

Theory-Building in Border Studies: The View from North America

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Abstract

The sub-discipline of border studies has struggled to construct theories that can render explanatory and predictive models. Most work on border studies has been largely confined to descriptive inference under the justification that it is nearly impossible to theorize such multidisciplinary and geographically scattered phenomenon as borders and borderlands. In this article, I argue that theorizing in border studies would go a long way if much more attention were paid to methods instead of focusing on the nature of the phenomenon of borders and borderlands. Careful attention to methods will help render sets of variables amenable to theory building.

Introduction

Theorizing in any discipline can run afoul of the details of reality or, worse, an entire theory may be brought down by a single anomalous fact. But in any field or subfield of human knowledge, theorizing is required to both explain and predict. Theorizing is in fact the only way to advance knowledge, although theory-building must be followed by rigorous testing against the facts of reality.¹ It is in this continual cycle of theory-building and theory-testing that we find the most exciting scientific work. In border studies, theorizing has proven a challenge. And while there is some theorizing in the field, it is still exceptional in a fast-growing field of studies. Scholars who have attempted to theorize on borders have run into a bewildering number of perspectives, an unruly number of variables, too many values attached to those variables, and individualizing and unique circumstances that make it problematic to engage in the kind of theorizing that can advance knowledge beyond mostly descriptive work.² Good examples of theorizing are slowly emerging in border studies, some of which are breaking new ground.³ The production of border theories that can

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¹ Philip Kitcher, *The Advancement of Science* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1993).

² Vladimir Kolossov, "Border Studies: Changing Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches," *Geopolitics* 10: 4 (2005): 606-632; David Newman, "On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 18: 16 (2003): 13-25.

³ See the work of Mathias Albert, David Jacobson, and Yosef Lapid, eds. *Identities, Borders and Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer, eds. *B/Ordering Space* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005); Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams,

explain and predict, however, is far behind the production of empirical knowledge in border studies. In fact, the last forty years have produced a considerable amount of data-driven knowledge on the world's borders and borderlands but few durable theories. Both the Association of Borderlands Studies (ABS) and the Borders Regions in Transition (BRIT) groups as well as the EUBORDERSCAPES Project, which bring together most of the serious border-related academic work from around the world, meet periodically to share the results of the many studies produced by border scholars coming from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and using a variety of tools. But most of the work continues to be composed of case studies.

The problem of theory has already been addressed in the past. Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly's essay "Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective" draws attention to the problem of theory in the field.⁴ Brunet-Jailly offers a typology of variables centered on market forces and trade flows, policy activities among multiple levels of government, the political clout of borderlands communities, and the specific culture of these communities, in an attempt to offer a theoretical framework broad enough to encompass many different border zones. On a second take, Brunet-Jailly's essay "Toward a Model of Border Studies: What Do We Learn from the Study of the Canadian-American Border?" is an important attempt at theorizing by drawing generalizations from a single case study—a way to indicate the need to transcend empirical, single-case knowledge.⁵ Similarly, Houtum and van Naerssen sought to use certain sociological concepts (bordering, ordering and othering) to understand borders generally.⁶ Likewise, Newman uses the concept of power in his essay "On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework" in an attempt to create a theoretical framework around borders through a single heuristic idea.⁷ Newman himself in "The Lines That Continue to Separate Us: Borders in Our Borderless World" challenges the idea of a borderless world – mostly a fad of the 1990s – and urges more theorizing on the subject.⁸ Rumford also notes the importance of theorizing borders in a world where globalization is a reality but there is still much resistance to it.⁹ More recently, Moré attempts to explain the nature of border flows in twenty cases

"Lines in the Sand? Towards an Agenda for Critical Border Studies," *Geopolitics* 14: 3 (2009): 582–587; Noel Parker and Nick Vaughan-Williams, "Critical Border Studies: Broadening and Deepening the 'Lines in the Sand' Agenda," *Geopolitics* 17:4 (2012): 727–733; Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, eds. *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); Íñigo Moré, *The Borders of Inequality: Where Wealth and Poverty Collide* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011); among others.

⁴ Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, "Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective," *Geopolitics* 10: 4 (2005): 633–649.

⁵ Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, "Toward a Model of Border Studies: What Do We learn from the Study of the Canadian-American Border," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 19: 1 (Spring 2004): 1–12.

⁶ Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen, "Bordering, Ordering and Othering," *Journal of Economics and Social Geography* 93: 2 (2002): 125–136.

⁷ David Newman, "On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 18: 1 (2003): 13–25.

⁸ David Newman, "The Lines That Continue to Separate Us: Borders in Our Borderless World," *Progress in Human Geography* 30: 2 (2006): 1–19.

⁹ Chris Rumford, "Theorizing Borders," *European Journal of Social Theory* 9:2 (2006): 155–169.

around the world by using income inequality as a determinant of cross-border flows.¹⁰ Newman's, Van Houtum and Van Naerssen's, and Moré's approaches are less ambitious than Brunet-Jailly's more comprehensive attempt and use instead cross-cutting heuristic concepts, such as ordering, othering, power, or inequality, to establish plausible theoretical frameworks, but all address themselves to theorizing in border studies.

Thus, the issue of theorizing in border studies remains an open challenge to border scholars. Continued theorizing on borders is not only a pending task, but increasingly necessary, particularly because the optimistic discourse on a borderless world, again, mostly a phenomenon of the 1990s,¹¹ has fallen flat and there is in fact a renewed importance assigned to borders both in the political and in the policy world. Nearly every scholar in the subfield of border studies¹² and beyond agrees, in fact, that borders continue to matter today.

