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Sealing Borders? Rethinking Border Studies in Hard Times

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Abstract

This working paper is based on the keynote lecture held at the International Conference “B/ORDERS IN MOTION. Current Challenges and Future Perspectives” on November 15, 2018. The talk starts with a couple of snapshots from developments and conflicts in the Mediterranean in the summer of 2018 in order to conjure up the high stakes of border studies today. The attempt to seal the maritime border performed in particular by the Italian government is then discussed within a global framework and against the background of recent developments in (critical) border studies. The point is made that in order to understand even the most exclusionary border policies and regimes, there is a need to take into consideration a multiplicity of heterogeneous bordering devices which prompt and shape wider transformations of political, social, and economic orders. The talk closes with an outline from this point of view of some of the main challenges for border studies in Europe and beyond emerging from the current conjuncture.



Sealing Borders? Rethinking Border Studies in Hard Times

Keynote lecture, held on November 15, 2018.

International Conference “B/ORDERS IN MOTION. Current Challenges and Future Perspectives”, European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) and Collegium Polonicum, Ślubice, November 15-17, 2018.

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Allow me to start my talk by warmly thanking the organizers of this timely and challenging conference for inviting me and for giving me the privilege to deliver this keynote speech at the very beginning of our deliberations. This is not the first time I come to Frankfurt (Oder). In the 1990s, I spent quite a lot of time in Berlin, and I remember coming a couple of times along with a friend, Helmut Dietrich, who was pursuing a militant investigation of the shifts and transformations of the border regime between Germany and Poland in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of really existing socialism on behalf of the “Forschungsgesellschaft Flucht und Migration” (FFM). A notebook published by FFM in 1995, *Polen. Vor den Toren der Festung Europa* (“Poland. At the Gateways of Fortress Europe”), was a first outcome of that investigation.

At that time, long before Poland’s signature and implementation of the Schengen Agreement (respectively in 2003 and 2007), its border with Germany was a site of dramatic conflicts and intense experimentation with technical, administrative, and legal devices doomed to proliferate at the “external frontiers” of the EU (as well as within and beyond the European space) in the following years. The notion of “third safe country” was for instance tested between the two banks of the Oder, while the dynamic of “repatriation agreements” spurred a “domino effect” that involved other borders and other countries further to the East, foreshadowing what has been widely described in the last fifteen years as a process of externalization of border control. More-

over, the cooperation between the German and the Polish border guard established an influential framework of exchange and training that led to the refinement of traditional tools and to the invention of new ones to entrench what the French philosopher Grégoire Chamayou (2012) calls “cynegetic power” – which means the specific technologies of power deployed in hunting and chasing illegalized migrants.

The situation at the border between Germany and Poland, and more specifically in the cross-border region of Frankfurt (Oder) and Ślubice, may be completely different today, and I am eager to learn more about that in the next couple of days. But it was important for me to hark back to the 1990s, since I am convinced that the conflicts and tensions surrounding the German-Polish border at that time played a really important (and somehow forgotten) role in spurring European developments in the following years. Moreover, the encounter with that particular border at that particular moment, as well as the research of Helmut Dietrich that I have just mentioned, was very important for my own work on the topic. Borders were definitely not part of my own academic and even political training in the 1980s. And I think this was a generational experience for people like me, who grew up in the framework of the Cold War in Western Europe. Borders were really nothing more than lines drawn on a map; it could be exciting for us as children to cross an international boundary (mostly the one between Italy and France in my case) and to try to spot the differences in the traffic

signs, in currencies, or in the restaurant menus. But borders, to quote from the title of our conference, were definitely not “in motion.” They were rather frozen and congealed, and even the ones among us who, like myself, had a rebellious spirit and were eagerly looking for a critical approach to the “present state of things” tended to take for granted the partitions inscribed by borders onto maps, lands, and minds. What we call *border studies* today, the thrilling and diverse field of research nurtured by anthropology and geography, history and political theory, legal studies and sociology (to mention just a few relevant disciplines), was simply inconceivable in Western Europe at that time.

