Toward a Comparative History
of Borderlands*

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N ATIONAL borders are political constructs, imagined projections of
territorial power. Although they appear on maps in deceptively
precise forms, they reflect, at least initially, merely the mental images
of politicians, lawyers, and intellectuals. Their practical consequences
are often quite different. No matter how clearly borders are drawn on
official maps, how many customs officials are appointed, or how many
watchtowers are built, people will ignore borders whenever it suits
them. In doing so, they challenge the political status quo of which
borders are the ultimate symbol. People also take advantage of borders
in ways that are not intended or anticipated by their creators. Revolu-
tionaries hide behind them, seeking the protection of another sover-
eignty; local inhabitants cross them whenever services or products
are cheaper or more attractive on the other side; and traders are quick
to take advantage of price and tax differentials. Because of such unin-

tended and often subversive consequences, border regions have their own social dynamics and historical development.

Up to now, the study of borders and borderlands has been concerned mostly with legal, geographical, and geopolitical questions.[1] Recently, transnational migration has been added as a concern. Here, we are more interested in the historical effects of borders than in the politico-legal aspects of their creation. We look at the struggles and adaptations that the imposition of a border causes in the regions bisected by it, and we posit the need for comparative historical research into the history of borderlands. But we are also interested in the question of how the social dynamics of border regions affect the formation and territorialization of states. These questions should be studied systematically because they refer to important historical processes in the modern world.

Our point of departure is that we can properly understand the often unintended and unanticipated social consequences of national borders only by focusing on border regions and comparing them through time and space. In the words of John W. House, "there is an urgent need both for empirical and comparative studies of a dynamic nature for [border] situations, whether these involve confrontational or cooperative relationships, and for a more coherent set of theoretical frames within which to study such situations."[2] Traditionally, border studies have adopted a view from the center; we argue for a view from the periphery. In this article we identify some of the central factors involved in the history of borderlands. Rather than focusing on the rhetoric and intentions of central governments, we look at the social realities provoked by them. We outline the dimensions of this reality and suggest conceptual tools to tackle it. Finally, we suggest some new directions in the study of borderlands.[3]

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[1] See, for instance, J. R. V. Prescott, Political Frontiers and Boundaries (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987). For a recent example, see Malcolm Anderson, Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World (London: Polity Press, 1996). An overview and a preliminary bibliography of borders can be found in René Barendse, Borderlands: A Theoretical Survey, Occasional Paper 4 (Rotterdam: Centre of Border Studies, 1994).

[2] John W. House, Frontier on the Rio Grande: A Political Geography of Development and Social Deprivation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 264. In the quotation, we have substituted the word border for frontier.

[3] Of course, our perspective is not completely new. An early example of this approach can be found in Richard Hartshorne, "A Survey of the Boundary Problems in Europe," in Geographic Aspects of International Relations, edited by Charles C. Colby (Chicago, 1938; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), pp. 163–213. More recently, seminal research on the history of borderlands has been done by such scholars as Peter Sahlins, A. I. Asiwaju, and Lawrence Herzog. It is worth stressing that our article focuses exclusively on land borders, since maritime borders have very distinct characteristics.

BORDERS AND BORDERLANDS: SOME CONCEPTS

Terms indicating the limits of social groups are as old as human history. All languages have evolved such terms. These often refer to different ways of conceptualizing the contrast between "self" and "other," so that translating them is full of pitfalls. For example, such etymologically related words as French *frontière*, Spanish *frontera*, and English *frontier* have widely different connotations. As a result, academic discussions on borders are often confused because of a lack of conceptual consensus.[4] Moreover, within the anglophone world we encounter confusion resulting from differences in the use of the terms *frontier*, *boundary*, and *border*. There appears to be a tendency for U.S. scholars to use the first, and for British scholars to use the other two, but that is not all there is to it. The terms also imply a conceptual difference. *Boundary* is often used in diplomatic discussions on the precise location of borders, but it also has a more general meaning, pointing at the dividing line between different peoples or cultures.[5] When discussing psychological differences and when emphasizing regions rather than lines drawn on maps, the term *border* is normally preferred. *Frontier* commonly refers to the territorial expansion of nations or civilizations into "empty" areas. This expansion (and its supposed consequences for national political cultures) has been famously analyzed by Frederick Jackson Turner.[6]

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[4] For early discussions, see Lucien Febvre, "*Frontière*: The Word and the Concept" (1928), in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Lucien Febvre*, edited by Peter Burke (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1973), pp. 208–18; and Ladis K. D. Kristof, "The Nature of Frontiers and Boundaries," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 49 (1959): 269–82. See also Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, "Les frontières: Vision historique," *Relations internationales* 63 (fall 1990): 229–42.

[5] E.g., Fredrik Barth, ed., *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Differences* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969); Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1985); and Anthony P. Cohen, ed., *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986). Also, Raimundo Strassoldo, "Boundaries in Sociological Theory: A Reassessment," in *Cooperation and Conflict in Border Regions*, edited by R. Strassoldo and G. Delfi (Milan: Angeli, 1982), pp. 245–71. In the contemporary United States, many people have come to use the term *frontier* or *frontera* to indicate ethnic and cultural distinctions in the extended U.S.–Mexican borderland. In Chicano literature the concept of "border" or "frontera" has acquired strong symbolic connotations that have hardly anything to do anymore with the "real" border. See, e.g., Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); and Carl Gutierrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[6] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1894), in *Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner*, edited by R. A. Billington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961). See also the forum entitled "The Formation of Ethnic

In this article we do not address the classical themes of the frontier —that is, demographic, political, or economic expansion into "empty" territories. Here the term *border* is used for the political divides that were the result of state building, especially from the eighteenth century onward. In other words, our examination of borders is linked to their political context and the logic of their genesis. The historical analysis of borders is especially important in the case of the modern states in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. In this period, borders all over the world became crucial elements in a new, increasingly global system of states.

Borders became markers in two ways. First, they revealed the territorial consolidation of states. Most states tried to curb regional autonomy and were no longer content with "rough edges." This was especially clear in the case of the colonial and postcolonial states in the so-called Third World.[7] By taking possession of disputed or unclaimed areas, state elites tried to resolve the problem of loosely defined border regions to which two or even more states might lay claim. In this way, they drew sharper lines between citizens, invested with certain rights and duties, and "aliens" or "foreigners."[8] If there is one thing that has been central to all borders, it has been the contest about these rules of

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Identities in Frontier Societies" (and especially David A. Chappell, "Ethnogenesis and Frontiers"), *Journal of World History* 4, no. 2 (fall 1993): 267–75. For Latin America, see Alistair Hennessy, *The Frontier in Latin American History* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). Peter Sahlins stresses that *boundary* and *border* evoke a precise linear division and *frontier* connotes more zonal qualities (*Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], p. 45).

[7] For an erudite analysis of this process in Latin America, see Laurence Whitehead, "State Organization in Latin America since 1930," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 6, part 2, edited by Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 3–95, especially pp. 16–32. For the Caucasus, see John F. Wright, Suzanne Goldenberg, and Richard Schofield, eds., *Transcaucasian Boundaries* (London: UCL Press, 1996); and for premodern Europe, Josef W. Konvitz, *Cartography in France, 1660–1848: Science, Engineering, and Statecraft* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 32–41. Konvitz describes the situation in Europe before 1789 as follows: "Jurisdictions overlapped, and nations often possessed enclaves, bits of land surrounded by territory belonging to another power. The appearance of a border as a continuous line on a small-scale seventeenth-century map simplified a complex situation. Far from being at all regular or consistent, in many areas the boundary had no clearly defined shape on the ground" (p. 32).

[8] This did not imply an end to preexisting cross-border communications. However, it did allow states to prohibit certain goods, animals, or people from entering the country. In Africa this often led to the curtailing of nomadism and migration in order to prevent the spread of human and animal diseases. See Roger Blench, "Pastoralists and National Borders in Nigeria," and Maryinez Lyons, "Foreign Bodies: The History of Labor Migration as a Threat to Public Health in Uganda," both in *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities*, edited by Paul Nugent and A. I. Asiwaju (London: Printer Pub., 1996), pp. 111–28, 131–44.

inclusion and exclusion and the efforts of people to use, manipulate, or avoid the resulting border restrictions.

