

Communicating Borders

Martin van der Velde and Henk van Houtum*

Introduction

“When we meet.” This was the original title of a conference (changed later to “Communicating Borders”) that was organized in Nijmegen (The Netherlands) in September 2002. This titled tries to capture the two main objectives for organizing the conference: (1) to discuss borders as places where people from different regions meet and interact; (2) to facilitate a dialogue between scientists from all over the world dealing with borders, border-regions and border-related issues. Whether these objectives were met is for you to judge based on the contributions in this special issue, but the preconditions for a dialogue were present, witnessing the continental composition of the participants.¹

This special issue summarizes the main outcomes of the conference sessions. It distinguishes itself from the special issues² and edited volumes on border related themes that have been published in recent years (Ganster (2001); Van Geenhuizen and Ratti (2001); Meinhof (2002); Perkmann and Sum (2002) and Berg and Van Houtum (2003)). These special issues focus on specific topics or themes within the realm of border research. This special issue is not so much topical; here the emphasis lies on the differences in approaching the several themes within border-studies.

The first part of this introduction will address some of the differences we observe between Europe and North America when dealing with border studies. Our observations are partly based on participation in several conferences, seminars and meetings both in Europe and the U.S. Furthermore our co-editorship of the *Journal of Borderland Studies (JBS)* also provides us with useful insights into the way cross-border issues are dealt with and which topics are the center of interest, of course keeping in mind that we still are embedded in a European context.

Reflections from a European Border Scholar

To start, please look at the four pictures on the following page (Figures 1 and 2). What differences do you see? These four pictures were taken at the outer border of the European Union (EU), in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on the African continent, and at the inner border of the NAFTA-region at the San Diego-Tijuana border.

It would be interesting to play the game: “Find the ten differences.” At first glance there seems to be a striking resemblance in the pictures. Even the colors of the border patrol cars are similar. From this, one might come to the provisional conclusion that there are lessons to be learned from each regarding the other. However, a major distinc-

*Van der Velde and Van Houtum are co-editors of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, and are at the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research at the University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

tion is that the U.S.-Mexican border is an inner border of a continental trading bloc, whereas the EU-Moroccan border is an outer border. This is not visible in the pictures.

Figure 1. The Ceuta-Morocco Border

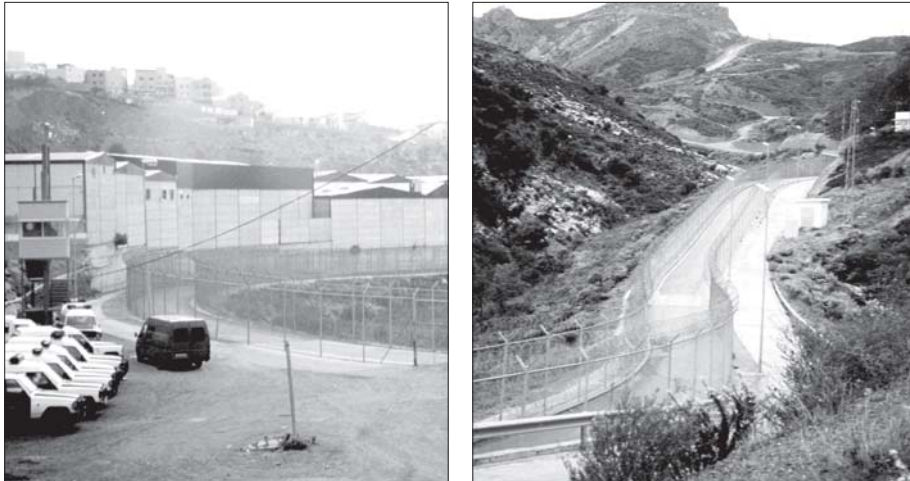
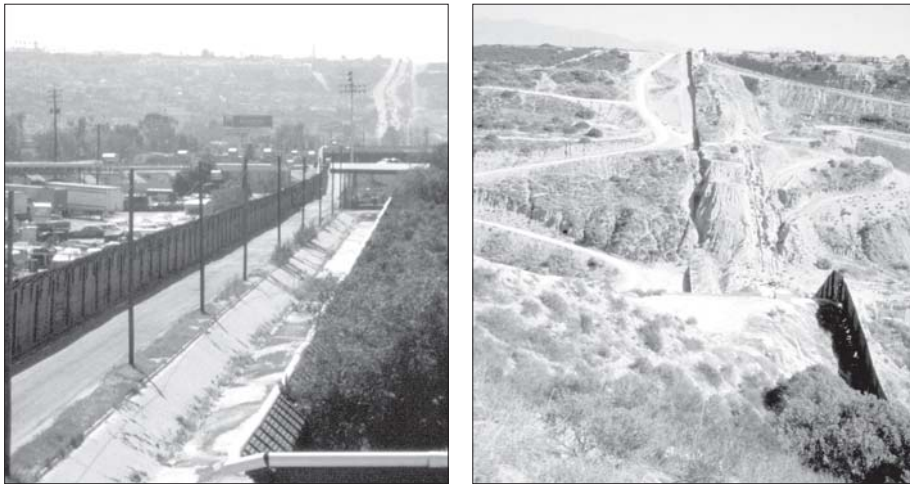


