The Political Geographies of Migration: The Borders, from Static Lines to Mobile Entities

La geografía política de las migraciones: las fronteras, de líneas estáticas a entidades móviles

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Abstract

The article explores the border literature in political geography in order to understand the contemporary proliferation of bordering practices in the Western world. It takes the case of President Trump administration’s policies to show how borders can be concealed in social and political practices inside of sovereign territory. This expansion of geographical borders continually shapes the sociospatial identities of migrants. The text also analyzes why the traditional bordering practice of building border walls is still an appealing resource aiming at keeping immigrants away from Western territories, even after the promise of a “borderless world” in the late 20th century. This article argues that the expansion of border walls is explained by the analysis of three factors: the transformations on the refugee protection framework after the 90s, the change in states’ perception of refugees as a threat to Western societies, and the fear of states to be perceived as actors non-capable to maintain their sovereignty. These contemporary practices are consistent with recent debates in border theory that see the border as a mobile entity instead of a static territorial line separating two units of land. This article aims at fostering the idea of border studies as a way to unveil new forms of power and control. It also pretends to foster an understanding of the interconnectedness of border practices around the world.

Keywords: borders, border walls, migration, political geography, U.S. immigration

Resumen

Este artículo explora la literatura acerca de fronteras en la disciplina de la geografía política con el fin de entender la proliferación de prácticas fronterizas en Occidente. El artículo toma el caso de las políticas propuestas por la administración del presidente D. Trump para demostrar como las fronteras pueden ser ocultas en prácticas sociales...
y políticas dentro del territorio soberano. Esta expansión de las fronteras geográficas moldea constantemente las identidades socioespaciales de los migrantes. Este artículo también analiza las razones por las cuáles la tradicional práctica de construir muros fronterizos es todavía atractiva para los gobiernos de Occidente con el fin de mantener a los migrantes lejos de sus territorios; a pesar de la visión de un mundo sin fronteras a finales del siglo XX. Este artículo argumenta que esta práctica sea explicada a través de tres factores: el análisis de las transformaciones en el sistema de protección para refugiados en los años 90, el cambio en la percepción de los Estados hacia los refugiados viéndolos como amenazas para las sociedades de Occidente y el miedo de los Estados a ser percibidos como entidades no capacitadas para mantener su soberanía. Estas prácticas contemporáneas son consistentes con los recientes debates en los estudios de fronteras que ven a las fronteras como entidades móviles y no como líneas territoriales estáticas que separan dos unidades de tierra. Este artículo tiene como objetivos fomentar la idea acerca de los estudios fronterizos como una manera de revelar nuevas formas de poder y control, así como ayudar a entender las interconexiones entre prácticas fronterizas alrededor del mundo.

**Palabras clave:** fronteras, muros fronterizos, migración, geografía política, política estadounidense

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**Introduction**

The recent decades of scholarly research in social science, particularly in political geography, have increasingly focused on migration and border security. The intensified mobility that expanded after the Second World War and the discourses surrounding its complex dynamics helped to explain a new distribution of power in the international agenda. This literature is relevant as it offers a new perspective to study how spaces become political and how power relations become visible when crossing strict mobility controls (Amilhat-Szary & Giraut, 2015). The study of borders has changed considerably over the years. In past decades, borders were seen as static lines located at states’ edges that merely defined two or more territorial spaces.

