

# **Territoriality matters in the anthropology of borders, cities and regions**

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## **Resumo**

Territórios e territorialidades persistem como preocupações centrais para cientistas sociais pesquisando bordas, limites e fronteiras. O território subsiste como um componente principal de territorialidade e também é um mecanismo central de diferenciação social e política e de integração. As tensões na academia, que surgem a partir das muitas maneiras em que as fronteiras e territorialidade se relacionam, são fatores fundamentais para o crescimento mundial nos estudos de fronteiras. Os estudos, enquanto amplamente focados nas fronteiras geopolíticas internacionais, também têm muito a oferecer no exame dos limites, bordas e fronteiras que delimitam e definem outras entidades geopolíticas, como as regiões, províncias, e as cidades. Vilas e cidades, por exemplo, têm os seus próprios limites internos e externos, muitos dos quais são paralelos ou cruzam outros tipos de fronteiras, regionais e nacionais. Este artigo explora aspectos de estudos urbanos e regionais para mostrar que uma antropologia das fronteiras ainda deve enfrentar questões importantes a respeito de território e territorialidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Territorialidade. Fronteiras. Regiões.

Despite protestations to the contrary in much post-modern discourse, territory and territoriality still matter to social scientists who are interested in borders, boundaries and frontiers. When approaching the issues of place, space and identity, territory remains the principal ingredient in territoriality. Territory is an inescapable agent of social and political differentiation and integration. But territory has also become one of the many concepts that have been recently asserted to be in decline as a basis to social life, in what is seen to be a globalized world that has shed its former national and normative constraints. In this vein of argument, national identity and the nation-state have withered away or been made almost redundant given the new flows, mobilities and spaces of late modernity, late capitalism and a new world economic order. But in the interplay of nations and their states, it is still the case that the size, location and contours of territory matter.

The tensions in scholarship that arise from the many ways borders and territory intersect, and the many ways in which frontiers and territoriality matter to each other, are key factors in the worldwide growth in border studies. These border studies have resulted, among other things, in a renewed interest in the origins and functions of nations and nationalism and in the changing dimensions of citizenship, sovereignty, and security (for a review of the current state of border studies in anthropology, as they relate to other disciplines, see Wilson and Donnan, 2012). Border studies, while largely focused on international geopolitical borders, also has a great deal to offer in the examination of the boundaries, borders and frontiers that delimit and define other geopolitical entities, such as regions, provinces, and towns and cities. Towns and cities, for example, have their own internal and external boundaries, many of which parallel or intersect other sorts of borders, such as the regional and national. In this essay I seek to explore how an anthropology of frontiers must still wrestle with the still important but still thorny issues of territory and territoriality by examining aspects of urban and regional studies.

### **Power, state, borders**

Borders are still the essence and embodiment of state and

nationhood, the symbols of national identity and historical continuity, and despite many advances globally which open up borders to more commerce, ideas and people, the emotive ideas of sacred and sovereign homelands persist. It is because states define themselves in regard to their capacity to provide and safeguard the sovereignty of the nation that they see as legitimate the use of force to provide internal order and external defense, on a territory that is the physical extent of that power and sovereignty. Thus, borders must also matter to scholars, policy-makers and general citizenry across the globe. In anthropology in particular border studies have been growing in prominence within our field and across the social sciences for a generation if not longer (WILSON; DONNAN, 2012).

It is not difficult to see why. Despite debates over the current health of the nation state, the state today has increased its presence and power, relative to earlier forms of the state, in the lives of its residents and citizens and in its dealings with other such entities on the world stage (MANN, 1993, 1997). Over the last thirty years nation states have increasingly intruded into the everyday lives of citizens, residents and visitors through its growing role as employer and provider of services. When public transfers are factored into direct salaries and wages, it is clear that the state has become a major, and in some many cases the major, source of private household income (THERBORN, 2011, p.280).

