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Olivier Thomas Kramsch

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COMMENTARY



## Remembering Chris Rumford (1958–2016)

Olivier Thomas Kramsch

Nijmegen Centre for Border Research (NCBR), Department of Human Geography, Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen, Netherlands

Death is the ultimate border. We who write for a living realize with the passing of a comrade that we write on the hither side of this border, approaching it ourselves on borrowed time. We, too, shall inevitably cross over it, onto the “other side,” into the vastness of that starry night. Appropriate to his all too short lifetime’s intellectual engagement, Chris Rumford crossed this border with grace and dignity, leaving behind a lasting legacy in many fields, including Sociology, Geography, International Relations, European Studies, as well as Global and Transnational Studies. As one of the founding members of the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London when it was founded in August 2004, he contributed enormously to its subsequent development. His prolific publication output over the years attests to a dazzling array of interests, as suggested by work addressing, among other topics, Turkey and EU enlargement, social spaces “beyond” civil society, critiques of integration within European Union studies, cosmopolitanism and Europe, the globalization of strangeness, “spaces of wonder,” the post-emotional responses to the 7/7 London terror attack, the abuse committed by British troops during the 2nd Gulf War in Iraq, and last but certainly not least, the globalization of cricket.

As readers of this journal surely know, it goes without saying Chris<sup>1</sup> also had a transformative impact on the field of border studies. This essay does not mean to survey the entirety of Chris’ contribution to the border studies literature. It will, however, attempt to take stock of some of his major intellectual moves, setting them in dialogue with his contemporaries, the better to highlight the pioneering problems and issues he raised. Among those to be canvassed here are Chris’ embrace of the late twentieth-century “spatial turn” for the field of border studies; his drawing attention to the “changing consciousness” and concomitant “cosmopolitanization” of borders resulting from the embodied experience of crossing borders as part of everyday life in Europe; his influential notion of “borderwork,” which re-oriented border studies’ scholarly gaze away from state-driven bordering practices to those of vernacular and bottom-up citizen initiatives producing not only local borders but those resonating over wide geopolitical terrains (i.e. “global borders”); and finally his late-career intuition regarding the need to develop a multiperspectival approach to borders, one which segued beyond the “territorial trap” of state-centric thinking and legitimized a space from which to “see like a border.” Each of

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**CONTACT** Olivier Thomas Kramsch  o.kramsch@fm.ru.nl  Nijmegen Centre for Border Research (NCBR), Department of Human Geography, Radboud Universiteit, Postbus 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen, Netherlands

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these moves, I argue, illuminate Chris' ongoing curiosity towards the cultural encounter, framed as a generous and worldly border-crossing encounter with the Other. Originally written as a chapter contribution to a Festschrift written in his honor (Axford et al., [in press](#)), this essay has been accepted with the proviso that it be modified to align with current interests and concerns of the wider border studies readership of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. For this I warmly thank the editors of the journal, who have gone so far as to inaugurate a whole new section so as to accommodate this intervention, as well as, hopefully, more like it to come. Chris, in death as in life, still causing productive trouble.

### Jumping "the Pond"

At a conference dinner I hosted in Nijmegen some years ago, the political scientist Malcolm Anderson asked me what I was doing "in this small pond," by which I took him to mean the relatively small community of Continentally-based scholars studying European borders. The implication, which irked at the time, was that someone like me should be "out in the world," presumably among *les Anglo-Saxons*, where the real action was to be found in border studies. If I may be permitted to hold fast to Anderson's watery metaphor, Chris did swim out there in the big wide sea among the Anglos (but of course more than just the Anglos), and we can all be grateful for that. The width and depth of that sea allowed Chris a certain freedom and latitude of thought the significance of which some Continentally-based border scholars have yet to appreciate. Whereas by the mid-2000s some scholars were preaching "interdisciplinary dialogue" (Newman 2006a), for instance, Chris by then was doing so robustly, most notably in his important call to connect the study of borders to critical social theoretical debates relating to the consequences of globalization, cosmopolitanism, networked community, mobilities and flows (Rumford 2006, 155; Urry 1999; Castells 2000; Sassen 2002). For Chris, border studies' more active engagement with critical social theory held the promise of overcoming what he perceived to be a major conceptual impasse in the field, defined by an unproductive choice between a neoliberal, elite-driven "borderless world" narrative resulting from the supposed disappearance of borders under the impact of heightened global flows, and a "world of borders," increasingly prevalent in the wake of security concerns after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centers and the hardening of borders worldwide in the subsequent "war on Terror."