Figure 2. The San Diego-Tijuana Border



Traditionally American scholars look at the European integration process and its consequences for inner borders as examples for the U.S.-Mexico border situation. Hansen (1985) stated that the U.S. and Mexico should be able to derive mutual benefits from the lessons of the European experience, because, although there are obvious differences between European and U.S.-Mexico border situations, there also are many significant similarities. This may be true, but from the pictures above we could also come to the conclusion that the EU may look to the internal NAFTA-borders (especially the U.S.-Mexico border) as showcases for their outer-borders. As the photos

suggest the outcome of the processes (however different) along both borders are quite similar.

In a contribution in an earlier *Journal of Borderlands Studies (JBS)* special issue on the European perspective on borderlands (Van der Velde 2000), the question was raised whether some value added could be accomplished by stimulating a dialogue between scientists from both sides of the Atlantic. The argument was made that in order for a dialogue to be fruitful, some interesting and potentially fruitful complementarities and analogies have to exist between both continents.

Complementarities potentially exist for both research themes and topics as well as with methodological issues; not only where it concerns philosophical issues, but also with the dichotomy of applied vs. conceptual research. In this section some potential thematic complementarities are discussed.

In the fore-mentioned contribution (Van der Velde 2000) four dimensions were discerned where interesting complementarities could exist. In this section they are summarized and three additional dimensions are added. Without claiming to be exhaustive and also aware that a presentation of dichotomies tends to transform developments into caricatures, and therefore might result in a somewhat distorted and certainly oversimplified view of actual situations, we summarize the supposed complementarities. It is important to note that we don't consider these dichotomies to be two separate containers, in which every border-case can be categorized exclusively, but rather as the two poles of a continuum.

In describing these complementarities as being mutually beneficial another warning has to be issued as well. Border situations are localized and cannot be transferred from one particular situation to another. It is our conviction that borderlands situations are too complex to be able to formulate one grand theory to grasp the political, social, cultural and economical environment. To paraphrase Heyman (1994), one has to take into account the territorial as well as the deterritorialized character of borders and recognize the social and cultural networks in which they are embedded. Therefore context sensitive and localized approaches are necessary.

Notwithstanding this remark, we regard the comparison of different borders and border regions to be very fruitful and productive. For the sake of this contribution the two continental traditions are ascribed to one of the ends of the described continuums.

Integration and Separation or Protection

As noted before, in comparing North American and European borders and border regions in general, very often the argument is used that both cases involve inner-borders of integrated or integrating (continental) blocs, in our case the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and the European Union (EU). For instance, Hansen (1985) in the mid 1980s compared the Swiss-German-French Regio Basiliensis with the U.S.-Mexico border. His main argument was that the similarity in current and past regional circumstances were such that a comparison could be made.

However another and maybe even more interesting type of comparison could be made as well, the one between the inner borders of NAFTA, especially the one between the U.S. and Mexico and the outer border of the EU. Given the fact that NAFTA does not seek to achieve full-fledged integration, the protective function of the border remains far more important. In this regard, environmental problems, and immigration,

crime, and culture issues in the borderlands have received attention for a long time in North America.

Leitmotiv

A second continuum is related to the genesis of the integration process itself. From the start, in Europe, the basic goal was a political one (Bainbridge 1998). After World War II, at the start of the integration process, an important belief was that the integration of European countries could increase mutual understanding. Despite the failures of the early attempts to turn the EU into a political union, the major direction still bears a certain kind of continentalism (Blatter & Clement 2000). The European integration process, therefore, can still be regarded as a political project.

