

Borders on the mind: re-framing border thinking

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Abstract

From one viewpoint, interstate borders are simple ‘artefacts on the ground’. Borders exist for a variety of practical reasons and can be classified according to the purposes they serve and how they serve them. They enable a whole host of important political, social, and economic activities. From a very different perspective, borders are artefacts of dominant discursive processes that have led to the fencing off of chunks of territory and people from one another. Such processes can change and as they do, borders live on as residual phenomena that may still capture our imagination but no longer serve any essential purpose. Yet, what if, although still necessary for all sorts of reasons, borders are also inherently problematic? We need to change the way in which we think about borders to openly acknowledge their equivocal character. In other words, we need to see a border not as that which is either fixed or that as such must be overcome, but as an evolving construction that has both practical merits and demerits that must be constantly reweighed. Thinking about borders should be opened up to consider territorial spaces as ‘dwelling’ rather than national spaces and to see political responsibility for pursuit of a ‘decent life’ as extending beyond the borders of any particular state. Borders matter, then, both because they have real effects *and* because they trap thinking about and acting in the world in territorial terms.

Keywords: *borders; frontiers; decent life; dwelling; territory; heterotopia; globalization*

Interstate borders have recently become the focus of renewed interest in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet empire, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the increased political fervor about immigration across the entire world. There are two very different but prevalent ways in which we tend to think about borders. These are primarily normative rather than simply empirical in orientation. Today, we find groups of scholars ensconced in theoretical camps that reflect the two competing conceptions of borders and why they matter. From one viewpoint, borders are simple ‘facts on the ground’ (or, more radically, lines on the map). Borders exist for a variety of practical reasons and can be classified according to the purposes they serve and

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how they serve them. They enable a whole host of important political, social, and economic activities.

From a very different perspective, borders are artefacts of dominant discursive processes that have led to the fencing off of chunks of territory and people from one another. Such processes can change and as they do, borders live on as residual phenomena that may still capture our imagination but no longer serve any essential purpose. Borders, therefore, are not simply practical phenomena that can be taken as given. They are complex human creations that are perpetually open to question. At an extreme, perhaps, existing borders are the result of processes in the past that are either no longer operative or are increasingly eclipsed by transnational or global pressures. In other words, borders are increasingly redundant, and thinking constrained by them restricts thinking about alternative political, social, and economic possibilities.

Yet, what if, although still necessary for all sorts of reasons, borders are also inherently problematic? What I have in mind is not so much defining a *via media* between the two sides, in the sense that both are right up to a point, but reframing the border question in practical and ethical terms in such a way that moves beyond the simple either/or stipulation of the current debate. We need to change the way in which we think about borders to openly acknowledge their equivocal character.¹ In other words, we need to see a border not as that which is either (a) fixed or (b) as such must be overcome, but as an evolving construction that has both merits and problems that must be constantly reweighed. My main normative commitment is to the idea that the answer to what borders do should always be related to the overriding ethical concern that they serve and not undermine human dignity and what Jonathan Seglow has called ‘the right to a decent life’.²

From this viewpoint, rather than reflecting an unambiguous sovereignty that ends/begins at a border or that must be overcome as such, border thinking should open up to consider (a) territorial spaces as ‘dwelling’ rather than national spaces and (b) political responsibility for pursuit of a decent life as extending beyond the borders of any particular state. Borders matter, then, both because they have real effects *and* because they trap thinking about and acting in the world in territorial terms. They not only *limit* movements of things, money, and people, but they also *limit* the exercise of intellect, imagination, and political will. The challenge is to think and then act beyond their present limitations.

I want to first say a few words about why borders matter as facts on the ground, so to speak. I then want to briefly address the dominant arguments about why they are inherently problematic. Finally, I will suggest a few ways in which we can move beyond the dialogue of the deaf between these two approaches to thinking about borders. The point is to encourage both sides to see something positive in the other and to show how they can begin to do so. But this requires abandoning the either/or approach to borders that currently dominates most thinking about them.

