

The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries

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What a joy it was. Re-reading two of the classic works in boundary and border studies, that is Julian Minghi's overview and review of boundaries studies in political geography of 1963 and Victor Prescott's work on the geography of frontiers and boundaries published in 1965, in order to write this commentary under the rubric 'the classics revisited', gave me a lot of enjoyment. It was an inspiring experience to be reminded again of the early insights of what could be considered two of the founding-persons in boundary and border studies. It was for instance pleasantly narcissistic and flattering for a boundary/border scholar to be reminded again by Minghi that boundaries touch the heart of the political geographical discipline: boundaries 'are perhaps the most palpable political geographic phenomena'.¹ I could not agree more. Re-reading these two classics particularly reminded me as well of how embedded the past (as well as current) boundary and border paradigms and themes have been and are in the dominant academic thinking of the various times. We are children of our time. In the beginning of the twentieth century, different themes were debated, different approaches were popular and different views were held on how to approach and study the boundary/border. Where in the early 1960s the field of border studies was pre-dominantly focused on the study of the demarcation of boundaries, the lines, now the field of boundaries and border studies has arguably shifted from boundary studies to border studies.² Put differently, the attention has moved away from the study of the evolution and changes of the territorial line to the border, more complexly understood as a site at and through which socio-spatial differences are communicated. Hence, border studies can now dominantly be characterised as the study of human practices that constitute and represent differences in space. In other words, the border is now understood as a verb in the sense of bordering.³ Confusingly, in anthropology, the definition is usually precisely opposite, here a boundary generally means the socio-spatially constructed differences between cultures/categories and a border generally stands for a line demarcated in space.⁴

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What is more, when looking at the current debate in geographical border studies, it can be argued that the dominant voice is now notably post-modern and/or critical. Some voices are more critical than others, some even claim to be radical, some are more postmodern than others, some are even claiming that they have never been modern, but by and large seen on a broader time-horizon these are merely nuances, relevant and immensely fascinating to study as they may be. Environmental determinists or geopolitiker in the classic German style as you would find in the First and Second World War periods are hard to find these days. Most current political geographical papers that wish to understand the relationships between territory, sovereignty and identity, which use the lens of borders to do so, are anti-deterministic, anti-essentialistic and not focused on the line per se. Instead, borders are now pre-dominantly critically investigated as differentiators of socially constructed mindscapes and meaning. The return to geopolitics in the guise of critical geopolitics is telling in this respect.⁵ It seems that border scholars took the advice of Minghi seriously, as given in the conclusion of his 1963 paper, that is, 'the study of international boundaries in political geography, however, must also take the view that boundaries, as political dividers, separate peoples of different nationalities and, therefore, presumably of different iconographic makeup'. Consequently, the political geographer 'must undertake investigations in the sociological field, as well as in the cultural and economic areas, for the spatial patterns of social behavior can be even more important than other patterns in determining the impact of a boundary and its viability as a national separator'.⁶

That this was the conclusion of Minghi's overview of 1963 says a lot about the time in which it was written and the state of the art of the border studies then. As these two classic pieces in boundary/border studies are also children of their milieu, it is not surprising that both begin their overviews on border studies in political geography with the texts of Friedrich Ratzel and his view of the borders of nation-states. To be more precise, in their approach border studies are equated with the studies of the territorial limits of states. But by making Ratzel the founding father of political geographical border studies, one could argue that they are bordering and limiting the fascinating width and range of border studies. They fall in what John Agnew later called the territorial trap of the state.⁷ Needless to say, there were territorial and political borders before states and hence, there were interesting authors writing on these borders before Ratzel.⁸ And what is more, there were and are interesting disciplines outside political geography/geopolitics which have interesting things to say about borders. Is this any different from today's approach? Have we in the meantime learned to bypass or avoid falling into the state border trap? To some extent we have, I would argue. One of the key merits of the past few decades certainly have been the widening of the ontology and epistemology of borders. In a way, what we have seen in political geography and geopolitics the last few