Chris was far too much the gentleman to directly name the academic peddlers of what I have elsewhere called border studies' "blackmail" (Kramsch 2010), one made all the more conservative to the degree that it offers scholars no way out but to accept a world of heightened border controls, surveillance, compartmentalization and a purification of social life marked starkly by relations of Us/Them (see Newman 2006b; Paasi 2009; Wastl-Walter 2011). Reaching out to critical social theory allowed Chris to break through the deeply troubling implications of this stalemate by arguing neither along the lines of a "borderless world" scenario, nor from the vantage point of a world of heightened border closure, but from the perspective of those who cross and re-cross a world of multiplying borders. Furthermore, turning to social theory allowed him to clarify the uses of theory and theorization in border studies more broadly. During a period when scholars have been agonizing futilely over whether the field should or should not have a single, unifying theoretical framework (Paasi 2011), Chris' explicit turn to critical social theory allowed him to pose

unabashedly normative questions about borders and the bordering dynamic, while injecting an implicit emancipatory agenda into a field traditionally hostile to such approaches.

### **Injecting the “Spatial Turn” into Border Studies**

Such social theoretical moves were further enabled by three crucial insights, all established as vital research frontiers by the mid-2000s. Firstly, Chris was one of the first scholars to see the theoretical possibilities of the broadly defined “spatial turn” in the social sciences as a boon for a border studies still mesmerized by the “territorial trap” of state-centric spatial thinking.<sup>2</sup> Thus, drawing on the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Étienne Balibar and Ulrich Beck, Chris argued that our very understanding of space had to change in order to take account of the heightened pluralization, fluidity and cosmopolitanization of social life (and thus, borders), in the wake of 9/11 (Bauman 2002; Balibar 1998; Beck 2004). Concretely, Chris perceived the changing spatiality of politics in the rise of supranational governance (i.e. the European Union), networks of global cities, and transnational diasporic communities, all signaling for him that bordering processes had achieved a “spatiality beyond territoriality” (Rumford 2006, 160).<sup>3</sup> Chris called on border scholars to engage more fully with such a changing spatiality of politics as one pathway out of the dichotomizing impasse of the borderless/rebordered world debate, and saw the European Union as a privileged laboratory for working out the implications of this novel spatiality, thinking with and from its multidimensional “borderlands.” Chris’ ideas regarding the newly effulgent political spatiality of borders has gone on to inspire a range of scholarly work, notably expressed in Sarah Green’s recent ontologically-inflected invitation to replace the notion of “border-as-line” with “border-as-place,” the latter leading to a “sense of border,” or “borderness,” that can in turn help us define “what kind of knowledge is needed to recognize borders as borders” (Green 2012, 574, 580, 585).

