

## Book reviews

# Diener, C. A., & Hagen, J. (ed.) (2024). *Invisible Borders in a Bordered World: Power, Mobility, and Belonging*. Routledge.

Teodor Gyelnik

Central European Service for Cross-border Initiatives

[teodor.gyelnik@cesci-net.eu](mailto:teodor.gyelnik@cesci-net.eu)

Routledge Publishing issued an interesting edited volume in 2024 that aims to investigate the phenomenon of invisible borders in a bordered world. The main research target of the book is to contextualise and to research the issue of borders through interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological perspectives. The book primarily understands borders as structures that mainly result from “*multifaceted human actions to create and differentiate places by separating the social, political, economic, cultural, or environmental characteristics of one geographic space from others.*” (Diener & Hagen, 2024, p. 3)

The structure of the book is divided into three main thematic sections. The first section looks at the invisible borders as political control; the second sees invisible borders which are established through socioeconomic processes and control mechanisms; while the third one describes the newly emerging invisible borders through technological development, digitisation and its invisible control structures.

The modern understanding of standard political maps interprets the world through distinct territorial units. These territorial units are usually referred to as states which have their own sovereignty, population, bordered territory, society, symbols and identity. During the era of modernity, the visual representation of borders has played a crucial role within the process of ‘imagination of communities’ (Anderson) and/or ‘nationalisation of the public’ (Balibar). Within this frame, the dividing line is more-or-less visible and palpable between ‘geo-bodies’, and those lines are embodied in various visual forms like, physical wall, border control or border closure equipment, thus explicitly marking the limits of different geographic areas. Nevertheless, the authors of the book try to go beyond the perception of borders as ‘passive divider of space’. These older notions of border lines are certain archaic forms of understanding; consequently, the authors of the book attempt to figure out a much more latent appearances, they aim to grasp a range of political, socio-economic and technological border changes that flow through the

capacity of the traditional framework of borders and conventional cartography. These invisible, implicit, hidden borders permeate our everyday life and they are located much closer to us as we usually might think.

Diener and Hagen (2024, p. 21) note that invisible borders perform political control at various modalities. States usually install invisible borders in order to achieve specific domestic policy goals, but a variety of other actors also support invisible borders in order to promote their specific political agenda. To be more specific, *“The invisible borders of internal bureaucracy and administration can be equally impactful. Voting districts, school districts, and a variety of other de jure delimitations of authority and responsibility are often difficult to detect across the landscape but profound in their effect on political representation, allocation of public funds, and opportunities for development. Even in cases where the borders are part of a legal regime and clearly visible on county and municipal maps, they can be so blurred or buried in bureaucracy as to function largely out of public view.”*

Ariel Otrube offers a feminist approach of the South Ossetian Administrative boundary line. Georgia and South Ossetia were parts of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Union inspired fierce nationalism towards each other. A powerful slogan emerged, namely ‘Georgia for the Georgians’. Society-wide nationalism fuelled the sense of deep difference

and distrust between the Georgians and other ethnic groups. The dramatic triggering moment was the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and since South Ossetia considers itself as an independent sovereign political entity from Georgia. As a result, the border between South Ossetia and Georgia has been extremely hard and fixed. The author attempts to offer a perspective of borders and bordering at bodily scales, namely how the body itself becomes an active and territorial agent within the bordering process.

Mehmet Altingoz writes about transboundary water management, resources and the geography of hydro-political tensions in the separatist regions. Separatist regions are usually equipped with extremely hard and strict borders which are much more limited and hardened than the ordinary border structures between other sovereign states with normal relations. Although, these separatist regions may be sites of unregulated, unresolved shared water management systems that can be risky for all the involved parties, especially for the local population. In the case of Abkhazia, there are two potential transboundary water issues. One issue involves the Enguri River and the cross-border power generation system, namely the Enguri Hydropower Plant and the Enguri Dam. The power plant is on the Abkhazian side, while the dam is on the Georgian side. Abkhazia manages the production of electricity and Georgia controls the dam and the flowing structure of the river.

The transboundary system is unsolved because both parties have full ownership claims over the overall hydropower system. Another transboundary water issue is the Psou River between Abkhazia and Russia. The relations are favourable between the political entities, there is a functional water cooperation and a continuous dialogue.

In the case of Kosovo, Gazivoda Lake in Mitrovica represents a significant transboundary water issue. The region is dominated by Serbs who remained loyal to Serbia even after the declaration of independence by Kosovo in 2008. This lake is highly important since it is the main source of water and electricity in Kosovo. The management of this transboundary system has been quite problematic since the 2008 events. In the case of Cyprus, the two sovereign entities share two major aquifers, namely the Center and Western Mesaoria Aquifer and the Kokkinochoria aquifer. The relations are more or less stabilised and managed, but the inter-party cooperation is rather poor and water is an extensively over-politicised topic.

