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Generations and the 'Development' of Border Studies

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Victor Prescott's book on the geography of frontiers and boundaries[1] – and his expanded and updated version of it[2] – have for a long time been important sources of inspiration for border scholars. Prescott's aim was to scrutinise the importance of factors that determine the position and character of boundaries/frontiers and to determine what was the role of 'geographical features' in establishing boundaries. The ideas of a number of classical figures in boundary studies were introduced first, and the author then used references extending up to the early 1960s. The main contribution of the book, it seems to me, was to bring together an extensive body of empirical material from separate border case studies and to use this to illustrate the message of more general politico-geographical texts aimed at defining the terminology of border studies. Existing typologies of borders were also discussed in a detailed way, and the book provided the reader with a careful analysis of definitions of categories such as frontier, boundary, border or border area. The evolution of the definitions was illustrated by discussing a number of historical and more recent examples, and empirical examples from various parts of the world were used in a systematic way to illustrate various aspects of these definitions. These definitions have since circulated in a number of articles and books written by the following generations of border scholars. Boundaries (and frontiers) were above all concrete, empirical phenomena for Prescott, phenomena that have to be studied using empirical material. He supported Jones's idea that boundaries are unique and that generalisations about them are very difficult, and he emphasised the importance of a historical approach to boundaries. The potential significance of studying the attitudes of 'borderlanders' was also noted, but this theme was not developed any further.

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Julian Minghi's article, which came out a couple of years earlier, was meant to clarify the language and classifications used in border studies.[3] Minghi observed how the focus of attention was changing from the location and history of borders to their functional meanings. His paper thus reflected broader transformations occurring in the geographical discourse of the time: what mattered was function and process rather than form and location. The language of Minghi's paper reflected the *Zeitgeist* perhaps better than Prescott's book: the important thing was generalisations, and Minghi suggests that they should be drawn from and tested by significant case studies that meet the requirements of objective research. Where Prescott was operating in an empirically grounded (chorological) framework, Minghi was in this way taking steps towards the emerging 'spatial science' perspective. For Minghi it was the significant similarities and differences between socio-spatial communities divided by a boundary that are reflected in its functions. Minghi also used several case studies for illustration purposes. One interesting theme raised by him was the perception of borders, for he suggested that political geographers 'must undertake investigations in the sociological field as well as in the cultural and economic areas'. This is another example of *Zeitgeist*. The early 1960s was a crucial period for the development of what was later to be known as behavioural geography, even though it was still very much in its infancy at that time.[4] As far as border studies were concerned, the behavioural approach started to blossom much later and crystallised in a collection edited – again – by Julian Minghi, together with Dennis Rumley.[5] This book opened some early avenues towards the more sensitive ethnographic approaches that are currently popular among scholars interested in mapping human experiences of boundaries.

Both contributions are examples of studies produced in the context of the (political) geography of the 1960s. This has several implications. First, it is important to note that states and their boundaries were in flux, for although the Cold War had apparently fixed the Europe-centric world view, the decolonisation of the African states in particular was shaking up this global order. Secondly, and this might sound somewhat provocative and even paradoxical, it seems to me that Anglo-American border scholars were more internationally oriented at that time than they tend to be today. Contrary to most current Anglo-American authors, Minghi and Prescott had a number of references written in French, Spanish or German. This active use of foreign languages – which non-English speaking scholars are engaged in perpetually! – is something that we can also find in the key classics of Anglo-American geography, e.g. in the books of Richard Hartshorne.[6] This suggests that scholars managed more languages than nowadays, or at least were looking across national borders to see what takes place in geographical thinking and research elsewhere, and also took these debates and research results seriously. Take almost any current theoretical work published by Anglo-American geographers, for instance, and you rarely find

references written in languages other than English. This exclusiveness of English-speaking geography has been one of the key points in recent criticisms of the 'Anglo-American' hegemony in human geography.[7]

