

Border(ing)s: A Border-Studies Perspective

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Abstract: *In both migration studies and border studies, borders are often unquestioned and taken for granted. Increasingly, however, borders are seen as resulting from or resulting in processes and 'performing' as powerful agents. Therefore, in this paper, I discuss the border – or, more precisely, the process of bordering – as a common object of research, breaking it down into two steps from a border-studies perspective. First, I approach border(ing)s from different angles relevant to migration studies to illustrate how borders can be thought of and understood processually. Using this approach as a basis, I then discuss the epistemological bordering turn and its further developments from a conceptual point of view and present selected approaches to border(ing)s. I then show that progressive border studies no longer assume borders to be marginal conditions of the research setting but rather places them at the center of interest as composite structures. In doing so, migration studies and border studies will not be played off against each other but rather brought into a fruitful dialogue.*

INTRODUCTION

At least since the 2010s, national borders have returned to the political agenda and are increasingly at the center of societal debates. At first glance, however, the resurgence of borders is paradoxical. For while border walls are once again being built, fences being put up, and border facilities being expanded as territorial markings, regulatory and control practices are increasingly fragmented and invisible in trans-territorial terms. These developments both undermine and evoke the widespread idea that borders are linear markers of territorial edges. More importantly, however, they point to the need to rethink the notion of the border, considering its ubiquitous, multiple, polymorphic, or composite characteristics – to name but a few. In both migration studies and border studies, the border as an inherent object of research or as a powerful agent remains far too often unquestioned and is taken for granted. As a common theme of both fields of studies, the border – or, more precisely, the process of bordering – will, therefore, be discussed in this paper in two steps. First, we approach border(ing)s from different perspectives relevant to migration studies to illustrate how borders can be thought of and

understood as a social fabric. Using this approach as a basis, we then discuss the epistemological bordering turn from a conceptual point of view and present selected approaches to border(ing)s. In doing so, migration studies and border studies are brought into a theoretical-conceptual dialogue.

BORDER(ING)S: AGENTIC AND AGENTIVE

In the first step, we approach borders from six different perspectives to give examples of how borders can be thought of and understood processually. In doing so, a double perspective will be taken that allows us to consider borders as agents (agentic), but also as devices of someone's agitation (agentive).

First, the technological character of the border, which is also known as 'smartification', has significantly changed the materiality of the border. 'Smart borders' refer to monitoring devices such as satellites, drones, or radar systems used for registering and storing biometric data for big-data automation, or algorithmic projections of (flight) movements. Here, human bodies continuously enter alliances with technical apparatuses and become carriers of the border.¹ The technology-based embodiment of the border, in which the human body functions as a checkpoint,² is regarded as the central feature of border(ing)s at the beginning of the 21st century.³ In this context, Mau⁴ 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 is agentic only to selected persons: 'The growth of information, biometric recognition [...] is intended to ensure that the persons classified as risky or undesirable [...] are filtered out, but that the flow of all other persons [...] does not come to a standstill'.

Second, these developments result in a trans-territorial spread of the border, since it can no longer be located exclusively on the territorial edge. It diffuses in space and reveals itself where orderings, e.g., 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'.⁵ Like an agentic watchdog, the technological border moves around and strikes suddenly as soon as border persons approach: it lurks at airports, train stations, or other transit points, traces people through deserts or at sea, and carefully observes the precalculated migration routes. As an unpredictable pop-up phenomenon, the border is mobile and becomes ubiquitous.⁶ However, its ubiquity is only relevant for those who are turned into border persons via a (quite flexible) 'sorting logic' and thus brought into the impassibility of the border. While border persons must reckon with the border everywhere, which can pop up as a selection apparatus at any time, for others, it is hardly visible or relevant.⁷

