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Boundaries and borders

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Abstract : Symbolic artifacts that help to understand and define spatial discontinuities, boundaries and borders are essential to our territorial alphabet. The text first recalls on the historic construction of a bounded form of thinking (spatially) within the Western world, according to a model that was disseminated worldwide through colonization. The focus shed by globalization on flows and networks profoundly questions the nature of boundaries and borders, making them appear as more and more topological. In this context, where de/rebordering processes cannot be considered as symmetric to de/reterritorialization processes, contemporary borders have to be grasped through their portativity, considering a change of focus towards the individual and his/her personalization of a mobile device. The chapter ends sketching the premises of an ontology of the mobile border, allowing time and instability to be instilled into a renewed analysis of spatial limits.

Index entries : natural border ; mobile border ; border ; boundary, bordering ; de/rebordering ; de/ reterritorialization ; territoriality ; space, territory ; mobility ; body ; embodied border ; biometrics ; security ; wall ; barrier ; demarcation ; materiality ; network ; ontology

Boundaries have been a key component of the modern territorial vocabulary. They have origins in Euclidean thinking, which sees space as two-dimensional. They also fit in well with Kantian rationality, which considers space and time as two symmetrical conditions of human experience. They can be considered "a generic term for the linear spatial discontinuity" (Fall 2005). Borders constitute both a restriction and an expansion of the semantic field of boundaries, and in this sense it is hard to discuss one term without examining the other. Borders have indeed been endowed with a stronger political use than boundaries, having been "invented" in modern times to express a specific balance of territorialized powers. They also invite a more-than-linear approach, enabling the possibility of borderlands. This chapter will reflect on all of these terms.

Recent research in the context of globalization suggests the processual nature of geographical objects and their ongoing adaptation to new technologies that change the nature of well-established spatial notions such as distance and proximity. Thus, any definition of boundary-making has to strive to account for complex elements interacting in a technology-dependent context. Relativity and chaos theories on the one hand, and phenomenology and agency thinking on the other, invite us to reformulate our thinking of space and the relations it fosters. For those reasons, post-modernity requires us to re-conceptualize boundaries and borders whose initial definition context is definitely modern.

Being delimitations of space, boundaries and borders present a first paradox, that of being symbolic components of our environment that highly impact our lives. The second paradox that they share is the fact that our main experience of them is by confronting or crossing them. This may be what makes the recent (2011-2012) challenge two climbers set themselves – to follow as extensively as possible the border of an Alpine country, so exceptional (Amilhat Szary 2013a)! In a renewed way, by using their own bodies to attest to and question the existence of the conventional line, the climbers pose a complex question: Can we experience a border or a boundary as traced on a map? Boundaries may appear to be more mundane than borders, as more people have probably had the chance to experience them personally – be it physically, through their presence on urban fringes in “park boundary” signs, or mentally, since history books are replete with references to “boundary treaties” that make boundaries achieve a material consistency in the mind of every citizen. It is, however, much more difficult to touch a border, even when it is a material barrier or a wall, either because surveillance devices often restrict access to it or because, as in the case of the mountain fringes that our climbers decided to explore, they were not meant to be reached.

Language appears as an important filter to understand the dynamics of bordering. The Roman etymology (of the word boundary/or border) differs from the Saxon one: The direct translation of boundary in languages derived from Latin, such as “frontière” in French or “frontera” in Spanish, has its roots in the “front” and attests to the rivalries and battles that took place before linear devices known as boundaries were in use. The mythological history of the Western world stained with blood the first tracing of a border: It is worth noting that it was because of a sacred furrow, plowed to distinguish the soil of the city to be, Rome, from that of its unknown exterior, that Remus was killed by his twin brother Romulus. This deed was in reaction to Remus’ mocking of the boundary Romulus had just traced: While Romulus was lifting the plow to mark a threshold, Remus deliberately walked over the line to denounce its weakness. Romulus responded to Remus’ symbolic violence with a physical and irreversible act: One brother suppressed the other by declaring the possible territorialization of his identity through the establishment of a spatial limit.

