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SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

EUROPEAN COMMISSION
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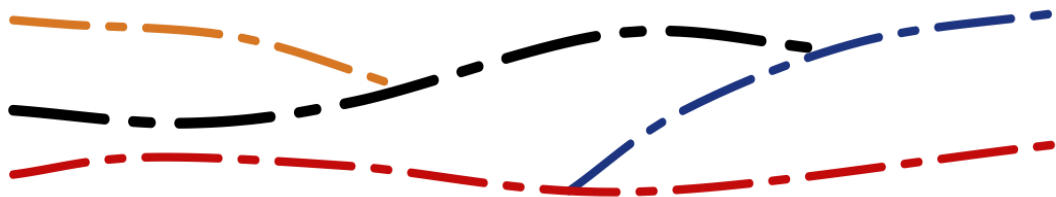Funded under Sicio-economic Sciences & Humanities

EUBORDERSCAPES

Working Paper 10

On borders' multiplicity: A perspective from assemblage theory

Christophe Sohn (Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research)

May 2015

Abstract

Various critical and scholarly works have underlined the multiplicity of borders, or the idea that borders mean different things to different people. This paper discusses the potential of the concept of assemblage for better understanding the ontological multidimensionality intrinsic to borders. An assemblage is understood to be a heterogeneous and open-ended grouping of elements that do not form a coherent whole that helps explain how different meanings emanating from various actors may interact and endure in a contingent and provisional way. It can be argued that such a topological approach may be well suited to unravel the uneven power relations that are both constitutive of a given border and mediated by it and to highlight the overall significance of a border's identity beyond its diversity and on-going transformation.

Key words: Border, assemblage, multiplicity, power relations, identity

Introduction

In the two last decades, border studies have undergone a dramatic expansion of new perspectives, in large part because they were recently opened to critical social theory and interdisciplinary research (see Johnson et al. 2011; Parker, Vaughan-Williams et al. 2009; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, Rumford 2006). This move has been driven by the spreading and multiplication of border functions, forms and effects at different levels of social and political action and in various spatio-temporal contexts (Balibar 2002). The changing nature of borders has been interpreted as a shift from territorial dividing lines and political institutions towards socio-cultural practices and discourses (Paasi 1999). Appearing more dispersed, fluid and multifarious, borders, or more precisely bordering practices, have become increasingly valuable in illustrating the reshaping of both geopolitical affairs and everyday life (Sidaway 2011).

This reflection is built on critical and scholarly work that has highlighted the need to better understand the fluid and manifold nature of borders. It represents a tentative contribution to the development of new border imaginaries and methodologies, as noted recently by Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2012). Elaborating on Balibar's (2002) seminal reflexions on the polysemic nature of borders (meaning that they do not have the same meaning for everyone), the aim of this article is to assess the critical potential of the concept of assemblage, crafted by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), as a way to better understand such an ontological multidimensionality. Assemblages are heterogeneous and open-ended groupings of material and semiotic elements that do not form a coherent whole but that allow us to explain how different meanings derived from various actors (and thus not only the state) may interact and endure in a contingent and provisional way. Beyond the conceptual exegesis, which has been achieved with great clarity by others (see notably Anderson et al. 2012; Bonta and Protevi 2004; Delanda 2006), the theoretical purchase of assemblage in border work is considered here.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The first section introduces the epistemological issue of downplaying the multidimensionality of borders with the help of examples of what I call the border synecdoche. Section 2 underlines the multifarious character of borders and seeks to identify how best to understand their multiplicity. Section 3 introduces the concept of assemblage and highlights why such a perspective promises to better represent the multiplicity of borders. In the last section, I consider the implications of the ontological condition of borders for critically rethinking them as multidimensional entities, with a particular emphasis on the power relations that underlie competitive border narratives and the significance of a border's identity beyond its diversity and transformation.

1. The border synecdoche

While the ontological multidimensionality of borders is acknowledged in various ways at the conceptual level (Rumford 2012), there remains a tendency to essentialize the discursive constructions that accompany the empirical apprehension of changing bordering practices and therefore reduce the significance of borders to a single aspect that is deemed most relevant. In most cases, a border is simplified to a mechanism of division and exclusion, or a site of encounter and connection, but rarely both simultaneously, as their intrinsic ambivalence would imply. The mechanism involved in the promotion of a reduced understanding of the border is akin to a synecdoche, a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or the whole for a part. In order to further explore this logic and highlight its consequences, I will address two main hypotheses in recent border debates as examples: the 'borderless world' thesis and the 'borders are everywhere' thesis. Despite their contradictory claims and the obvious differences in terms of their underlying paradigms and spatio-temporal topologies, both thesis encourage the downgrading in the multidimensionality of borders in favour of partial understandings.