While during the late 19th century, the approaches to understand borders were based on borders’ morphology and typology, scholars after the 50s began to consider borders’ functionality and its role in international conflicts and the creation of territorial identities (Kolossov, 2005). After the 80s, there was an increasing pluralism in the study of borders, as several disciplines began to consider them relevant for their epistemological development. Scholars from different disciplines, from political geography to anthropology, studied the role of borders in national conflicts, cooperation, securitization, identity-formation, environmental problems, and their role as social constructs and regulators of transboundary flows.
In recent decades, fruitful discussions have enabled the expansion of critical views that understand borders not only as territorial elements but also as factors that shape deeper complexities in political and social life (Johnson, Jones, Paasi, Amoore, and Mountz, Salter, & Rumford, 2012). During the postmodern era, beyond traditional approaches and contrary to the realistic International Relations agenda, critical geographers began to challenge the idea of borders as fixed aspects that only territorially bounded nation-states. These approaches intensified after the 90s as globalization changed the role of borders in the international arena. Notably, during this decade, renewed interest in borders was centered in debates of globalization and its role in the erosion of both: borders and states’ sovereignties. Contrary to what some people believed, scholars demonstrated that borders did not disappear, but they changed, mutated, and expanded towards different sites outside the states’ limits. These modifications mean that governments are now stretching its borders beyond their territorial line using tools such as interdiction, offshore detention, third country agreements and increased visa requirements (Walters, 2004; Mountz, 2011; Hiemstra, 2012).

This literature creates a framework from which scholars can study different bordering practices. These rank from the heavy securitization of borders at the edge of the states to other more discursive boundaries, which are spread out along states’ territory and that are also used to differentiate and categorize individuals. Thus, the border is now de-territorialized and has more significant impacts in more intimate spaces of social life. However, more critical interventions are needed to address the shift in the global discourse after the end of the Cold War that enabled the establishment of even stricter immigration controls. After a short remission of border walls in the 90s, the world started to experience a multiplication of boundaries and protectionist narratives in recent decades (Amilhat-Szary & Giraut, 2015). Although some scholars argue that borders are not always at the service of the state (Rumford, 2012), their relation to this entity should not be overlooked. Critical scholars should not forget the uniqueness of the states’ boundaries and their capacity for re-asserting authority through legal means. Thus, scholars should not forget their natural essence as territorial dividers, fixers of identity, and delimitators of access. The rise of right-wing governments and restrictive immigration politics demonstrates that borders have not disappeared, but they are now encountered in multiple dimensions of space.

These dimensions were made more evident in North America by the election of President D. Trump in 2016 and the establishment of restrictive immigration policies. This article aims to offer an epistemological analysis of border research literature in political geography. The first section will explore the development and proliferation of bordering practices in non-traditional manners, taking Trump’s actions against immigration in the last years as an example of 21st century bordering practices. The next section will focus on border walls and why different countries are building them even after the promise of a “borderless world” in the late 20th century. This section aims to offer a perspective of why traditional, heavy enforcement is appealing to governments that want to stop migrants’ arrivals to their sovereign countries. Thus, while bordering
practices might be found in more hidden and concealed ways in social and political practices, other powerful and traditional bordering elements are still used to demonstrate states’ power. This article aims to show how recent debates in political geographies offer powerful insights to explore contemporary bordering practices.

**The proliferation of borders in non-traditional places: the case of Trump’s administration immigration policies**

The increasing economic interdependence after the 90s changed the meaning of boundaries. Empirical research in the discipline has shown how borders are proliferating and how they are now encountered not only at the edge of the state but in different virtual and physical spaces (Amoore, 2006; Walters, 2006). Although globalization offered a new international landscape in which borders could be eroded, several geography scholars have demonstrated that a borderless world would be impossible as these are powerful elements of societal control. The increasing interdependence and speediness of communication have changed the meaning of boundaries; therefore, the traditional approach on borders related mainly to territoriality and geographic division is not enough to explain their influential role as social and political constructs (Newman & Paasi, 1998; Amoore, 2006; Jones, 2016). Critical theories in political geography have countered realistic International Relations approaches focused on functionalistic notions of the border and a static territorial bounded world idea.

This shift in how borders were perceived as situated in multiple spaces, offered new insights in how the dynamics of differentiation were not only carried out at the limits of the state (Newman & Paasi, 1998). The bordering practices are not only about geographical divisions between two states practices are about geographical divisions between two states and involve differentiation through discursive and iconographic landscapes. Thus, the media, nationalistic narratives, and cultural practices are part of governments’ bordering performances (Johnson et al., 2012). In the last decades, particularly after the 90s, the literature on border theory has changed significantly, offering scholars new critical perspectives to understand the politics of space and mobility.