Its Saxon etymology suggests the “boundary” or “border” could be “that which binds,” a place of friction or meeting where alterity is negotiated. Probably more than boundaries, borders are a kind of space where the relationship with otherness can be developed such a way as to allow for identity-building and place-making. This socio-anthropological definition of borders emphasizes the complex relations of the spatial divides with distance: In line with the Simmelian approach, by which social links are considered to originate from the connections between that which is close and that which is far, simultaneously fixed and mobile (Simmel 1972 [1908], especially Chapter 9), it is possible to define a border as a way of “putting distance in proximity” (Groupe Frontière et al. 2004).

The German word “grenze” seems to open yet another semantic field of reference. It comes from a Polish term meaning “milestone”, used to demark private property before it bore a more political power. The word was coined in the context of large borderlands where the line only existed as a mental construction tied to punctual signs in the landscape. However, curiously, in the European context, those different words have evolved « in a similar direction, that of a dematerialization through the metaphorical meaning of the linear limit” (Lask 1995, p. 68).

The past two decades have borne witness to two opposing movements in territorial thinking. On the one hand, one expected the “end of history” to entail the symmetrical “end of territory” (Badie 1995), as the flows of globalization indeed relied on a decline in barriers. A

former director of the World Trade Organization was thus able to advocate for a “world without walls” (Moore 2003) at the very moment when re-bordering processes were about to gain new legitimacy, as security became a key issue in international relations following the events of 9/11. On the other hand, the same period was marked by an “obsession with borders” (Foucher 2012 [2007]) shared by policy makers, politicians, and scholars. The renewal of border studies in the 1990s has built on the questioning of the linear component of spatial divides, and the shifting of boundaries from political science and international relations toward the field of critical studies. Historical knowledge of border demarcation took an important step (Foucher 1986, Sahlins 1996, Nordman 1998) after the Second World War, renewing the consideration of borders through the research lines set by the Annales school of history (Ancel 1938). A few authors led the way (Rumley and Minghi 1991, Donnan and Wilson 1994, Paasi 1996) to re-activate the theoretical insights of the previous generation (Guichonnet and Raffestin 1974, Raffestin 1974, Prescott 1978) and analyze the complex relations between power and space that borders “reified” (Raffestin *ibid.*). The input from this first generation of what was becoming structured as “border studies” was extremely well summed up in the widely cited paper by Newman and Paasi (Newman and Paasi 1998). Structurally, this was pushed forward by the birth of connecting structures such as the Association of Borderland Studies (founded in 1976), organizer of annual conferences and of a specialized publication, the *Journal of Borderland Studies* (launched in 1986), the BRIT (Borders in Transition) network initiating its conferences in 1994, lately followed by other regular border forums such as the *Borderscapes* conferences (2006-2014).

Since then, border research has expanded in two divergent directions, one focusing on the “cross-boundary” cooperation processes and socio-spatial issues in borderlands, and the other on the securitization of border crossings and the renewal of demarcation processes. Meanwhile, theoretical thinking about boundedness was much called for, without enough success, since this call was often answered through the prism of modeling (Brunet-Jailly 2005, Hamez et al. 2013) rather than an overall theory of borders. The recent and concomitant release of two companion books (Wastl-Walter 2012, Wilson and Donnan 2012) marked yet another stage of the maturation of this scientific field and opened the way for renewed scholarship on territorial restructuring, now in possession of the epistemological tools enabling them to tackle border and boundary together. Interestingly, for the first time, an important research grant has been awarded to a European consortium with an objective to reshape a conceptual framework for border studies (the EUBORDERSCAPES project, led by J. Scott; see in particular the extensive state of the art produced by the team: http://www.euborderscapes.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/EUBORDERSCAPES_State_of_Debate_Report_1.pdf). This expansion has also witnessed a shift from the two original geographical cradles of border analysis, i.e. the United States–Mexico divide and the European borders, toward a wider horizon that includes non-Western bordering practices and opens the way for post-colonial border studies.

However, recent spatial practices shake the groundings of bordering. The projection of bordering practices, both inside and outside national territories, as well as the multiplication of agency in the process, may lead to a questioning of the very notion of linear limits: Is the everywhere border still a border? This questioning goes along with the multiplication of exceptional statuses, whether in the economical sense (with the development of extra-territorial zones, as in Nyíri 2009) or in the political one (with the emergence of all kinds of camps, Minca 2005, Le Cour Grandmaison, Lhuillier and Valluy 2007). These indeed bring about shifts in the scale and complexity of time/space relations, which are at the heart of future research.

