

Approaches to the Border between Diffusion and Fortification

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Since at least the 2010s, borders have once again determined the political agenda and are increasingly at the center of social debate. At first glance, however, the resurgence of borders manifests itself in a paradoxical way. For while border walls are once again being built, fences are being put up and border facilities are being expanded as territorial markings, regulatory and control practices are increasingly fragmented and invisible in transterritorial terms. These developments both undermine and evoke the widespread idea that borders are linear markers of the territorial edge. Above all, however, they point to the need to rethink the concept of borders, which is still unquestioned in many places. For this purpose, selected approaches are presented in an overview below.

(1) Borders as Individualized Embodiments

In particular, the technology of the border, which is also described as “smartification,” has significantly changed the visibility and materiality of the border. So-called “smart borders” refer to monitoring devices via satellites, drones and radar systems used for the acquisition and storage of biometric data, for big-data automation or algorithmic projections of (escape) movements. Human bodies continuously enter into alliances with technical apparatuses and become carriers of the border (Amoore, 2006). The technology-based embodiment of the border, in which the human body functions as a checkpoint (Grosser/Oberprantacher 2021: 392), is regarded as the central feature of the border at the beginning of the 21st century (Schulze Wessel 2016: 52). In this context, Steffen Mau (2021: 156) distinguishes between the traditional territorial border as a “person border,” which regulates the movement of more or less all persons, and the “individualized border,” which distinguishes between border persons: “The growth of information, biometric recognition [...] is intended to ensure that the [border] persons classified as risky or undesirable [...] are filtered out, but that the flow of all other persons [...] does not come to a standstill.” (ibid.: 156f.)



(2) Borders as Ubiquitous Pop-Up Phenomena

These developments result in a diffusion of the border, since it can no longer be located exclusively on the territorial edge. It diffuses in space and reveals itself where regulation and control practices take place: “The biometric and electronically networked border attached to individual bodies and digital devices fills the entirety of state spaces and follows subjects wherever they move.” (Pöttsch 2021: 289) Like a watchdog in technological form, the border moves around transterritorially and strikes suddenly as soon as border persons approach: it lurks at airports, train stations or other transit points, traces through deserts or at sea and carefully observes the precalculated escape routes. As an unpredictable pop-up phenomenon, the border is spatially mobile and becomes ubiquitous (Balibar 2002: 84). However, its ubiquity is only relevant for those who are turned into border persons via (quite fluctuating) “sorting logic” (Mau 2021: 15) and thus brought into the impassibility of the border. They remain in an “ubiquitous state of potential persecution” (Pöttsch 2021: 289), which the geographer Clémence Lehec aptly describes with the term “frontière de Damoclès” (2020: 185). While border persons have to reckon with the border everywhere, which can be positioned as a control and selection apparatus at any time, for others it is hardly visible or relevant.



(3) Borders as Signatures of a “Walled World”

In addition to the dwindling visibility and differentiated ubiquity of the border, another development can be observed, which indicates the multiplication of visibly fortified borders along territorial edges (Gülzau et al. 2021; Vallet 2021). The trend of border fortification has intensified in particular in recent years, and today one fifth of country borders worldwide are equipped with fences, walls or trenches (Mau et al. 2021: 149). In this context, Benedicto et al. (2020) speak of a “walled world” when they consider the construction of border walls over the past 30 years: between 1989 and 2018, they say, their number worldwide increased from six to 63, of which 14 were erected in 2015 alone at the peak of the 2010 refugee movements. In Europe, the fortification of the internal Schengen borders began in 2015, when some EU Member States reintroduced controls and established additional border facilities as a result of refugee movements and terrorist attacks. Five years later, this process was repeated much more drastically with the hitherto unprecedented “covidfencing” (Medeiros et al. 2021) in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

(4) Boundaries as Longing for Collective Unity/Purity

Walls, fences and other fortifications of territorial inclusion and exclusion apparently remain “resistant institutions” (Mau et al. 2021: 150), although they are always permeable and hardly prove to be effective for actual closure processes. This contradiction is ignored in the widespread “populist glorification of borders” (Van Houtum 2021: 40) in favor of catchy arguments that stand against immigration and crime or for security and the protection of prosperity (Korte 2021: 52; Vallet 2021: 11). A prominent example of this is the wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, which Massimiliano Demata (2023) discursively exposes as a nation-constitutive othering. The linguist thus refers almost by way of example to the symbolic function of *border fortifications*, which are based above all on self-assurances and their securitizations. Henk van Houtum summarizes such self-constitutive processes, which materialize in border walls, with the concept of “id/entity”, which is intended to indicate the connection between territorial and collective unity/purity: “[W]e have seen an increasing desire to further strengthen the border in the name of protection and purification of a self-declared id/entity.” (2021: 34) In such processes, certain groups of people who are to be othered are usually attributed risks that legitimize an alleged protection of that which belongs to oneself through walls and fences. Border fortifications therefore do not aim exclusively at the visible border materialities. Rather, they are to be understood as materializations of cultural processes, which, driven by a “border anxiety” (Almond 2016), yield risky border persons as dispositives of self-assurance.

(5) Borders as Materializations of Cultural Order Processes

The multiplication of fortified borders on the territorial edges is thus revealed by cultural processes that stand for the dynamic and instrumentalized interplay of identitarian categories. Such processes follow carefully orchestrated risk policies that not only stigmatize certain groups of people but continuously mobilize the security argument with the help of threat scenarios. The (threatening) uncertainties and (existential) risks prove to be just as variable as those groups that are to be excluded or to be made border persons: “There is a constantly updated security rhetoric that is meant to recode the border again and again and make it defensible against external risks.” (Mau 2021: 158) Thus, it must also be noted for the fortified borders on the territorial edge that these are – beyond the border fortifications which are already effective regulators – unpredictable and selective filter processes. While the dwindling perceptibility and differentiated ubiquity of the border can be explained by alliances of specific bodies and technical apparatuses, in the wake of border fortifications specific groups of people are invoked for the

use of stationary border materials. Both developments are based on classification practices which, as cultural order processes, are not only changeable but also generate inequalities.



(6) Borders as Products and Producers of Inequality

The principle of the border is based on distinctions that use or (de)stabilize socially and spatially effective cultural orders. They manifest themselves in classification practices or the digital coding of people and have rarely been enforced as extensively as technology allows today or as it is declared necessary to exclude “unwanted” border persons. However, such order processes are not equally important for all people. Etienne Balibar (2002: 81) pointed this out early on with his statement “[Borders] do not have the same meaning for everyone” and ascribed a “polysemic nature” (ibid.) to the border. In this context, the philosophers Florian Grosser and Andreas Oberprantacher (2021: 394) speak of a “plasticity of the manifestations of borders”, which causes an “unequal distribution of (im)mobility.” The plasticity, which represents the selectivity of the principle of the border, is also described by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013: 175) with a variable “hardening and softening [of the border].” In this way, both authors want to emphasize the inequalities that are (re)produced via the selective logic of order of borders. Borders are therefore inscribed certain valences or relevance, which differ with regard to

different (border) persons and are expressed in correspondingly specific efficiencies. Borders can therefore be characterized as multivalent (Wille et al. 2023).

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