



Understanding Aterritorial Borders through a BIG Reading of Agnew's *Globalization and Sovereignty*

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This essay advances the emerging idea of 'aterritorial borders' through an argument by analogy with a recent publication by a leading political theorist.

In the early 2010s, the Borders in Globalization research project (BIG) began advancing an original and counterintuitive argument about borders and globalization: "borders in globalization are processes that in many instances are fundamentally 'a-territorial' because the border is ultimately carried by individuals, goods, and/or information" (BIG Progress Report, p. 21). The new international borders are not confined to territory. Sometimes, increasingly, they are global: multiple, relational, functional, mobile, fractured and scattered. For example, states have been "implementing border crossings at the source of movement [and] new local and global border 'markers' appear in regulatory systems and production chains organizing the mobility of trade flows and humans" (Brunet-Jailly 2019). States are now able to enforce their borders far from the boundary line, at foreign airports and seaports, midflight or on cruise ships, through placement of prescreening officers and infrastructure, electronic kiosks, biometric data, algorithms, product codes, microchips, GPS, and more. This means that borders have not diminished under globalization. On the contrary, they have multiplied. In some ways, for better or worse, borders have become partially liberated from territory.¹

When I first encountered the idea of aterritorial borders, I found it compelling and almost obvious, like something that had been waiting to be named. So I was somewhat surprised to discover that many students and academics, including those studying borders, found the concept difficult to understand or even resisted it.

The more predominant view about borders and territory can be characterized as follows. Borders are complex, contested, and contingent processes, governed by states and multiple levels of government as well as by non-government actors. But in the final analysis, *borders remain fundamentally territorial*. The bordering of space and community may not be strictly confined to the boundary line but remains more or less tethered to it or adjacent. For example, the literature on border studies has been dominated by the study of borderlands, generating insights into the mutually constitutive relationship between borders and the cultures, histories, and politics of the regions adjoining and straddling them (Alvarez 1995, Rogan 1999, Sahlins 1989). The *Journal of Borderlands Studies* and *Geopolitics* are emblematic of this research field. More recently, scholars have developed new concepts, such as

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borderscapes, borderities, and mobile borders, to further disclose the fluidity and shifting multiplicity of borderlands while also opening new vistas on critical questions about ethics, struggle, and methodology (Amilhat-Szary and Giraud 2015, Brambilla 2015, Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). Yet the bordering focus remains rooted in the land image, exemplifying the logic of geography, spatially related to the line, and in that sense, still stuck in John Agnew's famous 'territorial trap' (1994), or at least, more broadly, in a 'terrestrial trap'.

In distinction, the idea of aterritorial borders opens analysis apart from territory and geography. Indeed, a helpful way to understand the timely and challenging idea is to align it with Agnew's argument in his 2018 *Globalization and Sovereignty: Beyond the Territorial Trap*. Agnew's focus in this text is not borders per se, although they are implicated, so the reader is advised for the moment to set aside the puzzle of borders and step inside Agnew's formulation (except perhaps to note in advance that we will subsequently substitute Agnew's notion of "state sovereignty" with our notion of "state borders," a slight slip rather than a stretch).

Agnew's argument is not obvious but it is compelling. He corrects a common and misguided understanding of state sovereignty and globalization as oppositionally related, as antithetical political realities. According to the predominant conceptualization, globalization and sovereignty operate in zero-sum terms, with one waxing as the other wanes. In this conventional view, globalization threatens and erodes state sovereignty, and for states to reassert themselves, they must counteract or push back the processes and structures of globalization. This is a pervasive and compelling worldview, but Agnew repudiates it as a false dichotomy.

