

# Sorting Machines

## The Reinvention of the Border in the 21st Century

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*The passport is the noblest part of a human being. Nor does it come into the world in such a simple way as a human being. A human being can come about anywhere, in the most irresponsible manner and with no proper reason at all, but not a passport. That's why a passport will always be honoured, if it's a good one, whereas a person can be as good as you like, and still no one takes any notice.*

*Bertold Brecht*

## Borders Are Back!

The dramatic images from the Greek-Turkish border that flickered across our television screens in spring 2020 could hardly have packed a greater punch: buses carrying thousands of refugees across Turkey to the border, Turkish security forces herding people towards the border, wretched encampments with washing hung out to dry, Greek border police hectically putting up concrete barriers and rolling out barbed wire, stun grenades flaring and tall heavy-duty fans blowing clouds of tear gas over to the Turkish side of the border. Cut to John F. Kennedy Airport, New York, at almost exactly the same time. Hundreds of passengers stood for hours, crammed into narrow passageways, waiting to be allowed into the US. The requirements for entry into the US had been tightened overnight because of rising numbers of Covid-19 infections, resulting in chaotic scenes. Ad hoc orders to question incoming travellers and take their temperatures led to massive delays and bottlenecks, which the airport was not equipped to cope with. People were pushed together into tightly packed, slow-moving queues. Commentators spoke of a human petri dish, offering ideal conditions for the spread of the virus.

Both scenes are emblematic of the blocking and sorting effect of borders: borders stop people, push them back, lock them out, act as filters. Thanks to scenes like these, borders have made a dramatic return to our consciousness in recent years. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, many people had succumbed all too readily to the illusion that we were living in an age of opening barriers, expanding mobility and increasingly permeable borders. In 2009, ‘border’ – along with ‘paternoster lift’, ‘cheese on sticks’ and ‘tape recorder’ – even made it into the *Lexikon der verschwundenen Dinge* (Dictionary of Forgotten Things), as if it were something that belonged in a museum. Berlin, as the city once divided by the Iron Curtain, is especially symbolic of the end of a world structured by closed borders. One of the demands made in autumn 1989 was that ‘The Wall must go’; today, the border strip is nothing more than a tourist attraction.

At first glance there seems to be much to confirm this view of borders as a relic of the past. Trend data show that cross-border transactions and movements have risen enormously in the past three decades and even before that. Borders are crossed more and more frequently, their compartmentalizing character seems to have softened, and they are perceived as increasingly permeable. This applies not only to communication via the internet, trade and production chains, finance flows, and the dissemination of information and cultural goods, but also to the various forms of human mobility with which this book is concerned with. More and more often, for an ever larger group of people, leaving the inner space of the nation-state is becoming an increasingly self-evident step; crossing and recrossing the border seems like the

normal state of affairs. In analyses of these changes in the 1990s and 2000s, hypotheses about ‘vanishing borders’ or the ‘borderless world’ – all of them conjuring up obsolescent or increasingly porous borders – were not figments of the academic imagination, but often-evoked and much-quoted tags, which seemed to encapsulate major trends. Here, globalization was regarded as a powerful driving force, with a near irresistible capacity to open, or in some cases break down, borders.

In social theories from the same period, disembedding from place-bound contexts and the deterritorialization of social relations were even identified as crucial elements in the development of modernity. The theory was that we were no longer shackled to a single place, but extended our social relations over great distances, constantly crossing borders and striding around the globe in our seven-league boots. A few decades earlier, a period spent abroad had still been viewed as an ‘exotic’ exception; now cross-border social, family, romantic and employment relationships and transnational CVs had become routine and normal. Processes of deterritorialization, denationalization and transnationalization took centre stage; clinging to what was limited, national and immobile was seen as backward-looking, since it ignored the powerful dynamic opening up previously closed and contained societies. There was even talk of an ‘atopian society’, where territorial limitations were radically abolished; some saw the ‘world society’ appearing on the horizon. It seemed that nothing stood in the way of global interaction – or at least nothing in which borders played a major role.

Although this view may not have been an optical illusion, it overemphasized the debordering character of globalization and produced a one-sided image. And while an increase in ‘border traffic’ is often taken as evidence that a border has become more permeable or has ceased to function, this is by no means an obvious conclusion. Perhaps the focus on the dissolution of borders is partly to do with the specific way that ‘frequent travellers’ – the group responsible for the majority of border crossings – experience the world. For this group, – i.e., those who are able and authorized to travel, – globalization mostly means opening, debordering and greater opportunities for mobility. The most prominent proponents of the discourse of globalization are undoubtedly part of this highly mobile group, able to popularize their theses on podiums in Boston, Cape Town and Seoul. People who are allowed to travel themselves, and whose mobility is scarcely restricted by borders, may be inclined to generalize from their own experiences and to underestimate contrary developments. Perhaps this is a *déformation professionnelle* on the part of conference tourists? But then again, this is probably not the place for such speculations.