decades is a turn from a focus on boundaries, as political limits of states, to borders as socio-territorial constructs. The interest for studies of the border, in the meaning of the construction and representation of difference, could be considered as the off-spring of the postmodern turn in social sciences. It has been put forward in this debate that borders are the product of our knowledge and interpretation and that they as such produce a disciplining lens through which we perceive and imagine the world. As a consequence, it has been claimed that the difference between the ontology of borders, the study of what borders are, and the epistemology of borders, the study of what and how we know what borders are, has decreased if not disappeared. The insight that the making of borders is the product of our own social practices and habitus has led to the study of borders beyond merely states or nations. As this insight also applies to other territories than states, such as (macro-)regions, cities or neighbourhoods, a border has become less automatically connected to states alone, making the claim of a territorial trap in the present studies in theory less applicable. Having said this, what can be witnessed in practice however, is that state borders still inspire most of the works in border studies. Still, almost routinely, the field of border studies is related to state borders and the adjacent borderlanders. This is with good grounds, as states still are important territorial dividers in our daily world, but still, in my view the concept of borders is broader than the markers of states only and the dividers of borderlanders. I would argue that the philosophy and practices of b/ordering and othering, of fixing of territorial (id)entities, of purification of access as well as of scale transgressions, need not be restricted to the entity of states alone, but are valuable for theorising and studying in their own right.⁹

The overviews of Minghi and Prescott clearly paid significant, if not primary, attention to the question of the where. Where is the border located, how did it come about, evolve, change over time, became the topic of (military) disputes and what are the political consequences of its (changes in) location. These were the central questions of the debate in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century and hence of their overview. As argued above, the balance in the present boundary/border studies, is now leaning towards border studies. More precisely, boundary studies (where the border is) and border studies (how the border is socially constructed) have in fact grown apart, have become detached from each other to become separate subfields. Both subfields have their own institutional expertise centres, their own journals and their own leading figures. There is hardly, and much to my regret, any overlap between the two subfields anymore. Re-reading Minghi and Prescott's works, I believe, it would be a shame, if the many possible synergies that could emerge from an open discussion between the two subfields, were not sought after more. The knowledge of both subfields is needed to understand the historical context and critical evolution as well as conflict management of a border, the societal

structural and (im)moral consequences and representations of that border, and a possible (land-artistic) re-visioning of the border(land). The synergy could also inspire the ontological and epistemological discussions on borders and boundaries. It could lead to fresh debates on what lines in spaces mean for human beings, and how we attach to, and can break away from geometry and it could invoke what is often lacking in the current border debates, that is, an alternative vision on the b/ordering of space.

Another crucial element in both classic works is the distinction made between natural and non-natural borders. This distinction has become classic. In the beginning of the twentieth century this distinction was closely connected to that other classic distinction, namely that between good and bad borders. There were exceptions to the rule, but the overall view was that 'good' were generally those borders that were seen as natural, that is, made by nature in terms of its physiographic variation (seas, mountains, deserts) and borders were generally seen as 'bad' when they were human-made, 'artificial'.¹⁰ These two now classic distinctions are arguably a sign of the times as well. Both studies, that of Minghi and Prescott, appeared in the early sixties, only fifteen years after the dramatic first half of the century in which the First and Second World Wars had such tremendous impact on the study of borders. During this first half of the twentieth century a large part of border studies was concentrated on the nature of borders in terms of their being good or bad from a military point of view.¹¹ According to Minghi this led to an over-emphasis on disputes on and changes in boundaries, in terms of physical demarcations, in these times of war and military occupation and an under-emphasis for an interest in borders during 'normal'¹² times. It is understandable that since we have learned what horrific consequences an extreme politicisation of the naturalistic and/or organic view on borders can have on humanity, border scholars in the present debate have radically turned away from describing borders as natural. The overviews of the field of border studies in political geography¹³ and of regional and economic geography¹⁴ have made this clear. In the present debate, at least in the constructivistic, dominant wing of the debate, the argument is made that all political borders are human-made products. Since from this point of view there are no natural borders, the term artificial is not in use anymore either. Although I would agree with the denial that there are natural borders, I feel that the present total neglect for a discussion on the nature of borders is a shame really. I regret this for two reasons.

One, by claiming that all borders are human-made the present debate logically focuses on the construction of borders, in other words, *how* borders are made in terms of its symbols, signs, identifications, representations, performances and stories. This has had a tremendous effect on border studies and possibly is, in our time of postmodernisation of science, one of the explanations of the mushrooming of study centres, conferences and articles on borders. Hence, what we have seen the last decade or so is an immense growth of the focus of the representation of borders and national identities