This article argues that a dependable path to border theorizing is to pay attention to methods. This essay argues that a single heuristic concept, whether it is order, "othering," power or income inequality is a plausible path, but likely an insufficient one. Appealing to a limited set of variables, as Brunet-Jailly does, though more reasonable, is also somewhat limited. It is not that broad concepts or general variables do not help, but this article argues instead that the problem of border theorizing is a problem of methods. Specifically, border scholars, precisely because they are spread around the world and are in fact disciplinary and geographical specialists may find that more attention to methods might aid in theorizing. To construct border theories, we need to turn our attention to the methodological strategies and tools that we use and pick those that can enhance our explanatory and predictive power. It is argued that more rigorous comparative work by multidisciplinary and geographically diverse teams of researchers can help in theory construction. This is not a call for large-scale theorization, but it is a call to pay attention to methods as a way to build theories to explain borders today and predict their future contours.

The Two-Fold Problem of Border Theorizing

It has been argued that border studies as a field of inquiry requires more theorizing. It has also been contended that the hallway conversations among border scholars at annual meetings generally show a degree of frustration regarding the issue of theorizing in border studies, although there are excellent conversations on the subject. The problem of border theorizing, however, is not the inability or unwillingness on the part of border scholars to engage in theorizing – border scholars are highly trained researchers and as social scientists understand the need for theorizing. The problem of

¹⁰ Moré, *Borders of Inequality*.

¹¹ Anssi Paasi, "'A Borderless World.' Is it Only Rhetoric or Will Boundaries Disappear in a Globalizing World?" in *Politische Geographie. Handlungsorientierte Ansätze und Critical Geopolitics*, eds. Paul Reuber and Günter Wolkersdorfer (Heidelberg, Germany: Heidelberg Geographische Arbeiten, 2001).

¹² Daniel Drache, *Borders Matter: Homeland Security and the Search for North America* (Black Point, NS, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, 2004); Gabriel Popescu, *Bordering and Ordering the Twenty-first Century: Understanding Borders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012).

theory-construction in border studies is likely two-fold. First, it is a structural problem endogenous to the discipline itself, which has to do with its multidisciplinary nature and geographical dispersion. It is important to draw attention to this structural issue because the proposed solution – paying attention to method – requires more collective research efforts, as will be explained. Second, and most importantly, it is a problem of methodology as border scholarship could benefit greatly from examining its methodological approaches in order to leverage them for theory-building.

The two problems of border theorizing have now turned into important blocks that impede theoretical work. Although these may not be the only problems, resolving them would take border theorizing a long way. Let us dissect each of these two issues separately.

The Structural Problem of Border Theorizing

The so-called structural problem with border theorizing has to do first with the interdisciplinary nature of the subfield as well as its natural geographical dispersion. This, of course, is not an unknown issue as some scholars, such as Kolossov, have addressed it directly.¹³ In other words, the structural block to border theorizing stems in part not from the fact that border scholars do not wish to build theory but from the fact that they tend to do so by approaching borders and borderlands cases from their individual disciplines (international relations, geography, environmental science, economics, demography, etc.) and from their own geographical locations.¹⁴ This has led border scholars to approach their subject of interest through in-depth case studies within their disciplines and focus on the geographical areas of their specialization. This is to a great extent understandable, given that borders can be approached from so many disciplines and no scholar can be reasonably expected to be trained in all disciplines. This is further compounded by the fact that borders are found all around the globe and conceptualized so differently that no one scholar can possibly study them all. The resources required to travel around the world doing serious comparative border research would be in the millions. Still, in spite of these issues, which suggest that our work should be in teams of researchers from various disciplines and many regions, border research is rarely a collective task and appears to be more of a lonely endeavor – although collective efforts are growing particularly in Canada and Europe. Most border scholars go to conferences to present individual work, from their disciplinary perspective and on the region of their specialization. They do not come to build theory or engage in dialogue but get together to share their individual results before going home to the far flung regions that they all come from. Border scholars are in practice not individually multidisciplinary, even if the subfield claims to be, and are doomed to single case specialization because of the high dispersion of their geographical distribution.¹⁵ In other words,

¹³ Kolossov, “Border Studies.”

¹⁴ For a list of the centers and groups engaged in border research consult this website at the University of Tromsø. Accessed on January 10, 2014: http://www2.uit.no/ikbViewer/page/ansatte/organisasjon/artikkel?p_menu=28713&p_lang=2&p_document_id=108265&p_dimension_id=88147

¹⁵ This is not a trivial problem in any kind of theorizing and certainly not in border studies, a subfield that brings together so many disciplinary perspectives and that is yet to generate its own theories.

border studies are more a gathering of individuals largely interested in a single word, borders, who come together to share their findings, most of which contribute little to border theorizing per se.

The Methodological Problem of Border Theorizing

In addition to the disciplinary and geographical dispersion structural block that constrains border theorizing to a large extent, another obstacle has to do with the fact there is not enough consideration to cross-case comparisons or Large-N methodological approaches in border studies. Although there is an increasing number of important efforts in this regard, greater disciplinary focus is desirable if border studies are to generate testable theories. Both of these methodological approaches, multiple cross-case comparisons, and Large-N studies, could help construct theoretical frameworks that can aid in theorizing, although each implies different research designs.¹⁶ The key here is that, because borders are complex environments, theorizing on borders should avoid the problem of methodological confinement, that is, an excessive focus on single cases – the most common approach by border scholars. A broader dialogue on the optimal methods or the right mix of methods in border studies that can best produce border theories and maximize the explanatory and predictive power of the subfield is called for.

