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> Some Principles of Frontier Geography

Conferencia del 11 de septiembre, en el marco de los Diálogos del Forum de las Culturas 2004. Barcelona | Por Eyal Weizman



Photo: Milutin Labudovic for Shalom Achshav, 2002

If borders are nothing but abstract lines denoting the edges of jurisdictions, barriers make them concrete. With the complete mechanization of warfare in the twentieth century, and the relatively symmetrical power maintained across borders between similarly armed national and allied armies, defense was conceptualized no longer as a local practice, such as city walls and country forts, but as immense linear constructions amassed along the edges of the national space. Borders were initially fortified to control the movement of armies, but later used to regulate the movement of goods, labor, information, wealth, and diseases into the body of the state.

The trenches of the First World War were barriers on a continental scale, stretched along hundreds of kilometers. They proved that shovels and barbed wires could become strategic weapons capable of indefinitely paralyzing the movement of two opposing coalition armies. The post-WWI strategic doctrine that relied heavily on the principles of linear defense solidified into three major fortification systems – two were built along the volatile German-French border. The German *West Wall* was designed to hold off the French Army while the Wehrmacht was to occupy territories on the east. Parallel to it from the west was laid the French *Maginot Line*, designed to delay the Wehrmacht's westward *Blitzkrieg* while French reserves are drafted, and lastly the German *Atlantic Wall*, designed to defeat an Allied invasion of the continent along the Atlantic coast. With the increase in the ability of armies for rapid maneuver, concentration of forces, and air-ground integration, these lines were easily by-passed or pierced through. Their surprise collapse turned them into giant archaeological monuments to the absurdity of standing still in battle, and to the belief in eternal territorial control. The last of the fortified lines to have gone the path of a fantasy of eternal defense, and then to collapse, was the Israeli *Bar-Lev Line*, built on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. The 1973 Arab Israeli War – the last symmetrical battle to be fought between state armies of relatively equal force – saw the collapse of this last fortified line of defense. With the later “peaceful” collapse of the Iron Curtain, and the end of the symmetrical military balance, another political space – the frontier – and another type of military engagement – the low intensity non-symmetrical conflict between regular armies and quasi-military guerrilla organizations in dense civilian environments has gradually staged its return.

The frontier is the antithetical political space to that defined by the fortified lines of borders. Against the geographical

symmetry of static places, and the balance across sovereign lines, the frontier is a space of flow – it is a military and political pattern of elastic and shifting geography, a boundless border zone that could never be represented by drawing static lines.

In the following pages some geographical principles – parallels between varieties of historical frontiers – will be briefly outlined. Historical frontiers are different in many respects but the similar patterns they exhibit may help explain the consequences and dangers of the open frontiers of contemporary geopolitics.

Despite the common perception, the frontier did not originate with the expansion of the neo-Europes of America, Australia, or Africa. The margins of the ancient Roman and Chinese Empires, as well as those of the Aztecs and the Inca, were deep, shifting, and little-defined domains of cross-culture interaction and brutal battles with people defined since Roman times as “barbarians.” Barbarians were not an amalgamation of primitive warriors, as common language wants us to believe, but often highly organized and cultured, settler, or semi-nomadic nations. Zones of imperial control expanded not only through the conquest, occupation, and annihilation of the “barbarians,” but as well through their “acculturation” under a single language, culture, and religion, that is, through the flattening of differences and the melting of their “foreign” cultures into the social and economic pots of empires. [\[i\]](#) But the frontier is never only a single-track process of expansion. It retreats when the strength of the empire declines. In Rome of the fourth and fifth centuries, the by-then “barbarized” imperial army, almost completely manned by mercenaries, started to lose battles to more highly motivated, better organized, largely “Romanized” barbarians. [\[ii\]](#) On both sides of the battle lines were people not very different. In various periods throughout history and indeed still at present some of the (domesticated) colonized collaborate with the forces suppressing their own people.

In both its advance or retreat, frontier zones are at the edges of waves pushing towards (each period's) fantasies of richness and opportunities, or, in modern terms, being pulled by utopian visions of ideological fulfillment whose eccentricity often found no place at the center (think of the occult traditions of Templar knights developed during the Crusades, the Amish in America, and the contemporary mystical rituals, often involving the use of drugs, of some of the “youth of the hills” in today's West Bank outposts [\[iii\]](#)).

The pattern of the frontier's geographical expansion is highly irregular. It shifts with changing climate, geology, and technological possibilities: pouring wide across pastoral steppe grasslands in an attempt to grab and fence out large fields; following the narrow and splintering arteries of geological strata; tracing ridges of metal and mineral concentrations above ground in workers camps, towns, and cities; or occupying geographical “islands” above isolated fields of energy resources. Often the pattern of inhabitation across the frontier draws a direct diagram not only of the balance of power between “empire” and “barbarians,” but the economical and technological capacity and the social organization of the “empire” itself.

