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ESSAY
SPECIAL SECTION

Leveraging Border Studies: Some Ideas in Favour of Mobilizing Knowledge in Ways that Matter

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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.*

Borders have acquired a central position in the social and political transformation of the world and in the daily life of many people. Despite the mounting attention paid to borders and the ever-increasing complexity and differentiation of them in a great deal of recent academic writing, outside of academia, borders continue to be conceived of and treated in a somewhat simplistic way. It therefore appears that the increased production of academic knowledge on borders has only been put to practical use on limited occasions. Against this background, the aim of this short commentary is to initiate a discussion on what could shape the future agenda of border studies and suggest some arguments in favour of leveraging the field's relevance and impact.

As an interdisciplinary field, border studies has flourished, as evidenced by growing numbers of scholars, programs, publications, and conferences. Conceptual and theoretical expansions have helped reveal the dynamic, multifaceted nature of borders. Yet, this recognition often marks the endpoint rather than the starting point of inquiry. We argue that acknowledging border complexity should not conclude the research process but instead should serve as a call to action. To meet the challenges that borders present, we must move beyond describing complexity to mobilizing knowledge in ways that matter, both within and beyond academia.

From Critique to Constructive Engagement

The openness of border studies has enabled the field to absorb diverse theories, especially those countering state-centric paradigms. Critical border studies, cultural studies, and related fields have led the way in offering constructivist, fluid, and post-territorial understandings. While these approaches have been pivotal, their emphasis on critique can limit engagement with material and institutional realities. Some empirical approaches, focused on explaining border-related processes, often remain disconnected from more abstract theoretical frameworks. Concepts from border theory may be seen as too diffuse or inoperable in policy-oriented contexts.

Instead of settling for this divide, we propose that border studies has the potential to bridge critical insight and practical relevance. One promising pathway is through a postcritical turn, not a rejection of critique, but a way to supplement it with new interpretative practices (Anker and Felski 2017; Latour 2004, 2010). Such a reassessment of critique must challenge the dominance of deconstruction by fostering constructive, affirmative and reparative modes of knowledge as well as influence conversations in the public sphere. The emergence and vigour of a number of hybrid positions,

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eschewing the traditional separation between fact and value, the conceptual and the empirical, and the descriptive and the performative, signal such a broader intellectual shift in the humanities and social sciences. The move toward post-critical border studies could therefore reflect an effort to go beyond critique and engage with the material, technological, and institutional realities of bordering.

Engaging Beyond the Academy

Enhancing the impact of border studies also requires deeper engagement with audiences outside academia. Initiatives like the Borders in Globalization (BIG) network show that collaboration between researchers and non-academic stakeholders is possible, yet such cases remain exceptional. The gap between knowledge and its practical application continues to widen, in part because policy processes follow their own logic and timelines.

To address this issue, simply producing better evidence appears insufficient (von Winterfeldt 2013). As Langer, Tripney, and Gough (2016) suggest, academic efforts must account for how policymakers use knowledge, not just how it is produced. Border studies should therefore aim not just to inform decisions but to shape the values and assumptions that underpin them. This requires a cultural shift: researchers must move beyond linear models of knowledge transfer and instead embrace co-production of knowledge. That means involving stakeholders such as policy actors, practitioners, and local communities from the outset. Constructive disagreement between scholars and decision-makers can yield more robust and relevant outcomes than consensus alone.

Centering Everyday Experience

Equally important is sustained attention to those who live near and traverse borders. Border scholars have revealed how official narratives often clash with the lived experiences of borderlanders (Megoran 2012). These bottom-up perspectives challenge hegemonic assumptions in policymaking, media, and academic discourse alike.

By incorporating these everyday narratives into research design—and not just its outputs—border studies can become more reflexive and inclusive. Participatory and community-based methods, such as living labs and citizen science, can help decenter the researcher and invite co-creation with those directly affected by border regimes. Programs such as the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) Cross-Border Schools demonstrate how such engagement fosters meaningful dialogue between academics, policymakers, and communities. These collaborations help uncover forms of everyday resistance and agency that often go unnoticed.

Toward a Reflexive and Participatory Turn

Bridging theory and practice requires both epistemic humility and methodological innovation. Reflexivity about researchers' own positionality, assumptions, and impacts is essential. Participatory approaches, which invite stakeholders into the research process, create space for new forms of subjectivity, political agency, and resistance to emerge. Such work must account for the diverse actors involved in border-making: migrants, civil society, officials, and local residents. Their interwoven "borderwork" contests simplistic representations and opens new avenues for theorizing border regimes.

Conclusions: Towards a Hybrid Turn

Border studies, long grounded in its interdisciplinary foundations across political geography, international relations, sociology, anthropology, and critical theory, is undergoing a significant paradigmatic reorientation. The emergence of a post-critical or hybrid approach signals not a rejection of earlier critical insights, but rather an expansion of the field's epistemological and methodological horizons. This shift manifests in three interrelated developments.

First, there is a movement *from deconstruction to reconstruction.* While critical border studies has been instrumental in revealing the contingent, constructed, and exclusionary nature of borders, the hybrid turn re-engages with their material, institutional, and operational dimensions. This includes renewed attention to questions of territoriality, security and governance, particularly in light of the persistence and in many regions the resurgence of hard borders and physical enclosures.

Second, the field is increasingly concerned with *bridging theoretical divides*. Rather than situating itself in strict opposition to state-centric or realist paradigms, contemporary border studies is beginning to synthesize critical and empirical approaches. This integrative stance allows for greater analytical flexibility, incorporating elements of geopolitics and policy analysis while maintaining a sustained focus on power asymmetries, structural inequalities, and the diverse forms of resistance that border regimes generate.

Third, there is a growing *emphasis on praxis*. The hybrid paradigm encourages greater engagement with policy-relevant and applied research, addressing urgent real-world challenges such as migration crises, climate-induced displacement, and the expansion of AI and biometric technologies in border management. In this way, the field is not only expanding its theoretical scope but also enhancing its capacity to contribute

meaningfully to contemporary debates and interventions. Together, these shifts reflect a maturing of border studies, a field that remains critically grounded yet increasingly attuned to the complex, hybrid nature of borders in the twenty-first century.

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