PROBLEMATIZING ‘BORDERING, ORDERING, AND OTHERING’ AS MANIFESTATIONS OF SOCIO-SPATIAL FETISHISM

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ABSTRACT
This paper will re-examine and reflect critically Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen’s paper ‘Bordering, Ordering and Othering’ that came out in a related theme issue in TESG in 2002. My first goal is to contextualise their paper into the debates on borders/bordering that began to flourish at the turn of the millennium and have emerged since then. I will then evaluate the enduring significance of this text and discuss the geohistory of othering. My final intention is to push their ideas further and to problematise the processes of bordering, ordering and othering as ideological and material manifestations of socio-spatial fetishism that often conceal power relations and the alternatives for challenging and transcending these processes.

Key words: Bordering; othering; state; (ethno)nationalism; spatial socialization; socio-spatial fetishism

INTRODUCTION
This essay is an effort to revisit and reflect Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen’s (2002) paper ‘Bordering, Ordering and Othering’. I will start with an attempt to contextualise this text into wider debates on borders, bordering and othering at the turn of the millennium and since then. Second, I will look at the geohistory of othering. Third, I will problematise bordering, ordering and othering as ideological and material manifestations of what I define below as socio-spatial fetishism that typically hides both power relations and the alternatives for challenging and transcending the processes of bordering, ordering and othering Then I will evaluate the continuing relevance of the text and put forward some critical observations on the paper. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

Van Houtum and van Naerssen’s (2002) paper was an introduction to a theme issue in TESG focusing broadly on ‘othering’, a topic that touched upon the then ongoing debates on difference and on what the authors called as bordering. Bordering stresses agency; it highlights border-making as a result of the activities of not just national states but also of ordinary citizens and social groupings, that is as results of wider ‘border work’ (Rumford 2008). Bordering emphasises borders as outcomes of ideologies, as noted briefly in author’s illustrations. Further, their paper was attentive to the practices of ordering, that is how the discursive differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ occurs in the governance of socio-spatial entities. The authors importantly related othering and ordering to migration and transnationalism, topics that are today ever more significant.

The theme issue came out in the middle of a new momentum. Border studies had witnessed a major resurrection during the 1990s, which echoed wider international political and economic events and tendencies, as well as the emerging search for new theoretical/conceptual tools in border research. The breakdown of the ideological divide...
between the capitalist and socialist blocks, the ethnic wars in former Yugoslavia, the acceleration of the globalisation of economy, culture and social consciousness, and the quick expansion of information and communication technologies were the key (material) conditions. In Europe, a major drive for border studies arose from the aim to advance economic and political integration and from EU’s vigorous efforts to lower the borders between the Member States by encouraging cross-border cooperation. The expansion of the EU further reinforced these tendencies and a lot of EU-based research money flow to border studies.

As to the academic impulses, a critical feature was the upsurge of post-modern and post-structuralist thinking that researchers adopted to challenge the self-evident assumptions of state-centric worldviews (Paasi 2013). Anglophonic social scientists acknowledged widely the thoughts outlined in continental European philosophy and social theory by authors such as Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Virilio, or Derrida, who also inspired van Houtum and van Naerssen.

Anglophonic scholars criticised logocentrism that is ‘a practical orientation and a procedure that at once presupposes, invokes, and effects a normalising practical expectation’ (Ashley 1989, p. 261). IR scholar Ashley (1989) saw foreign policy as a boundary-producing political performance. Later Ò’Tuathail and Dalby (1998) suggested that critical geopolitics should focus on boundary-drawing practices (conceptual/cartographic, imaginary/actual, social/aesthetic), that reflect the processes of ‘Othering’ and the construction of symbolic/cultural boundaries between ‘us’ and the ‘Other’ (Campbell 1992). IR scholars and geographers questioned the state-centric premises of realist IR theory and such divisions as inside/outside, self/other or domestic/foreign that were routinely mobilised to upkeep the discourses on ‘national security’ (Ashley 1987; Campbell 1992; Walker 1993; Agnew 1994; Paasi 2013). New studies looked at how ‘national moral spaces’, made conceivable by the ethical borders of identity, as a much as by the territorial borders of the state, were shaped by drawing on images of threat/enemy in foreign policies (Campbell 1992). Albert et al. (2001) also problematised borders, orders and identities at the turn of the millennium. Debates in IR and critical geopolitics were absent from van Houtum and van Naerssen’s paper, but their idea of bordering resonates closely with boundary-producing practices discussed in these fields. What is more significant, they took this thinking to the transnational scale by putting forward versatile illustrations of transnational borderings shaped by human mobilities.

