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Contemporary Borders as 'Phantom Borders'. An Introduction

Eight years after 'phantom borders' gained their place in the social sciences and historiography, the use of this concept remains diverse. The research network 'Phantom Borders in East Central Europe', whose members were the Centre Marc Bloch, Humboldt University, and the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies, all in Berlin, as well as the Martin-Luther-University in Halle and the Alexander Brückner Center for Polish Studies in Halle and Jena, was coordinated between 2011 and 2017 at the Centre Marc Bloch. The network's prolific publishing activities include eight volumes in the network's own series with the Wallstein publishing house,¹ many articles, and some additional books and collected volumes.²

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¹ Béatrice von Hirschhausen et al., eds, *Phantomgrenzen. Räumen und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken*, Göttingen 2015; Đorđe Tomić, *Phantomgrenzen und regionale Autonomie im postsozialistischen Südosteuropa. Die Vojvodina und das Banat im Vergleich*, Göttingen 2016; Michael G. Esch, *Die Stadt als Spielfeld. Raumbegriffe, Raumnutzungen, Raumdeutungen polnischer Hooligans*, Göttingen 2016; Rita Aldenhoff-Hübinger/Catherine Gousseff/Thomas Serrier, eds, *Europa vertikal. Zur Ost-West-Gliederung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2016; Michael G. Müller/Kai Struve, eds, *Fragmentierte Republik? Das politische Erbe der Teilungszeit in Polen 1918-1939*, Göttingen 2017; Béatrice v. Hirschhausen/Michael G. Esch, eds, *Wahrnehmen, Erfahren, Gestalten. Phantomgrenzen und soziale Raumproduktion*, Göttingen 2017; Sabine von Löwis, *Das Phantom der alten Grenze am Zbruč. Kontinuitäten und Brüche sozialräumlicher Strukturen in der Westukraine*, Göttingen 2017; Sabine von Löwis, ed, *Umstrittene Räume in der Ukraine. Politische Diskurse, literarische Repräsentationen und kartographische Visualisierungen*, Göttingen 2019 (forthcoming); see series details at <https://www.wallstein-verlag.de/buchreihen/phantomgrenzen-im-oestlichen-europa-1.html>. All internet references were accessed on 8 October 2019.

² Among others, Nenad Stefanov, *Die Erfindung der Grenzen auf dem Balkan*, Wiesbaden 2017; Hannes Grandits, *Herzegowina*, in: Oliver Jens Schmitt/Michael Metzeltin, eds, *Das Südosteuropa der Regionen*, Wien 2015, 133-176; Nenad Stefanov, *Die Kartierung der Nation und die Zähigkeit der Terra Incognita. Nationalstaat und (Wieder-)Aneignung regionalen Bewusstseins in Bulgarien seit 1878. Überlegungen zu einer Dar-*

Thus, the lack of a single, coherent methodological definition of the concept has proven productive rather than inhibitive. The scholars who invented the notion of 'phantom borders' invested a lot of effort into conceptual reflections. The core idea behind the concept is as simple as it is intricate: phantom borders are political borders that once were, are no more, but—nevertheless—somehow still are. The theoretical and methodological substantiation of this notion is complex. How to define 'phantom borders' as a category of analysis without succumbing to historical determinism or, to the contrary, sliding into futile deconstructivism? 'Phantom borders' are neither unchangeable structures nor purely discursive phenomena.

What, then, is the concept's added value? While the term has been used mostly by scholars within the research network, it holds the creative epistemological potential to go much further. It is the aim of this special section to show that the concept of 'phantom borders' is both legitimate and useful for the fields of contemporary history and border studies. As the contributions to this section show, it is precisely the conceptual openness of the 'phantom border' concept that bears the potential of its productive application.