There are other forces at work that have driven the growth in border studies in anthropology, such as the general awareness of the poor fit between the idealized and mythologized nation-state and national society, the transformations in sovereignty and policy in supranational polities such as the EU and Mercosur, and the rise of regions and cities as relatively autonomous players in global economic relations. In this latter case regions and states often compete with their own states, thereby calling into question the roles which borders serve. Nations, states, regions, cities and supranational polities all continue to have and to privilege their borders, but over the last generation scholars have increasingly problematized the structures and functions of these borders. Many of these questions involve the issue of territory. As Balibar (2009, p. 192) has reminded, "Territories in our political tradition ... are not only associated with the 'invention' of the border,

but also inseparable from the institution of power as sovereignty.” States are in the business of defining, demarcating, defending and constructing their territories, as essential aspects of their sovereignties.

It is in the confluence too of space and place that borders, states, regions and cities overlap as objects and subjects of ethnographic research. Ethnographers among other social scientists cannot fully grasp the operation of power without recognizing the ways in which territory and territoriality frame social and political identity, identification, integration, and differentiation, particularly as they relate to conflict. In the following paragraphs I explore some of these ideas through a focus on border regions and border cities<sup>1</sup>.

## **Regions and borders**

Anthropologists have long considered political and economic processes beyond the village and neighborhood through a theorization of territory, particularly as it related to issues of nation and state. As John Cole concluded over thirty years ago, their efforts to understand the roles of localities within wider economic and political forces have led anthropologists to see the region as a unit of analysis (1977, p. 365). Many of these first regional anthropologists did research in relatively peripheral areas of nation-states, but ones that had historical and continuing cultural identities as regions, such as in the many regions that have gone into the construction of present-day Spain, France and Italy. In much of this early work a region was seen as “a unit of political ecology, where local resources and people are organized by an elite which is interposed between community and nation—and which may even bypass the nation in its relations with the world system” (COLE, 1977, p. 365). From those times to today anthropologists who have theorized regions have done so from the perspective that institutions of power external to localities frame if not direct aspects of local life.

A regional approach in social anthropology had its beginnings in anthropological attention to the issues of nation and state in Europe and Latin America. In fact the birth of an anthropology of regions in postwar Europe followed a parallel course to the evolution of regions

as political and economic entities within European states, a process impelled by European integration within the Common Market, then European community, now European Union. At first, anthropologists were slow to see regions as territorial entities within and across state boundaries, although they were relatively quick to recognize that nations and nationalism could not be easily bottled within a state container. The anthropologists who first turned to regional studies, that is the first who theorized regional studies, had recognized that local peasant communities could never be adequately studied as isolated entities because they, like all territorial and other communities, were enmeshed in social, political and economic networks that tied them to many locations and levels of society, polity and economy. These scholars were aware that most past classic studies of village communities in Europe, Middle and South America had included data on village connections to the nation, as may be seen in the influential works by Conrad Arensberg (1937) and Robert Redfield (1956). But they also wanted to examine these ties in order to theorize social processes in which local communities were immersed (an effort that took immediate root in the anthropology of Europe, as may be seen in Blok 1974; Boissevain 1975; Boissevain and Friedl 1975; Hansen 1977; Schneider and Schneider 1976; Silverman 1975; Wolf 1962). Much of this early regional anthropology adopted the language of centre, periphery and core in keeping with theories of dependency, the development of underdevelopment, and world-systems which had been pioneered in Central and South America (see, for example, Smith 1976a, 1976b).

From the beginning of regional analysis in anthropology, however, the questions arose and persisted of how to define and bound the region for analytical purposes, questions that have always been compounded when one layered in local actors' social constructions of their region (PARKHURST, 2008). While it is clear that all regions are contextualized space, it is also equally clear that space can be delimited functionally in myriad political, territorial, economic, administrative, social and cultural ways. Regions may be organized in terms of political jurisdiction, administrative competence, economic zones, historical traditions, social structures, and majority and minority cultures and

identities, and may be seen to be contained within national borders or not. All regions are territorial entities, but the definition of that territory, and its connections to social and political traditions, practices and meanings may vary greatly both among the residents of regions and among those who characterize them.