PLACING THE TRANSFORMATION OF BOUNDARY STUDIES IN CONTEXT

Many of the ideas discussed by Prescott and Minghi are certainly still valid, but there are also many things that have changed, both in the world around us and in geography as an academic discipline. When Prescott and Minghi published their works there were some 120 states in the world, whereas current scholars have to face almost 200 states and more than 300 land boundaries. They live in a world characterised by globalisation, regional integration and blocs such as the EU, NAFTA, MERCOSUR or APEC, the Internet and other flows of information, economics, refugees and tourists. Besides political geography, boundaries are also studied in a number of other academic fields: anthropology, IR, political science, sociology, literary criticism and folklore. A change has also occurred in research practice: 'the role and meaning of a state's territoriality are increasingly understood through the ways in which the state's boundaries define and channel both general popular outlooks towards adjacent states and the perceptions and actions of groups who live at the borders … Until this recent burst of intellectual enthusiasm, however, boundary studies had long been one of the most torpid sub-fields of political geography; largely oblivious to theorising about geographies of political identity and the spatialities of power.'[8]

As this comment by Agnew suggests, the major difference between traditional and more recent boundary studies is that the former aimed mainly at empirical analyses of concrete border cases or the application of the perspectives used to problem solving, while the latter more often than not aim at scrutinising or theorising upon boundaries empirically within the context of key social and political categories such as state, nation, nationalism, territoriality, identity and ethnicity. Both approaches are of constant importance, however, since in spite of all the theorisations, boundaries have their deeply practical meanings for states that are recognised by international law. This remains so in spite of the fact that sovereignty itself has been a continually transforming category. Think, for example, of the practical importance of the work carried out by the IBRU at the University of Durham and many other recently established border research institutes around the world. For the staff of these units, borders are mainly concrete phenomena that are crucial for the socio-spatial organisation of the contemporary world. Straightforward, universalising comments on the disappearance of boundaries or states must look more like grandiloquent political statements than existing facts for these people. It is important to bear in mind, as Anderson

has suggested, that boundaries have versatile functions: they are instruments of state policy and territorial control, markers of identity and discourses manifesting themselves in legislation, diplomacy and academic or scholarly languages.[9]

Thinking in the social sciences and the categories and concepts produced by this thinking must not be regarded as permanent or fixed. Even though we may still find useful the definitions presented in Prescott's book, for instance, their usefulness is inevitably context-bound. This context consists not only of concrete places, states and border cases but also of the 'location' of the biographies of border scholars in the transforming pattern of scientific thinking. Ron Johnston suggests in his *Geography and Geographers*, after evaluating the importance of the Kuhnian paradigm model for geography, that the paradigm model should perhaps be rephrased as a 'generational model'.[10] He came to this conclusion after reflecting the importance of context as an influence on the nature of human geography. He suggested how both the external and internal factors of science – and of course their interaction – are crucial for the development of scientific practice. What is perhaps more important for the present commentary, however, is his suggestion on how new conditions and challenges are best met by young members of the discipline. He cites Stegmuller, who suggested eloquently that 'it is mostly young people who bring new paradigms into the world. And it is young people who are most inclined to champion new causes with religious fervour, to thump the propaganda drums.'[11]

Johnston also discusses the implications of the generational model for academics' publishing and teaching practices. People belonging to different generations have been socialised into different world-views and disciplinary practices and discourses, which often implies that the ideas and research practices of newer generations do not totally replace the older ones but are rather 'sedimented' on them, often in such a manner that the tradition is partly rejected and partly exploited in new, re-interpreted ways. This raises the question of whether the 'development of border studies' is actually 'development' or rather a gradual transformation in research practice. This doubtless depends on our view of what the observed 'development' is, which may in turn depend crucially on our methodological stance with regard to science. For many representatives of empirical-analytical approaches to borders, contemporary theoretical approaches accentuating the importance of discourse, symbolism, institutions, social practice or power relations may look like regression rather than progress. For new (not inevitably younger) generations, the traditional empirical approaches may look 'torpid' and incapable of penetrating the discourse and power relations that are seen to be crucial to boundary producing practices and revealing their importance. The importance of generations is nicely illustrated in the preface to Prescott's book, where he, a senior lecturer at the time, extents his thanks for comments to such eminent scholars as W.G. East, Oscar Spate, S.B. Jones

and, finally, Richard Hartshorne, a major figure in geography who had to witness the fading of the importance of his chorological thought during the 1950s as spatial thinking, modelling and quantitative approaches pushed the chorological approach to one side.

