On Borders: Reflections of a European Border Scholar

by Martin van der Velde
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Living in a world where national borders play an increasingly paradoxical role, studying borders can be for many a fascinating job. In the last five years especially, the topic has blossomed as never before. In the second half of the last century, borders were more and more considered to be outdated, outlived and soon to be extinct (mostly because of the unstoppable and almost autonomous process of globalisation). The first years of the new millennium made quite clear that borders are still major instruments in dealing with global developments, especially the geopolitical ones. This is mainly so because the world’s organisation is still largely based on territorial principles, and the basic “national instincts” when dealing with threats (e.g. terrorism, but also environmental issues) are protecting the territory at its outer limits, its borders.

Recent history shows, however, that the current threats are very often not territory-based but have more global and/or network dimensions. A major issue in this respect is therefore how territorial organisations are dealing with non-territorial issues and how this is reflected in borders and border-regimes.

This dilemma has also not gone unnoticed in the social sciences, being firmly rooted in society. Be it in publications, conferences or research-projects, very often border and security issues are touched upon. Not only is the border-issue “creeping” into all kinds of disciplines, the area of border-studies itself becomes more encompassing. So one could say that the thematic or disciplinary boundaries around the field of “border studies” are blurring.

The observation that scientific study of borders is getting more and more “borderless” does not mean that they have disappeared. This dilemma has also not gone unnoticed in the social sciences, being firmly rooted in society. Be it in publications, conferences or research-projects, very often border and security issues are touched upon. Not only is the border-issue “creeping” into all kinds of disciplines, the area of border-studies itself becomes more encompassing. So one could say that the thematic or disciplinary boundaries around the field of “border studies” are blurring.

Distance Learning in the Social Sciences

by Dennis Catlin
WSSA Council

Below is the first part of a two-part article. The second part will appear in the Spring 2006 issue.

Distance learning in higher education is a controversial issue for faculties in almost every institution of higher education. The focus of much of the research in higher education distance learning has been on whether there is a significant difference between live classroom instruction and the various forms of distance learning, including exclusively on-line instruction. The controversy has not been settled. Brown and Liedholm (2002) found that undergraduate students in a principles of microeconomics course who participated in a virtual classroom performed significantly worse than their counterparts did in a live classroom setting. Conversely, Navarro and Shoemaker (1999) found those economics graduate students who were “cyberlearn-

Changes to the WSSA News

by Larry Gould
WSSA Executive Director

During recent discussion among the members of the Executive Council it was decided to reduce the publication of WSSA News to two issues per year, but increase the size of each issue. The rationale for this was that we no longer used the Winter issue for announcing the elections and distributing the ballots. This is now done by direct mail to each member. The net result of this change has been a tremendous increase in voting. There were, however, other considerations, primary of which was to make WSSA News more informative concerning social science and related issues. To this end we are publishing selected pieces such as the article by Dennis Catlin on teaching and the article by Martin van der Velde on crossing borders. Through articles such as these, we hope to bring important social science issues to the attention of our members.
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Continental context: A first major difference is the genesis of the border-influencing integration processes in the two continents. In Europe this project (also the EEC) has always been more political, whereas on the American continent the economy has always been on the bottom-up in order to tackle specific problems. The age-old International region are still serving as separators and protectors at least for certain cat-

The historical context is also important. As there are far more borders on the European continent, and as there have been many more wars over them (the continent was in a constant state of war during the first half of the 20th century), border regions have been ascribed with notions of being marginal, and of buffer zones between states where as little (strategic economic) activity as possible should be localised. In many cases, this legacy of being perceived as marginalised and peripheral, led to a sort of cross-border solidarity between people, cities and regions on both sides, creating a favourable atmosphere to come to cooperation.

Scientific approaches: Coming to the issue of a common language we have to emphasise the importance of methodological issues accompanying border research. This may be one of the most important and difficult topics when trying to set up a dialogue between researchers from different continents and (possibly different) research traditions. A major question is the possibility of contextuality of differences among our border studies (dependent on local situations, e.g. a European vs. American approach). Perhaps because integration (and the softening of the border) has progressed further in Europe, the attention has shifted from more descriptive questions about what’s happening at/across the border to more analytical questions concerning why things are happening at/across the border. What about learning from each other then? In the 1990s, one might have gotten the impression that Europe (or maybe better the EU) was taking the lead in adapting a largely territorial-based Westphalian world structure into something else in which the influence of states and their borders were fading. This decade has witnessed a resurrection of the state or at least the protective role of their borders. Even within the EU, borders are better guarded again. In this sense maybe North America is the “leading” continent. Or are we just watching the final convulsion of the state and its borders as we know them? Either way, the ABS (www.absborderlands.org) and the JBS are interesting venues to participate in the dialogue between scholars dealing with the important topic of border studies. Since the ABS meets annually with the WSSA, you too can take part in this process.

References


