

Revisiting good fences and neighbours in a postmodern world after twenty years: theoretical reflections on the state of contemporary border studies

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Abstract: It is almost twenty years since Paasi and Newman published a framework paper for understanding borders in an era of globalization in *Progress in Human Geography*, entitled *Fences and Neighbours in a Postmodern World*. In the interim period, border studies have undergone a major renaissance and expansion, drawing in scholars from across the disciplinary borders. Much of the research has focused on case study material relating to the border crossing experience as borders have become more porous and easier to transverse. Theoretical questions have been limited in their nature, with a focus on the dynamics of the bordering process, as contrasted with the border and its demarcation per se. The globalization narrative which focuses on the process through which borders are opened, and in some cases may be totally removed, is now paralleled by the post 9/11 securitization discourse which focuses on the reclosing and resealing of borders, even though the actual border dynamics may be taking place in different border spaces than the physical border itself. The next generation of border scholars need to posit a new set of challenges and questions which will help bridge the scholarly and practitioner understandings of border dynamics and change.

Keywords: globalization, securitization, bordering process, reterritorialization, conceptualizing border studies

Introduction

Almost twenty years have passed since the publication of the paper “Fences and Neighbours in the post-Modern World” by David Newman and Anssi Paasi in *Progress in Human Geography* (Newman & Paasi 1998). At the time, this was considered a first statement on the influence of globalization on territorial organization in general but, more specifically, on the changing role and significances in a world of rapid and constant re-territorialization. The

globalization discourse of a “borderless world” was in the process of gaining paradigmatic status, as the idealized view of a world sans-borders gained popularity amongst critical scholars and academics (Ohmae 1990; Toal 1999)

During the ensuing two decades, the renaissance of border studies as a sub-discipline within Political Geography and Geopolitics has been remarkable, as too the extent to which border studies itself has experienced its own cross-disciplinary border experience, drawing in scholars and

practitioners from the diverse disciplines of Geography, Political Science, International Relations, Sociology, Anthropology, Legal Studies and, more recently, reaching across the previous rigidly sealed boundaries to the Humanities and the Liberal Arts to include Literature, Film Studies and Philosophy / Ethics (Newman 2006a).

The crossing of the disciplinary boundaries is a useful metaphor for understanding the dynamics of the process through which borders are negotiated and experienced in the contemporary world, neither disappearing altogether (the myth of the borderless world) but whose significances and functions have undergone substantial change as a result, not only of globalization, but also of changing historical and political contingencies – such as the fall of the Iron Curtain, the expansion of the EU (and the opening of the internal boundaries), but equally the reconstruction of borders as a result of post 9/11 securitization, or the reterritorialization of large parts of the Middle East as a result of ISIS and the Islamic State laying claims to large areas of territory over and beyond the limitations of the state boundaries.

The expansion of cross-disciplinary border studies is evidenced by the large number of border related conferences and symposia which take place under the auspices of an equally large number of related border research institutions, the most prominent being the Association of Borderland Studies (ABS), Border Regions in Transition (BRIT), the International Boundaries research Unit (IBRU) at the University of Durham, the African Borders Research Network (ABORNE), all of which have become increasingly international

and cross-disciplinary over time. It is also reflected in the disproportionate number of border related publications which are submitted to scientific journals, notably *Geopolitics* and the *Journal of Borderland Studies* – which has undergone expansion. Border Companions and handbooks have also proliferated during this period (Pavlakovich *et al.* 2004; Scott 2006; Wastl-Walter 2009; Wilson & Donan 2012)

Border theory

Notably lacking in much of the border related research and literature is a focus on key conceptual and theoretical issues to frame the next generation of questions for a growing young generation of research students (Brunet-Jailly 2005; Kolossov 2005; Newman 2006b, 2009; Paasi 2005). While it is clear that there can be no single border theory, linking all types and categories of borders, into a single understanding of the dynamics of the bordering process, there has nevertheless emerged a common glossary of border terminologies, focusing on such concepts of the demarcation and delimitation of borders, the ways in which borders are crossed, border management, power relations at the border (Newman 2003), the ethics of bordering (Van Houtum & Boedeltje 2009; Williams 2003, 2006), and, most recently, the way in which borders are represented in image, discourse and narrative (Brambilla 2015; Dell'agnese & Amilhat 2015; Novae 2015; Schimanski 2015). All of these concepts apply to the diversity of scale, ranging from the local to the global – as the traditional almost exclusive concern with borders

between States in the international system become but one scale category of borders – as well as non-geographical or spatial borders, encompassing the vertical social and cultural categories within which human society is ordered, and by definition are bordered and compartmentalized.

Determining the criterion through which people are defined as belonging to a specific social or economic group, are members of a specific religious faith, or are subject to welfare policies, is as much an issue of demarcation and power relations, as are the physical borders which separate one state's territory from another. So too, the way in which individuals can cross from one such category to another, either through the redefinition of the criterion (demarcation and delimitation) or through the nature of the crossing process (a change in personal economic or social conditions through upward or downward mobility) and the documentation required for such a crossing to take place.

A disproportionate amount of border related research still focuses on case studies of specific border “openings” and the nature of the cross-border interactions which take place, especially at the grass roots level of local and municipal governments and the residents of the neighbouring border regions. The literature on crossing borders is largely anecdotal, highlighting the nature of cross-border difference experienced, especially by those for whom the border crossing is a novel experience. The opening of previously closed borders has not eliminated difference, but rather has enabled difference to be encountered and experienced without fear of the unknown. The invisibility and lack of

knowledge concerning the “other” side of closed and “sealed” borders is replaced by knowledge gained through the encounter, thus removing (in most, but not all, cases) the previous sense of fear and threat which emanated from the unknown.

