From Imagined Communities to Bordered Societies?

Bordering Processes in the Americas in the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries

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This study explores the meaning of borders in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in the Americas. It argues that borders can best be understood as the result of *bordering practices* which are socially defined and constructed. Following the theoretical framework proposed by Popescu, I analyse borders in the Americas through the prism of several trends: (1) de-bordering, which implies the decreased relevance or even disappearance of some international borders and (2) simultaneous re-bordering, which suggests the demarcating of new borders or their renewed relevance due to (3) the process of border securitisation in the early 21st century. This analysis of the current situation is set out against a survey of earlier border scholarship regarding the Americas. Current trends in bordering practices are highlighted through a case study of the international border between the US and Mexico.

Keywords: Borders, the Americas, de-bordering, re-bordering, border securitisation, US-Mexico border, globalisation, bordering, Latin America, North America, migration

Introduction

The work describes and analyses the meaning of borders in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in the Americas. It argues that borders today are best understood as the effect of bordering processes and practices which are shaped by parallel trends of "de-bordering" in the context of globalisation and "re-bordering" in the context of growing

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security concerns. This analysis of the current situation is presented against a survey of earlier border scholarship especially regarding the Americas. Current trends in bordering practices are then illustrated through the case of the international border between the US and Mexico.

When Benedict Anderson coined the term "imagined communities" to refer to national identities in modern nation states, he based his observations on processes of national identification in Latin America in the 19th century.[1] Indeed, the early decolonisation of this region was followed by parallel processes of building national consciousness on the one hand and demarcating borders in what had previously been administrative regions of the Spanish Empire on the other. Borders in the Americas bear testament to the fiction of exclusive state sovereignty overlapping with a specific territory, a notion which has become the bedrock of the understanding of the modern nation state. Moreover, this pioneering notion was implemented in the highly ethnically diverse societies of the Americas, consequently dividing single communities across different states; this is the experience of the Chiquitano population, split between Bolivia and Brazil and the Maya people, who are dispersed across Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. At the same time, understandings of the meaning of state borders in the Americas also changed considerably over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries.

From the Frontier to the National Security Border

Before proceeding with the detailed analysis of bordering processes around the turn of the 21st century – which is this study's core concern – it will be useful to briefly trace the genesis of the meaning of borders in the Western hemisphere, as outlined in earlier scholarship. At the outset of the 19th century, borders in the Americas were widely conceived of as *frontiers*. They generally represented unmarked zones where the territory of one state or empire faded into that of another, providing a kind of "buffer zone" between one empire and another. The free and open nature of the Western frontier in the American North gave rise to Jackson Turner's influential thesis about the frontier's significance in shaping the American character and democracy, an idea first proposed in 1893 that was a widely accepted framework for border scholarship until the mid-20th century.[2] This thesis was developed further through the writings of Prescott Webb, who argued that the 'great frontier' dis-

covered by Columbus was the stimulus for the rise of wealth, capitalism and democracy.[3]

The *borderlands* has been another important notion concerning borders in the Americas. These areas are generally understood not as lines but as zones surrounding the international boundary line. Their extensions are sometimes specified by relevant governments for the purpose of cross-border exchange and cooperation: the US-Mexico borderlands, for instance, are said to stretch 100 kilometres to the south and north of the international boundary.[4]

Lastly, the meaning of the border has often fused with the idea of a *boundary*, a physical line demarcating the separation of two states, each of which has full sovereignty over its territory. As we will see, this notion of the border has increasingly come to describe a fenced, policed and otherwise enforced political line between states.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the effects of globalisation challenged the idea of state sovereignty over a single territory. Globalisation processes led, as Sassen argued, to 'novel assemblages of territory, authority and rights.'[5] Enhanced by the larger context of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of ideological barriers, borders appeared to lose their importance. The world seemed to have entered an era of *open borders*. This shift was felt on many fronts in the Americas. Regarding trade, unprecedented flows of capital, goods and services started to circulate among the US, Canada and Mexico thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed in 1993. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other global economic institutions had a crucial role to play in the economic policies of most countries of Latin America in the same period. Transnational corporations acquired more wealth and relevance than many existing nation states. At the same time, the global human rights regime and its universal jurisdiction threatened to reach divisive Latin American leaders such as Augusto Pinochet in Chile and Alberto Fujimori in Peru.