### **Cosmopolitan Borders**

Secondly, Chris drew attention to what he called the “changing consciousness of borders” resulting from changing “state-society relations” under conditions of globalization (2006, 156, 162). Here, Chris observed that the full meaning of borders could not be exhausted by “lines on a map” or the securitized boundaries characterized by security check-points and passport controls, but had to consider the extent to which “borders and the regular crossing of borders, have become part of our routine experience, particularly in Europe where borders proliferate ... but where the importance of individual borders is in many cases very much reduced” (2006, 156). Although we may quibble to what degree the experience of routine border crossing (at least in Europe) is still very much an activity within the purview of an elite Erasmus business class, Chris firmly embedded the experiential, embodied dimension of borders as a key variable in taking account of their transformation in the early millennium, echoing parallel calls for a border studies more attuned to the “lived spatiality” of borders in everyday life (Kramsch and Hooper 2004). The changed “consciousness” of borders Chris wrote of in the mid-2000s dovetailed with our contemporaneous efforts at the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research to develop a processual, social-constructivist understanding of borders, one which shifted the substantive term “border” to its verb-form, “bordering,” to which was later added a “/” (i.e. “b/ordering”).

As Wolfgang Zierhofer, Henk van Houtum and I framed the latter term, it was meant as a playful – if in hindsight somewhat awkward – shorthand to denote the ordering function of borders into relations of socio-spatial difference (Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer 2005). As I have written elsewhere, the term has in the meantime become the victim of its own success (Kramsch 2019).

For Chris, the perceived unmooring of society and nation-state and the concomitant freedom for citizens and social movements to connect with others located beyond the confines of state institutions offered the promise of cosmopolitanizing world society ushered by accelerating mobility (following Beck 2004). The gradual cosmopolitanization of national societies for Chris would have important implications for our understanding of borders, as it would trouble the complacent dichotomies of inside/outside, us/them, national/international characteristic of mainstream approaches in border studies (Rumford 2007; 2008a; for an early foray in this direction, see Kramsch 2002). The elegant ruse of Chris' conceptualization of "cosmopolitan borders" was that it did not presuppose the eradication of borders but their exuberant proliferation:

Borders and mobilities are not antithetical. A globalizing world is a world of networks, flows and mobility; it is also a world of borders. It can be argued that cosmopolitanism is best understood as an orientation to the world which entails the constant negotiation and crossing of borders. A cosmopolitan is not only a citizen of the world, someone who embraces multiculturalism, or even a "frequent flyer." A cosmopolitan lives in and across borders. (Rumford 2006, 163)

Chris' understanding of the mutually constitutive relation of borders and mobility would go on to conceptually undergird more recent attempts to frame borders in terms of "borderities," the latter emerging from the "growing dissociation between border functions and border locations [which] provides the border with a mobile dimension that breaks with its traditional fixity in time and space" (Amilhat-Szary and Giraut 2015, 2–4). But we may go so far as to adduce to Amilhat-Szary and Giraut's notion of "diverging borderities" (2015, 9) a more critically normative frame for assessing the border-crossing mobilities of diverse constituencies – global airport class vs refugee pariahs – than available in Chris' earlier formulation, a reticence of his we shall return to at the end of this essay.

## Borderwork

Thirdly, by posing the provocative questions "who borders?" and "where are borders?" Chris helped shift attention from border studies' fixation on the state as primary bordering agent to a range of civil society actors operating at both supra- and sub-state levels. Whether by producing the dramatic downfall of the Berlin Wall, the more prosaic creation of "gated communities" or lobbying for the creation of a new national border police in the United Kingdom, Chris argued that the "borderwork" of ordinary citizens, as well as states, have the power to border and deborder space (Rumford 2006; 2008b). Although in conversation I gently chided Chris for a moral ambivalence inherent in the concept of "borderwork" – in my view the term embraced both "good" and "bad" forms of bordering, i.e. both repressive and emancipatory – it would arguably become Chris' most powerful intervention, with the most enduring legacy for our field. The term would go on to influence a range of work addressing both the actions of states bordering their territories and the counter-movements of citizens seeking to overcome the repressive border regimes

entailed by state actions (Paasi and Prokkola 2008; Bialasiewicz 2011; Johnson et al. 2011; Topak 2014; Varró 2016).

