

Borders and Frontiers in Global and Transnational History

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Introduction

In the last 25 years or so, global and transnational history have grown into an incontrovertible research agenda, investigating how all sorts of circulations, entanglements, and connections shaped modern history.¹ At the same time, this research agenda has been criticized for underestimating the continued relevance of studying historically important formations such as the nation-state, Europe, or world systems, which persist despite a cavalcade of connections piercing their boundaries.² How to combine the historical study of connections with that of long standing units of historical analysis such as nations, regions, or world systems?

To answer that question, this special issue takes borders and frontiers as its point of departure. So far, global and transnational history have predominantly addressed from a connection perspective. For instance, the contributors to the influential *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* were asked to investigate the «circulation of people, ideas and objects across national boundaries, with the structures that support these flows and with different scales across which structures and flows operate.»³ Transnational history has also drawn from borderland studies, which fittingly investigates borders as zones (not lines) of intense interaction and connection: According to the so-called «border paradox», borders trigger legal and illegal cross-border flows by virtue of the separations they create.⁴

1 State-of-the-art overviews include A. Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future*, New York, 2013, 2; P.Y. Saunier, *Transnational History*, Basingstoke, 2013.

2 E.g. on nations: M. McGerr, «The Price of the «New Transnational History»», in: *American Historical Review* 96 (1991) 4, 1056–1067. On Europe: P. Nielsen, «What, Where and Why is Europe? Some Answers from Recent Historiography», in: *European History Quarterly* 40 (2010) 4, 701–713. On world systems: E. Vanhaute, «Who is Afraid of Global History? Ambitions, Pitfalls and Limits of Learning Global History», in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 20 (2009) 2, 22–39.

3 «The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History: Guidelines for Contributors» (May 9, 2005). The authors possess a copy. P.Y. Saunier, «Learning by Doing: Notes about the Making of the Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History», in: *Journal of Modern European History* 6 (2008) 2, 159–180.

4 D. Shao, «Borders and Borderlands», in: A. Iriye/P.Y. Saunier (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, Basingstoke, 2009, 99–102. A. Knotter, «Perspectives on Cross-Border Labor in Europe» in: *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29 (2014) 33, 319–326.

This special issue, by contrast, explores how the study of borders can help us to symmetrically investigate the modern world's entanglements as well as relatively stable historical formations. In order to open up this topic, we draw inspiration from two bodies of research.

First, technology counts as a major historical force of connection across borders, especially in the modern period. It is therefore remarkable that research collaborations such as *Tensions of Europe. Technology and the Making of Europe* have produced transnational European histories that highlight the history of European integration as a process of simultaneous technological integration as well as fragmentation, of linking as well as delinking, and of transatlantic circulation as well as European, national and local appropriation. This program brings into view Europe's global connections, but also the emerging delineations of «Europe» (which came in many competing versions), the nation-state and the city.⁵ In the age of connectivity, these delineations could in part develop because of urban, national and «European» densities (in that order) in the making of global transport, telecommunication, energy, food, financial, industrial, and knowledge networks. They were furthermore sustained by the deliberate construction of borders. These take various shapes, ranging from national border checkpoints to the Iron Curtain, and from EEC agricultural protectionist measures to present-day attempts at «smart» EU borders – an advanced satellite, drone and ICT infrastructure to track and intercept illegal immigrants trying to enter the EU. The symmetrical study of connections and borders, in other words, shows us the (re)production of major spatial formations in a globally connected, multilayered Europe.⁶

Second, world (systems) historians have disapproved of the narrow political conception of borders, and used it to revive the historical study of *frontiers*. Their reinstatement of the concept «frontier» is remarkable because it has been severely criticised, especially with reference to US historian Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 «frontier thesis». Turner argued that the perpetual expansion of the US Western frontier shaped American democracy. The ongoing frontier struggle supposedly moved American settlers away from «European» aristocratic, authoritarian and class-based mindsets, towards democracy, individualism and violence. Turner's influential thesis has been dismissed for its ethnocentrism and for its contradictions with transnational history scholarship. For instance, Ian Tyrell called Turner an advocate of national exceptionalism and nation-centered analysis in US history, against which Tyrell pitched his «New Transnational History».⁷

5 E. van der Vleuten, «Toward a Transnational History of Technology. Meanings, Promises, Pitfalls», in: *Technology and Culture* 49 (2008) 4, 974–94. J. Schot / P. Scanton, «Making Europe: An Introduction to the Series». http://www.makeurope.eu/files/get/Series_introduction_ME.pdf (accessed October 8, 2014).