Othering takes place towards ‘them’ or outsiders and, consequently, the key issues are, who are actually the ‘we’ in mobilising such classifications and bordering processes, who are ‘them’ and how are they/them established/bounded as Others. Respectively, othering is a critical element in ordering, that is how geographical, cultural, governmental and legal dividing lines between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, ‘we’ and the ‘Other’, are established and maintained at various scales, from local communities to global dividing lines (cf. Walker 2016). Hence, we may pose, following the lead of Fabian (1983), a further question, how are ‘we’ and ‘they’ dialectically constituted as means to identify, signify and legitimate the political, temporal and historical conditions. This puts an emphasis on context and, correspondingly on spaces and spatialities that come into play in the making of difference, for instance, in establishing such frames as ‘here’ (inside) and ‘there’ (outside) (Walker 1993, cf. Paasi 1996). In such spatialisations, spatial fetishism often slinks in. Geographers have highlighted since the 1970s that social and spatial should be understood in a dialectical relation, not as separate entities, as if the spatial would be a causal force per se, and that it is crucial to problematise spatial entities and categories as part of the wider social production of space and spatialised ideologies. In the context of borders, we simply must ask how spatial entities like borders or spatial orders are established and mobilised in othering.

OTHERING IN A GEOHISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE RELOCATION OF BORDERS

Since one of the major themes in van Houtum and van Naerssen’s paper is Othering, I will
look next briefly at the geohistory of othering. Oppositions such past and present, public and private, true and false, we and they, friends and foes, good and bad have turned out to be substantial ideological tools around the world in the course of time (Paasi 1996). The discourse of the Other emerges from the perennial philosophical debates within the Western tradition of understanding identity and difference (Dalby 1990) but also other traditions embrace dualistic views of ‘us’ and ‘others’. Harle (1990) has recognised the significance of such dualisms particularly in the European mind and cultural heritage. Imperialism and colonialism have been in a critical position in their rise and spread. Today the key issue is how stereotypes turn out to be rooted geopolitical scripts that are mobilised in making dividing lines between us and the ‘Other’ and our/their territory, both in State’s activities and in everyday lives where such lines come into play. Contemporary border struggles should focus on revealing and superseding such dividing lines.

Othering is of course not a constant, static and singular phenomenon that can simply be wiped away if desired. Rather it is a complex, dynamic and malleable phenomenon, which is historically contingent, political and politicised phenomenon that often finds new forms and that tends to multiply borders. For example, when state borders are mobilised in othering and in creating antagonist images of social or ethnic groupings in one state, this can create new bordering and orderings that may stretch across state borders into both directions. This can create new local, regional, social, cultural and ethnic dividing lines and enclaves inside states and thus infiltrate the social tapestries of the societies in question. Racism and right-wing movements typically have also such internal but also international, border-crossing qualities based on networks.

Reflecting new bordering practices and tendencies, Yuval-Davis et al.’s (2019) new theoretically informed, historically and politically sensitive book, Bordering, usefully expands ordinary ‘political geographic’ understanding of what territorial borders and their use in everyday bordering means. They show how borders and bordering have progressively moved from the margins into the middle of political and everyday life. One of the most burning issues in the contemporary mobile world are the multi-scalar processes of de- and re-bordering occurring both inside and outside of state territories. They display how borders and the processes of bordering and ordering bring together different spheres of socio-political and economic life, and are often vigorously mobilised to convert and redefine the main categories of social life, such as identity, belonging and citizenship. Graham (2011), for his part, has suggested that states are becoming internationally organised systems geared towards trying to separate people and circulations considered risky and malign from those seen as risk free and in the need of protection. This ultimately leads to blurring of international and urban/local borders, a topic implied also in van Houtum and van Naerssen’s paper.