The mapping of modern borders, a process first perfected in Europe but soon applied all over the world, thus symbolized a collective attempt by state elites to establish a worldwide system of clear-cut territorial jurisdictions and to have their legal and political sovereignty confirmed cartographically. The mapping of borders, according to Jones's well-known classification, tended to proceed in three stages: *establishment, demarcation,* and *control* of the border.[9] As a result, conflicting territorial claims by neighboring states could no longer be ignored or played down: they had to be faced by means of negotiation, confrontation, or arbitration.

Second, borders became markers of the actual power that states wielded over their own societies. Leaders of the new states adopted the ambitious goal of making the state the dominant force in their societies, but to what extent could they really impose their jurisdiction on "the people"? Recent research has shown that these ambitions often failed because of the opposition of a stubborn society.[10] The confrontation between "state" and "people" was especially clear in marginal areas such as borderlands. Even borders themselves were often a result of negotiations between regional society and the central state. As Peter Sahlins remarks: "The states did not simply impose the boundary or the nation on a local level. By defining their own social and territorial boundaries, village communities, peasants and nobles, made use of the national state and its boundaries." Even after a border was created, Sahlins stresses, the state's power in the borderland could remain restricted and unstable. Members of local society tried to use state institutions to their own ends and sometimes played off one state against another.[11]

In this article the notion of *borderland* is of central importance. A

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[9] Stephen B. Jones, *Boundary Making: A Handbook for Statesmen, Treaty Editors and Boundary Commissioners* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1945). The desire of states to have clear and uncontested borders formed the basis of most of the "classic" border literature: e.g., P. de Lapradelle, *La frontière: Etude de droit international* (Paris: 1928); Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* (Munich and Leipzig: Oldenbourg, 1897); S. Whittemore Boggs, *International Boundaries: A Study of Boundary Functions and Problems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940).

[10] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[11] Sahlins, *Boundaries,* p. 276. This has also been the principal argument in the work of A. I. Asiwaju.

borderland is usually understood as the region in one nation that is significantly affected by an international border.[12] However, following the lead of A. I. Asiwaju,[13] we favor a cross-border perspective, in which the region on *both* sides of a state border is taken as the unit of analysis. This approach allows us to take into account the paradoxical character of borderlands. Borders create political, social, and cultural distinctions, but simultaneously imply the existence of (new) networks and systems of interaction across them. The existence of a border is our point of departure, but at the same time we draw attention to the social networks that reach across that border. The paradox of border studies is noted by Sven Tägil and colleagues in their statement that "boundaries separate people (or groups of people) and the separating qualities of boundaries influence interaction between them."[14] Stanley Ross also stresses that the Mexican–U.S. border is "a region where two different civilizations face each other *and overlap*."[15]

Jorge Bustamante has argued that from the perspective of national centers of authority, the border between countries is a sharp line, an impenetrable barrier. But from the perspective of the border, borderlands are broad scenes of intense interactions in which people from both sides work out everyday accommodations based on face-to-face relationships.[16] In this way, the study of border regions implies a critique of state-centered approaches that picture borders as unchanging, uncontested, and unproblematic. We argue that there is a definite heuristic and comparative value in studying the various ways in which people have manipulated and circumvented the constructed barriers that result from the territorialization of modern states.

STATES AND BORDERLANDS

The drawing of borderlines and the creation of borderlands are the outcome of the establishment of modern states all over the world. The

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[12] E.g., J. R. V. Prescott, *The Geography of Frontiers and Boundaries* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), pp. 33–34.

[13] A. I. Asiwaju, "Borderlands in Africa: A Comparative Research Perspective with Particular Reference to Western Europe," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 8, no. 2 (1993): 1–12; reprinted in Nugent and Asiwaju, *African Boundaries*, pp. 253–65.

[14] Sven Tägil, coord., *Studying Boundary Conflicts* (Lund: Esselte Studium, 1977), p. 14.

[15] Stanley R. Ross, "Foreword," in *Views across the Border: The United States and Mexico*, edited by Stanley R. Ross (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), p. xii (emphasis added).

[16] Quoted in David Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Towards the Internationalization of American History," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 432–62, especially p. 437. See also Jorge Bustamante, "Demystifying the United States–Mexico Border," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992): 485–90.

wish for well-defined, fixed boundaries was a direct consequence of the idea of exclusive and uncontested territorial state power that emerged in the nineteenth century. This development was the belated result of the legal principle of *uti possidetis*,[17] which implied flexible and often contested state boundaries. Many new states based the delimitation of their territory on this principle but in the process changed its meaning, often mixing it with arguments that sought to legitimize state borders in new legal, cultural, or racial terms. In this way, state elites removed the emphasis on the flexible nature of borders and used it to claim their eternal and irreversible sovereignty over a given territory.[18]

Most modern borders were conceived in state capitals where they were negotiated in the corridors of power and made final on drawing boards. Their creation can often be pinpointed in time. Their precise location was marked on a map, which was then ratified by the states concerned, or else imposed by one state on its neighbor. Clearly, the state was always involved. This is not to say that there was always a consensus about the borders and their significance. Within the state elite, various groups might struggle for a demarcation of the border that suited their own interests best. The interests of the armed forces, bureaucrats, politicians, landowners, traders, and captains of industry often diverged. Whether or not this "national" struggle continued after the border had been created depended on the cohesion of the state, the strategic and economic importance of the border, and the actual presence of the state in the borderland. State employees stationed in the borderland and their superiors in the provincial or state capitals could develop very different perspectives on their mission in the borderland. Customs officials might become involved in smuggling, schoolteachers might resist assimilatory language policy, and security forces might refuse to risk their lives against well-armed separatists.

The role of the state was further determined by its relationship with regional elites. When borderland elites were well integrated into networks of state power, they could become important allies of the state in its efforts to control borderland society. This was the case with the border *zamindar*s (superior landholders and tax collectors) of northeastern British India and the *caudillo*s of Latin American border regions: their local power depended largely on the state, and they were used by the state not only to extract tribute but also to discipline the

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[17] Principle that leaves belligerents in possession of what they have acquired (Latin, "as you possess").

[18] According to Caflisch, this process was especially clear in the postcolonial states of Latin America and Africa. Lucius Caflisch, "Essai d'une typologie des frontières," *Relations internationales* 63 (fall 1990): 265–93, especially pp. 270–71.

border regions. Sometimes such elites might also be enlisted for state expansionist projects or espionage. However, borderland elites often remained at least partly detached from the state—for example, in many parts of Latin America, where regionalism formed an effective countervailing force to centralizing tendencies. Here borderland elites retained an independent power base and were in a position to oppose state policies.[19]

If the state failed to incorporate these elites into the state structure, the result would be either a breakdown of state power in the border regions or an attempt by the state to enforce its territorial claims by means of military force. The first happened in northern Mexico in the nineteenth century and also during the Mexican Revolution.[20] An example of the second process was the ruthless dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. One of the first acts of that regime was the assassination in 1934 of Desiderio Arias, a regional *caudillo* who symbolized the independence of the border region. By displaying Arias's severed head in the state capital, the Trujillo regime affirmed that the power of the state was paramount even in the remotest corners of the country. A few years later Trujillo completed the process by ordering the massacre of thousands of Haitians who, according to the official rhetoric, were living "illegally" on Dominican territory.[21] In contrast, the history of Burma after 1948 is an example of a state completely unable to dominate its borderlands. The Burmese armed forces have been fighting inconclusive wars with separatist regional elites along the country's huge borderland, which stretches from southern Thailand via China and India to Bangladesh, for nearly half a century. Some of these regional groups, such as the Karen, established separate administrations that fell short of being states only because they lacked international recognition.[22]

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[19] This is a well-studied theme for northern Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. See, e.g., Enrique C. Ochoa, "Investigación reciente en torno al norte de México y la región fronteriza entre Estados Unidos y México a partir del Porfiriato," *Revista mexicana de sociología* 53, no. 3 (July–September 1991): 351–68, especially pp. 353–55.

[20] See Stuart F. Voss, *On the Periphery of Nineteenth-Century Mexico: Sonora and Sinaloa, 1810–1877* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982).

[21] For the prelude, see Michiel Baud, "Una Frontera-refugio: Dominicanos y Haitianos contra el Estado (1870–1930)," *Estudios sociales* (Santo Domingo) 26, no. 92 (April–June 1993): 39–64. See also Lauren Derby, "Haitians, Magic, and Money: *Raza* and Society in the Haitian-Dominican Borderlands, 1900–1937," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36 (1994): 488–526.

