Commentary

Border studies reanimated: going beyond the territorial/relational divide

‘Border’ has been a key category for social scientists since the 19th century when modern state-building and nation-building processes began to intensify in Europe. It is well known how Friedrich Ratzel, for example, stressed the importance of borders for ‘political balance’. A lesser known pioneer in border studies is the famous sociologist Georg Simmel, for whom “the boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially” (1997, page 142). He discussed the roles of borders in social life and for consciousness, and concluded: “By virtue of the fact that we have boundaries everywhere and always, so accordingly we are boundaries” (cited in Ethington, 2007, page 480). Tester (1993, page 9) condensed Simmel’s ideas as follows:

“The boundaries make life meaningful … but the very meaningfulness of life as something with a location and most significantly a direction (i.e. life going as somewhere other than here), implies the flow of life over permanent boundaries.”

It is a sort of a paradox that the ‘border’ quickly became a catchword 100 years later, simultaneously when the ideas of cosmopolitanism and the postnational/denationalized world as well as the neoliberal rhetoric on a ‘borderless world’ appeared on the agenda. New interest was aroused after the implosion of the ideological line between the capitalist and socialist world at the turn of the 1990s, an event that gave rise to both new ethnonational borders and ethnic violence. New attention also reverberated with ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ views on globalization (Paasi, 2003). More than any other event, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA and the consequent ‘war on terror’ generated security-related border research in which biopolitics, circulation, and technologies became key issues (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008). Indeed, if Simmel once stated that “people are boundaries”, scholars are increasingly noting how people become borders (Balibar, 1998) and how human bodies are key sites of borders in the current, biometrically managed world (Amoore, 2006).

This commentary will problematize the concept of border in a situation in which the social and political meanings of borders have been rethought in academia as well as in the context of securitization of state and suprastate (like the EU) spaces, and in which bounded spaces still have a role to play in the mobilization of emotions, racism, xenophobia, and, ultimately, violence. While only two of the world’s total twenty-nine major armed conflicts during 2001–10 have been interstate (SIPRI, 2011), a remarkable hardening of state borders has simultaneously occurred around the world (Rosière and Jones, 2012). I will first look at how the understanding of borders has evolved and how relational thinking contests traditional border studies. Secondly, I will take some conceptual steps towards a broader understanding of state borders that highlights both their porous and not-so-open qualities, thus going beyond the territorial–relational divide.

Contested borders

Academic keywords are characteristically contested, and even the most vibrant examples defy static definitions. Political geographer Prescott (1987) defined the terminology of border studies straightforwardly: boundary was the abstract line that separates state territories, frontier was a zone category, and borders were areas adjacent to a territory. Such characterizations were problematic in their blunt state-centrism and in anchoring the language of border studies to definite “artefacts on the ground” (Agnew, 2008). Consequently, boundaries were seen as dividers, edges of power containers that, after being established, were relatively stable, and
were often glorified as ‘holy’ entities in state ideologies. Prescott’s three terms are used more or less synonymously today and the ‘border’ has gradually become the dominant keyword.

Current interdisciplinary research on borders varies both thematically and in its theoretical, methodological and empirical orientation (Johnson et al., 2011; Wastl-Walter, 2011; Wilson and Donnan, 2012). Theoretical issues are occasionally raised explicitly by researchers (Bauder, 2011; Brunett-Jailly, 2011), but border more often seems to be a sort of ‘side-term’ that resonates only implicitly when scholars scrutinize topics related, for example, to security, population, and circulation (immigration, refugees) or to cultural themes (multiculturalism, cultural hybridity) (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008; Wastl-Walter 2011; Wilson and Donnan, 2012). More often than not, researchers stress the need to problematize the ‘flows of life’ across borders and how such flows are managed and governed at and across various scales, from human bodies to the global.

Likewise, the assumptions related to borders—their power and functions, and the agencies impacting on borders and bordering—are multiple. Contrary to tradition, borders are now rarely conceptualized as separate sociospatial entities. Further, rather than permanent elements, borders are seen as historically contingent institutions that are constituted in and constitutive of the perpetual production and reproduction of territories. The inseparability of borders and territories does not imply that they should form fixed bounded wholes, but rather that they are dispersed sets of power relations that are mobilized for various purposes.

