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From a 'borderless world' to a 'world of borders': 'bringing history back in'

Liam O'Dowd
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland; e-mail: L.Odowd@qub.ac.uk
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Abstract. The first part of the paper explores some of the reasons why contemporary border studies understate the full significance of state borders and their global primacy. It is argued that this failing is rooted in a much wider lack of historical reflexivity—a reluctance to acknowledge the historical positioning (the 'where and when') of contemporary border studies themselves. This reluctance encourages a form of pseudohistory, or 'epochal thinking', which disfigures perspective on the present. Among the consequences are (a) exaggerated claims of the novelty of contemporary border change, propped up by poorly substantiated benchmarks in the past; (b) an incapacity to recognise the 'past in the present' as in the various historical deposits of state formation processes; and (c) a failure to recognise the distinctiveness of contemporary state borders and how they differ from other borders in their complexity and globality. The second part of the paper argues for a recalibration of border studies aimed at balancing their spatial emphases with a much greater, and more critical, historical sensitivity. It insists that 'boundedness', and state boundedness in particular, is a variable that must be understood historically. This is illustrated by arguing that a better analysis of contemporary border change means rethinking the crude periodisation which distinguishes the age of empire from the age of nation-states and, in turn, from some putative contemporary era 'beyond nation-states' and their borders.

Introduction: the global primacy of state borders

Contemporary state borders are the primary global borders in the sense that few, if any, other borders, have attained comparable levels of globalised and institutionalised recognition.(1) This recognition is a testimony to the influence of the nation-state *ideal*, and the workings of the interstate system and its associated international agencies (eg the UN, World Bank, IMF, OECD). State borders are the most widely recognised and institutionalised dividers of world space—expressing what Balibar (2009, page 201) terms a "regime of meaning and power under which the World is represented as a 'unity' of different 'parts' ".(2) Not only do such borders help constitute the most widely recognised and legitimate form of polity on a global basis, in the process they also

(1) Other borders include those of civilisations, macroregional blocs (eg EU, NAFTA, Mercosur—collections of states), nations, cities, and ethnic and religious groups.

(2) Whereas Balibar suggests that all borders have a double meaning—local and global—I would suggest that state borders are distinctively global in a way that other borders are not. Rumford (2008, page 154) criticises Balibar's related assumption that the world is a single place that can be viewed from a single 'high-point' perspective which relativises all borders vis-à-vis the globe as a whole. However, Rumford's requirement which for borders to be global, a map of the world and all its borders would have to be universally recognised by all peoples, is too stringent. It is institutionalised power, rooted in time and space, that has established and sustained state borders and ensured that interstate borders are the most globally significant regulators of economic, political, cultural, and military activity. Recognition of these borders is not to be confused with the uncritical acceptance of any particular state border, as the history of border conflicts and change demonstrates only too clearly. Nor must we assume that state borders mean that states exercise exclusive or total sovereignty within their territories. Historic state borders have always been shaped by nonstate actors as well as by other states.

facilitate institutionalised forms of communication which delineate and underpin an interstate system which now covers the globe.[3]

Yet, somewhat paradoxically, contemporary border studies, in tandem with studies of globalisation, have increasingly discounted the significance and distinctiveness of state borders, suggesting that their status is in secular decline from some, rather poorly specified, historical highpoint. Informing this approach are (sometimes tacit) assumptions that the 'era of the nation-state', the successor to 'the age of empire', has now given way to a 'postnational' world—'beyond the nation-state'. In the postnational world, most commonly associated with Europe, state borders are now deemed to be only one type of border among many—above, below, and beside the state. While this literature usefully points to many of the ways in which contemporary state borders are being reconfigured, it tends to obscure and downgrade their multidimensionality, distinctiveness, and globality. It draws excessively and selectively on the experience of a few large states, notably in Western Europe; it discounts the global significance of a changing inter-state *system* comprising a great diversity of states in terms of size, resources, and historical trajectory, and it underestimates the complexity and flexibility of states' infrastructural power and its territorialising thrust. Perhaps more fundamentally, however, contemporary border studies have failed to balance spatial analyses with an adequate historical analysis and sensitivity which recognises the way in which empires and national states, imperialism and nationalism, have mutually constituted each other.

Existing states may claim to be 'national' or 'nation' states, but in practice they display different degrees of 'stateness' and 'nationness' (eg see Tilly, 1992). Too much theorising on borders and globalisation starts from a benchmark of an imagined sovereign self-contained territorial unit marked by a presumed congruence between state and nation. Yet this benchmark is an ideal type, not to be confused with the historical reality of actual states. Agnew (2003, page 1) warns against seeing sovereignty in totalistic terms and as a "once and forever phenomenon that all states by definition came to share irrespective of when and where they acquired it." If state sovereignty and territorial integrity are conceived more broadly than in quasi-legalistic terms, then the work of historical social scientists reminds us that they have always been contingent and compromised. The congruence of state and nation may characterise the political aspiration of many nationalists; it may represent an 'ideal type' of the 'nation-state', but it is seldom, if ever, realised in practice. Nor, indeed, is the relationship between state and nation formation necessarily unilinear.

Structure of the argument

In the first part of the paper I explore some of reasons why contemporary border studies understate the full significance of state borders and their global primacy. I argue that this failing is rooted in a much wider lack of historical reflexivity—a reluctance to acknowledge the historical positioning (the 'where and when') of contemporary border studies themselves. This reluctance encourages a form of pseudohistory or 'epochal thinking' which disfigures perspective on the present. Among the consequences are (a) exaggerated claims of the novelty of contemporary border change, propped up by poorly substantiated benchmarks in the past; (b) an incapacity to recognise the 'past in the present', as in the various historical deposits of state-formation processes; and (c) somewhat paradoxically, a failure to recognise the distinctiveness of contemporary state borders and how they differ from other borders in their complexity and globality.

[3] Of course, given the huge variation in the size, power, and wealth of states, this communication is seldom between equals; it also varies in intensity and is affected by factors such as geographical proximity, military alliances, and membership of macroregional blocs.

In the second part of the paper I argue for a recalibration of border studies aimed at balancing their spatial emphases with a much greater, and more critical, historical sensitivity. I insist that 'boundedness', and state boundedness in particular, is a variable that must be understood historically. Here I draw on critiques such as that of Hobson (2002) and more directly on the work of historical sociologists such as Tilly (1992) and Mann (1986).[4] In particular, I develop Mann's thinking on four forms of power: economic, political/juridical, ideological/cultural, and military.[5] The ways in which they are combined and the extent to which they are congruent accounts for the infrastructural power of states and the changing significance of their borders.

