

## INTO THE MILLENNIUM: THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES IN AN ERA OF GLOBAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

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### INTRODUCTION

The study of boundaries has undergone a significant transition during the ten year period in which the *Boundary and Security Bulletin* has been in existence. This largely reflects the parallel change in the functions of boundaries themselves as the world political map has experienced changes, not only in terms of the territorial configuration of states and sovereign territories, but also – and perhaps more importantly – in the functional role of boundaries in a globalised world. It does not require one to accept the ‘end of nation state’ and ‘borderless world’ thesis, so avidly promoted by economists with their unimpeded flow of capital and global corporatism, and information scientists with a cyberspace that knows no bounds, for one to accept that, to put it simply, international boundaries are not what they once were. Where only ten years ago, boundaries continued to create the barrier functions associated with iron curtains, they have become penetrated during the past decade, thus giving rise to a reassessment of their role in the new world order which has emerged as a result of the collapse of the communist bloc on the one hand, and the advance of global technology on the other.

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This essay looks at the changing role of boundaries during the past decade as it is reflected in the literature of this period. The number of texts relating to international boundaries which have appeared during this period is indicative of the renewed interest in the boundary phenomenon. Many, if not most, of these books (see the reference list at the end of the essay) have emanated from conferences devoted to this topic, examining international boundaries from a number of diverse, but complementary, perspectives. The five book compendium on *Global Boundaries* which was produced by IBRU in 1994 pointed a way to the many themes which have been taken up in later texts. Covering the globe, with books on the Middle East, Eurasia, and the Americas), the *Global Boundaries* series also addressed a number of important conceptual issues (in the first volume of the set) as well as including a separate collection of essays addressing maritime boundaries (which is not part of the discussion in this essay).

While political geography became the *bete noir* of the academic community in the decades following World War II, because of its associations with geopolitics in general and German geopolitics in particular, boundaries was one of the few areas of political geographical study which continued to be discussed. Some of the seminal papers of the immediate pre- and post-World War II period, such as the boundary classifications of Hartshorne (1936) and Jones (1945) reflected the continued interest in the nature of the lines which divide and separate the system of states in a Westphalian world order. But they equally reflected the largely descriptive approach to boundaries in general, focusing on the classification of the way in which they were demarcated and delimited, their respective length and shape, and the role of boundaries in different types of territorial and international conflicts.

Functional analyses of boundaries, fewer and farther in between, focused on the extent to which boundaries fell into two clear categories – open or closed – and the continuum between these two polarities which reflected greater or lesser degrees of trans-boundary separation or contact. Notions of political frontier were associated with the functional analyses of boundaries, with the existence of a political frontier in close proximity to the boundary largely a function of the nature of the relationship between two neighbouring countries and the way that this was reflected in the type of

boundary erected and the degree of trans-boundary movement which was allowed to take place by the respective governments.

This essay looks at some of the emerging themes of boundary studies during the past decade. This has been a period during which, like political geography in general, there has been a renaissance of boundary-related conferences and publications. Few themes have disappeared altogether, but the emphasis on some has been replaced by other, newer, themes which reflect much of the social science discourse of the 1990s, particularly as they relate to the relationship between boundaries and the social construction of national identities. Two reviews of boundary studies written at an interval of over thirty years are indicative of the changes which have taken place in the way we understand these territorial lines of separation. Minghi's 1964 study focuses on many of the traditional themes relating to boundary delimitation and the importance of their location with respect to territorial conflict, while Newman and Paasi's study of "*fences and neighbours in a postmodern world*" is indicative of the multi-dimensional nature of boundaries, not only in their strict geographical and territorial sense, but also in terms of their social, subjective and perceptual dimensions at different geographic scales, and the way in which territories are often socially constructed as part of the process through which national identities evolve and are compartmentalised into territorial units.

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Boundary case studies do remain an important part of the accumulated store of largely descriptive knowledge, serving as the testing ground for new ideas and theories and for the reformulation of many of the traditional boundary typologies and classifications. The technical and descriptive analysis of boundary case studies also remains an important part of the work carried out on behalf of governments interested in solving territorial disputes and/or presenting territorial claims to the International Court of Justice, at the United Nations and in regional forums. But, as is clear from a content analysis of the books reviewed in this essay, the study of international boundaries must also deal with a diversity of new themes relating to the way in which boundaries as a whole are understood and interpreted in a globalised and multi-cultural world.

