

Borders and boundaries: making visible what divides

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Borders and Boundaries: Making Visible What Divides

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Kerry Goettlich and Jordan Branch

Abstract

The concepts of ‘borders’ and ‘boundaries’ are in some sense inherently central to International Relations (IR), but historical IR is an area of the discipline where comparatively little work has been done which takes as its primary goal the analysis of ‘borders’ or ‘boundaries’. In this chapter we give an overview of IR scholarship which intersects with the history of borders, dividing it into two categories: first, historical IR which engages with borders and boundaries, and second, a broader range of IR work on borders and boundaries which either has a historical component or could benefit from having one. In a final section, we put forward some suggestions for future research, highlighting in particular some ways of dealing with Eurocentrism in historical IR’s coverage of the topic.

Borders and Boundaries

Kerry Goettlich and Jordan Branch

The concepts of ‘borders’ and ‘boundaries’ are in some sense inherently central to International Relations (IR). According to one IR textbook, for example, if there is anything that defines the discipline’s object of analysis, it might be summed up in the phrase ‘cross-border transactions’ (Brown and Ainley, 2009: 7). Studying IR, then, at some level, presupposes an understanding of borders. Within IR, many different perspectives have been developed towards this end, from the neo-liberal view of borders as a potential institution for reducing transaction costs (Simmons, 2005) to constructivist analyses of the norm of territorial integrity (Zacher, 2001) to studies by scholars associated with post-structuralism on how borders are ‘infused through bodies and diffused across society and everyday life’ (Vaughan-Williams, 2009).

The terms ‘border’ and ‘boundary’, as well as related concepts such as ‘frontier’ and ‘territory’, are difficult to define and have shifted in meaning over time and space. Indeed, among geographers, the meanings of such terms in different languages and traditions have been subject to debate (Juricek 1966 ; Kristof 1959; Amhilat Szary 2015). When scholars have made explicit distinctions, these often have to do with, for example, the difference between formal and informal institutions, or the distinction between wide ‘borderland’ areas and precisely demarcated borderlines. Most IR scholarship reviewed in this chapter, however, does not make a clear distinction between ‘border’ and ‘boundary’. We follow this usage, treating them here as interchangeable terms referring to the spatial limits of polities. Similarly, scholars have adopted differing approaches to ‘territory’ and ‘territoriality’. A range of IR scholars adopt Robert Sack’s (1986) analytical notion of territoriality as an attempt to define and control an area, while Stuart Elden’s (2013) genealogical and conceptual-historical approach to the emergence of the term ‘territory’ itself has also been influential.

Historical IR is an area of the discipline where comparatively little work has been done which takes as its primary goal the analysis of ‘borders’ or ‘boundaries’ *per se*, either in terms of what those concepts have meant in the past, or in terms of what has happened on borderlines or in the spaces between polities. That said, there is plenty of IR scholarship which, in one

way or another, engages with the history of borders and boundaries, as well as scholarship in other disciplines on the history of borders which IR has made use of. This chapter provides a brief overview of this work, approaching the topic from two different angles. First, we review historical IR scholarship which has been concerned with changes over long periods of time in the international system, which engages in one way or another with the character and role of borders and boundaries. Second, we explore a number of themes in IR research on territory and borders more generally in which scholars either draw on historical work or could fruitfully do so. In the final section, we point out some challenges in working with the topic which we suggest historical IR should consider, as well as opportunities for future research.

Modernity and Borders

While the scope of IR as a discipline is difficult to define in its early decades, interest in the history of borders emerged in geopolitical writings somewhere around the turn of the twentieth century. This occurred within a global context where a large number of boundaries, particularly across the colonized world, were being rapidly drawn, or redrawn in new ways. A major part of what concerned scholars at that time was the relationship between more and less ‘civilized’ societies, a distinction many of them thought could explain the disappearance of vague frontier zones and the appearance of linear borders. Friedrich Ratzel argued that ‘civilized’ societies had replaced wide frontiers and ‘no man’s lands’ with thinner and more fixed borders because they had learned to use their land more efficiently and thus valued it more highly (see Febvre, 1973). This thesis, along with much of Ratzel’s work, was brought to English-speaking scholarship by American geographer Ellen Semple (1907) and had a significant impact on the way borders have been seen in historical perspective. In a similar vein, former Viceroy of India Lord Curzon’s (1907) lecture on *Frontiers* continues to be influential. In the lecture, Curzon applauded what he considered progress in Western empires’ political and technical practices of delimiting and demarcating borders, arguing that recent advances held out promise for a more peaceful world.

