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Introduction

Introduzione

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Introduction

Introduzione

Chiara Brambilla

1. Opening

- 1 Border studies do not of course exist in a vacuum, but the way borders have been viewed and interpreted has evolved according to broader paradigm shifts in knowledge production as well as in relation to major geopolitical, social, and cultural events. After a somewhat premature attempt to discard borders in a paradigm suggesting a borderless, globalized world, in the late 1980s and early 1990s newer approaches acknowledged the continued relevance of borders for politics and everyday life. However, research interests increasingly shifted from a focus on borders as territorial dividing lines and political institutions to borders regarded as socio-cultural and discursive processes and practices (Brambilla 2010). As a consequence, border research went from being a sub-discipline of political science and international relations into a research theme among a greater range of disciplines, including the social sciences, the humanities and cultural, literary and media research globally (Wilson, Donnan 2012). Comparing the insights offered by these multi-disciplinary contributions, it is possible to understand that while borders continue to have considerable relevance today, there are ways in which we need to revisit them to productively respond to political, social, and cultural challenges of the contemporary world. Thus, the social and human sciences have increasingly converged in their emphasis on the urgency to develop alternative approaches to borders that may help in rethinking them not as a line but as a set of ideas and relationships across space and time pointing to borders as relational and dynamic sites, no longer confined to political margins but embedded throughout everyday life (Brambilla *et al.* 2015). Yet, new conceptualizations and methodologies emerging from this debate have only been partially developed until now. But then, what productive “tactics” *à la* De Certeau could be elaborated to critically rethink borders in order to broaden their implications and search for ways of engaging with them capable of communicating the multidimensional epistemic, spatial, and temporal

complexity of borders beyond the metaphor of the “line in the sand” (Parker, Vaughan-Williams 2012)?

- 2 Searching for an answer, the Guest Session aims to explore the potential of anthropological knowledge, methods, and practice for the development of alternative ways to understand the emergence and role of b/ordering-othering processes (Van Houtum, van Naerssen 2002) and their relation to contemporary global phenomena. Specifically, this collection of articles sets out to do two things.
- 3 First, the Guest Session is intended to show how an anthropological lens is helpful for advancing research on borders and the border-migration nexus. Anthropologists have a long-standing interest in borders (Donnan, Wilson 1999). The conceptualization of borders should not be located in the margins but in the very heartlands of the anthropological discipline, with the idea of culture and difference themselves (Donnan, Haller 2000). Cultural difference is the result of a universal human activity, the definition of social borders (Hannerz 1997). This suggests that the border is a prominent issue at stake of anthropological studies. Borders and border crossings have been studied in anthropological research since the late 19th century in three distinct but mutually enriching perspectives on the cultural, territorial, and social dimensions of borders (Donnan 2015). These three perspectives converge on bringing to the study of borders an appreciation of what borders mean to those who establish, live, cross, or challenge them, highlighting how borders should be regarded as multiply constructed, negotiated, and viewed. As Veena Das and Deborah Poole interestingly pointed out in their edited book, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (2004), anthropology represents an important vantage point for re-thinking borders, moving towards a novel understanding of them as continually performed and (re)composed by a set of performances, revealing the dynamic character of borders beyond simply being regarded as static divisive lines on modern political maps. Ethnography as an anthropological method, which privileges field experience, provides us a specific tool to investigate the social reality of the border from the perspective of border people and crossers, and border sites, capturing the complex socio-cultural texture and arenas of life at, in, and across the border (Vila 2003). This implies that attention should also be devoted to subjective political experiences of b/ordering in the wider social context, thereby making border-related individual experiences accessible in the public sphere (Khosravi 2019), and bringing subjectivity back to the foreground as a crucial aspect of social and political life (Yuval-Davis *et al.* 2019). The particular anthropological and ethnographic take capable of exploring how different types of borders – the internal symbolic and socio-cultural (which are related to the politics of identity) and the external political and territorial (which are related to the exercise of modern state sovereignty) – are interwoven anticipates some of the still unresolved questions at the very heart of contemporary border studies, at the same time characterizing the value and distinctiveness of an anthropology of borders (Fassin 2011). However, it is useful not only to consider how anthropology has already contributed to fostering a productive understanding of borders and border crossings as research object of today, but also to critically explore in what ways anthropology as a discipline might help promote further a more comprehensive understanding of borders in the contemporary era. In this regard, it is worth considering that there is a growing need in border studies to reflect on how sophisticated knowledge on borders can be made fruitful within research processes, relating the abstract level of conceptual change in border