Focusing on the methods that border scholars use reveals that most approach border studies from a single disciplinary perspective, confine analyses to a single geographical area, and focus on single case studies with many different variables. This undermines the goal of border theorizing. Correcting these issues will likely produce a much greater amount of testable theories. Correcting this means designing interdisciplinary and multi-geographical research teams, addressing multiple cases at once. At the same time, it means classifying variables into typologies that make sense for theorizing and carefully picking units of analysis in order to carry out more comparative case studies and Large-N research. This observation harkens back to Brunet-Jailly's model. The variable categories that Brunet-Jailly presents are a good first step to create a testable model but do not address the problem of methods at all. Brunet-Jailly's work, however, correctly points in the direction of allowing a much broader classification of variables that can allow the selective testing of different variables at different times, their application to several cases at once, and cross-case and multi-geographical comparisons. Depending on how each is operationalized, each variable may allow for Large-N studies as well. Engaging border studies through methods may help solve the problem of border theory.

In the next section, typological theory is posited as one potential methodological tool to begin to seek a resolution to the problem of border theorizing. There are many other such tools that can help solve the problem of border theorizing, and the exploration of typological theory here is merely to illustrate how paying attention to methods can help in theory-building.

¹⁶ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

Typological Theory: Illustrating the Power of Methodological Tools in Border Theory

Typological theory is one of many tools that can help overcome the obstacles that prevent theorizing in border studies. It can do so by providing a simplifying tool to rearrange our understanding of complex multidimensional phenomena – borders – and help clarify the similarities and differences across complex cases. Typological theory facilitates within case analysis – thus we give up nothing – but also engages comparative approaches, enabling us to sort out the variables at stake in each case. Typological theory helps create a comprehensive inventory of variables – without giving up our ability to detect small-scale change within and across cases –and helps draw lines that incorporate the intersection effects between them. Typologies not only draw attention to empty cells but also reduce the possibility of inferential error and facilitate the making of connections between variables and cases in complex relationships. As Bennett argues “We define typological theory as a theory that specifies independent variables, delineates them into categories for which the researcher will measure the cases and their outcomes, and provides not only hypotheses on how these variables operate individually, but also contingent generalizations on how and under what conditions they behave in specified conjunctions or configurations to produce effects on specified dependent variables. We call specified conjunctions or configurations of the variables’ ‘types.’”¹⁷

Typological theory does not exclude specific types of variables. Instead, the variables used, when it comes to their operationalization, can be nominal, ordinal or interval, depending on the type of data available or the type of measurement under consideration during research. Thus, typological theory does not necessarily exclude quantitative or qualitative techniques, and it does not preclude the use of either large or small numbers of cases, although it does ultimately require that careful comparative narratives of the variables be used in order to draw generalizations from the configuration of the variable types. Thus, typological theory can facilitate both comparative cases as well as Large-N studies and help move the theoretical problem in border studies forward.

Using Typologies in Border Studies

Theorizing in border studies often means disregarding parsimony and presenting instead sets of variables by type, carefully classified to enable prioritizing different kinds of variables for different borders based on an assessment of history, context, process of development, and even particular issues at hand. Well-crafted typologies can deal with comprehensive sets of variables that matter in border contexts and enable border scholars to determine the relevance of each set in different contexts, sensitizing models to subtle changes in the importance of certain variables over time. In other words, there may be many variables, but there are only a few sets of them, and they can be organized into explanatory models. This is what Brunet-Jailly attempts in his essay “Theorizing Borders: An Interdisciplinary Perspective” but can also capture other individual heuristic concepts presented by other authors, e.g. “power,” as Newman does in “On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework.”

¹⁷ Ibid., 235.

In the end, we are interested in causal inferences if we want to understand how borders function around the world, that is, on the way any given variable gives shape to particular borders or in the way a borderline shapes our behavior. In the process, we seek to create theoretical frameworks that can help predict when a decisive event or choice can reshape a border in a radical way, as the Schengen Agreement did with European Borders.¹⁸ The example of typological theory shows how a methodological tool can help classify the kinds of variables that have an impact or, better put, help explain the shape and character of borders.

This article does not propose a typology of borders; it proposes instead that more attention to methods and methodological tools, such as the use of typologies, can help resolve the problem of theory in border studies. It does not propose a typology of borders, which other authors have successfully attempted, but usually sacrificing nuance. In some ways, a typology of borders could emerge, much like the one proposed by Martínez in *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, where he spoke of 1) Alienated, 2) Co-existent, 3) Interdependent, and 4) Integrated borders. These, however, could be improved upon, if we pay attention to methods.¹⁹

To be sure, there are other classifications of borders, but they do not in and of themselves represent a typology of borders as much as a descriptive condition of the borderline. Vogeler, for example, presents two classifications of borders that include *hard* (fenced and guarded) and *soft* (regulated but open) borders as well as a classification that consists in *open* (where no visas, passports, or even inspections are required), *controlled* (where passports and inspections and sometimes visas are required) and *fortified* (where physical barriers, such as walls, are erected and border controls are militarized) borders.²⁰ Vogeler's border classification is centered on the physical appearance of the border. From the physical appearance, however, one must infer a considerably more subjective reality to the shape and character of a border. The physical appearance is, in fact, a manifestation of the deeper nature of the border itself. Martínez's typology relies on conflict instead. This reflects the many layers that our determinants of border shapes and characters produce. Putting aside the fact that hardly any of these theories have been rigorously tested, I argue that we can go further if we just pay attention to the methods instead of over-relying on a concept describing what we see through that lens.