Territorial pockets of control are thus in constant expansion or contraction, temporary lines of engagements and confrontations, marked by local makeshift boundaries and field defenses, are not limited to the edges of the imperial space but exist throughout its territorial body, describing the momentary balance of economical efficiency and military might. If sovereign borders are linear and fixed – the frontier is a deep, fragmented and elastic space in which clear distinctions between an “inside” and “outside” of a political system cannot be easily marked. The splintered geography folds inwards from the edge of the territory to empire's very interior. Like in a fractal arrangement, frontier conditions can be found to various degrees, wherever one looks at an empire. The “barbarians” are never organized behind fixed lines, but are already deeply inside. The border is everywhere, around every public and private property and infrastructure, splintered into a variety of local or regional fortification and security apparatuses, that are exemplified in today's road-blocks, check-points, fences, walls, CCTV systems, safety zones, mine fields, and killing zones.

The military geometry of the frontier relies, in all cases, on an elaborate interaction between points and lines. A series of relatively autonomous forts, scattered across the periphery, provides an intricate matrix of control over the whole terrain. Strongholds are often military colonies inhabited by civilianized veteran/soldiers (like Roman legionaries, or medieval knights) who are given land rights in return for fulfilling the task of frontier management and defense. These isolated settler/forts are equipped to suppress small disturbances, and located so as to be able to act as bridgeheads from which larger concentrated action into “barbarian” territory could be assembled. An interwoven and expanding network of communication and transportation lines is laid out to connect between the fortified points themselves and the empire's centers. The lines of communication and transportation are the wedges that open an alien terrain for further colonization, enabling larger populations to migrate and populate the settlement-points. The paths of the communication lines often

double up as effective barriers that honeycomb local populations into isolated enclaves of limited habitat.

The use of rivers is indicative of the difference between frontier and border geographies. For states, rivers (the Oder/Neisse between Germany and Poland, the Amur/Heilong Jiang between Russia and China, the Jordan between Israel, the occupied West Bank and the Kingdom of Jordan [\[iv\]](#)) are perfect borders marking the edge of territories, while in frontier conditions, rivers such as the Rhine and Danube for the Roman empire, the Chang Jiang for the Chinese empire, or the Mississippi river for the American frontier are but dynamic transportation, communication, and patrol networks running through the body of the terrain, lined from the banks by commercial/military strongholds.

The points and the lines are interdependent. The distribution of settlement-points across the frontier calls for a complex set of lines to connect them, while the safety of movement along the lines depends on the strong-points placed to protect them. As such the frontier resembles a dynamic battlefield played out in slow motion. It regularly shifts from offensive expansion – seeking the temporary occupation of new strategic points and securing the lines of supply to them – to defensive organization designed to protect the territorial gains from counter-offensives.

The forward frontier post (the legionary Roman fortresses, the Chinese steppe-forts, the crusaders' castles, the fortified peripheral settlements of the Conquistadors, or the suburban settlers' outposts on the West Bank) and the communication lines (the paved roads of the Roman empire, the mountain passes of the crusaders, the railway and the telegraph of the American West, and the bypass highways of the West Bank) serving for occupation defense and economic production, are instruments merging military and civilian architecture.

In his 1893 lecture, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," [\[v\]](#) the historian Frederick J. Turner announced the closing of the American frontier – complete interior colonization and domestication of North America coast to coast – and claimed that American democracy would not develop the way it had so far without incorporating into the national character some of the rough and ragged characteristics of frontier individuality and the values of "personal freedom." The frontier was seen as a liberating experience from the stifling European culture and the urbanized east coast. "What the Mediterranean Sea was to the Greeks, breaking the bonds of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities, that, and more, the ever retreating frontier has been to the United States," he claimed. [\[vi\]](#) The qualities of liberty and autonomy, as well as those of intolerance to law, order, and all things urbane, were typical of attitudes that developed in isolated frontier forts and settlements. On these characteristics, in a later echo Negri and Hardt claimed that "the open space of the frontier became the conceptual terrain of republican democracy." [\[vii\]](#)

There were other frontier myths and characteristics. From the refugees of the seventeenth century religious wars who left Europe to build their utopias in the new world, through to nineteenth-century survivors of plagues, pogroms, and famines, to the twentieth-century survivors of totalitarianism (to the twenty-first-century victims of terror?) – the people of the modern frontiers nourish myths of regeneration and triumph to contrast with histories and narratives of victimization and persecution. [\[viii\]](#) Recurring frontier myths tell of the fragile "immigrant" hardened into a "native," transgressing the limit between civilization and the wilderness, combating barbaric forces, gaining his right to settlement in the destruction of local "evil" forces, and finally becoming something of the "natives" just destroyed. Examples for this phenomenon are common and varied: the American pioneer admiration of the very nobility and unspoiled "savageness" of the native American nations he had helped destroy, his wearing of furs and pretences for scouting and camouflage; the common images of the Englishman wearing local costumes turning into a "native" hero; the Israeli outpost settler discontent with and rejection of the suburban culture of his parents and retreating into pastoral cana'aisation that is simultaneously both Arab-inspired and fiercely anti-Arab in sentiment... etc.