## **THE PROCESS OF BOUNDARY DEMARCATION**

International boundaries continue to be demarcated. One only has to look at the pages of this journal during the seven years of its existence (ten years including its predecessor, the *Boundary Bulletin*) to know that states continue to contest and redraw the lines separating them from their neighbours. This is mostly reflected in micro-territorial changes along parts of a boundary, rather than in the total redrawing of a boundary altogether. New, sophisticated, techniques of delimitation, coupled with the fact that we live increasingly in a world where the claims of smaller, weaker, states are being posited, has resulted in the reopening of territorial issues which were largely imposed by stronger parties in the past. More sophisticated historical research has enabled past lines of demarcation to be put forward as proof of territorial claims and, coupled with the growth of maritime boundary delimitation (about which this essay does not deal), states are pressing forward with their territorial claims.

Few of the books reviewed here deal with the way in which boundaries are being delimited and demarcated, perhaps because most of the world's land boundaries are now in place and those that remain to be negotiated are the outcome of isolated ethno-territorial conflicts. Excepting the ongoing reporting on boundary case studies on the pages of this journal, the last major study to look at the evolution of the world's land boundaries was *Political Frontiers and Boundaries* by Victor Prescott, which appeared towards the end of the 1980s. The *Encyclopaedia of International Boundaries*, edited by Gidon Biger also provides an invaluable source of knowledge, including many maps, of current land boundaries, their historical evolution, and the extent to which these boundaries remain contested between states.

Lines are being drawn and redrawn as part of the process of territorial reordering which has taken place in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and as other countries seek resolution to ongoing ethno-territorial conflicts. In many cases, the boundaries of new states are no more than the administrative boundaries which separated them during decades of Soviet rule and which, in many cases, reflected the international boundaries in the pre-Soviet era. But the process through which populations have been transferred, often forcefully, has created the sort of ethno-territorial mix within single territories which throws up new political problems (Kolossoff, 1992; Forsberg, 1995).

Another region in which the demarcation of land boundaries is presently taking place is in the Middle East. The ongoing peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and Israel and Syria (which recommenced in December 1999) are strongly focusing on issues of boundary demarcation. This is tied up with such traditional issues as demarcating a line which will provide security and defence for each of the protagonists, as well as ensuring an equitable allocation of resources, not least access to the water aquifers which underly any future boundary.

## **BOUNDARIES AND TERRITORIAL CONFLICT**

For as long as they have existed, international boundaries have been linked with territorial conflict. States seek to expand their territorial control and, as such, end up in negotiating, or fighting over, the demarcation of new boundaries. The globalisation era of the 1990s has done nothing to prevent territorial conflicts from taking place, and this is well shown up in many of the case studies which have been discussed in the *Boundary and Security Bulletin* during the past decade. While some political geographers may have begun turning away from the analysis of descriptive territorial change, some political scientists have begun to discover the importance of the territorial dimension in understanding the dynamic changes which continue to take place in the world political map. In their study of territorial conflict, political scientists such as Gary Goertz and Paul Diehl (1992), Paul Huth (1998), and Paul Diehl (1999) discuss the importance of territory and its relationship to notions of political stability.

Implicit in these studies is the idea that states continue to go to war with each other because of competing territorial claims. States demand the redemarcation of boundaries to take in ethnic groups of similar national identity, or because of a desire to claim control over scarce and valuable natural resources. Historical injustices in the way that the line was originally drawn are thrown up, while in an era of international human rights and perceived global equality, states often demand a more 'just' allocation of territory than that superimposed upon the landscape by the past colonial rulers. But for most political scientists, boundaries are viewed as constituting a given territorial fact, a static, unchanging feature, rather than one which has its own internal dynamics and which influences, and is influenced by, the patterns of social, economic and political development which take place in the surrounding landscapes – the frontier regions and/or the borderlands.

The edited collection of essays in Diehl (*A Road Map to War: Territorial Dimensions of International Conflict*) considers the role of territory in the initiation, evolution, escalation and resolution of inter-state conflict, drawing on material from both political geographers and scholars of international relations. Topics vary from an examination of international law in territorial conflicts to an empirical analysis of the fairness of the Camp David Accords. A theme which emerges in these essays is that conflicts involving a significant territorial component are more dangerous than other disputes, but that such conflicts can normally be peacefully resolved.

In their earlier work, Goertz and Diehl (*Territorial Changes and International Conflict*) argue that the fact that most of the world has been divided into states has

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made boundary disputes much less common than in the past. Nevertheless, they note that the process of territorial expansion is often rooted in the process of national development as states – both old and new – seek to acquire control over additional territory, pushing their boundary outwards to meet demographic, economic or ethnic objectives. In his study of territorial disputes and international conflict, Paul Huth (1996) argues that systematic knowledge about the origins, evolution and termination of territorial disputes is limited. His examination of 129 territorial disputes between 1950-1990 raises a number of questions concerning the extent to which international boundaries will be disputed between states, and under what conditions will such disputes be settled peacefully through compromise and/or concessions.