Thus, the use of typologies, as a way to pay attention to methods, enables us to classify the variables that may determine the shape and character of borders yesterday or today, here or there, now and then, until we have refined our theoretical frameworks. A useful tool like typologies can thus help prioritize variables and hypothesize relationships among them that can be tested on the ground, using qualitative or quantitative data. The exercise of studying borders with more attention to methods is complex, but no more complex than what is required of any other complex disciplinary

¹⁸ Ruben Zaiotti, *Cultures of Border Control: Schengen and the Evolution of European Frontiers* (Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Oscar J. Martínez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1994).

²⁰ Ingolf Vogeler, "Types of International Borders along the U.S.-Mexico Border," *Geography Online* 10: 1 (Fall 2010). Accessed on November 10, 2011: <http://www.siu.edu/GEOGRAPHY/ONLINE/gov10n1.html>

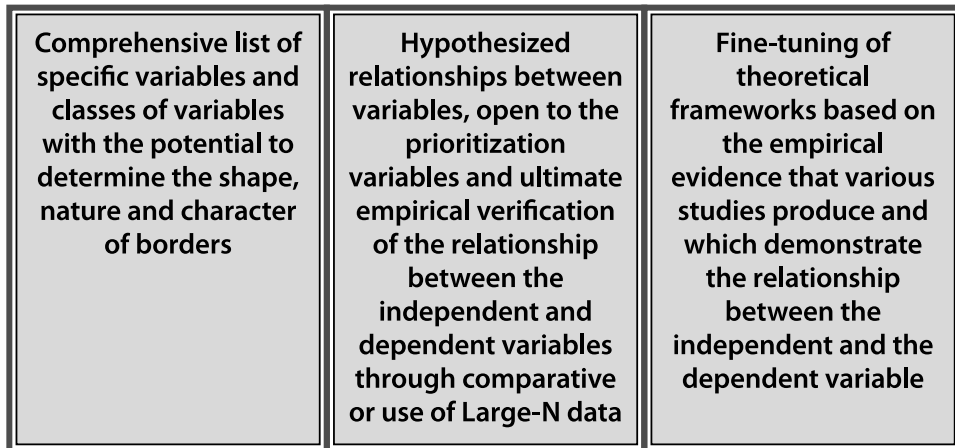


Figure 1: The inferential chain of typological theory. Author's elaboration.

field where the variables are many and the cases demonstrate a wide variety of values in the dependent variable but the number of cases themselves is somewhat compact. Figure 1 illustrates the process whereby typologies can be used to guide border studies in a scenario where method is considered just as important as the subject under scrutiny.

The View of Border Theorizing from the North American Experience

This reflection is inspired by the author's research experience on the borders of North America, the United States-Canadian and the United States-Mexican border, as well as by the work of scholars who have attempted to theorize in border studies, including early attempts such as Martínez's, which remains one of the most enduring theoretical models. In Martínez's category, both the U.S.-Mexican and the U.S.-Canadian borders fall under the category of *interdependent* borders in spite of the considerable differences between both borders.²¹ This reflection is also inspired by the occasional debates on border theorizing that occur during the meetings of the Association of Borderlands Studies and the Border Regions in Transition group as well as the theoretical production of important European efforts. To eke out the variables that matter in the North American borders, careful lines of causality must be drawn, but these cannot be determined before the elaboration of a solid typology of variables that can help us understand what makes these borders similar in spite of their differences. The idea here is that attention to the methodological tools, e.g. the use of typologies, can help by grouping variables that can be analyzed and then, based on the empirical evidence, classified in terms of the importance that they have in shaping and giving character to borders.

What the U.S.-Canadian and the U.S.-Mexican borders have to tell us about the usefulness of attention to methods is examined in the next session, as we first engage the exercise of establishing a typology of independent variables (determinants of the shape and character of borders) and the

²¹ Victor Konrad and Heather Nicol, *Beyond Walls: Re-Inventing the Canada-United States Borderlands* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2008).

relationship that they keep with the different values of the dependent variable – whatever border it may be.

A word of caution is pertinent before proceeding. Theory-building necessarily leads to generalization. Generalization is highly valued in the sciences because it helps wrap our arms around phenomena that we seek to explain and predict. Generalizing, however, has its downsides. In the process of generalizing, nuances can be lost and we run the risk of desensitizing our theoretical models to subtle changes in social phenomena. Thus, theoretical models have to account for such gradations in the nature of borders. Researchers must continually re-sensitize their theoretical frameworks to small-scale changes. Generalization may not always be desirable, but all science ultimately aims to explain and predict, and that requires comprehensive theoretical frameworks which can balance generalization and particularity.