It is no surprise then that the anthropology of borders and frontiers would develop at least in some part out of these concerns with local, regional and national relations, and with issues of the politics and economics of territory and territoriality. In fact, for years I was often made uncomfortable by the insistence of my colleagues from political science and political studies that what I was really doing in my examination of culture and power at international borders was the analysis of territorial identity. I resisted this notion, particularly in the twelve years when I worked at Queens University in Belfast, because the association of territory to identity forced me to counter pose that particular sort of identity to real or normative ones associated with the nation! My discomfort was due to my own long held notion, common among anthropologists of my generation at least, that all identities were normative in some ways, all were territorial in some aspects, and that national identity (which in the parlance of political studies has often meant "citizenship", as if the concepts were synonyms) was just one identification among many that groups of people of all sorts used and felt in various ways depending on the social stimuli.

In recent years I have been more at ease with such disciplinary distinctions, principally because while I was out of the United States, and as a result of the ethnographic critique of the 1980s and after, in one effect of post-modernism in anthropology, my own field had largely adopted the notion that boundaries are not what we and others thought they were, that territory is mainly a social construction, and that local community, regional, national and international borders no longer have the potency they once had in this rapidly globalizing world. As a result I steeled myself to rededicate my research and writing to some simple facts and some simple propositions. Even in a globalized world the nation-state still matters. The numbers of states has risen by almost 25% (if we go by the growth in membership of the United

Nations after the Cold War). New technologies of globalization have given new and better means for states and other polities to intrude in people's lives. And despite scholarly notions to the contrary, people still live in communities that they know are bounded, both physically and socially, and they do so in multiple components at local, regional and national levels.

In Europe where I do most of my living, working and researching, the number of regions has grown in line with European integration and the expansion of the EU to 27 members. It is arguable that more Europeans than ever before now live and work within the social, economic, cultural and political domain of the region. It is equally arguable that they must recognize and deal with more geopolitical borders than ever before in their history, precisely because of the proliferation in multilevel governance, the growth in the size and importance of regions, and the effects which the greater mobility in capital, people, ideas and goods have had on borders and frontiers. Anthropologists today continue to focus on the borders, boundaries and frontiers of regions precisely because many of these Europeans, like many others globally, perceive regions to be increasingly meaningful and instrumental in their lives (as examples of this continuing focus on borders and regions, see Kockel 2002; Kurti 2001; Pelkmans 2006; Stacul 2003).

## **Urban frontiers**

The fact is that the anthropology of borders has grown in geometric ways over the last twenty years despite calls to theorize the absence or removal of notions of boundedness of place, community and culture (WILSON; DONNAN, 2012). This has happened largely because the research spectrum in the anthropology of borders has been inclusive of all sorts of geophysical boundaries, but has also sought to investigate with equal enthusiasm all aspects of how identities might best be approached from the metaphorical perspective of borders. This latter approach, of border theory, adds a great deal to border studies (i.e., the comparative analysis of what happens at and because of geophysical

borders) precisely because multicultural, international, transnational and so many other forms of identity can be recognized and studied in borderlands, territories where nations and states meet, mix and contest (for more detailed considerations of border theory and border studies, see Heyman 1994; Wilson 2012b). But the anthropology of borders has not paid as much attention to regions as it has to the limits of nation-states, and it has paid even less attention to how territory and territoriality configure borders and frontiers in and across cities.

There have been notable exceptions over the years. Some of the key works in border studies have focused on cultural and other frontiers in urban areas, wherein frontiers are seen as zones of varying width and definition where cultures interact and intersect in dynamic and significant ways, and where liminality may very well be the norm (for a review of the history and contemporary usages of these concepts in anthropology, see Donnan and Wilson 1999). These cities have often been border cities, those whose existence were or are due mainly to the location and proximity of an international border. Some urban areas are not border cities at all, but instead are towns and cities which once were in one country but now are in another, and, whether distant from or near to the new international border, where their own sense of self is tied to past and present political territories. An example of the latter would be the villages studied by John Cole and Eric Wolf (1974) in the Tyrol, while the former would be Trieste as discussed by Pamela Ballinger (2003).

