Bringing Borders Back In: Some Implications for Sociology

Liam O’Dowd

School of Sociology and Social Policy and Centre of International Borders Research
Queen’s University Belfast
Email: L.Odowd@qub.ac.uk

Dept of Sociology, UCLA (Feb-June 2005)
The rise and fall, the construction and deconstruction of various types of boundaries are the very story of human civilization and of contemporary social transformation (T.K. Oommen cited in Paasi 1996:)

The description of contemporary globalization as an epoch of the breaking down of boundaries is an ideological posture rather than an empirical account; it is the glossy part of the picture. In effect, understanding contemporary globalization calls for a new border theory (Jan Nederveen Pieterse 2002: 10-11).

Boundaries provide preconditions of identity, individual agency and collective action; but they also close off possibilities that might otherwise flourish. Boundaries both foster and inhibit freedom; they both protect and violate life’... The political question is how to come to terms with the ambiguity of boundaries (William E. Connolly 1994).

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to argue that the question of borders (for present purposes state borders) should be rescued from the margins of sociological theory and research
and located more centrally in contemporary sociological discourse.\(^1\) Two broad reasons are advanced here – the first is that the state borders are a particular type of boundary – and boundary is a concept that not only is part of the ‘tool-kit’ of classical sociology, but which continues to stimulate new lines of inquiry across the social sciences (Lamont and Molnár 2002:167).\(^2\) The second is that the problematization of state borders opens up the prospect of adjudicating empirically on some of the central debates in contemporary sociology over globalization, transnationalism, imperialism and the future of the nation state. In so doing, two contrasting dimensions of current sociology are brought into question. One is methodological nationalism - a complex and long established perspective (for a useful dissection, see Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) and the other is the effusion of new theorising on globalisation, transnationalism and the nation-state. There is a concern with boundaries in the part of this literature most influenced by literary theory and the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences, but these boundaries are largely conceptual and symbolic and do not correspond with state borders. Indeed, the latter are increasingly discounted as focus shifts to the increasing flux and impermanence of cultural boundaries. On the other hand, approaches informed by a more structural focus, on power, the economy, migration and behaviour emphasise ‘border crossing’ or ‘transcendence’ frequently failing to problematise institutionalised state borders, i.e. what is being crossed and how. The obscuring of objectified boundaries such as those represented by state borders encourages theoretical approaches unmoored from empirical reality and informed by ahistorical and often ethnocentric speculation about the current and emerging forms of globalization and transnationalism as well as about the future of ‘the nation-state’.\(^3\)

\(^1\) This paper is informed by empirical work under way by the author and others on the creation, consolidation and reconfiguration of the UK/Irish border since 1920 and by work on the impact of the EU on the borders of its member states at the Centre for International Borders Research at Queen’s University, Belfast.

\(^2\) Lamont and Molnár (2002:167) organise their discussion of boundaries in terms of the distinction and tension between symbolic (i.e., conceptual) boundaries and social (objectified) boundaries. They note how the idea of boundaries has been associated with cognition, social and collective identity, commensuration, census categories, cultural capital, cultural membership, racial and ethnic groups, masculinity, professions, scientific debates, group rights, immigration and territorial borders.

\(^3\) Literature referred to here includes Urry 2000; Baumann 1998, Beck (2000) and Giddens (2002) among others. Interestingly in the 1980s, Urry (1991) and Giddens (1985) were stressing that sociologists should take into account the territorial dimension to social and political life at time in which there was much interest in state theory. It should not be assumed, of course, that ‘strong’
The paper is organised in three parts. The first discusses why state borders matter empirically and theoretically; the second section explores some of the reasons for the relative neglect of state borders by sociologists while pointing out that other social scientists increasingly draw on sociological perspectives within the new multidisciplinary field of border studies (see, for example, Paasi 1996, Andreas 2000 and Nevins 2002). The final section examines the case for privileging borders in sociological analysis while advocating approaches that acknowledge their historicity, variability and ambiguity while at the same time recognising their centrality to sociological understanding of contemporary global change.

Why Borders Matter

Territorial borders matter because they are one of the defining elements of the state – still the basic constitutive polity of contemporary global society. But state borders are also important social boundaries. As Malcolm Anderson (1996: 189) notes; ‘boundary making may be seen as part of the natural history of the human species’ and in its territorial form has been a part of all major political projects. Boundary making is also closely bound up with power, wealth accumulation, identity formation and even with cognition. We think with and well as about boundaries and we construct and reproduce boundaries through discourse. While boundary making may be an integral part of human behaviour, state borders as such are contingent rather than universal phenomena. Neither any one state border or the system of contemporary state borders can be seen as natural, pre-given entities- they are the product of a particular set of historical developments, relationships and interactions. Yet, as with any other hegemonic system, the inter-state system has encouraged the naturalisation of borders in a variety of ways – giving them an illusion of permanence and fixity that has been too easily accepted by sociologists and other social scientists. In much of their work, social scientists ‘normalise’ state borders, failing to reflect on their genesis, significance and specificity. Such normalisation connotes the important representational, as opposed to the analytical, role of contemporary social scientists – a role too frequently unacknowledged in sociological analyses. Sociology and the other social sciences are products of states and

theories of ‘globalisation’ theorists are free from the contagion of an unacknowledged methodological nationalism.
of a state system even as they attempt to analyse and deconstruct this system and its component parts. In many of their empirical and reformist guises sociologists have been part of the process of state and nation-building even if they have seldom fully recognised this role.