In advocating 'bringing history back in', I recognise that various kinds of history and historical perspectives already underpin border studies. For example, some contemporary research on 'bordering processes' and 'boundary work' hold out the potential at least for redressing the imbalance between spatial and historical analysis. The main critique here is directed at (often implicit) unilinear narratives of the declining significance of state borders resting on periodisations of history inadequately supported by empirical research. 'Bringing history back in', of course, begs many questions of which forms and styles of history might be advocated (for discussion see Tilly, 1991). To evaluate the range of options available is well beyond the scope of this paper; rather, the argument here is illustrated by discussing how empire and imperialism might be 'brought back in' so that we can take account of their historical legacies, and continuing influence, in shaping, sustaining, and restructuring national borders. Beyond this, my argument subscribes to Tilly's (1991, page 86) view that "all reliable knowledge of human affairs rest on events that are already history". The social structures and processes associated with state borders take a long time to unfold. The degree to which social processes are path-dependent makes the critical historical scrutiny of sequences essential. This scrutiny is lacking in the many of unilinear narratives suffusing the study of contemporary state borders and globalization.

Devaluing state borders in contemporary border studies

Influential studies of globalisation and critiques of 'the container state', 'embedded statism', methodological nationalism, and the 'state as territorial trap' (for an early overview, see Brenner, 1999) have found a receptive audience, especially in European border studies. These critiques, allied to accounts of the demise of the 'Westphalian' or 'Weberian' state, have become part of the conventional wisdom underlying studies of borders and globalisation. Europe and its borders are represented as the main exemplar and source of the new globalised, postnational, even cosmopolitan, world order (Balibar, 2004; Beck and Grande, 2007). Implicit in much of this commentary is that Europe, successively the progenitor of the great modern empires and the national state system, is once again accorded a vanguard role in postnational geopolitical change. In this vision, although state borders remain, albeit in reconfigured form, their status is in secular decline, not least because their functions have been diffused among other territorial and nonterritorial entities.

[4] Apposite here is Hobson's (2002, page 5) parallel critique of the "historophobic" tendency in the discipline of international relations, which uses history merely as a "quarry to be mined only in order to confirm theories about the present." He rightly suggests that history should be used instead to "rethink theories and problematize the analysis of the present".

[5] For Mann (1986, page 1), "Societies are constituted by multiple and intersecting sociospatial networks of power". States seek to 'cage' these networks of power territorially—something they can never realise fully. The degree to which they are successful is highly variable historically and is a measure of their boundedness, that is, the significance of their borders.

Despite the diminishing role accorded to state borders in the emerging global order, they are retained, implicitly at least, as the hinge or fulcrum of contemporary border studies (and, indeed, of globalisation studies as such). The territorially bounded state remains an abiding reference point for the study of border change—the measuring stick by which contemporary social change is assessed, even among those who are most critical of state-centric approaches. State borders continue to be deeply constitutive of the way in which contemporary social scientists think about social change, mobility and immobility, inclusion and exclusion, domestic and foreign, national and international, internal and external, us and them. For the critics of statism, it was only by the end of the 20th century that the social sciences had been able to break decisively with the state-centric epistemology which dominated the modern social sciences since their inception in the late 19th century (Brenner, 1999, page 46).

Even in Europe, however, the sternest critics of statism continue to think *with* state borders if not always *about* the historical ways in which they have come into being and how they continue to change. At one level, the extent to which states implicitly frame social science thinking is scarcely surprising given the heavy institutional dependence of the specialised social sciences on (particular) national states (Wimmer and Glick Shiller, 2002). Much contemporary analysis of borders and globalisation insists that escaping from the state-centric thinking is the sine qua non for grasping the novelty and the promise of the new world order. Yet, 'escape' is far more difficult than such observers imagine. Contemporary social science (especially in Europe and the USA) remains symbiotically tied to particular states and groups of states. Proclaiming the advent of a new world 'beyond the nation-state', where the significance of state borders is in absolute decline, is less convincing when social science practice is so tied to the world view emanating from (the dominant Western) states.

In privileging spatial analysis, that is, space over time, much contemporary border study lacks an adequate historical analysis of state and nation formation; they overemphasise the novelty of contemporary forms of border change and globalisation and, in the process, fail to register the extent to which we continue to live in a 'world of diverse states', shot through with the legacy of empires, past and present.

From a 'borderless world' to a 'world of borders'

With the acceleration of new forms of economic, political, and cultural globalisation in the 1970s and 1980s, specialists in border studies focused on debates over 'a borderless world' (including a 'Europe without borders'). The core agenda of social science debates revolved around neoliberal economics and 'strong' theories of globalisation. The main focus was on the novelty of a new era characterised by the increased transcendence and permeability of state borders due to the enhanced mobility of capital and new communications technologies. The emergence of subnational regions, transnational blocs, and global networks were identified either as radically modifying the system of bounded territorial states or as offering alternatives to it.

From the 1990s onwards, however, these 'borderless world' debates have given way to a new emphasis on a 'world of borders'. Here, state borders are understood as one type of border among many—within and beyond the national state. The influence of more relativistic and constructivist perspectives within anthropology and sociology has been important here in problematising what goes on within and beyond the black box of the national state. As border studies have become more interdisciplinary, other borders have been mapped onto the global mosaic of state borders: for example, the borders or boundaries which distinguish neighbourhoods, localities, cities, regions, macroregional blocs, nations, ethnic, religious, cultural, and even civilisational groupings.

This new focus was on the perceived proliferation, ubiquity, and greater fluidity of borders and boundaries of all kinds (Balibar, 2004). It was linked less with border transcendence than with borders as instruments of control, regulation, and social protection in the face of variety of threats such as crime, ethnonational conflict, terrorism, illegal immigration, and other 'dangers' unleashed by the dramatic geo-political changes associated with the end of the Cold War and by the complex consequences of accelerated globalisation. There was now renewed emphasis on state borders as barriers, forms of protection, and as regulators of population movement as images of a 'borderless world' receded.[6]

Certainly, the durability of national states and their borders is often noted in debates on the 'borderless world' and a 'world of borders'. The sense persists, however, of a continuing secular decline in the importance attributed to state borders relative to other borders within and beyond the national level. In this account, state borders survive but their functions are 'unbundled' and dispersed among a wider range of rather more specialised subnational and transnational borders. The 'unbundling narrative', however, remained much too unilinear and Western centric in its focus; nor did it account adequately for the distinctiveness or the multidimensional infrastructural power of states. As Kumar (2003, page 47), observes, even if states lose control over some areas of economic and cultural life, they intensify their control over other areas.[7] Moreover, arguments about loss of state control or sovereignty seldom acknowledged the great variability in the power, size, and historical trajectory of the growing number of states in the wider interstate system.