[22] Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1991); cf. Constance M. Wilson and Lucien M. Hanks, *The Burma-Thailand Frontier over Sixteen Decades*, Ohio University Monographs in International Studies, Southeast Asian Series 70 (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, 1985).
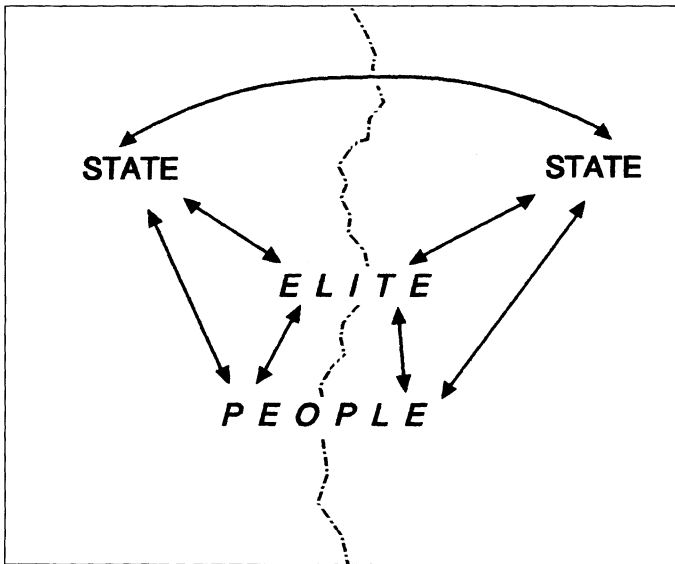
FIGURE 1. The double triangle of power relations in a borderland.

In addition to the state and the regional elite, the "common people" of the borderland made its social history. Their relationship with the regional elites and the two states that claimed the borderland largely determined the social dynamics that unfolded in the region. How these peasants, nomadic herdsmen, traders, and so on (re)defined their territories in reaction to the creation of a border shaped subsequent events in the borderland. These definitions were an expression of local conceptions of the triangle of power relations between state, regional elite, and local people at the time (fig. 1). Once the definitions were formulated, they in turn began to exert a powerful influence on power relations.

The historical development of borderlands was determined simultaneously by the situation in two states, and by the social, economic, and political interactions between them. Such interactions vary enormously, and differences can be clearly reflected in the shared borderlands. Borders have long acted as ethnic or religious divides, although in modern history such differences have very often been state-induced rather than local phenomena. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, borders have served more prominently as political and economic divides. Colonial borders delineated the territorial claims of European superpowers in far-flung parts of their empires. During the Cold War, borders all over the world became markers of competing political

projects, giving rise to imagery of iron and bamboo curtains. Most recently, human rights issues have come to the fore, and borderlands that connected states with different human rights regimes have sometimes experienced large cross-border population flows. A case in point is the large number of refugees from Central America who spilled into southern Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s. In other cases, such as that of Switzerland during World War II, a borderland could become the stage for large-scale rejection of refugees. But increasingly borders have become economic divides. People on either side of the border may live in vastly different social and economic circumstances. Where income, employment, and life expectancy vary sharply, a border can mean the difference between poverty and material well-being, and occasionally between life and death. Examples of borderlands that embody extreme economic divides are those shared by Mexico and the United States, and China and the British crown colony of Hong Kong.

Recently, Oscar Martínez has tried to capture the complexity of borderland interaction by suggesting four models. First, he distinguishes *alienated borderlands* in which routine cross-border interchange is practically nonexistent, mainly due to animosity between the two sides of the border. Second, there are *coexistent borderlands* in which a minimum of cross-border contact exists, despite unfriendly relations between the two states. The third model is that of *interdependent borderlands* in which the societies on both sides of the border are linked symbiotically, leading to a considerable flow of economic and human resources across the border. Finally, when practically all barriers to trade and human movement are eliminated, we can speak of *integrated borderlands*.[23] These models are certainly interesting as a heuristic tool for comparing borderlands, although we should be aware of the social and political dimensions: the benefits of cross-border interaction are usually distributed very unequally among the borderland population.

One of our main points is that borders are too readily reified. Generally speaking, there has always been an enormous gap between the rhetoric of border maintenance and daily life in borderlands. In the vast majority of cases it was possible for borderland people to cross the border, legally or illegally. The interesting questions are when they did so and for what motives.

The creation of a border sets the scene for new power relations in the borderland, based on new local definitions of social and territorial boundaries, and new confrontations between social groups. This pro-

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[23] Oscar Martínez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), pp. 5–10.

cess has become more pronounced as a result of massive transnational migration, both "voluntary" (e.g., labor migrants) and "involuntary" (e.g., refugees), which has come to characterize many parts of the contemporary world. Such migration presents a new challenge to national states and diminishes the salience of national borders. Recently, Michael Kearney has even argued that international migrants effectively undermine the whole idea of statehood and national boundaries. He suggests that the "transnational communities" that have been the result of this migration challenge the defining power of the nationstates that they transcend.[24]

BORDERLANDS AND SPACE

The social history of borderlands is determined first and foremost by the spatial dimension. Borderlands are geographically defined areas that can be drawn on a map like any other region. Traditional geography often thought in terms of two separate borderlands—one on each side of the border—but we argue that these should be seen as two parts of a single borderland. How far does the borderland extend "inland" from the border? At what point can we say that the influence of the border becomes so weak as to be no longer of importance to the lives of the people? This problem can best be approached by focusing on social networks in borderlands because these distinguish the borderland and determine the actual historical development of the region. We may roughly divide the border region into three geographical zones.

First, there is the *border heartland,* abutting on the border and dominated by its existence. Here, social networks are shaped directly by the border, depend on it for their survival, and have no option but to adapt continually to its vagaries. This is what P. de Lapradelle called "le voisinage" and J. R. V. Prescott "the border landscape." The region on the FrenchSpanish border that Peter Sahlins studied belonged to this zone. Often such regions were peripheral to the development of the central state, but nowadays they may be bustling industrial and urban regions: the Basle region where Germany meets Switzerland and France, the borderland between Singapore and Malaysia, and the U.S.

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[24] Michael Kearney, "Borders and Boundaries of State and Self at the End of Empire," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 4, no. 1 (March 1991): 52–74; and Kearney, "The Local and the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1996): 547–65. See also Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands," pp. 440–41; and Linda Basch et al., *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1994).

–Mexican borderland (which nowadays boasts some of the fastest grow-
ing cities of the American continent)[25] are cases in point. Second,
there is the *intermediate borderland*, the region that always feels the
influence of the border but in intensities varying from moderate to
weak. And finally there is the *outer borderland*, which only under spe-
cific circumstances feels the effects of the border. It is affected by the
existence of the border in the same way that land protected by an
embankment is affected by the sea. In daily life the border hardly plays
a role at all, but there is always a hint of suspense, a slight tinge of
uncertainty. Just as a tidal wave may sweep far into the interior, so a
political storm may suddenly engulf this zone and involve it directly in
border dynamics. In this way, borderlands may at times, though briefly,
stretch to embrace entire countries.

This view of borderlands as changeable spatial units clashes with
the visual representations of borders that we find on maps. Most of the
time, these maps are of limited use for understanding the historical
reality of borderlands because they are both too static and too simple.
At the same time, they are indispensable as sources for the politics and
ideologies of nation building, which in turn influence life in the bor-
derlands. It is crucial to realize that the ideological and practical
choices underlying the creation of maps shape our thinking about
borders. The political significance of maps is so great that in many
Latin American countries mapmaking is the monopoly of the military.
It is remarkable that, in this age of satellite monitoring, India, Bang-
ladesh, and other South Asian states continue to deny their own citi-
zens access to maps of border regions, even outdated ones. It is hard to
miss the importance of this issue when, as in the case of Ecuador,
national maps are manufactured that confer on the country almost
twice the territory that it possesses in reality. But we hardly give a
thought to the messages that mapmakers send when they mark the
border with a bold dotted line and select different colors for the terri-
tories on either side of it. Likewise, we rarely reflect on the use of
larger or smaller print to represent national, regional, and local units,
or on the omission of old names for cross-border regions (e.g., Bengal)
in favor of new, state-sponsored units of administration (Bangladesh;
West Bengal, India). The borderlands that we study, which extend on

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[25] On urban borderlands, see, e.g., Lawrence A. Herzog, "Changing Boundaries in the
Americas: An Overview," in *Changing Boundaries in the Americas: New Perspectives on the
U.S.–Mexican, Central American, and South American Borders* (San Diego: Center for U.S.–
Mexican Studies, 1992), pp. 3–24, especially p. 9. Also Daniel D. Arreola and James R.
Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities: Landscape Anatomy and Place Personality* (Tucson: Uni-
versity of Arizona Press, 1993), pp. 22–41 and passim.

both sides of the border, are *never* shown on maps. For this reason alone, the spatial representations of border regions provided by maps ought to be part of the subject matter of border studies.[26]

BORDERLANDS AND TIME

The meanings and consequences of borders change over time, and historical research cannot ignore the varying role and significance of borderlands. It is enough to read Richard Hartshorne's article of 1938 on European borders, and especially his ten-page table on conflicting border claims, mainly in eastern Europe, to see how rapidly the meaning and significance of borders changed.[27]

To highlight the temporal aspect of borders and borderlands, we may use an organic metaphor with a long tradition in border studies, that of the "life cycle." We can distinguish five stages in the life cycle of borders. However, it should not be forgotten that the different stages are ideal types. They do not necessarily follow one upon another in a unilinear fashion, nor do all borders pass through all stages.