The nature and scale of contemporary social change has begun to encourage a certain problematisation of state borders by many historians and social scientists. A quick glance at recent border changes exposes the illusions of permanence and fixity which is often associated with state borders. Change comes in two forms – firstly the proliferation of new state borders, notably in Europe since the late 1980s, secondly, the re-configuring of existing borders by the changing practices of governments, corporations, non-governmental organisations and people crossing borders. In Europe, comfortable assumptions about the geographical fixity of borders which had taken root between 1950 and 1980, were undermined by the end of the Cold War, the break-up of the Soviet Bloc and the proliferation of new states on the periphery of its Russian heartland. According to Foucher (1998), an estimated 8,000 miles of new state borders have been created in Eastern and Central Europe. Assumptions about border fixity are obviously both ahistorical and ethnocentric. The complex history of state formation in Europe (Tilly, 1990) culminating in imperial dis-integration throughout the twentieth century (of which the break-up of the USSR was the last phase), the border changes brought about by the world wars and their aftermath, and the long process of decolonisation, are all testimony to the geographical volatility of state borders. The legacy of problematical partitions left after decolonisation and imperial disintegration on the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, Ireland and Cyprus, and the ideological partitions of Germany, Korea and Vietnam should have been reminders of the contested and changeable location of borders (O’Leary, Lustick and Callaghy 2001).

---

4 This period also marked the period of most intense institutionalisation of sociology as a discipline in the UK and other parts of western Europe, locking the discipline into the existing state system and encouraging the naturalisation or normalisation of state borders.

5 Mann (2005: 513) suggests that until 1945 the colonial empires blocked the globalization of the nation-state ideal. In other words, not only is the national state not antithetical to globalization, it is an integral part of it. And, the implication is that the ethnic cleansing and violence historically associated with national state formation in advanced industrial countries has still some way to go in the post-colonial countries. Indeed advocates of older non-national and transnational phenomena like Sharia law become trapped into being statists and nationalists when they insist that states enforce religious law (Mann 2005: 514).
It might be argued in mitigation that institutional sociology has been closely associated with long established states such as France, Germany, Italy and the UK thereby discouraging an emphasis on borders. Yet, even a passing historical appreciation of the formation of these states, and the historic and mythic role of the ‘frontier’ in the shaping of large states such as Russia, the US and Spain, might have fuelled awareness of the nature and consequences of border change. Yet none of the big European states (apart from Spain) escaped border adjustment in the wake of the two world wars. Moreover, since 1945, Griggs and Hocknell (2002: 2-3) estimate of the total number of 191 states, 127 have emerged with recognised international boundaries and UN membership. They further estimate that between 6000 and 9000 nations exist within the 191 states and only twenty can be deemed to be uni-national.

The growth of ethnic, autonomist and secessionist consciousness over the last twenty years highlighted only a small proportion of the large number of ethnic groups or cultural minorities encompassed within, or straddling, existing state borders. Clearly much raw material exists for actual and potential border disputes and border creation in the future. Against this background it would be foolhardy to argue that the process of state disintegration and formation is coming to an end. Similarly, the inherited notion of ‘border fixity’ implicit in the Weberian ideal type of the nation-state seems scarcely appropriate.

The second form of border change involves the reconfiguration of state borders in situ, a process integral to the enhanced awareness of globalization. Here, the growth of transnational governance in its many forms, the globalisation of corporate production, neo-liberal moves to freer global markets, the revolution in mass communications, migration and the spread of a global consumerist culture have become the stock in trade of a huge literature in the social sciences on globalization, imperialism, transnationalism and the future of the nation-state (for overview, see Held et al. 1999). Yet, much general theorizing of these phenomena, while assuming the importance of border crossing or border transcendence remarkably pays little attention to borders as such. In fact, a discourse of ‘borderlessness’ and de-territorialisation is prominent in the general literature (Nederveen Pieterse 2002;)

---

6 Assuming that this figure is broadly accurate, the term ‘nation-state’ is misleading when applied to the inter-state system. It is also strange that many sociologists see the destruction of isomorphism of nation and state as one of the defining products of recent globalisation (e.g., Jacobson 1997).
The importance of borders, however, is being recognised explicitly in a burgeoning multi-disciplinary field of ‘border studies’ which has begun to empirically test some of the theoretical claims and generalisations in the wider literature. In part a by-product of the globalization literature, ‘border studies’ is a diverse field but marks a recognition of the continued salience of state borders in the face of wilder claims about an emerging ‘borderless world’. It is built around a realisation that the neo-liberal agenda of liberalising the movement of money, information and commodities across state borders has been accompanied by an intensified concern with regulating the flow of people, including economic migrants, criminals, terrorists, and diseases across those same borders.

If as Wimmer and Glick (2002) suggest methodological nationalism helps to institutionalise a division of labour between the social sciences, a problematisation of state borders encourages a degree of multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity. Border studies are testimony to Lamont and Virag’s (2002) arguments about the cross-disciplinary potency of the concepts of ‘boundary’ and ‘borders’. This is evident in the field of border studies and in the growing number of edited collections and special journal issues that it has emerged from it (e.g., Cunningham and Heyman 2004; Anderson, O’Dowd and Wilson 2003; Newman 1998) The Mexican-US border zone has become one of the ‘paradigmatic research sites’ in this field. Anthropologists (Wilson and Donnan 1998; Sahlins 1989); political geographers (Paasi, 1996, Sparke 1998 and Newman 2003) and political scientists (Anderson 1996; Andreas 2000, Albert et al 2001, Walters 2002) have been particularly prominent in border studies. But small numbers of historians (Baud and Schendel 1997; Adelman and Aron 1999), economists (Hansen 1983; Helliwell 1998 and Thompson 2000) and social philosophers (Moore and Buchanan 2003; Connolly 1991) have also contributed.