In conceptualizing 'phantom borders', the network of scholars emphasize the interaction between the imagining of space (*Raumimagination*), the experience of space (*Raumerfahrung*), and the formation of space (*Raumgestaltung*).³ This threefold definition relates back to the triad of social spaces as outlined by the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991).⁴

stellung von Regionen in Bulgarien in historischer Perspektive, in: Schmitt/Metzeltin, *Das Südosteuropa der Regionen*, 551-580; Kai Struve, *Räume der Nation – Polen im 19. Jahrhundert*, in: Jürgen Heyde et al., eds, *Dekonstruieren und doch erzählen. Polnische und andere Geschichten*, Göttingen 2015, 256-262; Kai Struve, *Germanisierung und großpolnische Agitation im 19. Jahrhundert. Die deutsche Perspektive*, in: Joachim Bahlcke/Dan Gawrecki/Ryszard Kaczmarek, eds, *Geschichte Oberschlesiens. Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, München 2015, 593-601; Béatrice von Hirschhausen/Caroline Garrido/Marie Hocquet, *Jenseits politischer Zäsuren? Berliner Phantomgrenzen in aktuellen Praktiken und Diskursen*, *Informationen zur Raumentwicklung* 5 (2015), 451-460; Sabine von Löwis, *Phantom Borders in the Political Geography of East Central Europe*, *Erdkunde* 2, no. 2 (2015), 99-106; Đorđe Tomić, *Vom Bauern zum „Benzinsman“*. Schmuggelpraktiken im Alltag der Somborer Grenzregion zu Beginn der 1990er Jahre, *Südosteuropäische Hefte* 1, no. 1 (2012), 17-31.

³ Hannes Grandits et al., *Phantomgrenzen im östlichen Europa. Eine wissenschaftliche Positionierung*, in: von Hirschhausen et al., eds, *Phantomgrenzen*, 13-56, 39.

⁴ On Lefebvre and his philosophy of space and history, cf. Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre*, London et al. 2004, 169-198.

The Imagining of Space

The imagining of space (*Raumimagination*) is consistent with Lefebvre's notion of 'perceived space' (*espace perçu*), or 'spatial practice'. This practice, that is everyday practices and perceptions, defines space in our everyday reality, for example our daily routine, the 'paths and networks that connect the work-places and the places of private life'.⁵ Unlike 'mental mapping' and the post-colonial studies approach, the 'phantom borders' concept is about symbolic borders being not only 'imposed through discourse', but also (re)produced by daily practices 'from below'. That is to say that the perspective of 'phantom borders' does not only refer to the political or intellectual inventions of hegemonic structures, but rather takes into account local actors. Such an understanding of space is reminiscent of Michael Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism', where practices of the many, such as the hanging of flags, play a major role.⁶ The difference is that the cognitive dimension is vital for the imagination of space, which is, on the other hand, reminiscent of Rogers Brubaker's theory of nationalism, i.e. that nations are not a 'thing' that materializes in the world, but rather a perspective on the world.⁷

The Experience of Space

The experience of space (*Raumerfahrung*) is consistent with Lefebvre's notion of a 'lived space' (*espace vécu*), that is space as it is directly experienced through its associated images and symbols. The space of the 'population', its 'users', is 'connected with the secret and underground dimension of social life'.⁸ The experience of space is defined as encompassing the historical spaces, divided between notions of continuity and notions of change. People internalize spatial relationships through routine. The experience may be as much individual as it is intersubjective, and thus can be defined as the 'present past', in accordance with Reinhart Koselleck. Within anybody's experience, 'there is also an element of alien experience contained and preserved in experience conveyed by generations or institutions'.⁹

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford et al. 1991, 33.

⁶ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London et al. 1995, 6.

⁷ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, Cambridge et al. 2004, 17.

⁸ Grandits et al., *Phantomgrenzen im östlichen Europa*, 39.

⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Pretekla prihodnost*. Prispevki k semantiki zgodovinskih časov, Ljubljana 1999, 346.

The Formation of Space

The formation of space (*Raumgestaltung*) corresponds to Lefebvre's notion of 'conceived space' (*espace conçu*), or mental space. Such 'representations (theories) of space' encompass space as it is conceived by scientists, planners, urbanists, technocrats, 'dividers', and 'social engineers'. Lefebvre defines this component as the governing space in a given society.¹⁰ The formation of space encompasses the creative potential of 'phantom borders', that is the actual production of space. The latter does not only manifest at the level of perception and experience, but actively co-creates the contemporary space. Societal changes continuously co-create 'phantom borders'—and vice versa. From the viewpoint of social relations, 'phantom borders' are simultaneously the active and the passive part of space. Studies on former borders that were abolished in the institutional sense but continue to influence how a given space is structured pay special attention to state territoriality. Here, the degree to which states establish solid spatial constellations and configurations is especially important. The layouts of borders, their markings, communication networks, the integration of the countryside, as well as administrative divisions and rules—all of this simultaneously constitutes a space, and a state.¹¹