The brutality necessary for the pacification and domestication of the frontier cannot be accommodated within the legal frame of the modern state. Frontier wars are not won before the enemy is either annihilated or domesticated to become an imperfect mimicked clone of his colonizer. [\[ix\]](#) No truces are permanent and no stable lines can ever be agreed upon across the fragmented geographies, until unconditional victory has been reached.

When criticized for its brutality, an expansionist power may claim it lacked effective mechanisms to enforce its own laws on the periphery of its territory, or claim that brutal and illegal actions carried out by its agents are grave exceptions that do not reflect on the rule; but often enough, it profits, in psychological effect, territorial control and otherwise, from the brutal and illegal actions carried out through "local initiatives" of armed settlers or rough soldiers, without having to own responsibility for their actions. It excuses what effectively is the rule as an exception, and the exception as the rule. It is

common enough for governments to create the atmosphere that allows certain crimes to take place. It was therefore sufficient, according to the Israeli Historian Benny Morris, [x] that David Ben Gurion makes his wish for expulsion of the Palestinians felt by IDF officers in 1947-1948, for actions to be carried out full swing. The frontier thus only seems to degenerate into complete lawlessness, but this form of chaos is often promoted and protected from the center. The surrender of authority has its price, however: the political initiative in states that have open frontiers shifts from the center to the periphery. The inhabitants of the frontier can thus exercise strong political leverage over mainland politics.

The perpetuation of violence is a necessary condition for pacifying the frontier. Provocation produces counter-violence and the very justification for the further suspension of law. The imposed martial law largely neglects individual rights and reflects nothing much beyond the present strategic need of an occupier. A legal paradox is thus created: in reaction to “disturbances,” states may suspend both international and national laws, act in breach of international convention, without international mandate (holding their “enemies” in artificially created enclaves that enable the military to act outside of the state’s own legal framework) – in general, operating in a complete lawless domain, while flagrantly criminalizing all acts of resistance to its own actions. [xi] This paradox may paraphrase some of the ideas of Giorgio Agamben. [xii] In his European imagination, and following Hanna Arendt, Agamben saw the spaces of legal exception exemplified in the concentration camps of totalitarianism. But frontiers offer a variety of zones of legal exceptions where crime and murder may be possible. The Native American reservations were sites of genocidal wars in the late nineteenth century; the South African Bantustans were to exclude a whole race from citizenship; the Gaza Strip is a walled-off space where selective death can be administered without legal jurisprudence by military units that compress the legal system (incrimination, arrest, trial, appeal, execution) into split seconds. [xiii]

Excessive violence is the rule, brutality exceeds the limits acceptable at the center, crimes are often unrecorded, soldiers and settlers kill without legal jurisprudence. As the civilian and military domains get blurred, frontier violence is never confined to organized armies or to guerrilla fighters. The struggle redefines every act of living, settling, extracting, harvesting, or trading as violence itself. The settler of a frontier zone is a militarized and often armed civilian; military action is often carried out in the midst of and against civilian population, resistance to it is carried out or assisted by entire populations.

The fragmented legal geography of the frontier is positioned outside the very condition of modernity and progress that brought it about. The frontier creates thus a shifting legal geography of exception, or using Agamben’s words, “zones of indistinction” [xiv] whose edges are elastic, shifting, and incoherent. According to Agamben the definition of the temporary is integral to the concept of the “state of emergency,” [xv] as this state is defined and justified as an exception limited by time. The temporary state of emergency and/or the temporary application of martial law, thus allow the frontier to maintain a level of lawless brutality that would, and could not be tolerated were the situation considered permanent. [xvi] The situation will remain temporary as long as it is essential for victory to be achieved, and the frontier to be completely domesticated – thus and only then the “closed” frontier could be imbued with the normal laws of the state. Frontier violence is thus termed as “pacification” (nineteenth and twentieth century) or “peace keeping” (twentieth and twentieth-first century) – a temporary instability in preparation for the “eternal stability” to come. In fact the geography of the frontier is often so fragmented that legal distinctions can no longer effectively be territorially based, law can not be contained by territorial envelopes, because these envelopes undergo constant transformation. Legal distinction is therefore effectively made between persons on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality, using categories of citizens, part-citizens, subjects, enemies, or aliens.