7 The US-Mexico border is the most intensely studied border in the world but it is scarcely a representative research site for the study of borders as such. It separates the world’s only super-power from a much poorer country which nevertheless is part of a common transnational free trade area. To the extent to which this border is an expression of huge material inequalities it is comparable to some EU state borders in Eastern Europe and in the Mediterranean, and perhaps to the borders between Hong Kong and mainland China. However, it is very different from other more symmetrical borders between states at the same level of economic development, and to borders in Africa and many parts of Asia.
Sociologists have been slow to develop a systematic and sustained focus on borders, boundaries and frontiers (Strassolo 1982: 245-6). While there has been a continuous, if often implicit, awareness of the concept of boundary in the discipline, an explicit sociology of borders remains underdeveloped and patchy (see Strassolo and Gubert 1973, Strassolo and Delli Zotti 1982, and more recently, Spener and Staudt 1998; Hall 2000, Nederveen Pieterse 2002, Ray 2002). The Italian sociologist Strassolo (1982) is one of the few to have tried to theorise state borders sociologically in the context of a general theory of boundaries anticipating Anderson’s (1996) claim that boundary making is natural to the human species.

Strassolo argues that boundary formation has an epistemological significance linked to humans’ needs to ‘find and impose order in the world’, so that we can tell differences and distinguish patterns. Building up from infantile learning processes that distinguish self from an independent external reality to an awareness of being connected symbiotically to this external reality, there is a dual process of recognising differences (and therefore boundaries) in reality, thereby creating new distinctions, differences and boundaries.

Strassolo (1982:247) suggests two tendencies within human beings – one is to rationalise, control and dominate nature, to discriminate between phenomena, to build systems and create boundaries. This activity may range from building dams to separate dry land from water, to building walls to mark the limits of civilisation, to creating ‘national borders’ to distinguish between us and them. Border creating activity is necessarily linked therefore to identity formation, social differentiation, institutional specialization and the division of labour – it involves codification, creating criteria for membership and regulation of boundary crossing. Legal systems and public administration define the limits of territorial and functional competence and serve to reproduce and maintain boundaries once they are created. The underlying logic is one of binary distinctions and clear boundary definitions. However, Strassoldo (1982: 248) also notes the contrary holistic drive to transcend boundaries to ‘find in nature harmony, unity and continuity instead of contrast, division and quantum leaps’. Here the emphasis is on the ‘abolition of differences, that is boundaries, between groups’ – such as those advocating a ‘classless society’, an inclusive or cosmopolitan world order, or an ‘ecosystem’ approach to society and nature. Transcendence of particular boundaries, of
course, can lead eventually to the creation of new boundaries.

Boundary making is therefore integral to logical thought, part of the epistemological project, ‘a necessary correlate of thought and communication no less than of technical control of reality’. Social science, modelling itself the classical natural sciences, adopted the ‘analytical mode, the caeteris paribus clause, the closed system’. But social science also reflects the contrary tradition that searches out the whole, the totality, i.e., that strives to transcend boundaries and the distinctions. Examples of this tradition would include dialectical historicism, interpretative sociology, structuralism and general systems theory.

While Strassoldo usefully signals the importance of border creation and transcendence, his theorising runs the risk of a reductionist perspective on borders between social collectivities. His empirical work on Italian borders employs systems theory to interrogate the nature of internal and external borders but leaves untouched many aspects of how borders are actively created, maintained and challenged (Strassoldo and Gubert 1973; Strassoldo and Delli Zotti 1982).

Yet, the creation, maintenance and transcendence of borders crystallise some of the key relationships central to contemporary political sociology. At the most general level they provide a window on the relationship between economy, polity and culture, between state and nation and between people, identity and territory. State borders bring into focus the relationships between state and nation and between people, identity and territory. To examine the process of their creation is explore the relationship between the arbitrary power, violence and coercion inherent in state borders and their facilitation of democracy, citizenship, social solidarity and cultural identity. The process by which they are maintained is a reminder that all borders are tested, even contested, in the interface between governmental practices and people seeking to cross or subvert them. Finally, transcendence, involves the creation of transnational relationships, rules, shared consciousness which ignore some, if not all, state borders. It involves border crossing but is not to be confused with it. Much border crossing in practice, helps to confirm or maintain borders. Despite the extent to which state borders shift location and the degrees to which they are contested and reconfigured, they continue to be naturalised and normalised. This is an indication of the hegemonic status of the inter-state system – and
the challenge posed to sociologists and others to problematise and empirically investigate what it happening to, and at borders.

Why Sociologists Neglect Borders

Two rather opposed tendencies in sociology have hindered the problematisation of state borders for analytical purposes. One takes existing state borders for granted and in the process thereby contributing to their normalization or naturalisation. The other assumes that they now count for little because they have become permeable to the point of insignificance. In crude terms, these positions correspond to either end of a modern-postmodern spectrum. The tendency to ‘normalize’ borders is rooted in what Agnew (1998) terms the modern geopolitical imagination which is based on three assumptions that (1) the world is divided into distinct sovereign states circumscribed by precisely defined geographical boundaries- in other words, the state-centric system (2) that the domestic and foreign are two distinct and separate realms; (3) that the boundaries of the state define those of the ‘society’. On the other hand, postmodern approaches reject state-centric conceptualisations and point to deterritorialization, state failure and the emergence of a ‘borderless’ global system of ever denser networks and flows(Luke and O Tuathail 1998: 17-18).

The tendency to normalise existing state borders is deeply rooted in sociology. The reasons may be traced to a number of sources: the impact of a number of ‘-isms’ on sociology – notably imperialism, nationalism, liberalism and socialism; the association of much sociology with large, long established states such as US, Britain and France where borders have long been taken for granted; and finally the settled conditions of most European state borders in the period (1950-80) which marked the greatest institutional development of sociology as a discipline in Europe.