In these discussions the distinctiveness of state borders vis-à-vis other borders became opaque. Yet, unlike other borders, state borders may be conceptualised as the outcome of sustained attempts to capture and develop linkages between four dimensions of infrastructural power: economic, politico-juridical, ideological-cultural, and military/policing. Of course, states vary in terms of the particular power dimensions that they are willing, and able, to emphasise and the degree to which they are made congruent with state territory.[8] The variability of infrastructural power is what shapes the nature and significance of state borders. It also makes historical analysis imperative as a means of understanding changing state borders. Much contemporary borders study fails to grasp the multidimensional nature of the infrastructural power of the state (Mann, 1993) and hence the specificity of state borders. The historical study of 'boundedness' enables an understanding of how state borders continue to be reconfigured, transgressed, and transcended in important ways.

Of course, there is a purely formal sense in which state borders are like other boundaries and borders—they simultaneously enable and disable, separate and connect, serve as barriers and bridges, distinguish between 'us' and 'others', and facilitate or hinder various types of communication. Like territory with which they are coterminous,

[6] The recent crisis in global finance capital (perhaps the most spectacular engine of the 'borderless' world), is a reminder of the continued importance of (large) states such as the USA, China, India, Japan, and the biggest EU states as regulators of and supports for the global 'market' comprising multinational enterprises and transnational finance corporations. Reformed global financial regulation is more likely to take an international form (at best), with little prospect of a supranational alternative in the horizon.

[7] Enhanced state control over the movement of populations is a case in point, and is a feature of the states of the European Union in particular. Arguably, few historical states had sharply defined cultural borders. While the further globalisation of contemporary cultural forms is undoubted, the significance of the state-based electronic and printed media in constructing and maintaining 'national narratives' may be increasing in many instances.

[8] For example, some states rely more on coercive military or police power, others on claims to cultural distinctiveness and homogeneity.

all state borders combine conceptual plasticity and physical specificity. However, as Berezin (2003, page 4) implies, the creation of state borders serves as metaphor of possession which imply collective actions—acquisition, exclusion, protection, as well as love, hate, and violence.[9] Cognitively and emotionally, they help us make sense of the world and allow us to communicate about it.

To assert the distinctiveness and global primacy of state borders, therefore, is not to imply that they are natural, immutable, or entirely distinct from other borders. But it is to recognise that there are few signs of systematic alternatives to an interstate system which sustain state borders as the global borders par excellence. Certainly, there are proliferating spatial networks and organisations spanning state borders encompassing such entities as ethnic groups, multinational corporations, religious organisations, cities, regions, nongovernmental organisations, and social movements. Although these networks are alternative ways of dividing and connecting global society, they have produced no systematic global system of mutually institutionalised power, recognition, or communication to match that of the interstate system. In fact, these nonstate entities typically operate through, and with, the state system. Networks of activity may transgress state borders, temporarily suspending them, but hardly negating their existence.[10]

Border studies remain overinfluenced by merely cartographic representations of borders—lines drawn on the map of the world. (Cartographical representations remain important of course, but in themselves they reveal little of the historical process of state and nation formation, of its variability, incompleteness, and even failures). This excessive spatiality has generated a sometimes implicit characterisation of social transformation that obscures the 'where' and 'when' of state and nation formation, and the great variability in the provenance, size, population, and power of actual national states (see Walby, 2003). There is a sense in which merely mapping the world's states conveys a false equivalence among them which obscures their differential power and status, the significance of their borders, and their differential capacity to shape the functions and status of their own borders and those of others.

Dichotomous or trichotomous views of border change

Although contemporary border studies privilege spatial over temporal analysis, they rest nevertheless on a mainly implicit, but nonetheless pervasive and superficial, view of historical change. Such approaches rest on crude, and very imprecise, periodisations which counterpose the current 'postnational era' with the era of national states. The latter in turn is seen as clearly distinct from the 'age of empires'. This view of 'history' is marked by assumptions about sharp transitions, and sharp distinctions between empires and national states. It rather ignores the reality that, however, compelling the nation-state ideal is, it has seldom if ever has been fully realised in practice—in terms of a congruence between nation and state.[11] A more historically informed approach might interrogate the extent to which the contemporary global order, and its

[9] It is difficult to imagine going to war to defend the borders of Schengen and the Eurozone, although less so in the case of the USA, Britain, France, or Spain.

[10] An appropriate analogy is any set of rules: transgression does not mean that they disappear—in fact, it may help clarify how they function.

[11] Griggs and Hocknell (2002) estimate that of the 191 states existing at the turn of the millennium, only twenty could be deemed to be uninational. They further estimated that the 191 states embraced between 6000 and 9000 nations. It is indicative of the ahistoricism of much contemporary sociology, for example, that many see the *destruction* of the isomorphism of nation and state as one of the defining features of contemporary globalisation (eg see Jacobson, 1997).

state borders, continue to be shaped by the legacy of imperialisms, old and new, and by the many nationalisms which have emerged in alliance and opposition to them.[12]

The benchmark of many contemporary studies is the ideal type of the nation-state, characterised as sovereign, self-contained, and precisely demarcated territorial borders. Critics of state-centric analysis rather miss the point in arguing that such states no longer exist. ‘Ideal types’ as analytical tools should not be confused with the reality of actual historical states. Such thinking encourages the notion that there has been a transition from an era of self-contained, sovereign, national states to a rather fluid, and highly mutable, global order ‘beyond the nation-state’. Remarkably, there is little historical evidence for the existence of such self-contained nation-states in the first place and considerable uncertainty and ambiguity over specifying when the era of the national state began (Mann, 2007).[13]

The prolific use of the ‘post’ term is no substitute for historical analysis, as in descriptions of the contemporary global order as postnational, postmodern, or even post-Western. Such thinking is reminiscent of the most criticised dichotomous thinking in modernisation/development studies in the 1950s and 1960s which distinguished ‘modern’ from ‘traditional’ societies (see Tipps, 1973) and which encouraged abstract, and ethnocentric, typologies.[14] From the 1970s onwards, fuelled by the cultural turn in the social sciences, even more abstract distinctions between ‘state modernity’ and postmodernity became prevalent in debates on globalisation and the prospects of state borders.

The German sociologist Beck (2005) captures much of the thinking underlying contemporary border studies when he argues that we have moved from an age of nation-states to an age of globalisation, critiquing in the process ‘the container theory’ of society and the methodological nationalism associated with it. More recently, Beck and Grande (2007) have further developed this analysis by characterising the EU as a ‘cosmopolitan empire’. They see this empire as a ‘postimperial empire’, however, clearly distinguishing it from the historic, prenational, European empires (for a critique, see Rumford, 2008, pages 98 – 101). Their primary concern is to characterise the contemporary ‘postnational’ era, rather than to show how empires and national states continue to be mutually constitutive.