Needless to say, the situation was quite different elsewhere. Just think of the U.S., where the landmark book by Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera*, was for instance published in 1987. The salience and violence of borders had never vanished in the mind and experience of people living in the former colonial world, where such a dramatic re-drawing of borders as the partition of the Indian subcontinent is simply a particularly catastrophic instance of border conflicts and wars that proliferated in many parts of the world after World War II. But in Western Europe, it was different. Borders were set in motion only at the end of the 1980s, at first with the sense of liberation that is always connected with the smashing of a wall. This sense of liberation was somehow prolonged in the following years by new movements across what had been the Iron Curtain, while the establishment of a “European citizenship” by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty was widely interpreted by scholars, activists, and significant sections of European societies as a “post-national” virtuality, a potentiality ultimately doomed to prompt a vanishing or at least a profound democratization of borders. But borders were in motion also in a different sense, as the Yugoslavian Wars (a real “European civil war,” considering the roles played by several European nation-states and the inability of the EU to stop

the slaughter) would demonstrate since 1991 in a shattering way. And the steady enlargement of both the Schengen zone and the EU, while allowing new experiences of border crossing in Europe, also implied the establishment (and mobility) of new borders – the “external frontiers” of the EU that once ran between Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice. Manhunts at the “external frontiers,” on land and at sea, have reactivated the violence that is constitutive of the very concept of the border in yet another dreadful way – turning, for instance, the Mediterranean sea into a huge graveyard.

The border became for me an inescapable topic precisely in the early 1990s, more or less around the time I first visited Frankfurt (Oder). Italy was going through an accelerated “migratory transition,” which turned within a decade a traditional country of emigration into a country of transit and eventually of immigration (while there is a need to stress that it never really ceased to be a country of emigration, as a quick visit to Berlin these days would for instance amply demonstrate). In the summer of 1993, there were clashes and riots after an attempted pogrom against migrants in the city where I was living at the time, the port city of Genoa. I suddenly realized, to put it quickly, that the city was not “white” anymore, that new bodies, languages, histories were transforming and disputing the urban space. I definitely wanted to side with migrants, but my political friends and I, coming from the experience of the Italian social movements of the late 1970s and 1980s, simply lacked the conceptual tools to tackle the challenge of migration. It was the encounter with migrants (basically from Senegal and Morocco in Genoa at that time) that allowed us to grasp this lack – and to start learning.

The encounter with migrants was at the same time an encounter with borders – with the amazing stories of border crossings that they told us, but also with the multiplicity of boundaries they had to confront in their daily experience in the

city: linguistic and cultural boundaries in the streets, bars, and shops; legal boundaries cutting across their statuses; urban divides engineered and entrenched by the real estate market; processes of segmentation of the labor market and citizenship. This was my first experience with the processes of proliferation, heterogenization, and what Vila (2000) called the *reinforcement* of borders that would later come to figure prominently in my own research agenda. And it was in those days that I further learned to critically analyze those processes from the angle of the primacy of practices of *border crossing*. The proliferation of borders in Genoa in the 1990s was indeed met by a proliferation of border struggles, which led me to follow the lead of Étienne Balibar (1992) – who had just started a rigorous and engaging theoretical politicization of the concept of the border – and to begin to forge an understanding of the border as a field of tension (or, as I sometimes like to say playing with classical references, not as a thing but as a set of social relations mediated by things).

The conceptual dyad “border reinforcement” and “border crossing” which I just foreshadowed and which I take from the work of the Argentinian sociologist Pablo Vila (2000), is quite widespread in border studies. And it provides us with a useful framework to map the development of the field over the last couple of decades. In a way, one can say that an emphasis on one of the two poles of the dyad characterizes different strands within the field, which can be traced back to the topics that compose its research agenda. Border crossing is for instance prominent in studies of transboundary regionalism, particularly although not exclusively in Europe, where an emphasis on reconciliation, cooperation, and coexistence leads to displace the image of the border as a wall and to privilege the one of a bridge. Research on processes of hybridization or creolization of border identities, at the macro as well as at the micro level, provides further examples of an analysis of border dynamics primarily concerned with border crossing. At the opposite end

