi, 2012a), for example, have recently criticized this dichotomy in the context of policy-making and policy transfer. They propose that

*Policy-making has to be understood as both relational and territorial; as both in motion and simultaneously fixed, or embedded in place. Rather than merely seeing this as an inherently contradictory process, however, what matters is to be able to explore the ways in which the working through of the tension serves to produce policies and places, policies in place. The conventional distinction that is often made between the two misses the extent to which each necessarily defines and is defined by the other – territories are not fixed, but the outcome of overlapping and*
interconnecting sets of social, political and economic relations stretching across space, while the existence of identifiable territories shapes and in some cases limits the ways in which those relations are able to develop (in other words relational space and territorial space are necessarily entangled)

Allen (2011) has also suggested that territorial, relational and topological forms of power/space occur and are ‘twisted’ simultaneously in social processes. Likewise complex social and political relations come into play when borders are established and exploited by various actors in the production and ordering of spaces. Borders are relational in the sense that they are produced, reproduced and transformed in diverging social relations and networks. Also territorial jurisdictions are sites of complex relational juxtapositions, and fold different scales in, around and in-between each other (Healey, 2006).

Mobile and non-mobile borders

Much of current spatial thinking emphasizes the porousness of borders, the hybridity of cultures, and non-essential identities. While these are often related to mobility and to the rise of transnational flows, it is important not to essentialize such views or to isolate them from contexts and practices. Firstly, ‘flows’ are typically monitored and controlled – governing institutions are thus ‘border producing’ and ‘reproducing’ (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008). Secondly, despite of the rise of transnational processes and the claims for a post-national/denationalized citizenship, the practices of state in foreign policy, securitization (military, political, economic, environmental), spatial planning, policymaking or national socialization still operate in the world of ‘spatialized essences’ (Thomson, 2004; Agnew, 2009). Jones (2009) argues that “When performing their practical politics, agents imagine and identify a discrete, bounded space characterized by a shared understanding of the opportunities or problems that are motivating the very nature of political action”.

Similarly the expanding “securitization complex” suggests that borders are best understood as processes that are related to circulation and technologies. Graham (2010, page 89) has proposed that “states are becoming internationally organized systems geared towards trying to separate people and circulations deemed risky or malign from those deemed risk-free or worthy of protection”. This ‘separation’ process occurs both inside and outside of state territorial borders and, indeed, results in a blurring between international and urban/local borders, thus also fusing the scalar dimensions of
borders (page 89). To follow the Simmelian (1997) metaphors, instead of bridges, there are doors that are opened selectively.

Previous discussion can be abstracted into two coinciding modalities of borders. Firstly, the institutionalization and governance of territorial spaces by states are typically rooted in practices and discourses that resonate with the narratives of nation(alism) and identity. In geopolitical terms borders are thus related to “people/nation” and “culture”. From this angle, the key ‘site’ of the border is not only the ‘borderland’ but the complex, perpetually on going, hegemonic nation-building process. Borders therefore resonate not only with state but also with nation, identity and the purported loyalties. While such borders are challenged by mobility, post-national and de-national processes (Sassen, 2002), at times by ethnic upsurges, studies on (banal) nationalism display how much emotional bordering, fear and loyalty is mobilized through nationalized and memorialized material landscapes like military cemeteries and monuments, or through national performances such as flag/independence days, parades and other elements related to national heritage, ‘purity’ and symbolism (Paasi, 2012b). These material and symbolic practices often both maintain and ‘stretch’ borders in both time and space and they are typically maintained in spatial socialization through such institutions as media and education. Bordering at times occurs ‘invisibly’, for instance, when the media turns the exclusive views of political elites into agendas on immigration issues and puts aside the views and biographies of asylum seekers, refugees or NGOs that represent them (Shah, 2008).

The power of such bordering practices – that can be labelled as discursive/emotional landscapes of social power (Paasi, 2012b) – is related to the fact that only 3% of the world’s population resides in a state other than the one in which they were born (Cunningham, 2004). This implies two things. Firstly, as Hirst and Thompson (1996) have reminded, despite of global flows, the bulk of the world’s population is still “trapped by the lottery of their birth”. Secondly, border-crossings by immigrants and refugees, about 190 million people, have concentrated unevenly in states: 75 percent of immigrants live just in 28 states (Shah, 2008). Developed countries, hosting one third of immigrants, have reacted to this phenomenon in the spirit of neoliberalism by preferring progressively a strategic ‘selectivity’ i.e. often prioritizing the ‘best’ and the ‘brightest’ (Hyndman, 2012). Immigration has been opposed, and attained privileges defended, in many states on cultural, ethnic, demographic and economic grounds, but increasingly on environmental grounds (the ‘greening of anti-immigration’). Not only populist parties often ride on themes leaning on exclusive reading of immigration statistics, but migration has to an increasing degree been represented as a
security question that draws on the purported risks of terrorism (Huysmans, 2006). As Hyndman (2012) reminds, the securitization of migration is a defining feature of current geopolitics. This closely resonates with biopolitics, management of population and thus accentuates borders. She suggests that attention is increasingly paid to border-crossers, not merely borders or acts of border-crossings.

