

Globalisation, Place and Twenty-First-Century International Border Regions: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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As we move deeper into the twenty-first century, the forces of globalisation continue to transform both the spaces around international borders and the social processes and political dynamics within and between these spaces. The future of international border regions and societies is now a critical area of scholarly inquiry.¹ The geographies of border regions have undergone a dramatic transformation over the last half century; nation-state boundaries grow ever more porous in many (though not all) areas of the planet. Global trade has become an accepted norm in business transactions almost everywhere. Coupled with the revolution in digital technology, the era of globalisation promises to continue to challenge old ideas with new approaches to understanding international boundaries and the regions they impact.

Scholarly debates about globalising borders began heating up in the 1980s and 1990s, when the first wave of the “deterritorialisation discourse” flourished. Where borders had previously been viewed as barriers, emerging phenomena such as global manufacturing and transnational trade, combined with seasonal or permanent cross-border labour migration, led to an outpouring of fresh debates and novel perspectives. Borders were viewed as becoming “softer” as global processes transcended them, bringing societies on either side into closer socio-economic contact. The new discourse on borders was highlighted by studies of cross-border change in North America and Europe.²

1. Border studies has become a major area of academic inquiry across the planet since the 1970s, with dozens of border academic and research centres in nations as far flung as Ireland, Russia, Denmark, the Netherlands, the UK, Mexico and the United States. There are major scholarly associations for border studies in both Europe (the Association of European Border Regions, formed in 1971) and North America (the Association of Borderland Studies, formed in 1976). These are mentioned in David Newman, “The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in a Borderless World”, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2006), pp. 143–161.

2. Major works on the US–Mexico border during that era include Niles Hansen, *The Border Economy* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981); John House, *Frontiers on the Rio Grande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Lawrence A. Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space and Politics on the US–Mexico Border* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990); Leslie Sklair, *Assembling for Development: The Maquila Industry in Mexico and the United States* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989); and Daniel Arreola and James Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1993). Early work on European borders includes R. Strassoldo and G. Delli Zotti (eds.), *Cooperation and Conflict*

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Frontier regions were no longer isolated and unproductive spaces at the margins of national life; they now had vital functions in a globalising world. From Western Europe to North America, some border regions served as “global conduits” for highly charged, multi-billion dollar import–export exchanges between nations, from transnational manufacturing and international tourism to cross-border commerce and other mutual exchanges. Some border zones evolved to become critical connectors—ports of entry for physical transshipment of the goods and services that feed the global economy. The structural dynamics, social composition, physical planning, urban design, transport/circulation planning and overall environmental management of these places represent some of the huge challenges facing these increasingly critical regions across the planet.

Examples from the US–Mexico border attest to the demographic and economic importance of frontier regions. Between 1980 and 2010, the populations of Mexican border states increased by over 50 per cent, from about 10.2 to 19.8 million inhabitants, while in that same period US border states grew from 41.8 million to 70.8 million, a gain of 59 per cent. This means that today, over 90 million people live in the US–Mexico border region states, with some 15 million now residing in the counties and Mexican municipalities physically fronting the boundary itself. These local borderland populations in the US and Mexico grew by nearly 20 per cent between 2000 and 2010. During the last several decades, the flourishing US–Mexican economy has seen bilateral trade grow from \$100 billion at the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993 to \$450 billion by 2011. Much of that trade flows literally through the land ports of the US–Mexican border, where the estimate in 2010 was \$255 billion.³ Since the 1960s, along the California–Mexico sector of the frontier, 35 million vehicles and 70 million passengers cross the border every year, along with merchandise valued at an average of over \$30 billion. Those numbers are expected to double by

the year 2020. Over 100,000 workers or more per week cross the border to work.⁴

A somewhat purist version of the deterritorialisation argument was the “borderless world” discourse, which posed the idea of a world where global trade and the flow of information render boundaries increasingly less necessary or relevant.⁵ This position was challenged by political scientists, geographers, anthropologists and others. They viewed globalisation in a more nuanced fashion, arguing that borders were still being constructed in some parts of the world, while their role was diminishing in others.⁶ The events of 9/11 led to yet another discourse, or “reterritorialisation”, around the tightening of border controls and hardening of cross-border policy in response to threats of terrorism. This was especially severe along

in Border Areas (Milan: Franco Angeli Editore, 1982); J.M. Quintin, *European Cooperation in Frontier Regions* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1973); Malcolm Anderson, “The Political Problems of Frontier Regions”, *West European Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1982), pp. 1–17; and James Scott, “Transborder Cooperation, Regional Initiatives and Sovereignty Conflicts in the Upper Rhine Valley”, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, Vol. 19 (Winter 1989), pp. 139–156.

