

Editorial

Borders, Movement, and Being-in-Between

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Abstract

This work in the format of interview opens the Special Issue of Vol. 2, 2022 dedicated entirely to the theme of borders starting from different multidisciplinary perspectives. The interviewed guest is Thomas Nail, Professor of Philosophy at University of Denver, and author of a now classic book *Theory of Border* (Oxford University Press, 2017). For many years, he has been studying the social, economic and political dynamics that are activated along border devices. During the interview, the Editors of the Journal – Prof Filippo Pergola and Prof. Raffaele De Luca Picione - discuss with the guest about a series of topics related to the definition of borders, their dynamics of movement, processes of *in-betweenness*, and both the specificities and diversity of border types (the *fence*, the *wall*, the *cell*, and the *checkpoint*). The study of borders is shown to be an essential means for understanding human phenomena in the contemporary world.

Keywords: *border, movement, in-betweenness.*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32111/SAS.2022.2.2.1>

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The Interview

Dear Prof. Thomas Nail, we are very glad that you have accepted our invitation for an interview on the topic of borders. The Issue 2 of the Volume II (December, 2022) of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis and Education: Subject, Action & Society* is entirely dedicated to an interdisciplinary reflection on the value and functions that borders assume in the course of experience. You have written a lot on the topic, developing very interesting theoretical and research elements on the relationship between politics and people's mobility. Your text *Theory of border* (Oxford University Press, 2017) represents a milestone for what concerns characteristics and processes of the borders in the socio-economic-political dynamics and human mobility.

I would like to be able to discuss with you during the interview on many central issues for the study of borders in human experience.

- 1) *First of all, how do you define the border?*

For me, a border is a process that modulates the circulation of things. It continually distributes and redistributes flows of movement that pass through or around it.

- 2) *Your perspective on borders is dynamic and processual. You state that the “in-betweenness” of the border is not a lack or absence. The notion of movement appears as the cornerstone of your work of understanding on the nature of borders. What do you mean by “border in motion”. It seems like a paradox, while instead it is a central feature that you have identified. Why do you define the border as an active process of bifurcation?*

I say that borders are “in-between” because they are never *entirely* included in one domain or excluded from another. They are places that touch both an inside and an outside simultaneously like our skin. And they are similarly porous. As they move, change, and breakdown, they modulate the inside and outside at once. The flows that pass through fork or bifurcate from the ones that don't like water divides around an islet in a river. The water erodes the islet and the islet bifurcates the stream into two branches that then shape the islet and river simultaneously. I think this fluid dynamic image is much better for thinking about how real material borders work. Borders do not have the power to fully open or close, just like the islet is in the middle of the river.

- 3) *Continuing to remain on the characteristics of movement, I would be grateful if you may explain what you mean by the border is a process of circulation.*

The border is a process in the sense that it is a metastable state. Just like a vortex, it requires a constant supply of energy input to maintain its form. Borders, political and psychological, are always eroding in various ways and have to be repaired, reformed, and refortified. For example, the US Mexico border wall gets about 3000 holes a year that are repaired at great expense. So the border is the process of continual repair, maintenance, and defense. Even when people or things pass across the border undetected their status on the other side changes. Indeed, most people who want to cross the US Mexico border illegally will be able to. But when they do, they are criminalized for it and begin to circulate inside a world of detention centers, private deportation industries, immigration enforcement raids, and capitalist exploitation. The border is not just at the limit of society, but borders are like webs that weave through all society. For an illegal border crosser, the border inside a country is anywhere where one can be reported and removed.

- 4) *According to your theory of borders, what is the relationship between spatiality and the border?*

Borders are spatial, but their space is fundamentally kinetic. In other words, they are made and remade by patterns of motion. There is no such thing as neutral or empty space. All space is made by movement. In my work on borders, I have tried to study the patterns of movement that reproduce and reform border spaces.

- 5) *In order for a good and solid development of a theory of borders, what do you think should be its relationship with empiricism?*

As a materialist philosophy, I try to take seriously the historical and material nature of my areas of study. I try to look at how people and things move in various patterns. Human groups also tell lots of stories and have lots of ideas about how things work or should work, but these stories more often than not do not accurately describe what is going on. For instance, in the US politicians try to rally voters around building a wall to prevent illegal immigration. But the southern US border wall has never been able to do that and there is a lot of evidence by those who study it saying that it cannot work like that. Indeed, most of the effects are that it funnels people to the desert and kills them and that it destroys the environment. The wall works in a thousands ways if you study it. If you only looked at how people talked about it or moralized about it you would be taking a shallow human-level and linguistic approach to understanding how the border itself functioned historically and materially.

- 6) *How do you think the relationship between border and identity is articulated?*

Just like borders, identities are metastable. Nothing is identical to itself, materially speaking. Identities are like the little eddies that ripple off the flows circulating through societies. Even if there is no metaphysical basis for identity, it is still a relevant metastable feature of our patterns of movement that we try to maintain in the face of constant transformation. In times of danger and crises, people tend to hold tighter to their identities and they uses all kinds of borders to do that. So perhaps we could say that “identities” are also processes that expand and contract historically depending on how much effort is made to reproduce and tighten their borders. For this reason, border zones tend to be places of hybridity because there is a lot of turbulence, mixture, and transformation. So although borders are “supposed” to regulate identities, their constant process of shifting and changing over time, actually makes them the sources of significant identify transformation. One feels the mutability of one’s identity more. Sometime hate this and it scares them so like the Minute Men at the US Mexico border they decide to enforce the border themselves. Others treat the feeling as a source of art and poetry and see it as a basis for shared humanity, like many migrant activists and artists at borders around the world.

