

BORDER THEORY

The Limits of Cultural Politics

Scott Michaelsen
and David E. Johnson, editors



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ONE

Reflections on Border Theory, Culture, and the Nation

Alejandro Lugo

border *n* 1: an outer part or edge 2: BOUNDARY, FRONTIER...

4: an ornamental design at the edge of a fabric or rug

SYN BORDER, MARGIN, VERGE, EDGE, RIM, BRIM, BRINK

borderland *n* 1a: territory at or near a border: FRONTIER b: an outlying region

borderline *n*: a line of demarcation

bordure *n*: a border surrounding a heraldic shield

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

frontera (de frontero.) *f.* *Confin de un Estado* [Limit of a state]

2. *Fachada* [ornamental design] ... 5. *Límite*

frontería (de frontero) *f.* ant. *Frontera*; *hacer frente* [To confront]

frontero, ra *Puesto y colocado enfrente* [Situated in front]

Diccionario de la Lengua Española

Heterotopia: disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the heteroclite. ... in such a state, things are laid, placed, arranged in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them.

MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The Order of Things*

We live in a time and space in which borders, both literal and figurative, exist everywhere. ... A border maps limits; it keeps people in and out of an area; it marks the ending of a safe zone and the beginning of an unsafe zone. To confront a border and, more so, to cross a border presumes great risk. In general people fear and are afraid to cross borders. ... People cling to the dream of utopia and fail to recognize that they create and live in heterotopia.

ALEJANDRO MORALES, "Dynamic Identities in Heterotopia"

(and we should all be somewhat mobile to be vigilant) should develop a denationalized and deterritorialized set of cultural practices. These would have to deal with the tough questions of gender oppression not only in that 'other place'... but also in one's own family, community, culture, religion, race, and nation" (1995, 367). Finally, just as Manuel Martín-Rodríguez, following Deleuze and Guattari, argues that a "minor language" can erode a "major language from within," I argue that the border region and border theory can erode the hegemony of the privileged center by denationalizing and deterritorializing the nation/state and culture theory: "In other words, minor languages erode, as it were, a major language from within, deterritorializing it, breaking up its system's supposed homogeneity" (Martín-Rodríguez, 1996, 86).²

Much more specifically, my analytic framework is the following: I will try to draw the contours of two theoretical parallelisms, both of which are constituted by seemingly disconnected conceptual preoccupations. On the one hand is the critical articulation between Gramsci's notion of *the state and its dispersal* and Foucault's notion of *power and its deployment*;³ on the other is Anderson's critique of the nation and Rosaldo's critique of culture in anthropology. I am particularly interested in Gramsci's uses of the terms "state," "force relations," and "war of position" and how they might relate to Foucault's "relations of force" and his faith in "the strategical model rather than the model based on law" as well as his strategic belief that "politics is *war* pursued by other means" (Foucault, 1978, 93; emphasis added). I argue here that these connections of resistance against folk notions of the "head of the king [and] the spell of monarchy" (Foucault, 1978, 88–89) — that is, "the state/the law"⁴ — are quite telling in themselves about the ways in which we have come to think about social life and culture inside and outside anthropology, which is my interest here. These critiques call for multiple discourses, wars of position, situated knowledges, positioned subjects, and different arenas of contestation in everyday life. Thus, the analysis presented here should help explain the recent production of theories of borders in our Westernized imagination. I will examine this articulation between border theory and the West, within anthropology, by juxtaposing Anderson's critique of the nation as an imagined community with Rosaldo's critique of culture as shared patterns of behavior.⁵

The Borders of Border Theory

If we wanted to carry out an archaeology of border theory, how would we identify its sources and its targets? Where would we locate its multiple sites of production and consumption, formation and transformation? What are the multiple discourses producing images of borders almost everywhere, at least in the minds of academics? In trying to answer these questions, more with an exploratory spirit than with a definitive one, let us say that the sites, the sources, the targets, and the discourses can be variably characterized by the following: previously marginalized intellectuals within the academy (i.e., women and other minorities), the outer limits of the nation-state (i.e., the U.S.-Mexico border region), the frontiers of culture theory (i.e., cultural borderlands vis-à-vis cultural patterns), the multiple fronts of struggle in cultural studies (i.e., the war of position), the cutting edge (at the forefront) of theories of difference (i.e., race, class, gender, and sexual orientation), and finally (at) the crossroads of history, literature, anthropology, and sociology (i.e., cultural studies).