Most sociologists have been reluctant to contemplate too closely the basis on which state borders were created in the first place much less integrate it into their analysis of borders (Tilly 1990 is one outstanding exception). The long history of state formation reveals no universally agreed criteria of how state borders should be drawn and who should draw them. Neither are there agreed guidelines for how many states should exist or on what
basis groups might affiliate to, or secede from, existing states (Anderson 1996) As state borders have changed and proliferated in the twentieth century, these questions have become more rather than less pressing. The absence of systematic rules of border creation necessarily leaves the door open for arbitrary action and violence. As Connolly (1994) observes, violence inheres in all boundaries – it is part of their ambiguity. The great majority of contemporary state borders were the result of elite arbitration and were established by elites and involved varying degrees of force and intimidation (Anderson 1996:37).

Imperialism and nationalism have provided different, if overlapping responses to the question of border formation and in the process have coloured sociological thinking on the topic. Both pre-modern and modern forms of imperialism were predicated on territorial aggrandizement (Caplow 1998). However, pre-modern and non-Western empires paid little attention to careful boundary limitation with few attempts to use precise spatial limits to define membership of a polity. Frontier zones existed with little direction from the centre. Modern state-empires which reached their zenith at the end of the nineteenth century (2) had more precise border-lines within Europe. Insofar as empires were centred on absolutist states shaped by their capacities to make war, tax their populations and rigorously map their boundaries (Agnew 2000:4; Tilly 1990), they reduced contested frontier zones to precisely defined boundary lines. Nevertheless with imperial expansion and over-extension, frontier zones emerged in overseas possessions and even survived, or re-emerged within Europe itself, e.g., in Ireland and parts of Central and Eastern Europe. While powerful states created their own nationalisms, they stimulated counter-nationalism in search of their own territorial borders. Imperialism and both forms of nationalism sought to legitimise the instrumentality or arbitrariness of their claims to border making.

In the absence of accepted theories and principles governing the drawing of imperial or national borders, post-hoc legitimation was emphasised. The first step here involves a selected political forgetting or amnesia about the coercive and arbitrary establishment of borders in the first place (Connolly 1991: 465). This ‘forgetting’ is facilitated by a process of ‘naturalisation’ initially deriving from appeals to divine providence, or to the ‘facts’ of physical geography, then via nationalist narratives that have sought to identify primordial nations with particular territories. The second step is to assert that the
bordered political entities are themselves privileged carriers of some universalising mission – e.g., the universalistic religion in the case of some pre-modern empires; the ‘civilising mission’ of modern empires which overlapped with ideas that modern nation-states were agents of rationalistic Enlightenment values and legitimate carriers of the values of the European renaissance and in Graeco-Roman civilisation (Agnew 2000:8).

Historically, sociology has been heavily influenced by liberalism and socialism both products of Enlightenment thinking. These ideologies combine universalistic programmes with the normalisation of existing state borders. Liberal democracies ‘require’ territorially bounded states for the rule of law and representative government to work. But the principle of self-determination provides no rules for where borders should be drawn (Anderson, M. 1996: 8). The many varieties of socialism are more likely than liberalism to problematise state formation and to appeal for the transcendence of existing state borders in the name of universal rights and interests. In practice, however, most socialist and social democratic practice has been targeted on, and framed by, territorially bounded states. In the process, it too has been border maintaining and normalising.

Liberalism and socialism informed imperialism and nationalism to varying degrees. As Miller 2003:265) observes most liberals have endorsed imperial conquest when empire building has been carried out by liberal states. The imperial ‘civilising mission’ might be accepted if it spread the doctrine and practice of liberal government among people with no access to it. Moreover, it is justified by claims to be spreading ‘true religion’ Contemporary liberals are more circumspect as they are more reluctant to rank peoples and cultures in the hierarchical manner so common in the nineteenth century.8 However, it might be argued that intervention in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and even Iraq has been accompanied by a revival of a form of liberal imperialism justified in the name of averting human disasters, protecting human rights or pre-empting threats to civilised or democratic states, or advancing economic and technological development.

‘Great state chauvinism’ coloured by residual or embryonic imperialist assumptions also

8 Of course, the hierarchical ranking of states in terms of development and quality of life indices has become normalised in sociology and other social sciences.
influence the sociologies associated with long-established states such as the US, France and England/Britain. These core states are deemed to have unproblematical borders and to be carriers of progressive, civilising or universalising values in contrast to the allegedly reactionary and parochial nationalisms of more recent and backward aspirants to statehood. Moreover, they have either historically assumed, or have been vested with, the right to impose political borders on others, or through leading roles in bodies like the League of Nations and the UN, they have presided over independence for post-colonial states. The contemporary version of this role is the claimed right to oversee the regulation of borders without necessarily redrawing them. Backward regions and states by contrast are seen to suffer from a variety of deficits in terms of economic, political or cultural development justifying interventions that range from facilitating the spread of capitalist production and consumption to direct and indirect military intervention in ‘zones of influence’ such as Latin America, the Middle East, and the Balkans. Maintaining the inviolability of homeland borders is nicely combined here with justifying the penetration and readjustment of other borders in imperial and neo-imperial terms.

Nationalism has been the most durable and potent territorial ideology of the twentieth century. But appeals to nationhood in the new states of the twentieth century and their claims to a ‘national homeland’ seem to expose the arbitrary nature of state borders at (Habermas 1996: 288) even if such arbitrariness in relation to ‘older’ states is conveniently ‘forgotten. Conservative forms of nationalism appeal to ‘historic borders’ that have allegedly organically developed across time while liberal forms seek to establish territorial self-determination in the name of majoritarian democracy, equal citizenship and representative government.

