



BORDERS, BORDERLANDS, AND FRONTIERS, GLOBAL.

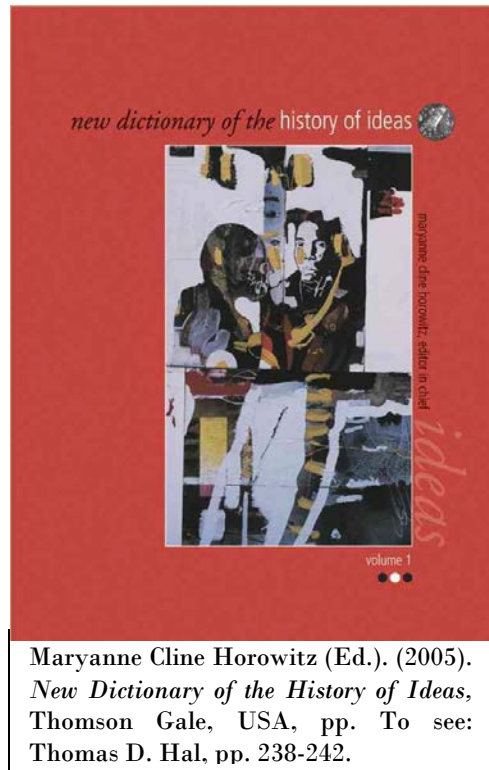
At first glance the concept of borders, borderlands, or frontiers would seem to be straightforward. A border or boundary is a line on a map delineating a territorial boundary or the limit of a political jurisdiction. Borders are primarily, but far from exclusively, seen as properties of and under the control of states. Nevertheless, this has generally not always been the case. Even in the contemporary world where such an interpretation often does apply, the concept of borders frequently becomes much more complicated.

Complications of a Seemingly Simple Concept

The first complication is semantic. In many European languages, including British English, the term *frontier* is a synonym for border. In the Americas, and especially in the United States, *border* means boundary, between countries, between the states of the United States, or between provinces in Mexico or Canada. *Frontier*, typically but not exclusively, refers to a historical boundary between expanding European settlements and indigenous settlements. Thus in English usage in the United States, frontiers and borders are very different concepts and refer to quite distinct social markers. This usage has often been generalized to any sort of border zone or borderland between different sets of peoples coming into contact. It is frequently extended metaphorically to refer to any boundary between known and unknown, an extension discussed further at the end of this entry.

The second complication is historical. Since the founding of the first states in human history in Mesopotamia some five thousand years ago, boundaries or borders have generally been vague, imprecise zones in which political—and to a lesser extent economic, social, and cultural—control fades away. That is, borders, boundaries, borderlands, and frontiers are zones or regions with some dimension, where there is a shift, more or less gradual, from control by one state to another or to an absence of state control. An important corollary of this complication is that the lack of precision is not necessarily a problem in semantics or conceptualization. Rather, it is often an accurate reflection of an actual fuzziness of boundary zones.

A third complication is that at different times and in different places these concepts have had different meanings, and they have been implemented in different ways. Often a word translated as *border* from one language to another had behind it a different meaning, a different concept of markers, and even different ethical and political implications of what that “border” entailed.



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A fourth complication is that the meanings of these terms and how they have been implemented have changed over many millennia. Throughout these changes there have often been disconnects or divergences between their social reality and what various actors (individuals or states) thought they should be.

Finally, there is a problem of scale. Almost any border or boundary zone, when viewed from a sufficient distance, appears as a sharp line. When viewed up close, however, it becomes a zone having some width and often having blurry edges. So from a central capital, a border or frontier may seem precise. Yet from the perspectives of those living on or near the boundary or frontier, or even from the perspectives of those charged with administering or controlling it, it can be quite vague and often contentious.

Defining Borders, Borderlands, and Frontiers

In order to discuss these issues it is useful to present somewhat general definitions of these terms. The following definitions carry two caveats or cautions. First, as with any generalized concepts, they will not be precise for all uses. Second, these terms shift meaning over time and through space. Still, the following are useful for further discussion: *boundary*—a demarcation indicating some division in spatial terms; *border*—an international boundary line; when a border is seen as a zone it is often called a borderland or the borderlands; *frontier*—a zone of contact with or without a specified boundary line. The term *borderlands* straddles the distinction between frontier and border and is often used as a synonym for frontier as a zone.

