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Studying Borders from the Border: Reflections on the Concept of Borders as Meeting Points

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ABSTRACT

Can the border be considered an epistemological starting point for the analysis of border theories and processes? Whether we look at Rumford's 'Seeing like a border', Mezzadra and Neilson's 'Border as Method', or at Mignolo's 'Border thinking', the answer seems to be a positive one. Similar in their way of employing a different gaze to look *at* and *from* the border, yet radically divergent in their methods and outcomes, each of these approaches has indeed provided a unique perspective on borders. However, I argue, a more critical analysis of such approaches reveals how they tend to (1) reproduce those epistemological distinctions that have cut across border studies in the past thirty years and (2) selectively consider some aspects in the analysis of borders, while omitting or overlooking others. All of them appear therefore necessary to grasp the multiplicity of processes, networks, and conflicts that produce and shape – while being simultaneously produced and shaped by – borders. Drawing from, yet critical towards these works, the article will take the border itself as a starting point of investigation, in order to (1) empirically analyse the processes, forces, and conflicts unfolding across borders and (2) analytically interrogate the various epistemological approaches with their advantages and shortcomings. The paper argues that borders should be better thought of as 'meeting points', i.e., places of encounter, interaction/clash, and reassessment/redefinition of different theories and processes. Conceiving borders as such, the paper concludes, can provide a more comprehensive framework for the analysis of borders, capable of looking at them not just as passive places moulded by different forces and encapsulated through conventional theoretical approaches, but as active, complex, and variegated processes capable of generating social outcomes and changes.

The so-called "border studies" approach was so powerful that many of us, graduate students at U.S. universities, went to the U.S.-Mexico border with the "mission" of validating with ethnographic works the ideas of García Canclini, Anzaldúa, and Rosaldo ... However, as soon as I arrived in the region, it became obvious that the border ... was different from the way it was habitually portrayed by the most prestigious American border scholars. (Vila 2003, 608)

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Introduction

Can the border be considered an epistemological starting point for the analysis of border theories and processes? From the recent development in the study of borders, the answer seems to be a positive one. Whether we look at Rumford's 'Seeing like a border' (2014), Mezzadra and Neilson's 'Border as method' (2013), or at Mignolo's 'Border thinking' (2013), borders have been considered not merely as objects of research but as agents in their own right (Vollmer 2021). In grasping the multiplicity of processes, interactions, and conflicts occurring across borders, as well as the various ways borders themselves can generate, shape, and transform social processes, each of these approaches has indeed provided a unique perspective on borders, thus incredibly enriching the discipline. However, I argue, a more critical analysis of such approaches seems to highlight two interrelated shortcomings. First, in starting from different conceptual, analytical, and methodological standpoints, these approaches have ended up reproducing those epistemological distinctions that have cut across border studies in the past 30 years. Second, in focusing on the role of either structural or agential forces, struggles or encounters, power relations or social networks, these approaches have selectively considered some aspects in the analysis of borders while omitting or overlooking other likewise fundamental aspects, thus remaining necessarily partial and limited. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of their limitations, all of them appear necessary to grasp the multiplicity of processes, networks, and conflicts unfolding across – and simultaneously engendered by – borders.

The current article shares the main concern of the aforementioned approaches in the study of borders, that is, the necessity to stand at the border and adopt a different, more comprehensive perspective capable of grasping the multiplicity of nuances and connotations underlying each of them. However, rather than starting from a specific approach, this article takes the border itself as an epistemological starting point for a critical assessment of the different epistemological perspectives on borders and an empirical analysis of the multiple processes intersecting on – and departing from – the ground. In other words, it starts from the empirical analysis of borders to (1) analytically interrogate the three studies mentioned above and, more generally, the different epistemological approaches on borders underlying them, with their advantages and shortcomings and (2) critically investigate the processes, forces, and conflicts that produce and shape, while being simultaneously produced and shaped by, borders.

The present article argues that borders should be better thought of as 'meeting points', that is, places of encounter, interaction/clash, and reassessment/redefinition of different epistemological and empirical processes. The analysis of capitalist relations and their historical development is inescapable in understanding current social processes. Yet, grounded, ethnographic work

is likewise fundamental to grasping the uneven spatio-temporal configurations that such processes generate, and the multiple connections, interrelations, and conflicts occurring on the ground. Conceiving borders as 'meeting points', I argue, can provide scholars with a different and more comprehensive perspective, allowing them to look at borders not just as passive places moulded by different agents and encapsulated through conventional theoretical approaches but also as active, complex, and variegated forces capable of generating social outcomes and changes.