of the field, a privileged focus on border reinforcement characterizes studies of the securitization of border control (including the growing use of biometric and digital technologies), the proliferation of walls, fences, and detention facilities across diverse geographical scales, and more generally the multiple functions of exclusion performed by borders in particular with respect to migrants and refugees. This focus on border reinforcement remains prevalent even in such brilliant analyses of securitization as the one recently proposed by Matthew Longo (2017) in the U.S., who effectively stresses the mobility of borders emphasizing the fact that modern borders “cannot merely be tall” (with great walls, soaring drones, and high towers) – “they must also be ‘wide’ and ‘layered’”.

This is just a very schematic sketch of the field of border studies, I know. And I have overdramatized a bit the opposition between border crossing and border reinforcement in order to shed light on the peculiarity of the approach that I have been developing over the last years, in particular in the book I wrote with Brett Neilson (2013), *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. To put it shortly, what matters for us in that conceptual dyad is precisely the *tension* between the two poles, which leads us to consider the border as always *in motion*, while at the same time allowing us to take the border as an epistemic viewpoint on a whole set of wider dynamics and transformations. Focusing our analysis on *bordering* processes and registering the shifts in the study of borders signaled by the widespread use of such terms as *borderscapes* and *borderlands*, we attempt to unearth the conflicts and tensions that destabilize the fixity of any border, even when it takes the intimidating and solid form of a wall. And indeed, to refer again to the title of our conference, we stress the need and productivity of a gaze *from the border* on the transformations of a multiplicity of *orders* – within and beyond the political territory that the border circumscribes in a seemingly firm way. At the end of the

day, it is precisely the powerful tensions undermining the classical, European notions of territory and territoriality in a global age that we have started to investigate in *Border as Method* and that we further analyze in our new book, *The Politics of Operations. Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (2019). The mention of capitalism in the subtitle of the latter work makes explicit a theoretical concern already underlying our engagement with borders, which was among other things an attempt to develop an often neglected critique of the political economy of borders besides the well-established critique of borders from a legal and political point of view.

Cutting through the field of border studies, Brett Neilson and I have always remained faithful to the original source of our interest in the topic. A profound indignation in face of the violence that shapes borders' operations and border-scapes in many parts of the world, including the Mediterranean sea and the Pacific zone north of Australia, has been spurring our research work even in its more abstract or historical moments. Whereas we share the political commitment of critical border scholars who work on such topics as deportation and camps, securitization and the tightening of border controls against migrants and refugees, we take nonetheless a critical distance from the conceptual emphasis on *exclusion* that often prevails in that field. We are in fact convinced that such an emphasis paradoxically leads to validate and reinforce a crucial aspect of what Nicholas De Genova (2013) calls the "spectacle of the border" – which means the clear-cut divide between the inside (the collectivity of the "included") and the outside (the "excluded") – that is precisely what is increasingly placed under duress today by a set of heterogeneous processes. Focusing the analysis on such processes (from the turbulence of contemporary migration to the externalization of border control, to mention just two of them) requires a critical awareness of the limits of such a conceptual binary as inclusion/exclusion. It is from this point of view that we propose to

work with the notion of differential and hierarchical inclusion.

This is a notion that in a way incorporates the mobility of borders and invites to analyze even the most violent (and "necropolitical") manifestations of the border from the angle of the transformations of codes of "inclusion" that are reshaping societies, political systems, legal orders, economic relations, and cultures in many parts of the world. While the geopolitical border remains crucial in such an analysis, the conceptual shift that we propose also requires a displacement of the exclusive focus on it that characterizes many critical border studies and a careful investigation of the multiple connections as well as disconnections between the operations of the geopolitical border and the heterogeneous boundaries that crisscross, shape, and organize the different "orders" that I have just mentioned. This is a move that we share with several critical scholars, who have argued for instance in recent years for a shift of attention from deportation to "deportability" (De Genova and Peutz 2010) – which means from the institutions and procedures that perform the removal of illegalized migrants from the bounded space of the state to the spread across that very space of a bundle of boundaries inscribed onto the bodies and minds of "immanent outsiders" (Anne McNevin 2011) and "illegal citizens" (Enrica Rigo 2011). Scholars who work with the notion of "border regime," as for instance the *kritnet* research network in the German speaking world (see Hess and Kasperek 2010), have further advanced our critical understanding of the mobility of borders, stressing the dynamic nature of border control, its working through a multiplicity of actors, places, and "discourses" as well as combining territorialization and deterritorialization. What these and other scholars furthermore share is an emphasis on what is often defined in terms of a *primacy of movement and mobility* (De Genova et al. 2015) that provides a kind of methodological key to the analysis of borders, border struggles, and border regimes.

