Development, Borders, and Transborderisms: Concepts and Processes

Desarrollo, fronteras y transfronterismos: conceptos y procesos

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Border studies is a relatively young academic field that has grown in dimension and complexity due to the fluidity of the contemporary conceptualization of borders. The current understanding of borders as both institutions and processes has inspired studies increasingly distant from the pioneering reflections that approached them mainly as territorial lines of separation and differentiation. This essay reflects on the evolution and current usage of the term transborder as a means of understanding the transformation of border studies as an academic field. It also explores the possibilities of re-signifying borders through their articulation with the symbolism and social practices of communities that claim transborderism as an identity and life space.

The Transborder: Trajectory of a Concept

The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary marks the year 1897 as the first recorded use of the word "transborder," which can be translated into Spanish as *transfronterizo* or *transfronteriza* (Merriam-Webster, 2021). In its pioneering sense, the term refers to anthropogenic or natural events that cross or extend across a border. The dictionary illustrates its usage, referring to international borders traversed by the phenomenon of "transboundary contamination" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). However, the definition is so broad that it can easily be applied to all kinds of phenomena transcending a border and to all kinds of borders: internal, linguistic, corporeal, organizational, and mental, among others. The dictionary's example, rooted in the environmental field, is indeed highly appropriate for illustrating the meaning of transborder but represents just one of the many fields in which the term is currently applied.

In the academic sphere, a quick search of the term in the citation and reference databases available in my university's library yielded an interesting overview of its adoption and evolution within the field of border studies. Between 1921 and 2023, just over a century, the search algorithm

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identified 2 998 articles with the term "transborder" in the title or abstract.[2] The earliest reference was found in an article examining the establishment of an office within the Ministry of International Affairs of the Canadian government in 1972 to handle the country's bilateral relations with the United States (Fox & Hero, 1974). In this article, the authors ponder whether the creation of this office would reinforce the state-centric approach to managing the relationship between the two countries or, conversely, would entail recognition of the complex and dynamic network of transborder relations driven by a subnational agenda propelled by actors operating outside the diplomatic space controlled by central governments.

Despite its pioneering use in international relations, the use of the term in the mid-1970s was predominantly concentrated in the fields of computer science, communications, and transportation. The semantic density of the term in these disciplines is clearly a result of globalization and the rapid diffusion of new communication technologies that accelerated and multiplied transborder flows of economic information, financial data, and trade at a global scale. Governments and international financial and trade organizations worldwide stimulated the study of transborder flows to support the creation of conventions and agreements aimed at reducing the risk of appropriation and misuse of information considered sensitive or exclusive (Golsong, 1979; Gotlieb et al., 1974; Walsh, 1978). Some of these studies explored alternatives to facilitate and expedite transborder information flows, including regulatory actions to remove legal barriers to global digital integration (Bigelow, 1979; De Sola Pool & Solomon, 1979). Social impacts, particularly the potential effects of massive information exchange on cultural identity, politics, and sovereignty, were also explored in the context of the multiplication and diversification of transborder flows caused by globalization (Schiller, 1979; Veith, 1980). A feature of these studies is the conceptualization of transborder as synonymous with "transnational," as reflected in the emphasis on elucidating the impacts of the new phenomenon on national security, competitiveness, and identity, as well as on the actions that nation-states could undertake to control and regulate it for their own benefit.

After a long hiatus, the term "transborder" resurfaced in the mid-1980s beyond the realms of transnational control and management of information and economic flows. This resurgence manifested in a series of studies on the involvement of subnational actors in international affairs traditionally reserved for the diplomatic action of national governments. For instance, Ivo Duchacek (1984) introduced the concept of transborder regional regimes to denote the growing presence of regions and cities in international forums and initiatives. According to Duchacek, the reconfiguration of the nation-state at the end of the 20th century resulted in the creation of a multi-actoral territorial state that reflected the interdependence and multi-scalarity induced by globalization.

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[2] The search was conducted in the digital collection of the central library of Arizona State University using the terms "transborder" and "cross-border." The tracking focused on the title and abstract of articles from academic journals, regardless of the language of publication. The search excluded books and book chapters, two widely used means of disseminating academic studies in non-English-speaking countries.

