

Some marks of the nation and nationalism in Latin American borderland studies

Algunas marcas de la nación y el nacionalismo en los estudios latinoamericanos sobre fronteras

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Abstract

The aims of this essay are: to identify some survivals of classical nationalist thinking in the Latin American field of border studies and to offer some tools to further a critical epistemology on borders. This essay is fundamentally based on a bibliographic exploration work and on the reflexive process that took place in my own research experience. I will pay particular attention to the persistence of the association between the concept of frontier and the form of the nation-state, as well as the monoscalar look. I mainly review the production of the Latin American south of the last decades, although works generated in countries further north are also recovered. This work does not reach conclusive results, but develops some guidelines that order my individual work as well as that of the group that I am part of, the Group of Studies on Borders and Regions of the University of Buenos Aires.

Keywords: border, Latin American studies, nation, nationalism, borderland studies.

Resumen

En este ensayo me propongo como objetivos: identificar algunas pervivencias del pensamiento nacionalista clásico en el campo latinoamericano de los estudios sobre fronteras y ofrecer herramientas para avanzar en una epistemología crítica sobre fronteras. Me baso, fundamentalmente, en un trabajo de exploración bibliográfica y en el proceso reflexivo acontecido en mi propia experiencia de investigación. Prestaré particular atención a la persistencia de la asociación entre el concepto de frontera y la forma del estado-nación, así como a la mirada monoescalar. Reviso, principalmente, la producción de las últimas décadas del sur latinoamericano, aunque recuperando trabajos generados en países de más al norte. Con este trabajo no llego a resultados conclusivos, sino, más bien, a algunos

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lineamientos que ordenan tanto mi trabajo individual y como el del grupo que integro, el Grupo de Estudios sobre Fronteras y Regiones, de la Universidad de Buenos Aires.

Palabras clave: frontera, estudios latinoamericanos, nación, nacionalismo, estudios sobre fronteras.

Introduction

Nations—understood as imagined communities limited to a discrete territory (Anderson, 1991)—and nationalisms—considered to be feelings of attachment to these territories and the political movements that drive them (Gellner, 1983)—are relatively recent phenomena in world history. As such, they can be considered contingent and not universal and immutable needs. For this reason, they remain elusive and changeable. Eric Hobsbawm (1990) dates the rise of nations and nationalism to around 1780 in northern Europe. Recent stages of the globalization process, far from quieting them, promoted the emergence of new facets (Alonso, 2009). This emergence was evident in the last two decades in Latin America, during which antagonistic forces converged to impose certain constructive meanings: emancipatory forces and universalist and liberatory expressions, with the notion of brotherhood, within the struggle to achieve equal rights for minorities. At the same time, destructive facets of nationalism were renewed that gave way to racism and xenophobia. These facets resulted in the struggle to preserve the privileges of some minority groups and violence, hatred, and contempt for certain differences expressed in xenophobic ways.

The nationalist narrative (in its different facets), in its spatial dimension, tends to seek a total coincidence of state, nation, and territory. Likewise, this narrative tends to present borders as closing elements of a national territory and as a place of net differentiation with regard to the other. Ideas are derived from this narrative that associate national territory with continuity, order, and interior homogeneity in the face of discontinuity, heterogeneity, and exterior chaos. In many discourses, the border allows a binary separation of what lies outside from what lies inside: an “us” faced with an “other” hides and loses sight of many internal differences while omitting the numerous similarities between itself and the “other.”

In Latin America, from the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century, academic approaches to borderland studies mainly associated borders with the form of the nation-state (recovering, for example, the writings of authors such as Ratzel or Mackinder). Likewise, this category was used for formulations of the territory as a static reality based on naturalist perspectives of territorial nationalism. This theoretical tendency draws from classical geopolitics and formed strong ties to academic geography and international relations. Another line of research that had the most impact in rural sociology and agronomic studies in general and that was related to the idea of expansion fronts highlighted the tension in the relationship between progress and backwardness (Turner, 1893) and the associated borders, with the emergence of a thriving new society that advanced on an untamed territory (Ratto, 2001). These early academic systematizations are highly criticized today given their questionable organicist assumptions—border-skin—or their ideological biases—a border-civilizing process—(Arriaga, 2012; Ferrari, 2014), and because they were pillars

for the construction of different nationalist imaginaries in Latin America, principally in their destructive aspect.

In particular, in countries further south, border problems with neighbors and the defense of borders were notably instrumental in the arguments used to justify, at least partially, the permanence of dictators in countries such as Chile, Argentina, or Uruguay. These arguments were laid out in writings that had broad repercussions for the manner in which borders were viewed in different academic, educational, public administration, and diplomatic spheres.

Beginning in the 1980s, with the end of the dictatorships, a progressive reorientation of borderland studies was produced (even though these studies with a defined nationalist bias never declined) with new theoretical underpinnings and from different disciplinary approaches. The fruits of this reorientation were the emergence of institutions, research groups, and various journals that specialize in or prioritize the subject of borderlands in different countries of the region. Among the most noteworthy of these publications are the following (indicating name, editing institution, country, and year of creation): *Estudios Fronterizos* (Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexicali, Mexico, 1983); *Frontera Norte* (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana, Mexico, 1989); *Fronteras de la Historia* (Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, Colombia, 1997); *Si Somos Americanos. Revista de Estudios Transfronterizos* (INTE, Universidad Arturo Pratt, Iquique, Chile, 1998); *Aldea Mundo* (Centro de Estudios de Fronteras e Integración, Universidad de Los Andes, Táchira, Venezuela, 1998); *TEFROS* (Taller de Etnohistoria de la Frontera Sur, Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto, Río Cuarto, Argentina, 2003) y *Geopantanal* (Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul-Câmpus do Pantanal, Corumbá, Brasil, 2009 in its current stage).