For the most part, such discussions were not of central concern to IR as it became a more distinct discipline later in the twentieth century. For example, an article by Leo Gross (1948), which played an important role in defining the 1648 Peace of Westphalia as a central historical benchmark for IR, says nothing explicitly about ‘borders’ or ‘boundaries’ between

states. More important for Gross was the establishment of sovereign states recognizing no superior authority, with the geographical nature of polities, territorial or otherwise, taking on background significance at most. One exception to this was John Herz (1957), who argued that the development of nuclear weapons would result in a growing permeability of ‘the political atom, the nation-state’. This prediction rested on the basis that the territorial state originated in Europe’s gunpowder revolution, in which castles could no longer provide sufficient protection for political communities and had to be replaced by large systems of fortifications surrounding a territory. The later invention of airpower, and then the atomic bomb, however, mitigated and would eventually make irrelevant the ‘hard shell’ that could be provided by fortification, and therefore potentially the territorial state itself.

Herz later retracted the prediction, but the basic idea remained of looking to the geographical organization of international politics, as it has historically changed in form over the *longue durée*, in order to understand seismic shifts occurring in the contemporary world. After 1979, when Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics* was published, this became increasingly important for many scholars criticizing neorealism for its inability to explain systemic change, which became an even more central concern with the end of the Cold War and increasing interest in globalization. This way of coming at the history of borders in international relations is best exemplified by John Ruggie’s (1993) article, ‘Territoriality and Beyond’. For Ruggie, one of the main problems with neorealism was that it denied that differentiation among units was important for international relations. On the contrary, Ruggie argued for an ‘epochal study of rule’, for which ‘modes of differentiation are nothing less than the focus’. In this long-term historical perspective, ‘the distinctive feature of the modern system of rule is that it has differentiated its subject collectivity into territorially defined, fixed, and mutually exclusive enclaves of legitimate dominion’ (Ruggie, 1993: 151-152). In this way, Ruggie hoped to develop a vocabulary for understanding contemporary changes associated with globalization.

In making this argument, Ruggie put exclusive territoriality, and by extension, certain kinds of borders, at the center of what defined modernity for international politics, setting a lasting agenda for historical IR scholars. The article offered no ‘theory’ of this transformation, but outlined a number of European historical dynamics that worked in its favor, perhaps the most distinctive of which it called change in ‘social epistemes’. By this was meant certain new ways of understanding the world, particularly the single-point perspective in European art,

which made possible ‘a view of society as a collection of atomistic and autonomous bodies-in-motion in a field of forces energized solely by scarcity and ambition’ (Ruggie, 1993: 157-158). This metaphysical shift led on the one hand to the territorialization of political authority and on the other, paradoxically, to its ‘unraveling’, by necessitating an extraterritorial institution of diplomacy, and eventually, multilateralism. In order to conceptualize the impact of social epistemes on sovereignty, Ruggie relied on the image of ‘disjoint’, or completely interlocking territorial spaces, implying at least an idea of linear borders and the absence of zonal frontiers.

Beginning in the 1990s, then, a body of IR literature developed which was inspired by the kinds of questions Ruggie had been asking, within which the history of borders played a role in various ways. Its coherence around any single question should not be overstated, but the basic concern was the way in which international systems, almost exclusively European, have changed over the course of centuries. For Hendrik Spruyt (1994) the question was how the sovereign state in Europe eliminated competing types of polities which had also grown out of increased commercial activity after 1000. In contrast to accounts from historical sociology such as that of Charles Tilly (1992), which stressed the war-making ability of the sovereign state, Spruyt drew attention to its organizational capacity, which he argued was better suited to take advantage of growing trade. Alternately, from a Marxist perspective, Benno Teschke (2003) argued for a focus on a shift from feudal to capitalist property relations in understanding modern sovereignty.

