Activity 1 – Zooming out: nation-states and their borders

Political borders separate the territory of one state from the territory of another. There are 194 nation-states in the world today, and there are more than 300 land borders between them, in addition to numerous sea boundaries. Borders are one way in which a government can control access to particular geographical areas and to maintain power over them, to define "the inside" and "the outside" of the nation-state, and to control flows of goods and people.

What can sociologists tell us about how borders work today? The three parts of this activity provide you with an overview of what the latest theories can tell us about borders today.

Part 1:
Are borders disappearing?

In the 1990s, much social science scholarship was dedicated to the study of deterritorialization, or the "softening" and the erosion of borders marked by intensified globalization, growing links between people who live in different countries, greater trade, increased travel, and a rise in technologies that allow all of these things to develop. The opinion that borders are becoming "softer" or even disappearing altogether is based on three main ideas:

Firstly, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the raising of the "iron curtain" with the collapse of the USSR brought about a "softening" of borders in Europe, both economic and political, and resulted in the growth of regions and organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA).

Secondly, the rise of transnational corporations and increased international economic interdependence in the global capitalist system prompted social scientists to think less about how states control work and production, and to reflect more on how big transnational companies are actually controlling flows of money, people, jobs, and good across borders. Thirdly, new and quickly developing technologies allowed for faster communication and greater information exchanges across state borders on a global level. Scholars interested in these trends emphasized the role of non-state actors and "flows" of people, goods, services, and organizations across territories worldwide.

Thus, scholars of "deterritorialization" focused on the increasingly important roles of non-state links forged by people "from below" and of supra-state structures like international organisations that eroded state borders.

Graffiti on the Berlin Wall, which no longer divides East Berlin from West Berlin

Optional readings on this approach:
The book "B/odering space", edited by Henk Van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch, and Wolfgang Zierhofer, with contributions by Anssi Paasi: http://henkvanhoutum.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/borderingspace.pdf
Anssi Paasi's Twitter: https://twitter.com/AnssiPaasi

Part 2:
Or are borders still important?

More recently, in the 2000s, there has been a resurgence of interest in border studies by sociologists who point out that while borders have become more porous, they are not disappearing altogether. Border studies scholar David Newman argues that the term "deterritorialization" does not reflect the continued presence of borders in the world, and instead we should use the term "reterritorialization" to emphasize that borders do not go away, but rather they are reconfigured and recompartmentalized in new global contexts. David Newman has defined "reterritorialization" as the process by which territorial configurations of power are ordered and reordered. Such studies focus largely on accounting for and explaining the continued significance of borders in the context of globalization.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 also stimulated a rise in studies of global instability, risk, and security, which have contributed significantly to border studies. As a result, many studies dating to the 2000s and especially the post-9/11 period focus on nation-states as key actors on the international arena, emphasise the importance of security and control over borders, and stress the continued significance of borders between states.

Border transit camp Friedland in Germany

Optional readings on this approach:
Krishnendra Meena's academic paper called "Locating Borders in an Age of Global Flows: Is Border Thinking/Instance Everywhere?": http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/publictn/eurasia_border_review/ebr_v5n2/EBR_v5n2_61.pdf
An interview with political scientist Wilfried von Bredow on the continued significance of borders: https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/ges/20669122.html

Part 3:
Concluding the exercise

As we have seen here, two interrelated ideas have emerged with regard to the study of borders: one of deterritorialization with a focus on the erosion of state borders, and one of reterritorialization with a focus on the changing, yet continued significance of state borders in the world.

Many sociologists today have come to agree that hardening and softening borders coexist across the globe in this historical moment. While some borders are being erased and border checkpoints are being closed down (for example, between member-states of the EU), in other places walls are being put up or reinforced to prevent the movement of people (for example, in the West Bank). Moreover, while borders are becoming more porous for some people, the same borders can become more and more impenetrable for other people (for example, while residents and tourists can move between the countries of the EU's Schengen area, asylum seekers do not have the right to cross these borders). Recent research shows that migration policies across the globe are becoming more selectively restrictive for irregular migrants through the tightening of border controls, while the same borders are opening up for other groups like workers and students thanks to simpler entry rules and new integration programs[1].

In the next two activities within this module, we will examine examples of different types of mobilities and immobilities at borders from the perspectives of sociology of mobility and ethnographic approaches to sociology.

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[1]See, for example, this academic article on migration policy change worldwide: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/imre.12288/full