in the field of border studies. As is explainable when basing oneself on postmodernism, much emphasis has been put on the form and the story by which borders are represented and symbolised. It has led to a bordering script, by which I mean that the construction, the making of borders by now is almost turned into a template, largely based on the works of post-structuralists like Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu and De Certeau, that is used for studying the everyday social construction of border X in case Y. Despite the intrinsic value of each and every study copying this template for a specific case or adding an interesting insight on another performance outlet of the construction of borders, I believe the present debate is somewhat out of balance. Maybe in this sense there is a similarity here with the debate in the first half of the twentieth century. Then, the debate was perhaps leaning too much towards the demarcation of the boundary, the where and the changes in the where, and there was too little attention on the social formation and socio-spatial manifestations of borders and identities. Now arguably the balance is leaning too much towards this latter, postmodern (*how*) perspective on borders. By claiming that all borders are human-made, and by denying that there are natural borders, just as I find this claim, the current debate thereby risks throwing away the baby with the bathwater, as it is overlooking the underlying question that has led to the distinction between natural and non-natural in the first place. That is the question of the *why* of borders. Why are there borders in the first place? Why do we see borders still as given? Are there no alternatives then to the current compartmentalisation of the globe? Have we become afraid to be named an essentialist or determinist when we dare to raise this question of the why? We should not be. Asking a why question does not mean that you cannot at the same time gaze through a critical or radical lens on society. Moreover, it may be an indication of the times we are living in that *Antipode*, the journal of radical geography, is one of the best cited journals now in the field of human geography, in other words, the anti-essentialist, anti-determinist (and anti-neo-liberal) approach has become mainstream. Hence, I am confident in taking that risk and going back to that important and thought-provoking question of the why. Why does humankind produce borders? Why are we still haunted by the Hobbesian ghost of (state) borders? Is the b/ordering of space in any way intrinsic from a biological point of view or it is merely a strategic choice than can be put on and off? What precisely drives the seemingly persistent human motivation to call a territory one's or our own, to demarcate property, to make an ours here and theirs there, and to shield it off against the socio-spatially constructed and constitutive Them, the Others.¹⁵ Is the desire for the construction of a socio-spatial (id)entity – not the form, the configuration, as this is always contextual, but I mean the construction per se – necessary or avoidable for humankind? In what way does this self-fulfilling geometrical fantasy of drawing lines in spaces contribute to the Self and the Us in daily life? And what explains the unwillingness to give up power or privilege? What are we

protecting? What is precisely the *raison d'être* of borders?¹⁶ Answering this question might reveal to us, why the b/ordering of space, in whatever form or shape, seems such a persistent constitutive power for humankind. In gaining insight into the immanent powers of the b/ordering of space we might learn to be more perceptive and sensitive for each other's yearnings for the construction of territorial demarcation and difference. Thereby we could perhaps unlearn to see borders as given, fixed, linear or stable and instead constitute a more open perspective on territoriality in which the gained insight on the deconstructed Self – the insight that the Self is not a stand-alone entity, detached from territory or society, but a socio-spatially constructed and hence always dynamic configuration of personalised social relations and networks – coincides with the territorial borders and markers that the dynamic Self constructs via social relations and networks. Hence, I would like to make a plea to return, with the theoretical confidence and the genealogical knowledge of the social constructions of borders in our rucksack, to that leading and challenging question that was sought to answer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century of political geography. In my view, there are some new promising researches that have recently been started up in geography that could be of value to answering this question of the why. I am particularly pointing to the psycho-analytical turn of human geography, including a fundamental theorisation of fear and desire, as notably is laid out by geographers that adopt the approaches of Lacan and Deleuze and Guattari and their followers. B/ordering in their view is basically the desire to distance oneself from the other in order to uphold the (fantasy of the) self during feelings of fear or anxiety. Possibly and hopefully this new leaf in the geographical tree, together with perhaps philosophical studies of humankind and evolutionary sciences, such as evolutionary psychology and environmental psychology, could re-open up the debate on the why of borders in geopolitics and political geography.

The second reason why I think it is a shame that we are not discussing the nature of borders in the current debate anymore is because of the neglect of a debate on good and bad borders, in other words, the ethics and justice of socio-spatial borders. Again, this discussion would have to be updated to the present time and knowledge, but the question of morality itself is very timely. Are borders justified and if so, to what extent is it morally just to protect ourselves and thereby deny the liberty of access to others? Is it justified to make a moral difference between citizens and strangers? Hence, in contrast to the earlier boundary studies of the first half century I would then not so much be interested in the goodness or badness of the line itself, the fit, for I believe then one engages oneself with the slippery path of an essentialistic justification of natural or military lines in space. Rather, I would welcome very much a more lively and engaged discussion on the justification of our borderings *per se*. I believe, the present debate and field of border studies would be enriched if it would embark on the discussion of the morality and immorality