'ENABLING' BORDERS

At one time, borders were often understood simply as boundary lines between self-evident states whose existence was presumed to reflect physical features or international treaties. In a somewhat later conventional wisdom, borders served various economic or social 'functions'. The more recent literature on borders as enabling a whole set of purposes has attended much more closely to how borders are socio-territorial constructs reflecting the discourses and practices of national identity and, in some cases, how bordering works under conditions of globalization. Most border studies, however, still tend to conceive of borders in cross-pressure terms.³ But now the emphasis is on how they are constructed socially rather than simply taking their existence for granted. The emphasis on cross-pressures across a border between adjacent states, both making and maintaining it in place, reflects a completely territorialized image of spatiality in which territorialized states (and, sometimes, their local agents) are seen as monopolizing the geography of power. So, if once it was 'forces' and 'functions' that constituted the moments of cross-pressure, it is now 'discourses' and 'practices'. What remains largely, if not entirely, the same in empirical practice is the emphasis on 'the philosophy and practices of b/ordering and othering', if not now just *at* the physical border, but also *about* the border as a regimen of territorial control outside of immediate borderlands (e.g. passport regulation at airports, visa checking at workplaces, etc.).⁴ The inevitability of borders is simply assumed.

Rather than recounting the history of border studies or providing yet another typology of cross-border studies,⁵ I would just mention one study that has been widely influential in border studies and because it is often seen as representing a radical departure from 'old-style' studies based on center-periphery and top-down understandings of how borders come about and are maintained. Indeed, in his widely cited and influential book, Peter Sahlins does not at first reading provide the epitome of a cross-pressure perspective.⁶ He is particularly critical of what he calls the 'received wisdom' that 'modern nations were built from political centers outwards'.⁷ In its place, he argues that 'the dialectic of local and national interests . . . produced the boundaries of national territory'.⁸ In turn, 'acceptance meant giving up local identities and territories'⁹ as 'local society brought the nation into the village'.¹⁰ Though ambivalent about how 'ancient'¹¹ or recent 'the conception of a linear political boundary'¹² actually is, he is clear, however, that it is instrumental, totalistic, and oppositional. His archetypal border, of that between France and Spain in the Pyrenees, was based on the 'nationalization of interest'¹³ as 'national identities were grounded in the affirmation and defense of social and territorial boundaries against outsiders'¹⁴ and as 'village communities, peasants and nobles, made use of the national state and its boundaries'.¹⁵ All this, of course, only happened because political entities called 'France' and 'Spain' provided the alternative repertoires of interests and identities around which the border between the two was defined. So, although Sahlins emphasizes the local sources of the interstate border, as opposed to complete imposition on the locals implied by the

more typical stories of border making, the border is itself viewed as the direct result of cross-pressures on identities and interests. The local sources were thus mobilized alongside pre-existing forces from over-the-horizon as local places in the Cerdagne/Cerdanya between France and Spain, were incorporated into the two countries. Concomitantly, he is leery of the association between nationalism as a collective political ideology and border making, preferring to see borders in strictly rational-instrumental rather than in cultural-symbolic terms. In this way, he can date commitment to borders long before the nineteenth century when nationalism first became the widespread phenomenon it is today. Frankly, I think that this is an untenable argument. As late as the 1770s in France and elsewhere in Europe, bourgeois sensibilities could still lead towards an identity as 'citizens of nowhere' as much as towards a secure and exclusive national sense of self.¹⁶ I see borders as they exist today and nationalism as twin and internally related developments, rather than the fruits of a strategic or rational political instrumentalism that suddenly sprang up in the 1600s (either peripherally or centrally), and has simply persisted ever since.¹⁷