These simple but often neglected facts provide one way to understand the power of ‘bounded spaces’ as stubborn soundboards for the political exploitation of ideas on apparently homogeneous territorial spaces and national narratives of belonging and identity – visions that are continually reproduced in the processes of spatial socialization (Paasi, 1996; Jones and Merriman, 2012). This occurs in spite of the fact that the ideas of citizenship, and the rights and obligations of national citizens, are changing in the spirit of neoliberal agendas from collective towards more individualistic direction (Soysal, 2012). Even in multicultural education (Mitchell 2003) there is a tendency towards mobile, highly tracked, skills-based direction. This “soft” side of bordering, crucially related to cultural aspects and the symbolic violence practiced in media and education, is still largely an uncharted terrain in political geography.

While previous ‘landscapes’ are crucial in inculcating national identity narratives and in mobilizing the imagined national communities among citizens, they are today fused with practices related to control and surveillance: borders, border-crossings and border-crossers are monitored by increasingly technical devices and practices. These technical landscapes of control are crucial in the post 9/11 world and are related, rather than to people, to population and circulation, i.e. biopolitics (cf. Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008). Similarly as the discursive landscapes of social power, practices and technologies associated with the increasing bordering and control of mobilities are not located solely in border areas but exist beyond the borders proper. At airports seductive signs encourage to vigilance by proposing that” security is everyone’s business, please make it yours”. Passports, iris and fingerprints are new synonyms of borders. Amoore’s (2006) concept ‘biometric border’ indicates a dual move in bordering: a turn to scientific and managerial techniques in governing the mobilities of bodies and the extension of biopower so that the body, in a way, becomes the carrier of the border and “it is inscribed with multiple encoded boundaries of access”. This complexity doubtless strengthens ‘bordering’ in a society, and may be constitutive of social, cultural and political distinctions between social groups (cf. Paasi, 2012b).
While borders are increasingly often concrete barriers (Rosiére and Jones, 2012), the securitization of ‘bounded’ state spaces occurs ever more in global space through border-crossings: border control and management stretch, in the name of security, across borders. This is particularly obvious in the case of some powerful states. The mission of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, for example, states that “We safeguard the American homeland at and beyond our borders”. The UK border agency, for its part, presents itself as a global organization with 25,000 staff - including more than 9,000 warranted officers - operating in “local communities, at our borders and across 135 countries worldwide” (Paasi, 2012b). Bordering practices thus become increasingly mobile, networked, technical, private and detached from what were formerly regarded as state ‘borders’.

Simultaneously the USA based and Western European companies are insurmountably dominating the global arms sales that states use to secure their territory (SIPRI, 2011).

These two ‘landscapes’ open the idea of border into a set of bordering practices that are historically contingent. These more or less mobile landscapes eventually operate towards the same track and may strengthen states as imagined bounded units, however porous they are in practice (Paasi, 2012b). They display how borders can be exploited to both mobilize and fix territory, security, identities, emotions and memories, and various forms of national socialization. Further, this conceptualization of borders suggests that while it is continually vital to examine how borders and bordering practices come about, it is also decisive to reflect the political rationalities and state-based ideologies embedded in these practices. The management and control of flows, (national) ideologies and socialization demand careful reflexion of the functions of states in bordering practices (cf. Johnson et al., 2011).

**Epilogue**

Contrary to the cosmopolitan optimism of the 1990s and the ideas of a borderless world, current vivid research on borders displays that borders are still with us but their meanings are more and more complex in both social and political practice and in academic research. Simultaneously there is an accelerating “flow of life” across borders. Borders are often contested, may be more or less permeable, come to an end or harden at some stage, and be replaced as part of the wider territorial transformation where spaces are unfinished and always becoming (cf. Massey, 2005). Consequently It is crucial to step beyond simple dichotomies according to which spaces should be understood either as territorially bounded or open. Even the most fixed borders transform, are crossed and are partly ‘mobile’.
While Andreu (cited in Graham 2010, page 88) is on the right track when proposing that “national borders have ceased being continuous lines on earth’s surface and (have) become non-related sets of lines and points situated within each country”, this is clearly not the whole truth on how borders make a difference. Agnew (2008) suggests that borders matter in two ways. First, they have real effects: borders are mobilized to both limit or allow movements of things, money, and people, a function that seems to have witnessed the hardening of borders since the turn of the millennium. Secondly, borders trap thinking about and acting in the world in territorial terms, that is borders tend to “limit the exercise of intellect, imagination, and political will” (page 176). Balibar (1998) also stated that what can be demarcated, defined, and determined maintains a constitutive relation to with what can be thought. It thus remains a major task for scholars to theorize and to uncover the ever more complex modalities of borders, the political and social functions of bordering practices, and their effects. Only then it is possible “to think and then act beyond their present limitations” (Agnew, 2008, page 176).

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