Determinants of Borders

I now turn my attention to exemplifying how a methodological tool, such as typologies, can help theorize in border studies by examining part of the academic experience of North American borders. Typologies, as already explained, help classify variables. Whether the work of studying borders is deductive or inductive, the classification of variables can help understand a particular border and then hypothesize and demonstrate relationships. Thus, the task of classifying these variables comes first. This essay suggests that nearly all variables affecting any one border can be classified into the categories presented below. These sets of variables are offered in no particular order, as the weight of each varies depending on the case itself:

- Historical Baggage
- Cultural Bonds
- Resource Claims
- Demographic Trends
- Degree of Institutionalization
- Economic Development Gaps
- Domestic Environment
- Global Context
- Technological Differentials

It is posited that each of the observable bits of empirical data in regard to borders is classifiable into these sets of variables, which can facilitate comparisons in order to make inferential observations about different borders. Let us review each one of them.²²

²² This is a list elaborated by the author over years of observing the types of variables that most studies of North American borders use in examining various border regions or issues in the literature.

Historical Baggage

This refers to the birth of the border itself. In fact, no border today can be understood without knowing something about its history and evolution. Konrad and Nicol, for example, argue that the United States-Canadian border is inevitably linked to the way the two nations were born, the United States out of a belligerent American attitude and a bloody struggle for independence and Canada by a slow and peaceful process of becoming a fully independent nation.²³ The United States-Mexico border, by contrast, continues to be an open wound (*una herida abierta*) according to Anzaldúa.²⁴ In fact, borders are never settled but often agreed to as a marker on the land, but very often resentments and silent claims remain or irredentist assertions linger sometimes long after the open claims have been resolved. Such is the case of the Mexican-American border, a line born out of conquest, invasion or takeover and ultimately mediated by the power differential between the strong and the weak. Such borders are often among the most complicated and remain unsettled for a long time, even if only in the minds of the conquered although, sometimes, these claims live in the popular imagination of the conqueror as well, as former Congressman Tom Tancredo's own insecurity about the U.S.-Mexico border is imprinted in his own work.²⁵ Many other borders are also the product of these conflictive historical moments, such as the Alsace-Lorraine, the Polish-German, the North and South Korean, the Indian-Pakistani, or the Japanese-Russian borders, among many others. Unresolved historical variables often determine the nature and character of binational relations but also of the border itself and increase the likelihood that the border becomes an alienated or, at best, a co-existent border.

The U.S.-Canadian and the U.S.-Mexican borders, however, are both interdependent in some sense in spite of the divergent ways in which they were settled; but this interdependence is considerably less true and less appreciated in the U.S.-Mexican border than in the U.S.-Canadian border. In fact, even after the North American Free Trade Agreement was passed, the U.S.-Mexico border continued to invite incendiary rhetoric by American politicians and social groups. Other than the economic variables and the amount of trade integration, the border remains largely complicated by historical claims. What is required here and in careful empirical work is to measure the variety of historical moments by which each border was born. The importance of the "historical baggage" variables will be established by observing a correlation between the degree of conflict from which the border was born and its impact on the dependent variable.

Cultural Bonds

Undoubtedly, culture is a complex subset of variables. Nonetheless, cultural variables are important in the border discourse. Borders that keep considerable cultural differences are likely to be

²³ Konrad and Nicol, *Beyond Walls*.

²⁴ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Press, 1987).

²⁵ Tom Tancredo, *In Mortal Danger: The Battle for America's Border and Security* (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House Publishing, 2006).

more complex and perhaps even less likely to be heavily integrated borders. This hypothesis, however, requires an appeal to the problem of culture and the literature that has been produced in the field of cultural studies in order to determine the pertinent variables to be tested. Cultural studies concerns the political nature of today's culture and delves into the foundations of culture as well as its defining traits and power to both create and define conflict and cooperation. In that sense, culture is a vital set of variables that can help define borders today. In addition, culture, like border studies, is multidisciplinary and involves complex phenomena such as language, religion, power, and other variables that can determine interactions at borders, places where cultural differences often both meet and clash. Culture often represents alliance, ease of connections, loyalty, or clash, conflict, distrust, and even consent. Culture is often the grease that makes the wheels of cooperation turn or the sand of distrust that makes the machine grind to a halt.

In this regard, the North American continent offers a contrasting set of variables that in and of themselves may mean something. The United States and Canada are both born out of the Anglo-Saxon culture while Latin America, including Mexico, rise from the Mediterranean culture. Does this, for example, have anything to do with the higher level of trust and cooperation that exists in the United States-Canadian border than at the United States-Mexican border?

Resource Claims

Culture only goes so far in explaining relations at borders. Under certain circumstances, even people that share common cultural traits can clash. These clashes are sometimes explained by resource-based disputes. Whether it be water, valuable minerals, fertile land, free passage, etc., resources have given rise to multiple conflicts and cooperation regimes across borders. Disputes are in fact one of the major variables spurring conflicts across borders as well as cooperative regimes. An identification of these resources and a set of resource-based variables can help us conduct cross-case studies capable of producing detectable patterns in numerous borders around the world. Such variables do not only include resource-sharing issues but also resource hoarding, resource pollution, and other such factors.

In North America, both the United States-Mexico dyad as well as the United States-Canada dyad have had resource-based disputes in the past,²⁶ but these conflicts have been mediated by cross-border institutions, the most important of which is the International Boundary and Water Commission on the U.S.-Mexico border and the International Boundary Commission between the United States and Canada. Resources, considered as a set of variables in this larger typology, can therefore be an important factor in border studies.

²⁶ Alan C. Lamborn and Stephen P. Mumme, *Statecraft, Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Making: The El Chamizal Dispute* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988); Helen Ingram, "State Role in U.S.-Mexico Resource Issues," *Transboundary Resource Report* 1:1 (1987); "State Government Officials' Role in U.S./Mexico Transboundary Resource," *Natural Resources Journal* 28 (1988).

