ESSAY
SPECIAL SECTION

Borders in Globalization Review
Volume 7, Issue 2 (Spring & Summer 2026): 52–53
https://doi.org/10.18357/big_r72202622811

From Mono- and Diachronic Border Studies to Border Studies Shaped by Temporalities

Birte Wassenberg

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

In the field of border studies, historians have traditionally relied on temporalities as a way of either retracing the historical development of borders and borderlands or comparing them across different time periods.

On the one hand, the monochronic view of temporalities starts from the idea that borders are "time written in space" (Kavanagh 2000) and that border studies retrace representations and practices of (national) borders from the past to the present, depending on where the border is situated in space. The monochronic view follows the shifting demarcation lines of national borders, which, since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, have become the visible limits of state sovereignty and have been constantly displaced throughout history through territorial claims, border disputes, and wars (Brunet-Jailly 2005). When linked with European integration studies, this also means retracing the development of cross-border cooperation in borderlands since the end of the Second World War (Beck and Wassenberg, 2009–2014). On the other hand, diachronic border studies compare border functionalities, perceptions, and cross-border practices at a given border during distinct historical periods, for example, before or after the First World War, in the interwar period, or post-Second World War. This allows for the temporal explanation of contested borders between neighbouring states throughout history as well as the transfer of cultural heritage and social practices in cross-border regions (Lane 2015). When applied to the case study of the Franco–German border, a diachronic approach to temporalities means, for example, comparing the practice of border controls between Strasbourg and Kehl at different periods in time and analyzing them in light of their respective historical context. Indeed, in 1921, the observations of Ernest Hemingway on border crossings between Strasbourg and Kehl reveal the endeavours of the French to affirm the (re)conquest of Alsace and to protect the new line of the Franco-German border by imposing harsh border controls on Germans (Hemingway 2022). The contrast with the post-1995 situation is evident when border controls were abolished in the Schengen space, and mobility between Strasbourg and Kehl became a daily reality with the border being literally "invisible" (Denni 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, when hermetic border closures were reintroduced in almost all Schengen countries, the practice of border controls between Strasbourg and Kehl largely resembled that of the interwar period observed by Hemingway (Berrod 2020).

Whereas monochronic and diachronic approaches to temporalities in border studies account for border demarcations, cross-border practices and relations in light of their historical context and the development from the past to the present, they do not allow us to explain how and why the present situation of borders and borderlands is still marked by the past and to what extent this determines their future. More recently, historians have therefore underlined that the analysis of temporalities with regard to border studies needs to look at the simultaneous interrelations between the past, present and future (Jaschik et al. 2024). In order to determine how border practices and perceptions are shaped by temporalities, the role of memory is crucial (Pfoser 2022). Indeed, the memory of reconciliation at the border between France and Germany has, for example, been identified as essential by many key witnesses

Birte Wassenberg, University of Strasbourg

Creative Commons
CC-BY-NC 4.0

of the borderland (Hamman and Wassenberg 2021). The Franco–German cross-border region illustrates well how cross-border practices are continually shaped by the narrative of reconciliation, which also constitutes the basis for the construction of a future (trans-national) identity (Wassenberg 2023). In the Garden of Two Rivers, the area alongside the Rhine between Strasbourg and Kehl, the practice of crossing the so-called "friendship bridge" is like a pathway through the temporalities of Franco-German reconciliation from the past to the present, reaching out into the future: it is the illustration of the "healed" border, the transformation of the border as a "scar of history" (Mozer 1973) into a place of encounter and future connections.

In an approach where temporalities are not only used as tools to explain the history of borders and borderlands, but where they become an inherent element shaping border studies, the interrelation of past, present and future is viewed differently. Indeed, in the daily reality of border regions, the separation between the past, present and future might be blurred, and temporalities of borders might coexist in space, in representations and discourses, and in the cross-border practices of borderlanders. The time of border temporalities might therefore have to be considered in all its dimensions at once: the past, the present and the future (Beckert 2016). This phenomenon has already been largely emphasized by border studies scholars, who realized that even when a state border disappears, it might still be represented in the collective memory, in the landscape, and in architecture as a so-called "phantom border" (von Hirschhausen et al. 2019). The fact that the temporalities of borders might encompass not only the remnants of past state borders in the present, but also the borders of the future, is well illustrated by the case of the Euro-district Strasbourg-Kehl. For example, in the Garden of the Two Rivers on the French side, there are mainly monuments referring to the Second World War, including a place to commemorate the liberation of the city Strasbourg by the Allies in 1945 and a French tank Cherbourg that is placed in front of a kindergarden. On the German side, a statue of reconciliation created by a young artist in 2003 symbolizes the present of the reconciled cross-border space and even points to the future imagination of an open and "friendly" border (Centre Jean Monnet 2025).