In this essay I argue that in order to understand its political and practical importance, we must reimagine border theory in the realm of the inescapable, mountainous terrains of Power (Foucault, 1978) as it has operated in the past two hundred years in the West (Foucault, 1978; Derrida, 1966), and as it has been imbricated in the academy, in culture theory, in the global contexts of late capitalism, and in the last analysis, and perhaps most important, in the realms of the changing "nation" (Anderson, 1991) and "state" (Hall, 1986).¹

This privileging of the "nation/state," on my part, relates to a current theoretical and political concern that has practical implications for the opening of more inclusive spaces under globalization, especially for the coming twenty-first century: *the deterritorialization* of the nation, politics, culture and border theory, and, finally, human agency (Ong, 1995; Morales, 1996; Martín-Rodríguez, 1996). For Alejandro Morales, "Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia explains border culture," and "life in the chaos of heterotopia is a perpetual act of self-definition gradually deterritorializing the individual" (1996, 23, 24). Regarding feminist practice in the global setting, Aihwa Ong argues that "diasporic feminists

By reflecting on these parallelisms—that between Gramsci's notion of the state and Foucault's notion of power (both being *dispersed* entities) and that between Anderson's notion of the imagined community and Rosaldo's cultural patterns (both being *homogeneous* entities)—I hope to show how border theory in the late twentieth century in anthropology (i.e., Rosaldo's "cultural borderlands") cannot be properly understood unless it is situated, willy-nilly, *vis-à-vis* changing discourses about the state, the nation, and culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least as these imagined categories and periodizations are examined in the works of Rosaldo himself (*Culture and Truth*, 1993), Anderson (*Imagined Communities*, 1991), Foucault (*History of Sexuality*, 1978), and Stuart Hall ("Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," 1986).

By locating border theory at the crossroads of culture theory in anthropology, and at the crossroads of ideologies of the state and the nation, which in turn produced "anthropologies" that represented national hegemonic traditions (American, British, and French), I hope to show the political and epistemological limits under which we teach, write, do research, and theorize. My main argument here is that border theory itself can contribute effectively to the exploration of these limits, as long as it is recognized to be (as theories of social life tend to be) a product of the codification of a "multiplicity of force relations . . . which by virtue of their inequalities, constantly engender states of power" (Foucault, 1978, 93).

The Current State of Culture: Cultural Borderlands *vis-à-vis* Cultural Patterns

Cultural borderlands should be understood, first of all, in relation to the previous dominant discourse about culture: cultural patterns. Renato Rosaldo has been very precise about the limitations of what he calls the "classic vision of unique cultural patterns":

It emphasizes shared patterns at the expense of processes of change and internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions. By defining culture as a set of shared meanings, classic norms of analysis make it difficult to study zones of difference within and between cultures. From the classic perspective, cultural borderlands appear to be annoying exceptions rather than central areas of inquiry. (1993, 27–28)

Although I agree with Rosaldo's critical assessment of the social and political implications of the ideology of "cultural patterns," my vision of the way those cultural patterns have been constituted in the theoretical imagination of classic anthropologists is a bit different. In fact, the historical process through which we have come to theorize and think about culture, society, cultural patterns, and borderlands should not be taken for granted, or as a given, if we want, as Foucault puts it, "to cut off the head of the king" (1978, 88).

I propose here that the attempt to decipher the complex relation between "structure and practice" was and has been a dominant thinking channel or tool through which the concept of culture has been imagined, though more implicitly than explicitly. Let us see how the latter contention is manifested in the writings of some of anthropology's major and recent practitioners. By considering the sociopolitical and historical context in which anthropologists wrote, I hope to shed some light on why, after all, a discourse on culture and society emerged. The following discussion will eventually bring us back to an analysis of the roles of the state, the law, and the nation in shaping our formulations of the concept of culture and of social life in general.

Marshall Sahlins has explicitly associated the concept of culture with a double existence: "In the dialectic of culture-as-constituted and culture-as-lived we... discover some possibility of reconciling the most profound antinomy of social science theory, that between structure and practice: reconciling them, that is, in the only way presently justifiable—as a symbolic process" (1982, 48). Regarding "society," however, Sherry Ortner has also identified a dialectical polarity in what she calls "practice theory," which constitutes the attempt to understand "how society and culture themselves are produced and reproduced through *human intention and action*" (1984, 158; emphasis added). Ortner argues that "the modern versions of practice theory... appear unique in... that society is a system, that the system is powerfully constraining, and yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction" (159). Ortner's similar treatment of both "society" and "culture" is less conspicuous, for our purpose here, than the way she imagines these theoretical constructs through pervasive critical dualisms: system and action, human intention and action. Sahlins's imaginings about