Before we describe the five stages of the life-cycle, it is necessary to say something about the stage in which clear borderlines were not (yet) distinguishable. This was the case in many premodern societies, in which clearly defined territorial states did not exist and political authority was a function of political alliances between regional leaders. Generally speaking, borders appear to have been preceded by situations in which two or more *frontiers* tended to close into, and sometimes clash with, each other. We could label this the *embryonic borderland*. Of course, many frontier areas never became borderlands.[28] Only afterward can we determine which frontier situations might be considered predecessors to formal borders.[29]

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[26] E.g., James R. Akerman, "Cartography and the Emergence of Territorial States in Western Europe," in *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, edited by John F. Sweets (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1984), pp. 84–93. For a comparable perspective, see Whitehead, "State Organization in Latin America," pp. 52–55.

[27] Hartshorne, "A Survey of the Boundary Problems," pp. 172–81.

[28] For a concise analysis of the different U.S. (expansive) and Chinese (defensive) conceptions of the frontier, see Stephen B. Jones, "Boundary Concepts in the Setting of Place and Time," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 49 (1959): 241–55, especially p. 164.

[29] The frontier region between the United States and Mexico presents a clear and well-studied example of one such historical process in which a twofold frontier region gradually gave way to a formal, and nowadays even sharply emphasized, borderland. For a recent study with an exhaustive bibliography, see David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

The first stage in the borderland life cycle is the *infant borderland*, which exists just after the border line has been drawn. Preexisting social and economic networks are still clearly visible, and people on both sides of the border are connected by close kinship links. National identities are still vague and undefined. Regional inhabitants can opt for a future on either side of the border, and some groups may cherish the hope that the new boundary may disappear. The border is still a potentiality rather than a social reality.

The *adolescent borderland* is the next stage. The border has now become an undeniable reality, but its genesis is still recent, and many people remember the period before it existed. Although economic and social relations are already beginning to be confined by the existence of the new border, old networks have not yet disintegrated and still form powerful links across the border.

In the third stage the border has become a firm social reality: this is the *adult borderland*. Social networks now implicitly accept and follow the contours of the border. Cross-border social and kin relations may continue to exist, but they become scarcer and are increasingly viewed as problematic. Even new cross-border networks, such as those involved in smuggling, are based on the acceptance of the border. Sometimes adult borderlands are perceived as "eternal," as part of the natural order handed down by earlier generations. The border has become so deeply embedded in the minds of those who live in the borderland that questioning it has become almost inconceivable.[30] It takes exceptional circumstances to turn such a border from a "natural" fact into a "social" fact. Then, to the surprise of all involved, the border is "rediscovered" and in a flurry of ideological fervor invested with new meaning and new legitimacy.

The *declining borderland* is the result of the border losing its political importance. New cross- or supra-border networks emerge, often initially economic in character, and these are no longer seen as a threat to the state. The decline of a borderland can be a fairly peaceful process: the border gradually withers away, losing its importance for both neighboring states as well as for the population of the borderland. It may also be a violent process, if the decline is contested and certain groups in the borderland try to stop it to protect their own interests. In

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[30] Jean Brunhes and Camille Vallaux called these borders "dead" because they had not changed for centuries. Their classification was the result of the geopolitical thinking of the time, in which nations and borders were considered living organisms that needed to be in constant flux. See Jean Brunhes and Camille Vallaux, *La géographie de l'histoire* (Paris, 1921); also Ratzel, *Politische Geographie*.

some cases they may succeed in halting or even reversing the process of decline; more often they fight a losing battle as the border disintegrates and becomes less and less relevant as an organizing principle in borderland society.

Finally, we can use the term *defunct borderland* (or the *relict boundary*, as it is sometimes called) when a border is abolished and the physical barriers between the two sides of the border are removed. Border-induced networks gradually fall apart and are replaced by new ones that take no account of the old division. Some networks are more resilient than others and change at a slower rate. These can maintain themselves for many years, even generations, in which case they may give rise to what J. W. Cole and Eric Wolf have called a *hidden frontier*.[31]

This developmental model of borderlands is not completely satisfactory because of its evolutionary and deterministic implications. But so far we have not found a better instrument to focus attention on how borderlands change over time and to allow for comparative analysis of these changes.[32] In the future, however, we will need more sophisticated tools to analyze how the relative positions of the three borderland zones mentioned above change over time. To use a musical metaphor, the borderland acts as an accordion that contracts and expands to the pressures of social, economic, and political developments on both sides of the border. In this way it produces, as it were, a complex melody over time. It is one of the challenges of border studies to capture and interpret this melody.

BORDERLANDS: OVERLAPPING NETWORKS

We now turn to what Lawrence Herzog has called "transboundary social formation," the extent to which political, economic, and cultural networks overlap in the borderland.[33] In this section we explore the political consequences of the changing "triangle of power relations" between state, regional elite, and local people in the borderland.

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[31] See J. W. Cole and Eric Wolf, *The Hidden Frontier: Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Village* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

[32] Martínez, *Border People*, pp. 27–28, suggests an evolutionary process in which his four models are, so to say, four stages, but he does not appear to allow for different patterns of historical change.

[33] Lawrence A. Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S.–Mexico Border* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, 1990), p. 135.

Politics

Borderlands are areas that are bisected by a state border. The actual boundary lines—demarcated by means of posts, stones, flags, fences, walls, or other landmarks, and highlighted by means of customhouses, border guards, and checkpoints—form their backbone. This display of statehood symbolizes the effort of each state to maintain exclusive control of its half of the borderland, and in this respect the border is the ultimate symbol of its sovereignty. But this does not imply that the effort is ever wholly successful.

First, the power of the state is usually circumscribed by supra-state, international political networks that may be more or less formal, long-lived, and powerful. Among the more formal and long-lived are international alliances, colonial empires, the United Nations, and the European Community; among the less formal are international organizations based on ethnic allegiances, governments in exile, and the "long-distance nationalism" of emigrant groups.[34] Such networks impinge on all regions of the state, including borderlands. Borderlands are not special in this regard, although supra-state political networks may affect border regions in specific ways.

Second, only in borderlands is the power of the state also circumscribed by local political networks that (continue to) connect the two sides and are therefore international too. Cross-border political networks allow borderland politicians more leverage with regard to the state than their counterparts in interior regions, as well as access to the political resources of two state units.[35] If cross-border political networks are strong, they may successfully defend "border interests" in the two state capitals. The political project symbolized by the state border is to eliminate such cross-border networks and to make borderland politicians resemble their counterparts in the interior. Structurally speaking, this is a shared interest of the two neighboring states, and they will often cooperate in stamping out cross-border political networks. When their relations are strained, however, states will use these networks to embarrass or subvert their neighbor. This is a potentially dangerous line of action because it strengthens the borderland politicians against the state and may backfire, as in the case of Kashmir,

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[34] See Benedict O. G. Anderson, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies, Amsterdam, 1992).

[35] For an interesting historical analysis of such a process, see Rodolfo O. de la Garza and Claudio Vargas, "The Mexican-Origin Population of the United States as a Political Force in the Borderlands: From Paisanos to Pochos to Potential Political Allies," in Herzog, *Changing Boundaries*, pp. 89–111.

where there was repeated, damaging war between India and Pakistan, as well as a movement for an independent Kashmir.[36]

Such international connections complicate the triangular power relations between the three social groups in the borderland (state, regional elite, and local people). It is most helpful to think of these power relations in terms of a double triangle whose points may overlap to a greater or lesser extent, according to how far the two states involved have been able to break up the unity of the elite as well as the "common people" in the borderland (fig. 1). States may actually cooperate in this, even though they may keep up a barrage of hostile rhetoric toward each other at the same time. This model is a simple tool for looking at borderland politics systematically and so facilitating a comparative approach. It points to the power politics involved in making certain borderlands easier to control by states and regional elites than others. The outcome will be one of three principal patterns: the borderland can be quiet, unruly, or rebellious.