The world is not caught or swinging between poles of globalization and sovereign retrenchment. Forces of an interconnected world are not contending against or eroding sovereign states. Rather, state sovereignty has always taken global forms to varying extents. Indeed, global processes have regularly been the devices and machinations of powerful states. The exclusive fusion of the ideas of territory and sovereignty in the nation-state in the popular imagination is relatively recent. For most of history, they were not fused, meaning sovereignty was more than territoriality. Even in the twentieth century, they were never entirely fused. Up to the present, power has often visibly transgressed Westphalian territoriality, in the form of empires, hegemony, the Church, capital, private enterprise, and organized crime, to name a few contenders. These put the lie to idealized territorial state sovereignty as compartmentalized and independent geographical units. Political authority and even sovereignty in particular

have always been far more multiplistic and transversal than that.

To develop his argument, Agnew posits that

the trick in understanding globalization and sovereignty is to develop a way of thinking that moves away from the either/or framework—either absolute state territorial sovereignty or a globalized world without sovereignty—in which most opinion has been trapped (2018, p. 9).

This is the challenge Agnew sets himself, to foster a different "way of thinking" that reveals the limitations of the territorial approach to state sovereignty. To do this, he identifies several alternatives and exceptions. Territorial state sovereignty is just one arrangement of political power among others. And globalization today should be understood as the latest changing configuration between geography and sovereignty. Here Agnew acknowledges (2018, p. 23) his debt to Saskia Sassen's groundbreaking work (2006) on assemblages of territory and political authority.

Rather than singular or abstract sovereignty, Agnew develops the idea of "sovereignty regimes," or "effective sovereignty" or "sovereignty bargains," to emphasize that in practice political power takes many different forms. The most familiar type, "classic/territorial," which is premised on a unitary political community and strict territoriality, is just one type of sovereignty regime. Another is "imperialist," which arranges power and space differently, more imbricated, networked rather than contiguous, with scattered hierarchies of political communities rather than a single uniform state. A third kind of sovereignty regime Agnew calls "integrationist," referring to multi-nodal or federal arrangements like the European Union or the United States before the Civil War, and a fourth type he calls "globalist," emphasizing networks and flows not territorially confined, citing the post-Cold War US-led global hegemony as an example. Agnew goes on to trace this four-part typology of sovereignty regimes through two in-depth case studies: the control of global currency and exchange rates, and government responses to immigration and refugees. Westphalian or territorial sovereignty is not sufficient to understand these more global manifestations of sovereignty.

Agnew summarizes:

Sovereignty is not just one thing. Its application takes various geographical shapes. The idea of sovereignty regimes is an attempt at providing a template or schema

by which to consider the dominant shapes that sovereignty has and continues to take. The four basic types I identify—classic/territorial, globalist, integrative, and imperialist—provide a frame of reference for discussing how globalization relates to sovereignty. These are all relational forms in which sovereignty in a particular case is always established in relation to other states and actors (2018, pp. 169-170).

Therefore, to imagine sovereignty as inextricably bound to territory, or to conflate the two, is sloppy thinking, and wrong. In the face of advancing globalization, particular configurations of sovereignty and space are at stake, not the integrity or survival of states or sovereignty as such. Globalization indeed runs counter to the territoriality of states, but globalization is fully conducive to other aspects of states. Against much popular misconception, globalization is not counteracting sovereignty or states. Rather, globalization involves "the attenuation of territoriality as sovereignty's primary mode of geographical organization" (p. 13).

The same can be said about borders. Agnew's argument about the compatibility of *sovereignty* and globalization translates into a parallel argument about *borders* and globalization. If we accept Agnew's arguments about sovereignty—and I think we should—then we can extend it to borders, as aspects of sovereignty, or the outer limits of sovereignty. Borders, like sovereignty itself, of which they partake, are no longer confined to territory. To drive this point home, consider again the first passage we quoted from Agnew. This time, however, replace each instance of the term "sovereignty" with the term "borders":

the trick in understanding globalization and ~~sovereignty~~ [borders] is to develop a way of thinking that moves away from the either/or framework—either absolute state territorial ~~sovereignty~~ [borders] or a globalized world without ~~sovereignty~~ [borders]—in which most opinion has been trapped.