3. All of these statistics are drawn or inferred from Christopher Wilson and Erik Lee (eds.), *The State of the Border Report* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2013).

4. See Lawrence A. Herzog, *Global Crossroads: Planning and Infrastructure for the California–Baja California Border Region* (San Diego: Transborder Institute, 2009).

5. For example, Kenichi Ohmae, *The Borderless World: Power and Strategy in the Interlinked Economy* (London: Harper Collins, 1990).

6. A good review of these literatures is found in Newman, *op. cit.*

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the US–Mexico and US–Canadian borders.⁷ Indeed, the push for homeland security has created uncertainty at the US–Mexican border. As a result, critical infrastructure remains unfunded or under-funded. Roads, new or upgraded rail transit lines, inspection facilities, new ports of entry, sewage treatment plants, air pollution monitoring systems and other vital projects have been delayed or cancelled for more than a decade. This is impacting the economies and ecologies of surrounding regions. The State of California, for example, is losing an estimated \$6–8 billion and 50,000 jobs per year due to the perception or reality of excessive wait times at the border.⁸

We have, in the end, a set of two overarching theoretical discourses about borders and border regions. Scholars continue to explore the ways in which the boom in global trade, technology, cyberspace and transnational labour flows is bringing

people together across borders. This approach, which speaks of the demise of the nine-teenth-century view of borders as barriers, is sometimes termed “debordering.” But, as mentioned, following the 9/11 tragedy in the US, a huge outpouring of work is being carried out on the shift towards “rebordering” and protecting the sovereignty of nation-states in an era of global terrorism. These two trends inevitably collide. Indeed, this journal published a special issue in 2013 on the subject of borders, security and politics. In that issue, attention was pointed towards the contradiction between the debordering trends in places like Australia, where the government is promoting economic integration with Asia while simultaneously implementing rebordering policies such as offshore detention centres for migrants and asylum seekers.⁹

Globalisation, Place and Border Regions in the New Century

While scholars debate whether “debordering” or “rebordering” defines global society in the twenty-first century, there is a third perspective that has often been missed by social scientists: the idea that border regions, over the last century, have become significant places in and of themselves, places that cry out for better understanding beyond the question of whether boundaries are “debordered” or “rebordered,” and instead look to the future sustainability and well-being of the millions who live there. Indeed, by the first decades of the current century, scholars had begun exploring the nature of border regions themselves, for example through the lens of “cultural hybridity.” A number of scholars emerged to explore innovations that result from the overlap of culture, economy and society that occurs along the US–Mexico border.¹⁰ Indeed, one could even argue that border regions represent laboratories for the study of globalisation and the intermingling of cultures and societies in high density urbanising regions.¹¹

7. Peter Andreas and Thomas J. Biersteker, *The Rebordering of North America: Integration and Exclusion in a New Security Context* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

8. San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), *Economic Impacts of Wait Times at the San Diego– Baja California Border, Final Report* (San Diego: SANDAG, 2006).

9. See Catarina Kinnvall, “Borders, Security and Global Governance”, *Global Society*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2013), pp. 261–266.

10. See Michael Dear and Gustavo Leclerc (eds.), *Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Baja California* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Rosalea Monacella and Sue Anne Ware (eds.), *Fluctuating Borders* (Melbourne: RMIT University Press, 2007); Daniel Arreola (ed.), *Hispanic Spaces, Latino Places* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004).

11. Lawrence A. Herzog, “Global Tijuana: The Seven Ecologies of the Border”, in Dear and Leclerc, *op. cit.*, pp. 119–142.

Scholars should be concerned with the impacts of globalisation on border zones, or the ways in which those regions serve as prototypes for understanding the contradictions and dynamics of globalisation facing the rest of the planet. This special edition of *Global Society* brings together a number of those scholars. Our particular focus is the transformation of border regions as living spaces and unique places in a time of transition. Some scholars are calling for more “place-based” ecological integrity along borders, recognising the inherent holistic nature of border regions, no longer two separate nations or two separate societies but rather increasingly inter-connected transfrontier societies.¹²

In the past, when borders were marginal zones, far from major concentrations of economic activity and population clusters, one could understand the fact that so little attention was paid to them. But since at least the second half of the twentieth century, border regions have evolved to become important zones of wealth production in such sectors as global manufacturing, trade, specialised crafts and services. Today, millions live, work and interact in border regions as far reaching as Israel–Palestine, the former border enclave of China/Hong Kong/Macau, the Mexico–US and European border zones. While the articles in this special issue draw mainly from the US–Mexico border region, their approach is to deconstruct the impact of globalisation on international borders as dynamic socio-ecological constructions and concrete geographic places. The lessons from these articles are applicable across the planet.

