

ReviewEssay

Manlio Graziano, *What is a Border?* Stanford Briefs, 2018.

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Any object has primary and secondary functions. A glass, for example, is made to drink out of, but it can also be used as a paperweight, pencil holder, decoration or weapon. Borders are no exception. It is with this visual simile that Manlio Graziano begins his thought-provoking and timely book, *What is a Border?*, published in 2018 by Stanford Briefs. Graziano is a geopolitics scholar and teaches geopolitics of religion at the Sorbonne, the Geneva Institute of Geopolitical Studies and the La Sapienza University in Rome.

Discourses on borders have been rekindled in recent years by populist-induced fear and a sweeping dissatisfaction felt by many. President Trump's emphasis on the border wall between the US and Mexico, the Brexit vote, and renewed ferocity in conflicts between Pakistan and India, Turkey and the Kurds, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Russia and Ukraine all show that borders, whether concrete or abstract, are immensely relevant. In Graziano's words: The last decade has shown an "excessive passion for borders" (81). Graziano is not the first to understand and survey the relevance of borders. For example, *Ethnography at the Border* (2003), edited by Pablo Vila, focusses on different ethnographic aspects of the US-Mexico border. More recently, Thomas Nail's *Theory of the Border* (2016) offers a theoretical outline of the types and functions of borders as well as a philosophical history ("Historical Limology"), followed by an analysis of the US-Mexico border.¹ Graziano's roughly 100 pages, however, do not focus

solely on the US-Mexico border. Instead, the book successfully offers valuable and globally applicable tools: an understanding of what borders actually are, the changing history of their conceptualization, and their societal and political implications. By presenting thorough and yet concise examples, Graziano shows that borders are part of underlying structural problems and the danger their resurgence poses worldwide. In other words: Manlio Graziano's *What is a Border?* is a short and accessible explanation of and for current times.

Graziano's introduction, entitled "The Return of Borders," both provides an initial understanding of the nature of borders, and maps out the importance of his endeavor. Borders are political objects, both real and symbolic. A good example of this is Trump's planned wall at the US-Mexico border. On the one hand, parts of the wall are already built or under construction. The dispute over the budget led to a historic thirty-five-day government shutdown (the longest in US history). As such, the wall is a very concrete (political) object. On the other hand, Trump's insistence on building the wall, connected with his damnation of border crossings as a national emergency, constitutes a symbol onto which all who are dissatisfied can project the above-mentioned dissatisfaction. Graziano further characterizes borders as overlapping zones of conflict and institutions of the state. Interestingly, he calls borders "both obsolete and actual" (4). As Graziano continues to show, however, borders *should* be obsolete nowadays, but instead they are increasingly relevant. This, he explains, is due to the fact that borders provide "a kind of epiphany of sovereignty" (5) and he quotes Michel Foucault: "restoring the visibility of borders calms (a sometimes imagined) cultural anxiety in the face of the clamor and fury of the world" (5).

Graziano ends each chapter on a note of warning. The introduction, for example, cautions against protectionism: "The mistake [of protectionism] is 'historic,' because it repeats the pattern of the 1930s and its tragic, fatal consequences. Since the 1930s, world GDP has grown twenty-six-fold: today's historic mistake could be at least twenty-six times more catastrophic" (7).

Graziano follows up his introductory chapter and his first warning words with "A Short History of Borders," a chapter in which he offers a historical survey of the

concept's development. It is subdivided into an analysis of "Borders in Law" (9-10), "Nativism and History" (10-14), "The Invention of Borders" (14-17), "The Invention of the Nation" (17-21), "The Nationality Principle" (21-24), "A World Without Borders" (24-28), and lastly "The Return of Borders in a Post-Protectionist World" (28-32). This quick overview showcases Graziano's broad historical approach and illustrates his conciseness and the book's legibility. He never loses track of the intended audience: everyone. Graziano's book is not a product for a select few but can speak to anyone interested in the question posed by the book: what is a border?

In the first chapter, Graziano begins his survey on the history of borders with international law, but quickly concludes that, "international law [...] does not offer an effective conceptualization of borders or, most important, a better understanding of the contradictory role they are playing in our current historical moment of global shifts in power" (10). He then guides the reader through an evolution of borders throughout human history: the settling down from the stage of hunter-gatherer to the rise and fall of many empires (the Mesopotamian Empire of Akkad; the Shang, Zhou and Qin Empires in China; the Maurya Empire in India; the Roman Empire). But here, too, he argues that the "borders we are accustomed to [...] are 'a relatively recent innovation'" (14). Like most historians, he dates this innovation to 1648, the Congress of Westphalia. He argues that at one point in time, walls used to generate borders. But with the beginning of the seventeenth century, industrialization and the spread of capitalism throughout Europe, borders actually became the way of creating, protecting, and enclosing both a nation and its national market. As such, borders incorporated walls into their conceptualization as political object. Borders generated walls and created geographical delineations of nations.