The Quiet Borderland. If state, regional elite, and local population are knit into a coherent power structure in which tension is relatively low, the borderland is likely to be peaceful. In these cases, territorial control by the state does not lead to major confrontations in the borderland, because the interests of the three actors are taken into account at every step. All three welcome, or at least accept, the creation and existence of the border, each for reasons of their own. We may call this the *harmonious* variant of the quiet borderland. A case in point is the Dutch/Belgian borderland after Belgium seceded from the Netherlands in 1830.

If state, regional elite, and local people are knit into a power structure in which the state clearly predominates, the creation of a borderland is also likely to be a relatively peaceful process. Here territorial redefinition can indeed lead to strong clashes of interest between the actors, but these will not be articulated in open confrontations. The interests of the state will prevail, as neither regional elite nor common people has the power to resist openly. We may call this the *enforced* variant of the quiet borderland. Border relations are in abeyance rather than peaceful. An example is the borderland between North and South Korea, after the Korean War ended in 1953.

The Unruly Borderland. When power structures are less coherent, borderlands are unlikely to be quiescent. The state may dominate, or have absorbed, a regional elite, but if neither state nor regional elite

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[36] Alastair Lamb, *Asian Frontiers: Studies in a Continuing Problem* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968), pp. 99–108.

has established a commanding position over the local population, the borderland will be difficult to control. Local society proves to be unruly, resisting the new social and territorial boundaries and the rules that come with them. In its attempt to enforce its sovereignty, the state is often exposed as weak because it oversteps the limits of its power and makes unrealistic claims to overlordship over civil society. The position of the regional elite weakens because it is exposed as an agent of the state rather than a protector of local rights and concerns. The usual policy in these cases is for the state to arm the regional elite and station troops in the borderland in an attempt to enforce state rule. If this policy of militarization is successful, the enforced variant of the quiet borderland ensues; if not, the borderland remains turbulent and disorderly despite the presence of an army of occupation, which may resort to a reign of terror. Northern Ireland is a case in point. Here in the late 1960s a Protestant elite backed up by the British state lost its ability to control a Catholic population. Neither British armed forces nor Protestant vigilantes could contain the armed insurrection of a section of the population that sought to merge the border region with the neighboring Republic of Ireland.[37]

The Rebellious Borderland. In the case of a rebellious borderland, a regional elite sides with the local population against a state that seeks in vain to impose its authority on a border. The rebellion, led by the regional elite, challenges state control over the borderland, ignores the new border, and attempts to establish a regional counter-government. Such rebellions can be regionalist, separatist, or irredentist in their objectives. If the state is unable to crush the rebellion, the borderland can develop into a separate state with or without international recognition, or it can be annexed by a neighboring state. An example of a rebellious borderland is the Golden Triangle straddling the borders of China, Laos, Thailand, and Burma. Here various guerrilla groups (ethnic, left-wing, and drug-related) have been fighting state armies and each other for decades in attempts to establish separate states.[38] Other current examples are Kurdistan (the rebellious borderlands of

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[37] See Thomas M. Wilson, "Frontiers Go But Boundaries Remain: The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide," in *Cultural Change and the New Europe: Perspectives on the European Community,* edited by Thomas M. Wilson and M. Estellie Smith (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 167–87.

[38] These struggles have been best documented for the Burmese part of the Golden Triangle. See, e.g., Bertil Lintner, *Land of Jade: A Journey through Insurgent Burma* (Edinburgh/Bangkok: Kiscadale/White Lotus, 1990); Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity.*

Iran, Iraq, and Turkey), the southern border region of Sudan, and the coca-producing regions of Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru.[39]

The patterns outlined above should be conceived of as a double set, for both sides of the border have to be taken into account. Borderland society has to deal with two different states that claim sovereignty over the two halves of the borderland. It is the objective of these states to break down the unity of the elite as well as the common people in the borderland, and to restrict their contacts and loyalties to the territory controlled by each state. The degree to which such fissuring of border-land society takes place can be seen as an indication of a state's control over its half of the borderland. Several combinations are possible: the borderland can be quiet on both sides of the border (e.g., the Swedish/Norwegian borderland throughout the twentieth century), one side can be rebellious and the other quiet (e.g., the Yugoslav [Kosovo]/Alba-nian borderland in the 1980s), and so on. These variations can follow one another over time, through successive stages of a border's life cycle, and geographically, as the "accordion" of border networks expands and contracts.

Economy

Local communities along most international borders continue their cross-border economic links. In many cases they do not really have a choice because the government fails to integrate the border economy into the larger national economy. Cross-border economic and com-mercial activities are often based on preexisting networks of kinship, friendship, and entrepreneurial partnership that now span both sides of the border.

Much like the economies of other regions, cross-border economic networks are influenced by macroeconomic forces. Fluctuations in world market conditions may alter the productive structure of the borderland, change agricultural technology, introduce new crops, lead to new industrial activities, and so on. Unlike other regions, however, borderlands connect two economic systems.[40] The economic policy of

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[39] In many peripheral parts of Colombia, the functions of the state have been taken over by an alliance of *narcotraficantes* and leftist guerrillas. See Alfredo Molano, *Selva aden-tro: Una historia oral de la colonización del Guaviare* (Bogotá: El Ancora Editores, 1987). For a similar process in Peru, see David Scott Palmer, ed., *Shining Path of Peru* (London: Hurst, 1992).

[40] This has been a focus of attention in the extensive literature on the Mexico–U.S. border. See, for instance, Herzog, *Changing Boundaries;* and House, *Frontier on the Rio Grande.* See also the journals *Frontera Norte* (Tijuana) and *Journal of Borderlands Studies.*

one state may create a scarcity or abundance of certain goods and ser-
vices on one side of the border. Different national taxes may lead to
sharply different prices and a reversal or intensification of existing
commercial activity. For example, the policy of successive Nigerian
governments to subsidize the consumer price of gasoline led to the ille-
gal drain of this commodity to neighboring Benin where it was sold for
higher prices.[41] Such developments may motivate the state to impose
strict border controls, making trade virtually impossible and provoking
smuggling. Or the state may condone such trade in order to defuse the
tensions that its economic policy causes, at least in the borderland.
Finally, state officials themselves may actively engage in border trade
for public or private gain.

Smuggling is a typical border activity in which the political and the
economic come together. It develops whenever a state tries to impose
restrictions on border trade that are not acceptable to (some of) those
living in the borderland and that cannot be enforced.[42] These restric-
tions usually imply the taxation of certain goods for the benefit of the
treasury. Sometimes they are the result of ideological projects that try
to prevent certain goods or ideas from entering the country. Cross-
border smuggling may be just an extension of existing trade that has
been made illegal by legislation. However, it is just as often the direct
result of restrictive state policies, which cause certain goods to become
scarce, attractive, and/or expensive. For example, the restrictive trade
policies of both Bangladesh and India, combined with a dramatic
relaxation of border controls after the mid-1970s, gave rise to smug-
gling of such briskness that it had a major impact on the labor market,
investment patterns, and poverty alleviation in the borderland. Based
on a new "politics of trust" among inhabitants of both sides of that
borderland, smuggling also strongly influenced borderland social struc-
ture, politics, and culture.[43]

Whenever a state applies restrictions on cross-border trade, it
invites smuggling. Of course, smuggling is not confined to inhabitants
of the borderland, nor does it involve all (or even most) of them. But

[41] Paul Nugent and A. I. Asiwaju, "Introduction: The Paradox of African Boundaries,"
in Nugent and Asiwaju, African Boundaries, p. 7.

[42] For example, David Collins, "Partitioned Culture Areas and Smuggling: The Hausa
and Groundnut Trade across the Nigeria-Niger Boundary up to the 1970s," in Partitioned
Africans: Ethnic Relations across Africa's International Boundaries, 1884–1984, edited by
A. I. Asiwaju (London/Lagos: C. Hurst/University Press of Lagos, 1985), pp. 195–221;
Willem van Schendel, "Easy Come Easy Go: Smugglers on the Ganges," Journal of Contem-
porary Asia 23, no. 2 (1993): 189–213.

