

Article

Borders and the Design of the Civic †

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Abstract: The word border may be the most constraining on human thought and action in history. Whether borders on territory, borders from ideologies, from politics, or anything else; they all condition action and thinking. I want to focus on the many borders that humans erect, walls that we construct, and how they block flows and processes that constitute life and well-being. If this were a conference on sustainability or ecology, I would go on about how human borders, especially administrative and infrastructural ones, block ecological flows and processes and thus harm biological life, including humans. Most ancient traditions of wellness and health, including Ayurvedic, Tantric, Chinese, Greek, and Persian, stressed the free flow of energy. Blockage of flows in the body were sources of illness and disease. Borders of all kinds are infused into virtually every thing that humans create, from organizations and institutions to customs and traditions. Yet the most constraining borders of all are the borders on our own thinking. After addressing several essential characteristics of borders, a number of policies and actions are suggested for dealing with political conflicts and humanitarian crises related to borders.

Keywords: civil society; planning; migration; politics; governance



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1. Introduction

The word border may be the most constraining on human thought and action in history. Whether borders on territory, borders from ideologies, from politics, or anything else, they all condition action and thinking. I want to focus on the many borders that humans erect, walls that we construct, and how they block flows and processes that constitute life and well-being. If I was referring to sustainability or ecology, I would continue with how human borders, especially administrative and infrastructural ones, block ecological flows and processes and thus harm biological life, including humans. Most ancient traditions of wellness and health, including Ayurvedic, Tantric, Chinese, Greek, and Persian, stressed the free flow of energy. Blockage of flows in the body were sources of illness and disease. Current practices of Tai Chi and Chi Kung advocate the same. Ecologists and biologists highlight the free flow of energy and materials in habitats and ecosystems.

In the human, social realm, the saying “good fences make good neighbors” is a quaint relic from an idealized, romanticized, small town past in a poem by the American poet Robert Frost. While this phrase is often quoted out of context as a positive thing, in fact it was a concept that he himself criticized in the poem. Today’s border walls cost a fortune to build and maintain, create an enforcer class and political class that pays more attention to forms and cages than humans and lives. Borders block flows of people while allowing flows of money, information and materials. Why is it that people are captive by borders but almost everything else that matters in contemporary capitalist societies roams relatively freely? This is but one price of the global economy dictated by the political capitalism of the financier class.

Yet the most constraining borders of all are the borders on our own thinking. This article addresses these issues regarding borders in the context of civil society. More and more today, civic engagement and political discourse are distorted by conceptions and

perceptions of “the other”. The “other” is itself a mental construct that is conditioned by borders and how we perceive them, discuss them, and act upon them. Thus, borders are critical for making positive advancements regarding various social and political predicaments facing societies and communities in these times. It closes with several principles to keep in mind regarding solutions.

Borders of all kinds are infused into virtually every thing that humans create, from organizations and institutions to customs and traditions. For example, borders are by definition built into organizations and institutions, and separate us from them, by separating those who belong from those who do not. In other words, “othering”. If I am I, and part of a We, regardless of how the We is constituted (community, organization, society, culture, nation, etc.), then the non-members of “my” group are They, and the Other [1]. The consequences of these borders are enormous and multifold.

There is no intent to simplify here, to sweep complex social orders, cultures, traditions, societies, and communities, which by definition beget and are begotten by borders, into mere categories, which themselves result from mental ordering and bordering. Nor do I claim to follow postmodern patterns which sweep away received categories, and sweep away received thinking, that itself opens the door for relativistic chaos and conceptual entrapment. That is another gross simplification of the world as it is. Instead, I suggest that we each, individually and in our multiple organizational memberships, take a close look at what borders mean and what they do to us as humans, as citizens in communities, and what they do to us as societies.

Scholars Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper argue that memberships in nations as citizens have led to and continue to shape competitive dispositions (worse yet, predispositions, in this author’s mind) among nations in the global arena [2,3]. This is partly if not largely determined by zero-sum perspectives on world trade and geopolitical power dynamics (Lissner and Rapp-Hooper 2020). This leads to the defending and strengthening of borders. This is ironic, almost, in an era where global trade and nearly unlimited and free information flow via the internet works in the opposite direction. The effect on discourse and civic participation tends to be self-reinforcing, mitigating against civil interaction within any given polity, as well as internationally among nations.

2. Passports, Borders and Control

Decades ago, a Columbian roommate in a shared apartment in Madrid asked me the question ‘since when did human beings need passports?’ Desde cuando el ser humano necesita un pasaporte? That question has stayed with me, even as I have three passports of my own. While there is an empirical answer to the question, it is a profound existential question that merits discussion, and action [4].

