Towards a Theory of Borders

Florian Schneider

Essay – November 18, 2011

According to Florian Schneider, researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, the world's current border policy is based on the outdated liberal ideology of the nation-state. He advocates the development of a new border regime in which the key concept is 'transnationality'.



Naked Against Borders: Activists stripping on the beach of Tarifa. – Photo Armin Smailovic

A border is always a matter of imagination. It appears as a feigned condition that is supposed to limit mobility for certain people and in a certain situation. Allegedly, a border marks a distinction: it may be visible to some and not to others. It may be considered artless or genuine when viewed from one perspective, but critical or bogus from another.

What seems like a truism at first glance is precisely what makes it so difficult to talk about borders, let alone act on them. In order not to be rendered useless, a border needs to refuse any attempt to abstract from its latent ambiguity in practical terms.

Borders are ambigrams: illusionary images that depict two mutually exclusive motives. This becomes evident, for instance, at specific locations around the Mediterranean Sea, where the two different mobility regimes of luxury tourism and clandestine migration overlap and holiday resorts are situated next to detention camps without disturbing each other's presence at all.

It comes as no surprise that the inherently uncertain meaning of borders has turned out to be both the subject matter and the structuring device of great narratives and mythologies of migration: from the parting of the Red Sea that saved the lives of the Hebrews and destroyed the army of the Egyptians to *Star Trek*, which was originally pitched as a 'Wagon Train to the Stars', across a new frontier of outer space; from the Underground Railroad, a secret network of safe houses and clandestine routes that helped slaves escape to the free states in the North of the USA and to Canada, to the metaphorical belittlement of the EU border regime as 'Fortress Europe'.

To leave one's country behind, to flee from persecution, to seek happiness or at least a better life somewhere else – if not sanctified or bureaucratically approved beforehand, the crossing of a border implies, in the first place, a collision with or at least the change of a regime of mobility that in very specific terms constitutes a certain notion of freedom of movement.

Rather than enclosure, rather than confinement to a country or any other disciplinary regime, the postmodern border regime is characterized by a deregulation of mobility that increasingly becomes subject to ad-hoc management: temporarily granted in real time, it can be revoked as quickly as it was accorded – without any need for further mediation. It is enforced by a system of control that is no longer limited to specific checkpoints or focus areas: it is in place virtually everywhere.

Borders fold and shift inward or outward, they are advanced into third states and expanded into the hinterland. Controls are no longer limited to the margins of a nation-state; they cover the traffic junctions of inner cities and supra-regional traffic routes to the same extent as they are extended into semi-public or private spheres.

There is a ubiquity of control. The drawing up of borderlines is becoming virtual, and its repressive character can hardly be generalized any more: it could happen here as well as there, for this reason or another, and with a series of different consequences.

Outdated Ideology

Yet the discourse on borders is still ruled by the predominance of a somewhat outdated kind of liberal ideology, which operates through patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Regardless of the intention, whether used in favour of migrants or at the service of xenophobic resentment, the dichotomies of inclusion and exclusion trace back to the core concept of the modern nation-state as the unique reference point: the idea of a homogenized and unified people as collective agency and the resulting need for a high degree of cohesion through identity.

In the last instance, any understanding of borders as a device that regulates inclusion or exclusion affirms a sieve principle that is supposed to act as a filter. It reduces the complexities of migratory movements to a single plot that switches between the alternate binaries of 'in' or 'out'. The more it feeds the fiction of the nation state, the less it is capable of grasping the paradoxical but increasingly relevant realities of transnational mobility and immobility.

The illusion of a governmentality able to restrict freedom of movement on a global scale, the belief, as naïve as it is popular, that politics could reduce migration to 'zero-migration', makes claims to be considered as a matter of course. In reality, it lacks any empirical basis, and is mere propaganda that has been spreading only most recently.

It has come with apocalyptic scenarios of a massive influx of so-called illegal immigrants into Europe and North America, it has been accompanied by the fable that misery and poverty are causing movements of people at a scale hitherto unseen, and it has generated a number of related mythologies, such as the notorious 'brain drain', unproductive money

remittances, or failed integration, just to name a few of the most popular rumours.

The fact is that borders are beyond control.[1] But if it cannot prevent what it promises to hold off, what then is the function of the border? Obviously, the criminalization of migration creates the conditions for the over-exploitation of a migrant labour force in the informal markets of late capitalism.

And those who cross the border without the necessary paperwork may experience the passage from one regime of mobility into another as the nullification of any remaining subjectivity. It is an extreme process of desubjectification – often characterized by living in ways that are almost unliveable.

As soon as the border is crossed, engineers turn into cleaners, academics into sex workers, professors into casual farm labourers or domestic workers. Pushed beyond the conditions and limits of what is often described as 'human', their experiences become a sort of negative freedom.

Scandalization

Mainstream media regularly provide footage that illustrates what is supposed to be going on out there at the border: reckless fortune seekers trying to make it across the borders against overwhelming odds. It is a scandal in the truest sense of the word:[2] in order to enter countries like Spain, Italy or Greece, people are climbing fences, squeezing into overcrowded boats, hiding under trucks or trains.

Not only does the border justify itself by a scandal, it is performed through a scandal. The grammar of its performativity consists of scandalization: a continuous loop of images and imaginaries that are widely publicized in order to produce allegations of wrong-doing or disgrace. In that respect, the postmodern border regime appears as a global soap opera that reiterates what everybody seems to know anyway. Its looping plot is based solely on the implicitness of unwritten laws that regulate that which is permitted to some and not to others.