In ‘western’ states, the empirical research agenda of sociology has remained predominantly state-centred and state-funded. In this capacity, it has informed governments and serviced reformist movements framed by national states, thereby normalising, often unwittingly, existing state borders. The latter are taken for granted even in comparative research where states remain the main units of analysis. For three

---

9 This phenomenon has been particularly prominent in the context of immigration and security issues. EU member states have sought to develop a ‘borders policy’ in concert while the US is increasingly interventionist in pushing the EU and other individual states towards tighter border controls.
decades after 1945, the Cold War had the effect of stabilising existing borders while the development of the welfare state deepened their significance from within. In Mann’s (1993) terms, the growth in the ‘infrastructural powers’ of the state, increased its boundedness – a process clearly visible in the welfare states of western Europe and the socialist states of Eastern Europe after World War 2. This further encouraged the identification of state and society within sociology.

Despite much evidence of border change, therefore, many of the structural and cultural influences on sociology encouraged the normalisation of state borders and a consequent disciplinary myopia about them. There seemed less excuse for such a stance from the early 1990s onwards. Not only were state borders proliferating, it seemed clear that they were being significantly reconfigured as well. Sociologists were to the fore in developing concepts of globalisation and transnationalism. Here surely were ideas which would help problematise borders and promote empirical research on them. But, remarkably much contemporary sociology lurched from normalising state borders (or taking them for granted) to making the contrary assumption that territorial state borders now count for little, or at the most, that their significance was rapidly declining in a unilinear fashion. Radical globalization theorists stressed the extent to which economics, politics and cultural identities escaped from bounded territories including states. They argue that the material value of territory is in secular decline, that state sovereignty is being eroded and that territorial identities have lost their significance because concepts of time have become more important than concepts of space (Forsberg 1996: 365-6).

The metaphors employed in this sociology were used to describe the growing ease with which information, capital, goods, services and labour cross state boundaries (Castells 1998; Lash and Urry 1994; Giddens 2002). Increased permeability was associated with decreased significance. Students of globalisation emphasised the permeability of state borders in stressing the growth of transnational governance (Held et al 1999), communities (Vertovec, 1998), social movements (Cohen 1998) and corporations (Sklair 1991). A more qualified position is that borders have not so much disappeared, as proliferated, thereby reducing their significance. For example, Bauman (1998) argues

10 Held et al (1999) labels such approaches ‘hyper-globalist’, a term which might be used to describe the approaches of Giddens, Urry and Beck in European sociology.
that, within the new global political economy, there is scope for a proliferation of states based on claims to cultural identity alone rather than to political or economic viability. Culture, therefore, could provide an effective basis for state borders even if economic and political power rested elsewhere.

Within the EU, the growth of functionally specialised borders such as those of the euro- and Schengen zones, and the increased salience of powerful intra-state regions, seemed to diminish the privileged status of state borders, at least in comparison to state borders at their mid-twentieth century zenith in Europe when, allegedly, it was able to forge a high degree of coincidence between its economic, political and cultural activities. As the ideology of neo-liberalism capitalism drove the European Single Market project between 1985 and 1992, it seemed that state borders might lose the privileged position they have held for three centuries vis a vis other types of borders. The bundle of functions once associated with territorial state sovereignty is now seemed to be dispersed to other territorial or non-territorial entities such as localities, cities, regions, transnational social movements, multinational corporations or even revitalised world religions.

As international relations specialists like Ruggie (1993) emphasised the ‘unbundling’ of state functions, the anthropologist Appadurai (1996:19), for example, was convinced that the ‘nation-state as a complex modern political form is on its last legs’. He suggests that the territorial units in which people accumulate wealth, seek power, and construct their identities no longer coincide arguing that the ‘new global economy has generated fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics’. Territoriality, defined as a spatial strategy which uses territory and borders to control, classify and communicate (Anderson 2001) seemed to be increasingly redundant in a globalising world.

Narratives of transitions from modernity to post-modernity suggested that the state-centric modern world of fixed territorial borders -‘a space of places’ - is being replaced by a more dynamic world characterised by the ‘space of flows’ which emphasises movement and exchange between places with more fluid and flexible borders. Urry’s (2000) agenda for a sociology of mobilities, however, seemed to imply that territorially defined entities are no longer relevant objects for sociology.
Cartography, a key tool in the formation of the state as a delimited entity (Biggs 1999) is on this account increasingly irrelevant. Luke and O’Tuathail (1998:79) in a geographical parallel to Urry’s (2000) analysis suggest:

*The flowmations (sic) of industry, investment, individuals and information (the global I’s) have been eroding nation-states, and now leave the world political map as a ‘cartographic illusion’.*

Radical versions of globalisation theory suggest that we are in transition from a bordered to a ‘borderless’ world where the national state has become an ‘unnatural and dysfunctional unit for organizing human activity’ (Ohmae 1990). Few sociologists of globalization adopted extreme position adopted by Ohmae but their references to the continued regulatory power of states were often relegated to asides (e.g., Giddens 2002 and Urry, 2002: 66-7).

The discourse of increased borderlessness confuses the erasure of territorial (including state) borders with their redrawing and redefinition. It also confuses border crossing and border transcendence. Much border-crossing activity continues to be international and inter-governmental and as such is border-confirming rather than border subverting. The radical globalisation theorists obscure the significance of this form of border crossing, failing to recognise the extent to which it co-exists alongside transnational forms of border crossing that establish norms and forms of consciousness spanning borders. Examples of the latter might include human rights, environmental consciousness, even EU directives, promoted by supranational institutions, non-governmental organisations or social movements. Even here, however, there is a reliance on state governments to act on, apply or execute policies promoted at transnational level.

