The Politics of Borders

Borders sit at the center of global politics. Yet they are too often understood as thin lines, as they appear on maps, rather than as political institutions in their own right. This book takes a detailed look at the evolution of border security in the United States after 9/11. Far from the walls and fences that dominate the news, it reveals borders to be thick, multi-faceted and binational institutions that have evolved greatly in recent decades. The book contributes to debates within political science on sovereignty, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, human rights and global justice. In particular, the new politics of borders reveal a sovereignty that is not waning, but changing, expanding beyond the state carapace and engaging certain logics of empire.

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The Politics of Borders

Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11

Matthew Longo
Leiden University

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For Nina

Contents

Preface: Anatomy of a Crossing

Imagine yourself at a border, or at the arrivals hall of an international airport. What do you see? It is a place swarming with activity. If you are in an airport, you have just walked past aisles of glimmering merchandise. If you are at a land border, you are accosted by touts calling out their wares – do you perhaps need a water as you wait in the sun, or umbrellas to defend against the rain? Then you come upon the queue of people waiting to cross into the country of their destination. Their faces reveal a medley of moods: excitement at coming home, fatigue from travel, anxiety about the impending interrogations. As you approach you wonder: what will they ask me? Have I filled out my forms properly? Will they search my belongings? What will they find? In fact, each border has two sides: one for each state. And within each border, two crossings: one for people (immigration), another for goods (customs). When you pass through these hoops – which cannot be taken for granted for many travelers – you breathe a sigh of relief. You are welcomed by flags and signs; a wall of gleaming faces. Perhaps this gaudy new horizon is a space of familiarity. Perhaps, trepidation. Either way, you are changed by the experience. Even if all you did was cross from one side of a line to another – an act that in the twenty-first century should be banal. You might wonder: what happened to have affected me so?

I

A border is a space of definition, of delineation. It is also an in-between place of heterogeneity and contradiction. A border can be like the wall of a fortress, fencing people out; like the wall of a prison, fencing other people in. The border is a palimpsest, signifying different things to different peoples at different times. It is a meaning-bearing space, meaning-generative too.

It is a place of absolution, of proving-one's-worth and proving one's not-worth-wasting-time-with. Of homogeneity-as-purity, security-as-omnipotence. And odd bedfellows: you should trust the system, but question your neighbor ("if you see something, say something").

It is a place where violence is most and least expected. Where the condition of its impossibility is also its allure.

The border is the definitive marker of the political, defining in and out, friend and enemy, us and them. It is also where all the paradoxes of modern politics come to the fore: the contest of *diversity* and *singularity*; *chaos* and *order*; *liberty* and *security*. And of course, power: power that is everywhere visible; that is invisible. That disciplines and directs; that saves some, as it punishes others. That watches and is watched, even when the lights turn off and the chamber empties of bodies. Power that lies in wait, that anticipates, which is, in itself, the antithesis of power.

For most of human history, the border was a peripheral thing, a dusty land of criminality and relegation, a haven for tax evasion and nonconformity. A forgotten, far-flung place. Today, it is the center of the political world.

II

This book draws inspiration from my own experiences at borders. Having traveled and lived for many years across the Middle East, border crossings have been particularly memorable – places I frequently felt uncomfortable as an American. What was I doing there, the officials wanted to know. Who was I working for? These were often spaces in which I came to feel unsafe, even though I was putatively in the hands of the state (including "friendly" ones), under the stewardship of my own government by means of the ceremonial blue-and-gold document in my hand. Yet just as frequently these encounters were banal, the giant flags and concrete towers excrescent from the sand bidding no process at all. In these cases, passage was automated, as through the turnstiles of a subway – my passport reduced to a glorified MetroCard. Either way, the border was an event. It was something to be anticipated, often the highlight of a long bus ride across a monotonous, lunar landscape.

But as much as these crossings abroad were formative, they paled beside my experiences returning home. Here, my passport – the very vehicle that protected me abroad and which guaranteed my re-entry home – became a liability. What were these foreign stamps – *Syria*, *Yemen*, *Egypt* – the port officials asked? Who did I speak to and what did we discuss? Because of my experiences abroad – as a student, an employee, a tourist – I have been escorted off planes, separated from my wife for interrogations, placed in vast databases (which continue to find me, unexpectedly). My documents have been taken away from me, placed in sealed plastic bags as though they – and thus, I – were a form of contagion. I was at home, but rather than feeling welcome, I felt *suspected*.