[43] Van Schendel, "Easy Come Easy Go."

it is most evident in the borderland, and this gives the entire border economy an air of stealth and subterfuge in the eyes of the state. Special economic policies may be devised to curb smuggling, and these affect border economies in several ways. For example, markets near the border may be closed, or people may be forbidden to carry more than small quantities of certain commodities within a certain range of the border. Such restrictions may lead to adaptations in marketing and transport, as well as in smuggling practices.

Smuggling always involves some members of borderland society and, depending on its profitability, often state officials and nonlocal entrepreneurs as well. Typically, two or more currencies circulate simultaneously in the border region, even though these may not be officially exchangeable. Unofficial local exchange rates apply, and changes in these rates are rapidly communicated by hearsay throughout the borderland. In the border region between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, for example, various currencies circulated until the 1930s. Regional traders used all kinds of money intermittently. The currencies of Haiti and the Dominican Republic were notoriously weak and unreliable, and other currencies were often preferred. Mexican (silver) pesos and U.S. dollars (often also called pesos) were common means of payment on both sides of the border.[44]

Border economies are always strongly influenced by political measures, and political processes on either side of the border do not normally coincide. Border economies react instantly to short-term policy changes, and constant adaptation lends them a speculative, restive character. This is one reason why it is so important to treat the region on both sides of the border as a single unit: changing economic policies on one side of the border lead to immediate adaptations on the other side as well.

Language, Ethnicity, and Culture

Theorists of borderlands have tried to make a distinction between "natural" and "unnatural" borders, based on geographical parameters. Rivers, watersheds, and mountains are often considered perfect natural borders. Other theorists have tried to do the same with culture, ethnicity, or language. For them, a border is natural if it separates groups that differ clearly with respect to phenotype (race), language, or cul-

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[44] Michiel Baud, "Una frontera para cruzar: La sociedad rural a través de la frontera Dominicana-Haitiana (1870–1930)," *Estudios sociales* (Santo Domingo) 26, no. 94 (October–December 1993): 5–28.

ture. The "naturalness" of such borders, however, is usually more apparent than real: evidently, differences in phenotype, language, and culture have often been manipulated in the service of a nationalist ideology that needed to legitimize existing borders by establishing, strengthening, or highlighting these differences after the fact.[45] The acuteness of the difference may be related to the stage the border has reached in its life cycle, as in the case of French Flanders. Here the northernmost corner of France met Belgium, but the state border did not coincide with the linguistic border separating speakers of French and Flemish (Dutch). As the border entered its adult phase, the Flemish speakers on the French side were subjected to the determined language policy of the modern French state, which aimed at eliminating all languages other than French. Flemish was relegated to the position of a local patois, spoken at home (and less and less frequently at that) but unacceptable in the school, the church, or the court of law. After World War II, as the states of western Europe became integrated into the European Community and then the European Union, the French-Belgian border progressively lost its "hardness," and cross-border economic networks increased. Knowledge of Flemish, which had been strongly supported on the Belgian side, now became more useful for those living on the French side, and Flemish staged a modest revival there.

The United States implemented a similar language policy in the U.S.–Mexican borderland. After the United States conquered a large part of Mexico's northern territory in 1848, it strongly promoted the English language there. In the twentieth century, however, extensive immigration of Mexican workers into the United States made it increasingly difficult to maintain the artificial separation of Spanish and English. Nowadays Spanish is widely spoken in the entire borderland, and in daily life language is no longer a marker of the border.

There can be no doubt that borders that cut through a fairly homogeneous population should be distinguished from borders that coincide with cultural or ethnic divides. Where people from the other side of a border can be recognized easily by their physical appearance—clothing, language, or behavior—it is less easy for them to move back and forth across the border, and their position on the opposite side is less secure. Examples include the position of Haitians in the Dominican Republic or of Bolivians in Argentina. Where material or cultural dif-

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[45] For an early critique, published in 1938 when the issue was extremely highly charged politically, see Hartshorne, "A Survey of the Boundary Problems."

ferences are less obvious—as in the case of Bangladeshis in India or U.S. citizens in Canada—"passing" is much easier.

Obviously, borderlands in which the border does not coincide with natural and cultural divides are potentially more complex than borderlands in which these distinctions are clearer. State policies with regard to language, culture, and settlement in borderlands often evince a preoccupation with establishing new cultural divides that coincide with the border. Symbols of national unity (the "national" language, the flag, the national army, portraits of the head of state, statues of national heroes, the liberal use of maps showing the national territory and the border, annual celebrations of Independence Day) take on a special, more emphatic meaning in borderlands.

Sometimes a border cuts through an ethnically distinct population, as in the case of the Baluchis (divided by the borders of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan), the Kurds (Turkey, Iraq, Iran), or the Sami or "Lapps" (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia). Politically these people belong to a state that demands their unswerving loyalty. Ethnically and emotionally they feel part of another, nonstate entity. If such conflicting loyalties occur within the confines of a *single* country, they may vary from quite manageable (Frisians in the Netherlands or Catalans in Spain) to extremely tense (East Timorese in Indonesia, Chechens in Russia). If more than one state is involved, problems multiply. When states are confronted by what Myron Weiner has called *transborder peoples*, the central issue is not so much ethnic identity as political loyalty. Weiner suggests that it is primarily the willingness of dominant ethnic groups to share power that determines the loyalty of transborder people.[46] Such willingness may be related to the existence of a state in which a transborder people dominates. Baluchis, Kurds, or Sami do not enjoy that position. But when the borders of Hungary were redrawn after 1918, substantial numbers of Hungarians found themselves minorities in the states of Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. Their subsequent fate was influenced by the relationships of these states with Hungary and by Hungary's willingness to champion their cause. In other words, it may be useful to distinguish between "state" and "nonstate" transborder people, and in the case of "state" transborder people, to differentiate between those with powerful, active protectors (e.g., the Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia) and those without them (e.g., Albanians in Kosovo).

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[46] Myron Weiner, "Transborder Peoples," in *Mexican Americans in Comparative Perspective,* edited by Walker Connor (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1985), pp. 130–58, at p. 155.

Furthermore, a distinction is sometimes useful between "old" and
"new" transborder people, as in the case of various Amerindian groups
(old) and Mexicans (new) on both sides of the U.S.–Mexican border-
land. Of course, these are never static categories. Ethnic minorities
have often used borders to escape discrimination or political repres-
sion, thereby changing their social and political status and transform-
ing elements of their culture. On the other hand, we should not under-
estimate the long-term influence of borders on ethnic divergence. The
emergence of a new umbrella term, *Jumma*, for ten distinct ethnic
groups in the Bangladesh–Burma–India borderland was directly related
to military repression that occurred on the Bangladesh side. Related
transborder peoples on the Burmese and Indian sides of the borderland
were not involved in this ethnic innovation.[47]

Despite attempts by central states to control their borderlanders
and to impose a "national" culture on them, a fascinating aspect of
many borderlands is the development of a "creole" or "syncretic"
border culture. When two or more languages meet, a border lingua
franca often comes into existence.[48] Where different religions pre-
vail on both sides of the border, people may visit each other's reli-
gious festivals, as well as festivities marking national holidays. Cross-
border (and often interethnic) networks of friendship, courtship,
and kinship are as much part of the border culture as cross-border
economic and political partnerships. The existence of such border
cultures is often resented by central governments. Government
measures to suppress or deny these border cultures may take the form
of attacking symbols of borderland unity—for example, by prohib-
iting the use of the local language in communications with state
officials—and initiating a cultural offensive to replace border cul-
tures by a more "civilized" national culture. State denial or suppres-
sion of borderland cultures has usually obscured these from the eyes
of outsiders, including academics.[49] The analysis of these cultures is
a fascinating aspect of border studies and perhaps their principal
justification.

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[47] Willem van Schendel, "The Invention of the 'Jummas': State Formation and Ethnic-
ity in Southeastern Bangladesh," *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (1992): 95–128; reprinted
in *Indigenous Peoples of Asia*, edited by R. H. Barnes, Andrew Gray and Benedict Kingsbury
(Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1995), pp. 121–44.

[48] For example, Sahlins, *Boundaries*, pp. 166–67. Also Baud, "Una Frontera para
cruzar."

[49] In the case of the Mexico–U.S. border there is a growing awareness of the ethnic and
cultural aspects of borderland society. See, e.g., "Border Perspectives on the U.S./Mexico
Relationship," special issue, *New Scholar* 9, nos. 1–2 (1984).