Moreover, where some leading border scholars argue that the complexity of state borders as locatable objects of research draws on the fact that the meanings attributed to such borders are “*inward-oriented*” and thereby closely linked to the ideological apparatus of the state (Paasi 2011, 14), Chris asserted otherwise that some borders – most paradigmatically the Cold War Iron Curtain separating East from West, but more recently borders such as the Mediterranean or Ukraine –, in addition to expressing national territoriality also have a global resonance, hence constituting “global borders” (Rumford 2010; following Balibar 1998). For Chris the study of global borders held the promise of refocusing the attention of border studies on the non-state, vernacular and “bottom up” dimension of boundary producing practices (see also Perkins and Rumford 2013); exploring borders “buried” by nation-state borders, notably during colonialism; and reconceptualizing borders as sites of encounter and connectivity, rather than only of division, purification and death.

### Seeing Like a Border

A final gift. Building on his observation of almost a decade earlier regarding the “changing consciousness of borders,” towards the end of his life Chris argued that to move the field of border studies beyond the territorial trap of state-centric thinking it needed to embrace a “multiperspectival” approach (2012). Drafting alongside a contemporaneous observation of mine regarding the “hidden” quality of global borders during European overseas imperialism (Kramsch 2012), Chris asserted that a multiperspectival border studies must dispense both with the idea of consensus on what a relevant border is as well as the notion that borders are all equally visible to all parties concerned (Rumford 2012, 891–2). How salutary this, as antidote to current attempts to locate a “substantive reference point” for identifying relevant research questions in border studies (Brambilla 2015, 16), a goal Chris would have found pointless if not destructive of the wider mission to keep border studies open, unruly, and alive to currents from around the world.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” (1991), Chris argued that moving beyond an Aristotelian “high point” in studying societal transformation would allow the field of border studies to open up to a much larger range of actors and events involved in bordering processes, thereby proffering an enlarged variety of perspectives (see also Green 2012).

Indeed, Chris went so far as to argue that rather than “seeing like a state” (the traditional perspective of border studies), a multiperspectival border studies could invite us to “see like a border” (Rumford 2012, 896). Such a vision would go on to inspire a younger generation of border scholars working to elaborate the concept of “borderscapes,” defined by “practices through which fluctuating borders are imagined, materially established, experienced, lived as well as reinforced and blocked but also crossed, traversed and inhabited” (Brambilla 2015, 30; for early formulations of the concept see Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). A key aspect of “borderscaping,” for these authors, is the ability to develop a “kaleidoscopic and double gaze” on borders, leading to an “innovative epistemology of/from the borders” (Brambilla 2015, 25). While the innovativeness of such a “double gaze” may be debatable (see Anzaldúa 1987), it certainly builds on Chris’ multi-

perspectival insights, themselves shaped in the crucible of his reflections on the “post-Westernization” of European societies more broadly (Rumford 2008a).

Indeed, tantalizingly underdeveloped in Chris’ late work, the notion of “seeing like a border” held the promise of dovetailing more firmly with postcolonial border studies scholarship, an emergent body of work seeking to grasp European bordering practices from an assertively subaltern perspective (Mignolo 2000; Davison and Muppidi 2009; Bhambra 2009; Kramsch 2010; Anderson, Kramsch, and Sandberg 2015; Aparna et al. 2018). Yet despite this potential convergence, Chris maintained a curious political quietism in widening critical border studies’ perspectival lens. Chris claimed that the goal of a multiperspectival border studies is “not to occupy the ‘standpoint of the subjugated,’ which is but one perspective” (2012, 894). When offering examples of “seeing like a border,” his cases almost all involve everyday acts of border reinforcement, “the project of those seeking to gain further advantage in society: entrepreneurs or affluent citizens, for example. Why remain passive in the face of other peoples’ borders when you can obtain advantage by becoming a proactive borderer?” (2012, 897). Whence this political reticence? What invisible border prevented Chris from crossing the line into a much more robustly normative stance, thus fulfilling border studies’ critical potential?

