



Introduction

Bioarchaeology and the Study of Frontiers

CRISTINA I. TICA AND DEBRA L. MARTIN

Frontiers, territorial borders, and the process of boundary making are important aspects of the natural history of the human species, since human consciousness and social organization are deeply influenced by territoriality (Anderson 1996, 189). Borders and frontiers are means through which humans assign meaning to their existence, as these delimitations connect and relate people to one another as being part of something special because it is separate (Williams 2006, 119). Territorial borders are an integral part of the way human societies work. They are fundamental contributors to our sense of belonging and our sense of place in the world; they allow us to relate to one another based on trust, commonality, and security (Williams 2006, 119). Thus, frontiers are intrinsically linked to the entities they encompass (Anderson 1996, 10).

Why We Should Care

Every culture defines and is affected by territorial borders. Defining, defending, and protecting the borders of a homeland are a fundamentally important social practice, since they divide political communities, political authority, and political rights and obligations. Accordingly, borders and frontiers lay the basis for collective identity formation. They require complex social processes that serve to protect people—or to put them at risk (Williams 2006, 124,133). The frontier includes and excludes while encompassing both the inside and the outside, the identity and the difference (Vaughan-Williams 2009, 1). Borders and frontiers

are protecting and imprisoning, at once gateways and barriers, zones of contact and conflict, cooperation and competition, opportunity and insecurity, ambivalent identities and aggressive assertion of difference, and dichotomies that can coexist simultaneously in the same people (Anderson and O'Dowd 1999, 595).

The daily news is a constant reminder of why a scholarship of borders and frontiers is not only still relevant but crucially needed. The portrayal of frontiers and borderlands as either a menacing threat or an optimistic prospect for sociocultural interactions is based on a weak (and frequently wrong) grasp of the past and therefore of the complexity of these phenomena. Their contradictory, problematic, and multifaceted nature makes borders and frontiers hard to conceptualize and define. Frontier is more of a set of processes rather than a “thing”; it is “a busy field of intersecting forces,” and defining it narrowly “will not tame these forces or unite them in a single pattern” (Rodseth and Parker 2005, 16). And as Rodseth and Parker (2005, 16) argue, all aspects of the frontier should be investigated, from all different points of view, in all its specific times and places; thus, the frontier should be investigated “in the wild,” so to speak.

As Thomas Nail (2016, 7) asserts, borders are dynamic and fluid. They never finish “including” people or things because they are never stable or immutable; they are easily changed in response to shifting politics or cultural changes. Borders and frontiers are also never successful in keeping everyone in or out (8), and as Nail emphasizes, they all “leak precisely because all borders are constituted by and through a process of leakage, which is only temporarily stabilized into border regimes” (13).

One of the definitions of frontier is a zone that separates civilization from the wilderness (Donnan and Haller 2000, 11), a territorial expansion into formerly “empty” areas (Baud and Van Schendel 1997, 213). However, during colonization, one group's homeland becomes another's frontier (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995, 473). The frontier is a place in and of itself but it is also a link in a larger network (Wendl and Rösler 1999, 10). Therefore, a change in one group's frontier requires the other group to also make accommodations and changes. And exchanges between two groups often underscore their interdependence (Green and Perlman 1985, 4). An example is the agricultural/hunter-gatherer frontier in temperate prehistoric Europe: as Dennell (1985) posits, the spread of agriculture was probably generated by the actual interaction between foragers and farmers, by a close dialogue between those on either side of the Mesolithic-Neolithic frontier.

To a certain extent, the notion of “frontier” is used interchangeably with “border” (Wendl and Rösler 1999, 3). Borders are spaces of “meaning-making”

and “meaning-breaking.” They are liminal zones that put in sharp relief the full range of “multivocal and multilocal” identities. Donnan and Wilson (1999, 64) maintain that this can be especially seen in the case of ethnic and national identities expressed at peripheries and borders in ways that often differ from how the same identities are configured in core areas of the state.

For the people who live on the frontier or in frontier regions, the meaning of what a frontier is is deeply influenced by the rules and regulations that frontier imposes on their lives (Anderson 1996, 2–3), rules and regulations created and enforced by those with more power who often live at the center. Borders and frontiers are rarely natural; they are almost always socially and politically constructed. They are subjective, negotiated, and contested; they derive meaning and function from the people they divide (Diener and Hagen 2010a, 3–4). Furthermore, borders and frontiers are lived; they are “historically contingent, politically charged, dynamic phenomena that first and foremost involve people and their everyday lives” (Vaughan-Williams 2009, 1).

A Bioarchaeology of Frontiers and Borderlands

This volume of case studies illustrates the ways that borders and frontiers have both material and symbolic uses (Anderson and O’Dowd 1999, 595). Each chapter demonstrates in different ways the complexity and the versatility of the border. What makes border theory so difficult to grasp is that there are many types of borders and frontiers: regional and geographical, political, religious, cultural, generational, ethnic, racial, based on class and socioeconomic stratification, and so forth (Vaughan-Williams 2009, 1). At the same time, borders are “equally atterritorial, apolitical, nonlegal, and noneconomic [phenomena]” (Nail 2016, 2–3) (for example, see chapter 3, this volume).

The study of borders and frontiers should not be exclusively undertaken based on any single type of division or social force because what is common to all these types of borders is the status of the “between” (Nail 2016, 2). Borders and frontiers can exist at different levels and scales: between individual and society, among individuals, among communities or groups, and among societies. Borders are places of (ethnic) conflict and accommodation because of their geographical location and their role as areas of immigration (Donnan and Wilson, 1999, 5). People at the borders adapt to the social, economic, cultural, and political necessities of living with, or in spite of, their cross-border neighbors, whom they might consider as friends, enemies, or neutral parties (Donnan and Wilson, 1994, 3).