Borders in Globalization Review
Volume 7, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2026): 11–13
https://doi.org/10.18357/big_r72202622810

ESSAY
SPECIAL SECTION

The Changing Dynamics of Lines, Fences, and Neighbours: Reflections on Fifty Years of Border Studies

David Newman

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

Border studies has come a long way over the past fifty years, and this is evidenced by the diverse but complementary short essays that are presented in this forum. Reflecting back on a halfway point in the development of this dynamic academic sub-discipline (see references), it is possible to see what came before and what has emerged during the past two decades. Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the study of borders focused almost exclusively on the physical walls and barriers that separated states from one another in what appeared, at the time, to be a very slowly changing system. Borders were demarcated and fixed by governments, either as a result of bilateral agreements or imposed at the end of wars and conflicts; they were mostly fortified and controlled, and they represented a system of territorial order within the international system.

Three decades after the end of World War II, the world seemed more harmonious and stable than at any time during the past century. This resulted in a political contingency which allowed for the "opening" of borders and an era of rapprochement. The breaking down of the Iron Curtain, epitomized by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the creation of a single Schengen European Union external border in place of the many internal state borders were indications of greater flexibility and fluidity in the way in which we understood and negotiated the lines separating States.

At the same time, the rise of globalization theory, the relatively free flow of global capital, and the impact of the internet and cyberspace for the dissemination of information and knowledge all pointed towards a breakdown of the barrier function of borders and, in turn, led to the "borderless world" discourse, which envisioned a world in which the role and significance of borders decreased.

For some however, this seemed to ignore the continuing importance of borders, not only in the international system, but also the way in which many types of borders, at a variety of social, spatial and political scales, continued to play an important role in the daily lives of each and every individual along with the continued imposition of order and hierarchy in our lives (Newman and Paasi 1998). With the exception of " world citizens" who travelled constantly and freely throughout the globe—a group which includes the majority of western academics, a group which was largely responsible for positing the borderless world theories—borders continued to be a demarcator of national identities, enabling the power elites, governments, and states to continue to manage the world in what was a changing, but still existing system of sovereignty and control (Kolossov 2012; Newman 2006b; Paasi 2012). Westphalia may have been a European understanding of territorial sovereignty, but it has continued (and many would argue continues) to underlie the system of global geopolitics, even if and when the functional dynamics of the border in many places have undergone substantial change.

A rejection of the absolute notion of a borderless world gave rise to a renewed interest in the study and understanding of contemporary borders. Crossing its own disciplinary boundaries, border studies moved beyond the interest of political scientists and political geographers to encompass a range of disciplines, from sociology to anthropology, from legal studies and the

David Newman, Ben-Gurion University

Creative Commons
CC-BY-NC 4.0

social sciences to the humanities, to include the ways in which borders are represented through images, literature, and the arts, enabling a greater understanding of how borders are negotiated from the bottom up, rather than just from a top-down governmental perspective (Brunet-Jailly 2005; Newman 2006a).

Over this period, some important myths surrounding borders have been debunked.

1. Borders are as much social, cultural, and vertical categories as they are territorial and spatial. They separate the diverse, complex group belongings of each and every one of us, as governments and policymakers attempt to order and manage society through simplified compartmentalization, each with its own rules of delimitation. Economic, religious, and cultural positioning on one side of a border or the other impacts our daily lives far more than the physical and territorial borders separating states and regions from one another.

2. Borders are not simply the physical, unchanging lines found on the map but are functional, dynamic geopolitical features in their own right. They are as much inputs into changing social and political categorization as they are outputs, and the change occurs with much greater rapidity than was traditionally accepted.

3. The almost unstated binary assumption is that the "opening" of borders is "good," as contrasted with the closing of borders or the construction of new ones as being "bad." While the breaking down of borders—be they social or territorial—reflects a coming together of people and ideas, a celebration rather than the fear of difference, it did not altogether remove the previous mantra that "good fences make good neighbours." Marking one's own national or personal spaces may constitute an important part of what enables neighbourliness and mutual understanding to take place, as a part of a gradual coming together of groups which had been separated, and perhaps lived in fear of each other, over a long period of time as a result of the artificial political, economic, and social categories which had been created and maintained. The opening of borders—be it physical or through cross-border cyberspace—has clearly demonstrated how such fear or "suspicion" of the cross-border other is largely due to a lack of knowledge in an era when borders could still constitute a barrier function to the dissemination of information.

4. The social construction of borders cannot be explained without a deeper understanding of the sources and the roles of power elites (Newman 2003). The coming together of the geo- and the political is as relevant to the opening of borders as it is to their closing and sealing. Border management, delimitation, and control can only be understood through an acceptance that those in power require such societal and spatial compartmentalization as a means of maintaining hierarchy and order, while challenges to the existing hierarchical structures invariably require a breaking down of the borders and replacing them with a new set of lines rather than their total obliteration.

Political contingencies have continued to change through the past four decades during which border studies has risen to prominence. We are living in a world that is witnessing the construction of new walls and barriers to an extent that was previously unknown, a world that has become more dangerous and more threatening than anything we knew in the decades following World War II and which we, perhaps naively, believed signalled the new world order.

The renaissance and growth of border studies from a small subcategory within political geography during the 1960s and 1970s, which did little more than typologize and categorize different types of state borders (Jones 1959; Minghi 1963), to a field in which the study and practice of borders has crossed its own borders, from the spatial to the social/cultural, and from the personal through the local to the global, is a leap of quantum proportions, no longer recognizable as the same discipline. We should not forget the important contributions of scholars from a previous generation, such as Victor Prescott, Gerald Blake and Julian Minghi, without whom the foundations would not have been in place. Not only has border studies experienced exponential growth, as evidenced by conferences, research projects, and publications on almost every aspect of the topic, but it has taken on a diversity of subtopics which more closely reflect the complex world in which we live. In short, border studies has indeed transformed into the ultimate form of cross-border disciplinary analysis, lacking any single or unified theory, and offering much potential to a new generation of border students and scholars.

Works Cited

Brunet-Jailly, Emmanuel. 2005. "Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective." Geopolitics 10 (4): 633–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500318449

Jones, Stephen B. 1959. "Boundary Concepts in the Setting of Place and Time." Annals of the Association of American Geographers 49 (3): 241–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1959.tb01611.x

Kolossov, Vladimir. 2005. "Border Studies: Changing Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches." Geopolitics 10 (4): 606–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500318415

Minghi, Julian V. 1963. "Boundary Studies in Political Geography." Annals of the Association of American Geographers 53 (3): 407–28. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1963.tb00457.x

Newman, David. 2003. "On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework." Journal of Borderlands Studies 18 (1): 13–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2003.9695598

Newman, David. 2006a. "Borders and Bordering: Towards an Interdisciplinary Dialogue." European Journal of Social Theory 9 (2): 171–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006063331

Newman, David. 2006b. "The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in Our Borderless World." Progress in Human Geography 30 (2): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132506ph599xx

Newman, David, and Anssi Paasi. 1998. "Fences and Neighbours in the Post-Modern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography." Progress in Human Geography 22 (2): 186–207. https://doi.org/10.1191/030913298666039113

Paasi, Anssi. 2005. "Generations and the 'Development' of Border Studies." Geopolitics 10 (4): 663–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500318563