The contemporary concept of a border as a sharp, precise line stems from two sources. First is the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which established the modern nation-state system under which a state had full sovereign control of the lands and peoples within its borders. The second source is the development of private property as a concept, in which one individual, or state, had exclusive rights to land or territory. While in the early twenty-first century these conditions are taken as “normal” or “natural,” they are neither. Rather, the idea of a border as a precise line grew out of the needs of states to define boundaries. The idea of exclusive control of land developed from the transformation of control of land from a matter of use rights to a concept of land as an economic commodity, that is, something that can be bought and sold. In other words, these contemporary conceptualizations, which are often seen as a part of the process of modernization, were themselves socially constructed under very specific historical, political, and economic conditions.

In premodern times, that is, approximately before the sixteenth century C.E., land was most often thought of as a resource to which individuals, or more typically groups, had rights to use. In many nonstate societies, if the individual or group did not use the land—usually for a considerable time—then they lost their use rights. This is almost always distinctly different, however, from the European concept of *terra nullius*, which means “empty or unused land.” For those groups who foraged for a livelihood or who practiced shifting agriculture, “use” of land often included long fallow periods. To groups that practiced intensive agriculture—from classic civilizations to modern states—such fallow land appeared empty, hence unclaimed and available for settlement. These differences in how rights to land are conceptualized have been the source of much conflict over many millennia between



agricultural states and nonstate peoples. For example, such conflicting viewpoints are at the root of the myth that the island of Manhattan was “purchased.”

Dutch occupiers presumed that they were buying a commodity with exclusive rights. Indigenous peoples thought that in consideration for a gift marking friendship they were granting rights to joint use of common lands. At least two caveats are in order in regard to such conflicts. First, nonstate peoples could and did come into conflict over use of land. Indeed, one of the major mechanisms of the spread of humans derives from such conflicts. Although they were sometimes resolved through fighting, such conflicts were more often resolved by one group moving deeper into unoccupied land, which over time led to the spread of humans over most of the earth. Second, many claims by civilizations or states that land was unused, or was *terra nullius*, were in fact veiled rationalizations for seizing land from peoples who had less complex social or political organization and who did not use the land as intensively.

From the development of the first states some five thousand years ago until the early twenty-first century, though abating somewhat since the Peace of Westphalia (1648), land could be, and often was, seized by conquest. To be ethical, such seizures often needed some sort of justification, such as a “just war,” reparation for previous harm done, or evidence of illegitimate use by those from whom the land was seized. Obviously, such claims could, and often were, readily invented and rationalized. Still, states did develop a territorial sense and became concerned with boundaries, borders, borderlands, and frontiers. A primary concern, however, was control, mainly political and economic but sometimes also social and cultural.

Even constructed barriers, such as the Great Wall of China or Hadrian’s Wall in northern Scotland that marked the edge of the Roman Empire, barriers that did constitute explicit boundaries, were primarily used to control movements of peoples and goods. They were seldom intended as absolute barriers. Such walls and other barriers were often constructed with military and control functions in mind. They served to regulate interactions between the state or empire and the surrounding groups, whether those were other empires, states, or nonstate peoples. They were constructed to keep members within the state or empire, to keep others out, and to regulate which individuals, groups, or objects could cross the barrier as well as why, when, and under what circumstances such crossings could take place. Such barriers often marked a shift from direct control to indirect control, wherein local leaders controlled the area, but via assorted agreements with the state or empire. In essence, such barriers were not sharp or precise lines but rather the visible centerlines of zones of transition. Some people tried to avoid these controls. Such avoidance is typically defined as “criminal.” Thus borders give rise to smuggling and smugglers.

Frontier as Membrane

These sorts of considerations led the historian Richard W. Slatta to describe frontiers as membranes. This is a singularly appropriate metaphor for frontiers and to somewhat lesser extent for borders, borderlands, and boundaries. Membranes are differentially permeable with respect to what may pass through them and what is blocked. Their permeability often is different for opposite directions. That is, some goods are allowed to pass, say horses entering China from the central Asian steppes



and silk leaving. Other things, such as armies, are not allowed to pass. Horses came into China but seldom left, unless mounted by soldiers seeking retribution for raids; silk left China but seldom came in. Membranes have thickness. When viewed from a distance they seem thin, almost like lines. When viewed up close they are zones through which objects, people, and ideas may pass.