First postulated in the early 1990s, the 'borderless world' hypothesis has been portrayed as the demise of the system of bounded territorial states that has accompanied accelerated globalization processes (Ohmae 1990). Such an absolutist interpretation of the impact of globalization on state territoriality is derived from the way borders were conceived by the proponent of a globalized neoliberal economy. By considering state borders solely as barriers to transnational flow, they have been essentialized as hindrances and reduced to one of their multiple functions, hence creating a border synecdoche. With the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the supposed hollowing out of the states, the rise of a new regionalism and the boom of an unimpeded global flow of people, goods, information and capital, borders are thus considered to be redundant, leading to an 'end-state' or de-territorialized world. Of course, these predictions about the loss of the significance of borders and the collapse of state territoriality proved overstated (Yeung 1998). This does not mean that the globalization discourse did not have a significant impact on the meanings of state borders (Newman 2011). Rather, it means that state borders continue to have significance beyond merely being territorial barriers; indeed, the opening of borders does not mean that those borders have ceased to exist. Gone awry, the metaphor of a 'borderless world' seems to have lost its relevance (Green and Ruhleder 1995).

Building on a critical reading of the transformation of borders in relation with the European integration and its bordering processes, Balibar's (2002, 2004) notion that 'borders are everywhere' (BAE) indicates that states' bordering practices are no longer solely located at the border lines of sovereignty but have been extended wherever selective control and surveillance practices are found. Indeed, specific bordering practices that used to be predominantly performed at the state territorial borders now have diffused inwards and outwards. Faced with this relative 'unbundling' of borders, the BAE approach tends to use the term 'border' as a synonym for a type of social control that can happen far from the political border and virtually anywhere (Paasi and Prokkola 2008). Two remarks arise from this observation. First, social control and state surveillance entail a much wider range of practices then those performed through 'bordering'. Thus, as pointed by O'Dowd (2010:1038), the use of the term border as a synonym for certain social controls contributes to "overextending the metaphor". Second, borders encompass a wider range of meanings and roles than merely control, filtering and surveillance practices. Ultimately, the BAE thesis highlights a two-way synecdoche, either in using the whole (social control) for one of its parts (border) or using a part (social control) for the whole (border).

So, what do these two examples of border synecdoche tell us? First, that the changing significance of borders in relation to globalization makes it difficult for social scientists to grasp these changes in a meaningful way. There is a risk of either oversimplifying what borders represent or obscuring their roles and significance. In both cases, the multidimensional character of borders is lost. Second, by portraying borders as barriers and instruments of control, they are disproportionately given a negative connotation (O'Dowd 2010). Their true Janus-faced character, which allows them to represent both constraints and opportunities, is thus downplayed. The aim of the next section is to highlight the multifarious nature of changing borders.

2. The multiplicity of borders

As a political entity, a border, whatever its materiality, always marks a limit between two territorial and social entities. In this way, it is both a separation between an inside and an outside and an interface between adjacent socio-spatial systems or categories. On one side, the border engenders a production and a differentiated occupancy of space, to which it associates dichotomous notions such as inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, we/them. On the other, the border is also an invitation to passing, transgression and unfamiliarity. Such a line thus conveys a fundamental ambivalence and a source of anxiety and quietude, fear and desire. According to their closed or open character, borders are part of the practices of differentiation, protection and control, but also of openness, hybridization and inventiveness. This dual movement, both centripetal and centrifugal, gives borders their Janus-face character (van Houtum 2012).

However, as social constructions, the signification of borders cannot be derived from their forms, roles or supposed functions. As borders mean different things to different people (Balibar 2002), the diversity of actors, objects, practices and representations that contribute to their reproduction must be accounted for. In their book to which this section makes an

explicit reference, Andersen, Klatt and Sandberg (2012) underline the necessity to think in terms of heteronomy and diversity in order to understand the multiplicity of borders. The reference to heteronomy signifies that a border does not exist in and of itself (i.e., in an autonomous way), but is instead created through the meaning that is attached to it. The freedom of action within structures highlighted by the structuration theory implies that depending on the individual, group or organization considered, a given boundary may be perceived and interpreted in different ways. For example, a wall circumscribing a territory may signify a protection against external dangers for some, an obstacle or a symbol of political oppression for others, a scene for artistic expression (e.g., a graffiti board) for others, or an economic resource for those who know how to bypass it (e.g., traffickers and smugglers). Along the heteronomy of the border, Andersen et al. (2012) also stress the importance of the diversity of actors that contribute to the ways borders are created, shifted, and transformed in everyday life and therefore to the variety of perceptions, beliefs and claims held at different levels and registers of action. Such a perspective echoes Rumford's (2012) emphasis on considering a multiperspectival study of borders and the concept of 'borderscapes' as a gaze "able to grasp the 'variations' of borders in space and time" (Brambilla 2014: 12).

