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COMMENTARY ON:

**Theorizing Borders in a 'Borderless World': Globalization, Territory and
Identity**

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Diener and Hagen have provided an excellent theoretical survey taking in the cross-disciplinary literature relating to borders, borderlands and borderscapes. They correctly argue that border studies are vital components of other questions about globalization, identity formation, migration, security and sovereignty. In doing so, they reinforce my belief that there is a valuable niche within theory-building for grounded human, and especially, political geographic studies of borderlands and borderscapes, as well as for comparative theoretical works on the broader implications of these political spaces. My response intends to raise additional strands that are worth fuller treatment and thought.

Thinking about Territory and Sovereignty in a "Bordering" World

Diener and Hagen (1197) are correct to be cautious in relation to Kenichi Ohmae's enthusiastic predictions concerning a 'borderless world.' The 'borderless' 'state-regions' so central in Ohmae's theoretical formulations, are much more akin to Bae-Gyoon Park's focus on South Korean state-inspired 'neo-liberal spaces' than reflections of true borderless political economies. Whilst states may well develop distinct zones for harnessing comparative

trans-national advantages to attract mobile capital, those same states may well be bolstering border defenses, increasing surveillance of migrants, and restricting certain categories of movement across border space in other places. As Diener and Hagen observe, we live in a complex world of simultaneous bordering, permeable borders, enormous flows across and between political spaces, and huge territorial and non-territorial anxieties about all kinds of security threat. Thus, the central question seems to be less about becoming 'borderless', but rather about the implications of all these centrifugal and centripetal forces on the nature of political sovereignty. Theory must contend with contradictory processes turning national borders into sites for reinforcing the 'state-nation-citizen nexus' (Soguk, 1999) on the one hand, whilst simultaneously borders act as spaces of flows, connectivity, and interactions of all kinds (legal, illegal, licit and illicit) on the other (Abrahams and van Schendel, 2007).

State 'territorial sovereignty' is negotiable, malleable, alterable, and is constantly being (re)shaped in order to enhance processes of capital accumulation, resource exploitation, foreign investments, and 'developmental' projects. There is a wealth of valuable literature examining how spatiality, state power and human landscapes have and are being transformed by neo-liberal institutions and processes, transnational corporations, and state actions to facilitate 'trans' border movements of capital, labour and goods. So, perhaps we should consider not only the borders of 'national geo-bodies', to borrow Thongchai Winichakul's (1995) terminology, but the many types of enclosure associated with commodities, markets and accumulation.

Commodification frequently involves territorialization, particularly in relation to environmental resources (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995; Nevins and Peluso, 2008). Whilst national borders may be open or closed, many other forms of bordering continue to transform human and physical space within (and between) territorial states. There are numerous enclosures, dispossessions and displacements associated with territorial processes along and away from inter-state borders. Sovereignty tends to act as a sort of "shield" when it is the State or combinations of State agents and other agents involved in intra-territorial violations of social, economic and environmental justice. With the exception of extra-territorial military and humanitarian interventions, the sovereignty shield continues to conceal many political, social and environmental geographical injustices perpetrated by States, or due to *de facto* conflicts within territories.

Territoriality, Power and How Space Affects Power

Boundaries are indeed 'expressions of power relations', as Anssi Paasi (2004: 82) put it, '(A)s institutions, they embody implicit or explicit norms and values and legal and moral codes' that influence all manner of social actions. He argues that we need to examine 'power' in relation to the way 'the state-centred naturalization of space is produced and reproduced' (2004: 83). However, we should also note that whilst boundaries may reify certain aspects of power (Sack, 1986) they cannot contain either social practices or political relations or power flows. Territories and boundaries do influence, affect and control human-'nature'-thing relations in space. However, theories of human territoriality also need to grapple with the many ways in which power is mediated, relational, contingent, and goes beyond territorial containers. This touches on the way we conceptualize human territoriality and political territories. As Samer Alatur (2006) observes, it is often not necessary to try to distinguish between territorial and non-territorial forms of power as they are 'mutually constitutive and should be regarded as such.' Furthermore, we may obsess about 'spaces of power', ignoring how certain spatial orderings produce multiple affects on power relations and the workings of power. As John Allen has noted: 'It seems that much easier to see the association of power and geography through the odd tall fence, high wall and exclusionary boundary marker than it is to recognize that the many and varied *modalities* of power are themselves constituted *differently* in space and time.' My point here is that theorizing borders also requires consideration of different forms of power – over, with, through, proximate, dispersed, hierarchical, associational, networked – in addition to considering extra-territorial bio-politics (Alatur, 2006; Allen, 2002). As such, there is much to learn by studying how specific forms of production, consumption, institutions, and particular issues generate their own spatiality, orders and hierarchies which are made and remade over time. For instance, actor-network theory considers space in terms of multiple 'socio-material relations' with many different kinds of actor-networks that often transcend rigid ideas about political territoriality (Latham, 2002). My suggestion here is that there is a need to both engage in more nuanced studies of territoriality and power, as well as the diverse ways space affects power and social relations create new spatial configurations of power.