It was precisely in this decade between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the 21st century that the function of borders as so-called *gateways* from one state to another was emphasised and their previous depiction as fixed and uncontested dividing lines challenged. Scholarly research became increasingly interested in processes of bordering, understood as the result of the efforts of powers to order social relations in space. The discursive and symbolic construction of borders in terms of "us" and "them" and the role of public debate and the

media came to the forefront of the analysis. Concepts of borders such as Bhabha's idea of an 'in-between' ambivalent space of intercultural contact proliferated.[6]

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in 2001 and on Madrid (in 2004) and London (in 2005) represented milestones in our understanding of borders, abruptly inaugurating the new border paradigm which Payan has called the 'national security border.'[7] Since those tragic events, international borders have ceased to be seen as the always open gateways that the optimistic 1990s had suggested they were. At the same time, they have been given the new task of becoming selective filters. As well as enabling the free movement of goods and capital, borders are expected to purify societies and protect them from the negative side effects of enhanced transnational exchanges in the age of globalisation. As a result, most border narratives since 2001 have been constructed around this ambiguous discourse of "open borders" on the one hand and "border securitisation" on the other. The latter has referred to practices including enhanced border policing, the use of "smart borders" and the adoption of aggressive migration policies focusing on the control of unwanted human mobility. In discursive terms, the border securitisation approach has been inclined to lump together issues of migration, terrorism and organised crime. While these border securitisation measures originated in the US, they can today be seen to constitute a new border regime worldwide.

As this brief survey of the genesis of our understanding of borders in the Americas suggests, although borders – as physical divides – may be fixed and static over time, their meanings, physical appearance and political importance are continuously shifting.

The next parts of this study attempt to highlight some of the main features of the new border realities in the Americas. Following Popescu, I examine current processes of bordering in the Americas through the prism of simultaneous trends: (1) de-bordering, which implies the decreased relevance or even disappearance of some international borders and (2) re-bordering, which suggests the demarcation of new borders or their renewed relevance due to the process of (3) border securitisation in the early 21st century.[8] My ambition in this work is also to describe larger processes of bordering in the Americas and thus create some contextual background for the other contributions in the present issue.

Processes of De-Bordering

During the 1990s, forces of globalisation were the main reason for the proliferation of free trade agreements and the selective open borders regime that allowed for greater cross-border exchange and cooperation in the Americas. Important transnational actors such as the IMF and the World Bank championed this model throughout the region. One of the results of these globalising forces was the emergence of 'third spaces.'[9] Such spaces are no longer exclusively national or global, and they should be perceived instead as an 'assemblage of elements of each [space].'[10] NAFTA (coming into effect in 1994), the free trade agreements between the US and Chile (2004) and the US and Colombia (2011) as well as the establishment of Mercosur (1991) exemplify such third spaces born out of the effects of globalisation in the Americas.

In the case of NAFTA, for instance, the free trade agreement meant the expansion of existing and robust commercial ties between the US and Canada, which share an almost 9,000-kilometre long and barely protected border. Further, it extended the free flow of goods and services into the vastly asymmetric market of Mexico, the US's southern neighbour with which it shares a 3,000-kilometre border. At the same time, however, the issue of human mobility was strictly excluded from NAFTA's provisions.

Due to these supranational integration projects and trade blocs such as Mercosur and the Andean Pact/Andean Community, there has been a vibrant cross-border exchange in South America over the past two decades. This is especially so in the Tri-Border Area between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay, as well as between Chile, Peru and Bolivia. The de-bordering process in the Americas is exemplified in several steps taken by the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) to promote free human movement: visa requirements for tourist travel between Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname and Uruguay were waived in 2006. Passport-free movement within UNASUR's member states allows current South American nationals to travel within the continent carrying only their personal identity card. In late 2014, UNASUR Secretary General Ernesto Samper announced plans to introduce South American citizenship, suggesting a future of free movement across the region, opportunities to study and work in any of its parts and mutual recognition of high school diplomas.[11]

Processes of Re-bordering

Notwithstanding the demise of borders as dividing lines in the age of globalisation that I have described above, new borders have actually been created at surprising speed since the 1990s. According to Foucher, more than 26,000 kilometres of new borders have emerged worldwide in this period.[12] The Amazon rainforest, which spans eight South American countries (Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guayana and Suriname) as well as the French overseas department of French Guiana, has been the focus of demarcation efforts aided by precise satellite technologies. The same can be observed in the Arctic whose area of over 20,000,000 square kilometres is the object of a fierce contest for sovereignty and the conquest of one of the last remaining frontiers on the planet.