This article arises from the consideration of the following questions: Have Latin American borderland studies overcome the nationalist and essentialist tradition that characterized the classical approaches? What is the relationship between the academic agenda and the media and government agenda that stimulates the need for certain xenophobic border policies? Furthermore, has the *monoscale* analysis of classical geopolitics, which associated borders with the form of the nation-state, been overcome? Lastly, can we speak of a new and mature (critical) Latin American epistemology for *borderology*?

With these questions, I set forth reflections based primarily on a literature review but supported by my own research trajectory. I have two objectives: the first is to identify some tendencies in Latin American borderland studies in which some marks of classic nationalist thought can be recognized; and the second is to offer, in an introductory fashion, some proposals to advance with a critical epistemology of borderlands. I work from the assumption that Latin American borderland studies have not freed themselves completely from the nationalist trap, as I argue in due course. Nationality (the country from which one writes, sometimes attributable to the simple fact of residency) and nationalism (feelings regarding this country that sometimes cloud reason) frequently continue to guide our methodological choices and the definition of our research topics.

Before continuing, I should recognize the limitations of my own research practice, which on more than one occasion was “trapped” in the tendencies that I discuss here. These limitations were the fruits of the nationalist education that I received in the formal school system and my socialization with the nationalist narratives and

discourses of my country of origin. Likewise, I should warn the reader about the scope of my gaze: many of the considerations that I expound on reveal an *Argentina-centric* perspective, given the fact that most of my knowledge comes from the academic production of this country. Similarly, emphasis on the interstate borders of southern South America is notable. References to Mexican and Central American literature, or to the literature of Andean countries located farther north of Bolivia, are more scarce. Another important clarification is that my approach to borderland studies is fundamentally geographical. Despite my recognition of the interdisciplinary nature of borderland studies, I was trained in this discipline, and its theoretical-methodological instruments are those that I can most capably wield.

Naturalization of the Association Between Nation-State and Borders

I draw attention to the fact that some studies that focus on nation-state borders tend to naturalize the association between the concept of borders (without qualifying the term) and the form of the nation-state. This naturalization occurs more often because of omission than as a result of a conscious act. As I subsequently argue, this phenomenon can be related to the territorial trap in which social studies often fall. The titles of some compilations recently produced in the field of borderland studies serve as an example.

Dilla Alfonso was the coordinator of the book *Ciudades en la frontera: Aproximaciones críticas a los complejos urbanos transfronterizos* [Cities on the border: Critical approaches to transborder urban complexes]. The reader might be interested in transborder urban complexes between subnational states (for example, between the state entities of Brazil) or the cities formed by the borders between counties. However, in the first line of the introduction, the compiler specifies the type of borders that the book will discuss when he refers to the growing importance of urban agglomerations that pass national limits (Dilla, 2008, p. 17) without having revealed this topic in the title.

Ramírez coordinated the book *Fronteras latinoamericanas: Ejemplos para su comprensión* [Latin American borders: Examples for understanding them]. Once again, based on the title, the reader might ask himself or herself if the book offers examples of the extractive borders that are spreading through the center of the continent. For example, will the book address the colonization of the Paraguayan Chaco and the advance of the modern agrarian border on this region? In the book's introduction, indirectly, and based on the reference to "international limits," the inference can be made that the book focuses on borders formed between Latin American states (Ramírez, 2017, p. 13). This inference is confirmed by reviewing the index on which the Colombia-Venezuela border and the northern border of Mexico, among others, are listed.

Another book is *El sistema fronterizo global en América Latina: Un estado del arte* [The global border system in Latin America: A state of the art]. To what does "global" refer? Again, the reader might be excited to read studies on borders in daily life or interethnic borders between indigenous peoples of the continent and land concession companies. However, on the second page of the introduction, the compilers happen to reveal that the book regards national borders, stating that in the 1990s it seemed as if the national borders of Latin America were going to disappear... (Zepeda, Carrión & Enríquez, 2017, p. 14).

In general, in these books, the reference to “national” when states are mentioned is usually clear. However, the border tends to be presented as an exclusively substantive reference, as if its mere mention accounts for its tie to the nation-state. Another presentation of this term is its qualification as “Latin American,” as if only the borders of and between the nation-states of Latin America were vital in its construction.

Here, I am not attempting to question the academic quality of the aforementioned texts or the empirical rigor of the manner in which the authors address the subjects they propose. I am simply pointing out that when the concept of borders is used, the omission of any reference to “nation-state” reveals an epistemology with a trace of nationalism that takes territory (understood as the material base of the nation-state) as a given and, by extension, borders. Both territories and national borders (in their geographic dimension) are often used as empirical data. Their historical, contingent, and processual nature have not been adequately problematized in the research process. Regarding this, Agnew (1998, p. 60) proposes the notion of the “territorial trap” that I already mentioned. That is, a tendency to “think and act as if the world was completely made up of states that exercise their powers over blocks of space and in this way become the only geographic-political reference of world politics.” Most likely, none of the authors whom I previously cited explicitly sustained this assumption when carrying out their study. Nonetheless, by omitting the specification of “national,” “nation-state,” or—in some cases—“international” or “interstate” when studying these types of borders, they fall into the “territorial trap.”

Regarding this concept, I would like to introduce the idea that borders can be considered *derived* spatial-temporal mechanisms to the extent that they have their origin in the definition of a larger entity, which in a generic way can be called a region—understood as a delimited space. Each border emerges as a necessary part of a region: it is the border of the territory of the nation-state of Peru, the border established by the soy fields, or the border of the Atacama desert lands. A trivial example of this concept is the response to the equivalent question: Where is the plate? Someone might respond that it is on the edge, to which naturally the response is *on the edge of what?* On the edge of the table. If individuals state that they will study a border, one asks: *Of what?* For this reason, I insist that the concept of a border is derived in nature. Clearly, nation-states produce borders, but, referring back to Agnew, so do other geographic references.