In addition to the dwindling visibility and differentiated ubiquity of the border, a third development indicates the multiplication of visible fortified borders along territorial edges. This trend has intensified in recent years: today, one-fifth of all national borders worldwide are equipped with fences, walls, or trenches.⁸ In this context, Benedicto et al.⁹ speak of a 'walled world' when they consider the construction of border walls over the past 30 years: between 1989 and 2018, their number worldwide increased from 6 to 63, of which 14 were erected in 2015 at the peak of the 2010 refugee movements. In Europe, the hardening of the internal borders in the Schengen Area began in 2015, when some EU Member States temporarily reintroduced controls and established border facilities in reaction to refugee movements and terrorist attacks. In 2020, this bordering was repeated much more drastically with the hitherto unprecedented bordering in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰

Fourth, walls and other fortifications of territorial inclusion and exclusion apparently remain resistant institutions, although they are always permeable and hardly prove to be effective for closure. This contradiction is ignored in the widespread 'populist glorification of borders'¹¹ in favour of arguments that stand against immigration and crime or for security and the protection of prosperity. A prominent example of this is the wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, which Demata exposes as agentic, e.g., as a nation-constitutive othering: Demata refers to the symbolic function of border fortifications, which are based, above all, on an imagined community and its securitization needs.¹² In such identity building processes, certain groups of people who are to be othered are usually presented as risks, justifying 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 agentic materializations of social processes, which, driven by a 'border anxiety',¹³ instrumentalize risky border persons as devices of identity building.

Fifth, the multiplication of walled borders and border fortifications on the territorial edges is thus revealed by social processes that consist in the dynamic interplay of identity categories. Such processes follow carefully orchestrated politics that not only stigmatize groups of people but continuously mobilize the security argument by using threat scenarios. The (threatening) uncertainties and (existential) risks prove to be just as variable as those persons that are 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'.¹⁴ Thus, the fortified borders on the territorial edge act as unpredictable and selective filters. While the dwindling perceptibility and differentiated ubiquity of the border can be explained through alliances of specific bodies and technical apparatuses, in the wake of border fortifications specific groups of people are called upon to legitimize stationary border materialities.

Both developments are based on bordering processes which, understood as a social ordering, generate inequalities.

Sixth, the principle of the border is based on the making of differences that establish or (de)stabilize social, cultural, temporal, or spatial orders. They are mirrored in classification practices and digital codings of people and have rarely been enforced as extensively as technology now allows for today or as it is declared necessary to exclude 'unwanted' persons. However, such order(ing)s are not equally important for all people. Balibar pointed this out early on with the statement '[Borders] do not have the same meaning for everyone'.¹⁵ In this context, Grosser and Oberprantacher¹⁶ speak of a 'plasticity of the manifestations of borders', which causes an 'unequal distribution of (im)mobility'. The plasticity, which refers to the selectivity of border(ing)s, is also described by Mezzadra and Neilson as a variable 'hardening and softening [of the border]'. In this way, both authors emphasize the inequalities that are (re)produced via the selective functioning of borders. Therefore, border(ing)s are characterized by multiple valences, which differ regarding various groups of people.¹⁸

This overview illustrates the extent to which borders can be understood as agentic and agentive processes and less as given 'beings.' Here, border(ing)s were exemplified as individualized embodiments, ubiquitous pop-up phenomena, signatures of a walled world, longings for collective unity/purity, materializations of social order(ing)s, and products as well as producers of inequalities. The next step is to discuss how border studies as an academic field has been dealing with the epistemological turn from considering the border as an object (border) to considering it as a process (bordering).