In North America the need for this kind of complete integration was never felt. The economic benefits for private organizations yielded by the development of other continental trading blocs (i.e., the EU), however, were regarded as potentially threatening. However, only some kind of partial cooperation was viewed as sufficient. As a result, free trade became the most important theme on the North American continent and consequently “integration” is more an economic project (Blatter & Clement, 2000).

Top-down vs. Bottom-up

A third issue deals with the level of voluntaryism experienced in cross-border cooperation. As central governments and supranational bodies were very important in the promotion of integration in the EU, this process has been of a strong top-down nature. Notwithstanding extensive campaigns for involving lower-level governments as well as the public in this process, the general tone has and still has been one of “take it, you cannot leave it.” In this respect the introduction of the Euro is very interesting. In most countries where the currency was introduced the people have not been able to vote on it. The general tone of the EU integration process is strongly normative. The message is that the widening and deepening of the European integration process is beneficial for Europe as a whole.

In North America, the focus on borders has been largely inspired by the (utopian) idea of free trade, although tempered by concern for environmental issues as well as issues like illegal immigration and drug trafficking. The process of cross-border cooperation therefore is built much more on functional considerations. The general rule seems to be that without urgent problems, parties on both side of the border seem hardly inclined to work together. With the functional approach, initiatives very often are triggered by private parties instead of the government. This results in a process that is much more constituted from the bottom upwards. In the end this might prove to be a more stable basis for cross-border cooperation, compared to the top-down approach in the EU.

Solidarity

Another issue may be regarded as mainly European. This has to do with the status of border regions and consequently people living in a border region, in the course of history. National borders are the containers of sovereign states. Border regions in this perspective can be viewed as the boundary spanning structures of the national state,

designed to deal with threats from the outside. Borders and border-regions used to be viewed as buffer zones between states where as little (strategic economic) activity as possible should be localized (Herzog, 2000). It comes as no surprise then that border regions lagged behind in their development, especially when these regions are compared to the national centers of power.

It seems that this process of marginalizing has had a stronger impact in Europe than on the North American continent. One of the reasons, of course, is that in Europe there are far more borders, and consequently, more border regions. And although in Europe the protective role of the inner borders in a military sense nowadays is almost non-existent, this legacy from the past still acts upon the socially constructed perceptions of border regions by borderlanders as well as people from outside. In many cases this perceived image of being marginalized and being peripheral has led to a sort of cross-border solidarity, creating a favorable atmosphere for cooperation.

Asymmetries

A clear distinction can also be made with regard to the way in which asymmetries on both sides of the border are dealt with. From a neo-classical point of view, (economic) flows only come into existence if there are certain asymmetries between two (trading) partners. In general, the bigger this asymmetry the bigger the flow. Based on these two considerations, especially along the U.S.-Mexico border, there is a tendency to preserve the economically profitable differences. In other words, there is no real stimulus for reducing the asymmetries along the border.

In the EU, however, asymmetries have been regarded as potentially harmful to the integration process. In the early days, cooperation was very much focused on eradicating the barrier effects, but especially since the second half of the 1990s, attention has shifted from the border itself to the border regions and their inhabitants. This shift partly took place because of the observation that cross-border interaction on the regional level did not increase to the extent expected. The perception of individuals concerning the other side of the border was seen as one of the causes. This was regarded especially true where perceptions led to mutual misunderstanding that could result in a discourse of 'us' versus 'them'. From a policy point of view it seemed logical to try to diminish the asymmetries both real and perceived.

Thus, in Europe there is a tendency to level the asymmetries on both sides of the border, whereas in North America, from an economic point of view, the differences are exactly the basis for cross-border activity.

Cross-border Governance

A sixth and more or less overarching issue is the governance of regions along and across borders. According to many scholars, the EU has been, still is and probably will be for a long time, a laboratory for supranational and transnational institution building. The effectiveness of this laboratory is largely based on what some call the negotiated suspension of sovereignty (Scott 1999), or the willingness to waive part of their sovereignty to achieve a united Europe.