6 P. Högselius / A. Kaijser / E. van der Vleuten, *Europe's Infrastructure Transition: Economy, War,*

Nature, Basingstoke 2015. Also: R. Oldenziel / M. Hård, *Consumers, Tinkerers, Rebels: The People Who Shaped Europe*, Basingstoke 2013; M. Kohlrusch / H. Trischler, *Building Europe on Expertise. Innovators, Organizers, Networkers*, Basingstoke 2014; W. Kaiser / J. Schot, *Writing the Rules for Europe: Experts, Cartels, International Organizations*, Basingstoke 2014.

7 I. Tyrell, «American Exceptionalism in an Age of

Saunier is also puzzled by the unresolved tension between the «insular national history» inherent in Turner's frontier thesis and the relational outlook of another famous Turner quote, which counts as an important transnational analysis precursor: «Local history can only be understood in the light of the history of the world. To know the history of contemporary Italy, we must know the history of contemporary France or contemporary Germany. Each acts on each. Ideas, commodities even [...] all are inextricably connected».⁸

World historians, however, have moved beyond the ethnocentric and exceptionalist study of frontiers and reconverted the concept into a useful tool for historical research. In particular, comparative world system analysis examines frontiers not as a national peculiarity, but as a feature of expanding socioeconomic world systems. In addition, world historians have widened their notion of «frontiers» as opposed to «borders». Here, borders stand for man-made lines that divide the world into specific places, territories and categories, to which legal, mobility and social norms apply. Such borders are typically formal demarcations of ownership or state authority (though they can also be informal associations of places with social groups or ideas). Since the Peace of Westphalia (1648), borders have particularly been associated with dividing lines between nation-states.⁹

Contrary to a border's political function to separate places, Thomas P. Hall and others define «frontiers» as zones where two social systems (non-state societies, states, even world systems) come in contact, interact and overlap. Here, many types of processes are in play. In the words of Eric Vanhaute: «History is made by permanent shifts in and between frontier zones [...]. Borders and frontiers modulate world historical processes via political expansion, human migration, economic exchange or incorporation, cultural assimilation and religious dissemination.»¹⁰ World historians do not ethnocentrically assume that these diverse processes are driven by the world system's «centre». They explicitly study «peripheral» agency and see frontier development as a complex, non-linear, two-way process. As a result, they found that world system frontier expansion was not always successful – far from it.¹¹

This special issue follows up on these insights. Since our aim is to explore how the study of borders and frontiers can enrich global and transnational history, we do not

International History», in: *American Historical Review* 96 (1991) 4, 1031–1055, 1035.

8 Turner as quoted in Saunier, *Transnational history*, 1.

9 A.C. Diener / J. Hagen, *Borders: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2012, 1–11, 37–43; G. Gavrilis, *The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries*, Cambridge 2008, 8.

10 E. Vanhaute, *World History: An Introduction*, London, New York 2013, 157–159; T.D. Hall, «Puzzles in the Comparative Study of Frontiers: Problems,

Some Solutions, and Methodological Implications», in: *Journal of World-Systems Research* 15 (2009) 1, 25–47; T.D. Hall, «Lessons from Comparing the Two Southwest: Southwest China and Northwest New Spain/Southwest United States», in: *Journal of World-Systems Research* 19 (2013), 24–56.

11 H. Cottyn, *Renegotiating Communal Autonomy. Communal Land Rights and Liberal Land Reform on the Bolivian Altiplano: Carangas, 1860–1930*, Dissertation, Ghent University, Ghent 2014.

carve these concepts in stone at the outset and give our authors some leeway in employing these terms. That said, there does seem to be a pattern emerging. This special issue applies the notion of frontiers to study Europe-based world systems; these are characterised by connections and frictions between European homelands and colonial frontier zones, as well as connection and separation processes within the frontier zones themselves. The notion of borders, on the other hand, is mostly used when studying attempts to maintain delineations within transnational spaces, such as borders to migration within a comparatively coherent North-Atlantic region or national borders on European soil. Either way, the articles suggest that these concepts expose the dynamics of boundary-piercing connections as well as such historical formations as world systems, nation-states and, as the final contribution somewhat surprisingly shows, the modern multinational company.

