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Paradigm Shifts in Border Studies?

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

This paper is based on some observations that stem from a seminar that was organized on the occasion of the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research (NCBR) in 2019. The NCBR is a research centre that deals with the critical analysis of borders, migration and mobility, and cross-border cooperation.

The seminar focused on the then-recent past and envisioned the possible future for the field of border studies: What has changed recently in terms of thoughts, topics, political debates, concepts, paradigms, methods, and cases? And what could we expect, what should we focus on, or perhaps, what can we do more of, or what can we do better from now on? Although some time has passed since that seminar, many of the observations made at that time are still useful for current discussions on the possible shift in paradigms today.

For the seminar, four scholars were invited to deliver a keynote. Two of them, Anssi Paasi (University of Oulu) and James Scott (University of Eastern Finland), were already very active before the inception of the NCBR and have been working closely with the research centre since then. The others were two young(er) scholars who stayed at the NCBR during parts of their PhD research: Chiara Brambilla (University of Bergamo) and Amalia Campos-Delgado, a Mexican scholar who is currently affiliated with Leiden University in the Netherlands.

Anssi Paasi gave what he called a "biographic perspective on border studies" (Paasi 2022), drawing partly from his personal biography but, above all, from his viewpoint concerning the changing keywords of border studies and other border-related concepts, ideas, institutions and events. In his presentation, Paasi looked at these elements historically, identifying three different strands that generally characterize the evolution of border research: consolidating territory, internationalization and (cross-)border spaces, and social practice. A major task, according to Paasi, was to think and act beyond the existing theoretical and practical limitations of bordering practices and borders. This is regardless of whether it gives rise to open borders, to no borders, or leads to a borderless world (which Paasi thinks is different from "no borders" as states still exist). This task makes it necessary to continually look upon the ethical and moral issues related to bordering, debordering, and border (non-)crossing, and makes responding to them necessary as well.

The ethics and morality of borders and bordering were also major themes addressed by James Scott. He discussed the ethics of everyday borders (Scott 2020). Referring to current events at the time, i.e., Trump's border wall, Hungary's closure of its borders to migrants, Scott raised the question of how we, as scholars, should respond to these policies. Do we have to become activists in both societal and academic discussions on borders? Or can we stay in our relatively comfortable armchairs as observers and analysts? He also addressed the issue of the relation between borders and the 'bordered'. Borders change, but so do the objects they limit. In other words, borders, their functioning, and their understanding are to be considered as explicitly relational phenomena and as evolutionary.

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Both Chiara Brambilla and Amalia Campos-Delgado moved away from the more traditional state- and nation-based interpretation of borders. Chiara put the process of bordering centre stage and elaborated on her key notion in studying borders, to wit, borderscaping, a concept that explicitly brings the material-physical into contact with more abstract notions of bordering. In her interpretation, borderscaping creates sites of struggle, where borders are markers of identity and borderscapes are places of becoming. Aesthetics and creativity are thus becoming important issues as well. She does proclaim to take a more activist stance in border studies, organizing projects (especially with young people) that contribute to mutual understanding and create, as she called it, "horizons of hope" (Brambilla 2023).

Amalia discussed transit control regimes, especially in Central America, again addressing the ethical issues. She used a de-territorial notion of borders, meaning that these regimes are basically an externalization of border control beyond the traditional territorial-national border (Campos-Delgado 2023). It is a new form of "border outsourcing," something that happens in many regions around the world. Campos-Delgado discussed the (policy) practices of these regimes, showing that the unease of managing irregular migration is now being transferred to non-destination countries. Additionally, she promoted the use of a cognitive mapping methodology, putting an emphasis on seeing the world through the lens of migrants (Campos-Delgado, 2018). Campos-Delgado considered the strength of cognitive mapping as a form of counter-mapping to be that it deepens our understanding of the embodiment and symbolization of the lived experience, thereby putting the migrant first.

So, from this seminar and other recent experiences, we would like to take four key issues or ideas that might be important for future border research and studies.

First, borders, or maybe better, the consequences of borders, can be considered constantly moving and in motion and are part of and also themselves evolutionary processes.

Second, borders are clearly relational and multi-scalar, so horizontal as well as vertical constructs, and have to be studied this way.

Furthermore, borders and border practices have become increasingly imbued with intense ethical issues, which have implications for border studies and the positionality of border scholars.

And finally, there is the issue of the supposed changing territoriality of borders. Some borders seem to be moving away from the traditional, territorial state-centric interpretation, whereas in other cases, the reverse seems to happen. Whether or not they are already or becoming a-territorial, or are in a process of re-territorializing, remains to be seen. As many of the supposedly "relocated" border functions still find their legitimacy linked to certain territorial bodies (countries, trade associations, etc.), it may be better to speak of trans-territorial borders. As with "regional" transnationalism, where mobile people take and maintain their identities in new contexts, the cultures and behaviour taken from the location of origin to other places function similarly. Ideas and the operations of borders are transposed from the location of origin and exercised in other places (whether physical or not).

Whether all of this is leading to a paradigm shift remains to be seen and is therefore left open for discussion.

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