The scholars collaborating in the 'phantom border' network acknowledged that their concept bore inconsistencies.¹² Where they succeeded was in making the asynchrony of borders more visible. Based on this visibility, it is possible to put the results of different spatial analyses into a comparative context.¹³ They cautiously crafted their concept as an innovative contribution to tackle the 'catch 22' of the determinism versus deconstructivism debate. Hitherto, no one has claimed the concept to be an irrelevant one; on the contrary, some scholars have noted that the authors even undersold their concept. Sabine Rutar emphasizes three fields of research in which 'phantom borders' could be applied usefully, going beyond the issues addressed by the network. These fields are nationalism studies, the study of extreme situations such as wars and occupation, and the study of the longevity of epistemological 'phantom borders' such as reflecting on why, thirty years after the demise of state socialism, scholarly thinking continues to largely function along the former Cold War East–West binaries. Furthermore, Rutar argues, during the years of reflection and application of their concept, the 'phantom border' network

¹⁰ Grandits et al., *Phantomgrenzen im östlichen Europa*, 39.

¹¹ Grandits et al., *Phantomgrenzen im östlichen Europa*, 53.

¹² Cf., for example, the review by Martin Knoll, *Grenzen als Phantome?*, *Neue Politische Literatur* 62, no. 1 (2017), 98–99.

¹³ Michael G. Esch/Béatrice von Hirschhausen, *Wahrnehmen, Erfahren, Gestalten. Phantomgrenzen und soziale Raumproduktion. Einleitung*, in: von Hirschhausen/Esch, eds, *Wahrnehmen, Erfahren, Gestalten*, 7–41, 10.

could have communicated more with the like-minded, slightly earlier works that have much in common with the ideas put forth by the network.¹⁴

In an attempt to take the 'phantom border' concept further, this special section was conceived at the international conference 'Borders and Administrative Legacy', organized by the Institute of Contemporary History of Ljubljana in November 2016, in cooperation with the Department of History at the Faculty of Arts of Ljubljana University and the National Museum of Contemporary History, in the framework of the project 'The Phenomenon of Border Rivers', financed by the Slovenian Research Agency (Project No. J6-6830, 2014-17, Principal Investigator: Marko Zajc).¹⁵ The purpose of the conference was to critically assess the methodological and conceptual relations between varying administrative legacies as well as to identify theoretical and empirical historiographical desiderata. The idea of 'phantom borders' stood at the centre of attention: administrative legacy was conceptualized as a phantom past, and it is archival records that give structure to this past.

Since the 'phantom border' research network launched its methodological tool, the latter has taken on a life of its own. Researchers in border studies have endeavoured to evolve the idea. In fact, its 'parents' have emphasized on several occasions the open nature of their concept.¹⁶ Accordingly, in this special section, the authors conceptualize 'phantom borders' differently from their original framing, in an attempt to further explore their methodological strength. They apply the concept of 'phantom borders' to existing, contemporary borders. In doing so, they challenge the basic proposition of the 'phantom border' logic: that 'phantom borders' refer to *past* borders. Contemporary borders have a past too, and in this sense, they are former borders too. It is an established consensus within border studies that no natural borders exist. In the words of Georg Simmel, borders are not a spatial fact with social effects, but rather a social fact manifesting itself in space.¹⁷ Every border has a history; present borders have emerged as a result of past structural and

¹⁴ Cf. her review, Sabine Rutar, Béatrice von Hirschhausen et al.: *Phantomgrenzen. Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken, Südosteuropa. Journal of Politics and Society* 64, no. 4 (2016), 576-580, DOI: 10.1515/soeu-2016-0049.

¹⁵ Presentations from the conference 'Borders and Administrative Legacy' are accessible online as video lectures: *Borders and Administrative Legacy, Ljubljana, 24-26 November 2016*, <http://hdl.handle.net/11686/37178>.

¹⁶ Esch/von Hirschhausen, *Wahrnehmen, Erfahren, Gestalten*, 10.