We start our endeavour with an article on early modern Europe. It has long been debated whether transnational history is a paradigm for modern history or if it applies to other historical periods as well. The argument to focus on the modern era is that «transcending the national» has added value only in a period characterised by the rise and dominance of the territorially bound nation-state. For earlier periods, some find it «restrictive» or even «anachronistic».¹² The counter argument is that global and transnational history refer to a set of research questions about connections that can, and should, be researched for any period. Even if one accepts the first standpoint, from a border and frontier perspective, the early modern period should certainly be included, for it was here that modern border and frontier processes began. Bram de Ridder's article «Sustaining the Munster Peace: The *Chambre Mi-Partie* as an Experiment in Transnational Border Arbitration (1648–1675)» is a case in point. After the 1648 Peace of Munster, the border between the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Habsburgs had been defined on paper. Now the question arose how to sustain this border in a former war zone, where the new borders were constantly challenged by a variety of parties. In this context the *Chambre Mi-Partie* was a non-political, supposedly neutral, court of arbitration. It was a transnational organisation designed to uphold two autonomous states and their common border. The paper investigates the workings of this body and shows the challenges of border maintenance in the early modern period.

We then move to the modern era in European history. The late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century was a period when frontier and border processes were in constant flux. In «Building Imperial Frontiers: Business, Science, and Karakul Sheep Farming in (German) South West Africa (1903–1939)», Robrecht Declercq investigates

12 C.A. Bayly et al., «AHR Conversation: On Transnational History», in: *American Historical Review* 111 (2006) 5, 1441–1464, 1442; M. Krieger, «Transnationalität in vernationaler Zeit? Ein Plädoyer für eine erweiterte Gesellschaftsgeschichte der

Frühen Neuzeit», in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (2004), 125–136. Saunier reviews the debate and settles on «the last 200–250 years broadly understood». Saunier, *Transnational History*, 12.

the role of frontiers in the intriguing practice of breeding karakul sheep in South West Africa (Namibia). Contrary to the traditional imperialist narrative he finds that this frontier was formed in an interactive process between the German state (seeking to develop the colony), the Leipzig fur business (building alternative supply lines when its Central Asian routes became problematic) and German genetic science (crossbreeding «African karakul» sheep through artificial selection). The case of genetic science demonstrates the two-way interactive connections between frontier and homeland: German scientists failing to institutionalise Medelian genetics at home, proving their field's value in the colony and only then gaining a foothold in German academia. Yet in the interwar years, the apparently successful frontier building process proved reversible. Frontiers and their imperial connections with homelands, we may conclude, can be unbuilt and rebuilt.

Next we move to the transatlantic space. In the nineteenth century, a surge in transatlantic migration connected Europe and North America into one North Atlantic region. Once US nativists and labour unions began to view immigration as a threat instead of a valuable resource, however, the US authorities started creating an Atlantic border. In «Bounding Mass Migration across the Atlantic: European Shipping Companies between US Border Building and Evasion, 1860s–1920s», Torsten Feys argues that this process should not be studied merely from a US policy-making perspective, but in terms of practical implementation by port officials, shipping companies and migrant organisations. US Atlantic border control was partly delegated to shipping companies; in actual control practice, the US border moved on-board ships to European ports of departure, and even inland Europe to migration hubs like Vienna and Budapest, where candidates were selected and separated. Finally, the same shipping companies that collaborated with the US authorities to consolidate borders, also contributed actively to the borders' porousness by assisting migrants to circumvent inspections, and thereby preserved their business model (which depended on steady migration flows).

We conclude this special issue with a study of another kind of frontier – a type of frontier hitherto unnoted in transnational history. In the 1890s, Frederick Jackson Turner argued that westward expansion of the US frontier had fuelled the nation's dynamism for centuries. But Turner noted that this process had halted; the frontier had reached the Pacific and no longer existed. Half a century later, US policymakers identified science and technology as a new frontier that could expand endlessly and do the same job of propelling nations forward. Especially Vannevar Bush's policy report *Science – The Endless Frontier* (1945) became extremely influential. As its ideas circulated throughout the Western world, it became characteristic of a technocratic postwar age. Bush and others had promised that the ongoing conquest of the technoscientific frontier would enhance the prosperity and health of nations. In «Technology as the New Frontier: Unilever and the Rise of Becel Margarine», Mila Davids studies key technoscientific frontier processes in an intriguing case. Dutch-British Unilever's development of Becel diet margarine required state-of-the-art chemical, biomedical, and food science research to tackle one of the major health problems in Western societies, cardiovascular diseases.

David's study underscores the point this special issue wants to make: a frontier perspective on innovation makes us aware of how existing limits and delineations were pierced, but also how existing historical formations – in this case the multinational company – were reproduced: Unilever managers and researchers found scientific frontier processes vital not only for the health of nations, but also for the development and survival of their company.

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