APPROACHING BORDER(ING)S

Since the 1990s, border studies have emancipated themselves from the essentialist idea that borders are given facts, due to the influence of the cultural turn¹⁹ and the spatial turn.²⁰ Instead, they have emphasized the idea that borders

emerge through or from agentic and agentive processes. This view has been uncontested in border studies since at least 2000 and is linked to the assumptions that borders are continuously (re)produced, changeable, stand for (social, spatial, and/or temporal) ordering performances, and are thus always political.²¹ This development is referred to as the 'processual turn'²² or 'bordering turn'²³ and entails a methodological de-centring, i.e. the analytical focus is no longer on the borders as 'lines in the sand',²⁴ but on the performative and sometimes contested processes of their (re)establishment, (de)stabilization and/or shifting (de-/re-bordering). Early work by van Houtum and colleagues, who elaborated on the relationship between bordering practices (bordering), symbolic demarcations (othering), ordering performances (ordering), and spatial productions (spacing) paved the way for this change of perspective.²⁵ They distinguish a social and spatial dimension of bordering processes to be understood as an 'ongoing strategic effort to make difference in space'.²⁶ Border studies has been working with the bordering approach for over twenty years now, whereby the associated research premises have undergone various developments. They show an ongoing reflection on how the performative process of bordering can be conceptually and methodologically thought of, practically investigated, and theoretically conceived. According to Gerst et al., 'a pluralization of theoretical and methodological approaches can be observed, which have established themselves in further development or opposition to the more or less explicit positivism of earlier border research'.²⁷ This is due to the resurgence of borders as well as the progressive opening of border studies to cultural studies perspectives and has progressively refined the understanding of border(ing)s.²⁸ This development is reflected in an analytical differentiation on an epistemological, ontological, and methodological level to be outlined in the following.

This includes the differentiation of bordering processes into various dimensions that stand, each

of them, for specific research interests. For example, the spatial dimension, which focuses on symbolic spatial productions, relational spatial constellations, or questions of political cooperation and (cross-border) spatial development, is often of interest. Furthermore, a material dimension addresses border materialities such as walls and, more recently, the role of animals, plants, viruses, etc. in a more-than-human perspective. This is also related to the technological dimension, which focuses not only on digital and automated control practices but also on the physical dimension from a biopolitical perspective. This is followed by the multivalent dimension, which deals with border injustices and the selective order(ing)s that are effective in it. Finally, the temporal dimension is to be mentioned, which includes time entanglements and the underlying politics effective in the emergence of powerful border temporalities.

Additional developments in the wake of the bordering turn include the insight that various actors are involved in bordering processes (simultaneously). This can easily be seen in the example of migration management at the EU's external border: the 'neocolonial outsourcing' of migration control to non-EU members implies authorities of other states.²⁹ Control practices within national borders, in turn, also call on actors such as private (security) services.³⁰ With the insight into the plurality of actors and the associated polyphony, the notion of bordering has expanded: such processes are considered neither as 'matters' of only one actor nor exclusively of one state authority but as a fabric of the agency of multiple actors – often in conflictual constellations and across different scales. This includes civil society actors such as citizens, activists, artists, smugglers, refugees, and many more. Rumford calls their agentic participation in border(ing)s 'borderwork' and thus refers not only to the capacity to shape borders but, above all, to the intervention of civil society actors.³¹ Considering multiple actors is a means of empowering actors in bordering processes that have been made invisible and allowing the different voices involved to speak. This

approach, which is also referred to as 'a multiperspectival study of borders',³² 'border multiple',³³ or 'multiplicity',³⁴ allows for a broader picture and is often motivated by observed inequalities and the desire to uncover the ordering processes that have been set in motion for it.

With the bordering turn, the ontological question of what a border is was replaced by the question of how the border is performed, or processualized. The ontological interest, here, is redirected towards how the process of bordering can be conceptualized. To give an overview, two basic concepts of bordering processes will be presented, which are currently practiced (alongside each other) in border studies. Regarding borders first and foremost as a line-work is frequently predicated on the idea that borders materialize and manifest as lines. Such a processualizing of the border as a line is often observed in research that uncritically follows the idea of a world divided into national containers. The focus of these types of work is typically on static and visible border fortifications and the processes related to them, such as specific practices or discourses that result from assumed borders or result in assumed borders. From a methodological point of view, this approach entails situating bordering processes outside of line borders, with a focus on phenomena related to them. Gerst and Krämer call this approach 'seeing at the border' or 'seeing across the border', which focuses on border effects.³⁵ These are then referred to as de-borderings or re-borderings, which stand for the permeabilities and durabilities of pre-existing line borders.