Changing social epistemes, or political ideas, also provided a basis for scholarship on systemic change, as part of the turn to constructivism which IR was undergoing more broadly (Philpott, 2001; Hall, 1999). Reus-Smit (1999), in particular, while ultimately interested in the roots of multilateralism more than territorial sovereignty, took seriously Ruggie’s identification of territorial borders as an important part of the modern system of sovereign states. Contrary to many other accounts, Reus-Smit argued that the geographical extension of sovereignty was not specified until the 1713 Peace of Utrecht, which eliminated any possible dynastic union between the crowns of France and Spain.

Furthermore, some have taken seriously the problems Ruggie raised for understanding borders across history without completely adopting his methodological perspective (e.g., Larkins, 2010; Strandsbjerg, 2010). For example, some scholars interested in the origins of

modern territoriality have drawn on a genealogical approach, in which concepts such as sovereignty and territory have no stable, final meaning, which can be ‘bundled’ and ‘unbundled’, as Ruggie had put it. Jens Bartelson (1995) conducts a genealogy of sovereignty, not without implications for the spatial boundaries of the concept, in which political authority was gradually associated with territorial space within legal contestations between the Holy Roman Empire, the Roman Church, and the various principalities of Christendom. The trend is exemplified in a 1313 Papal Bull, which gave legitimacy to the phrase ‘*rex in regno suo est imperator* [the king is emperor in his kingdom], where *regno* now had acquired an unequivocal territorial signification’ (Bartelson, 1995: 99). Yet the border itself becomes more important in the ‘Classical Age’ after the Renaissance, when it comes to be imagined as a physical separation between states, reflecting an emerging distinction between domestic and foreign policy. Stuart Elden’s (2013) genealogical study *The Birth of Territory* is also relevant here, as there is significant overlap in substance, although it is not primarily written for an IR audience. Elden sees a recognizable concept of territory in the term *territorium*, as it was adapted from Roman law in the fourteenth century, and, like Bartelson, gives great importance to the formulation of the idea of *rex in regno suo est imperator*. Also similarly to Bartelson, Elden sees a separate important shift occurring in the seventeenth century, but this time through the work of Gottfried Leibniz, which explicitly tied sovereignty and territory together.

The work in IR that has been done on the history of territorial sovereignty and the state system has important implications for the study of borders in historical IR. Jordan Branch’s study of the role of cartography in the origins of territorial sovereignty in Europe has foregrounded the question of how political authority has been defined, and of when and how a territorial definition became predominant and excluded other possibilities (Branch, 2014). Even in the Peace of Utrecht, authority in Europe continued to be specified in treaties by lists of places, jurisdictions, and objects, rather than by describing the course of a borderline, while at the same time European empires in the Americas had long been using linear borders.

Many questions yet remain to be answered arising from historical IR’s longstanding interest in the way in which international politics came to be dominated by the fragmentation of political space into interlocking, or, as Ruggie put it, ‘disjoint’ territories. While many different explanations exist for the emergence of territorial sovereignty in Europe, there is much room for new interpretations of the apparent universalization of linear borders

worldwide. It may be tempting to explain the latter in terms of the ‘expansion’ of Europe or of an already existing international society to the rest of the world through imperialism (e.g., Bull and Watson 1984). Western imperialism is undoubtedly part of the answer, but this explanation is rarely supported with careful empirical study. The fact that until the late nineteenth century European empires throughout the Eastern Hemisphere used a variety of different terms in negotiating over space with non-Western polities, rather than purely linear borders, suggests the process was not so simple. As Kerry Goettlich (2018b) has argued, the history of linear borders is related to, but distinct from the history of territorial sovereignty, with linear borders only becoming consistently applied in practice globally starting in the late nineteenth century. The long-term sociological process of rationalization, or the privileging of certain forms of quantifiable, secular, ‘scientific’ knowledge, offers one potential explanation for the linearization of borders which may avoid some of the difficulties of existing theories.