Essentially dichotomous approaches risk developing a ‘checklist’ approach to border change—evaluating the present in terms of rather static and abstract models of the ‘past’. Given this somewhat static, idealised view of the past epitomised by the ‘sovereign’ Westphalian or Weberian nation-state, it easier to characterise the present as dynamic, fluid and, above all, novel.

[12] The revival of interest in empire reminds of us of the many forms that it assumed historically. Likewise, an extensive literature demonstrates the great variety and malleability of historic nationalism and the complex associations with different types of state. The adjectives regularly attached to nationalism are illustrative, for example: imperial, antiimperial, anticolonial, democratic, totalitarian, fascist, racist, socialist, civic, ethnic, elite, banal, popular, emancipatory, and reactionary. As the number of national states have proliferated in the wake of interstate and intrastate conflicts, it has become more difficult to naturalise the state – nation nexus, whether we examine, in Tilly’s (1992) terms, ‘states seeking nations’, or ‘nations seeking states’.
[13] As argued above, acknowledging the historical processes whereby states caged or captured economic, political, cultural, or military power does not imply that these processes were ever fully realised in a perfectly self-contained, fully sovereign polity—an outcome far from realisation, for example, in any of the great empires or states of the last three hundred years. For example, state elites seldom succeeded in fully appropriating the power localised in intrastate interest groups or long-established transnational entities associated with Islam or Roman Catholicism.
[14] In fact, development studies eventually became historicised and different trajectories of economic development were identified (see So, 1990).

Overextended metaphors

In the rush to capture the 'novel' and nebulous qualities of the new global order and its associated borders, social scientists have reached for a profusion of metaphors, scapes, networks, flows, and fluids to illuminate the growing ease with which capital, information, goods, services, and people cross state boundaries. Although metaphors are essential for social scientific analysis, when overextended they can accentuate the problem of ahistoricism. Favell (2001, page 391) for example, refers to "A sprawling metaphors-based cultural theory, that piles up recent discussions of scapes, cyberspaces, networks, chaos theory and time–space compression." In his view, this 'globaloney' takes on a life of its own at the expense of empirical analysis and empirically formed theory. The term 'border', deemed 'extremely rich in significations' by Balibar (2004, page 1) has attracted an impressive barrage of metaphors. Borders have been usefully represented inter alia as barriers, bridges, gateways, filters, sieves, firewalls, and membranes. As a verb, the term 'bordering' has been extended to connote a range of social control practices in a variety of contexts, and at different spatial scales, within and beyond the territory of states. One example is the contention that state bordering practices have moved away from the geographical border and have come to pervade the territory of states generally (Balibar, 2004). The 'borders are everywhere' (BAE) approach (Paasi and Prokkola, 2008) tends to use 'borders' as a synonym for social controls, thereby overextending the metaphor. If anything, what goes on within the territory of the state, in terms of monitoring the mobility of goods and people, actually increases the state's effective territorial sovereignty and the hence the significance of its external borders. Highlighting the diffusion of 'bordering' practices throughout the state territory, rather obscures the significance of state borders and the fact that they are much more multidimensional and ambiguous than the specialised 'control borders' evident in airports and on motorways and trains.

This profusion of metaphors also extends to the study of globalisation where it sometimes threatens to dissolve 'state borders' altogether in a world of 'time–space compression', 'liquid modernity', and 'distance annihilation' (Baumann, 2000; Castells, 1998). Prozorov (2008, pages 25–26) has suggested that this type of analysis has become a hegemonic commonplace, at least in Europe, where it is an epochal discourse characterised by an impatient and hurried enumeration of 'global transformations' (globalisation, integration, global civil society, decentering of economic governance, and the decline of the nation-state). He sees this discourse as "little more than a proliferation of abstract conceptualizations under the guise of empirical descriptions". It involves a denigration of (state) boundaries, that is, the claim that they are inappropriate:

> "We hardly ever encounter an empirical analysis of the problematic status of sovereign statehood, made from a normatively 'statist' perspective. The empirical problematization of boundaries is only thinkable on the basis that they are always-already ontologically and axiologically problematic" (page 28).

Prozorov, is referring here mainly to political science and international relations theory which tends to emphasise the transcendence of boundaries, although he somewhat overstates the case. For example, the political scientist, Anderson (1996, page 189) notes that territorial boundaries have been part of all major political projects. Likewise, few social scientists have fully embraced Ohmae's (1990) vision of a 'borderless world' where the state is portrayed as an "unnatural and dysfunctional unit for organizing human activity" (page 24). Lamont and Molnár (2002) demonstrate how boundaries and borders remain a recurring strand across the social science disciplines, and theorists of globalisation continue to genuflect to continued significance of national states. For example, their enduring regulatory function is recognised in theories of

governmentality and multilevel governance. Crucially, however, the role of state has been relativised and portrayed as just one, albeit important, actor in shaping global border change (eg see Giddens, 2002).

Ethical discomfort

Prozorov touches in passing on an abiding and pervasive discomfort among liberal and radical social scientists in acknowledging how integral borders are to human behaviour. They ascribe negative connotations to borders as dividers of humanity and as expressions of particularisms which serve to undermine the universalising agenda of liberal Western social science. The continued links between social science and the institutions and agenda of particular powerful Western states are part of this intellectual context. The discomfort with borders arises from their role as limits, barriers, instruments of control—set up to dominate, exclude, and exploit. State borders, in particular, carry with them a legacy of congealed coercion and violence that must be forgotten, however uneasily, for liberal representative democracy to flourish (Connolly, 1994). The progressive or 'civilizing missions' of imperial Western states in spreading liberty, democracy, and prosperity involves a partial occlusion of the violence and repression which has accompanied such 'missions'. Moreover it involves 'forgetting' the wars, ethnic cleansing, and exploitation which were constitutive of the 'model' states of Europe and North America in the first place. Here we begin to see some of the reasons for avoiding historical analysis of state and border creation. The eruption of violent revolutionary or secessionist demands to establish new states or resurrect old ones (eg in Northern Ireland or the Balkans) challenges this collective amnesia. They are a reminder of the violence and coercion inherent in all state borders and of the need for a more persuasive and empirically grounded historical analysis

For liberal social scientists, the unwelcome spectre in the background is the absence of any universal or consensual rules for specifying where, or how, state borders might be drawn, or how many states might ideally comprise the world system (see Buchanan and Moore, 2003, on the ethics of making and unmaking state boundaries). There is no possibility of appealing to an 'automatic' mechanism, the equivalent of the neoliberal market, that might promise an optimal number of states and a peaceful global equilibrium. Exaggerating the decline or transcendence of state borders, and stressing the ubiquity of borders, help obscure the violence enshrined in actual *state* borders, the historic role of coercion as the "dark side of democracy" (Mann, 2005), and the role of territory as a "repository of congealed identity, emotion and power" (Berezin, 2003, page 27).