### Coda: Uncorking the Spatial Genie

In sum, by offering us a much more nuanced, differentiated and creatively imagined view of borders, Chris created a *space* for our generation of border scholars to break out of the shackles of a number of unproductive binaries that continue to impoverish our field, i.e. borderless/rebordered-securitized worlds; borders of comfort/alienation; Us/Them. Most interestingly, while lamenting the lack of attention of mainstream border studies to the “spatial turn” in social theory, he may have unwittingly hit upon the reason for this *lacuna* in an almost throwaway observation from the mid-2000s:

The spatial turn has encouraged us to look to space first, and borders second ... [It] may work to subordinate borders to spaces, as if the former were somehow dependent upon a prior spatial ordering. (Rumford 2006, 166)

Chris’ entire subsequent life’s work was dedicated to proving that intuition wrong. *Pace* determined efforts to continue policing the boundaries of the field so that it does not become contaminated by critical spatial thinking, borders are intricately bound up with an expansive view of socio-spatial life. Once the spatial genie is out of the bottle, she cannot be corked back into it so easily again. We can all be grateful to Chris, a true border comrade,<sup>5</sup> for having uncorked that wine and sharing it so generously with us.

### Notes

1. Henceforward, I will refer to Rumford by his first name, as an indication of the comradeship we shared over many years.
2. To be accurate, Chris refers to “a new spatiality of politics” when discussing this social theoretical shift (2006, 156). I take this call, however, to be in thorough alignment with the “spatial turn” Barbara Hooper and I introduced into the field of border studies two years earlier, drawing loosely on the postmodern geographical framework of the so-called LA School (Kramsch and Hooper 2004; see also Kramsch 2011). Although Chris never directly cited

our volume, I think he sensed that critical spatial awareness in my work, which is why we got on so well, both personally as well as professionally.

3. Inspired by our shared LA School experience, Barbara Hooper and I would define the late twentieth-century “spatial turn” differently, drawing our lexicon from the “postmodern” socio-spatial struggles of communities of color in California and the broader American Southwest (i.e. progressive White working class, Black postmodern feminism, Chicana Lesbian activism). We would nevertheless join hands with Chris’ understanding of borders “beyond territoriality” to the degree that we embrace a spatial *praxis* that seeks to overcome the binary thinking characteristic of modernity, ie, us/them, Black/White, straight/gay, auguring what Barbara Hooper and Ed Soja called a “new cultural politics” (Soja 1996, 83–105).
4. I believe more sinister forces are at work behind the anxious quest for “substantive” reference points that have very little to do with freeing up the field from the “ultra-modernistic, territorialist Western geopolitical imagination” (Brambilla 2015, 16), and everything to do with what I have elsewhere referred to as the machinations of the Funding University Knowledge Complex (FUKC) (Kramersch 2019). In effect, FUKC operates by freezing and fetishizing border concepts, rendering them marketable to EU funding institutions, which in turn support large-scale networks of European scholars, themselves building careers under precarious academic working conditions, as well as the journals who extract surplus from their scientific endeavors. All in all, the very antithesis of the intellectual community Chris was invested in. At a workshop he organized some years ago, Chris floated the idea of starting a journal dedicated to borders. As far as I can remember, competition with JBS was the farthest from his mind; what counted for him was, paraphrasing the Spanish border scholar Maria Lois Barrio, a “border studies without surnames” (“un estudio de fronteras sin apellidos”; Lois Barrio 2013).
5. This may be the appropriate moment to mention Chris’ incredibly dry, British wit, which I always enjoyed. A brief anecdote will suffice. Driving together onto the grounds of Royal Holloway some years ago *en route* to our conference venue, Chris and I passed the RHUL Geography department. Looking over at their windows, a gleam in his eye and the faintest of smiles, he remarked: “Of course I don’t expect any of them [to attend the conference]. They’re all busy being ‘excellent.’” That was Chris Rumford: ironic but not blasé, and on sure ground.

## Disclosure Statement

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