All of the articles in this special issue speak to the ways in which border regions have become important places in their own right, spaces where people live and work, where corporations invest, and therefore spaces that need to be managed, despite the cross-national and global forces impinging upon them. The articles seek to explore a set of critical elements, including ecology, public health, cross-border cities, labour and, finally, security.

Ecology and International Borders

Border regions have their own complex and fragile ecosystems. Environmental preservation in borderland zones is complicated by three critical factors. First, bordering nations often have different national laws and institutional capacities when it comes to preserving nature. Second, border societies may also have different cultural views about the environment and how to sustain it. Third, the process of

managing cross-border environments remains an institutional challenge for bordering nations across the planet, since there is no single political-administrative model for border ecological planning.

As Mumme points out in this volume, the border between Mexico and the US separates two distinct entities. On one side lies the United States, a highly industrialised nation with a well-institutionalised environmental movement that lacks representation in government and ends up relying on lobbying and litigation. On the other side sits Mexico, with a poorly institutionalised environmental movement, weak representation in government and a reliance on presidential discretion and administrative rules, and ultimately, a weak track record for ongoing environmental improvement. These differences have rendered the preservation of the environment in the booming US–Mexico border zone problematic, especially

12. Keith Pezzoli and his colleagues make this very point in their article in this special issue.

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since the region experienced meteoric urban growth rates and a booming industrial assembly sector dating back to the 1970s.

The massive modernisation and urbanisation of the once marginal US–Mexico borderlands has left what the American Medical Association described as a “cess-pool” of contamination, from toxic waste dumping sites, sewage contamination of critical water sources, and dangerously high levels of air pollution. Millions of citizens who now live in northern Mexico and the south-western United States are at risk. Taking on this deeply vulnerable environmental crisis, Mumme analyses the political-institutional responses following the North American Free Trade Agreement in the early 1990s. More than two decades after this massive “debordering” policy shift, Mumme argues that the two nations have not succeeded in confronting the big environmental threats facing citizens. The planning agency created by the NAFTA agreement, the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission (BECC), and its funding partner, the National Development Bank (NADB), have spent several billion dollars on infrastructure, but gradually funds have not been replenished, while conservative governments of the first decades of the new century in both nations ushered in an era of diminishing commitment to environmental initiatives. This reversal of commitment to protecting nature in the borderlands is a stunning defeat for both nations. It brings to light the problem that, given the uncertainties of binational policy-making, protecting nature along international boundaries may be difficult

during the remainder of the twenty-first century.

Public Health across Boundaries: The Case for a Bioregional Approach

A second important challenge to our thinking about international borders lies in the question of how we conceptualise border regions in terms of citizen well-being. As Pezzoli and his colleagues point out in their article, national boundaries are generally antithetical to the ecological arrangement of the planet, since they often literally cut across mountain chains, divide river basins and otherwise ignore nature. This becomes increasingly problematic as these regions have become more densely populated and developed more diverse economies, including manufacturing and commerce, which involve the construction of infrastructure that can contaminate the ecosystem. The article by Pezzoli and his co-writers makes this clear, pointing to the example of the California–Baja California case of the Mexicali–Calexico urbanised region, where toxic pesticides from large-scale, intensive agriculture and chemical runoff from industrial assembly plants are combining to seriously contaminate the region’s watershed, which runs from the New River to the Salton Sea. This has led to documented cancer clusters.

Pezzoli’s research team raises the question of bioregional health in cross-border regions. They argue that the only way to manage contemporary global public health challenges, like the spread of diseases such as HIV, SARS, Avian flu or dengue fever, is by framing the problem in a bioregional framework. This acknowledges that cross-border outbreaks of disease require early warning systems and other institutional structures that connect to the bioregion. The University of California research team has crafted an innovative policy initiative called One Bioregion One Health (OBOH). This institutional concept moves away from both “metrocentric” (over-emphasis on the city) and “anthropocentric” (over-emphasis on humans) ways of thinking, towards an approach that is respectful of the city/

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countryside connection (e.g. food and natural components in the hinterland intimately connected to urban sustainability), as well as the human/animal connection (e.g. preservation of wildlife, sustainability of animals within the animal/human food chain).