Simultaneously, Niles Hansen (1984) reflected on the consequences of France's administrative decentralization policies for transborder cooperation and other institutional spaces where border cities and regions could participate as legitimate actors. In his view, these experiences could be emulated by Mexico and the United States in managing their common border. Hansen stressed the importance of recognizing the complex interdependence between border regions and cities, asserting that it was possible to strike a balance between the sovereign imperative of the nation-state and the transborder cooperation demanded by subnational governments and actors. Both Duchacek and Hansen agree that the transborder phenomenon is centrally expressed, firstly, through the increasing involvement of subnational actors on the international stage, and secondly, through the redefinition of the national in the imaginary and actions of subnational, national, and global agents. However, Hansen is explicit in placing the locus of transborder processes within the confines of territories and jurisdictions proximate to the border.

In an article on attitudes and practices in environmental management on the Mexico-United States border, Joseph Nalven (1986) continues this transborder perspective. In this article, the author expresses concern about the potential impact of cultural values and attitudes of Mexican and American environmental technicians and planners on the development of transborder cooperation in the Tijuana-San Diego region after the signing of the 1983 La Paz Agreement, a binational accord addressing environmental issues in that region (La Paz Agreement of 1983). It is important to note that Professor Nalven's work is part of a collective impulse to imbue the term with content it had not previously held (Bustamante, 1989; Hansen, 1983; Herzog, 1991; Stoddard, 1984). To begin with, the term no longer only refers to physical flows, movement of goods, signals, or data but also to the construction of social spaces linked to the border. Of course, Nalven (1986) was concerned about what he called "fugitive flows" (p. 111) of wastewater from Tijuana to San Diego that triggered a crisis between Mexico and the United States, turning the deficiencies in Tijuana's sewage system into an international issue. However, his central concern was to elucidate the factors explaining the primacy of nationalist attitudes dominating environmental management at the border, and that restricted the adoption of concepts and practices inherent to integrated transborder environmental management. Many other researchers specializing in the Mexico-United States border during this period were engaged in constructing a narrative in favor of transborder environmental cooperation, an idea based on the concept that border cities should be visualized and managed as coherent, unitary planning structures rather than adjacent but unconnected entities (Fagen, 1984; Friedman & Morales, 1984; Herzog, 1983). Although Professor Nalven seemed not entirely persuaded by this approach, he undoubtedly belonged to a cohort of social scientists shaping what we could term the "transborder turn" in environmental studies in the Mexico-United States border region.

The Processual Border

According to Gernaert (2006), the term transborder evolved into a rising concept during the 1980s, driven by the emergence of the sustainable development paradigm. This paradigm posited the complex, multidimensional, multiscale, and interdependent nature of ecological systems, calling

for the integrated and cooperative management of natural systems not contained by national borders yet degraded by state-centric policies prioritizing competition for resources and territorial control. The ascent of this paradigm was supported by the efforts of multilateral organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme and gained widespread acceptance globally, including in the Mexico-United States border region (Gladstone et al., 2021; Mebratu, 1998).

On a larger scale, the rise of the concept is linked to the processual turn in border studies that unfolded at the end of the 20th century (Brambilla, 2014; Rumford, 2012). During this period, there was a profound transformation in how borders were perceived within the realm of border studies. They began to be viewed as socially constructed and malleable structures, subject to the influences of social practices and discursive processes governing socio-territorial differentiation. While borders maintain their essential function as devices of separation and differentiation, a complex and dynamic gradient of inclusion/exclusion and separation/integration is now acknowledged as producing a broad spectrum of processes that originate in and transcend borders. This shift in perspective implied a departure from the traditional conceptualization of borders as passive lines demarcating the sovereign limits of the nation-State and propelled the revitalization of border studies, shaping it into a multifaceted and increasingly interdisciplinary field of inquiry (Newman, 2006; Rumford, 2006).

The processual turn led to the proliferation of border studies under a new understanding of the nature and function of borders as living institutions capable of generating complex socio-spatial realities with multi-scalar expressions (Agnew, 1994; Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999; Brenner, 1999; Parkman, 1999). As Paasi (2022) explains, this turn stimulated the study of mobilities, as well as reflections on the human experience resulting from border crossing and the reconfiguration of identities within spaces impacted by the diversification and intensification of transborder interactions. Furthermore, it prompted the reformulation of old concepts and the creation of new ones needed for theorizing and empirically researching mobilities, networks, flows, representations, imaginaries, identities, cooperation, conflict, and other social processes highlighted by the processual turn (Newman, 2003). In essence, the densification of the transborder in border studies is partly the result of the emergence of once invisible or marginal topics and the pressure experienced by these studies to renew their conceptual and methodological toolbox.