This oppositional model of how identities are formed is hardly unique to border studies such as that of Sahlins or others. Indeed, a case could be made that it is a dominant element in a wide range of types of contemporary social science and political theory that rely theoretically on 'Othering' and border definition as their main socio-geographical mechanism.¹⁸ Territorial social formations are seen as the root of all identities.¹⁹ The boundaries (including borders) between them are then viewed as defined by opposing and exclusionary identities that *pre-exist* the coming of the borders. Thus, nation-states are assimilated to a notion of social boundaries of which their borders are simply just another, if frequently more fundamental or definitional, exemplar. Even those critical of particular borders because of the paths they follow or because of unequal power-differentials across them, nevertheless often see them as expressive of distinctive national identities that can only be appreciated at the border. The border thus remains absolutely necessary for inter-group expression. Thus, the Israel-Palestine 'border runner' Michel Warschawski says that 'The border is not merely a place of separation where differences are asserted; it can also be a place of exchange and enrichment where pluralist identities can flourish. One can have encounters there that cannot take place elsewhere'.²⁰

Be that as it may, it is implicit in this understanding that borders can serve a number of vital socio-political purposes. One is straightforwardly instrumental: borders help clearly demarcate institutional and public-goods based externality fields. If spending on infrastructure projects (education, highways, etc.), for example, must necessarily be defined territorially, as Michael Mann has argued, and the revenues raised concomitantly, then borders are necessary to define who is eligible and who is not to share in the benefits of the projects in question.²¹ Thus, absent territorial restrictions on eligibility, cross-border movements of people would undermine the essentially contractual obligations that underpin both state infrastructural power and the autonomous role of the state that depends on it. So, liberal conceptions of borders can be less inchoate than frequently alleged, if understood

solely in terms of defense of rights in property, but only if refocused on the provision of public goods rather than on the protection of private property.²²

Less liberal or instrumental in character are the ways in which borders help focus on the question of political identity. This has four aspects to it. The first and most traditional is the claim to sovereignty and its realization since the eighteenth century as a territorial ideal for a people endowed with self-rule. Typically, all struggles to extend and deepen popular rule, associated usually with such terms as ‘democracy’, have been bound up with the sovereignty ideal. Who shall rule around *here*? has been the rallying cry across all political revolutions. Thus, recently, Jeremy Rabkin has defined sovereignty as the ‘authority to establish what law is binding . . . in a given territory’.²³ From this viewpoint, laws can only be enforced when the institutional basis to that law is widely accepted. It depends on popular acceptance and agreement to allow coercion in the absence of compliance. Intuitively, the reach of institutions must begin and it must end somewhere. This is a fairly conservative understanding of political identity. Beyond it lie several other versions of how political identity is served by borders.

One is that identities themselves, our self-definitions, are inherently territorial. Contrary to a liberal sense of the isolated self, from this perspective all identities are based on kinship and extra-kinship ties that bind people together overwhelmingly through the social power of adjacency. From clan and tribe to nation, group membership has been the lever of cultural survival. Rather than merely incidental, borders are intrinsic to group formation and perpetuation. Thus, a self-defined political progressive such as Tom Nairn can speak openly of a ‘social nature’ that requires ‘belonging’ and ‘can be chosen and self-conscious’, which can result in people coming to feel ‘more strongly—and less ambivalently—about their clan, football team or nation, than about parents, siblings and cousins who directly helped to form them’.²⁴ Many nations today are still actively in pursuit of their very own state with its very own borders.²⁵ Kurds rioting in Turkey and Tibetans protesting Chinese rule are only two of a myriad of recent examples. Elsewhere, there is a revival of spatially complex forms of citizenship, as in Spain and the United Kingdom, where people can simultaneously belong to several polities differentially embedded within existing states.²⁶ Of course, this was once quite common all over Europe.²⁷

A second theme in how borders serve political identity is a broadly social democratic emphasis on how social solidarity within national borders furthers goals such as diminished poverty, increased equality of opportunity, and given the absence of effective global-level institutions, macroeconomic regulation and stabilization. To Paul Hirst, for example, as sources of power are increasingly ‘pluralistic’, the state becomes even more important in providing a locus for political solidarity.²⁸ In particular, he writes, ‘Macroeconomic policy continues to be crucial in promoting prosperity, at the international level by ensuring stability, and at the national and regional levels by balancing co-operation and competition. Governments are not just municipalities in a global market-place’.²⁹