studies with actual bordering processes and practices (Brambilla 2016). Indeed, this is something with which border studies has been rather ill-equipped to handle until now due to the fact that erudite conceptualizations of borders end up – as Michel Agier (2016: 44) has argued – losing the «ability of reference» which leads to over-generalization and to a disengagement with the political and the social. Adopting an anthropological viewpoint could instead help to “operationalize” theoretical knowledge on border complexities as this particular take on borders provides us with a «multi-sited approach» (Brambilla 2015: 22) at different levels, combining not only the various places where borders could be observed and experienced – both in borderlands and wherever specific bordering processes have impacts, are represented, negotiated, or displaced – but also different socio-cultural, political, economic, legal, and historical locations where a space of negotiating actors, practices, and discourses is articulated (Heyman, Symons 2012).

- 4 The second thing that the guest session – taking up what Robert Alvarez (1995) has seminally argued – sets out to do is to reflect on how borders are a stimulating research topic to push anthropological theoretical and empirical reflection forward (see also Herzfeld 2006). As Agier (2016: 8) pointed out, it is «on the basis of fieldwork» that one could come «to understand that the border is continuously both remade and challenged» and could discover «the centrality of the border». But in order to grasp this centrality of the border, Agier continues, «it is necessary to redefine anthropological “decentering”: not an exotic “detour” into distant countries that are supposed to be radically other, but the study of what makes the border of everything, and thus denotes, for concrete experience, the possibility of an alterity» (*Ibidem*: 8). Hence, focusing attention on the border makes it possible to rethink and reconstruct decentering as the foundation of a disciplinary field, empirical and theoretical, of urgent importance for our present, the anthropology of borders in its multiple figures and locations, overturning traditional assessments of mobility and settlement, identity and strangeness, borders and border crossings. Far from being marginal in anthropological knowledge, borders should be regarded as a prominent “laboratory” where anthropologists can search and find appropriate analytical tools to productively respond to major challenges of the contemporary world. Or, taking up Italian anthropologist Ugo Fabietti’s pioneering argument in his book, *Etnografia della frontiera. Antropologia e storia in Baluchistan* (1997), developing an “ethnography of borders” actually means developing an “ethnography of the contemporary”.

2. Contents of this Guest Session

- 5 It is against this background that the articles gathered in the Guest Session make a contribution to advance conceptual and applied research on borders by paving the way for a more continued dialogue between the emerging interdisciplinary field of critical border studies and anthropology, along a scholarly frontier, which continues to be seldom crossed until now but provides fertile ground for advancing critical knowledge on what one can call – taking up Agier’s expression – the «centrality of the border» (2016: 8). The authors “situate” their reflections on specific border-related grounds: from the Mexico/U.S. border to the Mediterranean borders (Heyman, Ribas-Mateos), from the European Union and Brexit to the past and present experiences of border-crossings on the Greek island of Lesbos (Green), from the European border regime in

South-East Europe (Hess, Kasperek) to relevant examples of borders moving “within” Europe (degli Uberti, Leutloff-Grandits). These border-related grounds at first glance might appear rather disparate, whereas they can be fruitfully linked together through the multi-sited analytical anthropological approach to borders. Providing a powerful link between the processes of social and political transformation, conceptual change and local experience, this “kaleidoscopic” anthropological understanding of borders contributes to progress beyond the current state-of-the-art in critical border studies. At the same time, all the articles in this Guest Session provide relevant examples of how research on borders and border-related issues has been playing a role in developing new conceptual and methodological approaches in anthropology and cognate disciplines.