These new processes of bordering are also occurring at an intrastate level in the Americas. An emblematic case is Brazil, which in the 1990s saw extensive political efforts to demarcate the borders of autonomous indigenous territories. In 1992, the tribal land of one of the country's large indigenous tribes, the Yanomami, was officially "homologised" by the president of the republic, a decision affecting an area of 94,000,000 square kilometres in the northern Amazon bordering on Venezuela.[13] Over the past two decades, this process of intrastate bordering has involved over a hundred more indigenous communities though control and law enforcement in those territories remain hotly contested.[14]

Additionally, borders have taken on new importance after the terrorist attacks in the US and Europe. While not entirely relinquishing their "gateway" function, these borders have a new role which has been likened to filtering: even as they allow for the free movement of goods and capital, they are expected to guarantee the security of societies by monitoring human mobility and "purifying" them of unwanted elements. In this regard, Franco Aas notes that efforts to maintain a 'bordered society' via border controls are intertwined with efforts to achieve an 'ordered society.'[15]

Finally, over the past two decades, we have seen active steps to physically reinforce some international borders in the Americas. This is the case with the 3,000-kilometre long divide between the US and Mexico. In the most exposed urban localities and traditional crossing points for migrants such as Tijuana-San Diego, el Paso-Ciudad Juárez, the construction of border fences actually started in the early 1990s, anticipating the securitisation process after 2001. Since that date, these

efforts have been stepped up with the building of intimidatingbarriers of two or three rows of barbed wire. This infrastructure is equipped with the latest surveillance technologies. While the US-Mexico border is the most infamous example, the reinforcement of the Mexico-Guatemala international border within the Southern Border Program (El Plan Frontera Sur) launched in 2015 also highlights this re-bordering process.[16]

Border Securitisation

The new security paradigm which stemmed from the 2001 terrorist attacks and the political and public discourses that followed gave borders a new task: to stop unwanted human movement and, at the same time, allow the flow of capital, goods and services (so-called good mobility). Based on this logic, borders came to be seen as 'sites where transnational mobility can be securitized.'[17] Spearheaded by the US, this "border securitisation" process was soon implemented in EU countries, with other states following to such an extent that it has since become the new standard early 21st-century border regime worldwide. In the case of the Americas, we find that this new paradigm has monopolised all border-related agenda in the North while in South America, by contrast, its impact is so far only limited.

The shift to border securitisation is exemplified in public policies which focus on enhancing security and selectivity at international borders. Accomplishing these goals has not solely been a matter of the physical enforcement and increased policing of borders. Rather, the new security paradigm seeks to assess the mobile security risks arising from transnational movement and globalisation. Redefining what a state border actually is, where it is located and how it is to be enforced has thus become crucial.

Another key aspect of the new border securitisation has been the transfer of a series of border management responsibilities, previously reserved solely for government, to private or quasi-public actors and institutions. As a result, the border has come to be understood as something dispersed throughout a society. As the popular phrase has it, "the border is everywhere": it does not only exist at the margins of state territory and it is no longer the exclusive concern of border agents. Local police along with companies and universities are required to check on the immigration status of their employees and stu-

dents and to report on this from deep within their societies. Biometric technologies are increasingly being deployed as tools to conquer the "ultimate border" – the body. Unique human body metrics such as iris data and fingerprints are captured by former military technologies to guarantee the imagined reduction of security risks.

In a third shift, the migration control agenda has been exported outside state territory to third countries: in the EU, for example, the Frontex agency has succeeded in de facto extra-territorialising European borders. In the region of the Americas, Mexican and Central American nationals wanting to travel to the US are now required to obtain their visa before leaving their home country: this requirement alone is one of the most powerful filters when it comes to determining who enters legally ("good" mobility) and who does not. The dividing line between those who can travel and those who cannot oftentimes corresponds with ethnicity, gender and economic status. In this way, the new selectivity imposed at the border connects with existing inequalities, resulting in race-biased immigration policing which can be set off anywhere. As Bauman has pointed out, in a world otherwise marked by transnationality and freedom of movement, immobility has become a prime form of social exclusion.18