A third connection with political identity is made by those who emphasize the idea of ‘the exception’ in relation to border control. From this viewpoint, associated most

closely with the conservative argument of Carl Schmitt about the suspension of law to protect the essence of the state and the radical argument of Giorgio Agamben to the effect that the sovereignty of the state puts the very life of people in doubt depending on their biopolitical classification, borders are absolutely central to the definition of the state.³⁰ They function to decide who is inside and who is outside in an essential opposition between the 'friends' and 'enemies' (or Romans and barbarians) into whom the world is divided for these theorists. The 'idiom' of the exception has recently become extremely popular in trying to understand various facets of the so-called War on Terror, such as the US prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and the 'rendition' of terrorist suspects between states to avoid writs of habeus corpus and to facilitate the use of torture to extract information and exact confessions.³¹ But to Agamben, in particular, this signals the onset of something much more dramatic: the exception is everywhere becoming the rule. Citizens are now also inmates or detainees in giant 'camps' rather than purposeful agents. As one sympathetic interpreter puts the argument, 'The state maintains order not through law but through obedience'.³² The analogy of the camp (most notably, Auschwitz) can be made to border containment the world over. Unfortunately, in departing from much by way of any empirical analysis, this approach neither explains the specific political structures associated with a Guantánamo Bay³³ nor how much the notion of the extra-legal exception adds to the understanding of military interventions, international law, or border controls.³⁴ Agamben's putative radical politics of avoidance may well point beyond actual borders as such, but his analysis of the existing world remains trapped within them.³⁵ In this perspective, therefore, borders are obviously key moments in the mechanics of a worldwide and thus generic territorialized political imagination, even when claiming to move beyond them.

'DISABLING' BORDERS

To many commentators on borders, however, they are explicitly deemed as arbitrary, contingent, or even perverse. Most importantly, international borders are not just any old boundaries. To begin with, worldwide, it is hard to find a single international boundary that has not been inspired by the example and practices of an originally European statehood. Much of this was the direct result of the imposition and subsequent breakup of European empires outside of Europe into state-like units, even if, as in Latin America, there was rather more local inventiveness than there was at a later date in Asia and Africa. But it has also been more broadly the result of the spread of a model of territorial statehood, a state-centered political economy, and the association of democracy with territorial citizenship from Europe into the rest of the world. At one and the same time, both a political ideal and set of socio-political practices, the imagination of territorial statehood rests on imitation and diffusion of established political models that define what is and what is not possible in the world at any particular time and in any particular place.

European (and, later, American) cultural hegemony has thus ‘written the script’ for the growth and consolidation of a global nation-state system. The model of statehood has had as its central geographical moment the imposition of sharp borders between one state unit (imagined as a *nation*-state, however implausible that usually may be) and its neighbors. Previously in world history, a wide range of types of polity co-existed without any one—empire, city-state, nomadic network, dynastic state, or religious polity—serving as the singular model of ‘best political practice’. It is only with the rise of Europe to global predominance that an idealized European territorial state became the global archetype. Part of the political tragedy of the contemporary Middle East and Africa, for example, lies in the attempted reconciliation of the Euro-American style territorial state of sharp borders with ethnic and religious identities distributed geographically in ways that do not lend themselves to it.³⁶

Lurking behind bordering everywhere is the effect of that nationalism which has come along with the territorial nation-state: that being perpetually in question, national identity has to be constantly re-invented through the mobilization of national populations (or significant segments thereof). Borders, because they are at the edge of the national-state territory, provide the essential focus for this collective uncertainty.³⁷ Even as defined strictly, therefore, but also by remaining in perpetual question, state borders provide the center of attention for more generalized elite, and sometimes popular, anxiety about what still remains to be achieved by the state for the nation.³⁸ The everyday nationalism in which borders are implicated as central moments, then, is not a project that simply takes place at the border or simply between adjacent states.³⁹ Indeed, it is only secondarily territorial in that its origins often lie in distant centers and in scattered Diasporas where elites and activists engage in the task of defining and defending what they understand as the nation-state’s borders, the better to imagine the shape or geo-body of their nation. Consider, for example, the histories of Irish nationalism and Zionism with their origins in scattered Diasporas.