- 6 Sarah Green’s contribution opens the Guest Session introducing the idea of «entangled borders», which goes beyond current borders research to analyse complex border entanglements, overlappings, and crosscuttings as a key feature of contemporary border dynamics. Although border entanglements probably exist just about everywhere as a part of the “normal” (not exceptional) working of b/ordering processes, they are rarely mentioned. Green interestingly explains how there is in fact a «trouble with overlapping borders» because it is something not supposed to happen within the political-juridical order of the Western nation-state sovereign power in the modern era. Indeed, entangled borders could not be described with the “language of sovereignty” and the help of modern political maps, which are designed to “naturalize” such power-laden processes of bordering and the purview of the sovereign power of the state. Against this background, Green does not pretend to have a new map to replace the old one, but the article does contribute to a better understanding of complex entanglements and crosscuttings within contemporary border dynamics, thereby tracing possible pathways to highlight that «the co-existence of border arrangements that crosscut and overlap with sovereign political borders is a normal feature of contemporary border dynamics – it is part of the spatial, political, legal, financial and infrastructural environment in which people live these days». In doing this, Green uses analytical and methodological tools in anthropological research that allow for adopting an “intersectional approach” to borders capable of illuminating dense entanglements of geopolitical borders with other kinds of boundaries (social, cultural, economic, infrastructural), which are generated by other powerful forces (e.g., financial institutions, supra-national organizations, organized religion and infrastructural systems) around the world. Sometimes, these diverse overlaps converge at the border; much more often, they are entangled in a plethora of ways and crosscut one another as well as multiple locations that take place far from the border itself. Therefore, Green emphasizes the need to adopt a “trans-scalar approach” beyond the mere scale of nation-states in order to gain a better understanding of borders and the nexus between borders and movement across them. At the same time, the emerging vision aims to assess how «border entanglement works in practice». For this task, the article makes a contribution to “operationalize” knowledge on the complexity of entangled b/ordering processes adopting an innovative research methodology based on «a combination of ethnographic, historical and even a short biographical piece» focusing on the island of Lesbos. This also shows that critical border studies could benefit from a broadly historical and comparative approach that anthropology has been so skilled at exploring. Last but not least, it’s worth noticing that Green’s text is rich in its use of metaphors and one could say that the author bases her argument on metaphors that

are employed to explain the multi-dimensionality of borders as “complex assemblage” (e.g., “entanglement”, “entangled/disentangled”, “knot”, “carpet”, “thread”) as well as to navigate border entanglements on Lesbos, in the village of Molivos (e.g., “flows”, “traces”, “folds”). The metaphor of entangled borders proposed by Green significantly contributes to “mobilize” alternative border imaginaries, which are so much needed to grasp how border entanglements works in practice and as a practice.

- 7 Sabine Hess and Bernd Kasperek’s contribution discusses how the post-2015 border regime (i.e. the border regime in the aftermath of the so-called 2015 Summer of Migration and the “fabricated” rhetoric of refugee/migration crisis) urges border studies to revisit its established theoretical and methodological toolbox, which has turned out to be no longer adequate to explain and productively manage the rising multi-dimensional complexity of the border-migration nexus in the contemporary global world. At the same time, Hess and Kasperek provide useful critical resources for pushing this debate forward by drawing on their ethnographic research work on the European border regime in South-East Europe within the *Transit Migration 2* project in 2016 as well as on insights of legal anthropology and camp and infrastructural studies. What I find particularly interesting is that it is precisely by exploring the results of their ethnographic work that they are able to identify relevant issues and dynamics that have been ill-grasped by interdisciplinary reflections within border studies until now. Specifically, Hess and Kasperek make three arguments based on their ethnographic research, which are helpful to advance scholarship in critical border studies. First, the authors call for a more “eventalized” and contingent understanding of the European border and migration regime as well as of what we can call a “wider European project”, at the same time demonstrating how such an understanding could be properly gained by shifting the focus to contemporary “borderscapes” as both creative heuristic devices and analytical fields (Brambilla 2015) to rethink the complex genealogy of the European project from its shifting margins. Second, the article highlights the paramount importance to bring the question of migrant agency and autonomy of migration back to the foreground (De Genova 2017). Third, Hess and Kasperek advocate for the need to devote greater attention to the intrinsic complex nexus between the drawing of borders and European migration governance and governmentality practices and policies (Walters 2015). Moving away from the rhetoric of crisis, the article enhances an alternative outlook on the relationship between borders and migration that can be productively connected to the approach of «ethnographic border regime analysis», as elaborated elsewhere by the authors to theorize the border from the perspective of the autonomy of migration (Tsianos, Hess 2010). Taking this one step further, the authors illustrate the potential of establishing a dialogue between the approach of ethnographic border regime analysis and relevant conceptual, methodological, and analytical resources provided by legal anthropology and camp and infrastructure studies. The article interestingly concludes by arguing ⁵⁸ echoing Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) ⁵⁹ that border studies offer us a valuable lens to advance a critical understanding of European border and migration regimes as well as of the emergence of a new humanitarian-military complex within such regimes. Yet, Hess and Kasperek caution that the potential of the «border as method» can only be “actualized” within a framework that includes a range of practices or borderwork in everyday life which challenge monolithic hegemonic border regimes.