The Case of the US-Mexico Border

The 3,169-kilometre long international border between the US and Mexico serves as a clear illustration of most of the border paradigms and bordering practices that have been outlined so far. Although the current physical boundary between these countries was agreed in 1853 in the Gadsen Purchase Treaty, the border to the US southwest corresponded with the notion of a "frontier" until the early 20th century; sources depict it as an open area of free movement of goods, services and persons with hardly any obstacles. It appears that at the very end of the 19th century, there were just four immigration service inspectors along the entire southern border. When US officials described "illegitimate immigration" in the first decades of the 20th century, they spoke of Middle Easterners, Europeans and Japanese and Chinese people who were trying to avoid tougher immigration controls by entering the US through the southern border. Records of arrivals through the US-Mexico border were kept from 1908. Mexicans were perceived as "legitimate immigrants"; on arrival in the US through official ports of

entry, they faced a head tax and a literacy test. Mexico's only border-related measure was the establishment of a special customs police which was supposed to help collect tax revenues from cross-border contraband activities.[19]

The US Border Patrol was established in 1924 and entrusted with guarding the border against the illegal transit of people and goods. This institutionalised both a heightened anti-immigration mood in the United States and the advent of the prohibition era concerning alcoholic beverages. The Border Patrol started with several hundred agents, and this number grew to 1,500 in 1965.[20] Today, it has 11,000 personnel, most of whom are stationed at the southern border.[21] Since the time of the Border Patrol's institutionalisation, border crossings have been monitored and bureaucratic—though the rest of the border has hardly been guarded. Over the decades, the growing economic, social and geopolitical asymmetries between the US and Mexico have led to an increasing perception of Mexicans as foreigners. Still, they continued to move across the border with relative ease until the 1970s. The bilateral Bracero guest worker programme, which from 1942 brought 4.6 million temporary workers from Mexico into the US agriculture industry, was ended in 1964. In the following decade, large-scale undocumented migration began from Mexico to the US Primary determinants of the trend included the population boom and low rates of job creation in Mexico as well as the constant pull of work offers in the US.

The Reagan administration introduced a number of measures that have since influenced the US government's approach to the border: first, it launched a series of law enforcement initiatives to protect the US from the perceived "flood" of undocumented workers coming from Mexico. Second, it increased the policing of the border in response to an important shift in drug trafficking routes. That change after 1982 diverted the lucrative Colombian cocaine trade from the Caribbean towards the southern border between the US and Mexico where marijuana and heroin smuggling had gone on for decades. The US Border Patrol personnel and budget grew further as efforts to "protect" the border were stepped up. Since this time, a sense of urgency has dogged policy debates about undocumented migrants from Mexico.

It is true that NAFTA allowed for the unprecedented movement of trade in goods and services among the US, Mexico and Canada following its implementation in 1994 and it remains a prime example of de-bordering processes at work. Nevertheless, this agreement occurred

at the same time that several military-style operations were carried out along the US-Mexico border by the Clinton administration. Their objective was to "get serious" about border enforcement and strengthen the "main gates" against undesired human movement and drug trafficking. These re-bordering processes included Operation Hold-the-Line (1993) in Texas, which fortified 30 kilometres of the El Paso-Juárez metropolitan area; Operation Gatekeeper (1994), which started in the San Diego-Tijuana area in California and extended border protection from the Pacific Ocean to Yuma, Arizona; Operation Safeguard (1994), which began in Arizona but lacked significant funding; and Operation Rio Grande (1997), which was launched in the south valley of Rio Grande, Texas. The number of US Border Patrol agents more than doubled in the 1990s.[22]

Aside from being an enormous financial investment, the building of fences at the most exposed parts of the border between the US and Mexico had the secondary effect of diverting migrant flows into the Sonora and Arizonan deserts. Over the same period, the number of deaths of migrants trying to avoid being caught crossing the border grew exponentially. From 1994 to 2001, there were approximately 1700 migrant deaths reported along the border, a toll which rose, as Cornelius has reported, in tandem with the intensification of border enforcement.[23]

Following the tragic events of 11 September 2001, the border securitisation paradigm dominated approaches to the US-Mexico border. All matters related to the border and its surveillance were placed under the jurisdiction of the newly created Department of Homeland Security and reframed as national security issues. In 2005, then president George W. Bush announced the Secure Border Initiative (SBI), a governmental strategy characterised by a unilateral law enforcement approach; its concerns were the increased patrolling of borders, expansion of detention and deportation powers, hi-tech detention and surveillance tools, infrastructure improvements and the increased internal enforcement of US immigration laws. Data gathered by Payan indicate that the 'budgets for border security and surveillance increased even more than they had in the 1980s and 1990s, reaching 7 billion USD in 2006.'[24] More federal agents were deployed to the southwest border for the purpose of immigration and customs enforcement.