However, the author presents also a good example that could be seen as a 'best practice' of the transboundary water management, namely the hyper-arid Atui Basin between Western Sahara and Mauritania. The Basin is managed by old Bedouin philosophy that offers an efficient and usable approach to the shared water resource. Western Sahara and Mauritania are both from the same

Bedouin tribe, thus mutually respecting the traditions and the customs. According to the Bedouin philosophy, water is sacred and all humans and animals have the right to drink water, hence any marketing and egoistic usage of water is clearly forbidden. In other words, the old Bedouin customs efficiently ensure the peaceful and cooperative management of the transboundary water system.

Special economic zones might usually appear as another significant example of invisible borders. End of the Cold War, fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, fall of the communist economic mode of governance and the global victory of capitalism led to a proclaimed 'end of history' and to a celebrated 'borderless world'. The neoliberal approach became the dominant economic model. It proposed deregulation and removal of barriers on a global scale, thus removing the economic barriers and the limiting effects of borders. Consequently, global neoliberal capitalism has generated uneven geographic development. As a result, there are regions whose profit is high, while there are regions which suffer neo-colonial trading frames, where the "*...colonizers today are multinational corporations*" (Dando, 2024, p. 200). This uneven geographical development causes uneven distribution of economic activity and opportunity, hence leading to invisible borders.

Moreover, the global dominance of the neoliberal economic approach led

to proliferation of economic actors, like multinational corporations, trade organisations (e.g. WTO) and free trade agreements. These newly emerging economic players become equipped with power and influence that may easily reach beyond the visible borders of nation states, thus decreasing the modernist concept of state sovereignty. Subsequently, the new economic rule, the 'invisible hand' of the market, the international and supranational economic organisations have remade the global constellation. On the other hand, they played a crucial role to remove the limiting effects of borders. On the other hand, they have inserted new forms of invisible borders of economic and social control. Diener and Hagen (2024, p. 106) aptly note this process in the following way, *"...rather than passive dividers of space, invisible borders of social control and their attendant practices and processes surreptitiously socialize people to the written and unwritten rules that define acceptable behavior within specific places. While borders operating in more formal, political settings remain conspicuous, borders in more informal socio-cultural settings are so intuitive as to be invisible in most everyday contexts."*

Claudia Wilipo offers a chapter that works with the issue of rejected asylum seekers and their experience with the local bordering practices of Switzerland. The author underlines that migration control appears as a local bordering process in the everyday life of illegalised inhabitants of migration camps in the Zurich canton. Camp as a space and the

asylum process themselves represent an invisible socioeconomic bordering process.

Collective of authors put an interesting chapter on the topic of losing ground, namely on indigenous territoriality and the 'núcleo agrario' in Mexico. The post-revolutionary Mexican indigenismo ideology openly disagreed and opposed the establishment of the indigenous minicipos because their establishment could be a powerful ground for an isolation of the indigenous ethnic groups instead of wide-scale integration within the nationality and with the requirements of the modern nation state. However, most of the indigenous communities do not express territoriality that goes beyond the community level in Mexico, hence a broader multi-community or regional territorial control is non-existent.

Village-scale identity is rather seen as a pro-indigenous with very strong community and territorial identity. Subsequently, Mexican indigenous territoriality has been based on the bounded structure of 'núcleo agrario' which is a functional territorial jurisdiction with the aim and ability to manage and to develop indigenous agricultural communities through a form of semi-autonomous governance that cooperates with state and municipal authorities.

Indigenous territory, 'núcleo agrario', is a communal land holding(s) of the rural space that was protected with the idea of inalienability, thus assuring communal

space for local development that was closed in front of marketisation and speculative tendencies. However, there are tendencies in Mexico to remove the indigenous protection and to apply marketisation logic into the communal land holdings. These socioeconomic changes transform the ‘núcleo agrario’ into private property holdings with serious threats to the local population. The authors of the chapter describe this process of land dispossession as a ‘property regime change’. This regime change may generate deep-penetrating social pressures on indigenous society on the one side, but also an environmental threat on the other side. This means that the majority of indigenous territories are under some sort of priority for the conservation of its biological resources; although, marketisation will deeply disrupt the biological and ecological frames, because the market logic principally prefers economic interests instead of biological and ecological interests.