THE NEW IMPORTANCE OF BORDER STUDIES

So where are we now? Nowadays border studies are mushrooming all around the world, for reasons that are well known by now,[12] new books on boundaries are being published all the time and a number of institutes concentrating on border studies have been established. Border studies is an interdisciplinary field nowadays, and even in geography it is not merely political but is also discussed by economic, cultural and regional geographers, often rather separately. Some current conceptual themes alluding to boundaries in geographical thinking are presented in Figure 1. Much could

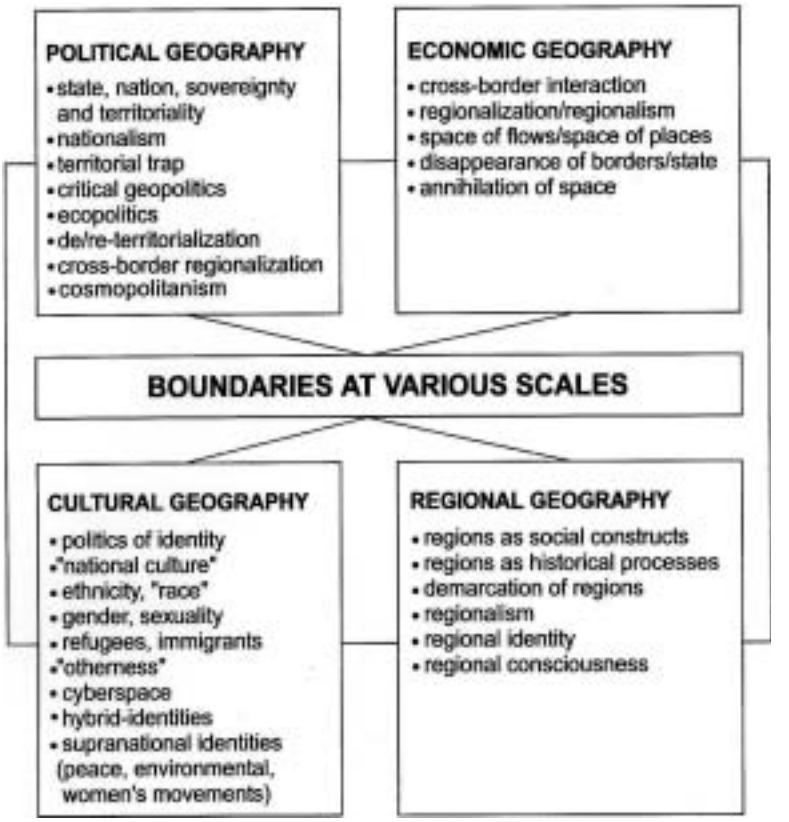

FIGURE 1 The manifestation of boundaries in some subfields of human geography.

be done to cross the boundaries between academic fields and even between the subfields of geography in this respect.

More often than not scholars claim that a general theory of borders should be developed. This suggestion implies that borders are separate objects of social research, or even separate objects of 'geographical' research, that can be put into the form of a fixed theory. One can, of course, raise the question of what is meant by theory. Minghi was certainly theorising with regard to the role of boundaries. For him the task was to develop a more functional perspective on them than the political geography of the past could provide. Similarly Prescott was committed to the project of making geography into a science. In the spirit of the 1960s, this claimed 'to clear the mind of subjective views which will influence the selection of facts and the presentation of cases'. This was his aim because 'the danger of subjectivity is probably greater in political geography than in any other branch of the subject'.[13]

A general theory of borders would seem a very problematic matter – not because they are all unique – but because one can theorise upon them in a reasonable manner only as part of a broader effort towards a socio-cultural theory which should combine such questions as the production and reproduction of territoriality/territory, state power, human agency and experience – and all these elements are deeply contextual. Boundaries may be unique, but there are a number of social, cultural and political processes that need to be theorised contextually. I prefer here to understand theory as a question of theorising, since this approach places stress on the active creation of abstractions, and thus on conceptualisation.[14] This forces us to reflect and re-shape existing theoretical arguments contextually instead of merely repeating them in different contexts. In the social sciences – and especially in the case of boundaries – theorising or conceptualisation is thus contextual. Of course we need at the same time to develop thing that can perhaps be labelled as 'conceptual invariances': conceptual elements that are general enough but not totally fixed and can be further employed to theorise upon boundary-producing practices and discourses in different contexts. These invariances may inform us about the modalities of change, stability and human attitudes (knowing, believing, hoping, asking, imagining, etc.). This reflection should take place in relation to concrete research contexts, which may then produce new theoretical insights to be further re-conceptualised by other researchers in new contexts. This demand for reflexivity also holds for methods and research materials.