The construction of a "virtual border" along the more than 3,000-kilometre border between the US and Mexico was proposed in

2005 as part of the SBI. After its implementation on an 80-kilometre stretch of border in Arizona at a cost of almost $1 billion USD, plans to install this high-tech surveillance system along the whole border were abandoned in 2011 due to technical problems and the high cost. Other tailor-made initiatives were announced for the remaining parts of the border. Border management responsibilities, previously reserved for federal US government agents, simultaneously passed to private/quasi-public actors and institutions. Those entities included employers, universities, local police, private subcontractors and, in some cases, even armed vigilante groups active in Mexico border states like Arizona. Moreover, as part of its response to these border securitisation developments, the US decided in 2005 to increase the border zone for law enforcement purposes to 160 kilometres inside of any US external boundary.[25] This expanded notion of the borderlands encompasses approximately two-thirds of the entire US population as well as the largest US cities and entire states. This move resulted in the significant extension of the area of action of the US Customs and Border Protection agency as well as Border Patrol agents. They are now able to check an individual's immigration status with the support of one of the many internal checkpoints throughout the country. While most of these checkpoints are located in the southern borderlands, a number also exist in the states of New York and Maine. Since 2001, those crossing the border have been treated as suspected terrorists.

This case study of procedures at the US-Mexico border at the turn of the 21st century bears witness to the three parallel trends described above: the practice of de-bordering in the context of globalisation, the use of re-bordering in the face of growing security concerns and finally, the rise of border securitisation after 2001. We can observe a general inclination to close the border as well as the escalation of both US policies and public discourse that are border-focused. This logic of escalation continues well into the second decade of the 21st century and has affected subsequent democratic administrations. President Barack Obama deployed 1,200 national guardsmen at the US-Mexico border in 2011.

Conclusion

Recent world events have shown that borders are far from being fixed and uncontested in the 21st century. While the enhanced movement of

commodities, capital, services and people might seem to render borders less effective, they remain central to processes of globalisation contrary to what was expected in the 1990s. At the same time, borders continue to be acutely relevant as a source of identification for citizens. As Fredrik Barth has pointed out, borders are not drawn to separate differences; it is because we have drawn up borders that we actively seek out differences and become acutely aware of their presence.[26] This study has focused particularly on tracing the shifting understanding of borders over the last three decades moving from the 20th into the 21st century. It has, thus, tracked their transition from "gateways" to "purifying filters" and from lines of division to smart and securitised borders that can materialise anywhere in a society.

Against the background of the changing international context caused by the fall of ideological borders in the late 20th century and the new security threats of the early 21st century, I have considered how processes of de-bordering and re-bordering and the securitisation paradigm have affected contemporary border regimes across the Western hemisphere, and specifically the border between the US and Mexico. It may be concluded that the region of the Americas epitomises the present era of simultaneous and contradictory bordering processes. On one hand, increased economic and political integration seems to have influenced the prevalence of the de-bordering paradigm in the southern part of the Americas. On the other hand, the notion of borders as sites where human mobility is scrutinised has ascended in the northern part of the Americas. Border securitisation has come to be seen as an adequate response to mobility-related risks in the era of globalisation.

I began with the recollection that it was Benedict Anderson who famously described the nation as an 'imagined community' based on research into early national movements in Latin America. This act of imagining, he suggested, operates through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Such processes help to establish the boundaries of the nation: who is "in" and who is "out." Today, several decades after Anderson's concept was formulated, it is curious to see how some scholars are revisiting it. This new work refers to imagined identities that are being fabricated by applying sophisticated technologies to specific bodily metrics in an attempt to control the transnational movement of people.

The case study of the US-Mexico border helps to illustrate how the escalation of political and public discourses since 2001 has established explicit connections between immigration, terrorism and organised crime and resulted in "one-size-fits-all" border securitisation policies. These policies collapse these three very different concerns into a single approach that has so far been hugely ineffective and costly in both financial and human terms.

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