If *territory* is considered an expression of the relation between space and power, as a space that is defined and delimited by and based on power relations, it need not be—nor should it be reduced to—the association with the figure of the state. “Territories exist and are constructed (and reconstructed) on different scales, from the narrowest scales (for example, a street) to international scales (for example, the area formed by the group of territories that constitute the member countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]), and within the most varied temporal scales: centuries, decades ...; territories can be of a permanent nature but can also exist periodically” (Souza, 1995, p. 81). Likewise, the *border* need not be nor should it be reduced to the scale of, or the association with, the figure of the nation-state.

Just as the discipline of geography has worked to free the concept of territory from its exclusive association with the form of the nation-state (Raffestin, 1980), I consider it fruitful to do the same with the concept of the border. Perhaps if we denaturalize the latter’s direct and exclusive tie with this single scale, we can take note of many other borders present in processes of social exclusion, including those that exist

on the borders of the nation-state. Using the category *border* without qualifying or specifying to which entity we are referring, produces a monoscale and state-centric conceptualization.

Borders as a Peripheral Phenomenon

Borderland studies, especially of national and international borders, tend to privilege the analysis of events that occur in places that are far from the power centers. I would like to point out that this tendency is frequently accompanied by the perspectives that these distant places have of the center. In a sense, the geopolitical maxim that borders are the peripheral parts of the nation-state territory still appears to carry weight.

Directing our attention to the tradition of national border studies in Argentina and Chile, we can see that an organicist focus was predominant until the 1980s: borders were considered the skin of the state. This notion dates back to the production of Ratzel (1897, p. 370), who conceived of borders as "...the periphery of the domain of the State, economy and population, whereby the transfer, by absorption or expulsion, of all of the fibers that depend upon or rebuild the life of a people or state is produced...". In tune with this statement, but a century later, the Argentinian Rey (1979, p. 10) adjudicated: "The periphery of our nation —the true skin of the State's body— is integrated by two elements: the international limit and the border ...". In turn, Pinochet (1978, p. 161), in his geopolitics of Chile, asserted: "The border is the periphery of the State... The border is the periphery organ of the State and as such is proof of its growth and strength. The border is the boundary of one State with another." Continuously employing biological analogies, the entry of people and their ideas were viewed as an undesirable penetration that brought impurities that could lead to the dismemberment and infection of the living organism that was the state.

In contrast to this idea, in addition to provoking certain spatial discontinuities, borders are frequently tension-ridden and transgressed by a complex interweaving of social relations that express spatial interactions. The mutual construction of spatial *others*, between "us, who are here" in the face of "them, who come from the other side," proposes the relational nature of any border. In the case of borders (nation-state borders but also spatial entities of another sort), I propose that this nature is a double nature. In its origin, it is established in reference to the outside: what defines this relationship is the construction and reproduction of the boundary or periphery of the contour that makes us an entity (understood as a unit) and distinguishes us from the rest. A rich body of contemporary literature exists on the construction of national identities and otherness based on the state border that I cannot reference in its entirety here.

In addition to this construction with that which is outside, the external, another relationship immediately arises: an inward relationship toward the center at which the borders are an interior component in the construction of territory. Likewise, they are constructed from the inside and, to a great extent, from capitals and in tension with capitals where, in general, the border is usually associated with the distant, extreme, and peripheral—as something exotic from the central perspective. Incidentally, it comes to my attention that no field of study exists on capitals or centers of territorial command

(aside from those who study global cities as fundamental components of advanced capitalism). From my point of view, this substantial part of the field of borderland studies is because, in general, borders are produced and reproduced from a certain center of command. All advancing fronts have a barrack to help its soldiers, and the modern agrarian border today has its agribusiness nodal cities. Just as publications and research centers exist that are interested in the borders of nation-states, finding the same for national capitals that are problematized not as an urban phenomena but as a geopolitical phenomenon is difficult.

Returning to the peripheral nature of how borders are understood, in the city of Buenos Aires, the border with Bolivia in the far province of Jujuy is frequently studied, whereas the nearby border with the Republic of Uruguay is completely ignored. In Santiago, Chile, the distant borders of Arica or Los Lagos are more actively studied than the closer Los Libertadores pass. The border often continues to be synonymous with the exotic. In capital cities, many territories arise and are transformed along with their respective borders that, as I subsequently mention, are only recently being thematized as such.

Another inheritance of classical geopolitics is the exaltation of extreme points as a reference of a national territory, or the country's confines in the four cardinal directions, which emphasizes the peripheral nature of the border. In the case of Argentina, this relationship is expressed in the formula *de Ushuaia a La Quiaca*. An example of this formula is the musical work produced around 1984 by the singer León Gieco, who proposed to assemble a sample of Argentinian popular music (Guerrero, 2006). He titled this work, *De Ushuaia a La Quiaca*, which are the cities located at the extreme south and north points, respectively, of the national territory. Frequently, those who want to show the national scope of something use this slogan. In Brazil, the formula that expresses the totality of a national territory to reflect the remoteness of the borders is do Oiapoque (RR) ao Chuí (RS) e da Ponta Seixas (PB) a Cruzeiro do Sul (AC).