The challenge Agnew identified—to move beyond binary oppositions of sovereignty and globalization—applies equally to border studies today: to move beyond binary oppositions of borders and globalization.

This has been a research priority for the Borders in Globalization project, including two new publication streams, the book series *BIG_Books* and the interdisciplinary journal *BIG_Review*. Part of their mandate is to document and better under-

stand the ways that borders operate aterritorially. Brunet-Jailly elaborates:

states and private sector actors are implementing data collection policies allowing for the pre-clearance of global trade flows and migration movements; individuals and objects are cleared by authorities of their place of destination prior to leaving their place of origin. Contrary to traditional states' territorial bordering, a-territorial bordering obeys a fundamentally different logic: A logic primarily concerned with functional belonging, and driven by the development of mechanisms based on trust. This finding points towards new, yet understudied phenomena, that are continuing to transform borders in the 21st century (2019).

In this view, aterritorial borders follow the logic of function and flow more than territory or geography.

To be clear, "aterritorial" does not mean "anti-territorial" or even entirely "non-territorial." Rather, the prefix 'a' implies a lack, or absence, neither strictly bound to the logic of territory nor inherently its opposite. The prefix 'a' is analogous to the prefix of the term "amorality." Amorality is lacking morality but not necessarily immoral; it is ambivalent with regard to morality and immorality. Likewise, aterritorial borders are not antithetical to territory. Sometimes they are non-territorial; other times they overlap and integrate with territorial borders.

We can conclude by observing that Agnew and Brunet-Jailly both converged, via different paths and with different lexicons, on the aterritoriality of borders and sovereignty in the twenty-first century. This is an important conceptual shift with significant ramifications for a wide range of policy areas. Neither borders nor sovereignty are fundamentally threatened by globalization, despite persistent cries to the contrary from across the political spectrum ('borderless world' on the left, 'globalist threats to sovereign borders' on the right). Rather, we should strive to comprehend the complex and counterintuitive ways that borders no longer coincide with boundary lines or even remain subject to the logic of territory. Contemporary challenges to the global governance of borders—and the movement of people and things across them—demand new and better ways of seeing and thinking about the world. To leave the reader with one direction this line of thought could lead, similar arguments could be constructed about *migration* and borders as about globalization and sovereignty. That is, just

as the term "sovereignty" could be swapped out for the term "borders" in Agnew's argument, we could also swap out the term "globalization" with "migration," since migration is an aspect of globalization (one globalizing process among many others). Making such a substitution begins to disrupt the pervasive and false dichotomy of borders and migration, which wrongly presupposes that borders and migration, like sovereignty and globalization, are zero-sum terms. But that's another task.²

Notes

- 1 The idea of aterritorial borders can be traced through the work of the Borders in Globalization research program, which began in 2013. For example:

our research hypothesizes that contemporary borders in globalization are processes that in many instances are fundamentally 'a-territorial'. We assume that bordering processes are not uniquely territorial anymore, but fundamentally linked to interactions across the world. Our research program approaches this set of assumptions from the perspectives of networks and flows that each have a history, are cultural, are fluid in nature like trade, migrations and environmental changes, and security, and ultimately have led to new forms of governance. Borders and bordering processes are not territorial because the border is ultimately 'carried' by individuals, goods, and/or information (BIG Progress Report, p. 9).

While the terms "aterritorial" and "aterritoriality" (or "a-territorial" and "a-territoriality") emerged from the BIG project, the basic idea goes back further. See, for example:

Today, non territorial [sic] borders are not always located in borderlands, for instance processes of preclearance of goods or people may be done anywhere but at the boundary line where they often make the least sense. Then borders result from competing production and re-production practices that are fundamentally rooted in individual actions, themselves deeply rooted in economic, political and cultural interests and motivations (Brunet-Jailly 2011, p. 4).

Traces of this idea can also be found in Walters (2006), Muller (2008).

- 2 Breaking down the binary opposition of borders and migration is one of the aims of Carpenter, Kelly, and Schmidtke (forthcoming).

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