## COMPARTMENT-ALISING NATIONAL IDENTITY

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If the study of territorial conflict indicates the continuation of traditional themes within political geography in general, and boundary studies in particular, then the relationship between boundaries and national identity is a theme which, while related to notions of conflict, has become of significance during the past decade. In their most concrete dimension, boundaries compartmentalise national territory. These territories contain populations who are expected to retain a loyalty and affiliation to the state within which they reside. National identity is tied up with the territory within which they live and this, despite the fact that most states are multi-national rather than nation-state, and that boundaries are continually changing in such a way as to leave ethnic and national minorities resident of states to which they do not confess a national identity. In this sense, boundaries are very unnatural features in that they do not create territorial compartments which are compatible with the distribution of the national populations. States attempt to resolve this incompatibility through processes of national and territorial socialisation, applied through such agencies as the media, the formal educational framework, and other means of emphasising the symbolic and mythical elements of the homeland landscape, together with the inviolability of the state boundaries.

Pioneering work in this field has been carried out by Finnish political geographer, Anssi Paasi, in his study of the Finnish-Russian boundary (*Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness*), emphasising not only the relationship between territory, boundaries and national identity, but also focusing strongly on the agents of socialisation which are used by the respective governments to strengthen the feelings of national identity in and around the border zone. The first section of Paasi's book attempts to construct a theoretical frame for the study of boundaries in general, and the relationship between boundaries and the social construction of national identity in particular. Amongst the diversity of books reviewed here, this is the single most important conceptual statement to be made.

Paasi's notion of boundaries as institutions is strongly mirrored in Anderson's study of *Frontiers* (1996), a term which has traditionally been associated with the border notion. Traditional texts, such as that of Prescott (1987) or any introductory political geography text, have normally differentiated between the boundary or border as constituting the line, around which there is a political frontier (described in many of the more recent texts as a borderland). Anderson's notion of frontiers is much wider. Anderson discusses the relationship between frontiers and the territorial formation of states, emphasising four dimensions of the frontier concept. First, they are instruments of state policy because governments attempt to change the location and function of frontiers. Secondly, the policies and practices of governments are constrained by the degree of *de facto* control which they have over the state frontier. Third, frontiers are the markers of identity, and fourth, the frontier is a term of discourse, with the meaning of this term changing over time and place.

*'what comes first? – the boundary or the identity?*

There has always remained the chicken and egg question concerning 'what comes first?' – the boundary or the identity? Does the fact that people are spatially compartmentalised within a fixed territory result in the gradual formation of a

national identity which is focused on that specific territory, or does the prior formation of cultural and national groups bring about the subsequent demarcation of boundaries around the groups territory – or at least that territory in which they constitute a clear demographic majority? History points to both processes taking place at one and the same time. The so-called ‘end of nation state’ thesis of the past decade does not stand up well in the light of the return to the nation-state concept which has taken place in the newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union, in the Czech and Slovakian republics, in Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Cyprus, and Israel-Palestine – the list is endless. The move towards localised autonomy, such as is taking place within Western Europe, points to the importance of what were, until recently, no more than internal administrative boundaries, becoming the new demarcators of ethnic and national territorial identity.

The relationship between boundaries and national identity is a theme which is addressed in a number of the texts reviewed here, notably in the studies of anthropologists and sociologists. Two collections of essays, edited by Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson (*Border Approaches* in 1994; *Border Identities* in 1998) take up this theme. Interestingly, the editors note that although they considered interpreting the notion of borders in a figurative and symbolic sense, they eventually decided to limit their understanding of borders to that of a concrete, physical, political border. Notwithstanding, their focus on these boundaries concerns the dynamic relationships between the peoples and institutions of the ethnic groups and nations which reside on both sides of the boundary. These local border communities are, for them, major agents of change in the socio-political processes, not just the passive beneficiaries or victims of their location in and around the border regions which have been superimposed from above. The importance of the role of localised identities as part of the wider process through which national identities are constructed and differentiated is described at length in the fascinating study of *Border Peoples* by Oscar Martinez, focussing as he does on the US-Mexico borderlands. His study, much of it based on personal interviews and narratives, shows how people’s lives have been shaped by the borderlands milieu, within an analytical framework broken down into borderlanders, border types and border experiences.