Confronted with all of this information, I wonder if borderland studies presume to focus exclusively on peripheries. Frequently, the production of meaning and the definition of courses of action regarding borders are generated in the center. Even when centers are situated on or near interstate boundaries, as is the case with Asunción, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, they are not considered borderlands. The same occurs with Santiago and La Paz, which are between 60 km and 95 km from the border, respectively, in a straight line. The construction of the meaning of centrality tends to produce itself as opposite to the peripheral (and distant) nature of the *portals*. The border appears to occur only there. In this sense, an interesting case in Argentina is that of two cities that have not benefited from the symbolic hierarchy of being an extreme point: Aguas Blancas and Prof. Salvador Mazza. These two small cities are situated on the limit that the country shares with Bolivia. In both cities, signs have been put up that announce to whoever arrives at this point that it is a "portal" (Figure 1A) or a "portico" (Figure 1B) "of the country." These signs do not "look" toward Bolivia but rather inwards to within Argentina, at those who come from the center. In contrast, in La Quiaca, a sign installed on the international limit by the National Directorate of Roads reminds us that on the other extreme of the country, 5121 km to the south, is Ushuaia (Figure 1C), "the world's southernmost city."

Figure 1. Signs on the border cities of Aguas Blancas (A); in Profesor Salvador Mazza (B); La Quiaca (C) in the Republic of Argentina

(A)



(B)



(C)



Source: Alejandro Benedetti, 2018.

State-Centered Analytic Journey

In a Uruguayan journal, the Uruguayan researcher Clemente (2010) published an article on “the Uruguay–Brazil border region.” A few years earlier, the Brazilian geographer Dorfman (2007) did the same in a Brazilian journal with her article on the “Brazil–Uruguay border.” The Argentines Hevilla and Molina (2010) produced an article whose setting was “the Argentina–Chile border of the central Andes” for an Argentinian journal. Not long after, in a Chilean journal the Chilean Núñez (2013) talked about “The Andes mountain range in the Chilean–Argentinian Norpatagonica.” I could offer many more cases such as these, of authors who, when they designate the international border dyad as an object of interest, follow an analytical sequence that is analogous to the geographic sequence that goes from the country of nationality-publication of the author to the neighboring country. It can be assumed that these cases simply reflect state-centered national education.

The problem begins when these logics of state self-observation permeate methodological decisions without mediating sufficient reflexivity (Llopis, 2007). In many cases, this permeation causes categories that can account for geo-historical dynamics in one’s own country to be displaced to the neighboring country. This displacement is what Agnew (1998) and García (2002) refer to as “methodological nationalism” (Benedetti, 2011), which occurs when the gaze of the nation-state in which research is being conducted determines the perspectives of scientific observation. I want to point out that this displacement does not necessarily occur in the production of the authors recently mentioned.

The numerous studies conducted in Brazil, where the organizational logic of the Brazilian national border is transferred to its neighbors, are allusive regarding this problem. For example, Andrade, Morais and Silva (2015, p. 223) mention the “faixa de fronteira peruana” in a study of forests. In the same way, Morais, Andrade and Souza (2011, p. 2), on analyzing certain practices of Seringueiras families, allude to the “faixa de fronteira entre o Acre (Brasil) e Pando (Bolívia).” In turn, Souza (2013, p. 76), on describing the demand in Brazil for the services of people from Paraguay, refers to the “faixa de fronteira paraguaia.” I highlight that all of these authors, of Brazilian origin, use an expression that has a long trajectory in the legislation, politics, and vocabulary of Brazil—*faja de frontera*—but that is not significant in Paraguay, Bolivia, or Peru.

In its most recent Constitution of 1988, the Federal Republic of Brazil established the border strip or belt with “up to one hundred and fifty kilometers in width along the land borders” (Constitución de la República Federativa de Brasil, 1988, art. 20). In the legislation of the remaining South American countries (organic laws and constitutional texts), other categories have been institutionalized: border area, border zone, border strip, and others (Figure 2). Any of these categories contain meanings, functions, and specific evaluative attributions that participate in the symbolic construction of the borders of different national territories.

Figure 2. Denomination of the border zones in South America, by country

Source: Benedetti & Bustinza (2017).

Lastly, this information leads me to propose the reflexive need to differentiate between the categories of the geographic definition of the nation-states—used in the process of differentiation with their neighbors—and those that have a heuristic function in the field of social studies. As I subsequently observe, social scientists frequently review, argue, and problematize only the vocabulary that pertains to nation-states. As a result, we confine ourselves to a somewhat meager vocabulary.

Isolationist Conception of National Territory

The object of study of classical geopolitical scholars was almost exclusively their nation-states of origin. Furthermore, conceiving the border as the skin of the state and a living expanding organ guaranteed its differentiation with regard to the surrounding environment, basically, neighboring nation-states. In the case of Argentina, this idea was presented by Daus using the notion of “detachment.” According to this author, the Argentinian border system,

[o]f all the countries in the World, possesses exceptional traits due to the high proportion, in the totality of the perimeter, of borders coinciding with physical accidents of a large scale, which efficiently perform their mission of aiding in the ‘detachment’ and therefore national unity, with minimal international friction (Daus, 1957, p. 39).

The cover of a journal published at the same time as this text is very eloquent (Figure 3): the extent of Argentina’s territory appears as a red zone clearly delimited and “detached” from its surroundings, without showing the surrounding geography in greater detail: differentiating the emerged lands (where the territories of Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile extend out) from the submerged ones is not easy.

Figure 3. A “detached” Argentina



Source: Cover of the journal *Argentina*, 1(5), June 1, 1949.

The idea of the border as the periphery line that guarantees both unity within and difference without, thus making the consideration of the numerous transborder relations a matter secondary importance, is a constant in the area of planning in the case of several countries. An example that illustrates this concept is Figure 4, in which the “Plano Estratégico de Fronteiras” is promoted with a map of Brazil that paraphrases Daus, “detached from the rest of South America.” This idea is simple and puts a question to anyone who has been socialized with the cartographic evidence of a national territory equated with a figure introduced in the form of a polygon, filled with the single color red and placed on a large “empty” surface that covers the entirety of the page used for the representation. We find this same idea on the cover of many academic works focusing on interstate borders, such as in Figure 5. Although the authors of this book are not unaware of the multiscale tensions to which the borders of the Brazilian state are subjected, they opt for a “detached” image when choosing an image for its cover.