COMPARING BORDERLANDS

The study of borderlands invites us to look at states, concepts of social space, and local history from a different perspective. It helps us pose questions in a new form. There is an extensive literature on how states have dealt with their borderlands, but historians have paid much less attention to how borderlands have dealt with their states. As a result, borderlands have been represented as far more passive and reactive than is warranted. The study of borderlands assigns an active historical role to borderlands and their population. The purpose is to redress the imbalance of "state-centered" studies, and to discover which social impulses originated in the borderlands and what effects they had locally as well as beyond the borderland. We are interested in the cut-and-thrust of life as it was lived in thousands of borderlands all over the world and the ways in which local societies dealt with the appearance (and sometimes disappearance) of national borders in their territory.

The problematic of modern borderlands is worldwide, and the social history of borderlands needs to be developed in a broad comparative framework. To begin with, it is essential to note certain differences in historiographic traditions. These variations by themselves are already an indication of regional differences. Africa, the continent with the youngest borders, has the most buoyant borderland historiography. This is certainly partly due to the efforts of the eminent Nigerian scholar A. I. Asiwaju, but it should also be seen as an indication of the undefined character of many African borders and the immediate social and political relevance of borderland research. A similar theoretically informed historiography is absent in both Asia and South America. In these parts of the world, borders and borderlands have been studied chiefly as diplomatic and military battlegrounds.[50] The one exception for Latin America is the Mexican–U.S. border, which has provoked an enormous literature. The marked attention this particular borderland has received is significant in its own right. It shows the political, economic, and perceptual relevance of this border; the influence of U.S. financial support in directing academic research; and

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[50] See Jack Child, Geopolitics and Conflict in South America: Quarrels among Neighbors (New York: Praeger, 1985); and Dorothy Woodman, Himalayan Frontiers: A Political Review of British, Chinese, Indian and Russian Rivalries (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1969). For good case studies, see Bryce Wood, Aggression and History: The Case of Ecuador and Peru (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1978); and Neville Maxwell, India's China War (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).

the effect of an emerging Chicano consciousness in which the border plays an important symbolical role.

The concepts we have outlined in this article point to some other ways of approaching the enterprise of comparing borderlands. For example, examination of the temporal and spatial aspects of borderlands suggests that it might be worthwhile to explore whether systemic differences have existed between borderlands in different periods of world history or in different regions of the world. Is it possible to distinguish borderlands of the mid-nineteenth century from those of the late twentieth century? If so, on what grounds? Such questions bring us back to reflections on the bases of state power at specific moments in time, and whether these differences are sufficiently large to posit different historical types of borderland.

There are many pitfalls here. We cannot assume any linear development of the relationship between borderlands and states over time, particularly if we compare different regions of the world. Comparative exploration of the temporal aspect of borderlands can be done by linking change in borderlands to "world time." Clearly, dramatic world historical events, such as the two world wars, the economic crisis of the 1930s, or the collapse of the Soviet empire, affected many, perhaps all, borderlands at the same time. Other events had a more localized effect but still allow for comparison between several borderlands. Examples are the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, which had an impact on African borderlands, and the Partition of 1947, which affected South Asian borderlands. There is no reason to privilege world historical occurrences (strong influences may emanate from states and borderlands as well), but it may initially be easier to take crucial events on a world scale as our point of departure when engaging in the historical comparison of apparently unrelated borderlands.

Although it is possible to select a significant world historical event and study its impact on several borderlands, it is unlikely that we will find parallel developments in these borderlands, for their historical transformations depended on national and local factors as well as on "world historical" ones. For analytical purposes we may therefore make a distinction between world time, state time, and borderland time. The impact of a particular world historical transformation (world time) on social change in borderlands must be related to the developmental phases of the states concerned (state time), as well as the stages of the life cycle in which individual borderlands find themselves (borderland time).

Another approach could be to look for certain systemic differences regarding the types of borderland prevailing in different continents.

The study of borderlands in Europe deals with a long process of trial and error in which the modern state developed more or less organically. Borders came to be generally accepted, and when violence between states broke out, disagreement about the location of borders usually was not the main cause. In the other continents, the modern state and its approach to borders usually arrived as one of the trappings of colonial rule. In each continent, it encountered a different situation. In Asia, for example, highly developed states existed with their own conceptions of territorial integrity and boundaries, which differed from the European model. As a result, in many parts of Asia precolonial statecraft exerted a powerful influence over colonial administration. Colonial borders were often superimposed on much older political and religious divides.[51] After decolonization, Asia boasted strong and populous regional states that were able to engage in large-scale military campaigns to settle any border conflicts. These in turn brought in the major world powers as mediators, arms dealers, and combatants in border conflicts (for example, between China and India in 1962, Iran and Iraq in 1980–88, and Iraq and Kuwait in 1989–90). In the process, local border disputes were elevated to the level of major world events.[52] The impact of Asian border wars on contemporary global politics underlines the importance of analyzing the long-term repercussions of encounters between well-developed local definitions of state boundaries and external, "colonial" definitions of territoriality.

By contrast, in much of Africa and the Americas colonial rule was generally less restricted by precolonial state formation and local definitions of territoriality. Here colonial borders were more frequently drawn without any regard for local society and in places where no history of state border formation existed. In Latin America, the principal problem for the Spanish crown and the independent successor states of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was how to physically occupy the immense territory. It was said in nineteenth-century Latin America that to govern was to populate, *gobernar es poblar*.[53] This desire to control the marginal frontier areas was part of the "civilizing" policy that aimed at the incorporation or extermination of indigenous populations that were considered a symbol of "barbarism" and a threat to state formation and nationalism. This ideological content, combin-

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[51] Lamb, *Asian Frontiers*.
[52] For an overview, see Anderson, *Frontiers*, pp. 87–105.
[53] This dictum is from the Argentinian politician Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants; or, Civilization and Barbarism* (New York: Hafner, 1971; original edition in Spanish, 1845).

ing political, economic, and moral objectives, may explain the fascina-
tion of Latin American politicians and historians with the "frontier"
and the agricultural colonization of frontier regions.[54]

With respect to political boundaries, the Spanish colonizers used
the territorial boundaries of the Inca and Aztec empires to organize
their colonial jurisdictions in Spanish America. But in many other
regions they established borders with no regard for local territorial
definitions. In a historical process that extended over three centuries,
they created colonial borders that were sometimes superimposed on
native borders but that often cut across them. Most of these colonial
borders survived in the postcolonial period. In the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries, border conflicts between the new states did occur,
but they had nothing to do with the pre-Columbian political struc-
tures; rather, they were determined by the national ambitions of the
new ruling elites.[55] Only very recently have some pro-Indian politi-
cians and intellectuals in the Andes started questioning the legitimacy
of existing borders between Latin American countries, arguing that
they ignore indigenous ethnic and spatial structures. In this they find
inspiration in the arrangement on the U.S.–Canadian border, where
Native American groups recognized as such by both governments are
allowed to cross without any state interference.[56]

The development of modern state borders in Africa has been quite
different. It is generally accepted that they were arbitrary and artificial
colonial constructs, drawn without any respect to existing patterns of
ethnic and political organization.[57] The "modern border" in Africa was

[54] See Hennessy, The Frontier in Latin American History; and Silvio R. Duncan Baretta
and John Markoff, "Civilization and Barbarism: Cattle Frontiers in Latin America," Com-
parative Studies in Society and History 20 (1978): 578–620. Also Richard W. Slatta, "Histori-
cal Frontier Imagery in the Americas," in Herzog, Changing Boundaries, pp. 25–46. An
uneven collection of earlier published material is David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch, eds.,
Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly
Resources, 1994). A good historical monograph is Catherine LeGrand, Frontier Expansion
and Peasant Protest in Colombia, 1830–1936 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico
Press, 1986).

[55] See, e.g., Herzog, Changing Boundaries. See also Child, Geopolitics and Conflict in
South America; and Wood, Aggression and History.

[56] Such rejections of state boundaries are more general in Asia and Africa. For a begin-
ning of a comparison, see Weiner, "Transborder Peoples," especially pp. 152–58.