State borders are not, therefore, simply just another example of, albeit more clearly marked, boundaries. They are qualitatively different in their capacity to both redefine other boundaries and to override more locally-based distinctions.⁴⁰ They also have a specific historical and geographical origin. If social boundaries are universal and transcendental, if varying in their incidence and precise significance, state borders, in the sense of definitive borderlines, certainly are not. They have not been around for time immemorial.⁴¹ Attempts to claim that bordering is historic in the sense of unequivocal and definite delimitation, or to take bordering as a given of state formation are, therefore, empirically problematic. What is evident has been the need to give borders a deep-seated historical genealogy even when this is a fictive exercise.⁴²

There is, then, nothing at all ‘natural’—physically or socially—to borders. They are literally impositions on the world. This is not to say that borders are somehow simply metaphorical or textual, without materiality; lines on a map rather than a set of objects and practices in space.⁴³ It is more that borders are never transcendental objects that systematically secure spaces in which identities and interests can go

unquestioned. We may today also be living in a time when they will begin to lose their grip because they no longer match the emerging spatial ontology of a world increasingly transnational and globalized.⁴⁴ In the first place, as impositions, borders frequently transgress rather than celebrate or enable cultural and political difference. For example, the US-Mexican border cuts through historic migration fields and flows of everyday life,⁴⁵ perhaps around 40 million people have US-Mexico cross-border family relations;⁴⁶ the Israel-Gaza border is a prison perimeter premised on collective punishment of a population for electing rocket-firing adherents to *Hamas*; and most borders in the Middle East and Africa make no national or cultural sense whatsoever (e.g. the Somalia-Ethiopia border with more than 4 million Somalis within Ethiopia or the Israel-Palestine border that is constantly in mutation as Israeli settlers encroach on what had been widely agreed was 'Palestinian' territory). But in every one of these cases, borders play a crucial role in focusing the aspirations of the groups on either side. The perpetual instability of the border is precisely what gives it such symbolic power in the mind's eye of the nationalists who favor/challenge it.

Contemporaneously, and beyond the claim of their imposition, however, three trends are seen as militating against borders as relevant social facts. One is that economic organization is increasingly working at odds with a bordered world. In this construction, we are living in a world that is increasingly global and local and decreasingly national. Thus, to Manuel Castells, a world of 'flows' is replacing a world of 'places'.⁴⁷ To others it is more that states are losing their regulatory grip and capital is increasingly footloose. This is sometimes posed as if territorial and networked forms of spatial organization are mutually exclusive with one, typically, the latter, replacing the other. This interpretation is unfortunate insofar as it misses the degree to which territory and spatial interaction have always co-existed as modes of spatiality.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that territorial limits to exchange are less effective than they once were because of both technological and geopolitical changes that have enabled more globalized types of economic organization.

A second emphasis relies more on the growth of various international and global regimes concerning human rights and governmental behavior, which are spreading into political and judicial practice within a wide range of countries. From many a liberal or radical perspective, all borders are ethically suspect.⁴⁹ The universality of claims to equal freedom and the inherent rights attached to one's status as a human rather than a specific nationality strongly suggest that borders should be in question if they pose a barrier to movement of people searching for a better life or seeking to escape from persecution or hide behind them unspeakable crimes of one sort or another. As a result, some commentators point out how modes of judicial reasoning increasingly move across international borders.⁵⁰ Others suggest that there is the possibility of an increasingly 'transnational' public sphere in which 'for any given problem . . . the relevant public should match the reach of those life-conditioning structures whose effects are at issue'.⁵¹ Finally, citizenship is seen by more and more scholars as increasingly labile as regards both its presumed association with a singular territorial political identity and its mutual exclusivity. Thus, Melissa Williams suggests that loyalty is increasingly given to religion, social groups, and political

communities other than the nation-state.⁵² Others, such as Peter Spiro make the case for how many people now have multiple citizenships and of how ‘thin’ national citizenship can be in terms of personal affect.⁵³ He points out, for example, how few people once they have a Green Card in the US, guaranteeing them a right of residence, ever actually apply for naturalization to citizenship. Dora Kostakopoulou suggests that the ‘fuzzy boundaries between ethnic and civic understandings of nationhood’ disclosed in many recent studies bring into question the nationality model of citizenship tout court.⁵⁴ Riva Kastoryano makes an ancillary point that increasingly ‘nations’ can be global in character as their members scatter around the world but remain more attached to their putative homeland than to where they actually reside.⁵⁵ Examples of this, such as Kurds and Armenians, come readily to mind.