The removal of inalienability of land and provisions of the ‘núcleos’ by the neoliberal reforms and the liberal marketisation may generate serious new invisible socioeconomic borders, as the authors (Herlihy et al. 2024, p. 168) underline it, *“the pressures of privatization and marketization will dispossess indigenous villagers of their historic núcleos lands. And finally, this will also cause related loss of indigenous cultural identities and practices closely tied to those lands, as well as bringing dire consequences on the forests and other healthy habitats within.”*

The final chapter of the socioeconomic invisible border is the issue of internal colonisation and the construction of pipelines in the United States of America. The chapter offers a critical media discourse analysis of the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipeline projects. These two pipelines are in process of construction in the Appalachia region, where the government aims to present the positive aspects, making benefit to the nation by the use of media messages. This means that there is a deep concern and conflict of interest over environmental issues and resources, thus the role of media coverage, media discourse and presentation appear as crucial factors. Nevertheless, the marketisation of resources and building of pipelines might generate serious intra-nation invisible borders, namely “American peoples and places will be pitted against each other, with local interests pitted against national interests, boundaries will be invoked, and we will need to continually reexamine what it means to be labeled a landscape of “low consequence” and the implications for that place and its people.” (Dando, 2024, p. 210)

Rapid technological, telecommunication, internet and digital development have been experienced for the last few decades. These developments have had an impact on nearly every aspect of our life. Digitisation has profoundly challenged the well-known fixed, visible national borders and their links to society and territory. Borders in classical terms are

no longer able to easily accommodate the digital and online challenges. Classical fixed and visible borders have become diffused, they have been relocated from the margins of the territory of a state into the direct spaces of everyday life, for example various types of firewalls and/or censorship policies implemented by states. As Gabriel Popescu writes (p. 254), there is an unprecedented technological reconfiguration of borders, “*Borders are buried deep inside binary codes running silently on biometric machines, microchips inserted into passports, and cloud-based databases where information is stored.*” The future of these border shifting conditions are not well known, but their intensification is almost a certain trend. Diener and Hagen write (2024, p. 218), “*Given the rapid pace of technological innovation and its capacity to alter extant realities, it seems safe to conclude that a brave new world of invisible borders of technological control has already emerged with profound but as yet uncertain implications for the human condition.*”

Our post-modern world experiences the emergence of a new power elite, namely cyber-libertarians, crypto-secessionists and/or crypto-anarchists. These new elite groups exist and act on the basis of shared ideology instead of shared geography/sovereignty, thus establishing the so called ‘encrypted geographies’, namely undermining the modern nation-state frame and promoting a hybrid form of space with the ability to exit itself from politics. These groups aim to redefine

the modern forms of citizenship, governance, nationhood and as Isabelle Simpson (2024) writes, they “*create alternative economic and governance structures and as a way to open up new techno-political frontiers beyond the reach of governments*” (p. 223).

They promote decentralised communities and governance systems with denial of conventional politics, which is marked as old “folk activism”. Subsequently, space becomes disconnected from society through cryptocurrencies, start-up societies, blockchains and decentralised autonomous organisations, thus producing the rhetoric of peer-to-peer decentralisation, where any user is free to join the network. However, this kind of society remaking erects new ideological and digital invisible borders. It substitutes the physical walls to digital walls in order to keep out anyone, unless they are high net-worth investors, as it was proven in Puerto Rico by the Puertopia initiative.

Cyberspace has profoundly blurred the conventional boundaries. In cyberspace, borders do not disappear, but rather they are transformed into new invisible limits. These new and invisible borders might include various forms, like internet censorship which is performed by many governments with the aim to control and restrict internet content and access. “*The border, in this case, may reside in a server, in government software, in internet service providers, on the computers of users, or, in the case of self-censorship, in the minds of users themselves.*” (Warf, 245)

The explosive growth of cell phones has created new smart frontiers in cyberspace, giving governments and corporations almost unlimited possibilities to collect data about users' preferences and behaviour. Moreover, everyday mobile devices perform unnoticed monitoring not only the location of the user, but they also collect very private information, like heartbeat, blood pressure, sleeping patterns, etc. Consequently, biometric borders are formed and the classical border patrol is complemented by software developers, engineers, system experts and designers. As Gabriel Popescu (2024, p. 263) puts it, *"The adoption of biometrics for identification management does not simply represent a mere technological upgrade from analog to digital borders. Rather, this is a process fraught with power given that technology is always politically and socially mediated."*

To sum up, the edited volume of Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, 'Invisible Borders in a Bordered World: Power, Mobility, and Belonging', offers a very interesting reading on those processes and realms that challenge the modernist and classical understanding of sovereign cartographic borders. Instead of clearly palpable and perceptible borders, the new invisible borders have been structured in implicit, hidden and covert mode. The edited volume aims to explain the origins of these border alterations through different prisms, like the political, socio-economic and technological. The book is primarily recommended for the academic community, students of political sciences, international relations, international law, border studies and is recommended for people who either meet (as citizens) and/or work with borders.