From structural determinism to bordering processes and 'boundary work'

Of course, at one level, the tendency of contemporary students of borders to downplay history, empire, and state may be read as a praiseworthy attempt to distance themselves from the politics and perspectives of Ratzel, Curzon, Haushofer, and Mackinder. Interwoven in the writings of these early border theorists is a combination of structural determinism, imperialism, organicism, state centrism, and a denigration of borderlands as arenas where civilisation confronted barbarism (Beck, 2008, page 375). As border studies have developed, there has been a significant shift in focus from fixed physical and geographical borders to bordering or 'border work' (Rumford, 2008, pages 61–63; Van Houtum, 2005). More commonly, this tendency is captured under the labels 'bordering', 'debordering', and 'rebordering'. Critiques of state centrism and methodological nationalism, so pervasive in contemporary studies of borders and globalisation, reject the normalisation or naturalisation of fixed territorial units.

Such critiques not only reflect the cultural turn in the social sciences but also the spread of constructivism across the disciplines. As in the study of ethnicity or nation building, it heralds a shift from structural determinism to approaches which stress agency

(Wimmer, 2008, page 1027). Here, too, state borders tend to lose their privileged status and become treated in the same manner as a host of symbolic (conceptual) or social (objectified) boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). State borders may not be dissolved entirely in this perspective, but they become more contingent, fluid, mobile, and capable of being frequently changed or reconfigured by a variety of social agents.

There is a sense, however, in which an exclusive focus on agency can make the state as such disappear from the analysis altogether. States do not act in the way that individuals, governments, political parties, or corporations do. They are outcomes rather than a set of practices—the work of many hands, including long-dead generations constituted by their place in an evolving inter-state system. As emergent structural and territorial frameworks, they can be acted on or, alternatively, can enable or disable various forms of action. Excessive focus on agency tends to subjectify the state, ironically enhancing its cognitive and 'taken for granted' status.

Cultural approaches allow borders to be seen as multiple and diffused, as linked to choice rather than determinism. They also help convey the ambivalent and equivocal nature of borders as expressions or symbols of identity. Culturalist approaches have little difficulty in demonstrating that the 'container state' does not easily map on to cultural forms in a world where the lack of congruence between state and nation is becoming more problematical, and where the communications revolutions render them more permeable. Of course, such analyses beg the question of whether state borders ever were self-contained cultural containers in the first place. Moreover, they rather underestimate the ways in which contemporary states enable the creation of banal forms of national identity and nationalism. Exclusively cultural approaches highlight the multiplicity rather than singularity of borders, and can obscure the fact that some perspectives on borders are far more powerful than others—and indeed that some borders are far more significant than others.

Some consequences of 'process' approaches

The focus on bordering processes and boundary work has certainly advanced the study of borders. While often ahistorical, and heedless of power differentials, in practice it has the potential at least to make spatial analysis more historically sensitive by recognising that state borders are the product of many agents, that their functions and meanings may change over time, as may their number and location. In the words of the geographer Paasi (2006, pages 1–2), there are many agents (ethnic, religious, economic, military) who challenge the deeply rooted images of the 'fixed essences' of territory, territoriality, and boundaries. Thus the sociospatial units of the global territorial system are, as "historical and social processes, in a perpetual state of becoming and transformation". Paasi's empirical work (1996; Paasi and Prokkola, 2008) nevertheless fully recognises the durability of state structures by emphasising the resilience of the national state form and state territoriality.

When taken to extremes, however, the 'process approach' risks dissolving states and their borders altogether. The durable concentrations of power within the territories of large prosperous states, and in the hands of their governments, are obscured in this postmodern world, as are the capacities of some governments to project their power beyond their own territories. A tendency to dissolve structure into process and agency implies a world of proliferating and fluid borders characterised by voluntarism, choice, mutable states, and mobile borders—a perspective which obscures inherited structures which enable, constrain, or channel contemporary boundary work. The rules, functions, and meanings of state borders vary a lot (Paasi and Prokkola, 2008, page 14). It is perhaps no accident that social science perspectives linked to the more powerful states are more prone to emphasise agency, subjectivity, border mutability, and border

crossing, than are perspectives from weaker states. The governments and populations of the latter are 'objects' rather than 'subjects', and are forced to accommodate themselves to the economic and military control wielded by the more powerful states and their capacity to regulate the movement of peoples, goods, and capital across the borders of the interstate system.

In Europe the overall effect of these developments has been to downgrade theoretically the significance of state borders. In recent critical analyses of conventional EU studies, the statist paradigm is portrayed as a major impediment to understanding the EU variously as a postmodern, neomedieval, or potentially cosmopolitan entity (Beck and Grande, 2007; Rumford, 2008; Zielonka, 2007). Here the idea persists that the EU is seen as a harbinger of a new political system 'beyond the national state', much in the way that in an earlier historical phase Europe spread the national state system to the rest of the world. Thus the supranational role of the Commission, the emergence of transfrontier regionalism (or regional cross-border cooperation), or signs of the increased importance of transnational civil society organisations are all taken as evidence of the rise of new political borders below—leaving us with a world of proliferating and fluid borders implausibly mutable, beside and above the national state challenging the latter's hegemony. In this view, the EU represents a system of proliferating and overlapping borders such as Schengen, the Eurozone, and a variety of religious and cultural borders. The sovereignty *shared* by the core national states of the EU is typically perceived as sovereignty *diminished* in the interests of creating a larger bloc, economically stronger and more culturally diverse, which might act as an exemplar or pole of attraction for states beyond its borders.

Such arguments present Europe almost exclusively in terms of process and 'practices', rather than in terms of structures or outcomes. The concept of territorial infrastructural power introduced above allows for a greater analytical balance between structure and process. It also helps avoid confusing the abstract, and static, ideal of the 'sovereign state' with actual historical states while facilitating the historical analyses of the uneven development and variability of state power. Infrastructural power also enables an understanding of imperial and national states within one interpretative framework capable of distinguishing types of empires and national states.

'Bringing history back in'

For much of the 20th century one of the major barriers to revitalising the historical analysis of state borders has been the considerable resistance to analysing states and empires within one framework. Empires were consigned to some vaguely delimited past, and national-states were perceived as embodying antithetical conceptions of state territoriality and borders—and indeed of statehood generally. A revitalised historical social science holds out the promise of usefully interrogating the conventional wisdom embodied in these assumptions.