---

11 My own work on the growth of transfrontier regions in Europe and on the promotion of cross-border co-operation in Ireland under the Belfast Agreement, confirms the continued importance of states in confirming their existing borders. This ‘internationalising’ activity co-exists with transnationalising activity focused on functional or market oriented activity organised via cross-border networks with elastic territorial remits. Civil services, police, the national media, military and elections all continually reproduce the territorial bounds of their respective states in discourse and practice. If this is the case in the EU and in the Irish case where the process of transnationalization has developed greatest depth, then it would appear likely that the latter does not spell the demise of state borders (O’Dowd 2002, 2003; O’Dowd and McCall 2004).
The discourse of borderlessness is also peculiarly ahistorical. The implication that states are losing control over activities within their own borders makes the heroic assumption that all or most states wielded such control in the past. In the nineteenth century even the actions of the great European powers were shaped by their often competitive relationships with other imperial states. By the late 20th century, it was arguable that small EU states such as Ireland, Finland and Austria, far from losing some mythical, exclusivistic sovereignty actually gained power and discretion from being embedded in the new networks of international and transnational governance as they are now less at the mercy of their powerful neighbours. Secondly, states themselves have been major actors in creating many of the structures of transnational governance and, as in the EU, continue to shape its direction.  

Some observers have problematised the political consequences of contemporary border change seeing it as threatening the democracy so long dependent on precisely bounded states. For example, Anderson (2001) notes that democracy (in its representative form at least, largely stops at the borders of states. Transnational governance in general suffers from a democratic deficit even if does encourage forms of participatory and deliberative democracy (Eriksen and Fossum 2000). Similarly, it is the least democratically accountable institutions of the national state that are most strengthened in transnational governance such as central banks, the civil service, and the police (including border police). These institutions act as conveyer belts for the directives of supranational entities such the IMF or the EU. Other parts of the state such as those dealing with welfare services tend to be weakened (Sassen 2000: 375).

It may be argued, of course, that the above account overstates the neglect of borders in sociology. Many of those who emphasise flows such as students of international political economy, migration, tourism, crime, and communications technology empirically recognise, at least implicitly, the necessity of a sociology of both borders and flows. For example, capital and information flow more freely across borders than people. And there is substantial empirical recognition that different types of people are treated differently at state borders, i.e., that cross-border mobility is structured by

---

12 There is a sense in which the prolonged debate about whether the EU is mainly an inter-governmental or transnational body is beside the point. It is both. The precise mix is a matter for empirical investigation.
nationality, skin pigmentation, class, gender and age. Sociological treatments of nation and state building and ethnogenesis do draw attention to the construction of boundaries. The relative geo-political decline of the big western European states and the emergence of the EU have encouraged some sociologists to theorise the specificity of ‘Europe’ with respect to other macro-regions such as North America and the Asia (Delanty 1996; Therborn 1995). While these perspectives implicitly recognise the geo-political enhancement of some borders, they fail to make them central to their analysis theoretically or empirically.

**Privileging Borders in Sociological Analysis: Historicity, Variability and Ambiguity**

To bring state borders more centrally into sociological discourse, the tendencies to naturalise/normalise or discount them must be resisted. Instead, more nuanced and empirically driven approaches are required that no longer see them either as natural phenomena or as simple manifestations of epochal changes from a modern/national to a post-modern/post-national world. A reading of the inter-disciplinary field of border studies suggests the value of distinguishing three moments of border development: border creation, maintenance (or confirmation) and transcendence. These moments are best seen as analytically rather than chronologically distinct. As Paasi (1998: 86) [a geographer who draws freely on sociology] observes there is a need to ‘develop abstractions to make the multi-dimensional character of territory and boundary building “theoretically visible.” The border creating, maintaining and transcending practices of human beings in pursuit of wealth, power, and cultural identity suggest that (state) borders are not only multi-dimensional but also complex and often contradictory phenomena. One-dimensional, unilinear accounts of the declining significance of territorial borders under the impact of globalisation fail to grasp the complex reconfiguration of state borders or indeed the importance of border change as a necessary and integral part of social transformation. Borders may be multi-faceted and contradictory phenomena but they are also a ubiquitous part of social life.

They are lines on the ground but also on-going social constructions involving processes and institutions which are integral to creating and protecting wealth, power
and social identity. As institutions they provide stable structures for human interaction and human reciprocity which reduce uncertainty and ontological insecurity (Paasi 1998:75) materialising as ‘border regimes’, i.e., ‘networks of rules, norms and procedures that regularise behaviour’ in border zones (Langer 1996: 62-3). Paasi (1998: 75) points out that borders are ‘above all, manifestations of social practice and discourse’. In terms of practice they are shaped by the interaction of governmental agencies and people seeking to cross and utilize border, legally or illegally. As discourse borders are critical to identity formation and political legitimation.

Their significance for identity formation is established in official state narratives through which people come to know and understand their social world, constructing their social identities in the process. The state border, like other boundaries, becomes ‘one of our most fertile thinking tools because it captures a fundamentally social process – that of relationality (Lamont and Virag 2002:169). In a world of states of varying age and vastly unequal size, power and wealth, state borders express a complex and significant form of relationality central to understanding the forms on connectivity so often stressed, if not always empirically investigated, by sociologists of globalisation and transnationalism.

One of the consequences of naturalising or normalising borders is a tendency to project contemporary borders back into history. A sociology of borders needs to register the historicity of state borders. The process of creating, maintaining and transcending borders thus needs to be historicized. These three moments may be part of a general process but paradoxically are also characterised by a path-dependent particularism. Historical modes or repertoires of border creation can be identified, e.g., conquest, colonisation, inheritance, purchase, secession (including struggles for national liberation and self-determination).