Figure 4. A “Detached” Brazil



Source: Image used in the official launch of “Plano Estratégico de Fronteiras [Strategic Border Plan] (PEF),” June 8, 2011, in the Palacio del Planalto.

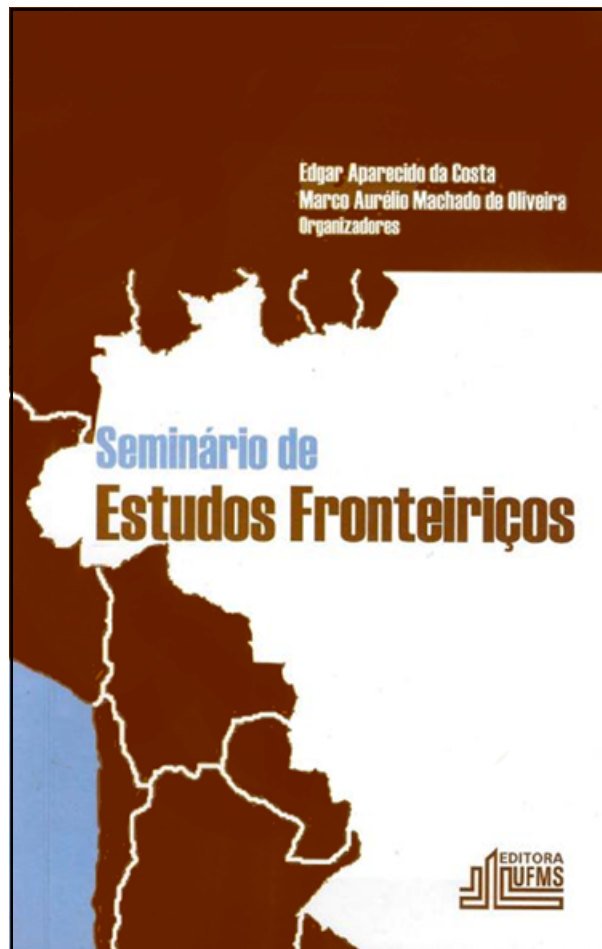
The (Numerous) Approaches to International Borders Versus the (Scarcity) of Studies on Other Borders

As I have pointed out in this article, the territorial peripheries of the nation-state, more than any other border of any other kind or spatial-temporal scale, have been the favorite object of study of social studies, historically and up until the present. This status is confirmed by a review of the last 10 numbers of a key journal in the field of borderland studies: *Estudios Fronterizos*. The purpose of this academic publication is

[T]o constitute itself as a space for debate and dissemination of knowledge generated regarding borders in general, international borders, border and transborder regions and phenomenon, globally. The REF publishes original

articles that show research results, theoretical analyses or methodological proposals for border studies (*Estudios Fronterizos*, 2018).

Figure 5. Puzzle of South American states



Source: Digitalization of the cover of the publication by Costa and Oliveira (2009).

Note: In a book produced by a seminar on borderland studies published in Corumbá in 2009.

Nevertheless, the number of articles that do not refer to nation-state borders are few.

If a researcher wanted to learn about the state of the art of interethnic and historical borders, he or she should preferably turn to journals such as *Fronteras y Regiones* (Colombia) or *TEFROS* (Argentina). In contrast, if a researcher is interested in productive borders, he or she might find an article in the *Revista Mundo Agrario* (Argentina) or *Economía, Sociedad y Territorio* (Mexico). If a researcher is interested in borders in urban contexts, he or she could turn to (and probably with little luck) the journal *EURE* (Chile). The most important (and few) periodical publications specializing in borderlands, such as *Frontera Norte* (Mexico), are principally journals regarding modern nation-state borders.

Here, I am interested in broaching the multiplicity of scales in borderland studies as a theoretical-methodological question but also as an epistemological question in general. I consider that various social occurrences construct spaces with their respective borders of a diverse nature. The scale of these occurrences is not implicit: at any rate, it arises from the approach strategy of he or she who seeks to understand them. In this sense, scale can be considered an epistemological category: it is not inscribed in events and processes. Rather, when choosing a particular event or process, degrees and criteria of generalization and simplification and, finally, a selection of cutouts of reality is established for its study. The scale or scales adopted depend on the questions formulated and the objectives established for a given study. The scale refers to two fundamental processes in the production of knowledge. The first of these is the identification (cutting out) of spatial-temporal units that are significant for the analysis. The second is the relationship: the scale assumes a relational principle between different spatial-temporal units, and one of proportionality, hierarchy, differentiation, sequencing, or opposition (Benedetti, 2017).

A multiscale analysis implies articulating various scales in understanding social dynamics. Stated another way, a multiscale analysis implies breaking with the analysis of a single scale, hence, the term *monoscale*. A classic alternative is to observe the game established between different institutional hierarchical scales. For example, how has a certain social issue been addressed in the regulations of different institutional levels in a given country? Like in a *mamushka*, county divisions are found within provinces and these within departments in the case of Bolivia. Gonçalves and Gomes (2011) offer a similar approach for the zone in which the national borders of Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay meet. The wall of a closed condominium defines a disaggregated scale within the city. Within this city are sectors differentiated by streets (that act as functional borders) and, within these, lots divided by ligustrinas.

Nonetheless, the game of scales is usually not as orderly or hierarchical. At the same time and in the same place, the social process can be manifested on multiple spatial-temporal scales. Furthermore, a phenomenon that responds to conceptually different scales can interact. An example of this is if the borders of the extraction territory of a logging company overlapped with those of an indigenous nation, in addition to an urban border and an interprovincial border, to the extent that they become involved for some reason. These scales can be spatially distanced, juxtaposed, or superimposed.