OTHERING, BORDERING AND ORDERING AS FORMS OF SOCIO-SPATIAL FETISHISM

To push further the openings in van Houtum and van Naerssen paper, I will reflect them through spatial fetishism. Spatialities and bordering do not arise out of blue but result from multipurpose agency, societal struggles and power relations at and across various spatial scales. Agency is not a neutral notion. As Soja (1989, p. 6) suggests, ‘We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology’. Academic literature, media, national politics and policies often uncritically represent bounded spaces and borders as subjects that can perform and do things and even negotiate. They can also be seen to have ‘agentic capacities’ as entities that are at times raised into a ‘holy’ position (Paasi 2016). Such imaginary is also deeply rooted in ordinary language where the bordering and ordering between regional, national or supranational bounded entities and their ‘identities’ are often fetishised and they contribute to Othering. Anthropomorphic language and related terminologies, accentuating spatial entities such
as regions/territories or borders as actors that can do things, are widely mobilised at various scales in politics, economy, and cultural practices and discourses where diverging ideas of boundedness are established.

The key problem is that some forms of fetishism commonly inhabit social life. Human beings seemingly do ‘fetishise’ relentlessly to be simply able to attain some convenient grasps on the complex world of open or semi-bounded social systems (Paasi & Metzger 2017). Spatial fetishism displays itself in many ways, from simple core–periphery-related political rhetoric, to views on spatial entities as fixed, stable, bounded and unchanging – a feature frequently associated with the territory and borders in geography and IR studies (Walker 1993, Agnew 2018). Spatial fetishism is often non-historical since it leans on a conception of social space ‘that is timeless and static, and thus immune to the possibility of historical change’ (Brenner 2004, p. 38). Therefore, fetishised spatial entities are typically naturalised as if they were everlasting units (think, for example, borders and state territories). Since such spaces suggests that they are shaped naturally rather than historically, they serve to attach the biographies of people in distinct territories and cut socio-spatial relations between them (Watts 1999). This is increasingly problematic in the transnational world, even if still only some three per cent of the world population lives in states other than those in which they were born (Paasi 2019).

Fabian (1983) suggests that we need to focus on the dialectical constitution of the Other and that the relations between ‘us’ and the Other must be recognised in their concrete temporal, historical and political conditions. Likewise, understanding the spatio-temporal life, and physical and symbolic borders and b/orderings are critical in the social construction of otherness and the practices of othering. Wherever and on whatever scale this occurs the deconstruction of the political and ethical elements of othering must be a critical project that strives toward emancipation from the ideological powers manifesting themselves in various forms of spatial fetishism. Construction of distinctions in time-space is a political and cultural act and an expression of power; both friends and ‘enemies’ are defined and interpreted through the relations between the self and the Other (Paasi 1999). When reflecting the social dimensions of spatial fetishism (that are critical for the processes of bordering, ordering and othering), it is crucial to recognise this phenomenon as a socio-spatial fetishism. Bordering, ordering and othering are manifestations of social spatialisation, and they are typically presented as inevitable in the perpetually ongoing social construction of the spatial at the level of the social imaginary (collective mythologies, beliefs) besides the concrete interventions in the landscape (Shields 1992). Further, in order to understand the rise and maintenance of the social and ideological meanings of borders and orderings in the process of othering, it is also necessary to pay attention to spatial socialisation: how socio-spatial fetishism comes into play when meaning is created to bounded spaces (Paasi 1996; Koch 2015).

THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF THE PAPER

Several themes discussed in van Houtum and van Naerssen’s paper have been continually attention-grabbing, as indicated by the frequent citations of the paper. A glimpse into paper’s keywords partly explains such appeal. Borders, others, identity, mobility, immigration, transnational places, social networks, and spatial morality, have all turned out to be key terms since the turn of millennium. All at once, they also display the conceptual richness of the themes discussed in the paper. Perhaps the most exciting from the current perspective, is ‘spatial morality’. While their paper does not actually explicitly discuss this term, as a keyword it anticipated the growing significance of ethnic and moral issues in border and migration studies. Newman and Paasi (1998) had noted earlier that borders are symbols, social institutions and manifestations of power relations, express norms, values, legal and moral codes, but neither did they problematise profoundly the term ‘moral’. Since then moral and ethical issues have become highly important in migration research (e.g. Carens 2013, Bulley 2017). Unfortunately, they have been somewhat
neglected in border studies until recent times (Buchanan & Moore 2003; Paasi 2019). However, these themes proliferate increasingly not only in academic debates but also in wider deliberations concerning human rights and solidarity in the case of migration/refugees. Ethical and moral problems also resonate with the often (utopian) ideals of a borderless world that emerged in literature at the turn of the 1990s. Similarly, they are important in the context of migration-related activism, for example, in the form of normative claims put forward by social movements such as Open borders and No borders that mirror contemporary border struggles in the case of migrants and refugees (Paasi 2019).

Socio-spatial fetishism and related ideologies, particularly ethno-nationalism jar against open borders. Van Houtum and van Naerssen’s text is therefore relevant not only because of burgeoning nationalism, but also because more nuanced forms of social and ethnic exclusion, and even Nazism and other fascist practices that dwell in bordering and othering, displaying often a counterattack on human rights and transnational mobilities. Exemplary victims are immigrants and refugees, ‘Others’ that fetishised spatialisations tend to represent as threats to the naturalised hegemonic b/orders, and social groupings. Yet, similarly, ordinary citizens may also turn out to be such victims if their worldviews are poisoned with dehumanising misinformation. The fears associated with the ‘Other’ may express diverging elements: racism, stereotypes, cultural habits, achieved economic and political privileges and their loss, for instance. Current complexity makes it trickier to diagnose and understand the relations between the self and the other. Kristeva (1992, p. 13) aptly writes: ‘Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognising him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns ‘we’ into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible. The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities’.

SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE TESG PAPER

As the previous discussion shows, van Houtum and van Naerssen’s paper has well maintained its relevance. However, now, 20 years after its publication, it is perhaps useful to reflect what elements were not yet accentuated in the paper. First, earlier and simultaneously emerging research on borders was largely absent in the references and discussions of their paper. Yet, critical political geographers and IR scholars had written earlier on othering and boundary producing practices (for a summary see Paasi 1996; Newman & Paasi 1998). Furthermore, as to issues that were not explicitly articulated in the paper, the variegated roles of state power were not put forward while the state, with its numerous institutions uninterruptedly being mobilised in both social spatialisation and spatial socialisation, is in a key position in the production and reproduction of bordering and otherness at various scales. Such institutions are major tools also in the creation and visualisation of the socio-spatial dividing lines and respectively in fetishising them. Here we can of course point the finger also towards the academic discipline of geography and geographic and cartographic education that the state’s educational apparatuses – critical ideological tools – effectively mobilise and control.

It has been suggested that borders can be theorised reasonably only as a part of the wider production and reproduction of territoriality/territory, state power and agency. Education is of course only one moment. Painter (2006) has noted that ‘stateness’, state as a relational territorial effect, infiltrates the everyday life in almost every area of social life. State authorities watch birth, health care, education, work, housing, mobility, and even dying. Likewise, territory itself is a product of social relations (and vice versa). The emotional side of stateness reverberates with the experiences of national symbols, memorials, rituals, spectacles, novels, movies, (political) comics, habits and affects, which are typically critical in establishing ‘us’ and the ‘Other’ (Paasi 2020).

Second, van Houtum and van Naerssen’s paper was published a bit too early to identify and to diagnose the huge impact of technology on our understanding of borders,
bordering and ordering. While there had been forecasts regarding the upcoming ‘borderless world’ since the beginning of the 1990s, typically related to Ohmae’s (1990) strong rhetoric on how internet and other technological tools would be critical in realising this world, technology was not yet so much related to borders (cf. Paasi 2019). It was the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which rapidly gave rise to new approaches to bordering that were related to security technologies. The authors submitted the TESG paper one month after the attacks, so the dramatic consequences of it on ordering, bordering and border studies themselves were not yet discussed in their text.