The creation of state borders may be understood as a contested social process rather than as consequent on an event such a war, invasion or peace treaty. The conceptual demarcation of modern state borders on a map seldom meant the immediate or direct

---

13 Tilly (1999: 418) makes this general point in relation to citizenship, democracy and nationalism, noting the importance of historical and cultural context in limiting directions of development.
institutionalisation of the border on the ground (Biggs 1999). Here its shape and nature became a product of the interaction between competing states or borderland groups – frontiers, as areas of mixed zones of settlement, and as buffer zones between contending empires were only slowly and often imperfectly incorporated into the bounded space of the state – frequently leaving in place localised cross-border relationships at odds with precise territorial definitions of the state.

The maintenance and confirmation of state borders involves the institutionalisation of a set of practices and relationships in border zones (and more recently at airports). Here there the sociological analysis of border crossers, legal and illegal, and the forms of regulation employed by state agents are capable of characterisation in a comparative manner which reveal much about the states involved and their relationship to other states and the rest of the state system.

The particular ways in which borders have been historically created and maintained shape ways of conceptualising and ‘narrating’ borders in official state institutions (while discouraging and suppressing other counter-narratives). For example, imperial and settler societies produce border narratives that stress civilising and improving missions with consequent implications for the representation of those they conquer, displace or eliminate. Such narratives are important to the legitimising of state borders and creation of social solidarity, shared identity and the mobilisation of resources, power and action within the bounded collectivity of the state. But, those pushed aside or repressed in contested frontier zones may return to establish or re-establish their own state borders. In Europe, for example, the frontier zones so clearly divided and suppressed by Cold War state boundaries were to re-emerge in south-east Europe in ways which re-called much older imperial frontiers.

Borders are also variable. There is a sense in which all borders are unique in that they reflect the formation of particular states and their relationship to other states. However a comparative and historical sociology is capable of distinguishing how, in broad terms, state borders differ from their predecessors – imperial, absolutist and

---

14 One of the distinctive feature of modern state borders, at least since the 1920s, is that airports now function as sites of state border crossing, internal to the territory of the state. They are prime sites for studying the aspects of border regulation and maintenance.
medieval. Such an approach might also distinguish between types of state border within the contemporary state system. While systemic recognition of state borders implies a certain nominal equality of status among states, they also in practice institutionalise the huge inequalities between states in terms of their size, power, wealth and culture – inequalities which are made manifest in the way they manage their borders and their capacity to facilitate or obstruct the passage of people, commodities, finance and information across them.

Connolly (1994) sees coming to terms with the ambiguity of borders as a key political question – it is no less a key sociological question. On the one hand, state borders reflect the arbitrariness, violence and coercion on which the state as a political entity is based; on the other hand, they can demonstrate how borders have been the sine qua non for the development of social order, democracy and social solidarity. Borders are both inclusive and exclusive, they are socially enabling as well as disabling; they oppress as well as offer escape from oppression. They institutionalise inequality while providing avenues of challenging it; borders and their surrounding zones are places of restriction as well as opportunity; they provide a site for observing governmental practices and the often contradictory form they take, while simultaneously illuminating the practices of border crossers and borderland residents.

Whereas borders may be seen as sharply defined lines in the power centres of the state, as one approaches the border, the line becomes fuzzy shading into a frontier zone. At borders we get a sense of the way that state and governmental practices shape and are shaped by ‘other states’ and by various categories of borderland residents and border crossers. National state borders are critical to identity formation in that in official state narratives they designate ‘a sacred space’ fought for, and defended by, past blood sacrifice, or a willingness to sacrifice in the future. Of course, the hegemonic identity narrative suppresses and generates counter narratives often rooted in borderlands. The more institutionalised the state borders are, the more they represent the distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, insiders and outsiders, and the sense of common fate and ontological security associated with the former as well as the threats, risks and ‘strangeness’ associated with the latter.

While a sociology of borders must be alert to ambiguity, it must also recognise the
extent to which these ambiguities are sustained and arbitrated by the power of states. This arbitration may have taken place in the distant past and subsequently have become legitimated or naturalised. Alternatively, it may still be open to radical contestation. Here sociologists’ eye for historical and comparative analysis should at least problematise methodological nationalism or alternatively the ignoring of borders.

Privileging borders in sociological discourse also means paying attention to the use of metaphors. Many of the metaphors currently employed in the sociology of globalisation - such as flows, fluids, networks and mobilities sustain notions of a ‘borderless world’. They serve to make borders theoretically and empirically invisible and while diminishing their multi-dimensionality and ambiguity. While metaphors are not a substitute for theory, they have always been integral to sociological analysis. Appropriate metaphors for borders should express both their abiding ambiguities, their flexibility and their multi-dimensionality. Examples include the representation of borders as barriers, bridges, filters, membranes and resources (O’Dowd 2003; Hall 2000).

