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The Growth and Trajectory of Border Studies: From Barriers to Bridges

Jamie Ferrill

This essay is part of the Special Section, ***Border Studies: Past, Present, and Future****, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Association for Borderlands Studies.*

Introduction

Our early understanding of borders, primarily focused on the static lines dividing state territories, has undergone a remarkable transformation thanks to extensive research and practice by a diverse group of scholars and practitioners alike. Border studies has grown into a vibrant, interdisciplinary field grappling with questions around inclusion, exclusion, identity, control, and power in our contemporary world. In a globalized world, the persistent, evolving, and proliferating nature of physical, social, cultural, and digital borders demands critical examination from this interdisciplinary field.

From the perspective of a former border security practitioner turned scholar, there is a certain reality to consider: that movement—or flows—across borders matters. How we understand these flows and the borders themselves varies. This submission explores the evolution of border studies, addressing some key approaches, such as how border studies fosters interdisciplinary dialogue across differences, how its core questions have shifted, what constitutes its object of study, how its impressive recent development occurred, what its potential disciplinary status might be, and the challenges it faces in the future.

Foundational Shifts: From Lines on Maps to Processes of Power

Early border scholarship, rooted in political geography and history, tended to treat borders as given territorial demarcations, focusing on their classification and role in state formation. Borders were seen primarily as a function of territory, often dictated by natural features such as the Nile River or political agreements like the Treaty of Westphalia, which established the state-centric model. This perspective viewed borders as containers that defined sovereignty and separated "us" and "them."

This "territorial trap"—the assumption of fixed, state-contained territories—has been extensively challenged. That is because, arguably, the territorial trap limits our understanding of transnational flows and of shifting power dynamics (Agnew 1994). What's more, territory is not a neutral backdrop but rather is (re)produced through social and political processes (Lefebvre 2012). To further nuance this, we can distinguish "territory" as a capability from "territoriality" as the state's legal construct, showing how the two can become misaligned, particularly under globalization (Sassen 2013). There is also the idea that concepts like

Jamie Ferrill, Charles Sturt University

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deterritorialization often miss the point by failing to grasp territory's modern conceptual basis in calculability and geometric space, a foundation shared by both states and global configurations (Elden 2005). The fact that space and territory are renegotiated due to geopolitics, climate change, digitization, public health crises, the (re)emergence of sub-state/supra-state/non-state actors, and illicit enterprises further challenges the trap.

Interdisciplinary Convergence and Evolving Questions

This theoretical ferment drew scholars from diverse fields, including sociology, anthropology, law, cultural studies, economics, climate science, criminology, and more, into the conversation. Border studies has become a rich site of interdisciplinary convergence, acknowledging that borders are simultaneously political, economic, social, and cultural phenomena. For instance, Brunet-Jailly (2005) proposed a model integrating market forces, multi-level government policies, local political clout, and borderland culture as key analytical lenses. This cross-pollination enriched the field, moving beyond state-centric views to incorporate perspectives on migration, identity, gender, and ethnicity as representations of flows and 'bottom-up' experiences in borderlands.

Consequently, the research agenda has shifted and expanded significantly. The focus has demonstrably moved away from borders as static lines towards bordering as a dynamic process of differentiation, inclusion, and exclusion (Newman 2006). What we study expanded from physical boundaries to encompass bordering practices, surveillance techniques, legal regimes, symbolic boundaries, embodied experiences, and the creation of 'borderscapes'—complex zones where territory, mobility, representation, and power intersect (Brambilla, 2015). The questions we ask have evolved too. Beyond traditional geopolitical concerns, we now investigate how borders are performed and experienced; the role of technology in surveillance and control; the impact of climate change on displacement and border pressures; the ethics of border regimes; and the complex relationship between security and mobility. From personal experience, the post-9/11 shift towards securitization, where the activities we police have reconfigured border controls, often blurs the line between internal and external security. This involves not just reinforcing the line but pushing controls outwards through practices such as pre-clearance and cross-border data sharing, and inwards through practices such as internal surveillance and intelligence (Andreas 2003).

Rapid Development, Disciplinary Status, and History of Ideas

The past few decades have been an interesting era for border studies, fuelled by events like the fall of the Berlin Wall, EU expansion, increased global migration, geopolitical conflict, the rise of transnational threats, and technological advancements. The patterns of these activities have been remarkable to track, and the epistemological shift they have demanded has not gone unnoticed. That is, there has been a shift from the spatial, territory-based logic of borders to an emerging spatial and mobile logic. Diverse philosophical postures have profoundly shaped the intellectual trajectory of the field, while diverse methodological approaches have been embraced.

Has border studies become its own discipline? Arguments can be made both ways. It possesses a distinct focus, dedicated research centres/institutes, journals, conferences, and increasingly specific methodologies. Yet, it remains deeply reliant on its contributing disciplines and lacks a single, universally accepted theoretical framework. Perhaps its strength lies precisely in this interdisciplinarity: its status as a dynamic intersection rather than a bounded field. Putting a border on border studies seems to do a disservice to the field. Given its expanse, border studies is certainly a recognized area for teaching and research program administration.

The Future: Enduring Relevance in a Bordered World

Looking ahead, border studies face critical challenges. Digital technologies are continuing to create new forms of bordering and surveillance. Climate change threatens to redraw coastlines and trigger mass displacement, pressuring existing borders. Pandemics highlight the tension between global interconnectedness and the need for border controls (Alden and Trautman 2025). The ethical implications of increasingly sophisticated surveillance, detention, and deportation practices demand scrutiny. The fundamental tension between facilitating flows and restricting movement will continue to shape border politics and practices.

The shift towards mobile, functional, and often extra-territorial security strategies, involving diverse state and non-state actors, is redefining control. Trust, reciprocity, and data analysis are becoming as crucial as physical barriers (Leuprecht et al. 2022). Borders are not disappearing; they are being reconfigured, multiplied,

and pushed outward and inward. Understanding these evolving lines of connection and division, and the power relations they embody, remains essential for navigating our complex, interconnected, yet persistently bordered world. What's more, the field of study should continue to welcome diverse views that help us think differently about the borders we shape and the borders that shape us. In the words of Newman (2006), "borders should be seen for their potential to constitute bridges and points of contact, as much as they have traditionally constituted barriers to movement and communication."

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