“Are borders opening or closing?”, David Newman asked in an influential article in 2006 (“The Lines that Continue to Separate Us”, 2006: 7). You may guess by now that from my point of view, such a question was basically misleading. “In our so-called borderless world,” Newman ironically contended opening his literature review of border studies, “there is no business like border business” (Newman 2006: 2). I took this booming of “border business,” independently of the need to critically analyze and assess its outcomes, as a sign of the growing awareness that far from bringing about a “borderless world”, what we call globalization is characterized, shaped, and driven by a proliferation (as well as by deep transformations) of borders. Once this point had been made, and once the border had been taken not merely as a topic of investigation but also as an epistemic viewpoint on actually existing global processes (as a *method*), it seemed to me that borders were selectively opening and closing, hardening and softening at the same time – in different places, with a different temporality, at a syncopated pace, for different kinds of flows. Even the notion of “Fortress Europe” that I mentioned at the beginning with respect to the work of Helmut Dietrich in the 1990s and that played an important role in the critique and public denunciation of European border regimes in the following years, seemed to me too rigid from a theoretical point of view, insofar as it obscured the mix of inclusion and exclusion performed by those regimes as well as the continuity of the radical challenge posed by migrants to the “external frontiers” of the EU through their sheer movements.

Fair enough. But I have to pause a moment and to ask again Newman’s question today, in November 2018: *Are borders opening or closing?* It is at least difficult to say that borders are opening nowadays. We are rather living through a global conjuncture that is characterized by a dramatic surge of nationalism and by an authoritarian twist of a neoliberalism that is nowhere really challenged. The re-

cent election of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil is a good instantiation of this mix of a particularly violent form of nationalism and authoritarian neoliberalism. Examples could be easily multiplied. Not surprisingly, borders figure prominently in the political discourses that set the tone of this conjuncture. “Porous borders”, to recall a phrase often used by border scholars, are the privileged nightmare of today’s nationalisms: they instantiate a kind of lack in the nation’s body that has to be filled by masculine rhetoric and ferocious policies, a wound that has to be healed through barbed wire. Think of the “Brexit” campaign, think of Donald Trump, think of Matteo Salvini, to remain in the “West”. National sovereignty over national borders is the refrain of the day, which conjures up ghosts of the past (as in the infamous “Breaking Point” poster of Nigel Farage’s UKIP) and concretely translates into families divided at the border in the U.S. and into closed ports in Italy. Well, to be honest, I have to say that borders are definitely closing these days, as migrants and refugees heading to the U.S./Mexico border or to the Italian coasts could explain to us in a few, effective words.

This is a conjuncture that urges us as border scholars to take sides. Allow me to say a couple of words on a personal note in this regard. I returned to Italy in late May this year after living and working abroad for three years. I must say that I was quite impressed by developments on the ground, both at the “external frontiers” of the EU – which means basically in the Mediterranean and in the ports of Sicily – and at internal borders in particular with France, where the city of Ventimiglia and the Alps have become scenes of regular manhunts to stop the “secondary movements” of migrants and asylum seekers while the simple act to give water to them (“giving drink to the thirsty,” to recall Matthew’s gospel) has been criminalized. There are definitely continuities with the actions of previous Italian governments (including those of the “center-left”), responsibilities of other national governments (the French one, for

instance), complicities of the EU (particularly regarding “secondary movements” and the failed reform of the “Dublin system”). But there is also a dramatic qualitative shift, which is apparent in the tone of public discourse and conversations, which are increasingly shaped by an aggressive and often ferocious closure in front of the “other”, epitomized by the migrant (and increasingly by the refugee) – a closure that replicates in the spaces of everyday life the obsessive invocation of sovereign control over sealed borders by the government. This is an attitude that is of course contested. But it is a widespread attitude that nurtures and in a way legitimizes the dramatic surge of racist attacks against migrants and refugees that we have been witnessing over the past few months in Italy.