What these borders revealed to me was a discord between how borders appear on maps – simple, homogenous, uncomplicated lines – and how they were manifest on the ground. On maps, borders are defined by several attributes: thinness (they have no depth); external homogeneity (all borders look the same); internal homogeneity (all aspects of the border are the same); and moral neutrality (no history of violence, legitimacy). But these cartographic depictions do not align with our *experiences*. In fact borders vary mightily. Some are marked, others aren't. Some have long queues, others are untrafficked. Some feel secure, even though they are all, in different ways, vulnerable. On the map, the border is a line defining one monochrome state from another. They are taken to be simple, and given, which could not be further from the truth.

Embarking on this project, I took as my starting point the goal of identifying the border in all of its complexity – as a site of human interaction. Before we can appreciate why this is true, we need to change the way we see borders, away from *thin* jurisdictions, and toward *thick* institutions. The following vignettes and anecdotes of border crossings frame the discussion.

III

Salman Rushdie, in a talk entitled "Step Across This Line," describes his experiences at border crossings as follows:

> At the frontier we can't avoid the truth; the comforting layers of the quotidian, which insulate us against the world's harsher realities, are stripped away, and, wide-eyed in the harsh fluorescent light of the frontier's windowless halls, we see things as they are … At the frontier our liberty is stripped away – we hope temporarily – and we enter the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies is unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in; where only the right things and people must go in and out. Here, at the edge, we submit to scrutiny, to inspection, to judgment. These people, guarding these lines, must tell us who we are. We must be passive, docile. To be otherwise is to be suspect, and at the frontier to come under suspicion is the worst of all possible crimes … We must present ourselves as simple, as obvious: I am coming home. I am on a business trip. I am visiting my girlfriend. In each case, what we mean when we reduce ourselves to these simple statements is, I'm not anything you need to bother about … Truly. I am simple. Let me pass.[1]

In *Palestinian Identity*, historian Rashid Khalidi describes the Palestinian experience:

> The quintessential Palestinian experience, which illustrates some of the most basic issues raised by Palestinian identity, takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint: in short, at any one of those many modern barriers where identities

are checked and verified. What happens to Palestinians at these crossing points brings home to them how much they share in common as a people. For it is at these borders and barriers that the six million Palestinians are singled out for "special treatment," and they are forcibly reminded of their identity: of who they are, and of why they are different from others.[2]

Henk van Houtum, a geographer, remembers family trips as a child, crossing into Eastern Europe by car during the Cold War:

> What particularly struck me during the passing of the Iron Curtain was the impressive sound of silence. On the way there, my parents were comforting and attentive. Games, music, eating, laughing – all was permitted up to this point. But the border stopped our childishness. When going through customs, my parents became surprisingly and impressively silent. We sensed they were no longer in control. Realizing that there was a bigger, overarching power other than our parents was frightening, unreal. The heavily armed men who checked our faces and passports made an intimidating impression on my sister and me. It was as if the making of sounds could lead to suspicion. We did not dare to look at each other. Our faces were motionless, without expression. We kept quiet. No laughter. No nothing. Passiveness. Tension. An atmosphere built out of machines, uniforms, domination, pressure and suspension. Not seldom this tension and containment turned into a joy of relief when we finally passed through. My father then would pedal the car a bit harder and we shouted things like "YEAH! We're through! Now our holiday can start!" It was if we had just passed a test.[3]

The power of these accounts derives from their commonality, despite radically different terms of encounter. For Rushdie, as for most first-world travelers, gates fling open. For the Palestinians, they slam shut. And yet, the same questions and anxieties obtain. The rollercoaster of emotions is captured masterfully by van Houtum, who describes breathlessness while awaiting judgment, anxiety at being watched, and euphoria at passing through to the other side. These emotions are familiar, despite taking place in an entirely different geopolitical era.

Interrogation has always occurred at international crossings. At the turn of the century, in the aftermath of the Haymarket Riot of 1886 and Immigration Act of 1903, US border officials asked questions like: "Are you a Polygamist?" or "Are you an Anarchist?" It's unclear the purchase of these queries except to prompt travelers to reflectively doubt their loyalties. Such was H. G. Wells' reaction upon reaching the US:

> The questions seem impertinent. They are part of a long paper of interrogations I must answer satisfactorily if I am to be regarded as a desirable alien to enter the United States of America. I want very much to pass that great statue of Liberty … [But it is] at the price of coming to a decision upon the (theoretically) open questions these two inquiries raise.[4]

Borders cultivate a sense of interiority and exteriority through their very presence (and practice). What is remarkable about this quotation is that the "other" created at the border has nothing to do with national differentiation – anarchists and polygamists are equally unwelcome, regardless of whether they hail from a friend nation or an enemy one, or *are themselves citizens*. The border is not home to anyone; it is a space of adjudication. One must prove one's worth to enter.