Before proceeding, however, some caveats are in order. First, the concept of 'borders as meeting points' aspires neither to construct an (other) overarching theory of borders (which would be necessarily incomplete or even undesirable, see Paasi 2011), nor to reduce the divergences between the different approaches to an epistemological flatness. Any endeavour to classify different epistemological approaches into a comprehensive theoretical framework could only run the risk of containerising such approaches and bordering the field of border studies itself. By critically assessing the multiplicity of border theories and processes from the grounded materiality of the border itself, the concept of 'borders as meeting points' acknowledges instead the uniqueness of every border theory and their essentiality in analysing border processes. In recognising the multiplicity of diversities and nuances within the different approaches, as well as the interrelations and conflicts between and across them, I hope therefore to overcome such issue, aware nevertheless that social reality is much more heterogeneous and variegated than any epistemological approach can possibly grasp.

Second, while this remains primarily a conceptual work, it draws inspiration from empirical fieldwork conducted in the Greek port city of Patras in 2015, which is discussed in the final section. Just as the sociologist Pablo Vila realised once he arrived at the border (2003), so I was confronted with the same issue: the epistemological baggage that I carried with me appeared inadequate to capture the multiplicity of processes intertwining across the port/border area of Patras. Structural and agential forces, global and local processes, social and individual choices frequently came together and reconfigured themselves at the border, generating a myriad of encounters, negotiations, and conflicts that made that particular place unique. The exploration of such processes converging at and departing from the border will therefore provide empirical flesh to the concept of 'borders as meeting points', allowing a reassessment of the different border theories and processes.

Converging at the Border

Since the 'processual turn' that started to question the deterministic vision of borders as natural and static 'lines in the sand', scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds have engaged in a passionate debate about what

borders are, where they are located, and how they regulate territories, mobilities, and identities (see, among others, Albert, Jacobson, and Lapid 2001; Johnson et al. 2011; Paasi 1991, 1996, 1998; Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2009, 2012; Vaughan-Williams 2009). In recent years, some border scholars have taken this debate even further by considering the border not simply as an object of study but as an epistemological starting point for the investigation of social theories and processes. To put it differently, borders are conceived not simply as passive places moulded by different processes and agents but as epistemological agents themselves, capable of generating and transforming social processes and consequently producing social outcomes and changes. To do so, adopting a different point of view is necessary: only by standing at and looking from the border is it possible to assess the relative importance of the different approaches on borders and to examine the variegated processes intersecting across – and simultaneously shaped by – borders themselves.

The endeavour to deploy the border as an epistemological starting point is not new. To my knowledge, three studies have gone in this direction, namely, Rumford's 'Seeing like a border', Mezzadra and Neilson's 'Border as method', and Mignolo's 'Border thinking'. Starting from the awareness that contemporary social processes cannot be grasped from a single point of view, the 'seeing like a border' approach adopts or, rather, constitutes a different way of looking at borders, attempting to capture both the proliferation of borders away from the territorial edges of nation states and the industrious process of 'borderwork' that a wide array of subjects – citizens and non-citizens alike – performs through everyday practices of connectivity and encounter (Cooper and Rumford 2011, 2013; Perkins and Rumford 2013; Rumford 2013). This epistemological shift in looking at borders allows us to grasp the vernacularised and cosmopolitan nature of borders, generated by the myriad relations and connections that border agents perform across them (Rumford 2012, 2014). Borderwork and connectivity emerge thus as crucial processes that occur at and shape borders: far from strengthening national security or dividing people and territories, borders connect a multiplicity of agents and dynamics while simultaneously projecting them towards a wider cosmopolitan dimension (Cooper and Rumford 2011; Perkins, Cooper, and Rumford 2014). Borders, in other words, are not merely 'markers of division but also … mechanisms of connection and encounter' (Cooper and Rumford 2013, 108) that link the local and the global.