Borderlands and Frontiers as Zones of Ethnic Change

Because borderlands and frontiers are zones between different human organizations, they are also zones of intense interactions of objects, peoples, and ideas. These interactions can range from very peaceful, mutually beneficial relationships to incessant warfare. Oftentimes, several types of interactions along the range from peaceful to warlike can occur simultaneously. For instance, along the northern frontier of New Spain (what is now the southwestern United States) various indigenous groups would have peaceful trading relationships with some Spanish villages while they were raiding others. This also occurred among various indigenous groups. Indeed, at indigenous groups and villages but varied from family group to family group on both sides. In short, frontiers are zones of intense interactions, often of several types at the same time. These interactions can change rapidly with local circumstances. This locally variable volatility is a special characteristic of frontiers and borderlands.

These were and are zones where different products and processes mixed and intermingled, often leading to the development of new products and processes. On frontiers one process of this sort, called ethnogenesis, is especially salient. Ethnogenesis is the formation of a new ethnic group via the amalgamation of two or more previously distinct groups. With the interactions of different peoples, interbreeding and intermarriage were not rare, even in cases in which one or both sides tried to prevent such mixing. When the mixing became sufficiently regular and frequent, it could give rise to an entirely new group. The Metís in Canada and Genízaros in northern New Spain are examples. The Metís grew from unions between French fur traders—typically males—and indigenous women. These long-term relations were mutually beneficial. French fur traders gained access to furs collected and processed through their wives' groups (such unions were frequently polygynous, with the trader having more than one wife, often from different groups). The indigenous groups gained access to European trade goods acquired through traders who were relatives and hence under considerable kinship obligation to trade fairly. In the early twenty-first century the Metís are still negotiating with the Canadian government for recognition as a people distinct from both indigenous or first nations and from European immigrants.

In northern New Spain there was an active trade in captives, both indigenous peoples captured by Spaniards during fighting and Spaniards captured by indigenous peoples; in both cases, the captives were typically women or children. Indigenous children raised in Spanish communities developed a separate identity that was neither fully Spanish nor fully of their natal indigenous group. If an individual Genízaro or his family rose to prominence, typically as a frontier soldier or sometimes through economic success, he or they could be assimilated into Hispanic society. When the United States annexed the region, the trade in captives



rapidly ceased, and the Genízaro population gradually assimilated into either Hispanic or indigenous societies.

The anthropologist Frederick Barth describes another role for boundaries with respect to ethnic identity. Barth argues that ethnicity is not defined by its content but rather by the boundary or boundaries that separate one group from another. This seemingly counterintuitive view developed from studies showing that when individuals or families crossed ethnic boundaries (which may or may not coincide with political boundaries), they often changed identity. Such events are not all that rare in the ethnographic record. Furthermore, some individuals and families made such changes more than once in a single lifetime. Typically, such changes are associated with changes in ecological adaptation. Chinese farmers who moved onto the steppe and became pastoralists typically joined a nomad group and took up that group's culture. If or when they moved back and again took up farming, they again became Chinese. In such cases, not only is the border or frontier a membrane, but it also is a catalyst for identity change. As noted, such ethnic boundaries seem most common where local ecology forces changes in productive strategies.

Changes in climate and especially the development of new technologies allow such borders to shift over time. Recent research by the biologist Mark Pagei and the anthropologist Ruth Mace supports Barth's interpretation. Pagei and Mace argue that boundaries help maintain a sense of group and enhance social solidarity and cooperation, but often at the cost of promoting conflict with other groups. Thus boundaries and borders play an important role in group formation, even while generating conflict between groups.

The Puzzle of Borderlands and Frontiers

These complications give rise to yet another, enduring aspect of borders, borderlands, and frontiers. On first glance they all seem the same or certainly similar. But with closer examination, each border region seems unique. This puzzling aspect of frontiers has fascinated and frustrated scholars who study frontiers comparatively. The sociologist Thomas D. Hall argues that this puzzling quality derives from the complex way in which frontiers are formed. In a nutshell, frontiers are constructed by the interaction of two or more different groups. The location, extent, duration, and changes in any specific frontier zone entail a complex mixture of factors external to the frontier zone and local factors, all mediated by the actions of the peoples who live in the frontier zone.

The broad similarity among frontiers derives from the small number of factors, in the following example numbering five, that shape most frontiers:

- the types of groups that come into interaction (three types: nonstate, tributary [or ancient] states or empires, or capitalist [or modern] states);
- the type of boundary involved (four types: local economic, political or military, long-distance economic, and cultural);
- the types of nonstate groups (three types, such as those conventionally labeled bands, tribes, or chiefdoms);
- the type of frontier (four types: buffer, barrier, internal, or external); and
- the type of ecological environment (four types: steppe, sown, hill, or valley).