When investigating temporalities in border studies, there is not necessarily an obligation to choose between a monochronic and a diachronic approach, nor to focus on temporalities as an element that shapes border studies. Both approaches can be used even simultaneously, depending on the objective pursued by the research. It therefore remains crucial to investigate the chronology of the past in order to explain the present situation of borders and borderlands, while it is also important to demonstrate that the past, present and future are decisive elements forging the reality of (cross)-border relations.

Works Cited

Beckert, Jens. 2016. *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Beck, Joachim, and Birte Wassenberg, eds. 2009–2014. *Living and Researching Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe*. 6 vols. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Berrod, Frédérique, Morgane Chovet, and Birte Wassenberg. 2020. "La frontière franco-allemande au temps du COVID-19: la fin d'un espace commun." *Bordering in Pandemic Times: Insights into the COVID-19 Lockdown*, Special Issue, UniGR-CBS: 39–43. https://ubt.opus.hbz-nrw.de/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/1428/file/UniGR-CBS_Borders+in+Perspective_thematic+issue_Vol.+4.pdf

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

Centre Jean Monnet. 2025. "Borderwalk 3." https://centre-jean-monnet.unistra.fr/2024/04/09/borderwalk-3/

Denni, Karen. 2008. *Rheinüberschreitungen, Grenzüberwindungen: Die deutsch-französische Grenze und ihre Rheinbrücken (1861–2006)*. Konstanz: UVK,

Hamman, Philippe, and Birte Wassenberg. 2021. *Mémoire d'Europe-mémoire de paix. Témoignages de la région frontalière d'Alsace*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Hemingway, Ernest. 1922. "Crossing to Germany a Way to Make Money." *Toronto Daily Star*. September 19, 1922.

Jaschik, Johanna, Machteld Venken, and Birte Wassenberg. 2024. "Introduction: Border Temporalities In and Beyond Europe." Special issue, *Borders in Globalization Review* 6 (1): 8–14. https://doi.org/10.18357/bigr61202427686

Kavanagh, William. 2000. "The Past on the Line: The Use of Oral History in the Construction of Present-Day Changing Identities on the Portuguese-Spanish Border." *Ethnologia Europaea* 30 (2): 47–56. https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845295671-237

Laine, Jussi P. 2015. "A Historical View on the Study of Borders." In *Introduction to Border Studies,* edited by Sergie V. Sevastianov, Jussi P. Laine, and Anton A. Kireev, 12–33. Vladivostok: Dalnauka.

Mozer, Alfred. 1973. "Entwicklungspolitik zu Hause." *Entwicklungsregionen in der EWG*. Schriften der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. Bonn.

Pfoser, Alena (2022). "Memory and Everyday Borderwork: Understanding Border Temporalities." *Geopolitics* 27 (2): 566-83. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1830761

Von Hirschhausen, Béatrice, Hannes Grandits, Claudia Kraft, Dietmar Müller, Thomas Serrier. 2019. "Phantom Borders in Eastern Europe". *Slavic Review* 78 (2): 368–89. http://doi.org/ 10.1017/slr.2019.93

Wassenberg, Birte. 2023. "Die Auswirkungen der Covid-19 Pandemie auf den Eurodistrikt Strasbourg-Kehl/ Ortenaukreis: Von Ressentiments zur Europäischen Solidarität und grenzüberschreitenden Innovation." In *Pandemisches Virus-nationales Handeln. Covid-19 und die europäische Idee*, edited by Dominik Brodowski, Jonas Nesselhauf, and Florian Weber. Springer, Wiesbaden, 171–93. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-37808-0_10