Fundamentally, the multiplicity of borders stems from the diversity of practices attached to it and that give strength to a multitude of specific versions. However, considering the multiplicity of a border from a set of juxtaposed meanings or a motley world of contingent practices does not seem sufficient. As underlined by Husserl in his reflections on multiplicity as a philosophical concept (cited by Ierna 2012), it is the relationship between the properties of an object that define a multiplicity. It is therefore not the absence/presence of certain meanings that define the multiplicity of a border (which is always potentially there and can be actualized), but the ways in which they relate one to each other, the ways in which some gain influence or legitimacy while others are instead contested or downplayed. Applying relational thinking to the borders' multiplicity leads us to consider the concept of assemblage.

3. The border assemblage

The use of assemblage is rooted in the work of the French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and in particular the second volume of Capitalism and Schizophrenia, A Thousand Plateaus (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Despite its complexity and its sometimes perplexing vocabulary, assemblage thinking seems to have gained currency in the social sciences in recent years (see notably Marcus and Sakka 2006; Phillips 2006). In human geography, the concept has proliferated through its application to a wide range of substantive topics and various contexts giving rise to the notion of 'assemblage geographies' (Robbins and Marks 2009) and more broadly what Bonta and Protevi (2004) call a 'geophilosophy'. Indeed, different socio-spatial formations and processes such as regions (Allen and Cochrane 2007), places (Dovey 2010), scales (Legg 2009), infrastructures (Bennett 2005), urban policy-making (McCann 2011) or social movements (McFarlane 2009) are apprehended through the concept of assemblage. Presented as part of a broader 'relational turn', Anderson et al. (2012) have categorized the three ways according to which assemblage is applied, namely as a broad descriptor of the fit of heterogeneous elements, an ethos of engagement with the world and

experimentation, and a concept that relates to the theoretical elaborations of Deleuze and Guattari.

The way I aim to conceptualize borders as assemblages relates principally to the last concern mentioned above. Thus, my reflection follows the works of Best (2003) and Woodward and Jones III (2005) in their attempts to introduce the thoughts of Deleuze and Guattari to the field of border studies. Rather than a full-fledged theory, I conceive of the assemblage theory as a conceptual toolbox that is well suited to explore complex systems characterized by non-linearity and far-from-equilibrium operating trajectories (Bonta and Protevi 2004, Dittmer 2013). Four main features of assemblage thinking appear to be particularly useful to better understand the multiplicity of borders, although this should not be seen as an exhaustive presentation.

First, and contrary to the notion of a system or organic whole that generally implies some kind of coherence, relative autonomy and regulation capacity, the notion of assemblage is much looser and suggests the heterogeneous grouping of different parts without actually forming a coherent whole (Allen 2011). As discussed previously, borders' multiplicity basically signifies that a given border means different things to different people. In its simplest form, the type of assemblages that interest us here are thus made up of actors (i.e., individuals, organizations, networks) and meaningful expressions. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 88), the two dimensions refer to the 'machinic assemblage of bodies' and the 'collective assemblage of enunciation'. The first performs a material role, while the second plays an expressive role (linguistic or symbolic). Of course, a detailed study of a singular border would require the addition of a variety of components which play a material role, including physical infrastructure (such as border markers, walls or checkpoints), policing procedures and tools (passport and visas), surveillance technologies (with their machines, algorithms and the data collection), various resources (money, energy, time), and carriers and their transportation networks (either because of their formal role in border policing or because they actively circumvent and contest the border). To this end, we should also consider the physical locales where bordering practices in their diversity are performed and materialise, and not only along the continuous lines of demarcation, but thought a multitude of places, zones and networks. As far as the components playing an expressive role are concerned, besides beliefs and narratives related to bordering classification and categories (us/them, citizens/aliens, domestic/foreign), legislation defining a border regime, rituals as expressions of solidarity and legitimacy (oaths, national holidays, official celebration) and symbols (national flags and anthems) referring to a given territorial identity should also be considered. Indeed, some components may serve both roles simultaneously. For example, a border post that plays a material role in controlling border flows may also perform an expressive role as it refers to the orderliness of the bureaucratic procedures enforced (Green 2012). The same duality can also apply to the physical entities (such as rivers or mountains) that have often been chosen to materialize a border and make it look 'natural' or legitimate. In short, depending on the context, all or part of these components (and sometimes more) may dwell together in a specific assemblage.