During his years in office, President D. Trump has proposed and established aggressive policies aimed to 1) prevent new immigrants from arriving at the U.S. and 2) destabilize the life of immigrants that already lived in the U.S. territory. During and after his campaign, he made immigration the centerpiece of his discourse, appealing to the use of securitization as his primary strategy to combat U.S. international threats (Pierce & Selee, 2017). His nationalistic and populist views, particularly those related to keeping migrants away, perpetuates the idea in the contemporary world of the U.S. border as a hard line and heavily militarized, that aims to make a racial distinction between U.S. “good” citizens versus “bad” outsiders (Jones, 2016). Trump’s immigration agenda is based on a violent view of enforcement through which he aims to protect American land.
Trump’s immigration agenda restores the functional approach of borders aimed to separate and categorize populations based on race and ethnicity. He uses a territorialistic and violent view of enforcement through which he sees to protect American territory. However, Trump’s actions in immigration policy also show how bordering practices are even more dispersed across the U.S. territory, including social practices and political discourses. He has enabled the hardening of previous traditional strategies, such as the border wall and employers’ raids; nonetheless, these traditional methods of bordering now include groups of individuals that were not considered high-risk in previous administrations. Traditional immigrant communities in the U.S. have been affected with the suspension of their Temporary Protected Status (TPS) (e.g., Salvadorians, Nicaraguans, and Haitians) or the suspension of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals); however, individuals from other refugees sending countries have been affected by his proposed travel bans as well (e.g., Syrian, Somalis, Iranians). One of the most recent policies, which caused significant disapproval and criticism from other Western governments, was the separation of families at the US-Mexico border. As part of their “zero-tolerance policy,” more than 2,000 children were separated from their parents (Cummings, 2019) and held in facilities near the border in poor conditions, making evident how these strategies are used to dehumanize people. Nowadays, the U.S. border has extended even more outside and inside U.S. territory: from the bodies of those people unable to travel to the U.S. due to the travel bans to the bodies of children waiting in detention living in substandard conditions. The establishment of different types of restrictions towards people that were not previously considered high-risk for the U.S. shows how the U.S. border during Trump’s administration has proliferated to include new groups of people, spaces, agents, and regulations (Coleman, 2009; Cornelius, 2001).

On the other hand, Paasi (2009) and Walters (2004) emphasize the importance of associating bordering practices with political imaginations and the iconography of the state. The classical topographical perspective that portrays the state as a strong political body bounded and separated by hard lines from other spaces allows politicians to link their territory with the notion of home, that should be safeguarded from external threats. Trump’s discourses follow this parallelism of the state to legitimize the proliferation of spatial and socio-spatial divisions in the U.S. Trump constant use of phrases like “protect America” and “protect the lives and safety of all Americans” aims to rationalize the expansion of a series of security measures in and beyond their territory by reducing immigrants’ rights (Molnar & Silverman, 2016).

The aggressiveness of Trump policies in the contemporary political agenda in the U.S. as tightened immigration policies had been normalized during the last decades (Amoore, 2006). However, the use of travel documents, categorization of individuals through surveillance systems and deterrence at the border, are strategies that had been put into place before Trump was elected president in the U.S. Racially charged discourses and actions against “undesirable” groups of people offer new opportunities to study how these changes impact the governmentality of migration and migrants’
strategies to seek asylum. Thus, the study of the proliferation of discursive and physical borders in the U.S. can help explain the recent land crosses from the U.S. to Canada, the increasing of asylum petitions from Central Americans in Mexico, and the new dynamics of restrictive mobility that is lived worldwide in the 21st century.

The role of borders in constructing sociospatial identities

Recent discussions in political geography have framed the borders as powerful elements that organize and transform social identities. Trump’s policies demonstrate how borders are not merely a territorial notion of divisions, but they are also encountered in other hidden practices transforming sociospatial identities. 