[57] Asiwaju, Partitioned Africans, especially the list on pp. 256–59; Ieuan Griffiths, "The
Scramble for Africa: Inherited Political Boundaries," Geographical Journal 152, no. 2
(1986): 204–16. The importance of the Berlin Conference for the partition of Africa is
qualified in Simon Katzenellenbogen, "It Didn't Happen at Berlin: Politics, Economics and
Ignorance in the Setting of Africa's Colonial Boundaries," in Nugent and Asiwaju, African
Boundaries, pp. 21–34. For a comprehensive diplomatic overview, see Ian Brownlie, African
Boundaries: A Legal and Diplomatic Encyclopaedia (London/Berkeley: C. Hurst/University of
California Press, 1979). See also Anderson, Frontiers, pp. 78–87.

considered a novel phenomenon requiring local societies to radically
adjust their concepts of social space. In the same breath some observ-
ers reject the concept of nation-state as something alien to African
tradition.[58] However, in a provocative article Paul Nugent has recently
put these ideas to the test.[59] Conceding the accuracy of much conven-
tional wisdom on the construction of colonial boundaries, he qualifies
some of its generalizations. First, he argues that colonial authorities
were often more aware of precolonial units than they are convention-
ally believed to have been. Second, he stresses that many practices of
the colonial and postcolonial African nation-state were a direct con-
tinuation of earlier political alliances. This was also true for the idea of
borders. He writes: "Many Africans were quite familiar with the prin-
ciple of a boundary of exclusion . . . although their conception of polit-
ical space undoubtedly differed from that of late nineteenth-century
Europeans."[60]

Still, in a broader comparative perspective, the history of African
borders is different in two ways.[61] First, in most parts of the continent
colonization occurred quite late and lasted only about sixty years. The
borders that were drawn normally preceded nation building and state
formation. Even the postcolonial states had relatively little time and
inclination to come to grips with the resulting complicated situation.
Although they accepted the colonial divisions for the postcolonial
period during meetings of the Organization of African Unity in 1963
and 1964, they have not really been able to find a way out of the maze
of ethnic boundaries, precolonial state borders, and colonial demarca-
tions, as their serious falling-out over the status of the Western Sahara
demonstrated. Cross-border ethnic, economic, and political ties have
remained important, resulting in high levels of interaction between
peoples and goods on either side of most African borders.[62] This may
be interpreted as the survival of ancient networks of regional trade and
a form of protest against a predatory postcolonial state.[63] It can also be

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[58] See Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*
(London: James Currey, 1992).

[59] Paul Nugent, "Arbitrary Lines and the People's Minds: A Dissenting View on Colo-
nial Boundaries in West Africa," in Nugent and Asiwaju, *African Boundaries*, pp. 35–67.

[60] Nugent, "Arbitrary Lines," p. 60.

[61] See especially Asiwaju, *Partitioned Africans*; and Asiwaju and Nugent, *African Bound-
aries*.

[62] O. Adejuyigbe, "Identification and Characteristics of Borderlands in Africa," in
Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa,
edited by A. I. Asiwaju and P. O. Adeniyi (Lagos: Lagos University Press, 1989), pp. 27–36,
especially pp. 34–35.

[63] Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden*, pp. 202–203.

seen as a result of the disintegration of old (trading) networks and the
expansion of new export-oriented production.[64] Intensive cross-border
contact is a distinct characteristic of African borderlands. Ieuan Grif-
fiths even suggests that African borders are specifically characterized
by their permeability.[65]

Second, African states generally do not have a political structure in
which a single ethnic group dominates. While European colonialism
in the Americas created a hierarchy in which descendants of European
colonists and their (mixed) offspring controlled a population made up
of various subjected ethnic and racial groups, in Africa the relation-
ship between ethnicity and the state has been much less straightfor-
ward and stable. Here various ethnic groups continue to compete for
control over the state apparatus. Often these struggles for hegemony
are supported by members of the same ethnic group who happen to
live across the border in a neighboring state, and this has given Afri-
can borderlands a distinct political volatility.

Clearly, there are broad regional differences in state formation and
the imposition of national borders. But whether these different histor-
ical experiences warrant a distinction between three regional types of
borderlands—Eurasian, African, and American—remains to be seen.
The value of such models can be assessed only in their application.
They may help us to better understand the complexity of the social
history of any borderland. They may also allow us to gain a better
insight into the structural similarities and contrasts of borderland
dynamics and to make more systematic and meaningful comparisons.
We consider the points brought forward here merely a starting point
for further, more sophisticated formulations—but these can develop
only along with case studies of borderlands that are consciously com-
parative from the outset.

Conclusion

National borders are political constructs that have exerted a remark-
able influence on the minds of professional historians and the ways in
which they have constructed historical narratives. People living in
borderlands have often been rather less impressed by borders, as their
attempts to create their own local history demonstrate. It is entirely in

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[64] Nugent, "Arbitrary Lines," pp. 55–60.
[65] Ieuan Griffiths, "Permeable Boundaries in Africa," in Nugent and Asiwaju, *African
Boundaries*, pp. 68–83.

line with recent trends in social history to introduce such competing views of modern states and their borders into the academic discourse. Although historians have distanced themselves from the state and the axiom of a "national history," they have done so by retreating from the state to a "civil society" that is still seen as contained within the state territory.

We invite researchers to undertake the comparative history of borderlands. We have argued that the study of borders and borderlands has been unduly restricted by an emphasis on the geographical, legal, and political aspects of the creation and consequences of borders. This has led to a state-centered approach, in which researchers took the central state as their point of departure. Further, they have tended to focus their research on only one side of a certain border. In this way, they have grounded their research upon these artificial lines in social space and—often unwittingly and unwillingly—confirmed the nationalist claims that borders represent. By taking both sides of the border as a starting point for research, it will be easier to understand the social, cultural, and economic dynamics of borderlands and the particular historical transformations that they have experienced. It is necessary to invest borderlands, and their population, with a more active historical role. We should ask which social and political impulses originated in borderlands and what effect they had locally as well as beyond the borderland—particularly in relation to state building on both sides of the border. The crucial question is what borderlands can teach us about ways of conceptualizing social space and local identity, and the roles these have played in promoting or thwarting the development of modern states.

The shift in perspective that we propose makes it necessary to adapt the use of source material. The historical information left behind by the institutions of the two states concerned, deposited in (local) archives, should be approached with the clear understanding that it represents the view of only one player in a complex game, the state on one side of the border. To gain a better understanding of the historical dynamics of borderlands it is necessary to address two issues: the triangular setup within border regions, which has often led to an intense struggle for hegemony, and the interaction between the two sides of a given border. In the struggle for hegemony, the borderland elite and the local inhabitants were just as important as the central state. The study of borderlands cannot progress unless we collect information from these other players. Analyzing the interlinkages of their triangular power structures will enable us to see how power struggles in border regions can be decisively influenced by social or political alli-

ances with social groups across the border. In addition, it may give us clues as to the existence of "transborder" political groupings, which are able to shift their loyalties or allegiances according to the political conjunctures within and between the states involved.

However, studying borders is not only a matter of politics or economics. It is also necessary to look into the social and cultural impact of borders. If in this postmodern epoch so much attention is paid to the construction and deconstruction of historical concepts, borders should be one of the first issues begging our attention. We began by emphasizing the artificial character of borders. They are prime examples of how mental constructs can become social realities. Once agreed upon in diplomatic meetings and neatly drawn on maps, borders become something real for the people living near them. To understand this process, it is necessary to explore new sources of information. Borderland historians may have to rely on oral history to reconstruct the historical self-images and perceptions of social groups in the borderland and the impact of these on people's political, economic, and cultural behavior. We feel that this is one of the most challenging tasks of borderland studies.

Whatever may be their real impact, borders become part of the perception and mental map of borderlanders. The paradox of how borders simultaneously separate and unite is the direct consequence of this mental mapmaking. Borders divide people living on both sides, who may have had a long history of cultural and social contact, but at the same time it unites them in the experience of closeness to the border and (partial) dependence on it. This paradoxical character of borders can be considered a metaphor of the ambiguities of nation building, which have recently provoked so much interest.[66] This may be the strongest argument for the study of the mental, cultural, or ethnic consequences of borders. Research on the changing practice and meaning of borders can provide us with valuable clues as to the magnitude and limitations of the most powerful mental construction of the present-day world, the nation-state. Borderland studies offer a way of correcting the distortions inherent in state-centered national histories. They can be powerful exactly because they dispute the territoriality to which modern states lay claim. It is with this conviction that we propose the study of borderlands, not as another historical super-specialization but as an indispensable focus on the modern world.

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[66] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; reprint, New York: Verso, 1991); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Also Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).