Connections and encounters are also present in the 'border as method' approach (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), albeit very different ones. For Mezzadra and Neilson (2013), the border represents not merely an object of enquiry but an 'epistemological viewpoint' (ibid., 18) from which to capture the constant encounters and tensions between capital and labour at the global level. This approach offers a penetrating gaze into the historical process of capitalist appropriation of land and resources, which has expanded spatially

and culturally in the attempt to dominate and exploit the labour force globally. As this violent process displaced masses of people to integrate them in the capitalist labour market, it also engendered multiple forms of labour and struggles that needed to be governed through mechanisms of biopolitical control (92). The continuous reinforcement and proliferation of borders aimed therefore at regulating the mobility of labour and its differential inclusion within nation states, 'filtering, selecting, and channeling migratory movements – rather than simply excluding migrants and asylum seekers' (165). In its violent unfolding, however, this process also generated frictions and struggles, producing a subjectivity capable of implementing practices of resistance at and against borders (280).

Although emerging outside of the field of border studies, the 'border thinking' approach (Mignolo 2012, 2013; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006) presents several connections with the idea of starting from the border for the analysis of border theories and processes. Through the critical examination of the historical foundations of knowledge, this approach aims at delinking local histories from the grand hegemonic project of liberalism/modernity and its corollary of imperialism/colonialism. While the latter tends to erase epistemic differences through the suppression of the colonial body, 'border thinking' recognises the diversity of local histories and discloses the presence of the Other in the world, empowering the disempowered and the marginalised (Mignolo 2013; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). Far from being a universal and encompassing project, this approach rather aims at providing the Other with an alternative option that goes beyond the necessity of accepting their inferiority, assimilating into the liberal/modern project, or competing against it. The option of delinking allows the Other to refuse the imposition of Western domination, realise the fiction of their subordination, and open up alternative ways to reaffirm their biographical, geographical and historical presence in the world (Mignolo 2013). By bringing to the fore the lived experiences of colonised peoples, 'border thinking' challenges European liberal/modernist historiography and its epistemic privilege – typical of the social sciences and humanities – of observing the world through the lenses of Western paradigms, empowering colonial subjects and allowing them to write their own history (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006).

By taking the border as a central epistemological category, these approaches provide a different gaze to look at borders, grasping not simply the processes occurring across them but also the multiplicity of ways in which borders themselves form, inform, and transform social theories and practices. However, despite their attempts to adopt a more comprehensive point of view for the analysis of borders, these approaches seem, first, to reproduce the same epistemological distinctions that have marked the study of borders over the past 30 years, and, second, to take into consideration only certain aspects in their analyses, neglecting or omitting others. Therefore, I argue, all

of them seem necessary when standing from the border and yet insufficient, if taken singularly, to provide an overarching examination of the variegated processes shaping – and shaped by – borders.

Drawing from the social constructivist tradition, the 'seeing like a border' approach can effectively look at the border – whether it be spatio-temporally located (as in Strüver 2020; Tsoni 2016) or detached from grounded manifestations (as in Brambilla 2014; Cassidy, Yuval-Davis, and Wemyss 2018) – as a continuous and ever-changing local process with a potentially global dimension. The point of view that Rumford, Cooper, and Perkins adopt allows us to investigate the process of de- and re-bordering operated and performed by multiple actors at multiple levels (see Van Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer 2005), as well as the parallel, symbolic, and often imperceptible construction of social imaginaries that, in shaping identities and behaviours, contribute to legitimise and reinforce it (see Albert, Jacobson, and Lapid 2001; Paasi 1991, 1996). When 'seeing like a border', the performative and experiential work of formal institutions, informal agents, and even non-humans becomes more visible (see Agier 2016; Green 2010; Pallister-Wilkins 2018; Rumford 2013; Sundberg 2011). In this way, it discloses the dominant role of borders, which shape (our and other) id/entities and fulfil 'our' intimate desire for security and protection from a socially constructed 'other' (see Van Houtum, Kramsch, and Zierhofer 2005; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002), as well as the multiple strategies of connection, negotiation, and resilience carried out by border subjects (see Brambilla 2015; Brambilla et al. 2015).