Graziano argues in a rapid, but comprehensible fashion, that Woodrow Wilson's idea of the principle of nationality (also called principle of self-determination) cannot be an objective solution. For Wilson, a nation should be able to create its own independent government or state. He understands nation as a group of people with similar political ambitions. Graziano argues that this idea "is

still promoted as a unique recipe for peacekeeping” (23). At the same time, he acknowledges that the idea, “that political borders must coincide with cultural and linguistic ones has not produced better results” (22), going so far as naming it “one of the triggers of the two world wars” (22). Consistently, Graziano supports his argumentation with convincing facts and examples. Against Woodrow Wilson’s concept,² for example, of tracing borders along the outer limits occupied by a given nationality, he gives the example of the “natural border” on the Rhine between Germany and France (cf. 21) which has been claimed several times by France and Germany, respectively. Graziano does not mention, however, that after the First World War, Woodrow Wilson also promoted the League of Nations which was oriented towards a global and transnational struggle for peace and thus a cooperation across borders.

Graziano makes it clear that the dream of a world without borders, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was just that – a dream: “the European continent and its Eurasian margins added about 16,600 miles of political borders. [...] In sum, for every mile of dismantled borders (the Berlin Wall), 107 miles of new (official in 2007) borders have been built in Europe” (28-29). He argues that the dissolution of the bipolar world order (USA vs. Soviet Union) led to an explosion of nationalism (e.g. the Bosnian War) that had previously been bottled up for decades after the Second World War. But Graziano does not point fingers nor does he assign guilt or fault. Instead, he simply shows the deep roots of systemic problems for which borders are merely an easy, superficial, but ineffective reaction.

Graziano’s second chapter “The Power of Place” focuses on migration and the current social and political discourse, making the important point that “[b]orders are not the same for everyone” (36). Obviously, they are not the same for people with and for people without a passport. But all too often, borders are different for people with passports belonging to a specific nation or country, as well. Graziano argues for the existence of two types of boundaries for migrants: the visible, official borders that separate states from each other and the invisible, albeit no less effective, borders that internally segment states, regions, cities, and

neighborhoods” (34). The invisible ones, he writes, “are by far more numerous than visible ones” (34).

Graziano adds to the public discourse on refugees and migration by clarifying: many refugees either go from one ‘developing’ country to another ‘developing’ country or migrate within the country in which they were born (“three out of four migrants and two out of three refugees have not crossed national borders,” 36). Against such a factual background, the political reality can seem all the more absurd: Graziano points out that Turkey, for example, took in 2.5 million refugees, while Hungary took in 2693 (0,013% of all international refugees, cf. 35-36). One of the two countries built a wall, and it was not Turkey.

Connected to migration, but of general validity is his argument that where you live coincides with the borders you encounter. If you live in a slum at the outskirts of a city, you will encounter different borders than if you live in the best part of town. While that might seem obvious, even tautological, it is nonetheless true for the power of place. Furthermore, he argues that borders are fluid insofar as migrants can bring borders with them:

When you go from the Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg to that of Greenpoint, for example, there is no crossing of any border, yet you come into an area where everyone speaks Polish, news agents sell Polish newspapers exclusively, grocery stores have only Polish food, and the churches are all Catholic, obviously Polish. The border is something immigrants bring with them (40)

It is arguments like this one, however, that would need some further consideration or exploration because it still leaves questions: the Polish language, Polish newspaper, and so on, are all part of a specific culture. Does Graziano equate culture with border, at least in this example? Here, exceptionally, his precision is insufficient.

The third and last chapter of the book focuses on borders in progress and, more importantly, their problems. Again, his global approach and knowledge is visible: his analysis includes Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Russia, and China. Europe, for example, is “the continent with the highest ratio of internal borders to total surface” (58), “the one producing the most recent borders” (58), but its borders are part of a bigger problem. The Schengen Borders are different than the ones from the European Union which are, in turn, different from the Eurozone, which are different from the forty-seven countries of the European council, “not to mention the different borders of the European countries belonging to NATO” (59). In other words, Europe is full of institutional borders, many of them conflicting or overlapping.

His conclusion takes on the most premonitory tone while emphasizing that borders are ill-advised reactions instead of solutions and as such, cannot change things for the better. If other countries catch up to, for example, the US, but wages there have barely risen in the last decades while cost of living and many other things have, it feels like a loss to many. People then see an increase in migration as well as their “worsening conditions of life” (81) and assume causation instead of correlation. Graziano is, again, very visual in his simile: “Thinking that the problem can be resolved by strengthening borders is like thinking that one can lose weight by breaking the scale” (81).

All things considered, Graziano’s book is sorely needed. Not just his warnings but also his sound reasoning for the deception that borders represent, their ineffectiveness as well as their social and political implications, come at a time where it is essential to understand borders. *What is a Border?* gives a great general overview of what borders are. His style is comprehensible, informative, very timely, and grounded in sound argumentation and facts. Further, it is a book whose ideas are not just reserved for a specific border, but borders in general. Graziano’s perspective is a global one, not just one limited to Europe or the US. His final words are both an expression of hope and urgency on his part, and an implicit call to the audience: “The hope is that this book will do its small part” (88). It definitely can.

¹ Among many others who write on borders, interesting insight is also provided by Bonnie Honig in her 2001 work *Democracy and Foreigners* and by Étienne Balibar's writings, especially *We, the People of Europe?* (2014).

² Graziano acknowledges that Wilson was by far not the first to have this idea.