EQUIVOCAL BORDERS

In my view, borders have always been more equivocal practically and ethically in their origins and in their effects than the two dominant types of story allow. I would suggest that the overarching normative question in re-framing understanding of borders is how much borders enhance or restrict the pursuit of a decent life. They have always been open to question, if not to all who would cross them. The paths they follow are often quite arbitrary and without any sort of ‘natural’ justification. Their socio-political significance is very recent (much more recent, for example, than Sahlins’s sixteenth century) and this relates perhaps as much to the increased infrastructural power of some states and lack of it in others, increased gradients of economic development across borders around the world, and improved ease of travel as to the identity functions they perform and that are emphasized so much in both of the stories. In moving beyond the either/or perspective, we need recourse to some concepts that aid in understanding the ambiguity of borders.

In a recent article, Mark Salter makes imaginative use of Michel Foucault’s ideas of ‘heterotopia’ and ‘confessionary complex’ to understand the bordering activities that take place at airports.⁵⁶ Borders are encountered at locations within (airports and immigrant policing at workplaces) and well beyond (immigration posts at foreign ports and airports) any particular map borders. Heterotopias are locations that because of their very specificity, problematize the various functions typically associated with ‘like’ locations; in this case bordering locations other than airports.⁵⁷ These are unusual places. They are sometimes referred to as a type of ‘non-place’ in which the rules of everyday life that prevail elsewhere across places within a national territory are replaced by some very particular and peculiar ones. A confessionary complex refers to the docility and anxiety typically engendered, at least in Western cultures, by the gauntlet that must be run past agents of the state in places such as airports. This dual focus takes us away from the simple obsession with borders as easily guarded land borders characteristic of much border thinking (and anti-border thinking) and towards the complexity of what borders do and how they are managed

for both territorial and networked spaces. Two particularly important features of the article lie in its countering both excessively laudatory accounts of airports as transversal places in which inside and outside are invariably confused and the similarly frequent failure to note the relative inefficiencies with which airports fulfill their security functions because of their inherent contradictions (screening for objects versus identifying dangerous persons, etc.) and all of the other activities they carry out, such as transportation and, increasingly, shopping, by those not subject to containment and deportation. In other words, border crossings such as airports are not always as easily grounded or readily transgressed as the two dominant stories, respectively, would have us believe.

Of course, borders have always had such focal points, from Ellis Island NY as a port of entry for European immigrants to the US, to Checkpoint Charlie between the two Berlins during the Cold War. All checkpoints, not just airports, have simply become more complex in the range of functions they perform. Beyond them, along the border, not much happens most of the time. Indeed, most borders remain unfenced and largely undefended outside of the checkpoints to which people crowd because of routes and modes of transport that focus them there. In a number of respects, therefore, it is not entirely clear to me that airports differ fundamentally from other border checkpoints (except, perhaps, in the shopping) and should be placed in this wider context. What airports do suggest is how much bordering is beyond the land borders of states *per se*. Rather than taking place only at borders on a map, bordering practices are much more widely diffused geographically.