In celebrating borders merely as connecting institutions, however, the 'seeing like a border' approach – and social constructivist approaches more generally – risk obliterating the peculiar history of each border and depoliticising the struggles of border agents. While every act that shapes borders can be considered political to some extent, 'emphasising the vernacularisation of borders brings the individual back into borders but not necessarily his [sic] subjectivity' (Amilhat-Szary and Giraut 2015, 6). In other words, the 'seeing like a border' approach tends to overlook those fractures and divergences that cut across borders, silencing the differences and the conflicts producing – and produced by – borders. Despite – or precisely because of – its 'irresistible vagueness' (cf. Krichker 2021), the 'seeing like a border' approach ends up corroborating those same class and power divisions that borders create, failing to deconstruct the 'socio-spatial fetishism that typically hides both power relations and the alternatives for challenging and transcending the processes of bordering, ordering and othering' (Paasi 2021, 18). Certainly, the rich empirical investigations to analyse the multifarious socio-spatial manifestations of bordering practices (see Mountz and Loyd 2014; Van Houtum 2010), their continuous reproduction through policies and discourses (Strüver 2020; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019), and the local stories of those who live, experience, cross, or meet across borders

(Agier 2016; Rumford 2013) remain necessary in view of a 'politics of hope' (Brambilla 2021). Yet, it is also to be hoped that the 'big stories' underlying the production and proliferation of borders will still be in sight.

Following political-economy approaches, the 'border as method' approach seems to overcome this shortcoming by conceiving the border precisely as a site of struggle between the capitalist regime of accumulation and dispossession, the governmental mechanisms of security that filter labour mobilities, and the migrant unruliness that constantly attempt to defy or escape them. This approach delves more deeply into the role of borders in managing the flows of capital, goods, and people to the advantage of capitalist accumulation (Cross 2013; Hanieh 2019). With the internationalisation of capital, borders have become indeed paramount not only to maintain and reinforce territorial divisions between nation states but also to regulate the mobility of workers at the global level (often through racialised and violent means, see Walia 2013), thus reproducing structural inequalities in a supposedly global market (Anderson 2012). Although considered constitutive of a totalising system of capitalist accumulation, borders are not necessarily understood as homogeneous and immutable institutions. Quite the contrary, just as capitalism has expanded unevenly throughout its history, generating multiple and differentiated patterns of development (Smith 2008), so have borders and border regions changed in space and time, developing local and unique meanings (Anderson and O'Dowd 1999; O'Dowd 2010).

In this respect, ethnographic research (often coupled with historical or intersectional analyses, see Ferguson and McNally 2014; Wright 2004) would allow us to uncover the particular configurations that borders acquire to (re) produce capitalist development, either through the creation, re-location, and disposal of unfree labour (Cross 2013; Pradella and Cillo 2021), the spatio-temporal regulation of mobilities across differentiated security regimes and hierarchies (Cunningham and Heyman 2004; Pijpers 2011), or even through the shaping of the everyday life of people crossing or living across borders (Andersson 2014; Heyman 1991). However, despite Mezzadra and Neilson's intention 'to refer also to the set of everyday practices by which migrants continually come to terms with the pervasive effects of the border' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 13), their analysis still seems disconnected from the materiality of everyday life, lacking an important empirical perspective. The absence of grounded analysis has two significant repercussions. First, although the authors correctly reject the methodological nationalism that entrap certain strands of border studies, the border that they outline emerges as an immaterial, intangible entity, uprooted from any territorial substance. Second, and consequently, while their analysis focuses on and emphasises the struggles between capital and (migrant) labour, it appears to overlook the multiple

strategies of negotiation, mediation, and evasion occurring at and across borders, which a more grounded analysis would have instead allowed to capture.

Firmly anchored in post-colonial grounds, the 'border thinking' approach conceives borders, on the one hand, as the result of 'the very constitution of the modern/colonial world' (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, 208), with its process of land expropriation, political control of colonial subjects, and erasure of colonial difference, and, on the other, as places with a deeply political, subjective, and cultural meaning, which disclose and connect 'people, languages, religions and knowledge on both sides' (ibid.). Whether spatio-temporally intangible or territorially grounded, the border is something that needs to be crossed, either materially or culturally, by experiencing it, living (in) it, and embracing its overlapping histories, hybrid identities, and multiple belongings (see Anzaldúa 1987; Nelson 2007). In this 'vague and undetermined place . . . in a constant state of transition' (Anzaldúa 1987, 3), people are continuously traversed by multiple, hybridised, and ever-changing identities (Trujillo 2009). Crossing the border, therefore, means disentangling oneself from the colonial/modern project that dominates subaltern subjects and divides them across class, gender, and race lines (Mignolo 2012; Quijano 2000; Vila 1997), as well as rediscovering the local and multiple histories and knowledges of subaltern subjects (Limón 1992; Pérez 1999; Shuler, Johnson, and Garza-Johnson 2014), aware that the latter can speak for themselves (Spivak 1993).