While the physical placement of a city at a border is one way to marry the concepts of *urbs* and *limes*, there are other scholarly concerns that expand the notion of urban frontiers. Some cities have sought to re-position themselves by creating new frontier relations, across an international border or within the city itself. Some towns and cities that face each other across a border have little formal cooperation, due to various forces such as national enmity, state conflict, economic competition, and environmental challenges. In some of these cases the border may appear to be a major obstacle, perhaps because of national policies, or local implementation of same. Sometimes the border cities are simply oriented towards their national cosmopolitan centers. As



Nugent (2012, p. 558-559) reminds us, the placement of cities at or near international borders offers little insight into historical origins or contemporary relations, and may yield little information about the role of the border itself.

These concerns notwithstanding, any urban area known as a border or frontier town must be approached in regard to their relationship to territory and territoriality. While this may be true for all localities where there are major aggregates of people who live and work with each other in significant ways, there may be aspects of territory that are found in greater or heightened degree in border cities precisely because they sit at the edge of nations and states, and act as conduits and barriers to so much that is valuable to people on either side of the borderline. Cities are always sites of importance in borderlands and regions because of the economic and social capital that accrues to them due to their locations. They are of course significant to their own residents and visitors, but may also be of more lasting national and international significance because of their roles in the national imaginary, linking them to the history of state sovereignty, legitimacy and citizenship. They are often also linked to histories and memories of war, exclusion, and sometimes imperial and colonized pasts. And in the middle of all sorts of positive and negative memories and histories related to cities and their frontiers are the key ingredients of border life, territory and territoriality, the political cement that unites and differentiates so many social and political institutions and practices in borderlands.

This is especially apparent in twinned or double cities that are tied across international borders. Double cities are relatively adjacent; their local authorities acknowledge a special relationship between the cities, an awareness shared by many of the general population in each city. Moreover, between the cities there is often a clear and renewable plan of cooperation, and ties that in the short or long-term help to create a mutual sense of identity, as well as an increased identification with the joint project. History alone, between localities in the borderlands or perhaps between their related states, may make these difficult criteria to attain. Double cities often find it hard

to strike a balance in the emotions that frame their competition and cooperation, sometimes due to the ethnic, national, religious, class and other identities of the cities' inhabitants and leaders. Examples of such double or twin cities abound. There are many along the US-Mexico border, the most famous being San Diego and Tijuana. The twin cities of Guben-Gubin in Germany-Poland have served for years as living laboratories for the study of such things as uneven development, transnationalism, European integration, post-socialism and democracy (DÜRRSCHMIDT, 2002; ASCHER, 2005). And even "hygiene wars" can still characterize the relations between cities that represent, at least in some ways, Brazil and Argentina, nation-states which have had checkered dealings at that border in the past (Grimson 2002). Sometimes the twinned cities are separated by what were once major environmental barriers such as rivers and straits, now transcended to allow new and stronger relationships (as for example where tunnels and bridges link cities, regions and countries anew (DARIAN-SMITH, 1999; LINDE-LAURSEN, 2010).

Cities with special relationships across international borders often are the basis for transnational regions themselves, as in many of the Euro regions that have been fostered by the European Union, or have developed elsewhere on that continent based on the EU model. These cities clearly call into question the evolving dimensions of national sovereignty, and they challenge those who persist in seeing international frontiers as precisely drawn territorial demarcations. The edges of states are often blurred because of territoriality, which may be seen as an umbrella term for a multitude of social and other identities that are tied to varying and often opposed notions of territory, sovereignty and power. These identities can co-exist within and among groups in borderlands.

Beyond issues of sovereignty and territory, border cities also call into question the capacity of states to provide the order through the use of legitimate or illegitimate force. In fact, frontiers are often areas which are not fully incorporated into a state's zone of control, mirroring in form and function urban ghettos which may also be frontier-like zones where the state seeks to extend its control over borders and territory

(RON, 2005, p. 9). For example, the divided cities of the Balkans and the Middle East, whether they are at the edges of states or deep inside the national territory, are ethnically partitioned along national fault lines, a situation which has marked them as global sites of contest, conquest and compromise. Five of the most famous of these cities, Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Nicosia and Mostar, have long been key points of international conflict between states with oppositional national identities and strategies (CALAME; CHARLESWORTH, 2009). But each of these cities also has dividing lines of intra-urban territorial significance, marking off spaces of work, leisure and conflict. In Belfast, for example, there are many state-sanctioned 'peacelines' which mark home territories for either of the sides in the lingering ethnonational conflict in Northern Ireland. These peacelines are also often delineated by local communities, who show where the state should establish the lines of interdiction and defense. And they persist even after almost fifteen years of relative peace in the city and the region.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