Context is thus particularly important in the case of boundaries. Much of the content of recent boundary studies seems to be based more on reviews of general international discussions than on contextual theorising, field observation and inquiry among borderland inhabitants. One background to this is doubtless the recent 'textual turn'. Scholars are increasingly reading and interpreting texts on boundaries instead of doing

time-consuming fieldwork among border people. This is not inevitably a problem if they are concomitantly developing new theoretical perspectives that will help us to understand the socio-political processes of the world that exist contemporaneously at and through several spatial scales. This means that a profound theoretical analysis of foreign policy texts may produce a more fruitful border study than a non-theoretical survey of local opinions. The final result thus depends on our ability to balance the theoretical and the empirical.

Each of the 300 or so current land boundaries is unique and each is related in different ways to local, regional, state-bound and supranational (or even 'global') processes. While boundaries are always located somewhere and have developed in context, these contexts are increasingly often located in the broader social world: they are not merely boundary lines in 'border regions'. Boundaries are hence to be found not only in border areas but in wider social practices and discourses all around societies; they are impregnated with social power that manifests itself not only in politics (which would make boundaries relevant objects of 'political geography') but also in economics, culture, education/socialisation and governance.[15] Boundaries are simply part of the material and discursive practices/processes by which the territorialities of 'societies' are produced and reproduced, and here the state is still in a crucial position. It is a major task of border scholars to study empirically and theorise upon the ideological and material practices by which the 'territorial trap' created by the state (system) and methodological nationalism[16]– key manifestations of boundary-producing practices – become part of broader socio-spatial consciousness and the everyday lives of individuals. These practices and discourses are more often than not *institutionalised* practices that can be studied in various contexts by means of multiple methods and bodies of material: conceptual work, fieldwork, media texts, archives, statistical information, novels, diverse products of material culture, experiences, attitudes, emotions and so on. In this respect, boundaries can be regarded as diverging sets of contextual performances in which institutional – that is political, cultural, economic and governmental – practices come together, and in which emotions such as pride, hatred or competition and social and cultural distinctions based on social memory and future structures of expectations also dwell intensively. All of these – not only the 'political practices' – are hugely politicised. One of the most impressive border performances I have ever seen takes place regularly in the border area between India and Pakistan, where the border guards organise a flag-lowering ceremony every day and behave like peacocks in front of their applauding national audiences. It is clear that a pure empirical description of the border landscape and its physical structures (and even symbols) would omit most of the emotional and nationalist loading attached to this event, i.e. the processes by which the territorial trap is effectively reproduced at the local level.

DISCUSSION

Boundaries have become increasingly important objects of research since the collapse of the East–West Cold War configuration. A number of scholars in various academic fields are engaged in studying them using established methods and theoretical approaches. My impression is that a kind of saturation of the theoretical perspectives on boundary studies has taken place, as the ideas of regions and boundaries as discourses, social institutions, practices etc. are now effectively circulating in a number of papers. This means that we have to reflect on our concepts of the theory rather than trying to develop a general theory of borders. This is best done in relation to other categories inherent to geography and the social sciences, such as region, place, space, territory, agency and power, to social practices such as politics, governance and economics, and to cultural processes such as ethnicity or national socialisation (education). Important research themes would be the implications of the existing (competing) boundary narratives for the ideas of identity, citizenship, political and territorial loyalties and territorialisation of memory and the power relations that these narratives may reveal. An increasing volume of cross-disciplinary research is needed to broaden the methodological perspectives in border research. Similarly sensitivity and imagination is needed to broaden the scope of possible bodies of empirical material that could help us to study the meanings of boundaries in identity building on various spatial scales and to study the relations/differences between state boundaries and other social and symbolic boundaries.[17]

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