Still attentive to the importance of borders in perpetuating capitalist relations and structural inequalities, post-colonial approaches place subaltern subjects in the spotlight, reinstating their primary role as engines of social change that constantly open up new spaces of escape and resistance. However, they tend either to overlook the reproduction of class, race, and gender relations among and within border subjects themselves (see Vila 1999) or to romanticise their role in contesting bordering practices, disregarding the obstacles and failures that they often experience (Scheel 2013). With its deeper process of reflection from, and experience of, the border, the 'border thinking' approach certainly eschews such critiques, in an attempt to 're-writ[e] geographic frontiers, imperial/colonial subjectivities and territorial epistemologies' (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, 214). However, just like in Mezzadra and Neilson, the border is thought of as an epistemological, immaterial conception: despite wanting to disclose the multiplicity of local histories through a pluri-versal narrative, these local histories are only theoretically enunciated but not empirically analysed in their formation, development, and experience. The lack of grounded analysis, I argue, seems to involuntarily reproduce a dichotomy – presented in fact as an option – between a Western and an 'Other' epistemology, without really taking into consideration their multiple relationships, negotiations, and contradictions. Finally, precisely because of its

conception as an alternative 'option' to assimilate into, refuse, or challenge Western epistemology, 'border thinking' seems to overlook the conflicts occurring across and within borders.

Whether seeing like a border, taking the border as a method, or thinking from the border, every approach, with its peculiar point of view, seems necessary to explain some of the processes shaping and shaped by borders but not sufficient to capture the complicated, multifarious, and ever-changing role of borders in defining social theories and processes. Besides, I argue, despite looking at borders from different points of view, these approaches have adopted a specific epistemological perspective, inevitably ending up reproducing the same epistemological distinctions affecting border studies. As Novak argues in his analysis of the different approaches in border studies, when trying to answer ontological questions on borders and migration, social constructivist, political-economy, and post-colonial approaches seem to 'first, define the social forces, practices and relations that, more than others, define what a border is, and, second, find in borders and migration a spatial confirmation of such (predefined) ontology of the social' (Novak 2017, 849). In other words, while epistemological approaches inform our perspective on the study of borders, the multiplicity of social processes that traverse borders appears instead irreducible to single epistemological containers. Structural and agential forces, global and local processes, societal and individual choices frequently commingle and intertwine, producing encounters, negotiations, and conflicts that continuously shape – and are shaped by – borders.

How can we solve this epistemological dilemma? Novak suggests precisely going 'back to borders', that is, employing '[a]n analytical trajectory that starts from the spatial to investigate the social' (ibid., 858). To put it differently, rather than analysing borders through pre-defined ontological tools, going 'back to borders' aims at investigating the spatial manifestation of borders as a way to critically analyse those same ontologies of the social that often shape our understanding of spatial processes in the first place. This contribution goes precisely in this direction, arguing that only by standing at and looking from the border is it possible to assess the relative importance of the different epistemological approaches on borders, as well as to examine the variegated processes intersecting across borders. At the same time, by considering the border not simply as an object of study but also as an epistemological starting point of investigation in itself, it attempts to go one step further. In other words, the border cannot be simply conceived as a passive place moulded by different processes and agents, but also as 'an agent in its own right', to paraphrase Vollmer, capable of generating and transforming social processes and consequently producing social outcomes and changes. To do so, a different view – one that starts *from* the border – is necessary to investigate the role of borders in creating and shaping social theories and processes. By urging border scholars to investigate border processes from the border, the

concept of 'borders as meeting points' aims precisely to bridge the gap between these different epistemological approaches, looking at how all of them are necessary to understand borders as agents and to investigate their role in shaping social and spatial processes. The next section will precisely explore the concept of 'borders as meeting points' through a reference to the case study of Patras.