The anthropology of borders with its particular focus on territory and territoriality clearly offers much to urban and regional anthropology, and vice versa. Social, political, administrative and cultural frontiers abound within cities, between neighborhoods, development zones, leisure quarters, transportation hubs, and governmental centers, among so many other territorially-based entities. So too cities and town are nodal points in other territorial configurations within regions, a process of scaling that extends beyond the region to the state and then to supranational arrangements such as that of the European Union. Bordering processes, between and among identities, social institutions, and performative actors, are the stuff of anthropological attention to borders, which are clearly not just geopolitical lines in sand or on a map. Thus the notion of frontier is inextricably tied to border, because the former captures in a word the interstitial nature of all bordered institutions and constructions. But frontiers when seen as zones of negotiation, contest and integration provide only a partial image of

their function and significance, because they also are tied to notions of land, place, belonging and territory.

One of the ways in which territory and territoriality conspire to provide great significance in the lives of many is through their role in politics (and here it might be appropriate to lament the decreasing attention to territory as a mode of politics today, in keeping with the decline in much that defined political anthropology as a field of scholarship for generations; for a review of the recent evolution of political anthropology, see Vincent 1994). Politics as the provision of order cannot be adequately understood without reference to territory, and the ways territory relates to issues of identity, home, belonging, sovereignty and citizenship. This is why all politically demarcated territory implies social and cultural relationships and identifications, which might be best termed "territoriality". This is a process that often serves multiple purposes: territoriality simplifies issues of control, makes relationships of power more concrete, and provides symbolic markers of inclusion and exclusion (ANDERSON, 2002, p. 27). But territoriality also offers a basis for division and differentiation in what might be seen as a barrier effect to communication, exchange and understanding.

This contradictory nature of territoriality permeates all frontiers of cities, regions and states. As a result any one of these geopolitical entities cannot be understood in isolation from each other. The anthropology of borders and frontiers demands that borders be seen as conduits between peoples and their social and cultural institutions, including those that coincide or diverge from politically-defined territories. As I have argued elsewhere, in concert with Hastings Donnan (DONNAN; WILSON, 2003), all social and cultural frontiers cannot be studied on their own because all border zones and regions are interstitial arenas in which the negotiations of territoriality are played out. On the contrary, approaching cities, regions and states from the perspective of borders and frontiers inevitably leads to a consideration of territory and territoriality, among other ordering principles in contemporary society, as abiding processes of a supposedly globalized and borderless world. I agree with Liam O'Dowd (2010) when he concludes that instead of

a borderless world we are living in a more bordered world where an attention to history makes clear that power adheres to territory, and territoriality allows some, and prevents others, access to that power.

## Notas

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article are elaborations of ideas first broached in Wilson 2012a and Wilson 2013. The issues that revolve around definitions of borders and frontiers in anthropology and our cognate disciplines have interested me for years, and often with my colleague Hastings Donnan I have examined how liminality as a key ingredient of frontier life is often also an aspect of a related territoriality. If the reader is interested in the evolution of this approach, please see Donnan and Wilson 1994, 1999, 2003 and Wilson and Donnan 1998a, 1998b, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For extended discussions of the comparative study of divided cities within contested states, see O'Dowd 2012. See also Anderson and O'Dowd for an analysis of borders, border regions and territoriality.

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## **Abstract**

Territory and territoriality persist as key concerns to social scientists who are interested in borders, boundaries and frontiers. Territory remains the principal ingredient in territoriality, and is an inescapable agent of social and political differentiation and integration. The tensions in scholarship that arise from the many ways in which frontiers and territoriality matter to each other are key factors in the worldwide growth in border studies. Border studies, while largely focused on international geopolitical borders, also have a great deal to offer in the examination of the boundaries, many of which parallel or intersect other sorts of borders, such as the regional and national. This essay explores aspects of urban and regional studies to show how an anthropology of frontiers must still wrestle with the important issues of territory and territoriality.

**Keywords:** Territoriality. Border. Regions.