Cross-Border Metropolitan Regions

As international border regions have shifted from being marginal and isolated to

places where urbanisation, industrialisation and economic development are occurring, we must begin to conceptualise cross-border urbanisation. Herzog and Sohn, in their article in this volume, speak to the emergence of the “transfrontier metropolis,” and both the theoretical and practical urban planning implications of these twenty-first-century spaces. Conceptually, they revisit the ideas of “debordering” and “rebordering,” exploring their applicability to the case of cross-border urban regions. They view debordering through the act of constructing built environments and planning approaches that are cross-border in nature. But they also recognise that in a globalising world there are new dangers, from drug smuggling to terrorism, and therefore governments and interest groups are seeking greater securitisation and “rebordering,” especially in urban areas which are more vulnerable due to higher-density concentrations of people.

Herzog and Sohn argue that, while these may seem dialectic and in opposition, they can also be viewed simply as part of a general scheme of “bordering” in places, which is dynamic, ever-changing and sometimes contradictory in urbanised boundary zones. They go on to recognise the ways in which debordering can be seen as either a threat or a resource, and rebordering as an obstacle or a working shield. By tracking the recent histories of US–Mexico (San Diego–Tijuana) and Europe (Geneva–French metropolis) metropolitan cases, they illustrate how border regions pass through different historic eras, where debordering and reborder- ing dynamics play out, are negotiated and renegotiated, as cities and nations cope with the challenges of border region urbanisation.

Workers

International border regions have long been thought of as “pass-through” zones for migrant workers heading to employment destinations in the interiors of nation-states. However, as border regions grew and sustained their own economies and spawned cities of significant size in some parts of the world, workers crossed and remained in the border region itself. This has been well documented in the case of the US–Mexico border region, but is also true in other parts of the world, notably Europe. Workers represent a significant segment in the daily life of border regions.

Of course, over time, changes in national immigration policy have an impact on workers in the border region. Indeed, sometimes the border region has been targeted by national governments to symbolically enforce new policies, or changes in policy. That is precisely the concern taken by Joseph Nevins in his article for this special issue. Nevins confronts the ongoing question of human rights for cross-border immigrants in the twenty-first century. He argues that US immigration policy has “hardened,” in line with the aforementioned “rebordering” trend

connected with the idea of greater territorial control in an era of “homeland security.” He uses the case of a US immigration authority raid on a restaurant in San Diego, California, and the subsequent deportation of workers who did not have proper documentation, as an example of a trend where the federal government is trying to coerce employers and business owners into cooperating with government-led policing of workplaces, to, in Nevin’s view, ultimately “cleanse” them of unauthorised workers.

Nevins’ article raises a number of critical questions for international border regions. If cross-border workers supply much-needed labour for global economic activities in urbanising border regions, what are the trade-offs between “debordering” policies that facilitate cross-border labour migration, on the one hand, and “rebordering” policies that curtail or contain those worker movements, on the other? And to what extent does this grey area of policy-making render the quality of life of workers more precarious, and thus become a concern for the defence of their human rights? Should governments be in the business of policing workers or protecting their rights?

Borders and Security

In the end, the dialectic between debordering and rebordering becomes a paradox for life along the border. In a global era, how can nations like Mexico and the United States, or the members of the European Community, engage in cross-border trade and build globally strong economic relations while constructing fences and other security infrastructure designed to curtail movement and filter out flows amidst the threats of terrorism, violence, drug smuggling or illegal immigration? Paul Ashby’s article in this volume speaks directly to this paradox for the case of the United States and Mexico, and the border regions in which millions reside.

If border regions are, indeed, independent, thriving ecosystems, places with their own unique histories, culture and ecology, is the threat of overzealous securitisation also a threat to their ability to preserve their environment and maintain both quality of life and their newly thriving identities? To what extent might the homeland security paradigm of fences, surveillance and more border patrol agents in the field along the US–Mexico border compromise the \$500 billion cross-border trade economy? And how can local governments protect their interests in the midst of federally approved massive spending for border security infrastructure? Will all of this security apparatus eventually curtail border crossings, and thus diminish the US–Mexico border economy, and therefore the well-being of millions who now make the border region(s) their home?