This chapter will open with the historical development of bounded thinking. This retrospective view will emphasize the correlation between limit-building, world-compartmentalizing, and the linear shape of boundaries (notably on maps). Subsequently, the evolution of the spatiality of limits will be considered, from linear to topological metrics, before opening a discussion of the ontology of the mobile border and its consequences for our spatial alphabet.

1. Bounded thinking

A historical review reveals that the invention of physical limits is linked to the process of sedentary settling. The action of materializing compartmentalization into space may date back to the days when the first Sumerian cities were fortified with walls. Such a broad perspective indicates that national borders, even if they have strongly contributed to changing our more general representations of boundaries, are a very recent phenomenon that goes back only a few centuries. The great novelty of the modern (post-Renaissance) period has been the transition away from a medieval multi-bounded world, since the feudal system was based on inter-personal allegiances that did not require spatial contiguity, and territorial limits were not the most meaningful. The political order that emerged in modern Europe was built on the necessity to find a balance between political organization and territory. It is thus generally acknowledged that borders (defined as state limits) were “invented” in 1648, with the signing of the Treaties of Westphalia that marked the end of the Thirty Years’ War in Europe and the search for a balance of power guaranteed by territorial stability (See the title of Foucher’s 1986 book, which is indicative of the constructive paradigm that historians were discovering at the time, whereby they were engaged in the analysis of all kinds of “inventions.”) Although these treaties were far from ushering in an era without war, they did open a bounded way of thinking modernity. The extent of a state’s power was thus to be limited by the extent of a rival political domain, upon the agreement over a partition of space symbolized by a common separation line that would thereupon be called a border.

This opened the possibility of an “inter-national” order, negotiated between nation-states that were in the process of consolidation, while the idea of empire was supposedly left behind, at least concerning the European space (regional empires survived, notably Austria-Hungary, but the idea of a European empire was left behind). The modern nation-state was thus created upon the notion of territorial sovereignty (Elden 2013), which in turn gave rise to a long-lasting tautology whereby territory is defined by state, state by sovereignty, and sovereignty by territory.

Just as they were drawing their external borders, the recently established states undertook a concomitant reorganization of their territories in order to confirm their rule upon them, and this was done through a process of internal division. The emerging administrative grids can be understood as a form of political rationality aimed at ensuring population control. For those who have no personal relation to the people in power and for whom order is symbolic, administrative boundaries have a mundane materiality. Foucault (2004) has stressed that governing techniques, among which administrative divisions play an important rule, have taken over previous sovereignty structures, and his work will help us to draw political links between boundaries and borders.

The generalization of what we could call “territorial thinking” took time. The 18th century marked a turning point in the success with which various governments established the administrative grid of their territories through the conjunction of effective networks such as tax collection or postal distribution, achievements based on better physical infrastructures and regional restructuring. The quest for the “territorial optimum,” or the best possible division of space also dates to this period. The French Revolution indeed included the proposal of a new map that offered to replace all previous territorial (ecclesiastical, judiciary, etc.) sub-divisions by a series of geometric figures. Ultimately, however, France was not divided into squares: New administrative boundaries were attained through the invention of a new level of administration, that of the *department* (“département”), but its boundaries were negotiated according to the spatial rationality of the times, that is the quest for natural limits, and many French departments bear the names of the rivers that define their outline (Ozouf-Marignier 1989).

This example highlights the importance of the tool that allows any theory to be enacted. In the case of any kind of boundary or border, the map function is much more than illustrative. One could even say that the map has constituted the condition of existence of the political convention that it was meant to represent. If placing a boundary on the map makes it real, it is the existence of the map that makes it possible for the limit to exist as such, notably as a linear device. The first known European boundary treaties are indeed contemporaneous with the first precise regional maps that made it possible for the decision makers to provide their governments with tangible evidence of their decisions on the localization of international limits. In this context, the act of drawing a boundary relied on the elements that *did* figure on those maps, and notably on topographical features. For example, rivers appeared as curves, and mountains were represented by a series of small triangles linked together in order to suggest the then-fashionable idea of “chains.” These two kinds of representational abstractions prepared the ground for the tracing of lines.