To provide a concrete example, no one can be unaware of the relevance of the wall built by the United States to prevent or control the movement of persons coming from Mexico. The wall is a border on a national scale but that expresses itself in particular ways in each urban agglomeration such as Tijuana or Matamoros. Nonetheless, the daily itinerary of the inhabitants of these cities is organized based on many other borders of a smaller scope that are generated for other purposes and, therefore, with other scales. Thus, we can mention gated communities (Enríquez, 2007) that separate residential areas for the wealthy to the exclusion of the poor. Furthermore, a broad range of territorial manifestations of private property coexist that is expressed in the construction of walls intended to differentiate between those who can enter—and stay—and those who cannot: supermarkets, gastronomical spots, or leisure service

providers are produced and reproduced in walled-in geographic areas of a limited size. Clearly, capital has generated many kilometers of walls, fences, and barbed wire in the cities of the world to separate private space from public space (Figure 6). The more exclusive the spaces, the more solid their borders. Luxury territories (of some nation-states or certain private agents) are established within perimeter walls.

Figure 6. Urban borders

(A)



(B)



Source: Photograph by Alejandro Benedetti 2017.

Note: Electric wire and sign indicating that this property is protected (A). Access to a condominium (B). The city of San Pablo.

In line with Newman (2003), these considerations are established by a simple fact in the life of the majority of the world population: only a small proportion of people move across interstate borders on a daily basis. For the great majority, crossing over from one country to another is, at the most, something circumstantial and sporadic. In contrast, everyone crosses many other borders on a daily basis, sometimes without even perceiving them. Domestic, educational, health, commercial, and administrative activities are organized in a system of delimited and walled spaces (including, without a doubt, that of the nation-state) that are expressed in different and superimposed spatial-temporal scales. Multiple borders are crossed in daily life. Some are imperceptible and appear to be of no consequence, such as when a conveying line crosses intercounty borders. Others, however, operate as important social classifiers, such as a club only for men. Despite the overwhelming ordinariness of these borders, the social sciences are fundamentally interested in state and interstate borders to the point of rendering all other borders invisible.

National and Interstate Borders that are Not Seen

Trifinio designates the point at which the limits of three jurisdictions, or of any other type of area, come together. An equivalent expression is a *tripartite point*, and a derivation of this point is a *triple border*. In South America, the process of interstate delimitation that took place, mainly from the mid-19th century until the beginning of the 20th century, led to the formation of 13 interstate trifinios. The most widely studied South American interstate urban region, known as the *Triple Frontera*, was structured around the trifinio that was situated at the convergence of the Parana and Iguazu rivers. A search for the term “*triple frontera*” in Google scholar verifies that the majority of the results refer to this space.

The literature on this trifinio is abundant and varied. Most notable are works that focus on contraband and small-scale commerce that states consider extralegal (Cardin, 2011; Rabossi, 2004; Renoldi, 2015). Some authors have taken an interest in the geopolitical and security imaginary (Dreyfus, 2007), in religiosity (Giménez, Montenegro & Setton, 2005), and in tourism dynamics (Ferreira & Fraga, 2013) or processes of cooperation and physical integration (Rhi & Oddone, 2010), just to name a few. This tiny part of the articles, books, and doctoral theses regarding this trifinio are compared with the knowledge that we have regarding the remaining 12. In fact, some of the trifinios are practically unknown to academia, such as those formed among Argentina–Bolivia–Paraguay or among Bolivia–Brazil–Paraguay (Benedetti, 2018a).

Thus, the Triple Frontera is found in the group of what Lois (2017) called “spectacular borders.” The continuous academic attention paid to this border is the result of its government and the media association with narco-trafficking, terrorism, and organized crime, in addition to its proximity to the tourist destination of Iguazu waterfalls and two large hydroelectric centers. The concept is that one of the largest freshwater reserves on the planet is found there, and friction exists between Brazil and Argentina in their struggle to influence Paraguay. A similar situation exists with the Mexican–U.S. border, and that of Morocco with the Schengen space in which the death of hundreds of people who attempt to cross them every year, together with the declarations of presidents of powerful countries that announce the strengthening of walls, fences, and biopolitical controls, make these borders attractive and potential material for television shows. Many other borders, however, are considered “boring” because apparently “nothing happens” (as occurred in the majority of South American trifinios). This situation can be seen as an expression of the colonization of thought by the public and media agenda.

Before the 2000s, the interstate Argentinian–Uruguay border was scarcely considered by the geopolitical nationalist tradition and even less so by critical studies (Benedetti, 2015). The already classic book by Grimson (2000) that offered a panorama of Argentina’s borders did not include any studies regarding this case. In contrast, between 2006 and 2010, a kind of boom occurred. Not by coincidence, this boom occurred together with the development of an episode that had a notable media and political surge. Up until the beginning of the 2000s, the border between these countries made the news when the line of Argentinian automobiles wanting to cross over to the Uruguayan coast grew. This situation changed around the middle of this

decade when the inhabitants of the cities Fray Bentos and Gualeguaychú reacted to the imminent installation of a cellulose production plant motorized by transnational capital on the left bank of the Uruguay River in Uruguayan territory.

This local reaction was a scandal that led to the cutting off of the international bridge by those who were against the plant, as well as the presentation of demands before the La Haya International Court. During this period, many articles were published that turned the until then dormant *Argentina–Uruguay border object of study* into one of the most studied borders of South America (Alvarado & Reboratti, 2006; Crisorio, 2008; Gautreau & Merlinsky, 2008; Giarracca & Petz, 2007; Graña, 2010; Landau, 2006; Manero, 2009; Palermo, 2006; Palermo & Reboratti, 2007; Stang, 2008; and the list goes on). Several of these authors, neither before nor after, showed interest in understanding border dynamics. In fact, a few of them reflected in this category. Once the conflict passed, with few exceptions, academic interest in this border waned or flickered out.