As globalization accelerates, cities and nation-states are struggling to cope with “others” who are not historically members of their new communities and societies. This is exaggerated by the rise and conjunction of neoliberalism and populism. In the former, neoliberalism has led to the weakening of the public and the civic—that is, common norms and forms for conduct. The latter, populism has led to reactionary activism—that is, the erosion of civil discourse, polarization, and heightened mistrust of the other, even if they are from the same society and ethnicity. There are many ironies that cast the combination of neoliberalism and populism in a dark light. One supreme irony is that history itself is the story of human migration. Another is that many of these societies have been founded by immigrants and for immigrants, and in the past welcomed them. As one result, walls, borders, and closings of the mind and spirit reign, and rain havoc on societies and lives.

Two recent books document these conditions in the world. One, by G. John Ikenberry, takes the longer view of an historian to survey the current international liberal order. He finds that democracy is hanging by a thread now due to the politics of polarization that have developed in response to the massive migrations of refugees of all kinds, political, famine, draught, war, genocide, climate change and the like. Borders, including the ones solidified by the global institutions created in the aftermath of World War II, such as the UN,

IMF, World Bank, NATO, and the EU, have prosperous nations and less prosperous ones, jealously guarded by borders [5]. These same borders have led to many of the problems created, unintentionally, by these institutions.

I am a child of refugees. Political refugees. My parents landed in America in 1950, then a promised land of liberty and hope. My story is not unusual. Many people I know are refugees or children of refugees. Research suggests that there will be many more, up to 1.2 billion by the year 2050, largely climate refugees [6].

Borders in Europe as elsewhere were historically so porous that under one king or dynasty you belonged to one ruler, including language, laws and taxes; and the next year you may have belonged to another. These shifts occurred regularly throughout Europe and elsewhere. These shifts made and defined history as it was written and lived. On top of that, people were moving continually, everywhere. In my family's case, it was the Sudetenland. In fact, my surname, Neumann, in German means new man. The name stems from being an immigrant, a new arrival in a town, before becoming established and taking on the last name, typically of an occupation, such as baker, cooper, and smith. Think of the situation in the decade after World War II. Europe was teeming with refugees and migrants. Compare that with today—what has happened to our societies since? Are we as open and welcoming now to migrants and refugees? How is this reflected in our public spaces and places where we meet and conduct social intercourse, and debate public ideas and policy? Can they be designed and redesigned, and how? This has been made more challenging in a world where a pandemic may be ongoing indefinitely, as herd immunity may never be reached?

Refugees are not going away. According to a report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in Geneva, there were eleven million refugees in the first six months of 2019 alone [7].

In addition to being porous, borders are forever fluid, always shifting. These porous and shifting qualities are examined in a recent book titled *Border* by Kapka Kassabova, a Bulgarian now living in Scotland. She writes about hard borders like the iron curtain and soft borders like between EU countries. To quote briefly from her book:

“Now the Greek-Bulgarian border is softened by the shared membership of the European Union. The Turkish-Bulgarian and Greek-Bulgarian borders have lost their old hardness but acquired a new one: the new wire walls erected to stem the human flow from the Middle East. I happened to be there when the flow was becoming a haemorrhage. Global movement and global barricading, new internationalism and old nationalisms—this is the systemic sickness at the heart of our world, and it has spread from one periphery to another [8].”

She goes on to note the tempting quality of any border or limit. Humans are curious and adventurous animals. We want to see what is on the other side. “Once near a border, it is impossible not to be involved, not to want to exorcise or transgress something. Just by being there, a border is an invitation. Come on, it whispers, step across this line [8].”

To continue with her luminous prose, “An actively policed border is always aggressive. It is where power suddenly acquires a body, if not a human face, and an ideology. One obvious ideology that concerns borders is nationalistic. . . . But a more insidious one is centralist in practice: the belief that the centre of power can issue orders from a distance with impunity, and sacrifice the periphery [8].”

Since borders are always fluid and porous, we can at any time find ourselves on any side of any border, including what we may consider the wrong side. Causing us to act, even if contrary to law, and even if it puts us in danger, and separates us from home and loved ones. Does this make us a native, or a settler (Mamdani 2020)? Are we not all migrants, in a way, if we take the long view? How does this affect the way we interact socially and politically, with our neighbors and our governments? How does this affect our identity, and the politics that we identify with?