The origin of the “natural border” concept harks back to these first border maps and happens to constitute an 18th-century coincidence: It was not only technically easier to draw the boundary upon a line on the map, but politically also very convenient. As they considered themselves to be reigning over a piece of land in the name of God, the sovereigns of the time were very interested in having their kingdoms rely upon naturalized territorial limits. If their borders were supported by topographical elements such as rivers or mountains, which were themselves outcomes of divine creation, then they could claim their authority also resulted from this divine order... And this would reveal a useful way to deflect questions concerning the justification of their kingdoms’ borders (Debarbieux 1997). An analysis of the modern context in which boundaries emerged also allows us to define them as both technical tools and performative creations, according to the double status of maps laid out by Dennis Cosgrove (Cosgrove 1999). From the moment they were laid on the vellum of the map, boundaries were given a consistency that retroactively justified the power that had ordered the map. Boundaries were born of this visual condition. This ingrained mapping condition of boundaries and borders may help us to better comprehend the difficulty of understanding territorial constructions in regions that were devoid of mapping culture (or at least of Cartesian drawing culture). African borders are certainly not more artificial than others, but they overlap a political order that was not traditionally established on a “mappable” sovereignty. This may explain why, in some regions, collective representations have clashed so much with territorial borders.

The mobile dimension of space and the correlated necessity to examine borders in a more dynamic way have always existed, but this necessity has in general been obscured by methods

of analysis that privilege stable elements over labile configurations. Borders have often been defined as palimpsests: those old manuscripts that kept the traces of vanished words when new scribes had written on them. Foucault (Foucault 1991, p.43) describes them as “time inscribed within space,” testifying in the present of complex restructurings of the past. The genealogical method that Foucault deploys can be very useful to apprehend the by-pass that has for so long compelled us to perceive boundaries as stable. When Foucault retrospectively looks to ancient Greece for the origins of governmentality, he distinguishes this period from the rest of Western history as being the only true territorial era, “the Greek god [being] a territorial god, an intra-muros god” (Foucault 2004 p.129). He opposes Greek polity to the rest of the Mediterranean, where shepherds managed mobile flocks, and he points out that the Greeks only managed to produce this political scheme at the very small scale of scattered cities. On the basis of these historical hints, we may question the linear model that we have taken for granted the past few centuries and ask ourselves whether, perhaps, borders may only have been a Greek illusion?

2. From linear to topological limits

Boundaries and borders were reinvented during the modern era to define a political order that was conceived as stable, or at least as one that was undergoing a process of constant, linear stabilization. It reflected an ontological perspective that divided objects into exclusive categories, separated from each other, that very few political geographers challenged, except for J. Gottman who was one of the first to emphasize the importance of flows to understand the world organization (Gottmann 1952). Indeed, it has recently been stressed that the inclusion of the word “order” in “b/order” was not a coincidence (Van Houtum, Kramsch and Ziefhofer 2004). Nevertheless, the contemporary global era has proved the opposite: Borders of all kinds are very unstable. A whole new set of borders has emerged during the disintegration process of the Cold War geography; more generally, territorial restructuring is also highly visible on all scales and in very diverse cultural settings (Antheaume and Giraut 2005).

However, the coining of the “b/ordering” word play grounds the term within one linguistic context, exclusive of others, since it does not work in Roman or Germanic languages. The globalization of scientific production and the domination of English writing do not stand alone to explain the success of this expression. The way English relies more readily on verbs than on nouns makes it apt for describing the labile condition of contemporary socio-spatial objects. Over the past 25 years, border studies have established that boundaries are never given spatial settings. They are always undergoing “debordering” and “rebordering” processes that can affect them in any point of space and at any time, simultaneously. This dialectical process means there exist simultaneous conditions for the opening up of any boundary, notably linked to the globalization of trade and the increase of flows of human beings, goods, capital and ideas, as well as for the closing down of any boundary, in order to ensure the security of those flows through control and filtering. It follows that any given border or boundary is undergoing both opening and closing processes at the same time in the same place.

This can happen because the forms and functions of borders do not spatially coincide anymore. Given the dominance of functional spatial analysis in border studies, this kind of an understanding of borders has taken some time to emerge. Examining the controlling and filtering roles of any territorial limit too closely can indeed prevent us from questioning the

complexity of its spatial forms. The security paradigm that imposed itself in the media and academic agendas after 9/11 has led many authors to try to trace the evolution of controlling functions and to document their apparent dematerialization. In various situations, border crossings are no longer controlled when a line is crossed, but through ever more sophisticated means of technological surveillance (Pickering and Weber 2006) in various network hubs, such as at bus and train stations, airports, ports and logistical centers.

