

The Global Reconstitution of Borders: A Five-part Symposium

Written by Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni

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METTE EILSTRUP-SANGIOVANNI, MAY 21 2017

Since the 1950s, European integration has been based on a gradual tearing down of national borders. Progressive moves towards ‘ever closer union’ have made European borders more easily traversable and, until recently, largely invisible. Yet increasing migration—both within and into the EU—and, recently, the mounting European refugee crisis have underscored the continued significance of borders—both as physical and jurisdictional barriers and as dividing lines in the minds of people.

Fear of uncontrolled migration seems to have played a significant role in the June 2016 Brexit referendum. Yet, as the contributors to this symposium remind us, the British are not alone in worrying about the growing porousness of their country’s borders. A survey by Chatham House published in February 2017 indicates widespread public opposition to further migration across Europe—especially to immigration from predominantly Muslim states. In the United States, Trump’s proposal to build a wall to Mexico has drawn support from a wide segment of the electorate. Borders also appear to be hardening *within* national communities, with rights for immigrants increasingly restricted and gated communities expanding.

In this symposium, four leading international scholars examine the current nature and role of borders. Borders are a constituent part of nations and states. They provide a powerful symbol of what unites social and political communities and distinguishes them from the outside world. It is no surprise, therefore, that borders tend to thrive in times of crisis and adversity—real or imagined. The more communities feel threatened and deprived, the greater the allure of fences and borders, whether local or international. During the Brexit campaign, Nigel Farage’s UKIP party released a poster depicting a queue of refugees being escorted through Slovenia by police with the caption ‘Breaking Point. The EU has failed us all’. The poster gave no information on where the people in the picture were coming from or where they were headed. What’s more, surveys show that British voters are largely unaware of the actual numbers of migrants seeking to enter Britain every year. None of this mattered. The image successfully captured the fear of being ‘overrun by strangers’.

Another Leave imagery—this one a leaflet distributed door-to-door—provided a graphic illustration of countries “set to join the EU”, showing the location and landmass of current EU applicant countries and indicating the size of their populations. Applicant countries are colored red while the UK is black—highlighting its small geographic size relative to the largest applicant, Turkey. Two countries that have never applied to join the EU—Syria and Iraq—are tinted dark orange, while the rest of Europe appears in shades of grey. The implication is that by remaining in the EU, the UK would open its doors to hundreds of millions of potential immigrants from poor and war-torn countries. Again, fear of being ‘overrun by others’ is vividly invoked.

Perhaps tellingly the Remain campaign did not use similarly evocative imagery to highlight the benefits of open borders and integration. One could imagine a poster depicting mile-long queues of cars and trucks waiting to cross the border between Britain and France, then between France/Germany/Italy/Spain—all popular destinations for British exports, workers, and holiday-makers. One might also envision gloomy images of customs officers confiscating wine, champagne and other goods purchased on the Continent by British holiday-makers. Or posters depicting elderly citizens uncared for, or crops unharvested due to lack of foreign labor. Yet, mobilizing support for

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open borders by appealing to benefits that might be lost through self-seclusion seemed a far harder mission than campaigning for reinforced barriers and fortifications through appealing to instinctual fear of 'outsiders'.

Borders both constitute and personify political communities, simultaneously symbolizing their cohesiveness and embodying their separateness from (and fear of) 'others'. In an EU context, the fact that external borders are *shared* rather than subject to sovereign national control means that increasing migration flows provide a tough test, not only for social and political cohesion within individual countries, but also for solidarity among member states. Since 2015, more than two million refugees and migrants have entered Europe—many fleeing civil war in Syria. This mounting crisis has divided Europe and has elicited national, rather than European, policy responses. Since 2015, individual EU members have successively re-instated national border controls citing 'serious threats to internal security'. This has triggered a "reverse domino" effect whereby borders previously dismantled are one-by-one rematerializing, thereby threatening to undermine the 'borderless' Schengen area in which 22 member states currently participate.

At the same time as they are barricading themselves behind 'temporary' borders, EU states have failed to implement an effective system for redistributing migrants across the Union. In September 2015, the Council adopted an emergency relocation scheme under which migrants arriving in Italy and Greece would be relocated to other member states to have their applications processed. Recognizing the EU's collective responsibility for tackling the 'migration crisis', the framework committed member states to relocate 160.000 migrants by 2017. As of March 2017, fewer than 15.000 people had been relocated. The unity expressed in the 2015 re-location agreement appears to have evaporated. A stark illustration is the barbed wire fence on Hungary's border with Croatia designed to keep out refugees (see Nora Berend's contribution to this symposium).

Whatever direction we look, today's world seems to be a world in which borders are growing more, not less, salient. Ironically, globalization may be largely to blame. As Julia Sonnevend argues in this symposium, globalization has torn at the fabric of local and national communities and has made many people anxious about their personal livelihoods and safety, and about the future of their communities. This has caused a hardening of borders—not just along national lines, but also along divisions of class, gender, and race.

Yet, perhaps there is room for hope. As John Mollenkopf argues in his contribution, the experience of living in diverse communities, and resulting benefits of economic growth and innovation, often give rise, over time, to strong communities that celebrate diversity and hybridity. Buttressed by vocal arguments on behalf of the benefits of migration, free trade and open-borders and by real efforts at redistributing the gains from globalization, as prescribed by Jennifer Hochschild (also this symposium), this might yet succeed in steering the world towards genuine cosmopolitanism.

About the author:

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