Second, as an assemblage is an uneven topography of trajectories that cross or interact with each other according to different temporalities and spatialities (Bennett 2005), the way in

which the disparate elements are held together despite their heterogeneity is of crucial importance. Following Deleuze's claim that 'relations are external to their terms', entities are affected by their related terms but are not fully determined by them. In other words, the connections are not defined and made permanent by the roles, functions or properties of the parts they link together. What matters is not the affiliations but rather the alliances, co-functioning, and symbioses (Deleuze and Parnet 1987). As DeLanda (2006: 11) puts it, these relations of exteriority are *contingently obligatory* but not *logically necessary,* as in other relational thinking. The components of an assemblage are entities in their own right and their relations may become obligatory at a given time in history. This key feature implies that the different entities can be detached from an assemblage and become part of another one. In this perspective, the above-mentioned flaws associated with the syndrome of border synecdoche are disregarded: instead of questioning what a border *is*, thus overextending or shrinking metaphors, we trace how various practices connect and disconnect, placing borders in the process of unfolding and becoming.

Third, an assemblage approach privileges processes of transformation over form and structure. As stated by Anderson et al. (2012: 177), "an assemblage is both the provisional holding together of a group of entities across differences and a continuous process of movement and transformation as relations and terms change." The on-going transformation of an assemblage relates to what Deleuze and Guattari call *territorialisation* and *de-territorialisation*. Territorialisation is the process by which an assemblage stabilizes itself, reinforcing its own identity. In contrast, de-territorialisation relates to the intervention, or appearance, of the components that destabilize (relative de-territorialisation) or dissipate (absolute de-territorialisation) an assemblage. While de-territorialisation disturbs established relations and may challenge the very existence of an assemblage, it also conveys 'lines of flight', representing new possibilities of re-territorialisation around a particular attractor. Such a perspective allows the border to be envisioned as a singular whole in the making, or a becoming. Although many borders may seem stable and display enduring effects, thanks notably to the processes of territorial institutionalisation, and their stylized repetitions of bordering practices, they are never truly static or fixed. The de-territorialisation of a border (driven, for instance, by cross-border regionalism) should not be equated with the disappearance of territoriality. Instead, it always leads to new forms of territorialisation, inventive forms of (re)bordering based on reassembled temporalities and spatialities (Woodward and Jones 2005). Similarly, processes of rebordering (driven by, for instance, state securitization) are always accompanied by vectors or paths of de-territorialisation, allowing the escape from a state apparatus; that is, a stratified and over-coded assemblage. Traffickers and smugglers are good examples of counter forces that can be part and parcel of a border assemblage territorialized by a state apparatus. Ultimately, the two movements of gathering and dispersing are caught up in one another, and everything takes place between the two (Deleuze and Parnet 1987).

Lastly, the difference between actual entities, the emergence of new properties, and the duration of certain arrangements are not derived from external factors, essentialist conditions or divine orders. Actually, these processes relate to the ontological distinction between the *actual* and the *virtual* (Bonta and Protevi 2004). On the one hand, the actual register displays stratified systems, or *strata,* to use the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari.

Their extensive properties are the aspects displayed by self-regulating systems when in a stable or steady state, which is locked in a deep basin of attraction. On the other, the virtual register provides the structure for intensive morphogenetic processes composing assemblages or strata to occur. This is called the *plane of consistency* in A Thousand Plateaus. Defined by 'universal singularities', the structure of the virtual realm is called a 'possibility space' or a 'diagram' (DeLanda 2006). It basically shows what an assemblage can do, and its degrees of freedom. The crucial distinction thus lies between the *properties* of a part, which are known and refer to actualized features, and its *capacities,* which represent an open-ended set of potentials that cannot be fully known in advance. Whereas properties are the result of interactions between entities, capacities depend on the potential interactions with other terms or relations (DeLanda 2006). As historical and contingent products, borders are 'individual singularities', displaying extensive properties such as the crossing capacity of a port of entry or the enforcement of immigration rules. However, borders also entail unexercised capacities that are open and often unpredictable. For instance, the opening of state borders inside the EU and their re-territorialisation around region-based cooperative practices has given rise to new properties that were not initially conceived or planned, notably their role as economic and symbolic resources for cross-border regionalism.