One important step has been the abandonment of the view of borders as mere lines and the notion of their location solely at the ‘edges’ of spaces. This has helped to challenge strictly territorial approaches and to advance alternative spatial imaginations which suggest that the key issues are not the ‘lines’ or ‘edges’ themselves, or not even the events and processes occurring in these contexts, but nonmobile and mobile social practices and discourses where borders—as processes, sets of sociocultural practices, symbols, institutions, and networks—are produced, reproduced, and transcended. Questions have also been raised as to who is bordering, and how, where, and why this occurs in certain ways (Johnson et al., 2011).

Another challenge is posed by relational thinking, which has deep roots in the social sciences. Emirbayer (1997) suggests that such thinking has given rise to a fundamental dilemma: whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily of substances or in processes, in static ‘things’ or in dynamic, unfolding relations. Such dilemma has long roots in geography and has manifested itself in efforts to abandon container-based views on territory, region, and place. While relational views can be traced at least to the situation after World War II, this issue emerged powerfully on the agenda in the 1990s. Massey (1995), for example, argued in general terms that borders inevitably cut across some other social relations that constitute social space. Borders do not hence embody any ‘eternal truth of places’ but rather are drawn on by diverging actors to serve particular purposes. Similarly, the spaces that borders enclose are never culturally ‘pure’ (Massey, 1995), a point which has become increasingly critical around the world when political extremists claim such purity of state spaces.

What is the lesson of the relational approach to border studies? Possibly the key message is that ‘boundedness’ is a contextual–empirical rather than an ontological issue, which is of critical importance when moving beyond the territorial–relational dualism. Cochrane and Ward (2012; cf Paasi, 2012a), for example, have recently criticized this dichotomy in the context of policy making and policy transfer. They propose that

“policy making has to be understood as both relational and territorial; as both in motion and simultaneously fixed, or embedded in place. Rather than merely seeing this as an inherently contradictory process, however, what matters is to be able to explore the ways in which the working through of the tension serves to produce policies and places,
policies in place. The conventional distinction that is often made between the two misses the extent to which each necessarily defines and is defined by the other—territories are not fixed, but the outcome of overlapping and interconnecting sets of social, political, and economic relations stretching across space, while the existence of identifiable territories shapes and in some cases limits the ways in which those relations are able to develop (in other words relational space and territorial space are necessarily entangled)” (page 7).

Allen (2011) has argued that territorial, relational, and topological forms of power/space occur and are ‘twisted’ simultaneously in social processes. Likewise, complex social and political relations come into play when borders are established and exploited by various actors in the production and ordering of spaces. Borders are relational in the sense that they are produced, reproduced, and transformed in diverging social relations and networks. Also, territorial jurisdictions are sites of complex relational juxtapositions, and fold different scales in, around, and in-between each other (Healey, 2006).

**Mobile and nonmobile borders**

Much current spatial thinking emphasizes the porousness of borders, the hybridity of cultures, and nonessential identities. While these are often related to mobility and to the rise of transnational flows, it is important not to essentialize such views or to isolate them from contexts and practices. Firstly, ‘flows’ are typically monitored and controlled—governing institutions are thus ‘border producing’ and ‘reproducing’ (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008). Secondly, despite the rise of transnational processes and claims for a postnational/denationalized citizenship (Sassen, 2002), the practices of states in foreign policy, securitization (military, political, economic, environmental), spatial planning, policymaking and national socialization still operate in the world of ‘spatialized essences’ (Agnew, 2009; Thompson, 2004). Jones (2009) argues that

“When performing their practical politics, agents imagine and identify a discrete, bounded space characterized by a shared understanding of the opportunities or problems that are motivating the very nature of political action.”

Similarly the expanding ‘securitization complex’ suggests that borders are best understood as processes that are related to circulation and technologies. Graham (2010, page 89) has proposed that “states are becoming internationally organized systems geared towards trying to separate people and circulations deemed risky or malign from those deemed risk-free or worthy of protection.” This ‘separation’ process occurs both inside and outside of state territorial borders and, indeed, results in a blurring between international and urban/local borders, thus also fusing the scalar dimensions of borders (page 89). To follow the Simmelian (1997) metaphor, instead of bridges, there are doors that are opened selectively.