Kramsch (2014) allude to social studies' predilection for spectacular borders. It remains to be asked whether the academic shift toward the analysis of conflicts that install themselves in a country's daily agenda expresses an academic interest in analyzing social processes with a well-founded theoretical-methodological predisposition or whether it responds to the imperatives of the visibility of scientific production through indexed scientific journals.

Privilege or Exclusivity to the Categories Border and Boundary

As I enumerated in previous pages, in the legislation of South American countries, to refer to borders as closing elements of national territory or as mechanisms that link neighboring countries, specific categories are used such as *border security zone*, *border zone*, *border security line*, *border belt*, *borderline strip*, or *border interaction region*. In contrast, in bilateral regulations (treaties and deals), the categories mentioned are *border integration zone*, *controlled integration area*, *border committee*, *integration committee*, *border single center*, *border integration zone*, among others (Benedetti & Bustinza, 2017). It is important to say that, with different variations, "border" is the category par excellence for accounting for isolated, lineal, or zonal mechanisms either situated on the periphery of national territory along its entire length or used simultaneously as territory dividing lines between two or three nation-states. Other documents used to negotiate territorial demarcation speak of *limits*, *international limits*, *border rivers*, and others.

Classic, state-centric geopolitics also tended to focus on limits and borders. Milia (2015, p. 16) differentiates them as follows: "A limit is a line that divides two state entities and their agencies, marking the respective territorial heritages, their jurisdictions, and competences. Border: Is the area adjacent to the limit. (...) limit is a line, border is an area." Something similar occurs with some geography dictionaries that frequently limit themselves to one or two of these categories. Johnston, Gregory and Smith (1981) only include *border* (understood as a line that marks the limit) and *front of expansion* (the margin of a nation's territory). Baud, Bourgeat and Bras (1997) exclusively incorporate the word *border*, within which *international border* and *internal border*, *border space*, and *pioneer fronts* appear. Lacoste (2003) works with the trilogy *border*,

limit, and *periphery*. López (2015) only coins the term *border* (which integrates limit, edge, wall, and others). It is important to state that an entire universe of phenomenon, processes, and situations remain tied to two nodal concepts: limits and border.

Academic production frequently mentions the notable polysemy and lability of a border as a concept. In social science texts, it is almost common to say that “this term is polysemic,” and it can be affirmed that this is a truth of Perogrullo because the majority of the words are polysemic. Since 1732, the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) considers “border” to have been a term within the language defined as: “The line and end point that separates and divides two kingdoms where one is the border of the other...”; also, “that which is positioned and placed in front of something else” (RAE, 1732). In turn, in the academy’s 1780 dictionary, a limit is “the end point, confine or boundary of possessions, lands or states. Confinia, ends” (RAE, 1780). In their origin, these two words are practically synonymous. Since then, similar to any other category with numerous revisions in the social sciences and that also forms part of a common lexicon, these words inexorably acquired polysemy to the extent that they had innumerable meanings in the different fields in which they were the object of study. Likewise, this situation grew to the extent that each state appropriated this notion, imprinting it with diverse meanings that at times opposed one another. Faced with the lability, the multiplicity of definitions, and the elusive nature of these concepts, to stabilize them, authors tended to select one of the three alternatives that I subsequently mention.

The first alternative differentiates border line from border zone, which is the equivalent of privileging the category of border—sometimes understood as a line, other times as a polygon—over that of limit. Thus, for Giménez (2007, p. 20):

The border, properly speaking... is no more than the dividing line that separates two or more States and is provisioned with customs officials and other forms of control of access, and the border strip... that is open on either side of the border in a longitudinal form.

In another proposal, it is affirmed that the

[b]order, in a preliminary reading, can be seen as... a line indicating the limits of sovereign power... Not unchanging, geopolitically, it configures, in reality, a zone and not a line; stated another way, a geographic zone between State systems, which many times exercise reciprocal influences (Sabedra, Colvero & Machado, 2016, p. 41).

In turn, Medina (2006, p. 719) affirms: “The term border designates very different and opposing realities, in some cases referring to barriers or dividing lines between differentiated spaces, and in others referring to an entrance and contact with the other side.”

Another alternative is the use of the prefix *trans* to the extent that the accent is placed in the junction or linkage of that which is on both sides. Thus, the notion of a transborder arises or, as Valenzuela (2014) proposes, “transborders.” Linares (2009) differentiates between the demarcation line, understood as “a cut in territory, something that was cut short, that only marks the separation, difference, the territorial, political and social limit of a determined space” (p. 51), and the transborder zone, a “territorial strip that surrounds the line of demarcation with the purpose of focusing transborder social relations that involve both sides of the national border” (p. 51).

Other alternative expressions are “border space” (Sánchez, 2013), “transborder region” (Pinto, 2011), or “transbordering processes” (Rückert, Carneiro & Uebel, 2015).

Lastly, some authors broaden the conceptual universe by incorporating a third alternative: edge. Various authors contend that, as a category, border is different from limit, and these are different from edge. For Valero (2002, p. 94-95), “borders maintain spatial continuity and therefore imply integration,” whereas limit is a “convention that marks the legal and territorial organization of the Nation-state.” González (2012, p. 105) affirms that “while limit is a lineal sign and mechanism, border is more complex because it makes visible and connects territory/territories... both border and limit are social and historical constructions.” Emmerich (2006, p. 4) proposes a sort of maturational differentiation between these concepts in their association with the state: “Nation-states were formed when clear ‘borders’ consolidated in the place of more imprecise ‘limits’ characteristic of more traditional States.” Finally, Dorfman and Cardin (2014, p. 33) work with three concepts: limits, border, and margin.

