The brief, euphoric moment following the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to signal the dawn of an increasingly cosmopolitan, global community. The liberalization and integration of markets, the negotiation of free trade zones, and the expansion of the European Union all suggested that borders were becoming more porous and international politics could largely become a positive-sum game. The euphoria was short-lived. Today, countries are aggressively asserting their sovereignty, often through the spectacle of border control. When the Cold War ended there were fifteen border walls; today, there are more than seventy.[1] States have outsourced border controls to foreign states and private contractors to prevent migrant arrivals. They have devoted billions of dollars to immigrant detention.[2] European Union states are also creating internal border controls, while the United Kingdom has voted to leave the EU altogether.[3]

This (apparent) proliferation in borders seems in many respects puzzling. Many social, economic, and political processes are by their nature transnational. Indeed, it is hard to see how many of the most pressing issues such as climate change, migration, and terrorism can be adequately addressed within the state system. At the same time, place continues to define people’s lives and states remain at the center of the international system, even if their claims to sovereignty are in some cases bluster.

Manlio Graziano’s What is a Border? seeks to make sense of the seeming proliferation of borders in a rapidly changing world. Despite—or perhaps because of—the ubiquity of borders, they are surprisingly hard to define, let alone theorize. Borders are social objects with histories. They depend on people continually recognizing and, in many cases, enforcing them. A border that few people acknowledge ceases to exist. This also means that the nature and function of borders can change over time. Another source of confusion lies in the disjunction between rhetoric about borders and their nature or function—what laws, treatises, and politicians say about borders is often distinct from what they are or do.

For these reasons, the question in the English title, What is a Border? (also the title of a seminal essay by Étienne Balibar) is in many respects badly posed.[4] (Graziano’s original Italian title, Frontiere [Borders], is preferable.) Borders come in many forms (explicit, implicit, rigid, porous) and encompass many different domains (political, economic, religious, legal). They do not fit neatly under a set of necessary and sufficient conditions; any definition is likely to involve a family resemblance.

Borders are also ethically fraught. They separate and unite, include and exclude. Borders play a central role in constituting our lives and identities, but often at considerable cost and violence toward outsiders.[5] The failure to theorize borders is not merely to misunderstand them, but may also contribute to constructing them in morally problematic ways.

What is a Border? is divided into three sections, “A Short History of Borders,” “The Power of Place” (the title comes from Harm de Blij’s influential 2009 book), and “Borders in Progress.” Though Graziano discusses other types of borders, his main interest is in making sense of the role of state borders in today’s world.
Graziano begins by reminding his readers that borders are a “product of history” (p. 2). The current form of political borders is often traced to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. Though borders emerged with “agriculture, writing, religion, and property” (p. 2), contemporary political borders are in many ways distinct. Their emergence required a conception of sovereignty as a monopoly of power over a territory. As Stuart Elden has argued, this conception depended in turn on revolutions in philosophy and physics that gave rise to Cartesian geometry, the notion of absolute space, and the geometrization of nature.[6] Most recent—and most problematic—is what President Woodrow Wilson called “the principle of nationality” in which the ideal is for every state to contain a national community (p. 21). This achievement has too often been accomplished through the expulsion of ethnic and religious minorities.

Graziano makes it clear that the combination of borders, territory, and sovereignty is not found in the feudal system or in earlier empires, which employed more fluid relationships between power and space. Even in the nineteenth century, borders were in many respects aspirational—their technologies to effectively identify and police them did not exist. This historical perspective reminds us that borders are contingent and in flux.

Chapter 2 takes up “The Power of Place.” While telecommunications and cheap international travel may have “flattened” the world for some people, geography continues to play a fundamental role in people’s lives. In the midst of all of the attention given to migration, we often lose sight of a possibly more puzzling question: why do so many people remain rooted in place?

Graziano is sometimes torn between providing an analysis of state borders today and theorizing other types of internal or transnational borders. Rural to urban migration receives far less attention, but is as dramatic as international migration, with migrants often confined to slums on the periphery of cities where they work 3-D (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs and face discrimination and sometimes violence. Graziano makes valuable points about “the invisible, albeit no less effective, borders that internally segment states, regions, cities, and neighborhoods” (p. 34). He notes the obstacles imposed on internal migrants—most dramatically, internally displaced people restricted to camps. He also brings up the Chinese hukous system in which internal passport controls deny Chinese migrants without internal visas social services and secure employment. He concludes that internal migrants also often find their progress stymied by invisible boundaries of economics and class.

The plight of international immigrants, Graziano notes, parallels the problems for internal migrants. International immigrants often find themselves segregated in ghettos or banlieus. Though international and internal borders are often studied independently, there is a strong case for examining them under the same analytic lens, as they often interact and reinforce each other. Here Graziano misses an opportunity by writing that “the border is something immigrants bring with them” (p. 40) without discussing how borders are often imposed on immigrants and other racialized populations.

Chapter 2 also includes a fascinating discussion of ideological borders, which include the construction of religious borders in what Olivier Roy calls “holy ignorance” (p. 45). Under holy ignorance, religion is severed from its cultural and geographical context, territorialized, and used to offer (ultimately illusory) solutions to complex problems. There is a parallel here with how national identity is invoked as a bulwark against perceived insecurity and threats. Often, erecting borders (or appearing to erect borders) does not protect from external threats, but in fact generates them. Graziano gives the example of the partition of India in 1947 and the perversity of immigration enforcement, which often serves less to prevent migration than to make it more lethal and more lucrative for smugglers and security firms.

In the ambitious, unwieldy final chapter, “Borders in Progress,” Graziano surveys borders today, covering Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Russia, China, and the United States. The ultimate effect of this chapter is to demonstrate the perversity of many borders (for example, Middle Eastern and African borders were imposed by colonial powers) and their surprising stability (which does not entail political stability).

Graziano ends with two messages. The first message is that the recent turn to erecting borders is a response to a shift in relative power away from “old” powers to emerging countries such as China, India, and Indonesia. This contributes to scapegoating of immigrants and foreign competitors, creating a vicious cycle in which nativism and protectionism cause further decline. Nowhere is this starker than with Brexit, where “compensating for the anxieties generated by the ongoing changes on a global scale is an act psychologically comparable to committing suicide for fear of dying” (p. 84). There may be something to this narrative of decline and reaction for western Europe, but it is not clear how it would explain the resurgence of Hindu nationalism in India or Prime
Minister Viktor Orbán’s increasingly xenophobic regime in Hungary.

The second message is that with a few exceptions, borders have been remarkably stable since the end of World War II and their modification is dangerous—as the cases of Eritrea and South Sudan attest. Within this context, Russia’s annexation of Crimea is particularly alarming, as are proposals in the Middle East to shift borders along sectarian lines. What Is a Border? thus ends on an ambivalent, if not paradoxical note: neither the reassertion of traditional borders nor the redrawing of borders is likely to resolve the current malaise.

Graziano ends by telling us borders “must be handled with care and wisdom so as not to become permanent threats hanging over humanity’s heads like the sword of Damocles” (p. 88). No doubt this is right, but it leaves us in an uncomfortable position. Reactionary reassertions and radical proposals for redrawing borders are likely unwise. At the same time, conservative attempts to maintain the status quo are likely unfeasible. The only remaining option is abolition of borders, which appears unlikely and raises its own challenges. What Is a Border? serves as a useful primer that leaves us with the realization that there is much to learn if we are to create more satisfactory political and social groupings for today’s world.

Notes

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