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ESSAY
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Integrating Political and Social Perspectives in Border Studies: A Focus on Sense-Making

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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.*

The evolutionary character of border studies is evidenced by the continuous expansion of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and even post-disciplinary approaches. As a result, a greater appreciation of the complexity of borders has emerged that enriches our understanding of space-society relations. I will argue that possible future directions for border studies lie in establishing closer links between political, territorial, social, and affective understandings of borders in order to reflect the centrality of borders in everyday life. One way of achieving this is by focusing attention on cognitive processes. While the cognitive sciences are a vast field of research and involve many theoretical and empirical aspects that are rather distant from the social sciences and humanities, there is nonetheless a clear connection between cognition and "sense-making" and the ways in which borders are constructed, perceived, and transcended (Tateo and Marsico 2019). Echoing the bordering and borderscapes paradigms, but from a biologist's perspective on the bases of cognition, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980) focused on the human propensity and need to *create categories of distinction* and relationality between spaces. The central borders-related premise of cognition is that without borders, relational thinking about the world and the development of meaningful agency in the world would hardly be possible (Malpas 2012). Boundedness is hence an essential element of space-society relationships and is central to stabilizing ways of knowing the world.

The link to cognition is essentially a way of thinking about borders in terms of the ways they provide meaning to individual and collective experience. Sense-making elements of the everyday are expressed, for example, in the form of narratives, images, and art, giving rise to productive dialogues between the humanities and social sciences. Specifically, concepts such as 'border-crossing' and 'border-thinking,' as well as narrative approaches to understanding how borders are created in everyday contexts, help reveal the interrelated nature of—and tension between—ontological, territorial, and social place-making. Moreover, borders as sense-makers are very much linked to ontological security and psychological processes of broad political significance. Consequently, focusing on cognition and meaning-making does not suggest an abandonment of critical perspectives on borders. Border-making is an intersubjective process embedded within specific social relations and socio-cultural contexts, and is therefore a cognitive process that is ontological, political, as well as emotional.

Cognitive borders can indeed be highly abstract in physical terms, but they are rather concrete in terms of categories of distinction and difference that inform politically salient identity constructions. Recent events have reminded us of the close relationship between cultural environments, social backgrounds, and political beliefs in constructing socio-political categories

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of "us" and "them." Political and cultural cognition, as well as attempts to minimize disruptive cognitive dissonance, help explain, among other things, seemingly irrational voting patterns (Bornschler et al. 2021; Jenke and Huettel 2016). Scholarship in the field of political psychology has, for quite some time, emphasized the significance of place and place boundaries as markers of politically salient identities (Hopkins and Dixon 2006). Indeed, the recent surge in electoral support for right-wing parties in several countries reminds us of the close relationship between cultural environments, social backgrounds, and political beliefs. In terms of political psychology, social, and to a significant extent, territorial boundedness is also expressed in phenomena such as 'enclave deliberation' (Sunstein 2002) or group polarization leading to more extreme political views. This self-referential bounding can produce both political 'Balkanization' and the empowerment of marginalized groups who, through enclave deliberation, succeed in achieving greater visibility (Gronland, Herne, and Setala 2015).

The bordering salience of political psychology is not only recognized by scholars within mainstream academia, but the use of borders as a mobilization of existential (in)securities has received considerable media attention. The urgency of understanding the mechanisms through which political and social borders are linked is underscored by the dangers of right-wing populist (RWP) border-making practices and the ways in which RWP conflates political, social and cultural borders. Given the uncertainties that characterize the present global situation, we need tools that help us comprehend the workings of the borders that are around us, within us, and those we constantly make. Such knowledge might help us break with monological obsessions with identity and consider borders not only as barriers but as spaces of opportunity. Identities emerge on and at borders not as binary oppositions but rather as multiple subjectivities that interact in very dynamic spaces. This is privileged thinking because, despite the vulnerability and struggles that underpin being "at the border," it is a way of thinking that provides a space for both self-creation and, more broadly, the disruption of simplistic narratives of difference. Thinking about and reflecting on the fact that crossing borders is a central aspect of our lives could be a powerful resource for awareness, learning, greater tolerance, and understanding of complex social realities. It entails the prospect of expanding our own borders to encompass new ideas, experiences, and possibilities. Future research along these lines could advance the interdisciplinary state of the art through greater dialogue between the humanities, social sciences, cognitive sciences and health sciences. Such scholarship could also help explain to a wider audience why research on border studies matters in practical terms by indicating how illiberal and anti-democratic appropriations of borders can be anticipated and countered.

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