The above discussion can be abstracted into two coinciding modalities of borders. Firstly, the institutionalization and governance of territorial spaces effected by states are typically rooted in practices and discourses that resonate with the narratives of nation(alism) and identity. In geopolitical terms, borders are thus related to ‘people’, ‘nation’, and ‘culture’. From this angle, the key ‘site’ of the border is not only the borderland but also the complex, perpetually ongoing, hegemonic nation-building process. Borders therefore resonate not only with state but also with nation, identity, and purported loyalties. While such borders are challenged by postnational and denational processes, mobility, and at times by ethnic upsurges, studies on (banal) nationalism display how much emotional bordering, fear, and loyalty are mobilized through nationalized and memorialized material landscapes like military cemeteries and monuments, or through national performances such as flag/independence days, parades, and other elements related to national heritage, ‘purity’, and symbolism (Paasi, 2012b). These material and symbolic practices often both maintain and ‘stretch’ borders in both time and space and are typically maintained in spatial socialization through such institutions as
media and education. Bordering at times occurs ‘invisibly’: for instance, when the media turns the exclusive views of political elites into agendas on immigration issues and puts aside the views and biographies of asylum seekers, refugees or the NGOs that represent them (Shah, 2008).

The power of such bordering practices—which can be labelled as discursive/emotional landscapes of social power (Paasi, 2012b)—is related to the fact that only 3% of the world’s population resides in a state other than the one in which they were born (Cunningham, 2004). This implies two things. Firstly, as Hirst and Thompson (1996) have reminded us, despite global flows, the bulk of the world’s population is still “trapped by the lottery of their birth”. Secondly, border-crossings by immigrants and refugees, totalling some 190 million people, have concentrated unevenly in states: 75% of immigrants live in just twenty-eight states (Shah, 2008). Developed countries, hosting one third of immigrants, have reacted to this phenomenon in the spirit of neoliberalism by preferring progressively a strategic ‘selectivity’: that is, often prioritizing the ‘best’ and the ‘brightest’ (Hyndman, 2012). Immigration has been opposed (and attained privileges defended) in many states on cultural, ethnic, demographic, and economic grounds, but environmental arguments are increasingly utilized as well (the ‘greening of anti-immigration’). The phenomenon is not just a case of populist parties riding into power on themes leaning on often selective reading of immigration statistics, as migration is to an increasing degree also being represented as a security question that draws on the purported risks of terrorism (Huysmans, 2006). As Hyndman (2012) reminds us, the securitization of migration is a defining feature of current geopolitics. This closely resonates with biopolitics, the management of populations, and thus accentuates borders. Hyndman suggests that attention is increasingly paid to border-crossers, not merely borders or acts of border-crossings.

These simple but often neglected facts provide one way to understand the power of ‘bounded spaces’ as stubborn resources co-opted for political exploitation of ideas rooted ostensibly in homogeneous territorial spaces and exclusive national narratives of belonging and identity—all of which are continually reproduced in the processes of spatial socialization (Jones and Merriman, 2012; Paasi, 1996). This occurs despite the fact that, in the spirit of neoliberal agendas, the ideas of citizenship, and the rights and obligations of national citizens, are changing away from a ‘collective’ ideal towards that of a more ‘individualistic’, mobile, and skills-based one (Soysal, 2012; Mitchell, 2003). This highly contextual, ‘soft’ side of bordering is crucially related to cultural aspects and to the symbolic violence practised in media and education. However, it is still largely an uncharted terrain in political geography.