Building a cross-border cooperation structure within the framework of the EU is based both on local initiatives as well as supporting measures from national and EU-institutions, which results in a complex multi-level and multi-thematic framework of

formal and informal institutions. As a response to the generous amount of funds dedicated to cross-border initiatives, cross-border cooperation has sometimes evolved into a quest for subsidies.

When we compare integration within the framework of the EU with NAFTA, we find an important difference in attitude towards national sovereignty. On the North American continent, much of the local and regional resistance towards an omnipotent NAFTA comes from the fear of losing decision-making power with regard to trade, commerce and the environment.

Projects launched within the framework of NAFTA very often do not take into account the local and regional needs. Also there has hardly been any transfer of mandates, power, responsibilities and financial means from the national to the local and regional level. NAFTA therefore can largely be characterized as a state-centered initiative aiming at supra-national goals like increasing the global competitiveness of the North American continent, and as such seems not to be a fertile base for regional cross-border cooperation.

Approaches

Based on what is presented in the previous section, one could conclude that there are sufficient complementarities at least to start a fruitful dialogue. In this respect the preconditions for a thematic debate seem to be in place. But what about the way these themes are approached. In other words, what are the methodological (and philosophical) approaches used. In order to understand and learn from each other it is supposed that there has to be a common language. One of the settings where the language is put to the test is a conference. Table 1 and 2 show the titles of the sessions of two of border-conferences.

**Table 1. Overview of Sessions at the BRIT 2001 Meeting
BRIT V (Tartu, Estonia, June 2001)**

Panel 1.	Theoretical, Conceptual and Methodological Issues Relating to Boundaries
Panel 2.	Territorial Constructs as Geopolitical Imaginations
Panel 3.	Globalisation Rhetoric and Transborder Regionalism
Panel 4.	Bordering Territories and Institutionalising Borders
Panel 5.	Borders of Statehood and Identity
Panel 6.	Boundary-producing Discourse and Practices
Panel 7.	Bordering Security: Negotiations Over the Content and Meanings
Panel 8.	Boundary Representations and Social Practices
Panel 9.	National and Local Border Experiences
Panel 10.	Places and Flows in Border-crossing Practices
Panel 11.	Social and Environmental Issues in Transboundary Context

The first conference is the fifth BRIT (Border Regions in Transition) meeting in Tartu (Estonia) and the second is the 2002 ABS conference in Albuquerque. American scholars dominate the second conference, while the conference in Tartu had a majority of European border-scholars.

**Table 2. Overview of Sessions at the ABS 2002
ABS Meeting (Albuquerque, USA, April 2002)**

Panel 1.	Border History
Panel 2.	Income and Unemployment
Panel 3.	Culture
Panel 4.	Environmental Research and Management
Panel 5.	Terror and Law
Panel 6.	Information Technology and the Internet
Panel 7.	Environment-Applied Problems
Panel 8.	Border Theory
Panel 9.	Border Education
Panel 10.	Border Region Economic Analysis
Panel 11.	Maquila and Manufacturing
Panel 12.	Informal Sector
Panel 13.	Borders in N. America and Europe
Panel 14.	Environment-General
Panel 15.	Literature and Film
Panel 16.	Border Education-Applied Problems
Panel 17.	Religión y Frontera: Cambios Recientes en el Campo Religioso en la Región Fronteriza de México
Panel 18.	Population and Urbanization
Panel 19.	Border Issues-Student Session
Panel 20.	Cross Border Interactions
Panel 21.	Investment, Competition
Panel 22.	Historic Site Interpretation-Student Session
Panel 23.	Political Attitudes and Perspectives

Without having to conduct an in-depth analysis, it becomes clear that the emphasis in the ABS conference is far more on applying, describing and measuring, while the Tartu conference had a tendency towards theorizing and concept building. Illustrative in this is the fact that in Albuquerque only one of the sessions was labelled "Border Theory." The other sessions are all categorized thematically. Of course this does not automatically imply that no theorization was involved. It does mean however that themes are obviously more useful in demarcating different research arenas. When looking at the session titles of the Tartu conference, it is not so much the themes that are guiding, but much more the concepts. Instead of economy, education, environment, terror, history, etc., the titles deal with discourses, imaginations, experiences, representations, practices, etc.