Over the last two decades there has been a remarkable revival of historical analysis in the social sciences, much of it focused on states and empires (see Colàs, 2007; Cooper, 2004; Mann, 1986; 1993; Secor, 2007; Tilly, 1992). In this context globalisation is no longer seen as novel, but as deeply rooted in history (eg Hopkins, 2002). Empire and imperialism are increasingly back in fashion in mainstream liberal social science, stimulated by the changing geopolitics of the USA, USSR/Russia and the EU (eg Beissenger, 2005; Held and Koenig-Archibugi, 2004; Motyl, 2001). Imperial survivals and analogies are being resurrected as a means of understanding contemporary Europe also (eg Beck and Grande, 2007; Walters, 2004; Zielonka, 2007). New forms of empire labelled as 'postmodern', 'cosmopolitan', 'neomedieval', even 'postimperial', are presented as a clear break with the past of traditional empires and bounded states

[see also Hardt and Negri's (2000) argument that globalisation constitutes a new and diffuse form of empire]. All these approaches which have informed contemporary border studies are infused with the idea that we are nearing the end of the era of the national states—now apparently conceived as inhabiting a short period between the 'demise' of the traditional empires of 19th-century and early-20th-century Europe and the new forms of global empire emerging by the turn of the 21st century.

The argument here is rather different. It suggests that there is much more historical overlap and continuity between imperial and national states than is recognised in the contemporary borders literature. Empires and national states are political entities which both involve varying territorial projections of economic, political-juridical, cultural, and military/policing (coercive) power. The legacy and influence of historical empires live on in the contemporary state system, not least in Europe. (Ex)imperial states and national states have continued to coexist, interact, and mutually constitute each other. Neither are fixed transhistorical entities, although they do display different, if overlapping, processes of state formation. Once imperialism is recognised as continuing to suffuse the interstate system, then the reconfiguration of contemporary state borders seems less of a 'break with the past'.[15]

Empires and states: ideal type distinctions and historical overlaps

Of course, *ideal-type* distinctions between empire and national states are useful analytically if rooted in the same historical period—in particular the distinction between the territorial ideology of empire and that of national states. The former is predicated on territorial expansionism, or at least on the projection of informal or indirect power beyond the confines of the borders of the imperial state. Allied to this is a sense of being carrier of a universalistic civilising mission, such as that embracing the spread of religion (itself a feature of premodern empires), democracy and human rights, and modernisation broadly defined. Imperialism in this sense is unbounded. As an ideology, it is also hierarchical in seeking to institutionalise the 'vanguard' or leading role of the core imperial states (often in competition with each other). This role may mean implementing different norms of governance in imperial lands outside the core, or in setting the rules governing the relationships among diverse polities—rules from which the core imperial states themselves are exempt. Several empires coexisted in the late 19th century with rather different capacities to influence each other, but there was no presumption of even nominal equality between them. Likewise, their internal composition and structures varied enormously.

Unlike imperialism, nationalism is in principle more egalitarian in that it posits the nominal equality of national states in an interstate system; its territorial imagination is limited and particularistic as opposed to expansionist; it appeals to a universal right to self-determination on behalf of a people or an ethnonational community, and to the ideal of state–nation congruence. The ideology of nation-states also puts greater emphasis on the homogenisation of administrative forms, culture, and citizenship within fixed territorial borders. Empires, on the other hand, legitimise racial and cultural hierarchies of human capacity and entitlement, embracing their heterogeneity and the wide variety of political entities and jurisdictions between their boundaries. Therefore, unlike national states, no common normative standard of governance prevails—rights of citizenship vary, multiple standards apply—distinguishing the 'civilised' from the 'uncivilised', white Europeans from 'lesser races', the deserving from the undeserving. Imperial states' capacity to project extraterritorial economic and coercive power, to create and modify

[15] The argument in the next section draws on that advanced by Anderson and O'Dowd (2007, pages 936–940).

political borders, and to set the rules governing relationships between polities is seen as confirmation of their inherent superiority.

In practice, of course, at least since the late 19th century, modern European empires contained would-be national states at their core. These were governed on different premises from the territorial possessions outside the core. Thus modern empires contained rather contradictory ideologies which subsequently led to their disintegration, retreat, or replacement by new empires. As the ideal of the nation-state was, wittingly or unwittingly, exported or turned against the imperial core by anti-imperial nationalists, the ideological dominance of empire was undermined. Insofar as 1945 marked a decisive break with the past, it marked the replacing of the imperial ideal with the ideological hegemony of the nation-state *ideal* on a global basis. As Beissenger (2005) observes, by the 1970s, unlike the position fifty and one hundred years previously, no political entity was willing to describe itself as an empire or claimed to be pursuing imperial ends. The dominant superpowers the USA and the USSR officially proclaimed themselves as antiimperialist and supportive of the national state ideal. The persistence of empire and imperialism was occluded by the privileging of economic over direct territorial power by the USA (Smith, 2003), by the emergence of more informal and indirect forms of empire under American auspices, by the rhetoric of the Cold War, and a vocabulary of globalisation which occluded the power hierarchies within the interstate system.

The ideological victory of the nation-state ideal was significant in that it shaped communication within, across, and about states and was further underpinned by states' membership of international organisations. States and their borders assumed a type of global primacy linked to two, sometimes contradictory, rights to ‘territorial integrity and to ‘self-determination’. In practice, however, the capacity to realise or give substance to these rights was always contingent on power relationships between and within existing states. The recent quasi-legal formulations of ‘contingent’ or ‘earned sovereignty’ is an acknowledgment of the creeping demystification of state borders, at least in a quasi-legal sense (Elden, 2006). Agnew (2008, page 180) points to how the European model of statehood, has inspired nearly all contemporary international boundaries. However, as he notes elsewhere, the global diffusion of this ideological model needs to be distinguished from the very variable empirical reality of territorial sovereignty across time and space (Agnew, 2003). Simplistic notions of declining territorial sovereignty and the declining significance of state borders beg the question about the historical benchmarks adopted. Even the appeal to European statehood is itself vague as it begs the question of which European states have served as the global model.

When empires and states are understood in terms much broader than the merely ideological or quasi-legal, historical analyses remind us that there is no sharp break between the age of empires and the era of nation-states. Hopkins (2002, page 30), for example, argues that in the case of Britain, overseas expansion, imperialism, and empire were part cause and past consequence of the growth of the national state throughout the 19th century. Bayley (2002, page 66) argues that the emergent modern empires of the 19th century were built around core national states based on exclusivist notions of racial identity. National governing bureaucracies became the carriers of empire-coordinating policies of coercion, free trade, and even religious conversion. In Hopkins's (2002, page 6) words:

> “Land was everywhere converted to property; property became the foundation of sovereignty. Sovereignty in turn defined the basis for security both by determining the extent of the monopoly of coercive power and the reach of the tax-gatherers,

and by guaranteeing international credit, which was essential to the new global division of labour."