Studying Borders from the Border: the Meeting Point of Patras

In the port/border area of Patras, Greece's third most important city and harbour, events seem to keep happening in the same way day after day. On any given afternoon, ferryboats come and go from the port following their tight schedule; hundreds of lorries orderly disembark from their bellies while others queue in front of the security checks or rest inside the restricted area waiting to board; security officers perform their regular controls on incoming vehicles and passengers; police and port police agents patrol the area to guarantee the safety of port operations; few people jog or walk their dog away from the traffic of the nearby state road; groups of migrants squatting the abandoned industrial area opposite the port constantly try to run towards the parking lots and sneak under or inside those lorries that will bring them to other European countries.

The everyday circumstances occurring in the port/border area of Patras appear, at first sight, similar to those unfolding in similar locations across Europe, from the 'jungles' in Calais and Sangatte to the border settlements of Ventimiglia and Bihać. This is so in three respects. Under neoliberalism, first, borders epitomise key infrastructural nodes within the global supply chains, connecting loci of production and consumption at the worldwide level and facilitating the unbounded circulation of capital, goods, and passengers (Heyman 2004). Second, as the dismantlement of spatio-temporal barriers could not occur without the parallel securitisation of logistical hubs, borders have also become key sites of securitised border management, balancing between economic and security imperatives through a complex assemblage of laws, mechanisms, and procedures that regulate the different mobilities using, or tentatively doing so, logistical networks (Coleman 2005; Cowen 2014). Finally, borders are transformed by the unpredictability of migrant movements, which disrupt and defy the dominant spaces of capitalism and security, negotiating their temporary permanence and producing alternative places of refuge and transit.

The specific ways in which logistics, securitisation, and migration intertwine and overlap in Patras, as in any other place, cannot be analysed in isolation from each other, nor can they be assumed *a priori*. The particular configuration of the port/border area of Patras appears indeed to be the unique result of the complex interactions among these variegated dynamics through

history and across space, so much so that adopting a single epistemological approach would necessarily fail to capture such a multifarious and hetero-geneous reality. Staring at the multiplicity of processes unfolding across the port/border area of Patras, one is therefore led to wonder how can one capture, understand, and elaborate upon these dynamics traversing and transformed by borders? How can one, in other words, look at the border not simply as a place of convergence of such processes but also as a starting point of other, reno-vated processes?

Looking at the port/border area of Patras through the 'seeing like a border' lens, for example, allows us to explore the multiplicity of intertwining cross-border processes and dynamics that originated further away in space and back in time, tracing imperceptible connections with other cities, events, and people at different levels (Cooper and Rumford 2011; Perkins, Cooper, and Rumford 2014). An invisible thread connects several places and times before appearing clearly in Patras: the heart of the distribution and logistics companies linking Greece with the rest of Europe; the European ministerial offices and national parliamentary assemblies where migration policies have been ideated, dis-cussed, and ratified; the USA where the security dispositions for port facilities have been initially approved and later adopted worldwide; the remote villages of Afghanistan and Sudan where the decision to migrate has taken place. As these processes intersect in the port/border area of Patras, they acquire their vivid materiality, producing their spatio-temporal significance, negotiating their presence, and reshaping their relations on the ground. The unfolding of such processes across the port/border of Patras, with their interconnections and contradictions, eventually reverberates to the global and European levels. From Patras, other threads depart imperceptibly, reaching the Italian ports of entry where other mechanisms of security are deployed to spot the potential presence of migrants, the extensive road network that will guide lorries through Italy and the rest of Europe, and the multiplicity of destinations where migrant journeys abruptly halt, temporarily pause, or successfully terminate.

When 'seeing like a border', not only does the border become a place of connectivity through the relentless work of countless agents, but it also shapes such connections and relations between these agents in the everyday life. Despite the border, or through the border, people are connected cultu-rally and socially: the popular expression 'una faccia, una razza' ('one face, one race', similar also in Greek), which Greek informants often say when meeting the Italian researcher, epitomises the cultural bonds that have historically tied peoples across the Mediterranean Sea. The border also connects migrant groups in the liminal space of the factories, not only between themselves through practices of conviviality, solidarity, and mutual aid that cut across ethnic or religious differences but also with friends and families in their countries of origin or disseminated all over Europe.