- 8 In the two subsequent contributions by Stefano degli Uberti and Carolin Leutloff-Grandits, both authors present accounts of their ethnographic research work in different contexts “within” Europe in the aftermath of the 2015 Summer of Migration. Both contributions enter into conversation with Hess and Kasparek’s argument and one could say that these two studies “put into practice” the insights provided by theory and method of an ethnographic analysis of border regimes.
- 9 Stefano degli Uberti’s contribution «empirically frames the concept of “border”» by giving an ethnographic account of asylum seekers’ reception policies in Alto Adige/ Südtirol (South Tyrol - Autonomous Province of Bolzano, Italy). Specifically, the article focuses on the experiences of the so-called “out-of-quota” asylum seekers (*profughi fuori quota/Asylbewerber fuori quota*) - that is, a label given to those migrants who did not arrive through the Mediterranean routes and were therefore excluded according to the Italian national quota system of redistribution. Degli Uberti further problematizes the sharp division between dynamics of inclusion and exclusion through a focus on the life experiences of the “out-of-quota” asylum seekers and provides an empirically grounded analysis of how processes of differential inclusion work in practice. Adopting the anthropological lens, degli Uberti critically assesses how labelling practices used to categorize migrants by local policy and media discourse do not only generate misrepresentations and stereotypizations of asylum seekers but they also translate into bordering practices that worsen juridical and social vulnerability of migrants and block their access to reception facilities and welfare services. What emerges then from degli Uberti’s analysis is the inherently “performative dimension” of labelling practices that ends up affecting the subjective experience of migrants, who «react to these measures with resignation in the face of powerlessness, but also with forms of resistance, showing solidarity with one another». Degli Uberti’s article also offers interesting insights at the methodological level highlighting the potential of applied anthropology to foster a better understanding of the complex relationships between borders and migration. Indeed, degli Uberti’s contribution is based not only on his fieldwork in South Tyrol but also on his working experience as a coordinator of an emergency centre for homeless people and as vice-coordinator of a reception centre for asylum seekers in Bolzano.
- 10 Carolin Leutloff-Grandits explores the diversification of humanitarian reception of refugees in Germany in the aftermath of the 2015 Summer of Migration. The article argues that bordering practices do not only take place at the political territorial borders of nation-states, but are constantly shifting, moving to the interior of the state, and multiplying at different points within social contexts. This is clearly exemplified in the diversification of the legal framework for asylum policy and administrative asylum procedures in Germany, which goes hand in hand with a complexification of the dynamics of in/exclusion and differential inclusion (Mezzadra *et al.* 2015). Leutloff-Grandits’s contribution particularly focuses on the temporal dimension of the multiplicity of “in/visible” borders (see also Andersson 2014), which refugees cannot avoid experiencing in their everyday life within the humanitarian reception system in Germany. This article adds the still missing analytical lens of temporality to the critical and political debate on borders (Donnan *et al.* 2017) to think beyond the oppressive bordering taking place in Europe while showing the centrality of “time-space governance” as a frame for examining contemporary bordering dynamics. In this regard, it is particularly interesting the section of Leutloff-Grandits’s contribution, in

which is given account of the author's participatory observation within a collective accommodation for refugees in a town in the German Federal State of Brandenburg. For this task, the article "operationalizes" critical knowledge on b/ordering-othering and particularly on the complex temporalities of borders, thereby contending that such temporalities necessitate a "double-orientation to the past and future" that calls for reconfiguring the way in which the time-space governance of migration should be addressed by theorists, politicians, and practitioners.