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In their later collection of essays, Wilson and Donnan draw together studies which focus on the way in which international frontiers influence cultural identities. Drawing on anthropological perspectives, the studies explore how cultural landscapes intersect with political boundaries, and discuss ways in which state power informs cultural identity. They argue that regardless of whether we live in a borderless world era, we cannot ignore the role of individuals, groups and institutions and the fact that even the new politics of identity are influenced by, and in turn influence, the formation of borders and boundaries.

## **BOUNDARY PERMEABILITY**

While boundary lines remain largely intact, their functionality has changed dramatically during the past two decades. Where boundaries acted as barriers to all forms of movement in the past, they have become increasingly permeable to movement in the contemporary world. In some spheres, such as the dissemination of information through cyberspace and the internet, and the transfer of media images through satellites and cables, boundaries have largely become a relict of the past. Within economics too, the flow of capital in a single global market pays scant attention to the barrier impact of boundaries, while the continued existence of customs and tariffs in some parts of the world is more of an attempt by states to demonstrate their sovereignty than it is a true barrier to economic flows. As people move more freely, they increasingly cross boundaries which were closed to them in the past. The flow of cheap migrant labour from poorer to richer countries, much of it illegal in the sense that the migrants do not possess the official documentation for crossing the boundary and/or remain in their country of work over and beyond the

time limits of the initial permits, is indicative of the failure of the boundary to 'keep out' and exclude those groups of people deemed undesirable by the state authorities. The global population has become increasingly mobile, international and trans-boundary travel is no longer limited to the rich elites, while the point of entry into the state has moved away from the boundary at the frontier to the one which exists in the very heart of the state capital, at its air and sea ports.

In other respects, many boundaries remain closed, especially in situations of direct military confrontation between enemy states. Political frontiers, often devoid of civilians and full of military installations are still the order of the day along many boundaries. While ballistic missiles may, in the view of some, have relocated the boundary from the territorial periphery of the state into the heart of the downtown of the capital city, the outer lines of defence remain important for most countries, not least because it continues to demarcate the geographic extent of their territorial sovereignty, and also because even in an era of modern technological war, the threat of an invasion by land troops from across the boundary remains a permanent threat for many countries.

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The notion of boundary permeability is implicitly discussed by a large number of the books reviewed here. It plays a major role in the study of the changing functional characteristics of borders in Europe – both Western Europe where boundaries are becoming more porous as a result of economic and political integration, as well as central and eastern Europe as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the (re)formation of new states. Transboundary cooperation, transnational regions, and the development of borderland regions – straddling both sides of the international boundary – are recurrent themes. Some of these have been put together in a more traditional geographic analysis, such as the collection of essays edited by Rumley and Minghi and which focus on the notion of border landscapes and the way that these have been changing throughout the world as a result of recent political changes. New approaches and directions in defining and elaborating the border landscape concept, and the impact of political decision-making and ideological differences on the environment in border regions is examined by most of the writers.

Notions of trans-boundary cooperation form an even more distinct theme in the collection of essays put together by Gallusser, emphasising the importance of political coexistence and inter-state harmony which has resulted in many regions – first and foremost in Europe – as a result of the opening of boundaries and the expansion of trans-boundary economic and cultural cooperation. This collection of essays looks at a number of dimensions relating to trans-boundary coexistence, with sections on communications, migrations, and economic factors, and a regional focus on the changing role of boundaries in Western and Eastern Europe. From a conceptual perspective, the most important study of the borderland concept is the chapter by Martinez, which appears in the first book of the *Global Boundaries* series, in which he discusses the differences between integrated, alienated, co-existent and independent borderlands, each of which is indicative of different levels and intensities of trans-boundary cooperation and, by definition, boundary permeability.

In yet another collection of essays arising out of a boundary related conference, Ganster *et al* attempt to put a more conceptual slant on the nature of trans-boundary cooperation. They note that the study of transboundary cooperation dynamics requires interdisciplinary research. They also note the importance of linking the local level and microregional study of transboundary cooperation within international border regions, with the more global economic and political contexts of interstate interaction. Despite the thematic and geographic diversity of the essays in this book, the studies all point to the changing functional role of boundaries and the dynamics of transboundary interaction as characterised by a constant tension between factors promoting cooperation and those engendering or nurturing conflict. These dual, and

parallel, processes also form a major theme in the collection of essays edited by Eskelinen *et al* (*Curtains of Iron and Gold*). In their introduction, they note that at both the macroregional and local levels, increased interaction across borders raises questions about people's identity, representation and civil rights in a context which is no longer dominated by a single sovereign state, while the promotion of socio-economic development as part of new cross-border practices may open windows of opportunity but are by no means automatic guarantors of success.