Tracing the development of 'territorial sovereignty' emphasises the continuity between the 'age of empire' and the 'era of national states'. Indeed, there is much uncertainty over when this last begins. The French Revolution, the emancipatory nationalisms of early 19th-century Europe, and national independence movements in Latin America are frequently mooted as starting points. Among sociologists, for example, Therborn (1995) settles for interwar Europe. In the view of Giddens (1985, page 291) and Mann (2005, page 513), it was only after 1945 that the nation-state became universalised as a political form and ideal with the emergence of international organisations spanning the globe. The fact that of the 192 states currently registered with the UN, 127 have emerged since 1945 (Griggs and Hocknell, 2002) underlines how recent the globalisation of the national state has been. From this perspective, those who are proclaiming the end of the national state era are according it a very short life indeed in historical terms. In contrast, Mann (2007) argues that it is just beginning.

State borders as expressions of multidimensional power

Contemporary border studies, especially those which emphasise the cultural and identity dimensions of borders, risk seeing nation-states and state borders simply as fixed ideological constructs or ideas, rather than as territorial projections of infrastructural power. Even a cursory overview of the new historical and social scientific literature on empires and states, reveals a much more multidimensional view of states and borders, and a keen awareness of the variable meaning of sovereignty, statehood, and borders. In historical perspective, territorial borders no longer appear fixed. Their meaning varies and they seldom if ever denote insulation from the 'outside world.' The 'container state' is less a historical phenomenon than an ideological construct, not least of those who constantly proclaim its demise. In the new historical sociology of states and empires, for example, there are few uncompromised forms of territorial integrity, or clear or fixed distinctions between 'interior' and 'exterior', or between states and the interstate system (Hobden, 1999) This is not to occlude the ideological or cultural power of state borders, but it is to recognise that borders also are also the products of other forms of power—economic, political, and military—which span and demarcate them.

Colás (2007, page 62) attempts to formulate a clear distinction between the territoriality of empires and national states:

"Whereas empires thrive on fluctuating frontiers, national states can only survive within tightly demarcated borders; where empires rule diverse peoples through separate jurisdictions, sovereign states claim to unify populations culturally under a single, overarching national jurisdiction; while empires mainly seek to control peoples, national states aim to control territories."

In practice, of course, by the last quarter of the 19th century modern empires, notably in Western Europe, encompassed both forms of territoriality identified by Colás. Whereas the core imperial states may have been initially constructed according to an empire template[16] themselves, they now began to assume a more clearly demarcated and nationalised form, often in competition with each other. As Beissenger (2005) argues, the meaning of empire itself began to be influenced by the ideology of national self-determination—the main mode by which 'empire' was to be transcended. Gradually, would-be national states became the fundamental constituents of empires now seen in increasingly pejorative terms as standing for the violation of sovereignty rather than for sovereignty (imperium) itself. Of course, this process was lengthy and

[16] The structure of the rimless wheel, linking peripheries to the core, rather than to each other, could be found in core states as well as in empires.

uneven, structured not just by antiimperial wars but also by interimperial wars. In the wake of the defeat or retreat of particular empires, states (or territorial entities) carved out by imperialists became the basis for nation building. Likewise, stateless nations sought states to confirm their right to self-determination (Tilly, 1992). This mutual interaction of empire and national state proceeded by fits and starts rather than in some unilinear fashion. In the course of the 20th century it was characterised by periodic ethno-national conflicts (Fearon and Laitin, 2003), partitions, and weak and ‘failed’ entities. The political entities that emerged, at the core of the old empires as well as in their territorial possessions, all subscribed to the label of ‘national state’ but varied enormously in terms of their provenance, size, infrastructural power, and degrees of territorial integrity and sovereignty—in other words, in terms of ‘stateness’ and ‘nationness’.

Since the late 19th century, two interacting and sometimes conflictual processes have been at work—state borders have been created as a result of ‘states seeking nations’ and of ‘nations seeking states’. Their prospects of success and the type of borders that emerged were heavily shaped by war and conflict and by shifting interstate power balances. The interstate system which emerged not only inherited the fabric of state borders laid down by the great European empires, it also bore the imperial imprint of the hierarchy of states which comprised it. Importantly, in Western Europe at least, the USA promoted a national state system, while the USSR presided over one in the postwar Soviet Bloc. Each projected different degrees of economic, political, cultural, and military power across the borders of these states, in the EEC/EU and in the old Warsaw Pact states. The break-up of empire and multinational states continued throughout the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, and the emergence of the US as dominant military and economic superpower. Indeed, it was precisely this changing geopolitics which helped stimulate the revitalised interest in empires and imperialism as such in the social sciences.

What has emerged, however, is a global patchwork of vastly variable and unequal states shaped by different historical trajectories and with very different capacities to regulate and control their territorial borders and the passage of goods, people, capital and information across them. Moreover, macroregional economic blocs such as NAFTA, the EU, and South/East Asia have developed, comprising constellations of national states. Structural adjustment policies, military intervention, the ‘war on terror’, and the selective control of the mobility of people and goods are driven by the agenda of the most powerful states.[17] The fusion and/or interaction of imperialist and nationalist practices in this context provide a more compelling historical perspective on state borders and their contemporary reconfiguration than much of the contemporary theorising in border studies critiqued above.

Much border theorising identifies Europe as the crucible of new transnational forms which diminish the national state and its territoriality. Yet it is arguable on empirical grounds, for example, that EEC/EU, at least in the case of is initial fifteen members, has actually enhanced the infrastructural power of its member states and hence their effective sovereignty and boundedness at a time when their global imperial reach was contracting. Deeper economic integration combined with the ‘contracting out’ of military responsibilities to the USA, allows European national governments to develop greater capacity in many areas of policymaking given that agreed transnational regulations, particularly in the economic sphere, greatly reduce the arbitrary power and influence exerted by more powerful governments in the world. In this

[17] Although the USA may qualify as the only contemporary imperial polity (Mann, 2003), many other strong states pursue imperialist policies which shape the effective sovereignty and territoriality of weaker states.

context, international or transnational sharing of certain functions does not necessarily lead to the diminution of sovereignty except in the nostalgic imagining of imperial powers in long-term relative decline. For nostalgic imperialists, the geopolitical presence or reach of the EU, for example, is a poor substitute for the military and political power of the old European empires. For the smaller states such as the Scandanavian countries, Austria, and Ireland, transnational regulations usefully constrain the pervasive influence and arbitrary power of large neighbouring states.