What I have in mind about the practical and ethical equivocality of borders can be related to four points that should be placed in this broader context about airports and other border checkpoints. First off, the security functions of airports are part of what can be called 'territorial regimes', constituting a wide range of state-based inclusionary and exclusionary practices that are more and less discriminatory and effective in given areas, compare financial transactions and container traffic across borders, for example, with eligibility for certain social and political rights by people that follow from establishing legal territorial residence.⁵⁸ With respect to human border crossing, which country's passport (and associated paperwork) you happen to hold and where it stands in the global pecking order becomes the crucial variable determining the experience of passing from one territory to another, be it at an airport gate, a ship's gangplank, or a land-border crossing. Although an important, and frequently neglected, site of territorial control, the airport should be kept within this larger theoretical frame of reference. In other words, the possibilities of transversal practice or transgression and 'global citizenship' should not be exaggerated. They are available, if at all, to relatively few, above all to the privileged employees of multinational companies and skilled immigrants of one sort or another. In addition, these days border controls extend well beyond borders *per se* into workplaces and neighborhoods in the interior of the state.⁵⁹ This not only makes the whole national territory into a border zone, but also potentially criminalizes the entire population in the face of enforcement of identity checks and so on.

Immigration checks at foreign airports extend the reach of some authorities well beyond their own putative borders.⁶⁰

In addition, as is clear from the American media rhetoric about ‘broken borders’, the fanatical CNN news anchor Lou Dobbs uses this phrase regularly to refer specifically to the US-Mexico border, and my second point, the map image of the borders of the state still exercises a major influence on the territorial imagination of whose security is at stake and who most threatens it.⁶¹ Many of us still live in a world where political borders are the most important signs on a world map. Even though airports, for example, may well be major sites for the arrival of contested migrants and possible terrorists, the most popular idea is that of the former running, swimming, or otherwise penetrating land and sea borders. This powerful image of the border as a guardian of personal security akin to a security perimeter or fence around one’s home underwrites much of the hardening of border controls around the US and the European Union in recent years.⁶² Yet, of course, this is totally misleading; not only in the fact that most undocumented aliens/those without papers/*clandestini* are not security threats (at least not in the sense frequently considered as involved in terrorist plots) and once they arrive fulfill a variety of economic functions that would otherwise go unfulfilled, but that the overwhelming majority of terrorist attacks around the world have involved legal visitors from ‘friendly’ countries or local citizens. The notion of trespass or unregulated violation appears to provide the primary ethical basis to the imaginative emphasis on the physical border per se as ‘the face of the nation to the world’, so to speak. Rarely is it immigrants tout court who are openly in question, it is those without legal recognition. Of course, it is their very illegality that is attractive to employers and consumers because of the lack of qualification for public services and the ever-present threat of deportation as a disciplinary measure. No one talks much about how difficult it usually is to be a legal immigrant. Yet, the discourse frequently is more ambiguous in simultaneously always seeming to worry about the cultural threat that foreign immigrants of whatever legal status pose to the national identity because blood and family ties often count so much (either officially or unofficially) in most definitions of who ‘really belongs’ within the national territory.⁶³ Even in countries which officially claim more ‘open’ definitions of citizenship than is typically the norm, such as France and the US, nativist movements have little doubt about who is more and who is less deserving of recognition as French or American. Debates about who does and who does not belong draw attention to both the fluid and the contested character of national identities.⁶⁴

Perhaps even more importantly, however, borders, including their sites at airports, serve vital economic functions. A third point, therefore, is that though borders are about classifying identities, they are also about sorting and sifting goods and people to enhance or maintain unequal cross-border exchanges.⁶⁵ They are not simply about a security-identity nexus as both dominant stories about borders tend to allege. Cheap labor on one side facilitates cheaper products for more affluent consumers on the other. Though the idea of a global economy has become widely accepted, in fact much economic activity is still overwhelmingly within national borders and most

firms are still effectively reliant on national models of business structure and spatial organization.⁶⁶ There are very few truly global companies and they are mostly Swiss (or from other small countries). More particularly, borders still stand guard over massive differences in standards of living that, though shrinking somewhat as within-nation differences have grown in recent years, are still largely defined precisely at national borders. The US-Mexico border—‘the tortilla curtain’—is emblematic in this regard. The extreme income gradient that it marks invites people to cross it whatever the barriers they encounter on the way. Alain Badiou makes the overall point eloquently as follows:

The fall of the Berlin wall was supposed to signal the advent of the single world of freedom and democracy. Twenty years later, it is clear that the world’s wall has simply shifted: instead of separating East and West it now divides the rich capitalist North from the poor and devastated South. New walls are being constructed all over the world: between Palestinians and Israelis, between Mexico and the United States, between Africa and the Spanish enclaves, between the pleasures of wealth and the desires of the poor, whether they be peasants in villages or urban dwellers in *favelas*, *banlieues*, estates, hostels, squats and shantytowns. The price of the supposedly unified world of capital is the brutal division of human existence into regions separated by police dogs, bureaucratic controls, naval patrols, barbed wire and expulsions.⁶⁷

Fourthly, and finally, policing borders still has a powerful normative justification in the defense of that territorial sovereignty which serves to underpin both liberal *and* democratic claims to (Lockean) popular rule. Now such claims may frequently be empirically fictive, particularly in the case of imperial and large nation-states, but the logic of the argument is that, absent effective worldwide government, the highest authority available is that of existing states.⁶⁸ How such states police their borders, of course, should be subject to transparent and open regulation. But why it is popularly legitimate to engage in policing functions in the way they are carried out cannot simply be put down to mass docility in the face of an omnipotent (because it is omniscient) state apparatus. National populations do worry about their borders because their democracy (or other, familiar, politics) depends on it. The border is a continuing marker of a national (or supranational) political order even as people, in Europe at least, can now cross it for lunch.⁶⁹ The problem here is that democratic theory and practice is not yet up to dealing with the complexities of a world in which territories and flows must *necessarily* co-exist. If one can argue, as does Arash Abizadeh, that ‘the demos of democratic theory is in principle unbounded’, this still begs the question of who is ‘foreigner’ and who is ‘citizen’ in a world that is still practically divided by borders.⁷⁰ As Sofia Nässtrom puts the problem succinctly: ‘it is one thing to argue that globalization has opened the door to a problem within modern political thought, quite another to argue that globalization is the origin of this problem’.⁷¹ Until political community is redefined in some way as not being co-extensive with nation-state, we will be stuck with much of business as usual.

Currently then, given the strong arguments about what borders do and the problems that they also entail, a more productive ethic than thinking either just with

or just against them would be to re-frame the discussion in terms of the impacts that borders have; what they do both for and to people. From this perspective, we can both recognize the necessary roles of borders and the barriers to improved welfare that they create. In the first place, however, this requires re-framing thinking about borders away from the emphasis on national citizenship towards a model of what Dora Kostakopoulou calls ‘civic registration’.⁷² Under this model, the only condition for residence would be demonstrated willingness to live according to democratic rule plus some set requirements for residency and the absence of a serious criminal record. Such a citizenship model requires a reconceptualization of territorial space as a ‘dwelling space’ for residents and, thus, a move away from the nationalist narratives which cultivate ‘the belief that territory is a form of property to be owned by a particular national group, either because the latter has established a “first occupancy” claim or because it regards this territory as a formative part of its identity’.⁷³ In a world in which wars and systematic violations of human rights push millions to seek asylum across borders every year, this rethinking is imperative.⁷⁴

In the second place, and by way of example, from this viewpoint it is reasonable ‘to prefer global redistributive justice to open borders. To put it bluntly, it is better to shift resources to people rather than permitting people to shift themselves towards resources’.⁷⁵ Currently much migration from country-to-country is the result of the desire to improve economic well-being and enhance the life-chances of offspring. Yet, people often prefer to stay put, for familial, social, and political reasons, if they can. There seems no good basis, therefore, to eulogize and institutionalize movement as inherently preferable to staying put. If adequate mechanisms were developed to stimulate development in situ, many people who currently move would not. Not only people in destination countries associate their identities with territory.

Using the standard of a decent life, therefore, can lead beyond the present impasse between the two dominant views of borders towards a perspective that re-frames borders as having both negative and positive effects and that focuses on how people can both benefit from borders *and* avoid their most harmful effects. In political vision as in everyday practice, therefore, borders remain as ambiguously relevant as ever, even as we work to enhance their positive and limit their negative effects.

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