I repeat: Border scholars have to take sides in such hard times, when established forms of intervention at the border are challenged and even criminalized. Think of “humanitarian intervention”, for instance. In *Border as Method* (2013), Brett Neilson and I stressed that NGOs had become not merely legitimate presences in border areas on land and at sea. We also demonstrated that the “humanitarian reason”, to borrow from the title of an influential book by Didier Fassin (2011), had become a *governmental* reason within the shifting assemblages of border regimes in many parts of the world. We underscored the pitfalls and potentialities of such a governmental twist of humanitarianism in border areas. I believe that a critical discussion of the “humanitarian reason” remains important, but today we are in a completely different conjuncture that is characterized – again: in the Mediterranean as well as in the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S. and elsewhere in the world – by a *criminalization* of NGOs. The real war waged by the Italian government against SOS Mediterranée, Open Arms, and Sea Watch last summer has made border crossing in the Mediterranean more lethal for migrants and refugees (especially for those fleeing from Libya), has disrupted the effective-

ness of the “Search and Rescue” (SAR) regime in the Central Mediterranean, and has emptied out the maritime border zone of witnesses and public light. It has also prompted a discussion within NGOs about the limits of the “neutrality”, of the merely “technical” (and not *political*) nature of their interventions, which has been for a long time a defining feature of “humanitarianism”.

In such a situation, as a modest instance of “taking sides” in the present conjuncture, I was part of a hazardous but eventually successful attempt to buy and launch a migrant rescue ship in the Central Mediterranean, openly confronting the Italian government. Managed by a heteroge-neous coalition of activists, volunteers, and researchers (the *Mediterranea* platform), the ship *Mare Jonio* is in my eyes a tactical device that enables an intervention in a critical border area in the hard times we are living through. Such an intervention counters the criminalization of “humanitarianism”, raising again the question regarding the meaning of being human in a space where the human, to recall the memorable words of Frantz Fanon (1963), is massacred every day. *Mediterranea* aims at disrupting the spectacle of the border through the many bridges it builds with the land, in particular with the many Italian and European cities where solidarity activities with our initiative are organized. It attempts to connect border crossings at sea with migrants’ movements and practices on the land, shedding light on the articulation between the “external frontiers” of the EU and the multiple boundaries that I mentioned before. It is also understood as a contribution to a new political imagination of the Mediterranean space – and therefore of Europe – from its Southern shores.

An initiative like *Mediterranea* is definitely focused on a geopolitical border, although in the liquid and somehow elusive space of the sea, where the limits between inland waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone, and

SAR areas are often blurred. Scholars like Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller (the founders of such a challenging project as *Forensic Oceanography*) have often contended in the last years that this liquidity and elusiveness of borders at sea provide an effective viewpoint for the analysis of the shifting configuration of borders and border regimes also on the land (Heller and Pezzani 2013). What they have in mind is the mobility of borders that figures in the title of our conference, which they invite us to analyze without any celebrating attitude and remaining attentive to the violent effects of hierarchization performed by mobile borders. In the current conjuncture, the border spectacle staged by the Italian government portrays precisely the Central Mediterranean as the scene of a migration emergency and of multiple threats to the sacred borders of the country. Our initiative, definitely focused on the need to reaffirm through what we call a “non-governmental action” (NGA) the right to intervene and perform SAR operations in maritime border areas, can also be read as an attempt to continue to shed light on the mobility of borders in our hard times. Through the multiple bridges between sea and land that we are building, we aim to deconstruct the border spectacle staged by the government, which projects the solidity of a wall onto the waters of the Mediterranean. And we try to open up spaces within which the proliferation and heterogenization of borders, as well as their mundane and everyday contestations, become visible again. At the end of the day, the question raised by *Mediterranea* regards the way in which we are to make sense of the current hardening and closure of borders without losing track of the mobility and transformations of borders that we have been analyzing over the last years.