In Calais, France, for example, people are and have been waiting to get in to the UK, even with the prospect (then) or reality (now) of a “no deal” Brexit. In the USA, immigrant

children were separated from parents at the border during the Trump administration (2017–2021). Who would have thought that in that country, that there would be border refugee camps? On a personal note, I remember going to Canada from the United States by automobile in the 1960s with our parents, just flashing a smile at the border crossing, not even showing a driver's license or any other form of identity.

This is happening in countries that putatively champion human rights, set up international agencies, and are home bases of many important humanitarian non-profits, etc. This is happening in the country where the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France on the occasion of the centennial of the American Revolution in 1876 (dedicated and open to the public in 1886), has engraved on a plaque on its pedestal the words of Emma Lazurus:

"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Are we going backwards?

3. Principles to Guide the Way Forward

In the scholarship on borders, planning and governing organizations and institutions are key societal elements in drawing and enforcing borders. This is especially apparent in sociology, political science, geography, and planning. Yet discussions of institutions and their roles vis-à-vis borders tend to be—inexplicably—muted, with significant exceptions. Among many interesting recent books are Madeline Albright's *Fascism* [9], *A Warning* and David Runciman's *How Democracy Ends* [10]. Key aspects of the border-institution nexus in relation to cities and how we plan, govern, and live in them ought to be a central focus of scholarship. Yet, what is the role of research and evidence in a so-called post-truth, post-political, dare we say Trumpian world? Can scholars sit back and merely conduct research? What are policy makers and scholars to do today?

Some principles to keep in mind regarding solutions are posited here for consideration.

Plan and design more high-quality public spaces for convivial civic interaction.

These can be indoors or outdoors, they can be owned by the public, private, non-profit, or mixed sectors, as long as they remain open to all at no cost, or a nominal user charge.

Work with schools of all types and levels to promote civic education. Teach and value democratic pluralism, especially about living with peoples from different places and backgrounds—how to be a good citizen, beyond voting, and how to create and engage in civic-minded activities.

A cornerstone of this civic education is the statement of Thomas Jefferson.

He was author of the American Declaration of Independence, contributor to the Constitution, and third president, and once remarked "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion."

Civic education has profound implications for the design of participative policy and planning processes, and governance structures. These must satisfy several criteria to be: flexible, adaptable, and enable (in fact, require) direct democracy, deliberative democracy. Scholars in the academy can serve as impartial, apolitical civic entrepreneurs in this regard. The aggregation and accumulation of incremental, local processes can add up to a new society. This occurred in the 1960s and the 1970s. What is the new Pedagogy of the Oppressed for the 21st century? Who is the new Paolo Freire [11], author of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*? One such entity performing these activities is the New Democracy Foundation in Sydney, Australia.

Promote the positive about pluralism.

Pluralism is a nearly forgotten word in Western democracies. A little more than 50 years ago, the most cited article in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, called the JAIP then, was Paul Davidoff's "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning". It has much to say about our present day. Pluralism then was central to politics and society. We

hardly hear the term anymore, or the term melting pot, the post-war colloquialism used to define American society.

Rethink identity politics and particularism.

Are the politics of identity and particularism well suited to confront our current predicaments? They focus on the individual and not the group, the community, or the society. Identity politics may give the feeling of individual or in-group empowerment, but it can provoke out-group antagonism. This is a central problem and cause of social and political polarization today around the world. Identity politics can also shift power away from the broader collective. The same can be said about interest-based politics and policy. We need to build a new politics that is collective at multiple scales.

How to rebuild and strengthen the public sector?

Who is best positioned to start now to rejuvenate the public sector? Is it a specific sector? Profession(s)? Or are there values and criteria that should guide all, especially leaders? We can lead efforts to revitalize the public good, the public trust, through deliberative processes and institutions that engage a plural society in discourse based on facts and reason.

Borders are always regions, or areas of land, and not mere lines.

They are spatial constructs. Thus, spatial planners and territorial policy makers along with other culturally and spatially attuned professions such as geography, anthropology, sociology, demography, and public health should be actively involved in leading the decision making of such areas, including their processes of dealing with migrants.

Promote, support, and be active in cross-border organizations.

These include but are by no means limited to groups such as *Medicins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) and *Architecture Sans Frontières* (Architects Without Borders).

We close with an apt quote in a biography of Vaclav Havel, the former Czech and Czechoslovakian president. It typifies what Havel, a playwright, excelled at in his early career as he lived in an occupied country with closed borders under Eastern bloc communism—subtle double, even multiple, entendre disguised in absurdist political theatre.

“The struggle against the stupidity of those who exercise power is the only human struggle that is as futile as it is permanently necessary [12].” Werich (Havel’s friend)

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