Border interrogation has evolved considerably since Wells' day and has come to include more invasive physical searches. Nowhere is this truer than at airport crossings. One contemporary social theorist, Gillian Fuller, describes these experiences as follows:

> Visible to all, only our thoughts move in private. Our baggage, our bodies, and our movements are all part of an encompassing spectacle … On a recent trip through a "SARs scare," I was thermally scanned and appeared though the operator's windows interface as a series of roughly pixellated mauve, green, yellow, and orange blobs … Each of my movements, including the incorporeal ones, where my digital-double was being processed generated another abstraction of me.[5]

Fuller is not alone in feeling turned-inside-out by technology at the border. Much recent social criticism is dedicated to the dystopian aspects of new security protocols, with the border described as the interaction point between the human body "and the data-double," driven by biometrics that turn the human body into "readable text."[6] The border is a site of purging – a place "to cleanse of guilt, sin and impurities" – where everyone is a suspect, and everyone feels the imperative to self-categorize as non-risky.[7]

In any case, for the individual traveler, the border manifests as a moment of identification – a site where the rudimentary aspects of our political and social identities are called into question, scrutinized and judged; where we are forced to reconcile ourselves as *citizens* or *co-nationals* and understand the privileges and obligations of those commitments. At the border we distill ourselves and all our human complexity into our nation. We become our papers, no more, no less – the same identity that we might otherwise identify *against*. This experience changes us. Forced to *be* our nation, to *be* normal, we are compelled to reconsider ourselves (in all of our transgressive abnormality). Here the border is like a funhouse mirror: we are reduced to a self play-acting at normalcy, a normalcy that is itself revealed as artifice. To act "normal" means to vanish into the undifferentiated mass of what is expected of us – i.e. to be the antithesis of anything security would concern itself with (Rushdie's "I am simple, let me pass").

Foucault's distinction between discipline and law here is instructive: law leaves room for that which is unknown; for discipline, what is unknown is the least allowable.[8] At the border the citizen is risky until proven harmless, not innocent until proven guilty. It is for this reason that at the border the traveler feels *unfree*. Through its practice, the border turns individuals into *population*.[9] This sets up a paradox: through discipline, individuals are reduced to "population" at the precise moment they are, through increasingly advanced forms of identification, most individualized. Discipline at the border is thus a process of *de-individuation through regulated individuation*.

At the border we also encounter our own foreignness, as we are not-quite-in but not-quite-out. Although we are not "strangers" we nonetheless feel estrangement, as the border (even *our own*) is not yet home. The port of entry is, literally, a door – an "in-between" place between home and abroad. The ambiguous nature of the border makes it the site of a paradoxical, *inhospitable hospitality*.[10] When a citizen returns "home," she is in need of hospitality from her own state, thus she is "guest" in a house, where by dint of membership, she should be "host." This estrangement at the border is amplified by our encounters with foreigners. It is a common trope that in spaces of cultural interaction, differences and similarities are thrown into relief – we realize, as Julia Kristeva observed, "*nous sommes étrangers à nous même*."[11] This reaction is acute at the border, as we meet foreigners at a point of *mutual strangeness*.

The border is also a space of *state vulnerability*, as the border is its least defined point, the intersection of law and nothingness. In this way, we are also disciplined by the *force of ambiguity*. The border-crosser is the *subject* of discipline, to be protected by the state, and its *object*, that which the state must protect against. They are at risk from intruders and of being an intruder. For the traveler, this experience prompts ontological uncertainty. Part of why we respect state authority is because it provides cognitive stability. As Bourdieu argues, one of the central functions of states is to produce the "naturalization of its own arbitrariness."[12] Yet this "naturalness" fades at the periphery. It is an arresting space for the traveler, as the world's arbitrary underpinnings are laid bare.

The border is precisely this liminal zone, where self/other, distant/proximate, citizen/state are called into question. In such a climate, identities are not just filtered, but created, modified and destroyed. This is evermore the case now, in the age of expansive security protocols. Ironically, borders have become far more critical in light of today's globalized mobility – putative borderlessness – than they ever were during preceding eras of sovereign fixity. Why this is the case, and why it matters, is the subject of the chapters to follow.