The Nijmegen Conference and This Special Issue

The Nijmegen conference focused on the theorization and conceptualization of the social and economic context that bring people from adjacent borderlands together. The two major questions discussed at length and in depth, both theoretical and empirical, were:

1. Why and how do people meet across and/or at borders and communicate borders? What is the context of their (non-)meeting? How and if so, why does the context differ and matter in the meeting and interaction between people in borderlands?
2. And how do differences in contexts (e.g. modern vs. post-modern, American vs. European) influence our own academic thinking and traditions about (cross)borderlands?

Under the general heading ‘communicating borders,’ thematic sub-sessions were organized around six different themes:

Communicating borders and...

- .. (cross)border security: loosening or tightening, do borders still exercise a control function?
- .. (cross)border economics: re-imagining economic (a)symmetry and transnational development
- .. (cross)border politics: crossing borders of and bordering political governance and democracy
- .. (cross)border environment: borders, nature conservation and transborder environmental concerns
- .. (cross)border culture: identity, belonging and migration
- .. (cross)border methodology: exploring borders in narratives, ideologies, representations and images

This special issue consists of five contributions that seek to reflect, although in somewhat different formats, on the discussions in the several thematic sessions. They are written by the session “animators,” which are also responsible for the contents.

The first theme focused on the question of whether borderless markets are increasingly replacing borders? Or are we propelled by feelings of fear and anxiety and hence motivated to secure our territorial borders more and more? Is there indeed such a bifurcation between the borders of control in the economic and informational domain and the borders of control in a security sense and what do these developments that imply for each other? David Newman of the Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva (Israel) reflects on this theme in the first contribution of this special issue.

Under the second heading the significance of borders and border-regions from an economic point of view were put to the fore. In this perspective, first the question raised was whether we really should be focusing on border-regions. Does economic integration really start at the physical borders of our societies or is it a process that supersedes the borderlands? Are border regions truly micro-scale laboratories of a macro-integration process, or is this merely political rhetoric? Should or can there be a specific role for border regions to play in integrating economies?

Under the subheading of “(inter-)actions and transactions,” the actual level of communication across borders was discussed. Are economic borders truly open? Why are border region economies then still more national than international? Is it because the context for interaction and transactions is too different, too asymmetrical? Or do we not (want to) see the benefits of cross-border networks? Or is the fear of more competition larger than the wish to cooperate? Where and for whom are benefits possible? And, should and can we stimulate cross-border networking between firms? Joan Ander-

son of the University of San Diego (USA) and Egbert Wever of the University of Nijmegen (The Netherlands) report on the discussions surrounding these and other questions.

The third topic dealt with was the issue of governance and legitimacy. At first the question was raised whether we really need spatial scales in politics, and if not, how territory can be planned and governed without scalar fixation. Secondly, with regard to the issue of democracy and legitimacy, the main question focused on the transnational power and the rights of people, the usefulness of cross-border regions for the transnationalization of democracy, how to democratize cross-border regions and finally the intriguing question how we can be citizens without fixed territories. Olivier Kramsch of the University of Nijmegen and Virginie Mamadouh of the University of Amsterdam (both in The Netherlands) try to formulate some answers on these questions based on the discussions in their session.

The fourth topic at first seems to be something that is of specific importance for the U.S.-Mexican context. Cooperation on environmental issues along the U.S.-Mexico border is almost as old as the border itself. For example, the IBWC (International Boundary and Water Commission) was established already in 1889, to deal with possible problems stemming from the specific environmental conditions along the U.S.-Mexican border. The crux of this session was to clarify and understand the power relationships and dynamics among actors at various levels in states, border communities, non-governmental organizations, and international institutions, as well as the role participatory approaches play in these relationships within the context of establishing transborder natural resource agreements. In their contribution, Jay Singh of the University of Washington (USA) and Paul Ganster of San Diego State University (USA), focus on the session discussions surrounding these issues.

The focus of the fifth theme was on cultural issues, in particular the matter of identity and cross-border mobility. The first sub-session, titled "making home/making difference," addressed the following questions. How are the borders of our imagined homes and communities made, imagined and inscribed in space? What are the normative consequences of the bordering of the imagination into a "we here?" How can identities and belongings be re-imagined, be represented and re-inscribed in space? Is a cross-border identity possible or needed? Can we identify ourselves without territories, without borders?