It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that experiences of border crossing are limited to a small number of privileged groups – on the contrary, they extend far beyond these groups and are global in scale. And yet the experience of crossing borders quickly, smoothly, comfortably and without hindrance is by no means a ubiquitous phenomenon. For a large part – the majority! – of the world’s population, the everyday experience of borders is one of exclusion,

denial of mobility, and obstruction; of being on the outside, of rebordering. It is still the case that borders are the place where, in the words of the pioneering sociologist Georg Simmel, the ‘merciless separation of space’ (‘das unbarmherzige Auseinander des Raumes’) becomes most obvious. At borders, critical processes of social division take place. Even in the global society, we live in parcels of territory, and borders take on functions of filtering, separation and circulation management. They are not just places where checks are undertaken: many groups are turned back at borders. The situation at the Greek-Turkish border, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is certainly not an isolated case.

So the idea that the process of globalization is essentially one of dissolution of borders is simplistic, and in my view misleading. Even under conditions of globalization – particularly under these conditions, in fact – border regimes enforce territorial control and selectivity; they are powerful ‘sorting machines’ of the globalized world. There is therefore no real scientific justification for associating or equating globalization with porous or disappearing borders, rather than seeing it as a complex, inherently contradictory process. This default setting has turned blind spots into a scientific programme and suppressed any contradictory developments. These developments can only be deciphered if we cease to consider globalization solely in terms of cross-border transactions or flows. Instead we need to take a much more comprehensive view, seeing it as a relatedness that extends beyond the nation-state and the national society. Globalization is not just about crossing borders; it is about modes of interdependence that include the hardening of borders, the denial of mobility, and border selectivity. The question to ask about globalization is not just how ‘old borders’ are opening or disappearing, but how borders are changing, and what ‘logic of sorting’ is in operation at the ‘new borders’. Under conditions of extensive, indeed massive flows of mobility, borders are designed to allow only the desired mobility, and to control and, if need be, prevent unwanted mobility. In such an understanding of globalization, opening and closing belong together; to grasp the dialectic core of globalization and give it sharper conceptual definition, we can even speak of a globalization of opening and a globalization of closing. These are two sides of the same coin.

It is a widespread misunderstanding to reduce the new forms of closing that are constitutive of globalization to mere (ideologically motivated) anti-globalization. In fact, the reverse is true: because globalization exists, borders become more important, are gradually upgraded, and are used as sorting machines. The closure and control of borders is therefore not only compatible with globalization, but an integral part of it and a prerequisite for opening. To re-emphasize this point: globalization does not cause borders to disappear, but induces and constantly enforces closing, selectivity and the intensification of control. Of course, insistence on border functions can also manifest itself as anti-globalization. In most cases, however, it is a facet of globalization itself, forms of closing in the service of globalization. In globalization, opening and closing go hand in hand. One indication of this is the unwillingness of those advocating

closure to restrict their own mobility privileges and the benefits they derive from open borders.

The Covid crisis was a shock, especially for Western societies, catapulted from a situation of freedom of movement and high mobility to a state of stasis and interrupted mobility. When the dramatic images from Wuhan first reached us in January 2020, they were extremely disturbing: roadblocks; police officers taking aim with thermometers as if they were guns; people shut into their apartments, calling out words of encouragement to each other; soldiers patrolling the street; closed railway stations, bus stations and airports. Just a few weeks later, many civil liberties and fundamental rights that we had seen as unassailable were also restricted in the 'West'. No event since the Second World War has so dramatically altered the political geography, causing states in all continents to close their borders and access routes overnight. With the exception of a handful of countries, nearly all UN member states took measures to close their borders in order to stop the spread of the virus. These included entry bans, the construction of fences and barriers, border checks, the interruption of international air travel, visa restrictions, demands for health information, and quarantine rules. Within a short space of time, populations were territorially fixed and separated from each other. Overnight, the highly mobile global society became a society of inmates, locked into national compartments.

Such a dramatic, worldwide closure of borders is undoubtedly exceptional; this is why it strikes at the heart of our collective self-image. It brings to the surface something that remains concealed in normal conditions: the state as a specific ensemble of territoriality, authority and control, which can use its extensive rights of intervention to structure social relations and forms of movement, and which permits or prevents mobility and residence. This reveals the fact that the nation-state – despite all prophecies of doom – still has substantial powers to separate spaces and suppress mobility with its border policies. The state is not just a supernumerary of globalization, a weak, powerless actor that can only gaze passively at the phenomenon of border crossing. On the contrary: its power, often concealed and withheld, has emerged unmistakably in the pandemic. It has reinforced the element of territorial control in spectacular fashion, and made the most of its capacity to isolate itself and others. The political concept behind this policy of closure was one central to the notion of sovereignty – the idea of defence against external (and internal) dangers.