During the 1990s, border scholars noted that borders are not motionless lines at the edges of state territories but are widely diffused in (and beyond) states as institutions, symbols, practices and discourses. Borders are selectively porous and spread in space in the form of technical landscapes of control and social or symbolic landscapes of social order (Paasi 2016). At this stage, also the understanding of the sites of borders and the processes of bordering began to change. Also van Houtum and van Naerssen highlighted that borders do not represent fixed points in space but rather symbolise a social practice of spatial differentiation. Their attention paid to migrant others in bordering was an important opening that paved the way for later more intensive research, which is still continuing with an intensifying pace.

Yet, simultaneously borders/bordering incessantly fixate and regulate mobility (not least human mobility) and contribute to the making of places in space. This expansion of the formerly rather narrow understanding of borders led to a sort of paradox that relational thinkers, such as Doreen Massey (1995; cf. Massey 2005) reflected; they challenged all kinds of ‘given’ borders. Echoing this, as also van Houtum and van Naerssen suggested, this sort of critical perspective is crucial in a world where immigrants, refugees, and displaced people face borders and the processes of bordering in very different ways than do transnational capitalists, educated elites or even tourists. This claims scholars to reflect, how social practices and discourses organise (and are organised) in the processes of bordering, as well as the influences of borders themselves (without assuming any direct causal or fetishised role for ‘space’ that would be separate from the social and cultural).

Massey (1995, p. 67) noted that borders do not represent any ‘eternal truth of places’ but, rather, are ‘socially constructed’ and are drawn by society and power holding agencies to serve specific purposes. Since social relations and spatial structures are not separate, borders are as much the products of society as are other social and cultural relations, which set up social space. Therefore, the places that borders enclose are never culturally ‘pure’ and can be constructed as protection by the relatively weak, as a form of struggle, or by the strong, and as a way to protect the privileged positions they have (Massey 1995). This has important implications for interpreting the relations between various forms of nationalism (e.g. civic and ethnic) and their relations to migrant integration, for example (Larin 2020).

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Border studies have turned out to be a very robust but dynamic multidisciplinary research field since the turn of the millennium. Correspondingly, political geographers, political scientists, IR scholars, economists, sociologists, historians, anthropologists, literature theorists, as well as researchers in security studies and aesthetics now scrutinise borders. Van Houtum and van Naerssen’s paper has doubtless contributed to the rise of such multidisciplinary perspectives. The extent of studies has also expanded, which resonates with the growth of the research community and the rise of new themes in border research. Respectively, not only border work and border-crossings occurring in specific border contexts (for example, daily life, identity building, hybridisation, smuggling, human trafficking, and immigration) are now studied but also security related themes such as border control and surveillance technologies. Borders are also increasingly studied in relation to mobile bodies and biometrics.

Likewise, the aesthetic and emotional roles of borders in daily life, the artistic manifestations of bordering (paintings, music, and
fiction) have also become ever more significant mediums in border struggles during the current times when borders are multiplicating and strengthening. As to bordering, ordering and othering, it is encouraging that new approaches often appear in the form of resistance that focuses against tightening border control and the forms of violence generated by borders that immigrants and particularly refugees face (Jones 2015). Thus, new approaches to understand bordering challenge in many ways the fetishised ideas of borders, orders, and othering. ‘Open borders’ and ‘no borders’ activists, for their part, often intend to lower borders and remove the borderlines between academic research and the struggle for human rights and free mobility. Correspondingly, border studies increasingly focus on new forms of borderwork as well as on new locations and institutions (e.g. sanctuary cities, aid organisations, refugee communities, detention centres, etc.). Subsequently, the overall idea of what borders are and what bordering means for social and human life has expanded dramatically. Previous themes have become more and more important and will very likely be key issues in the future organisation of international relations, since they mirror the complex, transmuting relations between the State, national identities, mobilities, climate change, and global uneven development, for example. Last but not least, currently rising right-wing populism and ethno-nationalism in many European states seem to provide major challenges also for border researchers and for their work against racism.

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