In this process, the border is “becoming a set of discontinuous dots” (Bonditti 2005 p. 10), which lead us to shift our thinking from the place of border encounters to the spatialization of the complex interactions that comprise the bordering act. This, in turn, leads us to redirect the focus “from boarding places to data sets” (Bonditti, *ibid.*), in other words, from place to digital information, from topography to topology. This computer and communications technology gap compels us to not only consider the territorial dissemination of border functions, projecting borders inward to and outward from national spaces, but it unveils the possible “pixelization” of any kind of boundary line (Bigo and Guild 2005). The possible decomposition of any border into sets of data and binary codes that are infinitely malleable could, however, mean the end of the notion of a boundary, because of its obvious dislocation. Could the border be that pervasive? The nomadic horizon traced by Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze and Guattari 2008 [1972]) to get out of the previous analytical dead-ends of structuralism should probably not be interpreted too literally. Pixelization is derived from the sophistication of both technological border control devices and of the networked organizations that manage them. But the mobile lenses that we now need in order to understand borders may reveal a necessary step toward the understanding of territorial restructuring: data flows intersecting in ways that produce new grids (Vukov and Sheller 2013).

Whether we are looking at debordering or rebordering processes, is it possible to localize the seemingly ubiquitous border? This quest is not merely the whim of a social scientist. On the very open borders within Europe’s Schengen Area, we can witness numerous initiatives to physically demarcate and symbolically erase the lines. From the transformation of customs check posts into tourist shops or museums to the erection of public monuments and the organization of cultural events, borderland inhabitants work on the preservation of the boundary landscape (Amilhat Szary 2012). The materiality of the border enacted by infrastructure, such as walls or barriers, may seem easier to assess on closing borders, even if most of the border control is made through a network of “smart” devices, from video cameras to digital sensors and robots. This technology apparatus is not devoid of its own territoriality (Popescu 2011), since it is linked to various infrastructures that are mobilized to ensure the continuity of the network. The latter, submarine cables and satellite relaying, even impose a three-dimensional vision of border dimensions, if not a more topological approach of boundary analysis.

Emphasizing this orientation, when the Department of Homeland Security of the United States tries to discern what the “the border of the future” could be, it describes a “continuum framed by air, sea and land dimensions” (Salter 2004 p.76). This notion of an absolute extremity of the national territory disclaims the linear nature of the border without canceling its spatiality. It also paves the way for the activation of bordering processes in parts of our ecosphere that had for a long time escaped territorial management and its effective implementation, in other words, sea and air. Maritime borders have indeed become an active frontier of international law and geopolitics, since GPS and satellite technologies allow the surveillance of the legal framework set up by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, signed in Montego Bay in 1982 but ratified in 1994 only). These borders

may become the scene for active claims that could be linked to land conflicts (for example, the conflict over the waters of the disputed area of Western Sahara) or for multidimensional interests, notably when illegal migrations issues interact with security agendas. In the Mediterranean Sea, the border map is complicated by the sinuous delineation of the often rocky coastline, the presence of multiple islands, the intense global flows that intersect with military surveillance and illegal crossings for human and drug trafficking. This is where the nongovernmental organization “Watch the Med” has set up a framework to monitor the cases of migrant deaths at the borders of the European Union that constitute a violation of human rights supposedly guaranteed by the neighboring states, subsequently engaging in a complex legal discussion over the consequences of territorial sovereignty in a multi-layered Europe.

These recent evolutions of “boundedness” appear, once again, to be firmly associated with the tools and instruments that contemporary technology makes available in a determined historical context. Changing our lenses, this context makes the contributions of cultural studies (Price 2000) crucial to all border scholars. As soon as one tries to shift the focus from the institutions to the people who constitute the border by living at and around it, it becomes apparent that the separation line is not essential. It splits up into a multitude of fragments, both functional and ideal. When the Chicana poet and activist Gloria Anzaldúa claimed she “was” the border (Anzaldúa 1987), she was one of the first to stress the performative dimension of border territorialities and to point out that the embodiment of an institutional convention meant more than the mere designation of a political status. In the Foucauldian sense, the border proves to function as a complex set of apparatuses, a “dispositif” where the political and the physical intersect. More than any other kind of boundary, the border becomes a place where identities are continuously at play, both on the spot of human interaction and in the multiple locations where the data sets are processed.