Yet contemporary 'core' states have arguably more infrastructural power than their imperial predecessors had (Mann, 2007). This involves a far more sophisticated capacity to tax wealth at source, and an exponential growth in state regulations covering most spheres of social life—in other words, a denser matrix of state institutions. Modern states, in their most institutionalised form (ie those with most infrastructural power), have "expropriated the legitimate means of movement and monopolised the authority to determine who may circulate within and cross their borders" (Torpey, 1998, page 239). The extent to which people, classified by nationality, class, racial grouping, gender, and age, are confined by, or able to cross, state borders is a question for empirical research, but it seems likely that it is far more regulated now by the most powerful states than it was previously. The consolidation of 'security-obsessed' national governments and 'surveillance states' is enhanced by cooperation between the stronger states aimed at selective regulation of the movement of goods and people across their borders.

For Mann (2007) today's strong states are more generally cohesive and monocultural than they were a century ago. Their institutional structure has become more dense. Citizens' family life, health, education, welfare, taxation, incomes, and consumption capacity is far more state regulated than was the case a hundred years ago. While production and trade span the world, governments negotiate the rules of global capitalism (via international and transnational organisations) more than they ever did in the past. The stronger and more interventionist states are those which are more deeply embedded in the global economy—whose agents are capable of setting the rules governing cross-border relationships. The weakest states are those which are marginalised or excluded. Mann (2007) estimates that one third of the 191 UN-recognised states are 'excluded' from the world economy and have weak infrastructural power and little effective territorial sovereignty.

The core states of the EU have experienced the most sustained process of transnational economic integration, from which has flowed a considerable measure of monetary and political cooperation. Yet empirical studies of cross-border regionalism among Western European states overwhelmingly display the resilience of states, their administrative integrity, and the extent to which the EU operates through existing state structures. Only limited areas of autonomy are carved out for cross-border regions or Euroregions. These depend on EU funding channelled through central states and have weak democratic legitimacy (O'Dowd, 2002). The development of the European Neighbourhood policy displays a mixture of 'networked borders' and the EU's attempts to consolidate new and weak states on the external borders of the EU. Although civil society organisations have developed considerable cross-border links, they play a subordinate role to government authorities, particularly in ex-socialist states (http://www.eudimensions.org). The new 'specialised' borders within the EU, including those of the Eurozone, Schengen, and the European economic areas, bear little resemblance to the multi-dimensional nature (economic, politico-juridical, cultural, and military) state borders which they traverse.

The 'return' of empire

Nevertheless, just as in the late 19th century, 'national self-determination' began to change the meaning of empire, there is some evidence that in the 21st century the 'rediscovery of empire' and recent imperialistic practices are beginning to change the meaning of national self-determination while also reconfiguring borders and boundary work. Imperialism here, however, is not an alternative to the interstate system but, rather, works through it, modifying it in the process. The growing impact of an arbitrary, and antidemocratic, power inherent in the collaborative policing of state borders, especially by powerful states, is indicative of a revitalised imperialism. Balibar (2004, page 109) reminds us of the inherently unaccountable and undemocratic dimension of state borders as they function paradoxically to enable the workings of representative democracy. The increasing role of American empire, however incoherent (Mann, 2003), in intervening militarily in specific states, in building a global network of military and naval bases, and in conditioning the security policies of national states, is testimony to a project of arbitrary and unaccountable power across state borders. Similarly, forms of Russian 'energy imperialism' in Eastern Europe and military repression in Chechnya and Georgia are examples of renewed imperialist practices—even if Russia itself may not qualify as an empire in its own right.

Perhaps, more significantly, some multinational states are increasingly subject to the politics of becoming empires by being labelled as such by territorially concentrated cultural minorities over which they rule which reject state domination over them. Beissenger (2005) lists Russia, China, Ethiopia, Britain, France, Spain, Indonesia, India, Turkey, the USA, and Iran as being subject to such politics practised by dissident or marginalised minorities within their borders. This is a reminder of the imperial capacities and potentials within the state system and of the continued pejorative connotations of imperialism. However, there are also signs that a more benign view of 'empire' is emerging as a means of organising a more globalised, culturally diverse world predicated on a transcendence of national states [eg Beck and Grande's (2007), Ferguson's (2002), and Zielonka's (2007) urgings that the US follow the 'progressive' model of Britain's empire after 1850].

Imperial practices and transnational relationships continue to be filtered through a highly unequal interstate system. State borders retain their global primacy but they should be understood as deeply ambivalent and equivocal phenomena, shaped by the shifting historical and contemporary relationship between imperialism and nationalism. The imperial origins of state borders reveal the imprint of arbitrary power and violence. The nationalisation of these borders, heavily critiqued in contemporary border studies, nonetheless has been the sine qua non for representative democracy with all its imperfections. It remains a political and normative question as to whether state borders continue to offer the best prospects for further developing popular democracy—or whether it is possible to change the territorial borders of existing states in a consensual and negotiated fashion in response to the demands of disaffected or excluded territorial minorities. To date, it would appear that despite the hopes invested in transnational organisations and movements, or in a more cosmopolitan, global civil society, it is premature to see them as alternatives to bounded national states. Nor does the 'return of empire' appear to promise greater democracy or equality.

Conclusions

Contemporary border studies would benefit from a more reflexive and empirical historical analysis for interpreting border change. This would avoid confusing ideal types with historical realities, and would understand 'nation-states' not just as ideological constructs or political ideals but as territorial projections of multiple forms of power.

Territorially bounded national states have never been the 'integrated wholes' or 'containers' imagined by many border theorists. Rather, they have selectively and unevenly linked economic, politico-juridical, cultural/ideological, and military/policing power. A recognition that empires and national states, imperialism and nationalism have coexisted, interacted, and mutually constituted each other since the late 19th century would undermine the exaggerated novelty of contemporary globalisation and border change and would help recast the tenor of much borders research.

To minimise historical analysis is to obscure the arbitrary power and coercion which went into the creation of state borders in the first place, as well as the subsequent processes of post-hoc legitimation, and nation and state formation. It also leaves social scientific analysis ill prepared for the eruption of violent challenges to state borders after long periods of stability and acquiescence (as in the Balkans and Northern Ireland, for example). To ascribe such violence solely to localised nationalistic prejudices is to occlude the abiding influence of empires and imperial practices. The hegemony of the nation-state ideal is a measure of the global primacy of state borders. But it also masks huge variation in the historical development, size, and power of states, in what the effective sovereignty of these states means, and in their capacity to regulate their borders.

Once the importance of imperialism is recognised, criticisms of state centrism must be tempered by recognition of how social science itself is symbiotically linked to particular Western states with a long imperial pedigree. The equivocal consequences of rejecting statism need to be registered more strongly in the borders literature. Above all, border theory is unconvincing on what the alternative to the 'era of national states' might be, especially if it has mistaken the end of the 'era of national states' for its beginning.

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