Demographic Trends

Demography focuses on researching human population trends, including its changes over time and space. Demographic changes have been linked to border studies, particularly through migration-centered studies. And even though the movement of peoples has been linked to specific issues such as overcrowding, natural disasters, and economic opportunity, migration across borders remains a controversial issue and one that determines the characteristics of borders, whether it is Mexicans and other Latin Americans crossing into the United States or Arabs and Turks crossing into Europe. Demographic trends create in fact national insecurities that manifest themselves in borders controls and even in rhetoric that becomes increasingly more inflammatory and drives migration-related legislation as well as border policy across the globe. The national desire to control migration in turn creates difficult conditions at borders, where individuals must negotiate individually and increasingly against legal and bureaucratic odds their right to entry or even their right to exit. This signifies not only increasing regulation of the movement of human beings across borders but it creates more barriers both physically and in document requirements. Technology is making the ability to control human mobility by governments an added complication for border crossers throughout the globe. In general, demographic trends represent a significant source of factors that give shape to borders both at ports of entry and even in remote areas and contour the way central governments deal with human mobility in general. In fact, human mobility and the (mostly individual) calculations behind it often clash with border controls and create some of the tensest moments at borders. Thus, the careful correlation of demographic trends and their impact on the variables that shape and give character to borders is an obligated step toward the generation of theory in the subfield of border studies. The field of demography is therefore a fertile ground to produce the kinds of variables that we must look at if we are to understand the “look” that borders take today.

In the case of North America, the issue of borders and immigration has been an undeniable source of many books and articles, particularly in regard to Mexican immigration to the United States, for a good portion of the twentieth century and beyond. Immigration, an issue at the center of demographic studies, is a major determinant of much of the policy actions by the United States and sub-national governments in regard to the borderline. In fact, this has led to the manifold increase in the number of Border Patrol agents along the U.S.-Mexico border, from 2,500 in 1992 to nearly 10,000 in 2004 to some 20,000 in the year 2010 – with over 17,000 of them stationed at the United States-Mexico border alone. This has occurred at the same time that most Border Patrol sectors in the United States report a decrease of up to 80 percent in the number of arrests of undocumented border crossers. The United States-Canadian border has also seen an important increase in the number of Border Patrol agents, although it remains well under 4,000. But inspections within 100 miles of the U.S.-Canada border have increased enormously since September 11, 2001. The issue of the porousness of the United States-Canadian border has become an issue among border residents and is increasingly giving shape to that border, as the U.S. government moves to penalize crossing the border between ports of entry and imposes increasing document controls at ports of entry. This kind of border “hardening” is nevertheless increasing around the world, far outpacing the scholarship

arguing for increased human mobility as a human right.²⁷

Degree of Institutionalization

As the centuries since the birth of the nation-state have passed, the ability of central governments to control more remote areas has increased, partly aided by technological advances. As governments, through their agents have come into contact with each other, the need for formal channels of interaction and communication has also increased. This need is partly compelled by a desire to have a higher degree of control over the policies of neighboring countries that may adversely affect the interests of the nation-state. Thus, countries seek mechanisms to establish cross-border institutions to enable cooperation but, more likely, a higher degree of control over border policies. This set of variables has been considered in border studies as one of the most important factors determining the shape of borders today and an important one in deflecting potential conflict among nations but also facilitating both cooperation and progress.²⁸

In the North American region, the issue of cross-border institutionalization continues to be studied by various authors but it is generally agreed that cross-border institutionalization is limited in part by the fact that the legal framework that the American and the Mexican constitutions provide is relatively narrow and inflexible, even if the Canadian Constitution is considerably more flexible, to provide for a fertile ground for effective, localized cross-border institution building. Moreover, the nation-states of North America have not been willing to compromise on the definition of sovereignty in the same way that the European nation-states have been willing to do by devolving power to the local governments and bestowing increasing political and public policy clout on them to carry out regional policy across borders.²⁹ This is so in spite of the fact that North American economic integration continues apace. The issue of sovereignty, the legal framework for crossborder institutionalization, the autonomy of the regions and border counties, and the willingness of state to redefine sovereignty are all components of this important set of variables that have to be considered in order to understand how institutionalization variables at borders shape today's boundaries and their nature and character.

Economic Development Gaps

No subset of variables has drawn more attention, perhaps with the exception of the security environment, than economic development gaps across borders. As Moré explains, development gaps

²⁷ Antoine Pécoud and Paul de Guchteneire, *Migration without Borders: Essays on the Free Movement of Peoples* (Oxford, England: Berghahn Books, 2007).

²⁸ Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, Tony Payan, and Gary Sawchuck, *The Emergence of CBRs along the U.S.-Mexican Border and in Europe*, Monograph funded by the *The Canadian Government Policy Research Initiative project on North American Linkages*, Policy Research Initiative #WP035 (2008).

²⁹ Olivier Kramsch and Barbara Hooper, eds., *Cross-border Governance in the European Union* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

between two peoples facing each other at borders are crucial to understand what flows in what direction. Economic development gaps can help explain not only labor and capital flows but also explain legal and illegal flows, as people seek to move regardless of what the border regulatory or security apparatus is. This is true, regardless of what indices are chosen to measure these development gaps.