Related Discussions in IR

Beyond these (relatively few) explicitly historical interrogations of borders and boundaries, IR scholarship across a number of related issues could be brought into productive conversation with historical work.

For example, there is an extensive literature on territorial conflict in IR. This has relied on a variety of methodological approaches and empirical strategies, but it has largely focused on contemporary conflicts or recent history—the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (See Toft 2014 for a useful review.) For example, quantitative cross-national studies have posited a number of causal drivers and mechanisms to account for why some disputed territories result in violent conflict (e.g., Huth, 1996) or why some conflicts have led to changes in the location of state borders (e.g., Goertz and Diehl, 1992). Although some more qualitative studies have problematized the historical nature of boundaries (e.g., Lustick, 1993), most studies of territorial conflict have taken the linear and territorial character of state boundaries as unproblematic and have instead focused on how the location of those boundaries results from or leads to conflict. In other words, they have largely ignored Ruggie’s point about the importance of change in the mode of differentiation. Given the historical period that much of this literature works on, the approach taken may be analytically useful and unproblematic. As

noted above, even those studies that put the emergence of state territoriality (and linear boundaries) at a late date tend to mark the early nineteenth century as an important point of consolidation. Yet it could still be useful for this discussion of territorial conflict to note the historical emergence of boundaries, especially for discussions of the possibility change in the dynamics of territorial conflict in the face of changing borders today. Some studies have begun down this path, focusing on issues around the role of historical boundaries in conflict (e.g., Carter and Goemans, 2011; Abramson and Carter, 2016).

Studies of other border-related issues could see similar benefits, such as the debate around the usefulness of territorial partition for ameliorating ethnic conflict (e.g., Kaufmann, 1996; Sambanis, 2000; Chapman and Roeder, 2007; among others). Again, this literature largely takes the type of division between polities as given and then asks about drawing new borders as a way to solve conflict—rather than how new or contested borders can lead to conflict. This also has been a productive discussion when applied to the contemporary international system, defined fundamentally by territorial borders, but might also be usefully expanded to think through diverse *forms* of partition rather than merely its presence. There are definitely opportunities for further theory development and historical empirical work here. A similar point applies to the literature on territorial indivisibility—the way in which certain spaces appear to be impossible to divide with a traditional boundary and how that makes them persistent sources of conflict (e.g., Goddard, 2010; Hassner, 2009; Toft, 2003). The category of indivisibility itself is constituted by the hegemony of linear division in today’s international system.

Finally, research on twentieth-century transformations in what borders mean and how likely they are to be altered has demonstrated change over time *within* the framework of linear boundaries. Research has been done in this vein in IR at least since the collapse of Western colonialism in the late twentieth century raised questions of what would and should become of borders left behind by the imperial powers, and what the consequences of maintaining or altering them would be. Many anti-colonial politicians at the time, such as Kwame Nkrumah (1963: 7), criticized existing borders as relics of the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 which had to be rejected. The historical logic often taken from this by IR was that African borders, unlike European borders, ‘are not the walls and moats of history... whose traces mark the military conflicts and diplomatic compromises of the nation’s past’, but instead dangerously cut across ‘tribal geography’, due to the geographically ill-informed nature of the ‘colonial

accident' (Zartman, 1965). At the same time, some scholars contested these generalizations, such as Saadia Touval (1966), who argued that Africans' 'relationships with Europeans played a role in the process' of dividing up the continent.