Connections (and conflicts) also develop between migrants and locals in an attempt to reduce distances through forms of humanitarian assistance and solidarity or, on the contrary, to contest the presence of migrants through borderwork activities. 'Polis Ealo' (The fallen city), the anti-migrant association established by local citizens in 2007 with the subtle support of local institutions (Kalaitzidou 2013), operated a re-bordering of the urban space, denouncing the perceived lack of security and order within the city so as to justify the necessity of cleansing interventions against the migrant camp.

While the 'seeing like a border' lens captures the multiplicity of connections developing at and across borders, the 'border as method' approach provides such connections with historical significance and a more structured framework. Developed as a trade hub for the export of raisins in the nineteenth century and as a 'gate to the West' for the emigration of thousands of Greeks towards the New World over the twentieth century, the port of Patras has acquired increasing importance in the Adriatic corridor since the 1960s, with the emergence of the first ferry lines to and from Italy. With the deepening and widening of the European common market, the port was included in the Trans-European Network for Transport, both for its international relevance and its potential contribution to the development of the intermodal logistical infrastructure surrounding it. However, Smith reminds us (2008, 122), the tendencies towards homogenisation and differentiation 'emanate side by side in the belly of capitalism', generating uneven patterns of spatial development. In its attempt to accelerate space-time connections between production and consumption sites, capital pushed for the expansion of the port and the improvement of the arterial connections surrounding it, but a series of other geopolitical and infrastructural developments opened new traffic routes in northern Greece and along the Balkans, eventually reducing transit traffic through the port of Patras and downsizing its importance within the Adriatic port system.

Since ancient times, the Adriatic Sea has represented a remarkable resource, contributing to the economic development of both the city and the surrounding region. With the reconfiguration of the European common market, which envisaged the abolition of internal border controls and the strengthening of external ones, that same sea turned Patras into a border post, hindering or delaying the movement of undesired people. The port/border area itself, with its assemblage of standardised procedures, securitised measures, and protected routes that migrants constantly attempt to disrupt through their 'practices of spatial disobedience' (Tazzioli 2017), has become not simply a place of struggle between capital and labour but a pivotal device that regulates the spatio-temporal mobility of migrants across Europe according to labour market needs. While those migrants that manage to cross are integrated in the labour market of other countries in a position of subordination (see Mezzadra and

Neilson 2012), those stuck in Patras often end up enlarging the ranks of exploitable workforce (and its parallel reserve army) through informal involvement in petty jobs or in the agricultural sector.

The border, however, is not simply a line traversed by multiple cosmopolitan connections nor a site of struggle between capital and labour. It is also a place that is differentially experienced, lived, and crossed every day, both materially and culturally. Across the border, power relations are certainly more visible and violent but never immutable nor invincible, and in fact continuously challenged and contested. While capital tends to absorb 'the daily aspirations, desires, and dreams of subaltern populations' (Kipfer 2008, 200), there is something that always challenges, resists, or escapes subordination. The 'border thinking' approach allows us to capture the 'local histories' that counteract the hegemonic liberal/modern project, giving voice and visibility to the subaltern. This can be done not only at the border between developing and developed countries but also within them, as global and local histories acquire multiple, ever-changing configurations. As capitalism has developed in an uneven and contested manner, the boundaries between centre and periphery and between colonial powers and colonised subjects have increasingly blurred and continuously shifted: although Greece is geographically located in the Global North, it has a politically and economically marginal position within the EU, exemplified by its participation in the infamous club of the so-called – 'in a typical colonial way' (Hadjimichalis 2011, 255) – PIGS countries.

The border, however, is not simply a place of convergence of different histories but also a place that, precisely as a result of this convergence, shapes individual and collective processes of identity formation and belonging, continuously transforming, contesting, and subverting the socio-political order. As Anzaldùa beautifully puts it (1987, 3), the border is '*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds', simultaneously losing its own lifeblood and merging with another one to form a new, continuously changing border culture. For some citizens, the border – which materialises in the fence that divides the port area from the city, giving the latter the infamous reputation of a 'seaside city without the sea' – represents a material impediment that hinders the possibility of enjoying the coastal area and that needs to be torn down even with exemplary actions. In January 2012, for instance, the then mayor and deputy mayor of Patras were temporarily arrested for having removed parts of the security fences around the old port gates, in opposition to the bureaucratic dispositions that impeded the municipality to take full possession of the area. For others, the border is a place to explore and live in, a place where to walk in the evening, jog away from the traffic, or get a drink in one of those fancy cafes along the marina. For migrants, however, the border is a more material, concrete experience that, on the one hand, prompts them to develop 'a world of knowledge, of information,

of tricks for survival, of mutual care, of social relations, of services exchange, of solidarity and sociability' (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 190) but, on the other, needs to be crossed by any means necessary to finally achieve their long-standing dream of building a new life somewhere else. The crossing itself becomes not only an aspiration that will eventually come true but also an action that discloses, challenges, and resists the dominant power relations that configure the border, opening up new trajectories of refusal and escape.

