

Protected: Violence at the border: borders and their deleterious socio-political effects on international migrants

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Abstract

This essay explores the multifarious construction of borders and their political effects on international migration. Fundamentally, borders are multidimensional concepts that encompass contradictory viewpoints and practices. As tools of political power, they serve to regulate movement and shape the cultural identity of migrants. Compounded with the geopolitics of national security and the embodied politics of difference, borders have become mediums of legitimizing exclusion. In recent times, borders have increasingly become more than just delineations of physical boundaries, undergoing transformations in both the physical and abstract realms as a concept. This essay will examine the different conceptualizations of borders and their socio-political effects, drawing on a variety of examples across the world. In the context of international migration, I argue that borders are dialectical in state identity, inherently undemocratic, produce status, and are the tools of power.

1. Introduction

Borders are polysemic concepts that revolve around identity, politics, and society, borders range from the physical and territorial to the social, personal and symbolic (Balibar et al., 2002). In the context of international migration, borders regulate the flows of people, capital, and information. While physically manifested as the 'skin of the state', borders are 'at its heart' (Megoran et al., 2005: 735). As discursive constructs, borders also carry contested meanings, practices and performances, and consequently enact inequalities and produce status (Blake, 2005). For instance, borders may enable the movement of capital but restrict the transition of labour (Balibar et al., 2002). Firstly, I will illustrate the multifarious construction of borders and their dialectical characteristics in state identity. Secondly, I will demonstrate how borders are mediums of projecting power, are inherently undemocratic, and produce status for international migrants.

2. Different Conceptualisations of borders

Natural and artificial bodies, such as coastlines and wired fences, serve as physical demarcations of territory. Borders can also be imagined as Cartesian spaces, encompassing lines of geometry that identify individuals as immigrants once they are crossed (Bauder, 2011). These differentiated forms of 'seeing' exemplify borders as markers of distinction that delineate territories of shared cultural identity and practices (Newman & Paasi, 1998). In its material performance, Williams (2006) posits that borders encompass the 'toleration of difference and diversity in human societies' (p. 96), due to their linkage with the rooted concepts of race, class, and geographic origins, tied to the political ideals of nationhood. National distinctiveness induces borders to create a material reality where cultural differences are 'institutionalized' (Eder, 2006: 269), causing contrasting social identities to

segregate the population between 'us' and 'them'. As a result, 'othering' (Horton & Kraftl, 2014) may arise, where foreign immigrants may be regarded as individuals 'out of place' (Cresswell, 1996).

In the context of Brexit, international migrants were framed as 'threats' to the stability of the UK, whose entries were facilitated by the EU's 'open border' policy. The Leave campaign viewed the alleged 'unbridled migration' across the border through a lens of insecurity, reinforcing the exclusion of immigrants (Gilmartin & Wood, 2018). Vollmer (2017) posited that the border was utilised as a discursive symbol of migratory control, serving as a sovereign medium of security in the age of 'globalization gone wild' (p. 306). Following the theme of 'taking back control', political borders, such as the 310-mile boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, have redefined the narratives of citizenship and national identity, as seen by a marked rise in applications for citizenship in the Republic of Ireland from residents in NI and Britain (Wood & Gilmartin, 2018).

Borders are dialectical concepts that shape, and are shaped by state identity. Bauder (2011) observed the 'impossibility of integrating the various meanings of the border into a single and coherent concept' (p.1127), highlighting the volatility and tension of political boundaries. The contradicting position of international boundaries can be seen in the shaping of border practices in statecraft (Megoran et al., 2005). National imperatives compel states to promote economic growth and capital accumulation, while contending with public concerns of security and national identity. This leads to a paradox of agendas, where states attempt to both internationalize border space and limit the levels of transboundary labour migration between countries at the same time (Herzog & Hayward, 2017).

For instance, the U.S. government's support for a barrier-free zone to the flow of goods and capital with Mexico manifested in NAFTA, which resulted in an influx of Mexican immigrants (Nevins, 2010). In response, American citizens raised concerns that their ethno-cultural stability may be threatened by the 'third world' immigrants, who were seen to alter and impoverish the character of the nation (Paxton & Mughan, 2006). The rising level of apprehension mounted pressure on the federal government to heighten boundary enforcement measures, such as implementing bio-informatic border security and remote surveillance (Vukov & Sheller, 2013). Ultimately, this cumulated in 'NAFTAization' and growing militarization simultaneously taking place at the U.S.– Mexico boundary (Andreas, 1998). The conflict between prosperity and security surfaced the increasingly dialectical state–citizen and national–local relationships at the border (Nevins, 2010). Here, the contradictory nature of the relationship between the state and its citizenry is framed through borders.