The second issue dealt with in this session concerned migration. Where do people feel they belong and where do they long to be. What routes does the longing to be of migrants follow? What motivates and hinders the longing to be. Is there a practical difference between integration and assimilation? Is it true that how we see and treat others reveals much of how we see and treat ourselves? What do we try to protect and how do we try to protect it and to what benefit/price for ourselves and for others? Kenneth Madsen of Arizona State University (USA) and Ton van Naerssen of the University of Nijmegen (The Netherlands) summarize the discussions in this session.

The last, but certainly not the least important, session of the conference focused on methodological issues accompanying border research. In our opinion this might be one of the most important and most difficult topics when trying to establish a dialogue between researchers from different continents and (possibly different) research traditions. Questions central to this theme concern first of all the possibility of the contextuality of the methodological differences in our border studies (dependent on our local situation, e.g. a European versus American approach). Inextricably tied to

this is the question whether these differences are part of a paradigm shift (modernism, post-modernism and “what’s next”), or such that a categorization of methodological differences are a form of essentialism itself? Witnessing this, how can we evaluate and learn each other’s approaches? And before all, do we want/need to?

The contributions to this special issue try to answer some of the questions raised concerning the first five topics identified above. The questions raised in the sixth session are to be answered by the readers themselves. As the editors of this special issue, we certainly hope that the answer to the question of whether we want and need to learn from each other is affirmative, not in the least because we are convinced that we can learn from each other.

Endnotes

¹ Of the 51 participants, 14 came from the USA and 35 from Europe (of which 19 from the Netherlands as host-country). The other two participants came from Egypt and Japan. For additional information on e.g. the background of the participants you can consult the conference web site: <http://www.kun.nl/ncbr/CommunicatingBorders> (N.B.: this address is case-sensitive).

- ²
- Focaal, *European Journal on Anthropology: European States at their Borderlands: Culture of Support and Subversion in Border Regions* (41, 2003)
 - *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie: Bordering, Ordering and Othering* (Vol. 93, 2, 2002)
 - *Regional and Federal Studies: Reconfiguring State Borders in a Changing Europe* (Vol. 12, 4, 2002)
 - *Space and Polity: Europe and the Spectre of Comparisons* (Vol. 6, 2, 2002)
 - *GeoJournal: Binational cities and their regions: From diverging cases to a common research agenda* (Vol. 54, 1, 2001)
 - *Journal of Borderlands Studies, European Perspectives on Borderlands* (Vol. 15, 1, 2000)
 - *Regional Studies: Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance* (Vol. 33, 7, 1999)

References

- Bainbridge, T. 1998. *The Penguin Companion to European Union*. Second edition. London: Penguin Books.
- Berg, E. & H. Van Houtum. eds. 2003. *Routing Borders between Discourses and Practices*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Blatter, J. & N. Clement. 2000. Cross-Border Cooperation in Europe: Historical Development, Institutionalization, and Contrasts with North America. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 15(1): 15-53.
- Ganster, P. 2001. ed. *Cooperation, Environment, and Sustainability in Border Regions*. San Diego: Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias.
- Hansen, N. 1985. *Border Region Development and Cooperation: Western Europe and the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands in Comparative Perspective*. El Paso: Center for Inter-American and Border Studies, University of Texas at El Paso.
- Heyman, J. M. 1994. The Mexico-United States Border in Anthropology. A Critique and Reformulation. *Journal of Political Ecology* 1, p.43-65.

- Herzog, L. 2000. Cross-Border Planning and Cooperation. In: P. Ganster (ed.): *The U.S.-Mexican Border Environment: A Road Map to a Sustainable 2020*. SCERP Monograph Series, No. 1. San Diego State University Press, San Diego. p.139-161.
- Meinhof, U. H. ed. 2002. *Living (with) Borders: identity discourses on east-west borders in Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Perkmann, M. & N. L. Sum. eds. 2002. *Globalization, Regionalization and Cross-Border Regions*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Scott, J. W. 1999. European and North American Contexts for Cross-border Regionalism. *Regional Studies* 33(7), 605-617.
- Van der Velde, M. 2000. On the Value of a Transatlantic Dialogue on Border Research, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 15(1): 281-290.
- Van Geenhuizen, M. & R. Ratti. eds. 2001. *Gaining Advantages from Open Borders: An Active Space Approach to Regional Development*. Aldershot: Ashgate.