Undoubtedly, the concept has continued to evolve and is now commonly used in various subfields of border studies. An in-depth and specialized insight into the term's evolution can be gained by examining its usage in articles published in the Journal for Borderlands Studies (JBS). The journal has been continuously published by the Association for Borderlands Studies since 1986 and is unquestionably the most important international publication in the field of border studies.

Between 1986 and 2023, 219 articles published in that journal utilized the term transborder in the title or abstract. The number of articles has consistently grown from an average of 2.5 per year in the 1980s to 6.1 in recent years.

Figure 1. Thematic Network of the Term Transborder in Articles Published in the
Journal for Borderlands Studies, 1986-2023
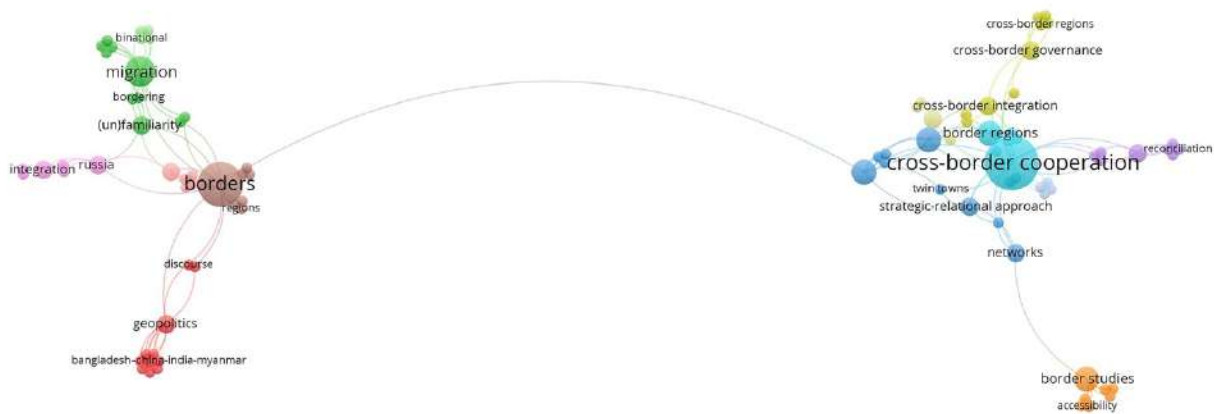
Source: Own elaboration based on bibliographic data from Scopus and visualization in VOSviewer.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the term's usage in the increasingly diverse and interdisciplinary field of border studies, revealing some interesting details. Firstly, the transborder approach has transcended disciplinary boundaries since its initial application in environmental studies. It has been widely accepted and adapted as an analytical and descriptive tool across various fields, including identity formation, citizenship, mobility, biopolitics, security, paradiplomacy, and cooperation among others. The term's application in both disciplinary and multidisciplinary studies aligns with the transformation of the field into a space for interdisciplinary reflections combining insights from economics, human geography, political science, sociology, history, and ethnography. This interdisciplinary approach enables the examination of border processes and phenomena that cannot be adequately understood from a single perspective.

Secondly, the figure reveals a bifurcated density in the transborder approach, characterized by a significant concentration in studies on both transborder cooperation and borders in general. In the first cluster, the concept coexists with terms such as cooperation, integration, regionalization, governance, twinning, management, sustainability, and security, among others. Articles in this cluster predominantly focus on transborder interactions and the conditions influencing their intensification, diversification, and impact on integration, cohesion, and socio-spatial planning processes. Changes in de-bordering or re-bordering levels can significantly affect the degree of interaction, reshaping the spatiality of social processes associated with the border and altering the functioning of transborder communities and institutions. Studies in this group often concentrate on the analysis of formal and informal responses of subnational actors and the effects of such responses on border management regimes. The second cluster encompasses studies exploring the transborder in contexts where borders remain focal points of conflict, and the institutionalization of interactions has not reached a sufficient level of formality for the development of diverse and stable transborder relationships. The gravitational center of this cluster is the border, primarily seen as a peripheral and territorialized space due to informal migration, distrust, immobility,

exclusion of indigenous populations, disputes over citizenship and individual and collective identities. It is not surprising that terms such as diplomacy, bordering, demarcation, and geopolitics are also prominent in this group, all tied to realities where the border functions primarily as an instrument of separation and differentiation.