An earlier pioneer in the exploration of development gaps in understanding is Joan B. Anderson, who dedicated much of her career to studying the way economic variables shaped the U.S.-Mexico border. Hardly anyone today examines the U.S.-Mexico border without considering closely the development gaps between the United States, the most highly developed economy in the world, and Mexico, a developing economy. Anderson explores this in a book chapter titled “Living with La Línea: Economic Development in the U.S. and Mexican Border Regions since 1950.”³⁰ In that same book where Anderson’s chapter is published, the other authors write about growth and its impact on migration, and about trade, investment, and manufacturing as well as human development. Similarly, Kathleen Staudt has explored what she refers to as the “real” free trade along the border, the informal economies that flourish along the borderline and the role that they have played on the development of the U.S.-Mexico border over time.³¹ Countless other authors have understood the role that economic variables play on the way borderlands look, including the author of this article, who has seen first-hand the trade that has flourished on the Israeli-Palestinian border, in spite of the severe border controls imposed by the Israelis on those lands. And one can hardly understand the role that high development plays in Europe in attracting African and Arab migration waves.

Domestic Environment

Very often, borders are transformed into political ideas by opportunistic politicians. In fact, they have been known to be used by politicians to score cheap political points. Borders, therefore, cannot be studied outside the context of domestic politics and must be closely linked to the dynamics of power competition and contestation at the domestic level. Although the easiest path for the study of borders is closely related to the problem of conflict and cooperation in the field of international relations, domestic politics is a major determinant in the shape and the meaning of any border. Borders have, in other words, a symbolic political value, particularly in volatile domestic political environments. This is even more so given that the forces of globalization push right up against borders and fuel the fear of losing native advantages. Border crossers often become easy prey to the innate human desire to find guilty parties to these losses.

This has been evident in North America, where the United States in particular has wrongly focalized much of the blame for the terrorist attacks of September 11 on its borders and their assumed

³⁰ Joan B. Anderson, “Living with *La Línea*: Economic Development in the U.S. and Mexican Border Regions since 1950,” in *Fifty Years of Change on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Growth Development and Quality of Life*, eds. Joan B. Anderson and James Gerger (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007).

³¹ Kathleen Staudt, *Free Trade: Informal Economies at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988).

porosity, without taking responsibility for its own decision to maintain labor mobility across borders increasingly constrained, even when it has been relatively well established that its borders had little or nothing to do with these attacks.³² The same has occurred in the case of immigration, particularly undocumented migration, not only in the United States but also in Europe, where economic crises tend to fuel the rhetoric around borders, turning them into hostile places or, worse, turning the “other,” whether inside or outside the national boundaries, into a dangerous, threatening entity.³³ Borders can represent, therefore, ideal spaces to both place blame and find culprits to national problems. Such variables cannot be ignored if we are to produce plausible border theories.

Global Context

The issue of global contexts, though complex, is one that cannot be ignored when seeking to build border theory. Although global context can include variables as diverse as trade and investment and security and war, it is an issue that cannot be ignored. In fact, the global context, properly defined, may be the largest source of individual variables to understand the forces that shape borders today. September 11 is perhaps the most recent game changer because it created a new climate and culture that has transformed borders worldwide. Border facilities and procedures have been revved up and vigilance has been stepped up across the globe, partly based on this new culture of (in)security. Just as the optimism of the 1990s fueled the talk surrounding the emergence of a borderless world, the pessimism that followed the terrorist attacks on the United States fueled a new culture of security that has transformed borders everywhere, from ports to airports and nearly all land ports of entry.

Technological Differentials

This important concept is often not considered in border studies, even though it is well studied in war and conflict studies. Because border studies constitute a multidisciplinary subfield, it is important to consider potential heuristic elements from other disciplines that might represent important factors in shaping the nature and character of borders. The set of variables referred to here as technological differentials, however, may subtly affect the nature of borders through important mechanisms such as the ambitions that they spur or the imperialistic bureaucratic interests that they create. On the United States-Mexico border, for example, technology appears to have created its own momentum. The building of the wall, the introduction of RFID technology, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, etc., are all factors that seem to have been introduced based on a confluence of both nationalistic rhetoric that borders on paranoia and on the bureaucratic interests of agencies, such as the Border Patrol to make themselves indispensable and the object of increasing budgets or, at least,

³² Tony Payan, *The Three U.S.-Mexico Border Wars: Drugs, Immigration and Homeland Security* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2006).

³³ Natsu T. Saito, “Crossing the Border: The Interdependence of Foreign Policy and Racial Justice in the United States,” *Yale Human Rights and Development Law Journal* 1 (1988): 53–84.

remain outside the budgetary chopping block.³⁴

Combining and Separating Variables: Finding Causal Mechanisms

This essay proposes that the ideal path to theorize in border studies in order to generate explanatory and predictive models – and perhaps from there on to generate policy recommendations – is to engage a much deeper dialogue on the methodological approaches and tools that we use within the field. In other words, most border scholars limit themselves to what King, Keohane and Verba call descriptive inferences, rather than seeking true causal inferences in their work.³⁵ A methods-centered dialogue among border scholars should focus initially on classes of variables useful to carry out cross-case comparison studies and transcend the prevalent within-case focuses. The theories generated can then be put to the test in different geographical areas under controlled, focused comparisons in order to refine the theories themselves. Only doing so can border scholars begin to create useful theories of border studies. We do not need very powerful or even comprehensive theories, but we need theories that are powerful enough to explain the conditions of various borders around the globe and, ultimately, predict where borders, as a complex phenomenon, are headed. This alone can aid border scholars in having an impact on public policy in regard to borders, given that few border scholars now generate policy papers and limit themselves mostly to descriptive work. It behooves us therefore to be suspicious of descriptions or even mono-causal explanations in regard to borders, particularly as we witness that such explanations have easily placed other disciplines in various crises. We do not need single theories either, but cross-cutting variables that can help us understand the causal relationships among events, personalities, and policies and the shape that borders can take. Thus we need to turn to the greatest strengths that border studies has to offer, a solid set of diverse scholars from many corners of the world, who can bring their disciplines, their geographical specialization, and the diversity of their methods in the construction of border theory through careful attention to methods.

