



WORKSHOP TITLE

Border Problems: Theory, Culture, and Political Economy

WORKSHOP DIRECTORS

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National borders once seemed to be natural markers of the geographical limits of state sovereignty, but recent globalization has stripped them of this benign appearance. Resisting the naturalization of borders, scholars now recognize them as constituents of political environments, and as such, subject to constant reinterpretation, mutation, and contestation. This workshop explores research problems concerning the construction, meaning, operation, and transformation of borders. It seeks to develop mobile conversations across disciplines and among world regions to improve research methodologies.

Our point of departure is the idea that territorial borders articulate inequality and power relations among people inside and across territories. We are particularly concerned with border politics that constitute national environments by controlling social space with national institutions. But because rampant mobility of people, capital, commodities, ideas, and symbols now renders national territory increasingly open to disarticulation, we must also interrogate borders inscribed inside nations, produced across nations, and projected by nations into wider social spaces, such as empire, diaspora, the world of Islam (*umma*), and globalization itself.

Imagining, defining, mapping, regulating, transgressing, and contesting borders generate many methodological problems for scholars to consider. We approach these problems from three perspectives, which depend upon one another: theory, culture, and political economy. By “theory,” we refer to ideas about borders that inform philosophical discourse, public debate, official state practices, and unofficial maneuvering around borders. By “culture,” we refer to meanings that borders acquire in everyday social practice among people who live among borders with particular histories and specific implications for inhabitants. By “political economy,” we refer to the productive power relations of modern capitalism, which make national states containers of wealth and also imbue border-making and border-crossing with costs and benefits. These perspectives enrich one another and do their best work when combined.

Each of our directors has a particular border concern that will inform the workshop. Julie Mostov’s work in political theory argues that “soft borders” represent a viable alternative to current “hard border” politics, which produce oppressive constraints and conflicts that afflict poor and weak groups most severely. Dina Siddiqi’s research in anthropology explores the contested constructions of gender within transnational frames of global liberalism and Islamism, on the one hand, and within

national and local frames of social identity and progressive politics, on the other. David Ludden's research focuses on power relations of economic inequality in global and national development regimes.

Our perspectives converge on the study of border environments under capitalism. We are concerned with symbolic as well as physical borders: what borders mean and how they live in the imagination are as powerful as iron gates and cement barriers. We are particularly interested in the gendered character of border environments, because the gendering of spatial politics reveals how the political economy of capitalism operates in border practices and their tangled disputation in public discourse.

We invite to this workshop participants who do research on state policy and related theories of border-making and border control, on cultural movements and disputes that inscribe the various borders of national politics, on border regulations that discipline migrant workers within national economies, and on struggles over borders inside and across national environments of territorially defined rights and entitlements.

Some specific topics for research papers at our workshop include:

- Neo-liberalism and structural adjustment as border-changing/challenging policies
- US imperial expansion as border reconfiguration
- Ethno-nationalism and national border politics: symbolic markers and territorial boundaries
- Cross-border migration: movement and constraint; mobility and vulnerability; linkage and disjuncture
- Cultural movements spanning borders – invading territory – e.g. Islamism, Christianity
- Border-crossing technologies, border challenges, and border controls
- Violence and borders: crossing (internal and external borders) and life in borderlands
- Cultural contestation and negotiation of borders