Beyond network analysis, it can be useful to mobilize non-Euclidean perspectives to offer innovative interpretations of border complexity (Lévy 2008, Martin and Secor 2013). However, if control technologies have made very clear that the border was no longer “a continuous line demarcating the territory and sovereign authority of the state, enclosing its domain” (Walters 2006 p. 193), but rather a more complex, reticular and mobile set of filtering devices, they have not entirely denied its materiality. This paradox hints at the fact that the de/rebordering phenomena are not equivalent to processes of de/reterritorialization. If debordering chronologically coincided with a moderation of state power, it does not necessarily imply a disaffection with territorial stakes. To understand the relations between spatial processes and the possible existence of bounded categories within which they are deployed, reterritorialization is an essential hypothesis. The materiality of bordering may never have been all that important, since the debordering/rebordering processes have been made clear. For that reason, it could be said that contemporary boundaries evidence a hyper-territorialization process that is not at odds with the existence of multiple networks that endow space with topological metrics.

3. Ontology of the mobile border

The disjunction between the functions and shapes of borders illustrate the difficulties relational geography faces in making sense of boundaries. What kinds of limits can exist between spatial objects if the very notion of division is tough to unpack? If the border is everywhere, is it still a border? Answers to these questions are of critical political importance. As Balibar points out, “when borders cease to be purely exterior realities (...) [and] if they are

no longer on the *verge* of politics but (...) *objects*, or better said *things* within the space of politics itself” (Balibar 1996 p.374), what do they say of our capacity to organize ourselves collectively? Since territorial sovereignty provides the grounds for state-building and also for the kind of social contract that democracy requires, can democracy survive border disorder?

Early post-colonial approaches to border issues stressed the positive aspects of in-between-ness that borders tend to foster. For example, Price (2000) states that “by its very fluidity, the border constitutes a potential-laden space where old power relations can be reworked and perhaps made less oppressive” (Price 2000, p. 105). But the flexibility of in-between-ness may only be an illusion, as borderlands are regional constructs that surround a linear device. Since the linear dimension of political limits has not totally disappeared, there is still space for liminal conditions of sociality. These can be seen positively as places of multiple exchanges that benefit from the border as a resource without colliding with its separating function. As Raffestin puts it, “territoriality constitutes the stumbling block of any division” (Raffestin 1980 p.153), and indeed, border life generally illustrates that linear divides are conventions that allow for multiple interpretations on the field. The theoretical backgrounds for migration and mobilities analysis have had to be reframed to take into account this multiplication of border experiences and the fact that crossing can no longer simply be defined as a move between two or more points (Richardson 2013).

However, the personalization of borders through the individualization of boundary experiences and definitions may make it too difficult to design a collective social being. If the task of defining identity and alterity is left to the individual alone, he/she may not be able to endure the violence of the process: Borders having been invented to materialize state protection over individuals are becoming the place where the same people now find themselves exposed, without mediation, to the violence of globalization. In *The archeology of knowledge*, Foucault (1969) writes that there is anxiety in the thinking of the other, because thinking of discontinuity can be fearful. Border culture, if it exists (Amilhat Szary 2013b), endorses some very violent components, since the constant exposure to alterity, the experience of “differance” (Derrida 1972), leaves every individual facing a constant need to redefine his/her identity (or identities) with no certainty about the political outcome of this quest.

In a sense, the spatial diffusion of the border and its propensity for ubiquity make it impossible to differentiate an inside from an outside, and therefore to separate insiders from outsiders. Such confusion goes very much against the idea of territorial exceptionality and the possibility of policing these intermediary spaces, even in the perspective that Agamben (2005) adopts. In this latter view, resistance to a system built on such bordering frames can no longer reside in crossing lines, even by illegal means. The only way to pervert such a spatial organization, Razac (2013) suggests, would be to inhabit the line. Finding ways to spatialize the mobile border allows the condensing of an argument in order to denounce its conditions of existence. This idea is also at the core of a collective of artists’ project: Decolonizing Architecture (DAAR), based in Palestine, has produced an installation based on what they found within the space traced on the map by the Oslo agreements. Less than 1 mm on the official paper, the space covered by the line traced with a red pen measures more than 5 meters in reality but has no legal status (<http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/battir-3/>). Basing their project on the official line, they have found exceptional places, including a baroque migrant house, a personal enclave, and the unfinished parliament of Palestine, over which they place the line in a very powerful statement that denounces the partition of the land they claim.