Elements of the sociological tradition are suggestive here. For example, nearly a century ago Simmel (1994) was demonstrating in ‘Bridge and Door’ that separation and connection presuppose each other in bordering processes – things must be separated in order to be connected. He developed a dynamic concept of space appropriate to contemporary globalisation which recognises the centrality of borders to the dynamics of space and lived experience. The principle of movement does not presuppose the dismantling of borders, rather borders are necessary to the principle of movement – in a sense they produce movement (Game 1998: 46). Cunningham and Heyman (2004: 294) note that borders are as relevant to the study of mobilities as they are to enclosures observing that ‘enclosures and mobilities thus join at borders, in the multifarious processes of entering, avoiding, detecting, classifying, inspecting, interdicting, facilitating, and revaluing that are borders of everyday routine’ (2004: 295). Immobility needs to be explained as well as mobility not least because an

\[15\] In a strong critique of Urry (2000), Favell (2001: ) condemns the way in which his use of ‘a sprawling metaphors-based cultural theory, that piles up recent discussions of scapes, cyberspaces,
estimated is the other side of the coin to mobility (Ray 2003). Only 3% of the world’s population currently reside in a country other than the one where they were born. This puts the scale and significance of transnational migration into perspective and encourages Cunningham (2004: 333) to employ the metaphor of the ‘gated globe’.

As ethnographers of border zones, Heyman and Cunningham (2004) stress the role of borders as structures of power, coercion and inequality. Indeed, the creation of state borders has been largely, if not exclusively, a matter of wealthy and powerful elites - staking their claims to discrete territories generally in competition with each other – who are eventually forced to mobilise a degree of popular support in support of their claims (Tilly 1990). Yet, perhaps one of the greatest paradoxes of state borders is that, despite their origins in warfare, coercion, intimidation and even ethnic cleansing, they have also enabled the development of territorial democracy helping to make rulers more accountable to the ruled, while developing citizenship rights, mutual aid, reciprocity and a sense of collective security. But the conditions under which this can occur are not always present and are worthy of detailed empirical investigation. As state borders are redrawn and re-emerge, as their functions and meanings change under the impact of globalization, transnationalism and neo-imperialism, the paradox of origins becomes more visible. The challenge of comparing forms of border change from the coercive to the relatively peaceful becomes ever more pressing for a critical sociology.

**Conclusion**

Rather in engaging in premature speculation about growing borderlessness, sociologists have much to gain by exploring what is happening to, and at, state borders. A sociology of borders might help negotiate between what Wimmer and Glick Schuller (2002: 235) have termed the ‘Charybdis of methodological nationalism’ and the Scylla of networks, chaos theory and time-space compression’ takes on a life of its own at the expense of empirical analysis and empirically informed theory.

---

16 Of course, this statistic obscures the cross-border mobility of tourists and other short-term sojourners as well as the scale of massive internal mobility as in the huge migration from China’s interior provinces to the burgeoning coastal cities.
‘methodological fluidism’\textsuperscript{17}. It is at borders perhaps the best guides to the present and to the future are to be found, where the nature of states and their variability are most in evidence, where inequities of power and material wealth and most visible. The study of borders also has the potential to expose for sustained scrutiny the representational role of sociology and sociologists. In its institutional practices the discipline is heavily shaped by national borders and the perspective of individual sociologists is inevitably formed by the cultural traditions of their own states.

Examination of state borders also reminds us that many state borders are embryonic and far from fully institutionalised compared to their western counterparts. They are works in progress and may even fail completely. More importantly, perhaps, even though the existence of internationally recognised state borders suggests a certain nominal equality between states, the legacy of old imperial borders remain. French, British, and Spanish states maintain informal zones of influence beyond their borders even if in a much attenuated form which has become encased within a EU framework. The EU has developed a border strategy which operates in its so-called ‘neighborhood’ which occupies old imperial space. Russia continues to struggle to stabilise its shrinking zone of influence in competition with the EU and the US.

So, the state system continues to ‘internationalise’ as well as transnationalise. However, huge discrepancies in the size, power and wealth of states seem to be leading to the emergence of embryonic macro-regional entities. The EU, as the most institutionalised of these entities, is developing a borders policy of which the executors are member states, just as the US works hard to mobilise governments in key strategic areas all over the world to act as border control agents for interdicting the flow of terrorists, criminals, drugs, weapons and other dangerous commodities. However, at key borders, such as those of the US and the EU, migration is a huge issue – its border management reveals much about the unequal power and often contradictory priorities of particular states. This broad brush analysis, however, needs to be tested empirically by what is happening to, and at, land borders, ports and airports. Much of what goes on here may be characterised as border maintenance or confirmation.

\textsuperscript{17} By fluidism they mean the dissolution of structures into fluidity, the replacement of sedentariness by mobilities, and where there are fixed boundaries everything equally and immediately interconnected (2002:235).
But perhaps most of all state borders are sites which remind us of the ambiguities in all social boundaries - a ubiquitous phenomenon of all human behaviour. State border are boundaries which are constantly being tested, if not actively contested. Even when they are not being contested by other state governments or by ethnic movements, they may be regularly tested by those who cross them and utilise them in ways that seek to circumvent bounded bureaucracies, legal and policing systems.

Borders are socially enabling as well as disabling; they include as well as exclude; they protect human rights and well as deny them; they sustain and regulate socio-economic inequality; they foster and inhibit identity formation. In their various modes of creation, they remind of the arbitrariness and violence which inheres in the establishment of any bounded political system. This violence ranges from coercion of populations, to their displacement and even to their genocide. In Michael Mann’s (2005) phrase, this is the dark side of democracy – but state borders still remain the *sine qua non* for electoral, representative democracy which is largely missing from transnational entities which remain remote and unaccountable to ‘bounded peoples’. There are signs that agendas of transnationalisation pursued by state bureaucracies, central banks, militaries, multinational corporations and inter-governmental organisations are allowing state elites to escape accountability even within the territorial bounds of the state itself. Different political systems and ideologies, even different states, grapple with these ambiguities in different ways – and it is the study of this process, particularly transparent at borders and in border regions, that might maximise the contribution of a sociology of borders to our understanding of contemporary social change.

*Bibliography*


Agnew, J. (1998) CHECK


www.qub.ac.uk/cibr/