In light of the above arguments and despite the general nature of this kind of conceptual reflection, the use of assemblage appears to be a promising approach toward a better grasp of shifting and manifold socio-spatial formations such as borders. In order to highlight a few tracks towards the empirical use of this concept to the multiplicity of borders, further implications will be examined in the last section.

4. Implications for the multiplicity of borders

Investigating the multiplicity of borders leads us to examine the ways in which different meanings relate to one another. What matters are the relations through which heterogeneous components connect, interact and cohere. According to an assemblage perspective, these relations are contingent, not necessary. The acceptance of this hypothesis raises two research questions.

The first question addresses the power relationships that impregnate borders and the way one can unbundle them using assemblage theory. The fact that various meanings resonate, cohere and reinforce themselves or, conversely, contest each other, reassemble and fall apart, is raising the question of the power practices attached to a border. From an assemblage perspective, the question of power is not apprehended through a central governing body but is instead conceptualized as a plural entity, distributed and in formation (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). It is therefore not the 'power over' that refers per instance to the capacity of an actor to decide who can cross and who cannot or to distinguish what is on the inside and outside of a border that is first and foremost concerned here; this form of instrumental power is part and parcel of the state border apparatus. Instead, it is the 'power to' which allows for the facilitative understanding and refers to the capacity of actors to influence or secure outcomes, which is at stake here. The struggle to influence, negotiate, claim or contest border-related meanings indeed points to the relations of congruence or conflict among the

actors that shape the alliances, coalitions, movements and counter-movements. Being exterior to their terms, these relations are not necessarily determined by the properties (e.g., role, status, affiliation) of their proponents. Instead, they stem from the position of actors within what Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007: xv) call a 'landscape of competing meanings' and their ability to constrain or grasp knowledge and semantic resources. To understand the interwoven relations of power hidden in the competing narratives on boundaries, it appears necessary to go beyond the divisions dictated by conventional border dichotomies such as the citizens and the aliens, those who are inside and those who are outside, and to de-emphasize the core/periphery representations of territory. It is also necessary to refute categories (ethnic, political, religious, gender) and monolithic entities. For example, instead of the 'state', it is the relations of exteriority that structure the linkages between the various agencies forming a central government that is sought here (Delanda 2006). Finally, and pivotal to such an approach, one should be attentive to ambivalent behaviours such as those dictated by tangled hierarchies, double binds and other paradoxical injunctions. Consider two actors who may simultaneously agree and disagree about a border's signification, thus introducing paradoxical strategies within the functioning of a real but nevertheless non-coherent border assemblage. What matters ultimately in an assemblage perspective is our ability to understand the coalitions against nature, the baroque congruencies, and also the latent dissonances and emerging disjunctions that may lead to the initiation of new practices of legitimization, contestation or resistance.

Considering the multiple meanings of borders using assemblage also leads to the important question: what defines a border's identity beyond its diversity? The assemblage perspective suggests that the identity of a border is not of an essential nature but must be framed in relative and provisional terms. Questioning a border's identity thus references its durability in relation to on-going transformations; in other words, "the ensemble of properties that support an invariance" (Badiou 2008: 40). To tackle this within an empirical perspective, one would first need to define the key dimensions of a border possibility space or diagram. In this context, these dimensions do not refer to universal laws or quantifiable parameters but instead reference qualitative properties expressing potentials (i.e., what can a border mean?). As such, they should be seen as open categories, contingently determined as forms of power, territory, citizenship, nationalism, identity, security, etc. Along the lines of such a provisional diagram, one could then analyse in a second step how the different properties/capacities of a unique border are positioned relative to each other. Despite the schematic character of these remarks, three types of trajectories appear to be potentially meaningful for the structuring of future empirical investigations. Firstly, the identification of a topological invariance in the way actual meanings interrelate would signal the enduring identity of a stratified border placed in a steady state. Secondly, the identification of a topological shift in the way these meanings interrelate or the actualization of new capacities would signal the transformation of the border's identity according to a process of relative de- and re-territorialisation, thus foreshadowing its transition towards a pre-established, albeit non-actualized, set of attractors within the diagram. Lastly, the identification of topological breaks and the appearance/disappearance of dimensions of the diagram (a change of its virtual realms) would signal a process of absolute de- and re-territorialisation, eventually leading to the dissipation of the border and the unleashing of a new set of attractors and patterns, thus creating a novel assemblage.

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