Thirdly, although the concept continues to be used as a descriptor—as a tool to account for social and economic interactions across national borders—its usage is increasingly tied to a more complex understanding of borders and the processes stemming from them. To begin with, the transborder is not limited to the crossings of individuals from one country to another that link places in specific social fields such as consumption or work; rather, it has expanded to examine how transborder practices of consumption or work produce and reproduce ways of life specific to border regions. The transborder approach informs us that through ordinary and routine interactions, people continuously change and reconstruct the meaning of the border, enabling social and economic spaces that operate under a logic distinct from the national.

The contemporary transborder approach also broadens the gaze to the role of citizens in the processes of re/debordering. Through continuous interactions, border people form networks through which they mobilize resources that can either challenge the legitimacy of borders or reinforce them (Sohn, 2020). It is common for the actions of non-state actors to respond to collective visions that erase, reconstruct, and change the border, facilitating transborder mobility for some while hindering it for others (Rumford, 2012). In this way, the transborder approach redefines the spaces created by borders as a social field in which citizens and their organizations are active agents in an ongoing negotiation process with the State, involving conflict, engagement, and adaptation (Barajas-Escamilla & Aguilar, 2013; Wong-González, 2005).

Transborder Development

Regarding the issue of development, Sergio Boisier (2001) rightly argues that it is a complicated subject due to its axiological load and changing nature. If we adopt the definition proposed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP),[3] then development is a process that results in the "expansion of people's choices" and produces significant material satisfiers to meet vital needs, as well as immaterial satisfiers necessary for the validation of communal ways of life and collective meanings (PNUD, 2004, p. 6). According to Boisier (2001), development is a process that encompasses spatial, social, and individual dimensions.

In border contexts, the spatial dimension of development implies the transformation of the territory into a *horizontal space*, that is, a space produced through a process of rediscovery, consensus, and shared progress. This is the precept that animates transborder planning proposals on urban, environmental, and public health issues, which are increasingly common in Europe and North America. An illustrative example is the use of the watershed approach for the study of shared aquifers within the framework of the Transboundary Aquifer Assessment Program (TAAP)

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[3] Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (PNUD for its Spanish acronym).

implemented by a consortium of research centers and universities from Mexico and the United States and facilitated by the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC, 2009). This program was created to assess the extent, capacity, and movement of transboundary groundwater and to generate information to facilitate the diagnosis and planning of water supply for industry, agriculture, and cities in the border region. As a scarce commodity, groundwater has a high potential for conflict that stimulates the territorialization of its management and the destructive consumption of the resource. Transboundary planning initiatives such as TAAP represent an effort towards sustainable and collaborative management of the reserves accumulated in aquifers shared by Mexico and the United States.

The social dimension involves strengthening civil society and fostering a sense of connection to the place. A community facing situations threatening its well-being or stability is more likely to act if it is imbued with a sense of control over the factors producing such situations. If the sense of control is accompanied by a sense of place encompassing both sides of the border, collective action is more likely to take the form of transborder cooperation. The importance of citizen participation for transborder local development becomes evident in the proliferation of informal and quasi-formal networks that contest, negotiate, or collaborate with central governments but sometimes oppose their actions in areas as diverse as protection of migrants' rights, public health, ecosystem protection, or regional economic competitiveness. In recent years, various authors have identified a trend toward the formation of regional identities characterized by a transborder sense of control and place, partly as a result of the rescaling of economic and social processes within the framework of globalization (Jessop, 2003; Newman, 2006; Rumford, 2012), but also as an expression of values and social practices derived from cultural and historical experiences with deep regional roots (Rumford, 2013; Tapia Ladino, 2021; Terlouw & Van Gorp, 2014; Vélez-Ibáñez & Heyman, 2017). However, for this type of cooperation to emerge and consolidate as a development mechanism, it must arise from issues affecting both sides of the border, which implies, first, facilitating the exchange of quality information among actors on both sides of the border and, second, strengthening narratives that generate a sense of mutual need.