of borders. (State) borders are too much taken for granted. In political philosophy some interesting new insights are being given with regard to this matter. Walzer, for instance, provocatively states that communities should not be allowed to make a claim of territorial jurisdiction and rule over the people with whom they share a territory.¹⁷ He argues that, although admission and exclusion are at the core of communal independence, the rule of citizens over non-citizens and members over strangers is 'an act of tyranny'. Seyla Benhabib, following Kant's essay on eternal peace and Derrida's essay on hospitality, also critically looks at the justification of borders.¹⁸ She ponders the question what is the ethical difference between the right to leave a democratic country, since in democratic societies citizens are not prisoners, and the right for others to enter? In a similar critical vein, philosopher Will Kymlicka argues that borders are 'a source of embarrassment for liberals of all stripes'.¹⁹ For liberals, he argues, it is not clear how the existence of territorial boundaries can be justified at all, 'at least if these boundaries prevent individuals from moving freely, and living, working and voting in whatever part of the globe they see fit'.²⁰ 'Any political theory', he goes on to say, 'which has nothing to say about these questions is seriously flawed. Moreover, the result, intentional or unintentional, is to tacitly support the conservative view that existing boundaries and restrictive membership are sacrosanct'.²¹ In the present debate, it is tacitly assumed that (state) borders are here and here to stay and the only thing that can be critically engaged with is the way borders are being produced and reproduced. Although I would agree that the focus on the how is a crucial and meaningful focus in border studies that needs continuation, I believe that this lens could be widened to open up for a debate on alternative ways to produce territories and spatialise our social lives. If indeed we accept the view that borders are human made, it would be needed to not only ask the question why humans are producing and reproducing borders, but also what moral consequences do the (re)produced borders have, are they justified and are there socio-spatial alternatives that could be produced? In what way does the maintenance of borders help or not help to create a more equal world? What reality are we making when b/ordering ourselves and others? And at what price?

Re-reading the classic works of Minghi and Prescott has once again made clear to me that the field of border studies is a flourishing field with a fertile past and an appealing future.

NOTES

1. J. Minghi, 'Boundary Studies in Political Geography', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (1963), p.407.

2. D. Newman, 'Boundaries, Borders and Barriers: Changing Geographic Perspectives on Territorial Lines', in M. Albert et al. (eds), *Identities, Borders and Orders, Rethinking International Relations Theory*, Borderlines 18, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2001).

3. H. van Houtum, O. Kramsch and W. Zierhofer (eds), *B/ordering Space* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005).
4. F. Barth, 'Introduction', in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (London, George Allen and Unwin 1969); H. Donnan and T. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (Oxford: Berg 1999).
5. See e.g. K.J. Dodds and J.D. Sidaway, 'Locating Critical Geopolitics', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 12 (1994) pp.515–24; G. Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge 1996); Newman (note 2).
6. Minghi (note 1) p.428.
7. J. Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: the Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy* 1 (1994) pp.53–80.
8. See e.g. H. Altink and S. Gemie, 'Borders: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern Definitions and Debates', in H. Altink and S. Gemie (eds), *At the Border: Margins and Peripheries in Modern France* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press forthcoming).
9. Van Houtum et al. (note 3).
10. Minghi (note 1) p.407.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p.406.
13. D. Newman and A. Paasi, 'Fences and Neighbours in the Postmodern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography', *Progress in Human Geography*, 22/2 (1998) pp.186–207.
14. H. van Houtum, 'An Overview of European Geographical Research on Borders and Border Regions', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 15/1 (2000) pp.57–83.
15. H. van Houtum and T. van Naerssen, 'Bordering, Ordering, and Othering', *Journal of Economic and Social Geography (TESG)* 93/2 (2002) pp.125–36.
16. H. van Houtum, 'Borders of Comfort, Spatial Economic Bordering Processes in the European Union', *Regional and Federal Studies* 12/4 (2002) pp.37–58.
17. M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books 1983).
18. S. Benhabib, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy', in S. Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1996), pp.67–94.
19. W. Kymlicka, 'Territorial Boundaries: A Liberal Egalitarian Perspective', in David Miller and Sohail Hashmi (eds), *Boundaries and Justice: Diverse Ethical Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2001), pp.249–75.
20. Ibid., p.249.
21. Ibid., p.253.