Different understandings of the history of colonial borders are of great importance for wider debates on sovereignty and statehood in the Global South. Because decolonization had essentially been a legal formality without socioeconomic substance, the colonial borders left intact gave little basis on which to build stable national communities (Jackson and Rosberg, 1982). This explained, as Jackson (1990) later put it, the problem of 'quasi-states', or states maintained externally by an international society that treated them as sovereign despite being overrun internally with civil war and corruption. Jeffrey Herbst (1989), while mainly agreeing on the characterization of the problem, argues that the discarding of any requirement of effective control in deciding boundaries had already occurred long ago in the colonial period, through the concept of the protectorate. It was this legal fiction, which bears some similarity to Jackson's concept of the 'quasi-state', that had enabled the colonial powers to avoid war. The impossibility of drawing any 'natural' borders in Africa is what led the colonial powers to that system, just as it encouraged African leaders to maintain the same borders after decolonization. Siba Grovogui (1996), however, entirely rejects Jackson's view that the misfortunes of African states are mostly due to the fact that 'Western powers have been unduly charitable to quasi states and their leaders by granting full sovereign immunity', drawing attention instead to the role of continued Western interventions of many kinds, including their efforts in favour of maintaining colonial boundaries.

Building on existing work on the persistence of colonial borders, IR scholars' interest in the border-drawing principle of *uti possidetis*, from international law, increased after the breakup of the USSR and Yugoslavia. While in Roman law the principle originally referred to favouring the actual possessor of an item in a property dispute, literally meaning 'as you possess', in modern international law it has come to mean adopting former administrative borders as new international borders in cases of decolonization or state collapse. Because, as some argued, it had been applied historically in the decolonization of Latin America and Africa, it should also be applied in the collapse of communist states. Some scholars of international law disputed this in terms of its consequences of potentially encouraging separatism or preventing alternative boundaries from being considered which might be better suited to local conditions (Ratner, 1996). Others noted that it rested on a questionable

interpretation of the history of post-colonial border-drawing, pointing out that *uti possidetis* was not actually historically applied as often or considered as binding as proponents hold (Lalonde, 2002).

For many IR scholars, however, the increasingly common practice of respecting inherited boundaries pointed towards changes in international norms on the possession of territory. Zacher (2001) noted that changes to the boundaries of states have become less frequent, especially after the middle of the twentieth century. He explains this by reference to an increasingly predominant ‘territorial integrity norm,’ which holds that border changes through force are no longer legitimate. In addition to analysing the legal principle of *uti possidetis* as a norm, this argument also drew on scholarship detailing the historical abolition since the First World War of a previously existing principle in international law entitling states to sovereignty over any territory successfully captured in war (Korman, 1996). Other authors have taken this discussion one step further, noting the consequences of operating in a world where borders are so rarely changed for issues ranging from state strength (Atzili, 2012) to the conquest and ‘death’ of states (Fazal, 2007). These debates can help foreground the ways in which linear borders can be transformed in function and meaning even as they persist in their fundamental definition.

All of these show the promise of fruitful research, if we can bring historical IR work on territory, boundaries, and their emergence into conversation with literature on territorial conflict, boundary disputes, and secessionism today. Of course, even within historical IR, there are numerous questions about the emergence of linear borders which remain to be asked, and challenges and opportunities for future research, explored next.

Challenges and Opportunities

One of the main challenges existing in scholarship on the history of borders and boundaries is Eurocentrism. This is especially evident in the fact that many of the most cited pieces of work on the origins and history of the state system deal exclusively with Europe. Others do engage with other regions, but primarily insofar as they received ideas, practices, and institutions already developed in Europe, which could also be considered problematic (Chakrabarty, 2000). Eurocentrism is not just a normative problem in that it involves treating the history of

some people and places as *a priori* more important than others, but it is also a problem for a discipline such as IR which claims to have global significance and is not meant to be European area studies.

There has been work in IR, and particularly in historical IR, which looks beyond the West for important features of international politics, sees the West and the non-West as co-constitutive, and questions and decentres the use of theories developed with Europe in mind as universal theories. Yet there remains very little work challenging the idea that the kind of borders taken for granted as universal today originated in the particular experience of Europe, with a few exceptions. IR scholars in particular who have looked at the role of abstract space in cartography and modes of representation have pointed to the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas and other examples of European empires using linear borders to divide up colonial territories centuries before this was a common practice within Europe (Branch, 2014: 100-119; Larkins, 2010: 169-194; Strandsbjerg, 2010: 92-110). Aside from cartography, different property regimes set up by imperial powers and settler colonists also played a role in encouraging the surveying and demarcation of these borders on the ground (Goettlich, 2018a). Questions remain, however, surrounding the potential role of colonized peoples in the process of linearizing borders, as well as the ways in which border ideas and practices travel between imperial peripheries and centres.