Whether it originates in the proliferation of flows resulting from globalization (Sheller and Urry 2006) or in the wearing of mobile lenses to analyze them (Retaillé 2005, Büscher, Urry and Witchger 2011, Retaillé 2005, Söderström et al. 2013), the waning of a fixed and integrated border line calls for a renewal of border studies. The conceptualization of these changes should be able to account for the emerging dissociation and crystallization processes at work and shed light on their meaning. One could say the border is becoming a complex assemblage (Allen and Cochrane 2010, Anderson and McFarlane 2011), or a “socio-technical network” (Latour 2005), and consider it as a “collective entity associating objects, actors (migrant or border police), places and regulations” (Fourny 2013). However, we tend to think that this kind of interpretation erases the very politics of border places and bordering processes. Shifting the focus from institutions to practices by emphasizing the “vernacularisation” of borders (Perkins and Rumford 2013) does bring the individual back into borders, but not necessarily his subjectivity (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

The apparently oxymoronic expression “mobile border” was able to impose itself as a growing number of scholars were confirming that the contemporary border could only be grasped through its portativity, considering a change of focus towards the individual and his/her personalization of a mobile device (Cuttitta 2006, Weber 2006, Richardson 2013, Jones and Johnson 2014; Steinberg 2009, Agier 2013). Ongoing research is suggesting a renewed approach to border studies through the coining of a new term, that of “borderities”, built upon a close reading of M. Foucault’s writings and deriving from governmentality (Amilhat Szary and Giraut 2015). By “borderity” we mean any technology of spatial or socio-spatial division: Borderity could be defined as the governmentality of territorial limits. Although initially defined as a technology of power, borderity may also appear as a differentiated social and political quality. Examining how political subjects can be disabled and enabled, the proposed “borderities” approach illuminates the question of how borders can be the site of both power and counter-power.

An ontological perspective can help us formulate proposals to inaugurate possible forms of theorizing a “mobile border.” If ontology resides in Aristotle’s method of hierarchical classification of the world, it may seem paradoxical to mobilize it to propose a dynamic vision of spatial relations. It is, however, because ontology allows us to question the physics and metaphysics in combination, that it answers some of the philosophical questions raised by the recourse to topologies. But any perspective that allows both the subject and the object to be taken into account had, up until recently, focused on a very stable state of being. A mobile ontology would therefore allow time and instability to be instilled into the analysis of borders. This could be the only way to underscore the fact that any kind of place where an object and a subject are to be thought together is a theater of unequal relations and domination processes.

Conclusion

Linear borders have not disappeared, although it has been made clear that their linearity represents only one aspect of their complex definition. The diversification of the forms and functions of borders helps us to grasp the need for elaborating strong yet nuanced proposals to think spatial boundaries and social divides, none of which has been erased by the de/rebordering processes. Understanding contemporary borders and the implications of their penetration into many aspects of our social, spatial and political relations indeed requires a strong epistemological effort. Only such an effort can allow us to escape the traditional and tautological relationship between territory, state and borders that always defines one term with another and thereby forecloses the possibility of questioning the politics of mobile limits.

The complexity of contemporary borders imposes that the first boundaries to be crossed to understand them be those of our own academic fields of activity. Border studies are developing as a multidisciplinary field of knowledge, bringing political geography together not only with other social sciences but also with many other cognitive approaches. Because this is never easy, some mediation may be called for, such as the development of experimental work with artists. This was at the core of the project undertaken by the French collective which gave itself the name of “antiAtlas of borders” (<http://www.antiatlas.net/en/>). The potential of art-science explorations certainly resides in their call for “un-discipline”, since “the inscription of research within specialized disciplines may make invalid or unthinkable questioning what could precisely come out of the refusal of objects and methods that disciplines acknowledge” (Loty 2005; p. 252, quoted by Mekdijan and al. 2014). Putting border thinking at this crossroads makes borders, more than ever, important laboratories to evidence the evolutions of both spatial thinking and contemporary political transformations (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

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