At this point, the question that arises is, should this entire constellation of processes, aspects, dimensions, scales, narrative genres, and disciplinary focuses call exclusively on the notions of border and limit and, eventually, edge? Do the Spanish and Portuguese languages offer no more options? I am inclined to think of two points. First, persistent state centrism in border studies leads to the review and questioning of the very concepts of state (border and limit) but without questioning their permanence as instruments of analysis. Second, the category of border (without qualifiers) became more of an obstacle than a fertile way of approaching issues and social problems where the processes of fragmentation, differentiation, configuration, cohesion, association, and spatial exclusion are discerned on multiple scales.

There is very simple empirical evidence. The Royal Spanish Academy’s dictionary has coined at least thirty terms of notable semantic proximity: extent (as in scope or width), fence (*barda*), barrier, edge, confine, dividing, end, front, border, bottom, facade, landmark, lateral, limit, boundary, line, mark, margin, dividing wall, milestone, end/limit, wall, rampart, rim, periphery, perimeter, end (*término*), transition, stripe, and fence (*valla*). These words have been whittled down by vernacular language, regulation, and academic practice. They refer to spatial, material, or symbolic entities that are used to account for some dimension, characteristic, particularity, regularity, or spatial relation. Sometimes they are associated with lines and other times with points or polygons of little extension. In all cases, they denote configuration, separation, and relation of greater geographic areas. They catalyze relationships of cooperation but also tensions and aggressions. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the analytic distinctions that these categories allow us to establish, their specificities, and their heuristic potential. I want to point out that this can be a stimulating alternative to continue breaking with the nationalism and state centrism that continue to pervade borderland studies.

Lastly, for this reason, I consider it necessary to differentiate border as a generic, analytic, broad, abstract, and flexible category that forms part of the system of concepts (such as territory, time, and processes) used in the social sciences. In generic terms, it can be considered that the category of border accounts for a variety of social constructed, spatial, and temporarily situated entities. These entities can express, simultaneously or not, three fundamental spatial properties: 1) the configuration or cohesion of greater entities; 2) separation or disjunction; and 3) the relation and

conjunction between spatial entities. In specific terms, borders tend to receive names such as walls, limits, peripheries, and edges, among others, in addition to border. Many concepts of border are specific and are used in unique contexts, inside and outside of academia, some of which I have already mentioned.

Conclusions

This article offered an interpretation of the recent development in Latin American studies regarding the concept of the border, insofar as this category is understood within the social sciences, and charting two paths for development in the process. On the one hand, this category attempted to draw attention to some traces of the nation (that is expressed in state-centric and monoscale analyses) and nationalism (that is discerned in the absence of methodological reflexivity). On the other hand, and to complement another study conducted by the author (Benedetti, 2018b), I proposed some key approaches in the discipline of geography that would enable us to advance toward a renewed epistemology for borderland studies or—to use a neologism—*borderology*.

The analysis that I conducted can be summarized in these seven propositions:

1. State-centric epistemologies continue to be used: the relationship between the category of border (without qualifiers) and the form of the nation-state is naturalized.
2. The analysis of occurrences that take place in the periphery of national territory tend to be privileged, in its external ties, while forgetting their necessary relationship with the center. In doing so, a sort of exotic view of borders persists.
3. The viewpoint of the neighboring country is exceedingly generalized based on categories generated by one's own country (and that many times even originate in state regulations).
4. An isolationist conception of national territory persists as a lingering trace of nationalist geopolitics.
5. There continues to be a differentiated circulation of numerous studies on national and international borders on the one hand, and a scarcity of studies regarding borders that refer to other kinds of spatial-temporal entities (urban, farming, among others) on the other hand.
6. Media and government agendas still weigh heavily on academia. For this reason, "spectacular borders" are better known than those that do not fit this category.
7. Two categories are privileged or granted exclusivity: border and limit. Not coincidentally, these categories are also privileged by state regulation, leaving the heuristic potential of many others unknown.

Latin American borderland studies have sought to overcome the nationalist and essentialist tradition that characterized classical approaches. However, it appears to me that there are still some challenges ahead. As I suggested, the academic agenda is highly contaminated by media and government interests. Many border locations have been forgotten by both academia and the government. Likewise, there is an overwhelming privileging of studies that focus on borders associated with nation-state dynamics, whereas other phenomena that also condense borders have been ignored and are only recently problematized as such. This case addresses urban borders.

To speak of urban borders does not mean that the border category becomes less precise. I am inclined to consider that no category is precise or imprecise *per se*. As Ortiz affirms (2004, p. 11):

The social sciences subsist on concepts. Sculpting these concepts is an art, not necessarily in the artistic sense of the word but in the sense of a craft, an act [...] They cannot be produced in a series, as in the case of the old Ford orthodoxy. It is necessary to take them, one by one, in their idiosyncrasy, their integrity.

New concepts of border exist that we need to finish sculpting using decolonized, critical, and flexible thought.

From my point of view, to achieve this sculpting, it is fundamental to break with the exclusivity of this concept's ties with the nation-state. I consider that borders are not only produced through discontinuities, inequalities, and spatial fragmentations that are more or less evident and occur at the national scale. However, this should not be confused with forgetting their importance and believing that we are moving toward "a world without borders." In contrast, we live in a world that has increasingly more borders that manifest themselves in a persistent manner. The dedication of such effort to study the external borders of the nation-state has led to the neglect of other realities that are closer to us and of a daily nature. Borders also catalyze unique forms of resistance, transgression, solidarity, and unrest that occur in rural areas and cities. Different episodes, processes, and situations produce borders that allow some to exclude, violate, push, subjugate, or subsume others. It seems to me that here is the path to follow to continue renovating our understanding of the border as a social phenomenon.

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