While previous ‘landscapes’ are critical in inculcating national identity narratives and in mobilizing the imagined national communities among citizens, today they are commonly fused with practices related to control and surveillance: borders, border-crossings, and border-crossers are monitored by increasingly technical devices and practices. These technical landscapes of control are crucial in the post-9/11 world and are related not to ‘people’ but to population and circulation: that is, biopolitics (cf Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008). Similar to the discursive landscapes of social power, the practices and technologies associated with the increasing bordering and control of mobilities are not located solely in border areas but stretch beyond the borders proper. At airports seductive signs encourage vigilance by proposing that ‘security is everyone’s business, please make it yours’. Passports, irises, and fingerprints are new synonyms of borders. Amoore’s (2006) concept of the ‘biometric border’ indicates a dual move in bordering: a turn to scientific and managerial techniques in governing the mobilities of bodies and the extension of biopower so that the body, in a way, becomes the carrier of the border and “it is inscribed with multiple encoded boundaries of access”. This complexity doubtless strengthens ‘bordering’ in a society, and may be constitutive of social, cultural, and political distinctions between social groups.
While borders are often increasingly concrete barriers (Rosière and Jones, 2012), the securitization of ‘bounded’ state spaces occurs ever more in global space through border-crossings: in the name of security, border control and management stretch across borders. This is particularly prominent in the case of some powerful states. The mission of the US Customs and Border Protection, for example, states that “We safeguard the American homeland at and beyond our borders.” The UK Border Agency, for its part, presents itself as a global organization with 25,000 staff—including more than 9000 warranted officers—operating in “local communities, at our borders and across 135 countries worldwide” (Paasi, 2012b). Bordering practices thus become increasingly mobile, networked, technical, private, and detached from what were formerly regarded as state ‘borders’. Simultaneously, US-based and Western European companies are insurmountably dominating the global sale of the arms that states use to ‘secure’ their territory (SIPRI, 2011).

These two ‘landscapes’ open the idea of border into a set of bordering practices that are historically contingent. These more or less mobile landscapes eventually gravitate towards the same path and may strengthen states as imagined bounded units, however porous they are in practice (Paasi, 2012b). They display how borders can be exploited to both mobilize and fix territory, security, identities, emotions and memories, and various forms of national socialization. Further, this conceptualization of borders suggests that, while it is continually vital to examine how borders and bordering practices come about, it is also critical to reflect on the political rationalities and state-based ideologies embedded in these practices. The management and control of flows, (national) ideologies and socialization demand careful reflection on the functions of states in bordering practices (cf. Johnson et al, 2011).

Epilogue
Contrary to the cosmopolitan optimism of the 1990s and the ideas of a borderless world, current mushrooming research on borders has shown that borders are still with us but also that their meanings are more and more complex in both social and political practice and academic research. Simultaneously, an accelerating ‘flow of life’ across borders exists. Borders are often contested, may be more or less permeable, come to an end or harden at some stage, and be replaced as part of wider territorial transformations in which spaces are unfinished and always becoming (cf. Massey, 2005). Consequently, it is crucial to step beyond simple dichotomies dictating that spaces should be understood as either territorially bounded or open. Even the most thoroughly fixed borders transform, are crossed, and are partly ‘mobile’. Although Andreu (cited in Graham 2010, page 88) is on the right track when he proposes that “national borders have ceased being continuous lines on earth’s surface and (have) become non-related sets of lines and points situated within each country”, this is clearly not the definitive truth on how borders make a difference. Agnew (2008) suggests that borders matter in two ways. First, they have real effects: borders are mobilized to both limit and allow movement of things, money, and people, a function which seems to have witnessed the hardening of borders since the turn of the millennium. Secondly, borders trap thinking about and acting in the world in territorial terms, that is, borders tend to “limit the exercise of intellect, imagination, and political will” (page 176). Balibar (1998) also stated that that which can be demarcated, defined, and determined maintains a constitutive relation to that which can be thought. It thus remains a major task for scholars to theorize and to uncover the ever-more complex modalities of borders, the political and social functions of bordering practices, and their effects. Only then it is possible “to think and then act beyond their present limitations” (Agnew, 2008, page 176).