Finally, the individual dimension requires public policies to focus on eliminating barriers that inhibit the empowerment and fulfillment of the human person. In the case of the border, this aspect is linked to mobility, the dignified treatment of people, and equity. This dimension of development is expressed in changes in the quality of life and in the affirmation of the human condition within the territory of each country, but also in the recognition of the right of the inhabitants of the border to inhabit the space built and imagined on the basis of their cross-border social and cultural practices (Iglesias-Prieto, 2017; Mandujano-Salazar, 2022; Velazco & Contreras, 2014). As social and cultural expressions of the everyday appropriation of elements that nourish the transborder way of life, these practices often occur in the interstices of State's structures of control; sometimes, they articulate forms of open resistance to these structures, but generally, they constitute alternative understandings and uses of the territory. As Oscar Martinez (1994) aptly observed, the border is a "powerful force that tends to attract many border residents into the orbit of the neighboring country" (p. 6), with the

consequent result of a diversity of transborder relationships and ways of life reproduced through consumption, work, family relationships, and the mixing of cultural expressions.

Transborderism

Transborderism represents a form of appropriation of border spaces involving the creation of collective meanings rooted in the territory, culture, and aspirations of border communities. This concept transcends definitions that confine transborderism to its concrete and quantifiable expressions, such as the continuity of interactions over time, geographic proximity, and the intensity and directionality of consumptive, labor, and recreational flows that occur daily in border spaces (Tapia Ladino, 2017). In line with this understanding, Iglesias-Prieto (2012) suggests that transborder is the manifestation of the level of connectivity that an individual or a group of people has with the other side of the border and that its most direct expression is through their interactions and perceptions of the border. Although Iglesias-Prieto argues that the degree of transborderism leads to variable forms of cultural complexity and identity, her analysis is limited to exploring transborder social practices and their effect on the production of collective representations of the border. I believe that transborderism can be taken further to incorporate the visions and aspirations associated with the concept of transborder development and endow it with epistemic substance and practical meaning.

As an epistemic tool, the concept can facilitate an understanding of the moment at which border spaces are situated regarding their potential to become transborder spaces. As it well known, transborder relations and interactions, in and of themselves, are not a sufficient condition for constructing such a space. The structuring of transborder space requires local actors on both sides of the border to develop a sense of connection beyond the utilitarian component of the exchanges they engage in and produce a systemic vision articulated around interdependence, synergy, and solidarity. As rightly observed by Iglesias-Prieto (2008), referring to the Mexican-American border, economic exchanges and interdependence do not automatically translate into more complex forms of "understanding, acceptance, and social investment" (p. 12) associated with transborder local development.

As a practical tool for development, transborderism can guide the adoption of strategies and actions needed to fill gaps in social representations and narratives about the border and hinder visions of the border as a symbiotic and functionally integrated space. Referring to the complex environmental issues on the Mexico-United States border, Professor Nalven aptly suggested that transborder solutions require a "reflective, cross-cultural rationality to detect cultural blind spots" (Nalven, 1986, p. 124) in constructing understandings free from nationalist constraints and defining what is politically and practically feasible in each border context. The concept of transborderism can help advance this task.

FINAL REMARKS

I would like to conclude by referring to Dilla (2008), who, in one of his works, introduces the concept of transborder urban clusters. Although these clusters can be contradictory and even conflict-ridden spaces, they can also be areas of coordination and collaboration where potentially incremental forms of integration and development can be observed. According to the author, in addition to geographical proximity, economic interdependence, and peaceful international relations, the construction of the transborder in these spaces also requires a shared sense of mutual need.

Transborderism encompasses all these conditions, but its potential as an instrument of change lies in the construction of the shared sense of mutual need referred to by the author. The question that remains, then, is how to contribute to its promotion in the diverse border contexts that exist in Latin America and other regions worldwide. Admittedly, a very successful step has been the establishment of graduate programs in transborder studies, such as the one created by Arturo Prat University in Chile, which replicates similar efforts elsewhere in the world. It is critical to expand and strengthen scientific production on borders, border regions, and transborder spaces through the training of specialists capable of critically integrating different disciplinary perspectives that recognize the historicity and evolution of these spaces. Additionally, privileging the transborder perspective is essential for understanding the complex dynamics and social issues characterizing border spaces. An even more significant and complex step would be transforming border studies into an academic practice informed by the issues relevant to transborder communities. However, moving in that direction is particularly challenging for an academic field that still navigates between theories, methodologies, and approaches borrowed from other social disciplines and vacillates between the singularity of dominant disciplinary and territorial perspectives in the social sciences and the multi-perspectival view required by transborder studies.

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