Exploring the Concept of 'Borders as Meeting Points'

At the port/border area of Patras, the various theoretical and empirical threads reconnect and intertwine. Just as the variegated spatio-temporal processes continuously converge and interact in the materiality of the everyday only to depart again and give life to new configurations, so the different epistemological approaches come into being at the border and are critically reassessed vis-à-vis the practical manifestations and interrelations that these processes bring forth. It is at the border, therefore, that the researcher should stand to capture the multiplicity of structural and agential processes as they converge and negotiate their presence, as well as to evaluate the various border theories and their practical translation on the ground. It is at the border that a different, renovated gaze is necessary not only to grasp the unfolding of such processes with their ever-changing interrelations, contradictions, and conflicts but also to assess the different epistemological approaches that attempt to capture them in a theoretical frame.

The concept of 'borders as meeting points' aims precisely to do that. Just like the other approaches, this concept conceives the border as a privileged starting point for the theoretical and empirical analysis of borders themselves. From a theoretical perspective, standing at the border allows border scholars to test, revise, or question border epistemologies through the careful investigation of the grounded processes intersecting across borders. From the port/border area of Patras, the different epistemological approaches seem necessary to grasp the complexity of processes intertwining across borders, as well as the multiplicity of ways through which borders themselves transform, negotiate, or even subvert these processes. Yet, taken singularly, they are not sufficient to achieve that, thus tending to reproduce the same epistemological divisions cutting across border studies. The 'border as method' approach, for example, can provide a critical analysis of the specific historical, political, and economic conditions that render each border unique, grasping the dynamic and intertwining spatio-temporal processes that produce and configure – and are simultaneously produced and configured by – borders. However, although this approach contemplates the role of migrants' struggles in reshaping the border, the lack of grounded analysis renders these struggles intangible, disconnected from the vivid and multifarious materiality of everyday life.

Similarly, the 'border thinking' approach envisages the emergence of local histories as a counterbalance for the hegemonic narrative of coloniality/modernity, but these histories are only theoretically enunciated and never empirically revealed. The 'seeing like a border' approach provides a more detailed examination of how border agents experience, negotiate, contest, or even produce bordering practices on the ground. Such an examination, however, tends to focus on the mere everyday experiences of border agents, often decontextualised from the structural framework within which they occur.

Despite their epistemological differences, all these approaches seem therefore fundamental to understanding borders and capturing the variegated processes crisscrossing them. The concept of 'borders as meeting points' builds precisely upon these epistemological differences and attempts to reconnect them through empirical research, overcoming some of their shortcomings in the analysis of borders. From an empirical perspective, the concept of 'borders as meeting points' claims the importance of empirical research to grasp and analyse the manifold, complex, and variegated processes unfolding at and across borders. The analysis of structural processes – as well as their intertwining connections with imperial and colonial relations of domination, as the 'border thinking' approach would put it – is indeed paramount to investigating both the global political-economic framework within which borders unfold and the peculiar historical developments that have given borders their specifically uneven configurations. While the proliferation of borders modifies the spatio-temporal dynamics of mobility, it also deeply affects the everyday life of border agents and migrants, in particular, who often become the target of criminalised, securitised, and racialised measures (see Jones and Johnson 2014; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2017). The study of borders, therefore, should necessarily include an in-depth analysis of border agents' multifarious histories, identities, and ambitions on the ground, as well as of their continuous connections, interactions, and struggles with the surrounding environment. From the border, it emerges more clearly how the same place can simultaneously include cosmopolitan connections, capitalist exploitation, and multiple belongings; it can involve encounters, struggles, and lived experiences; it can shape, and concurrently be shaped by, global, national, local, and individual dynamics. Only by standing *at*, and looking *from* the border, I have argued, is it possible to capture these processes and to assess the theories analysing them.

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