There is no point in exposing this scheme, since any further critique on a practical level risks increasing the efficiency of its performance. Scandalization transforms an otherwise ignorable event in order to solicit a moral outrage whose purpose is nothing but the reaffirmation of the border – a border that may otherwise be invisible, disputed or disbelieved.

As the product of a mixture of both real and imaginary incidents, it suppresses any distinction between certain degrees of documentary value and what needs to be considered fiction. The result of this blend is a single-purpose device: the scandal affirms that the border is still there, still true.

Its conceptual homogenization of real and unreal, documentary and fictitious elements reaffirms a collective identity thrown into crisis by the fading power of nation-states. In perfectly postmodern fashion, it makes it possible to enjoy and cooperate with a regime that relies on frail and ineffectual facts on the ground, as long as they provide the illusion of a border that can be controlled. Then one can even worry about its excesses and moderately criticize its violent character.

Victimization

But the other side of the coin is no less irritating. The scandalization of the border comes with concurrent strategies of victimization. First of all the criminalized migrants are deprived of any agency and turned into victims. At the mercy of human traffickers, kidnapped and abducted, they are reduced to human beings that merit only sympathy.

Left-wing and human-rights activism often falls into the same trap when it reduces migration to misery and calamity and understands it as a logical result of the movements of capital, as its unsavoury aftereffect or appendix.

Even contemporary right-wing populism can be conceived as a set of mirroring strategies that compound the victimization of migrants. In the aftermath of multiculturalism, right-wing populism mobilizes the desire of a non-migrant, anti-urban mentality to become a minority itself: it inverts the patterns of victimization. It reverse-engineers virtues that were formerly known as progressive. It recycles and reads against the grain the ideology of inclusion and exclusion, the morals of participation.

Condemning right-wing populism as racist or xenophobic is missing the crucial point: white, male, middle-class or heterosexual subjectivities that have usually been identified as perpetrators and that are gradually losing their privileged positions suddenly manage to seize the opportunity to frame themselves as victims, as an endangered species, or as a native population that will soon be overrun by heinous invaders.

As far as it addresses a certain need to treat the fading certitude of Western supremacy in the sunset years of its world domination, both the scandalization of borders and the subsequent victimization of migrants may turn out to be quite a successful therapy for the collective psyche. But its pain-relieving and alleviating effect is only temporary, and there is not even any great imperative to unmask it.

Instead there is an urgent need for a theory of borders that rejects the permanent temptation to remain descriptive and illustrative, to act in an ultimately affirmative sense and to provide a decoration of the border by indulging in recurrent tropes of charity and compassion, nostalgia and resentment.

As soon as the border becomes actual and concrete, every sign is subjected to a wide range of possible interpretations due to ever-changing perspectives. The imaginary character of the border is not only constituted by the deficiencies of laws and a lack of interpretive authority: first and foremost it manifests itself in an indiscernibility of real and unreal, an undecidability of true and false.

The phenomena of borders result from the experiences that the distinctions between these terms keep changing round. The constant exchange of meaning renders any form of independent, let alone subversive, thinking almost impossible.

Transnationality

The only way out is a radically different approach. A theory of contemporary borders has to dare a maximum degree of abstraction as the only possibility to undo the picture puzzle. It needs to take into account a series of hypotheses.

First, the border is not the limit but the differentiator of mobility. In its postmodern condition it does not restrict freedom of movement as such: it modulates it. As soon as it is seen from a global perspective, a border appears as a circuit rather than as a line.

The border regime operates as an amplifier. In all its paradoxicality it marks a shift from actuality to potentiality. But it acts in a sense that always contains within it its own potential to not be. What is at stake at the border is a very specific notion of impossibility.

It is a border that manages its violations rather than ignores them, let alone prevents them from happening. It is subject to permanent experimentation in a vast laboratory set up to prove under varying circumstances that there is no absolute freedom of movement, only a relative one.

Nevertheless, the concept of freedom of movement needs to be understood as the derivative of both a desire for autonomy as well as of its limitless postponement in societies of control, amid ever more convoluted regimes of communication and mobility.

A notion of 'transnationality' could be the vanishing point in the distorted view of such a theory of borders. Somewhere out of the field, beyond the borders of framed reality, outside homogenized space and time, it anticipates something that is neither seen nor understood, but nevertheless perfectly present within the everyday life of both a mobile livelihood and social movements.

Transnationality is a radically different form of organizing and unorganizing that transcends the idea of the nation-state as the only reference of different degrees of mobility. Instead, it dares to imagine the fragments of an absolute freedom of movement.

Florian Schneider is a filmmaker and media artist based in Munich and Brussels. He is one of the initiators of the campaign *Kein Mensch ist illegal* and curated the performance project *Dictionary of War*. He teaches at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art and the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht.

Footnotes

1. In 2001, the EU Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs, António Vitorino, acknowledged that Europe had lost its battle against clandestine migration. 'Europe must avoid repeating the zero-immigration mistakes of the past,' he said, concluding with surprising precision, 'restrictive laws have done nothing to halt the flow of clandestine migrants.' On the contrary, 'the ability to control migration has shrunk as the desire to do so has increased. Borders are largely beyond control and little can be done to really cut down on immigration,' as the economist Jagdish N. Bhagwati argued in 2003.
2. Scandal derives from the Latin *scandere*, to climb. But there is yet another, no less compelling, etymological perspective: the border as *skandalon*, which is the Ancient Greek word for a stumbling block.

Tags

Biopolitics, Control

This text was downloaded on November 24, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/towards-a-theory-of-borders