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Border Studies: Paradigms, Methods and the Road Ahead

Sergio Peña

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

The objective of this reflection is to explore the transformation of border scholarship through time and to identify relevant inflection points in the process of knowledge production. The discussion revolves around three research dimensions: theories, units of analysis, and methods.

Theories

Thomas Kuhn's (1997) ideas of **paradigm shift and paradigm competition** can serve as a platform to set up the discussion. Border studies in its infancy relied heavily on theories coming from the field of political science, particularly international relations (IR) theory. Theories derived from geography were also relevant to border studies. The fields of geopolitics and IR offered the conceptual tools needed to explain how modern borders were created by the Westphalian world order and how their meaning derives from sovereignty. Realist and neo-realist theories explained why nations go to war, form alliances, make territorial acquisitions, and make and remake borders. Geography explained the borders as natural and cultural phenomena; *demos* and space were twined to explain borders as homogeneous containers of economic, demographic, and cultural processes. Agnew (1994) labelled this latter paradigm the **territorial trap** and called the main tenets of this approach state-centric, whereby borders are naturalized and seen as a "thing" rather than a human-made outcome.

The emergence of **globalization and the fall of the Soviet Union** set the stage for the revitalization and exploration of border theories from different disciplines. One of the earliest debates was if there was a theory of borders and whether scholars needed it to develop one (Paasi 2011). Kuhn's idea was that when a theory is unable to explain new phenomena in a convincing way, then alternative theories emerge. Thus, border theory experienced "paradigm competition" when trying to move forward from the "territorial trap." Paradigm competition fostered an important number of theories that derived from the field of economics regarding economic integration, trade, and the process of "debordering." The creation of the EU not only brought "grand social theories" but also "mid-range theories" to explain issues such as cooperation and cross-border governance (Faludi 2013). Critical theory also produced important work reflecting on globalization and the new international division of labour, and on debordering as a re-functionalization of space to guarantee capital accumulation. The concepts of "othering, ordering and bordering" (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002) highlight the idea that the state is still present in bordering processes and practices. The theory of borderscapes is another example of explaining bordering from the margins and social struggle. Finally, there is the Foucauldian approach of borders and biopolitics.

Units of Analysis

Exploring the unit(s) of analysis that border scholars employ is another way to explain the past, present, and future of border research. I argue that **we have moved from macro- to micro-units of analysis, from structures to agency**; the shift in the scale of the unit of analysis has enhanced our understanding of borders, actors, and bordering practices in a more nuanced way.

The classical theory of territorialism explained borders from a state-centric perspective (Agnew 1994)

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and as a structure. As Agnew stated, the state was conceived as a political structure that existed before society rather than being a social product of society itself. Globalization theories were among the first to make us aware of the emergence of non-governmental actors and processes that had as much power as the state for re-bordering and de-bordering processes. Globalization forced us to investigate units of analysis such as flows in the form of foreign direct investment (FDI), multinational corporations (MNC), trade, migration, and mobility, among others. Critical theory also made an important contribution by paying attention to units of analysis that emphasized social issues such as exclusion, exploitation, gender, struggle, class, and race in re-bordering and de-bordering processes, making us aware of agency and power. An important contribution of border studies was also the analysis of local agents and the way they overcome, transgress, and transcend the border in their daily lives. Foucault and his theory of biopolitics led us to conceptualize the "body" and corporealization as practices of bordering; the border and the body are coupled, and people carry the border with them, which led us to propose the idea of mobility and "borders everywhere," or borders as a-territorial.

Methods

Methodology is the last aspect I want to discuss. I argue that our methodological tools have expanded and diversified; in addition to classical positivist methodologies, constructivist and postmodern methods have made their way into our border research.

Positivist methods have been present and are still relevant to our research tools. There are two sets of positivist methods that I consider relevant for border studies. The field of IR has produced an important number of quantitative methods; for instance, the Correlates of War project has been an important database for testing different ideas about why nations go to war, form alliances, etc. In this approach, borders are incorporated as control variables or as a measure of spatial contiguity. International economics has also made an important contribution, particularly the use of the gravity model, which forecasts cross-border flows of different sorts.

Constructivist and postmodern methods have won ground in our research scholarship. Qualitative research includes content analysis, case study, hermeneutics, semiotics, deconstructivism, participant observation, grounded research, and storytelling, among other methods. These methodologies have helped us understand in more depth the symbolic importance of borders and the intersubjectivity in the construction of narratives that are contextual. The facts about the border are analyzed not only through hard and objective data, but the border is also analyzed through communication; in short, a turn to the communicative aspect of borders. Other areas in the humanities, such as literature, poetry, film, etc., are beginning to emerge in border research.

The Future of Border Research

The emergence in recent years of Trump and right-wing authoritarian regimes sets the stage for rethinking border theory. Trump and Putin are challenging the neoliberal world order that globalization built. Today, there is uncertainty about the world order that will emerge. The emergence of a new kind of world order, which for lack of a better term I will call NEOIMPERIALISM, makes us reflect on whether border scholars will have to delve back into our old conceptual tools of geopolitics and neorealism.

So, I want to close this section with the question about the future. Will neo-imperialism bring back state-centric approaches? Using Bauman's (2000) idea, can we say that we are going to reflect once again on the "solid institutions" rather than the liquid world and borders? Last but not least, we need to think about borders not as linear in time and evolving progressively (Martinez 1997), but rather as something that regresses. Reflect on time not only in a chronological way but also as social time (Lefebvre 2013), where borders are made by cultural practices and people differ from those of the Westphalian world.

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