Additionally, given the complex nature of borders, no single variable or set of variables can fully explain the nature and character of an individual border. Rather, these sets of variables must be considered together and then prioritized based on the careful gathering of empirical evidence to put the hypotheses that they generate to the test. The challenge here is to sort out when they are mutually reinforcing and when they are mutually exclusive. That is, the challenge is to figure out under what circumstances a set of variables is more likely to have a greater impact on a case or a set of cases. The cases themselves must be comparable and not simply because they are borders but because they represent different stages of settlement and development. It must be assumed, however, that the variables chosen have an impact on borders and that the causal mechanisms are at least similar. Only cross-case studies, considering different sets of variables, can reveal how these variables operate in

³⁴ Tony Payan, *Cops, Soldiers and Diplomats: Understanding Agency Behavior in the Drug War* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

³⁵ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

the aggregate rather than singularly. Typological theory can help sort out the independent variables and the effect these have on borders in order to establish credible causal mechanisms and effects.

Below, in Figure 2, is an example of the critical path, based on a methodological approach, that can generate the sets of variables that must then be combined for explanatory power but also separated for analytical purposes. This critical path can generate plausible hypotheses that, when empirically tested, both in comparative and within case studies can in turn churn out the kinds of theories that can help not only describe individual cases but also explain the nature and character of borders in general as border research generates its own paradigms and, finally, can help predict their future course regardless of the geographical location. The number of categories is, admittedly daunting, but borders cannot be comprehensively explained without sacrificing a certain degree of parsimony. The way to rescue parsimony in theory building within the subfield of border studies is by drawing out the hierarchical importance of these different variables and the fine causal mechanisms that can be generated from comparative work through research strategies such as the one that typological theory provides.

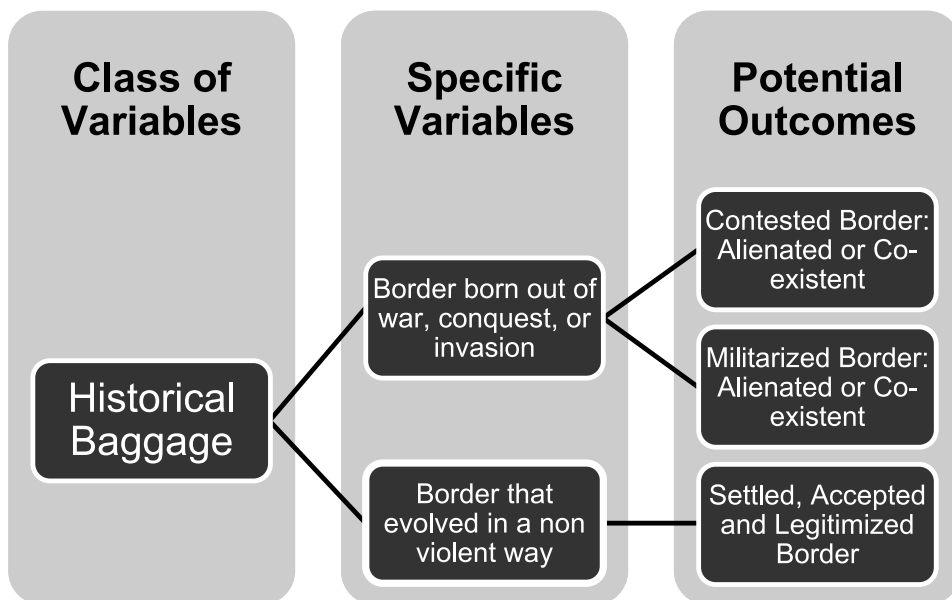


Figure 2: A three-stage example of the critical path from a variable class to the generation of specific variables to the final outcome. The figure was elaborated by the author combining Oscar J. Martínez’s typology of borders and Gary Goertz and James Mahoney’s methodological reflections in *Two-Level Theories and Fuzzy-Set Analysis*.*

* Gary Goertz and James Mahoney, “Two-Level Theories and Fuzzy-Set Analysis,” *Sociological Methods and Research* 33: 4 (May 2005): 497–538.

Conclusion

At the beginning of Chapter 2 in their book, Konrad and Nicol cite Ladis K. D. Kristof who,

in 1959, said that even though there was quite an extensive literature on frontiers and boundaries, few writers “have, however, tackled the problem from a more theoretical point of view.”³⁶ The authors go on to say that not much has changed since. Although important concepts have been developed, such as the crucial differences among the meanings of boundary, frontier, border, border region, and borderland, broader theories in and of themselves have proven somewhat elusive. This should not discourage border scholars but prompt them to engage methods as a way to build testable theories in border studies.

³⁶ Konrad and Nicol, *Beyond Walls*.