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**COMMENTARY ON:**

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

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The premature misconstruction and predetermination of borders as redundant in a 'borderless world', where the forces of globalization, re-territorialization and identity shifts have rendered a new geographical order, have obscured, initially, and then revealed emphatically, that borders do matter. Now we conceptualize borders in a re-ordered world where scale, territory, sovereignty, identity, belonging and movement all are re-imagined. This is a new world re-visioned in a multi-dimensional cadastre that defies conventional wisdoms and incremental interpretations. It is a world as well where borders and border processes stand out as landmarks of what was a world order, and heralds of how that order is changing. The authors acknowledge that borders are not only problematic in a 'borderless world' but also that borders figure prominently in the economic, environmental, cultural and geopolitical debates about this world. Bordering process is now viewed by theorists as spatial and social practice as well as physical and symbolic marking of difference. Border theorists note as well that borders shape and are shaped by what they contain, and that borders grow in significance in a world of increasingly asymmetric relationships based on wealth and power.

Collectively, the work of contemporary border theorists signals what the authors and others have termed a 'Renaissance' in border studies. This new era had been emerging slowly if not clearly in the sub-national, supra-national, trans-national and global deliberations among border specialists during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We may accept the authors' assertion that border specialists in these previous decades remained caught in what John Agnew has characterized as the territorial trap due to a lingering focus on the state. Yet border research in Europe, and at the southern and northern borders of the United States confirms, as early as the 1980s, that a new paradigm of border studies was emerging. As the authors establish, however, it was the new paradigm of global social and spatial organization transcending borders, and declarations of a 'borderless world' that together formed a catalyst for the new era of border studies and a growing interdisciplinary theory of borders. The edges rather than the core of territories now garner attention, and borders, as the authors acknowledge, "now constitute the physical and institutional forefront of a dismantling of the territorial trap that will allow a more nuanced and complex understanding of the negotiation of new socio-spatial realities at sub-national, national, trans-national, and global scales." (p. 1200) Advances in social theory have contributed substantially to expanding approaches and methods for border studies, and it is enticing to credit these advances for producing a new era. Yet, as the authors note, border theory exhibits an evolution with patterns of overlapping, accretion and exchange rather than clearly defined and marked stages, and that new approaches are combined with and do not necessarily replace traditional ones. It may be more instructive and revealing then to view the transformation of border studies as a productive, effective and articulated transition, and to reserve the designation of a renaissance until we have more evidence of the impact of the changes in orientation.

The value of the overview provided by the authors of this compelling essay lies less in the designation of the new era than in the characterization and evaluation of the main lines of debate. These are the role of borders in the tension between the forces of globalization and state sovereignty, the shifting meaning of borders with reference to territory and scale, the extended and complicated work of borders in the establishment of identity and confirmation of belonging, and the related final consideration of borders, migration, diaspora and trans-nationalism.

The first debate is essentially about how state borders will evolve, and although the 'endism' that views borders lose relevance has some vocal proponents, their version of 'strong globalization' has fewer scholarly adherents who would rather support an interpretation of 'weak globalization' characterized by long term variance, permeability and bridge borders. After

all, state borders remain reified and maintained by power despite the transformation of their meaning and function by a combination of integrationism and neo-isolationism, and the pressures of post-colonial re-territorialization and global terrorism. All modern borders, as the authors emphasize, reflect and cross a variety of social boundaries, invite transgression and are essentially always in process despite their apparent finality in space and as place. The border between Canada and the United States, as the authors acknowledge, reflects graduated sovereignty, and as I have come to realize over decades of observation, it is truly the fulcrum of mediation and communication—the ‘medicine line’—between the countries. Indeed, the US-Canada border has always operated beyond a container function, and it is a paradox that the border is more of a security enforced container today between two of the world’s leading nations in internationalism and trans-nationalism.