- 11 Finishing the Guest Session, Josiah Heyman and Natalia Ribas-Mateos's contribution points to the engine of conceptual developments in border studies today, which is both comparative and interdisciplinary (Wilson, Donnan 2012: 3). Indeed, the authors develop their argument starting with the question, «How can anthropologists and sociologists share ideas and knowledge on the Mediterranean and U.S.-Mexico borders to deepen insight and understanding?». Searching for an answer, Heyman and Ribas-Mateos advocate for the need to deserve attention not only to an unquestionably important, but deliberately one-dimensional geopolitical analysis of borders, which mainly focuses on the political relationship of (unauthorized) migrants and asylum-seekers to the state (e.g., militarized border enforcement and humanitarianism), but also to other dimensions. Specifically, the authors present a framework that identifies a few key themes that remain particularly salient but underexplored in border studies. First, the authors consider the multiple relationships involved in capitalism and their intersections with b/ordering processes and the drawing of borders worldwide (see also Mezzadra, Neilson 2013: 61-93), at the same time pointing to borders as «key places engaged in the fraught relationship between global wealth and global poverty». Second, the article points to the social and cultural complexity of border communities that are worthy of close ethnographic study in their own right. Heyman and Ribas-Mateos highlight the urgency of unraveling a more complex mobility, which occurs at borders, involving privileged and other differentiated and unequal mobilities. For this task, the article suggests that we need multi-sited and comparative ethnography capable of offering a multi-dimensional view of complex trajectories and practices of power as well as their multiple symbolic and material interactions and intersections at/in/across borders. Importantly, the authors show how «this is a frontier for border ethnography» as well, which is called to grasp and tell «contending ideas about relationship and polarization within and across borders» through a focus on borderlands as human social and cultural settings containing within them complex human stories traversed by tensions between reinforcement and resistance (see also Brambilla 2017). In this way, the article argues that a "re-politicization" of borders could be achieved moving beyond the mere political analysis of borders proposed by the literature on sovereign power and the state of exception, cautioning that conceptualizations of borders offered by this literature could help to produce the effect they critique: a de-politicization of borders, which are rendered as a singular icon of pure state sovereignty, naturalized, and devoided of historicity.

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ABSTRACTS

The Guest Session makes a contribution to advance conceptual and applied research on borders by paving the way for a more continued dialogue between the emerging interdisciplinary field of critical border studies and anthropology. Specifically, this collection of articles sets out to do two things. On the one hand, to explore the potential of anthropological knowledge, methods, and practice for advancing research on borders and the border-migration nexus. On the other hand, to reflect on how borders are a stimulating research topic to push anthropological theoretical and empirical research forward. Far from being marginal in anthropological knowledge, borders should be regarded as a prominent “laboratory” where anthropologists can search and find appropriate analytical tools to respond to major challenges of the contemporary world. Or, taking up Fabietti’s (1997) pioneering argument, developing an “ethnography of borders” actually means developing an “ethnography of the contemporary”.

Il Dossier intende contribuire all’avanzamento della ricerca concettuale e applicata sui confini mostrando le potenzialità di un dialogo più continuativo tra l’emergente ambito di ricerca interdisciplinare dei *critical border studies* e l’antropologia. In particolare, questa raccolta di articoli ha un duplice scopo. Da un lato, intende esplorare il potenziale della conoscenza, dei metodi e della pratica antropologici per fare avanzare la ricerca sui confini e sul nesso confini-migrazioni. Dall’altro lato, vuole riflettere su come i confini siano un tema di studio importante attraverso cui la ricerca antropologica, teorica ed empirica, può evolvere. Lungi dall’essere marginali nella conoscenza antropologica, i confini sono ripensati come un “laboratorio” in cui gli antropologi possono cercare e trovare degli strumenti interpretativi adeguati per affrontare le maggiori sfide poste dal mondo contemporaneo. O, riprendendo il pionieristico argomento posto da Fabietti (1997), l’elaborazione di un’“etnografia dei confini” va intesa, allora, “come etnografia della contemporaneità”.

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Keywords: critical border studies, anthropology, bordering, border-migration nexus, ethnography of the contemporary

Parole chiave: critical border studies, antropologia, bordering, nesso confini-migrazioni, etnografia della contemporaneità

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