Ecological and Bio-Physical Challenges to Sovereign Space

Twenty years ago, Patricia Mische (1989) wrote about the urgent need to reconceptualize sovereignty in an era of huge ecological security threats to humankind. Clearly, in a world that is becoming increasingly obsessed about the implications of climate change and the need to make global-regional-local adaptations to mitigate the harmful effects of global warming, our political boundaries and territorial sovereignty remain even more problematic today.

'Nature' produces its own geographies based on biophysical processes, ecosystems, rhythms and seasons that are spatially-temporally complex and do not fit comfortably with partitioned 'modern geography'. Diener and Hagen do mention the large numbers of trans-'frontier' parks, which are indeed imaginative examples of pooling resources, overcoming the partition effects on ecological and bio-physical processes, as well as trying to preserve certain 'natural' ranges and forms of non-human animal territoriality that transcend our artificial geopolitical spaces. However, human-nature relations are incredibly diverse, multi-scalar and complex, which means that there may be much to learn from different research projects concerning things like environmental resource governance in cross-border peace parks, international river basins, shared international straits, coastal and maritime zones (Grundy-Warr and Schofield, 2005). Theorizing borders is definitely relevant to conceptualizing more socially just and less nationalistic notions of environmental security (Dalby, 2002). Furthermore, there exists an impressive literature discussing legal-political-institutional regimes and instruments associated with developing international environmental law and research advocating more democratic multi-stakeholder forms of resource and environmental governance, and the need to protect local and global commons (Cuasay and Vaddhanaphuti, 2005).

Turning the Political Map Inside Out and History Back and Forth

Turning the political map inside out' (Grundy-Warr, 1998) is a way of saying we need to de-centre our thinking about identity, environmental politics, and a whole range of socio-spatial practices. Diener and Hagen definitely provide many arguments for why it is useful *to centre borders* in order to challenge dominant national geographic perspectives, to examine territorial contradictions, and to raise alternative ideas about the intersections of space and power. One final issue I would like to raise is the need for more historically informed political geography which examines the contradictions of national geo-bodies with reference to previous social relations and politics. One of the common aspects of modern nationalism is the way in which homelands involve highly selective projections of the 'nation' for centuries in the past that have virtually no relevance to the national idea. This is precisely why Thongchai's *Siam Mapped* was able to produce withering critiques of national histories that reveal Siam as a 'geo-body' long before it had one. Sadly, claims to ancestral homelands and national space may spark human passions, provoke terrible wars and produce bitter socio-psychological hatred in some notable cases.

It is instructive to see how people lived and organized themselves politically prior to the creation of modern boundaries. We should also consider more

carefully what was lost or hidden in the creation of our political maps, for as Thongchai (1995) argues, 'the ultimate losers' were those indigenous spaces that did not conform to the new modern 'grid'. However, this begs the question as to whether they were actually lost, or are there not many different alternative conceptions of borders and space that we should take note of, not least the counter-mappings associated with cultural politics over access to natural resources and livelihood spaces, various customary rights, and indigenous forms of *sub-national* sovereignty.

Historian David Ludden (2003) has also raised the discrepancy between national geography and human history in the treatment of human mobility. As has been correctly pointed out there is often a tendency to imagine that mobility and various forms of migration involve 'border crossings', 'as though borders came first, and mobility, second. The truth is more the other way around' (Ludden, 2003: 1062). In a similar way to scholars who discuss the multiple and overlapping jurisdictions and sovereignties of 'medieval' Europe, and draw some comparisons with contemporary transnational and sub-national socio-spatial-political formations, Ludden's perspective of mobility in contemporary Asia draws upon the 'mobile spaces' that were able to exist in the un- and loosely bounded kingdoms, chiefdoms and sultanates of the past. The essential point here is that human mobility defines us as much as territoriality, and there is a strong tendency within national geobodies to marginalize, prejudice, alienate, securitize, and politicize certain categories of 'bodies' on the move and aspects of human mobility that transgress the norms and conventions of inter-state space and sovereignty. Thus, in Asia, many traditionally peripatetic groups, such as the many different so-called 'hill tribes', forest dwellers, the *orang laut* (sea people) of the Malay archipelago, and long-distance traders, were turned into dispersed 'minorities', sedentarized, effectively becoming 'resident strangers' in spaces they have helped to shape long before the coming of modern geography. In spite of the overwhelming sweep of geopolitical boundaries and the legal-political institutions that support them, we should bring into sharper focus some of the alternative indigenous geographies, mobile territorialities (Casimir and Rao, 1992), and tremendous capacities that people have to maintain socio-cultural relations across political space.

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