Anssi Paasi
Academy of Finland/University of Oulu
References

Agnew J, 2008, “Borders on the mind: re-framing border thinking” Ethics and Global Politics 1 175–191

Agnew J, 2009 Globalization and Sovereignty (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD)

Allen J, 2011, “Topological twists: power’s shifting geographies” Dialogues in Human Geography 1 283–298

Amoore L, 2006, “Biometric borders: governing mobilities in the war on terror” Political Geography 25 336–351

Balibar E, 1998, “The borders of Europe”, in Cosmopolitics Eds P Cheah, B Robbins (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN) pp 216–229

Bauder H 2011, “Toward a critical geography of the border: engaging the dialectic of practice and meaning” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 101 1126–1139

Brunet-Jailly E, 2011, “Borders, borderlands and theory: an introduction” Geopolitics 16 1–6

Cochrane A, Ward K, 2012, “Guest editorial. Researching the geographies of policy mobility: confronting the methodological challenges” Environment and Planning A 44 5–12

Cunningham H, 2004, “Nations rebound? crossing borders in a gated globe” Identities 11 329–350

Dillon M, Lobo-Guerrero L, 2008, “Biopolitics of security in the 21st century: an introduction Review of International Studies 34 265–292

Emirbayer M, 1997, “Manifesto for a relational sociology” American Journal of Sociology 103 281–317

Ethington, P J 2007 “Planning the past: ’ground work’ for a spatial theory of history” Rethinking History 11 465–493

Healey P, 2006, “Relational complexity and the imaginative power of strategic spatial planning” European Planning Studies 14 525–546

Hirst P, Thompson G, 1996 Globalization in Question (Polity Press, Cambridge)

Huysmans J, 2006 The Politics of Insecurity (Routledge, London)

Hyndman J, 2012, “The geopolitics of migration and mobility” Geopolitics 17 243–255

Graham S, 2010 Cities under Siege (Verso, London)

Johnson C, Jones R, Paasi A, Amoore L, Mountz A, Salter M, Rumford C, 2011, “Interventions on rethinking ‘the border’ in border studies” Political Geography 30 61–69

Jones M, 2009, “Phase space: geography, relational thinking, and beyond” Progress in Human Geography 36 204–224

Jones R, Merriman P, 2012, “Network nation” Environment and Planning A 44 937–953

Massey D, 1995, “The conceptualization of place”, in A Place in the World Eds D Massey, P Jess (Oxford University Press, Oxford) pp 45–85

Massey D, 2005 For Space (Sage, London)

Mitchell K, 2003, “Educating the national citizen in neo-liberal times: from the multicultural self to the strategic cosmopolitan” Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series 28 387–403

Paasi A, 1996 Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness (John Wiley, Chichester, Sussex)

Paasi A, 2003 “Boundaries in a globalizing world”, in Handbook of Cultural Geography Eds K Anderson, M Domosh, S Pile, N Thrift (London, Sage) pp 462–472

Paasi A, 2012a, “Regional planning and the mobilization of “regional identity”: from bounded spaces to relational complexity” Regional Studies dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2012.661410

Paasi A, 2012b, “Borders and border-crossings”, in The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography Eds N Johnson, R Schein, J Winders (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford) in print

Prescott J V R, 1987 Political Frontiers and Boundaries (Unwin Hyman, London)

Rosière S, Jones R, 2012 “Teichnopolis: re-considering globalization through the role of walls and fences” Geopolitics 17 217–234

Sassen S, 2002, “Towards post-national and denationalized citizenship”, in Handbook of Citizenship Studies Eds E Isin, BS Turner (Sage, London) pp 277–291

Shah A, 2008 “Immigration” Global Issues 26 May, http://www.globalissues.org

Simmel G, 1997, “The sociology of space”, in Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings Eds D Frisby, M Featherstone (Sage, London) pp 137–170
SIPRI, 2011. *SIPRI Yearbook 2011* SIPRI, Stockholm

Soysal Y N, 2012, “Citizenship, immigration, and the European social project: rights and obligations of individuality” *British Journal of Sociology* **63** 1–21

Tester K, 1993 *The Life and Times of Post-modernity* (Routledge, London)

Thompson G, 2004, “Is all the world a complex network?” *Economy and Society* **33** 411–424

Wastl-Walter D (Ed.) 2011 *The Ashgate Research Companion to Border Studies* (Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey)

Wilson T M, Donnan H, 2012, “Borders and border studies”, in *A Companion to Border Studies* Eds T M Wilson, H Donnan (Blackwell, Oxford) pp 1–25