In order to tackle this crucial question for border studies today, allow me to conclude my talk by shifting the ground of my argument and introducing a topic that has become more and more important in my work in recent years, which means *logistics*. I mentioned before that my in-

vestigation of borders has been driven by an attempt to grasp the specificity of the global space through a mapping of the tensions and frictions currently undermining the classical European notions of territory and territoriality that have shaped the history of the modern state and its “international” order. From this point of view, the new mobility paradigm brought about by the so-called “revolution in logistics” since the 1960s (and epitomized by the shipping container) plays a paramount role. The tangle of supply lines, corridors, special economic zones, hubs, hotspots, and gateways connected with the development of logistics signals a production of space that is significantly different from the one instantiated by a traditional geopolitical, international atlas. As geographer Deborah Cowen underscores, the border is the site where the frictions between the logistical and the international spaces emerge in the most dramatic way. The logistical rationality tends indeed to turn every border into a “seam,” which means – to quote from Cowen’s influential book *The Deadly Life of Logistics* (2014: 82) – into “a liminal zone between inside and outside space, where old divisions no longer hold”.

The “seam” is no idyllic image in Cowen’s analysis. It rather encapsulates the huge amount of violence that makes global trade possible, it operates in a highly selective and hierarchical way, and it is predicated upon multiple lines of division that carve out the logistical space and produce the conditions for its seeming smoothness. Nevertheless, there is a clear tension and potential conflict between the “seam” and the sealed borders that are celebrated by nationalist rhetoric today in many parts of the world. And there is a need to stress that logistics plays crucial roles in contemporary capitalism, which are apparent not merely in the operations of inventory giants like Walmart and Amazon, but also in the new frontiers of “platform economies”, in the working of what Benjamin H. Bratton (2016) calls “the nomos of the cloud”, or in such an ambitious project as the Chinese “Belt

and Road Initiative.” In many parts of the world, it is possible to spot a *logistical turn* even in migration policies and related border regimes, as we try, for instance, to demonstrate in a collective book on the “integration into the labor market” of refugees in Germany after the “long summer of migration” in 2015, *Logistische Grenzlandschaften. Das Regime mobiler Arbeit nach dem Sommer der Migration* (Altenried et al. 2017; see also Altenried et al. 2018), the outcome of a research I coordinated at the Humboldt University in Berlin with my friend and colleague Manuela Bojadzijev. Such a logistical turn would seem in many ways adequate to the contemporary working of capitalism, and nevertheless – as German political developments in the last two years amply demonstrate – it is violently contested by the nationalist backlash that characterizes the present conjuncture.

Once we keep in mind the relevance of what I call the logistical rationality in today’s world, I am anyway convinced that the tension between the “seam” and the “sealed border” provides us with an effective point of entry into the analysis of some of the most intense conflicts and transformations that shape our present and that more often than not crystallize at the border. I should caution that I am far from thinking that we are simply liv-

ing through a tumultuous transition that will lead to a kind of necessary adaptation of borders to the model of the “seam” – which means, to put it clearly, to the presumed needs of contemporary capital. This is not at all the case, both because such a naïf functionalism is historically and theoretically unsustainable and because multiple combinations between the seam and sealed border are not only possible but also concretely emerging. What matters from an analytical and theoretical viewpoint is the undeniable tension between the two, which seems to posit the contemporary relation between what we can call with Giovanni Arrighi (2007) capitalism and “territorialism” as a relation structurally out of joint. And let me conclude by saying that what interests me more are the pains and practices, the struggles and even the dreams of the mobile subjects who often experience that tension as a lethal double pincer. It is by focusing primarily on the materiality of those pains and practices, of those struggles and dreams that it becomes possible to grasp the potential forging of new formations of freedom and equality – beyond the nation as well as beyond logistics. Borders continue to be crucial sites for such an investigation.

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