- 7) *Does the border represent a device of counteraction in face to the excess of fluidity of the contemporary world?*

We are living at a time in geological history when there are more people and materials moving faster and wider than ever before. Elsewhere, I have called this the “Kinocene.” It’s not just people moving around, it’s also plants, animals, and minerals. The more things move uncontrollably, the stronger the possible desire to control it all. I’m not endorsing capitalist displacement and climate warming, but border building against humans and against climatic changes is one of the fastest growing global industries right now. The fact

that bordering practices increased dramatically in the last 30 years is a failing and impossible attempt to control human mobility. So, yes, borders are a way to waste money, hurt people, and try and stop what cannot be stopped without addressing the root issues of capitalism and fossil fuel use. Global bordering is a psychotic delusion, a defense mechanism against an increasingly uncontrollable world.

- 8) *Do you think that the border can have both a negative value (as an obstacle to human development and mobility) and a positive value (namely, as constructive and promoting)?*

Yes, there are many kinds of borders. They are everywhere doing all kinds of things. We just have to look in detail about which ones we are talking about. But we are always modulating all kinds of social and psychological circulations. It takes border to keep things metastable. But we should be very careful in all cases not to delude ourselves about these borders and how they really work.

- 9) *How do you believe that the border can perform several functions at the same time, such – for example- as that of limit and threshold?*

Borders are processes that can, like other matter, undergo phase changes. They are non-linear like decreasing the temperature of water. The number is linear, but at a certain point water crystallizes into ice and you can't drink anymore. Borders act as linear limits, but they all have their thresholds past which they fall apart or completely change the societies they modulate. The border between North and South Korea crossed a threshold into something extremely rigid and frozen. A single infraction could escalate a national war.

- 10) *You have studied and analyzed in depth different types of borders: the fence, the*

wall, the cell, and the checkpoint. Could you explain what they are, how do they differ from each other and what are the preeminent characteristics of their functioning?

Historically, fences were typically light weight materials used to gather things together in a central place. They do not require any centralized administration or division of labor. They were invented in the Neolithic but get used throughout history in all kinds of ways. Walls are more serious. They require brick-making technologies, larger numbers of people, and typically a degree of centralized planning to structure them. So they have a centrifugal kind of organization from the center directed out toward the periphery. They were invented in the ancient world and are linked to a center of power. Cells are smaller and more modular. They were invented in the Middle Ages for transforming individual bodies and forcing them into specific social relations with one another. They create “tensions” that hold people together and apart simultaneously. Checkpoints were a modern invention to deal with rapid changes in larger and more mobile populations. They can appear, move around and disappear, and typically assume a complex system of documentation and data collection. In this sense I call them “elastic” because of their relative flexibility compared to walls and cells.

- 11) *Net of the different technologies available, what is the difference between the idea of borders in the past and the idea of borders in the contemporary world?*

For every major period of Western history there are different ways of thinking about borders related to the fence, wall, cell, and checkpoint. Today we are experience all of these techniques mixing together in a kind of historical hybrid.

12) *Borders can be used for externally exclusion or for internally segregation. What is the difference according to you? Is there a different political strategy in relation to the Otherness?*

Yes. There is no fundamental difference. There are only different patterns of motion that can work in different places differently. But yes, “external” borders often, but not always, have more dramatic, spectacular, and violent features to them (as one of many other features).

13) *Given your very broad philosophical interests, do you believe that the border is something that belongs exclusively to the sphere of human experience or does it extend to natural processes in general?*

Borders are definitely at work across scales. *Theory of the Border* mainly focuses on human history in the West up to the present, but we could look at borders at every scale of reality. The patterns would be similar, at least as far as I have tried to show in my book *Theory of the Earth*, but the details would differ significantly.

14) *A border theory certainly has an explanatory and interpretative dimension on the present phenomena, however - I ask you - if a good theory of borders can offer elements of prediction, outcome and possible evolution of future scenarios.*

My kinetic theory of borders is meant to be largely historical and descriptive. I have not tried to make it a quantitative program, but there is a basis for one. If we looked at any border we would find that it is circulating and bifurcating flows into one or more of the four patterns above. We could look at the patterns a border makes and put them all together and get a pretty good sense that it will continue to

reproduce that knotwork of patterns. In other words, any “pattern” we could identify is like a habit that are likely to see in the future and could look for. So Theory of the Border could be a starting point for predicting the predominance of certain patterns.

15) *Are there general tenets of your theory of border that can be extended to other disciplinary fields? At the same time, what are the different perspectives and fields of study with which you consider it useful to dialogue in order to further develop the understanding of border processes?*

Yes, the philosophy behind my theory of borders I call “the philosophy of movement.” It was meant to be a framework for understanding patterns of mobility in the arts, sciences, politics, ontology, and nature. I have now written books on all these major topics using this framework. The conceptual framework was meant to dialogue with every other field of study and I have had marvellous conversations with scholars and artists across nearly every one so far. Since my next book project will be on the philosophy of consciousness, I hope I will have a chance to dialogue more with psychologists and neuroscientists than I have so far.

16) *What do you think are the key points of the border research agenda for the near future?*

In all likelihood, border studies in the future will focus on climate-related migration and intensifying border regimes that follow. This is absolutely key and needed. But it would also be nice to see border studies look at borders and climate prior to the 18th. It might give us some perspective on how to rethink the nature of contemporary border mixtures. It would be a welcome turn to see more researchers taking a less anthropocentric approach as well.

Again, there are so many kinds of borders out there, but border studies has focused a lot on humans. Given the coming interest in climate-related migration it's a great opportunity to study non-human borders as well.