Borders and physical terrain are usually interrelated; however, recent debates started to consider boundaries as complex elements that construct social identities and reproduce power structures (Balibar, 2009; Parker & Vaughn-Williams, 2009; Rumford, 2012). Thus, governments have also implemented non-territorial borders that serve to complement their exclusionary practices. In this respect, Cuttitta (2015) argues, “there would be no migration controls if there were no territorial borders to protect, but only non-territorial status borders make it possible to determine from whom territorial borders should be protected” (241). Issues of power are relevant in this debate as the social construction of identities convey distinctions and add differences at personal, local, and national scales. As the border became increasingly mobile, immigrants’ identities and experiences change more profoundly and more rapidly.

During Trump’s administration, different groups of migrants saw their identities, and legal status changed from acceptable to high-risk threats for the American territory. Individuals that are part of DACA and TPS, those who were included in the travel ban, or the children that were separated by their families, not only were the target of xenophobic policies but also encountered the U.S. border in more profound and personal ways affecting their social and political identities. While in previous U.S. administrations, deportations were mainly focused on major offenders, now anyone who has minor offenses or those who have deported before, are also considered prime targets for removal. In this case, the border becomes more mobile, targeting those people who were not in high-priority categories and, thus, their chances of deportation increased considerably. The identities as authorized immigrants or quasi-citizens were transformed radically into a negative connotation due to these bordering practices. However, this is not the only challenge they confront as they also have to face personal changes by deportation to their countries of destinations to adapt to a community where they legally belong but not socially or emotionally. Thus, the border becomes more ubiquitous in their personal spaces.

The Trump administration’s action makes distinctions between citizens and migrants more evident. Several scholars have explored how borders support some groups of people and disempower others, the outsider being always the target of these political
differentiations (Rumford, 2012). With the termination of DACA and the Temporary Protected Status of Salvadorians, Nicaraguans, and Haitians, the negotiations made by these individuals concerning social and political membership in the U.S. were also closed immediately. The main argument of the Trump administration is the protection of America from “illegal” outsiders; however, degrees of assimilations from these groups of immigrants are overlooked while implementing this type of policy. These exclusionary practices are related to otherness and racial differentiation that provide a basis for these power relations. Trump’s discourse fosters the idea that Salvadorians, Haitians, Mexicans, and Arabs, among others, lack of assimilation to the American society, making them the Other, while they have been living for decades in their territory. Therefore, as the border is targeting them, it changes the relationship between their identities and the political space they are living.

When the border is mobile and influences on their identities, it also becomes a portable element by immigrants. Immigrants are continually encountering material and non-material manifestations of the border regardless of their legal status. These mobile border manifestations are related to their identities and the status they hold in the country of destination. Hence, professional skills, language, race, and lack of citizenship shape their access to social and political life. Trump administration’s immigration policies made the border more visible and mightier for them after years of relative safeness of being deported to their countries of origin. Parts of their identities as outsiders, represented by a lack of citizenship, became more powerful once these bordering practices were enacted. Even after decades of living in America, the border never disappeared as immigrants are in constant interaction with the network of immaterial and material manifestations of the geographical boundary they crossed (Cuttita, 2015).

Trump’s aggressiveness in implementing these policies is specific to the contemporary political agenda in the U.S.; however, tightened immigration policies had become normalized long before he became president. His racially charged discourses and the increase of actions against “undesirable” groups of people offer new opportunities to study how these practices impact the international regulation of migration and migrants’ strategies to seek asylum. The raise of governments like Trump administration and his politics in immigration demonstrates that: 1) the conditions of international spatial ordering are related to human mobility control, and 2) borders have not been dematerialized, but they can be encounter in multiple dimensions of space.

The appeal of building border walls around the world

Among his proposed initiatives, Trump’s campaign revolved around the expansion of the current US-Mexico border wall. However, the discourse of building a wall is not a recent strategy exclusive used in his administration. This technique has appealed to several governments around the world in order to stop the flow of
immigrants. According to Jones (2016), border walls have existed historically, but until the 90s and 2000s, the proliferation of walls became increasingly linked to the influx of immigrant journeying to the Global North. Although the first section of this article focuses on how borders expand in non-traditional ways, particularly in the U.S., the second section shows that one of the traditional ways of keeping immigrants away from sovereign territory is still considered and used by governments in the 21st century.