Not only does the legal exception of the frontier refer to violence, but often it refers to ownership of resources. These resources are often land, but may include minerals, metals, or energy resources. Land-registry projects, such as the ones enacted by virtually all colonial empires that operated in Africa, America, or Australia in the nineteenth century, do not recognize the full right of “natives” over lands in their possession in the same way as they recognize the ownership of the colonizers. The native and nomadic tribes are seen as parts of the natural landscape of trees and rocks, and their habitat, defined as *terra nullius*, could be handed to the imperial state or the crown. If rights are granted, such as in reservations, they are often do not extend vertically to include the natural resources below the surface. This principle allows Israel not only to seize almost half of all land reserves in the West Bank, but to control the water of the mountain aquifer under it, and the air over it.

Negri and Hardt implied that the current aggressive quest for Western expansion is but a further extension of the historical principle of the frontier. [xvii] As if the Pacific coasts were no effective limit, the centrifugal forces of capitalism are yet to

unleash another open-ended process of dynamic expansion into frontiers rich with natural resources and anger. The territorial architecture of the "war on terror" with its militarized flows has placed the imaginary space of the frontier in the forefront of global consciousness, and gradually extended its legal, social, and military geography across a new geopolitical construction site. Indeed the militarization of the global economical and legal infrastructure laid out during the 1990s turned economic enclaves into outposts and trade channels into temporary alliances and militarized trajectories. The world has become a deep zone across whose depth the Western Empire seeks its "barbarians" in an ongoing and brutal frontier war. The frontier ceased to be limited to a particular domain of the globe but gradually crawled to encapsulate its whole. The principle being that as long as there is an open frontier, the whole of the networked space would display frontier-like characteristics. Thus the new global geography of fragments, micro-conflicts, newly erected barriers and fortifications, exists everywhere in a constant state of territorial ambivalence, prone to the inconsistent behavior and self-destructive impulses that define a new global "borderline disorder." [xviii]

Christian Salmon recently described the geography of borders and barriers in the Israeli occupied territories in this way:

The border shifts like a swarm of locusts in the wake of another suicide attack, like the onset of a sudden storm. It might arrive at your doorstep like a delivery in the night, as quickly as the tanks can roll in; or it may slip in slowly, like a shadow. The border keeps creeping along, surrounding villages and watering places. It is a mobile phenomenon... easily transportable to keep pace with the ever-expanding settlements.

The border is furtive as well: like the rocket launchers, it crushes and disintegrates space, transforming it into a frontier, into bits of territory. This frontier paralyses the ebb and flow of transit instead of regulating it. It no longer serves to protect, instead transforming all points into danger zones, all persons into living targets or suicide bombers. It has ceased to be a peaceful boundary designed to separate two autonomous lands, to assign a rightful place to each, to endow a given space with its distinctive shape, form and color. The border here is meant to repress, displace and disorganize. [xix]

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Notes:

[i] Donnan, Hastings, and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*

(Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 48.

[ii] Paul Hirst, *Governing Space: Architecture, Politics and War* (manuscript to be posthumously published).

[iii] Dror Etkes, Settlement Watch, Peace Now <http://www.peacenow.org.il/English>, 14/3/2004.

[iv] Zionism in its pre-state period as well as currently could provide a text case of frontier geography. Although the Zionist project has its roots in the modern political concept of the nation-state, Israeli governments have nevertheless avoided recognizing its borders as final, currently keeping open frontier zones in Gaza and the West Bank.

[v] Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," a paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, July 12, 1893. It first appeared in the *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, December 14, 1893; accessible on the web at www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1893turner.html, on 24.2.03.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, op. cit., p. 168.

[viii] Idith Zertal, *Death and the Nation: History Memory Politics*, op. cit., p. 262.

[ix] Donnan, Hastings, and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders : Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*, op. cit., p. 137. On the importance of mimicry in colonial culture see: Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalend-ce of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28, Spring 1984.

[x] Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[xi] For application of Agamben's ideas to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, cf. Derek Gregory, "Defiled Cities," in *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24 (3), 2003, pp. 312-314.

[xii] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and the Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[xiii] Yitzhak Laor, Land of Israel vs. State of Israel, *Haaretz*, 7.5.04

[xiv] Agamben, op. cit.

[xv] According to Agamben, a European, the temporary state of exception is embodied in the concentration camp itself originally implemented in the frontier Boer Wars of South Africa.

[xvi] Ariella Azoulay, Adi Ophir, *Bad Days* (Tel Aviv: Resling Press, 2002; Hebrew), p. 56.

[xvii] *Empire*, op. cit.

[xviii] Zvi Efrat, *Borderline Disorder* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Science, Culture and Sport and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002).

[xix] Christian Salmon, "The Bulldozer War," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 2002, quoted in Derek Gregory, "Defiled Cities," in *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24 (3), 2003.

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