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On Borders: Reflections of a European Border Scholar

by Martin van der Velde
Co-Editor, Journal of Borderland Studies

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In the second half of the last century, borders were more and more considered to be outlived, outdated and soon to be extinct (mostly because of the unstoppable and almost autonomous process of globalisation).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 entirely, but the trend is there. In the second half of the last century, borders were more and more considered to be outlived, outdated and soon to be extinct (mostly because of the unstoppable and almost autonomous process of globalisation).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.

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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 “cyberlearners” to be more successful than those who participated in live classroom instruction.

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 use 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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peared already. In this respect, one specific dimension of “scientific” borders, to wit the geographical one, is particularly interesting. Studying borders may be a global phenomenon, but between regional clusters of scholars there seem to be marked differences when it comes to the specific issues of borders that are under scrutiny, the way borders are perceived, and the scientific approaches. In this sense, the Association for of Borderlands Studies (ABS) and its Journal of Borderlands Studies (JBS) are two interesting arenas to witness the confrontation between different styles of border research. The ABS, founded in 1976 at a WSSA meeting, and the JBS (established in 1986), having their roots in the U.S.-Mexico border region, originally focused on course of the American continent. In that sense, they both voiced the American tradition very strongly. In the mid ’90s the ABS tried to broaden its horizon to become an association that gathers border scholars from all around the world. The basic idea behind this effort is that there are lessons to be learned from each other. Traditionally, American scholars looked at the European integration process and the consequences for the inner borders as examples for their situation. In 1985, Hansen stated that the U.S. and Mexico should be able to derive mutual benefits from the lessons of the European experience because, although there are obvious differences between European and U.S.-Mexico border situations, there also are many significant similarities (Hansen, 1985). This may be so, but one could also conclude that the opposite is true. The EU may also use the internal NAFTA borders (especially that of U.S.-Mexico) as showcases for their outer borders.

In contributions to two special issues of the JBS, the question was raised whether indeed some value added could be accomplished by stimulating a dialogue between scientists from both sides of the Atlantic (Van der Velde, 2000 and Van der Velde and Van Houtum, 2003). The argument there was that in order for a dialogue to be fruitful, some interesting and potentially fruitful complementarities as well as a common language have to exist between both continents. In the case of the European-American case complementarities potentially exist both with regard to research themes and topics as well as with regard to methodological issues. In the next sections, I would like to focus on some issues that to my impression are responsible for differences among the studies of borders.

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 politically driven, whereas on the American continent the economy has always been on the forefront. Full-fledged integration here never has been on the agenda. This also influences the role that is ascribed to borders. Although NAFTA is also aiming at a certain level of integration, borders within the treaty region are still serving as separators and protectors at least for certain categories of cross-border flows. Within the EU, the ultimate goal is (at least for the Eurocrats in Brussels) to eradicate the national borders completely and come to a complete integration.

Cross-border interaction, in the EU (being very much a toy of the political elite) is much more top-down. The EU—and especially its border regions—has been, still is and probably for a long time will be, a laboratory for supra-national and trans-national institution building. The effectiveness of this laboratory is largely based on what some call the negotiated suspension of sovereignty (Scott 1999), or the willingness to waive part of their sovereignty at the expense of a uniting Europe. In this respect, integration is really brought to the (border)-region. On the other side of the Atlantic, actual cross-border cooperation is more often initiated from the bottom-up in order to tackle specific problems. The age-old International Boundary and Water Commission (est. 1889) is an interesting example.

Projects launched within the NAFTA framework, however, often do not take into account the local and regional needs. Also there has hardly been any transfer of mandates, power, responsibilities and financial means from the national to the local and regional levels. NAFTA therefore can largely be characterised as a state-centred initiative aiming at supra-national goals like increasing the global competitiveness of North America; as such it hardly seems a fertile base for regional cross-border cooperation.

Another marked difference between Europe and North America is the way (especially socio-economic) asymmetries are considered. In Europe there’s a tendency to level the asymmetries on both sides of the border. The main argument is that the EU should create equal living conditions for all. In North America, from an economic perspective the differences or asymmetries serve as the basis for cross-border interaction. NAFTA is much more about creating as much wealth as possible, and implies ‘producing’ in the cheapest place and “selling” at the highest price.

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


