

Unpacking Borders

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Routing Borders Between Territories, Discourse, and Practices. Edited by Eiki Berg and Henk Van Houtum. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003. 310 pp., \$89.95 (ISBN: 0-7546-3055-2).

In recent years, the study of boundaries—metaphors and delineations of division, difference, and, therefore, identity—has been usefully opened up to include more than the examination of international legal demarcations and territorial conflict. Indeed, the concept of a “border” is incredibly rich. Scholars like Yosef Lapid and Mathias Albert (2001), Eviatar Zerubavel (1991), Deborah Pellow (1996), Frederik Barth (1969), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), and Pablo Vila (2000) among others have probed what borders mean and what it means to “border” peoples, cultures, and ideas in social and political life. Processes of “bordering”—that is, of inclusion and exclusion—make distinct political communities possible. Accordingly, a critical study of them can be significant for both international relations and many related disciplines.

Much of the new thinking about borders rotates around the multifaceted and complex relationships among territory, security, and identity. This body of work is multidisciplinary and increasingly relevant given general debates about globalization (see, for example, Johnson and Michaelsen 1997; Ó Tuathail 1997; Agnew 1999; Paasi 1999; Ackleson forthcoming). Nonetheless, the nature and impact of borders remain understudied. Thus, *Routing Borders*, by Eiki Berg and Henk Van Houtum, whose overriding approach and themes fit well into this emerging tradition, is a welcome addition to it. The volume is largely informed by a critical (or in some cases post-structural) theoretical framework. The editors and contributors seek to unpack the concept of international boundaries and the sociopolitical discourses that help create and maintain them. They seek to eclipse our static and often reified understandings of international borders to analyze the processes that reproduce them. In effect, they are working to problematize borders, generally by applying theory to case studies set in Eastern Europe and Asia.

In assessing the book’s contribution to the literature, readers will draw a mixed conclusion. As with many edited compilations, *Routing Borders* is a bit uneven, both in quality and content. The first chapter by Laitinen on “Post-Cold War Security Borders” is a case in point. It begins with an intriguing premise: we need to understand security borders through the lens of critical or postmodern security studies. This objective is worthwhile, but unfortunately it is not clear that the chapter succeeds in meeting it, due largely to a scattered and somewhat problematic argument. Laitinen makes, for example, a rather sweeping assumption that “international borders are becoming so porous that they no longer fulfill their historical role as barriers to the movement of goods, ideas, and people, and as markers of the extent and power of the state” (p. 15). Although this may be partly the case in the European Union, it certainly is not happening elsewhere and, in fact, in some cases (for example, the US-Mexico border) the trend may be quite the contrary. The critical political agenda underpinning Laitinen’s effort—seeking to construct security borders based on cooperation or to gradually open up such borders—is progressive and admirable, but the conceptual and historical distinctions in the piece

occasionally break down. It is not clear, for instance, why post-Cold War security borders are fundamentally different from Cold War frontiers. Part of the problem is that we are given few concrete examples, beyond the European Union, to illustrate the argument that borders are becoming porous in political practice.

Many of the remaining chapters in Part 1, “Contested Politics of Security and Belonging” provide interesting insights, but these chapters could have been highlighted better if organized within a stronger general section on theory building. Essays by Merje Kuus (“Borders of Security in Estonia”) and Alina Hosu (“Post-Cold War Romania: A Study in the Construction of Security Identity”) in particular do justice to the tradition of critical security studies in international relations. They probe security discourses as they relate to identity, representation, and bordering practices.

Part 2 of *Routing Borders* deals with boundaries and environmental politics—a recurrent and problematic theme in the literature (see, for example, Mische 1989; Lipschutz and Holdren 1990; Dalby 1992). This issue arises, of course, from the fact that ecosystems and resources do not respect arbitrary political frontiers. The subject thus lends itself to a critical analysis and, for the most part, the two authors in this section (Henrik Gutzon Larsen and Eva Saroch) do a nice job of exposing the tension between discourses and practices of state sovereignty and transboundary environmental issues. A dialogue with emergent work in critical geopolitics—such as the efforts of Simon Dalby (1992) or more traditional approaches—would make for an intriguing second volume.

The third section of *Routing Borders*—“Imagining and (Con)textualizing Bordered Space”—is more explicitly theoretical, dipping fairly deeply into post-structural ideas. The contributions in this section traverse the complicated terrain of borders, space, and identity as understood through language, narratives, and context—focusing, in particular, on deconstructing meaning through representation. These chapters interface work by Mikhail Bakhtin (1982), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), and others, and thus they remain fairly true to the mission initially set out by Berg and Van Houtum to develop a “more reflexive critical post- or non-modernist stand on borders and boundaries” (p. 3). Anke Stüver’s chapter, “Presenting Representation: On the Analysis of Narratives and Images Along the Dutch-German Border,” is particularly interesting; it understands borders as “constantly reconfigured through social, but contingent, relations, practices, and meanings” (p. 166). It is this sort of approach that has the potential to bear intriguing insights, both in terms of theory building and as a model for empirical work on other borderlands around the world.

Routing Borders ends with a section on newly emerging forms of border politics, governance, and identity in Europe and South Asia (“Transborder and Cross-State Investigation”). These chapters seek to explore new imaginings and representations of land and identity beyond the traditional, modernist nation-state. Given developments such as the move to regional identities and alternative political arrangements, largely in Europe, this appears to be a fruitful area for future research.

As an epilogue, David Newman’s essay “Boundary Geopolitics: Towards a Theory of Territorial Lines” offers an important recommendation: that the field of international relations needs to develop a collective, holistic theorization of borders that moves beyond particular social and spatial dimensions and cases. This goal, and the general call for more transdisciplinary work on boundaries, is indeed necessary.

In books of this type, which deal with such large subjects, it can be easy to find gaps that require additional exploration or development. Perhaps this fact signals the overall need for additional scholarly investigation in this area. As it stands, however, *Routing Borders* is a good volume that will be of interest primarily to international relations scholars who are concerned with postpositivist, critical approaches to the study of global politics and with the bordering processes that underpin the international system.

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