IV

Not every project becomes a book; those that do, get help. This one would not have been possible without the assistance and support of many colleagues, friends and family along the way. I have had the immense fortune of working with two advisors that encouraged me in complementary ways. I first encountered Seyla Benhabib as an undergraduate at Yale. Her lectures introduced me to thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – figures I still engage with today, and without whom I probably never would have decided to pursue graduate education. As her doctoral student, she anchored me in critical theory, and refined my unruly ramblings into manageable and meaningful claims. At the same time, I became greatly moved by the writings and approach of Jim Scott, who encouraged me to go out into the field and test my intuitions; to see the border-world as it appeared to those that inhabited it, to abandon my comfortable perch many thousands of miles away. He gave me the courage to follow my passion for discovery, even though it fit uncomfortably in the rubric of the discipline. I am indebted to each in different ways.

Graduate education is a production with an ensemble cast; mine would not have reached its completion without Paulina Ochoa, Bryan Garsten and Andrew March, who coached me through the many stages that took this project from prospectus to dissertation to book. I also received support from a number of places, most notably the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program and the MacMillan Center at Yale. I feel particularly indebted to Ian Shapiro whose generosity helped propel the project at its outset; and later, kept it afloat. More recently, I feel very grateful to have had the opportunity to complete this work while as a postdoctoral fellow at St Anne's College, Oxford. A special word of thanks is due to Todd Hall, Neil MacFarlane, Ian Philips, Johannes Abeler and Terry O'Shaughnessy as well as to Michelle Clayman, without whom the fellowship would not be possible. Other colleagues who warrant a word of appreciation include Katharine Brooks, Daphna Canetti, Lucas Entel, Francesca Grandi, Nancy Hite, Humeira Iqtidar, Turku Isiksel, Leigh Jenco, Halbert Jones, Stathis Kalyvas, Willem Maas, Karuna Mantena, Lois McNay, Shmulik Nili, Erin Pineda, Ayelet Shachar, Steven Smith, Sarah Song, Luke Thompson, Peter Verovsek, Elisabeth Wood, participants at the Yale Political Theory workshop, the Oxford IR Colloquium, and the Comparative Political Theory Workshop at King's College, London and much earlier, to Ellen Lust, who helped pique my interest in scholarship long before this project ever took shape.

Finally, this book would not have been possible without the tireless, loving help of my wife, Nina. She has edited more drafts than I would like to admit, and her talent and dedication to craft has helped make this book what it is. Without her, this book may never have been written; it certainly wouldn't have been written as well.

Notes

1 Rushdie, Salman. *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992–2002*. London: Vintage, 2003, at 412.
2 Khalidi, Rashid. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, at 1.
3 van Houtum, Henk, and Anke Strüver. "Where Is the Border?" *you are here: the journal of creative geography*, 4, no. 1 (2002): 20–23, at 21.
4 Wells, H. G. *The Future in America: A Search after Realities*. Lexington, KY: Forgotten Books, 2014 [1906], at 3–4.
5 Fuller, Gillian. "Welcome to Windows 2.1: Motion Aesthetics at the Airport." In *Politics at the Airport*, edited by Mark B. Salter, 161–74. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008, at 165–70.
6 Muller, Benjamin J. "Travelers, Borders, Dangers: Locating the Political at the Biometric Border." In *Politics at the Airport*, at 128; Ceyhan, Ayse. "Technologization of Security: Management of Uncertainty and Risk in the Age of Biometrics." *Surveillance & Society* 5, no. 2 (2008): 102–23, at 104.
7 Browne, Simone. "Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity and Biometrics." *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2010): 131–50, at 145–6.
8 Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977–1978*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2007 at 46.
9 Ibid., at 57.
10 This follows Derrida's observation that every act of hospitality bears the potential for hostility. Derrida, Jacques. "Hostipitality." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3, 2000: 3–18.
11 "We are strangers to ourselves." Cited in Benhabib, Seyla. *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, at 165.
12 Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003 [1972], at 164.

Notes on the Cover Image

Border Door, 1988

Site Specific Installation/Intervention Performance
Golden wooden door, nails, keys, door knob, blue wooden frame and hinges

Free standing workable door installed on the Mexico/USA border ¼ mile east of the Rodriguez International Airport. The performance extended to the neighborhood where the artist grew up in Tijuana. Where he gave out over 250 keys inviting the residents of La Colonia Roma and Altamira to use his Border Door.

Artist: Richard A. Lou

Photo Credit: James Elliott