¹⁷ Georg Simmel, *Der Raum und die räumlichen Ordnungen der Gesellschaft*, in: Monika Eigmüller/Georg Vobruba, eds, *Grenzsoziologie. Die politische Strukturierung des Raumes*, Wiesbaden 2006, 15-23, 23.

discursive changes.¹⁸ Thus, if contemporary borders have a history, this history may 'haunt' them. Present borders can be possessed by their 'phantoms'.

Focusing on the criminalization of migration, Veronika Bajt explores the various administrative legacies of the Schengen border as a long-term political construct. Between 1991 and 2007, the Slovenian-Croatian border was transformed from a transient internal Yugoslav (inter-republican) border to today's Schengen border subjected to securitization and surveillance. Bajt is interested in the policy-making surrounding the symbolic construction of Slovenia as the EU member state that transformed into a Schengen border defender, due to the 'refugee crisis' in 2015. The emphasis on Slovenia's role as a 'Schengen guardian' has become apparent through its immigration management policies, administrative practices, and political discourse. In autumn 2015, a razor wire fence along the Slovenian-Croatian border was constructed by the Slovenian authorities to 'defend' the Schengen border against 'illegal migration'. The mutation that the Slovenian-Croatian border has undergone since it became an interstate border for the first time in 1991 represents a bitter irony of history. Seemingly predestined to quickly become obsolete again due to the integration of both Slovenia and Croatia into the EU, things went very differently. Croatia was accepted into the EU in 2013, but has not become a member of the Schengen area. The 'refugee crisis' and its political (mis)management has mutated a border that was to become once more a benevolent, that is insignificant, 'phantom border' within the EU into a veritably haunting border instead.

Alexandru Lesanu applies the 'phantom border' concept to better understand borders of non-recognized, de facto states, taking Transnistria (*Pridnestrovskaia Moldavskaia Respublika*, PMR) as a case in point. He assesses the functions of informal border-like structures in the context of global trade, the rules of which are defined by internationally recognized borders. The Transnistrian borders are defined as 'phantom borders' because they are not visible on any international map. Going beyond the original 'phantom border' paradigm, Lesanu shows how the different segments of the 'invisible' Transnistrian borders still carry differing historical legacies. Those legacies, including administrative ones, are significant when it comes to contemporary international transactions, and especially illicit flows of commodities. Is this about 'phantom borders', or rather 'phantom spaces'? De facto states like Transnistria could indeed be defined as 'phantom spaces', Lesanu concludes—they exist in certain ways, but not in others. Their borders can have but a phantom character.

¹⁸ Thomas M. Wilson/Hastings Donnan, *Nation, State and Identity at International Borders*, in: Thomas M. Wilson/Hastings Donnan, eds, *Border Identities. Nation and State at International Frontiers*, Cambridge 1998, 1-30, 9.

Jasper Klomp explores the discursive burdening of a current border with its historical and spatial 'phantoms' by looking at the role of the Polish-German border, the Oder-Neisse line, in nation-building efforts in Poland since 1989. This current border has had a 'haunting' effect on Polish (geo)political processes and society, Klomp argues. Polish conservative politicians have often presented the Oder-Neisse line as a frontier against 'savagery' from Western Europe, a heading under which they subsume things as varied as liberal ideas and Syrian refugees. What these discourses tend to overlook is the fact that, during the Cold War, Poland's western border did not quite match with Polish ideas on the location of the Polish state. It was a border born out of geopolitical and demographic 'engineering', and more or less imposed on the Poles by the Soviet Union. In the arbitrary post-1989 efforts to strengthen Polish national collectivity, the idea that borders are constructed has in fact been embraced and maximally exploited by a number of leading Polish politicians.

Marko Zajc focuses on the haunting nature of borderlines themselves, when it concerns dispute over the exact course of a state border in a changing landscape. He suggests the notion of administrative legacy, in order to understand the phantom-like dimensions of a contemporary border. His case study, the Slovenian-Croatian border dispute along the river Mur/Mura, shows the importance of cadastral municipalities established in the early 19th century for the construction of the contemporary border. Contemporary borders, Zajc concludes, can become 'possessed' with their historical phantoms when the creation of new political spaces is underway. Old border qualities only appear to 'fade out' into the past; in fact, they keep returning, and more often than not are conjured up by contemporary constructors of borders.

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