A slightly different approach is taken in the collection of essays dealing with Central Europe (edited by Eger and Langer, 1996). While adopting, in principle, the notions of trans-boundary cooperation and permeability, the editors argue that the term border rouses sinister associations, fear and anxieties in Central Europe. As such, the permeability of a boundary should be seen as an index to the democratic transition of these countries. It is, in their view, essential to bring the people on either side of these boundaries to a realisation that they have common interests and that boundaries need not necessarily divide.

**INTO THE  
MILLENNIUM:  
The Future of  
Boundaries in a  
'Borderless World'**

We may live in a world where boundary functions have changed and have become increasingly permeable, but we do not live in a 'borderless' world. On the contrary, while boundaries have become easier to cross, there are, at one and the same time, more boundaries in existence of which we are aware. The impact of localisation has meant that local and administrative boundaries have also become increasingly important in our daily lives, while international boundaries continue to demarcate those compartments within which we derive our citizenship and to which most of us continue to demonstrate a national loyalty. Many of us may travel across boundaries without a second thought, but few of us are truly citizens of the world. The collection of essays edited by Newman (*Boundaries, Territory and Postmodernity*) raise some of the counter-arguments to notions of the 'borderless world', looking at the impact of cyberspace, the trans-national flow of capital and economic activity, as well as a reassessment of the concept of political deterritorialisation.

One of the fallacies of the globalisation theory is that everything actually becomes global. While globalisation affects people and places throughout the world, it does not affect everyone. Territories, as boundaries, remain spatially differentiated, with some becoming more permeable (such as in Western Europe) while, at one and the same time, others are being constructed as part of a process of conflict resolution and are almost automatically becoming sealed. Where European concepts of fixed boundaries and territory were imposed upon African and Asian societies only fifty years ago, the Western European and North American discourse has now declared the arrival of the 'borderless world', while Africa and Asian countries have only just about moved from their own borderless world to a world full of borders. Thus, while boundaries will continue to be impacted by social and technological change, they will remain differentiated in the extent to which they will be subject to these impacts in different places and at different time periods. It is the impact of these changes on a geographically differentiated world political map which should serve as the basis for boundary studies into the new millennium

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Overall, a number of key themes can be detected in these texts. In the first place, the study of boundaries has become multidisciplinary, as sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists have moved in on a debate which has traditionally been conducted amongst geographers and, to a lesser extent, scholars of international relations and international lawyers. The significance of just what boundaries are and what their impact on the political ordering of society is, has also changed. From an almost exclusive focus on the physical nature and demarcation of the territorial lines, the study of boundaries has become multi-dimensional, focusing on the different scales of boundaries, as well as the impact on group and national identities, not all of which are necessarily organised along territorial lines.

The nature of boundaries remains strongly linked to the evolution and development of states, but rather than simply looking at the boundary-territory-identity triad in a deterministic fashion, many of the recent studies look at the practices through which these identities and these boundaries are constructed, both by the state (from above) as well as from the populations themselves (from below). All boundaries – be they social or spatial – continue to define the ‘us’ and the ‘them’, excluding some and including others. This may not always take place at the territorial level, but territory remains important in the way that many of these lines of exclusion are drawn up in the first place, and the extent to which interaction across these lines of exclusion/inclusion takes place.

In concluding it is worth reiterating the themes for an agenda of boundary studies, which were posited by Newman and Paasi (1997: 200-201) in their discussion of “*fences and neighbours in a postmodern world.*” They argued that:

- a) geographical studies of boundaries should reinsert the spatial dimension of these phenomenon more explicitly back into the discussion;
- b) that geographers should become more aware of the multidimensional nature of boundary studies, as well as the diverse types of boundary which exist;
- c) that the implications of creating or removing boundaries should be understood through a multicultural perspective, and that new boundary narratives should emerge from scholars in those societies that hold different representations of space and social identities;
- d) that boundaries should be studied as dynamic, not static, phenomenon in their own right and should be approached historically as part of a wider process, rather than as a collection of unrelated unique case studies;
- e) that the idea of nature and its associated environmental and ecological concerns should be expanded within the context of boundary studies; and,
- f) that the study of narratives and discourse are central to our understanding of boundaries, including state and international boundaries. It is important to understand who creates these texts and for what purposes.

**One of the major tasks of boundary studies during the next decade will be...to create a stronger conceptual and theoretical basis for the study of boundaries...**

One of the major tasks of boundary studies during the next decade will be the ability to draw these diverse strands of thought together in an attempt to create a stronger conceptual and theoretical basis for the study of boundaries, something which is sorely missing in almost all the texts reviewed here.

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