3. Socio-political effects of borders

Furthermore, borders are utilized as instruments through which state power is exercised; where political authority is coercively wielded over bodies. Immigrant receiving states remain duplicitous in their desire for and rejection of migrants, holding the power to determine lives that are valuable and valued and those that are not (Nevins, 2008). Balibar

(2002) argues that modern borders are utilised as tools to organize the world's exploitation by European states, facilitating corruption and the abuse of power through the treatment of international migrants. The 'muscular' state geographically reconfigures borders as instruments that simultaneously integrate the details of migrating bodies and differentiate these bodies through remote interception at the same time (Mountz, 2015). Violent immigrant policing policies, justified through the securitization of national territory, create an 'inhumane political field' (ibid, p. 190) shrouded in ambiguous jurisdiction.

The controversial management of asylum seekers on the Italian island Lampedusa demonstrates the subordination of migrants through the occurrence of 'bare life' (Dines et al., 2015). 'Bare life' refers to a biopolitical paradigm where the political power decides not only the life and death of individuals, but whether bodies are considered human beings in the first place (Agamben, 1998). On Lampedusa, migrants are detained in appalling conditions and 'exploited by governmental and non-governmental actors to affirm a less than human existence' (ibid, p. 437). States' governance of migration through borders establishes lines of exclusion by the means of filtering and differentiation, maintaining a tight grip over the lives of migrants (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, cited in Dines et al., 2015).

By virtue of their regime and control, borders are fundamentally undemocratic to international migrants. By definition, democracy revolves around the legitimization of the exercise of political authority in reference to those whom this authority is exercised (Abizadeh, 2008). The demos of democratic theory dictates that the sovereignty of borders must be justified to both foreigners and citizens. Hence, a hypothetically democratic border would accommodate the interests of the groups who are most affected by borders, such as international migrants. However, these very bodies are physically excluded from crossing state boundaries, marginalized by border practices, and denied identities of belonging (Bauder, 2011).

This can be seen in the performance of contemporary borders, which have been securitized, privatized, and militarized, acting in the interest of a few (Vukov & Sheller, 2013). Moreover, the performativity of borders is fundamentally configured by state authorities – through targeted patterns of identification and ritualized biometric profiles, it categorizes migrants into varying spaces of 'securability' (Amoore & Hall, 2010). By their very nature, borders disenfranchise non-members of the state, be it in the past or present. Historical borders were often demarcated through undemocratic and violent origins, such as via national conflicts or political revolutions (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999). Their modern counterparts are unable to emerge through democratic procedures, based on a 'paradox of origins' (Connelly, 1991). With territorial conflict between citizens and non-members of the state being the cause of exclusionary border practices in the first place, borders therefore cannot originate through conventional democratic mechanisms.

Lastly, borders produce status for international migrants. Through 'differential inclusion', borders control the rate and type of filtering of immigrants, reducing or accelerating mobility (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). In reality, borders function as contraptions that mould labour flows and configure labour exploitation. For immigrants, border crossing often translates to labour devaluation on an uneven economic playing field. Institutionalized

uncertainty, established by immigration policies, causes them to become 'precarious' workers over whom employers have greater ability of control (Anderson, 2010).

In Canada, former professionals who transit through the live-in caregiver program are 'subject to intrusive regulations' (Preston, 2003: 185) in the homes of their employers. Predominantly women of colour, these immigrants also face difficulty returning to their original occupations due to discrimination against their previous experiences as caretakers. A status of temporariness and immobility is created, where migrants are faced with diminished socio-legal rights and a restricted in activities. Power is congregated in the hands of the employer, as they hold control over the immigrant's job and residency. In extreme cases, migrants' personal security may be threatened. For instance, the brokerage system that governs undocumented migrant workers in Thailand leaves them vulnerable to abusive working and living conditions, and has been often associated with human trafficking (Pollock 2007, cited in Kaur, 2010).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, borders can be imagined as markers of cultural identity and the state's tools of power – consequently becoming intrinsically undemocratic and discriminatory as a result. As duplicitous amalgamations that encompass contradictory viewpoints and practices, there is no singular perspective of the border, as it possesses different meanings for everyone (Balibar, 2002). While borders serve as physically delineated territory and symbols of cultural identity (Anderson, 2010), they also represent embodied identity and difference, security, and national stability in the context of international migration. Future research could analyse how recent geopolitical developments, such as Brexit, have influenced the unevenness and performance of borders.

5. References

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