The border between Canada and the United States reflects as well the importance of scale in the changing meaning of borders and bordering. Cross-border regions and border communities have prevailed since the boundary was determined-delimited-demarcated, and recently there has been a proliferation of sub-national scalings of local to global processes and institutions. This major shift in the meaning of borders, according to Saskia Sassen, is seen in partial and specialized denationalization, global processes entering national space, and novel borderings inside national territory. Among the novel borderings in Canada we see pre-modern and indigenous notions of overlapping polities re-emerge in, for example, the construct of the Inuit territory of Nunavut. Also evident are the extra-territorial sites such as transit lounges in airports and the places in-between where people wait along the ‘thickened’ land boundary, and borderlines between ethnic and religious groups in the world cities of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

This consideration of the meaning of borders leads to questions of how borders relate to identity and belonging where boundaries are representational, and symbolic processes of inclusion and exclusion prevail to underline existing differences and engender new others including trans-national hybrids. The authors suggest that this exploration constitutes the cutting edge of border theory, and I would agree but would emphasize that as geographers we need to consider especially the nature and role of transitional zones, of *borderlands*, and other spaces in between. How do these ‘spaces’ and the ‘line’ work together and independently to produce otherness, and construct and maintain state-based identities and belonging while they generate hybrid identities and shared heritages? Who are border stakeholders, and what role do they play in border contestation, mediation and re-imagination? Is the meaning of the border apparent only to the group

imagining it? In order to address these and other related questions, in my estimation, requires an understanding of *borderlands culture*. The authors acknowledge that culture does play a role, and they cite Brunet-Jailly's model where local culture along with political clout, scaled governance and economic forces offer four interactive lenses to explore and build border theory. Culture, I would assert, needs to be scaled as well and viewed as a local to trans-national continuum in a model of how borders work. The role of culture, now viewed more broadly as socially constructed in the aftermath of the 'cultural turn', and in the context of the new cultural geography, needs to be situated in our thinking about borders and borderlands. With a better grasp of how culture works at and across borders we may address more effectively the border as mechanism for the production of exclusions and hierarchies, the impact of borders on belonging, the content of hybridity, and the meaning of the border and its related constructs of space and place.

The role of culture and its manifestations at the border are central to understanding the processes of reforming society and remaking citizenship. We need to articulate more effectively the cultural and the social in the process of bordering and re-bordering in migration and diaspora, and the creation of trans-national identities. In these contexts, as the authors express, there is a proliferation of processes where individuals and groups find themselves in new spaces of interaction and connectivity, where even the human body has become a border site, and new communities are formed in shared cyber space. A creative tension has emerged between borders as sites of vulnerability and markers of homeland. To comprehend this tension, and to understand the border constructs that emerge, it may be most useful to theorize borders as trans-national places in constant process. Although borders appear finite as limits of power, they are crossed constantly by all of the waves generated by power.

This property alone makes borders fascinating to theorize. The authors underline that borders and border regions are, moreover, indeed rich sites for research into the changing nature of human social organization and human capacities for action in the dynamic of globalization. Yet, their acknowledgement of the suggestion that there lies a new 'medieval' socio-political order in emergent global border dynamics misinterprets, in my estimation, the 'overlapping, opaque, flexible hierarchies' of globalization. The graduated sovereignty and citizenship are not 'neo-feudal social structure' reincarnated as they seem to imply, for we now see beyond the borders in a post-national perspective, and this view is informed because we know beyond borders and recognize global dimensions. We are both bounded again and unfettered now in a new era of territorial embrace as re-territorialization follows de-territorialization to confirm and assure the

articulation of power. We are re-scaling power and space simultaneously, and most assiduously at our borders. And, as the authors point out, these are complex re-negotiations of spatiality. They are shifting and contradictory. Or, are there elements of a congruity and a new order that we cannot see with our emerging theory of borders?

Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen have done an admirable job of outlining how borders have re-emerged as markers of difference and socio-spatial practice in a 'borderless world'. We are in a new era of border studies and the development of border theory, and this emerging theory promises greater insights about globalization, territory and identity. Not only do borders matter in globalization, but also borders and borderlands have gained global currency in our efforts to understand the shifts, changing scales, 'in-betweenness', and other transformations of sovereignty, belonging and migrations around the globe. We have discovered that the world is not at all 'borderless' in globalization, and that boundary construction and destruction in escalating dimensions and at various scales, are processes affecting individuals and groups whose identities, in every sense, are dependent on borders. Herein lies one substantial promise of border theory: to explore and unpack identity.