This section presents the arguments concerning the current fascination with building fences around the globe that can be explained by the analysis of the following factors: the transformations on the refugee protection framework after the 90s, the change in states’ perception of refugees as threats to Western societies, and the fear of states to be perceived as non-capable actors to maintain their sovereignty. This section aims to provide useful insights into the changes on the international migration agenda that allowed and justified more restrictive and violent policies, like the construction of fences.

**Transformations in the refugee protection framework after the 90s: immigrants becoming a threat**

After World War II, the dynamics of displacement changed the international governmentality of migration and the refugee protection framework. As thousands of Europeans had to migrate to other territories after the devastation caused by the war, the concept of refugee, and the principles to manage their movement emerged. During that time, asylum seekers’ movements were more structured and regulated than today in contemporary migration (Papastergiadis, 2000). Because World War II caused the most significant displacement of the 20th century, ideas of resettlement began to take legal form around the world. For example, the establishment of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees in 1950 and the creation of the concept of refugee in the 1951 Refugee Convention sought relief for people fleeing the aftermath of the conflict. Although not all countries responded in a welcoming manner to the arrival of refugees during these years. However, the international response showed a sympathetic reaction towards these groups of individuals. This reaction established the basis for a more open international immigration system for refugees during the Cold War. Places such as the U.S., Australia, Canada, and West Europe offered sanctuary to refugees fleeing from Communist countries during the 60s and 70s (Wasserstein, 2011). However, these welcoming practices change at the century end, mainly with the conceptualization of illegal immigration during the 90s and the terrorist attacks in 2001. Table 1 shows a mapping of individuals’ general movements after the second part of the 20th century. It also shows how states’ responses went from partially open borders towards asylum seekers to the adoption of tightened security measures.
### Table 1
Mapping of migratory movements after the Second World War

<table>
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<th>Years</th>
<th>Era</th>
<th>Type of movement</th>
<th>States’ responses</th>
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| 1950s - 1960s | Post-Second World War period | -Migrants from semi-industrialized and peripheral countries arrived in Europe and other Western countries with contract labor schemes. 
-Migration of refugees that fled from Eastern Europe (communist regimes) to Western Europe, Canada, the US, and Australia. | -Migrants were used as contract laborers, but governments and employers established restrictions for social rights and citizenship, e.g., Bracero program and guest-worker in West Germany. 
| 1960s - 1980s | Cold War             | -Asylum seekers fled political instability in Latin America, the Soviet Union, and Africa.            | -Humanitarian perspective of refugees. 
-End of guest-workers programs: hardening of immigration policies against economic migrants. |
| 1990s          | Globalization        | -Economic migrants and asylum seekers shifted away from traditional destinations using irregular routes and new strategies provided by the new interconnected world. | -Proliferation of the concept of “illegal migration” in political discourses. 
-Refugees began to be seen with suspicion (bogus refugee). 
-Assistance to refugees in their home countries (“preventive protection”). |
| 2000s          | Post-9/11            | -Diversifications of routes and strategies that migrants use. 
-New middle class and transnational migrants. | -Securitization after 9/11 (migrants/asylum seekers as criminals and terrorists). 
-Promote the arrival of high-skilled migrants. |

*Note:* Adapted from Castles & Miller (1998)
These changes from welcoming nations to protectionist states continue nowadays in the context of the global migration crisis as more restrictive methods of control have been enforced. The changes in the international migration system and the refugee protection framework around the world led to the acceptance of new strategies as elements to control the movement of people. Mainly after the 9/11, almost any action became justifiable. Security concerns were prioritized in Western states, and among these discourses, immigration became the centerpiece of these debates (Gilbert, 2012). As every method in immigration policies continues to fail, the border wall comes back as a way not only to deter migrants but also to show states’ capabilities to maintain their territory safe theatrically. While the border wall usually represents a brutal and violent discourse, the international legal community still has not decided how to treat these as legal objects (Paz, 2016). This option shows that the liberal democracies’ discourses related to human rights and refugee law that were predominant after World War II are now behind the protectionist and securitization accounts that prevail today.

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