These few factors, when divided into only a few basic categories, will generate 576 different types of frontiers. This immense variety—which could easily be expanded with finer categorization—explains why each specific frontier seems unique. The point of this example is *not* the specific list of factors *nor* the number of specific categories into which they are divided. Rather, it is that with only a few factors divided into a small number of categories an immense variety of frontiers or borderlands can be described. This then “solves” the puzzle of how and why all frontiers seem similar at first glance but on closer examination seem unique. The similarity derives from the small number of factors involved; the uniqueness from the large number of ways they can be combined.

Borders, Borderlands, and Frontiers as Sites of Social Change

Because of the various complex interactions that occur along borders, in borderlands, and on frontiers, such places are very fertile areas for studying how social, political, economic, and cultural changes occur and how individuals and groups both shape and are shaped by those changes. They are zones where the local and the global interact very intensely and hence exhibit processes that are rarely, if ever, seen in more central areas.

This is another reason why the study of borderlands and frontiers is often so fascinating to scholars. Frontiers are often seen as sources of change, as in the famous frontier thesis of the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932): that the frontier zones of the United States shaped the country’s national character. Turner has often been criticized for having the causality backwards: It was the central areas that shaped the frontier. The literatura of these debates is enormous, even leading some U.S. historians to question the utility of the concept of “the frontier.” A major problem here is in the definite article: “the frontier” was in reality many, highly fluid, and changeable frontiers.

One very positive result of these debates has been the development of a growing body of writings on comparative frontiers. By comparing different frontiers, scholars have begun to uncover both common, underlying factors and their various unique constellations. Such studies have done much to further blur the distinctions between history and sociology, anthropology, and geography. A conventional, if caricatured, view of these disciplines is that history is idiographic, concerned with painting detailed pictures, whereas sociology, anthropology, and geography are nomothetic or seeking lawlike regular patterns. This conventional view is flawed in at least two ways. First, it sees the two approaches as opposites or as in conflict rather than complementary. Second, it fails to recognize that there is a vast array of possibilities of combining both types of explanations and descriptions. Studies of frontiers or borderlands, especially comparative studies, must combine both approaches in ways that often render disciplinary distinctions unrecognizable. Phrased alternatively, comparative studies of frontiers are inherently multi- and interdisciplinary. Thus the comparative study of frontiers itself forms a kind of intellectual borderland.



Borderlands and Frontiers as Metaphors

No discussion of borders, borderlands, and frontiers would be complete without some attention to the metaphorical use of these terms. Most readers of English are familiar with such phrases as “the frontiers of medicine,” “the frontiers of science,” and “space, the final frontier.” Behind these metaphors is a state-centered view of borders, borderlands, and frontiers in which such areas mark a zone of transition from well-known territory under control of the state to little-known territory not under control of the state. This metaphor breaks down, however, if pushed too far. Spatial frontiers most often had residents on the other side who were obviously not unknown to themselves. Indeed, at first contact, from each side (and there often are or were borders or frontiers with more than two sides) the other side(s) seemed unknown and were seen as strange or mysterious by the other side(s).

The unknown quality of the “other side of the border or frontier” simultaneously generates curiosity, promise, threat, and fear. It is this combination of reactions brought on by approaching unknown and often uncontrolled territory, peoples, or ideas that is the key difference between frontiers and borderlands on the one hand and a border or boundary in the conventional sense on the other. Presumably with a conventional border, what is on the other side is known but is held separate and distinct by the border. The combination of mystery and danger accompanied by promise and curiosity seems to be at the root of the popularity of the use of frontier (and less frequently borderlands) as a metaphor. In that sense, of course, it is singularly apt for describing or labeling a transition from the known to the unknown.

Thus concepts of borders, borderlands, and frontiers seem at first glance straightforward, simple, and clear. Yet when examined more closely, they are mysterious, complex, and murky. This is why they are often regions of such fascination to scholars and thinkers in many disciplines. Also because of their transitional qualities, they are often excellent sites to study a wide variety of social, cultural, political, and economic change.

See also Ethnicity and Race; Migration; State, The; World Systems Theory, Latin America.

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- Gobernador Gregores -
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