Now this close connection between the state and its borders does not only come into being when epidemics break out; it is actually always with us. So the Covid crisis does not roll back globalization; it reveals – perhaps surprisingly for some – its otherwise obscured and overlooked flip side. There is hardly any other area of politics where we find so many different and sometimes contradictory developments occurring simultaneously: opening and closing, the dissolution and reinforcement of borders, the easing and intensification of control, mobilization and immobilization. To precisely observe this ambiguous development,

however, we need to move away from the conventional idea of the border as a physical barrier or boom gate. The border of globalization is not the same as that of the nation-state container, or of the twentieth-century territorial model of national societies. Today we face an ensemble of places, technologies and structures of control, which can facilitate, channel or prevent mobility. The checkpoint on the periphery of the territorial state, opening or closing the border for travellers, is an obsolescent model. The border of the twenty-first century is moving away from the borderline, and, in spatial terms, reaching far beyond the national container. Although the nation-state remains the point of reference, we can understand the border itself as part of globalization. To uncover this new politics of the border, we will look beyond the static borderline, the border hut, and the red-and-white-striped barrier, and ask: How does the border as a sorting machine operate today? How is border control changing, politically, spatially, and technologically? What forms does it assume, what functions does it perform?

As stated above, my perspective on the border centres on the mobility of persons (not goods, information, cultural artefacts, finance flows, etc.). It is not possible, however, and nor is it my intention, to consider all the functions relevant here; instead the focus is on the operative functions of control. Other functions, relating to identity, integration or symbolic demarcation or distinction, will be given a more cursory treatment, and border conflicts and secessionist movements will also not be discussed in detail. As I see it, borders represent processes, technologies and infrastructures, which are used to enforce sorting procedures and to regulate the interplay between territoriality, circulation and residence. Borders perform two kinds of sorting function: the first is spatial/territorial, and the second relates to mobility. The spatial function could be described as separation: borders separate territories and populations from one another. The mobility-related function can be described as selectivity: borders filter people. Both aspects, however, are closely interlinked. Historically, the spatial/territorial function – the ‘where’ of the border – has played a major role in the self-assertion of states. Over the course of history, borders have been disputed and borderlines have shifted; often the concept of the border or frontier has included the military enforcement and fortification of a borderline. Today, border practices and regimes are much more focused on the filtering and regulation of mobility: the border still performs a spatial/territorial organizing role, but the emphasis has shifted to the selectivity function. From the perspective of mobility, the border is responsible for marking and enforcing distinctions: between those who are allowed to pass and those who are stopped or turned back, between desirable and undesirable travellers. Today’s borders are no longer really about states asserting themselves against rival neighbouring states, but more about the management of mobility, about border crossings.

My aim in this book is to examine these reorganized borders, keeping my observational radar sharply attuned to their functions. My hypothesis is that, in terms of the movement of persons, we are certainly not heading towards a borderless and deterritorialized society. On the

contrary, borders, border fortifications and border control are part of globalization. They are, however, undergoing a radical process of operative, technological and spatial change, in order to become performant borders that support globalization. As a starting point for further reflection, I want to begin by recapitulating the classic connection between territoriality and border control, because it is of crucial importance for our modern ‘image of the border’, with its fixation on the physical borderline (Chapter 2). I will then turn to the debordering imperative of the literature of globalization, and counter it with the idea of a globalization that simultaneously imposes and removes borders – a dialectic of debordering and rebordering (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 will not only show that globalization has coincided with a rising interest in fortification and with new wall-building activities around the globe; it will also deal with the factors behind the new drive to seal borders, and with the precarious camps forming at these borders, in which people are gathered together, forced into bottlenecks, stopped in their tracks. The next topic is the filtering function of the border: I argue that this was always inherent in borders, but has been adjusted with increasing precision in the wake of globalization, so it is now possible to speak of a ‘global mobility divide’ (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 focuses on ‘smart borders’, a recent development in the use of digital technologies of surveillance, authentication and classification, which are rendering traditional, paper-based forms of control obsolete. Another element of the change in border regimes is the emergence of new macro-territorial arrangements as part of projects of regional integration (Chapter 7). Here new areas of circulation are being created, above the nation-state but below the global level, generating openness in their internal relations but reproducing or even increasing closure in their external relations. The last topic to be considered is developments such as the extraterritorialization [extraterritorialization?] of control, the displacement of control, and the use of technologies of control, along with strategies of ‘remote control’ focused on transit countries or travellers’ countries of origin (Chapter 8).

The book traces the transformation of the border into a sorting machine. This term is a metaphor intended to highlight the selectivity of border crossings and border control. My analysis is not focused on specific cases or historical epochs, but I will use examples and trends of change to substantiate my arguments. The panorama – however presumptuous this may sound – is global. The idea is to show that the old model of national territorial sovereignty and control of personal mobility has been replaced by a new border arrangement that is replicated on various scales (as summarized in Chapter 9). This leads to a substantial differentiation and interweaving of the border policies with which states attempt to maintain territorial control and simultaneously facilitate and prevent mobility. The result is an intricate control system with different scales, which has long since lost its close connection to national territories. Today the border as a sorting machine is a complex arrangement that subjects mobility to a paradigm of security, operates via intricate spaces of control, produces zones of circulation, takes its orientation from the social figure of the trustworthy traveller, and

generates a global hierarchy of unequal rights to mobility. The border of globalization is a border where inequality is created and perpetuated.