A different way to approach a non-Eurocentric history of borders and boundaries is suggested by historian Peter Perdue's (1998) observation that during the seventeenth century, 'as the result of mutual contacts, the major Eurasian states negotiated fixed, linear borders'. In particular, this refers to the 1639 Ottoman-Persian Treaty of Zuhab, the 1689 Chinese-Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk, and the 1699 Habsburg-Ottoman Treaty of Karlowitz. Perdue raises many questions for scholars of historical IR interested in borders and boundaries: to what extent were the logics of these distant but roughly similarly timed border treaties linked to each other? To what extent were state authorities aware of far-away changes in boundary policies? To what extent might these treaties, which predated most comparable institutions within Western Europe, have affected the latter?

The issue of language differences, however, means that Eurocentrism is no easy problem to solve. Differences among 'Western' languages and traditions create enough confusion on their own even when they have long been debated by scholars. Consider, for example, the

multiple and contradictory understandings of the term ‘frontier’ and its Romance-language cognates, which can mean either a more or less well-defined boundary or specifically the opposite of that, a wide borderland area (Juricek 1966). But there is much work ahead, especially where translation issues have not been sufficiently addressed. As Amanda Cheney (2017) has pointed out, for example, the use of the ambiguous term ‘suzerainty’ to express in English the status of Tibet before the 20th century has hindered scholarly attempts to understand how Tibet became part of the Chinese state. Future research, then, might focus in a similar way on how terms such as ‘boundary’ and ‘frontier’ have been used or misused to translate historical institutions and practices.

A second challenge is suggested by the ambiguous relationship between the concepts of borders and boundaries, the aspects of borders and boundaries which exceed the simple cartographic appearance of lines, and the kinds of geographical extremities of historical polities which stretch the definitions of ‘border’ and ‘boundary’. Most polities in human history have not specified their boundaries in the linear way which is routine among states today, and such frontiers should not be ignored in historical IR. Even when maps of historical polities, made contemporaneously or more recently, portray evenly controlled territory and fixed boundaries, political and legal geographies were often more complex, layered, and fluid, a point which historians such as Lauren Benton (2010) stress. Because linear borders are often seen as a product of European history, this challenge is intimately related to Eurocentrism. IR scholars should avoid reading history only to find phenomena that are familiar to a Eurocentric perspective. Doing so could result in missed opportunities; studying spatial ideas, practices, and institutions in historical contexts where linear borders were less commonplace could be useful for understanding the role of borders more generally in geopolitics. For example, Burak Kadercan (2017) looks at the ways in which the Ottoman Empire used different kinds of more or less ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ borders for different ends and with different results.

A further opportunity for future study is in the lack of a coherent literature or conversation around the history of borders and boundaries, particularly in IR. As suggested above, while there is plenty of literature on borders and boundaries generally in IR, this has been less the case in specifically historically-oriented IR, and the topic has generally tended to be treated via one or another related areas, such as sovereignty or the state system. One way to meet this challenge would be to treat it as a matter of taking stock of the large amount of work that

historians have done on borders and boundaries, and synthesizing or bringing them to bear on one another. Particularly useful in-depth historical studies include Thongchai Winichakul's (1994) work on the evolving territoriality of Siam within its imperial encounter with Britain and France, as well as Peter Sahlins' (1989) study of the French-Spanish border, focusing on dynamics among inhabitants of the frontier and their relations with state officials. Part of this work of making sense of the bigger picture has been done by historians themselves (Maier, 2017; Benton, 2010). But IR, we think, has much potential to contribute to the historical study of borders and boundaries, as an area of inquiry explicitly focused on the international.

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