Since at least the 2010s, there has been a second tendency for bordering processes to be thought of in terms of their territorial, actor-related, or scalar spread. This is due to the observation that border(ing)s diffuse in space and take place in a fragmented manner across different practices and discourses in the center and/or beyond national territories. Accordingly, border(ing)s are increasingly viewed as (complicated or complex) structures embedded in different but interconnected (ordering) practices and discourses

that (can) manifest in different places (simultaneously) and different constellations. Some examples of this are governance practices of migration, which do not take place exclusively at the territorial edge but rather are mobile and ubiquitous.³⁶ Understanding bordering processes as a spread, polymorphic composite structure (in motion) inevitably draws attention to their relational character. It addresses the interconnections between the (im)material actors, practices, discourses, and other elements that make orderings emerge. Relationality, here, understands the border as a trans-territorial, trans-temporal, or trans-scalar 'bordering apparatus' that is held together and driven by the relationships of the elements that constitute it. "[R]elationality" as a crucial feature of the border³⁷ thus stands for the desire to understand bordering processes as 'relational spaces'³⁸ or 'border complexities'.³⁹

The second tendency to processualize the border is reflected in several approaches: First, in the ethnographic border regime analysis,⁴⁰ which attempts to view bordering processes 'as a structure of multiple actors, institutions and other human and non-human factors and practices, without simplifying the various interests and rationalities of these forces into a simple linear logic or hidden agenda'.⁴¹ A second approach is borderscapes, which builds on Appadurai's 'Scapes of Globalization'⁴² and defines border(ing)s as 'space[s] of negotiating actors, experiences, and representations articulated at the intersection of competing and even conflicting tensions'.⁴³ Third, the bordertextures approach views borders as (self-)dynamic textures consisting of interwoven activities, discourses, objects, bodies, and knowledge, which, in their interplay, produce or challenge border(ing)s.⁴⁴ Fourth, there is the proposal to understand bordering processes as assemblages.⁴⁵ This approach allows the relational constellations of the elements involved to be thought of as dynamically changeable and specific socio-spatial formations. From a methodological point of view, these approaches require an internal view of border(ing)s. They do not focus on the

effects of separately assumed line borders but rather consider borders and border effects together as one and take an observation position in the 'bordering apparatus', e.g. border regime, borderscapes, bordertextures, or border assemblages. In so doing, they will understand border(ing)s in their spatial and social diffusion, the relevance of the elements involved or addressed, their performative interplay, and the underlying logics of these processes. Such observational positions, named by Gerst and Krämer⁴⁶ as 'seeing into a border' or 'seeing like a border',⁴⁷ build on the criticism that bordering processes cannot be understood adequately if scholars refer to pre-existing borders. Rather, here, bordering processes represent 'epistemological viewpoints',⁴⁸ as suggested by methodologies like border as method,⁴⁹ migration as a prism,⁵⁰ bordertexturing,⁵¹ or border praxeology.⁵²

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper first showed how borders can be understood as processes. Using this as a basis, insights were then given into how border studies has implemented the bordering turn and its further developments, and what conceptual and methodological suggestions it makes for approaching borders. It has been shown that progressive border studies no longer assumes borders to be an unquestioned and marginal condition of the research setting but rather places them at the center of interest by means of appropriate methodological approaches. In doing so, it aims to understand the functioning of the border, e.g. its ordered and ordering character, which is reflected empirically in the performative interplay of the (bordering) process elements. This brief reference to the empirical level, which also implies the question of the practical application of the concepts and methodologies presented, will be developed in detail elsewhere in the future. The present paper had a much more modest intention: it is intended as an offer to migration studies to enter a theoretical-conceptual dialogue on the

common and inherent theme of the border. This is a start.

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