This is in direct contrast to the traditional understandings of the function of closed borders as providing a sense of security inasmuch as a high fence, concrete wall and intense militarization of a border prevents the physical movement of threat, especially in the form of global terrorism, from entering into the national space and inflicting violence and carnage on the residents of the enclosed territory. A recent supplement in the *Guardian* newspaper (Henley 2013) highlights the large number of fences and borders which have been constructed in the post 9/11 era by governments intent on preventing such threats from entering into the national space and thus providing a “sense” of security for their citizens. The most notable examples have been the construction of the physical barrier along large swathes of the USA-Mexico boundary, and the Separation Fence / Wall / Barrier separating Israel from the West Bank, both of which have been accompanied by new sophisticated techniques of border surveillance aimed at detecting even the most minute cases of movement across the border.

Border discourses

The opening and removal of borders has been treated by most scholars as an idealized position, reflecting a value judgement that the opening of borders is

“good” and desirable. It somehow reflects a world in which animosity between States has broken down and has resulted in the opening and even removal of borders altogether. The European Union has invested a great deal of attention into the process through which the eventual opening of borders, as additional States become part of the enlarged Union, are to be bridged, transformed into cross-border regions, enabling the development of cross-border economic, cultural and functional links, as a process of foreplay leading up to the eventual opening of the border for unhindered movement. The border as such remains *in situ*. It continues to define the territorial extent of State control and, to the extent that it still exists, State sovereignty, but it is no longer reflected in a wall, a fence or in border controls which impede movement from one side to the other. This process of changing border dynamics is reflected in the research focus on behavioural models which assist the removal of border crossing restrictions and which bring about greater border porosity – for people, goods, and the flow of information and ideas.

The counter narrative, the securitization discourse, which focuses on the reclosing and resealing of borders is seen, at the best as a necessary evil, or at the worst as a struggle for hegemony between contesting political lobbies – Homeland Security on the one hand, and Free Trade on the other. This is a value position which has been adopted by much of the newer generation of border scholars and which pre-determines a perspective on the nature of reterritorialization, even if it is increasingly at odds with the position taken

by State practitioners who are influenced by securitization and safety in the increasingly volatile world in which we live (Brunet-Jailly 2007).

This, in turn, is countered by the fact that much of the border opening dynamics takes place beyond the physical borders within different spatial realms. The globalization discourse was much more about the mechanics of a “borderless” world which bypassed the physical fences and walls located within a geographical space between States, than it was about their physical opening and removal. The latter was contingent upon historical and political change (such as the fall of the Iron Curtain or the expansion of the EU) than it was about the structural changes within the world of global capital or cyber space which enabled borders to be circumvented. The political context has changed in the post 9/11 era with a return to discourses of fear and threat. But this is not a counter globalization discourse – on the contrary, it has even been strengthened through its ability to latch on to globalization, manipulating those technologies which enable the circumvention of physical borders. What is good for economics and labor flows, is also good for the dissemination of terrorism and violence. Crossing borders is not a selective process, in that the “good” things can move freely, while the “bad” ones are stopped.

Since this form of global transaction is not selective and cannot (nor should it be) censored, it includes the dissemination of knowledge which promotes terrorism and violence, as well as discourses of hatred, racism and discrimination. The parallel discourses referred to at the beginning

of this short essay are not symmetrical, either in terms of their location or in their intensity. Neither can they be filtered for their ability to do “good” as contrasted with “evil”, however these terms are defined and by whom.

Relocating the border

Increasingly we have stated the obvious – namely that the process of bordering does not take place exclusively at the physical border, but that is precisely the place which we continue to focus most of our research on. While we accept that the realm of cyber space and globalization has resulted in the creation of a new “beyond” border space, only a small amount of our research within an enlarged world of border studies has attempted to come to grips with how this space functions. A new definition of “where” the border is located (in airports, on the internet, or in the minds and images of people who perceive the border and its impact) is required and this is a major challenge facing the next generation of border scholars who attempt to negotiate the two discourses as occurring at one and the same time, often in the same space.

Another idealized position which was taken by many of the border scholars focusing on the positive dimensions of border openings, was the way in which crossing the border and the creation of trans-boundary regions would result in spaces of hybridity (Morehouse 2004; Yazdih 2010). Such spaces would constitute a transition between the binary positions of difference, bringing together attributes (social, cultural economic) of peoples on

each side of the border. But such hybridity has not necessarily occurred, especially not within the generation of people who have previously experienced the closed border and for whom the dynamics of border openings takes time to adjust. Meeting beyond the borders results in increased knowledge and a reduction in the extent to which the “other” constitutes a threat, but this is not necessarily translated into a mixing or almost messianic coming together of “difference”. The meeting may just as easily strengthen stereotypes of the “other” as it does to dissipate them. Not feeling threatened by that which is no longer unknown is not synonymous with the desire to fuse cultures or bring about a dissipation of behavioral difference. As with border studies as a whole, it is the previous binary positions which are transformed into a multi-dimensional reality, the outcome of which will differentiate through geographical and social space.

Concluding comment

Twenty years have passed since Paasi and Newman published their paper. During that period, border studies have undergone a major renaissance but they have nevertheless limited themselves to a narrow focus, in which the traditional physical border has come under examination and re-examination. Globalization has continued unabated. Political contingencies have changed in a way which was not forecasted at the time. Together, these have created a more complex world, one in which the parallel narratives of globalization-opening and securitization-closing take

place in different types of spaces – horizontal, vertical, cyber, and others. These are the challenges and facing the next generation of border scholars interested in gaining a greater understanding into the contemporary re-territorialization of the world and these are the questions which should figure prominently in the new research agendas of future border scholars.

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