GEARY DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

Borders, States and Nations.
Contested Boundaries and National Identities
in the Irish Border Area

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Geary WP 2005/03

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Abstract

Much scholarly writing on states and state boundaries assumes that these form or at least condition the bounds of identity. The 'institutionalisation' process is said to be one where the boundaries of the state become the boundaries of everyday life and imagined community. In an interdisciplinary, multi-stranded qualitative research on the Irish border, no such process of institutionalization was found. Rather the state border was perceived as a fluctuating area of danger and economic opportunity. To the extent that it was perceived to impact at all on identity, it was on the moral and cultural content of identity rather than its national form, on the mode in which national and ethno-religious categories were lived rather than on those categories themselves.

How does state formation and institutionalization affect ethno-national identity and the categories through which ordinary people make sense of their world? These questions have for long been at the core of scholarly debate on the relations between states and nations (Flora, 1999; Anderson, 1991; O'Leary, 2001; Lustick, 1993). They remain at the centre of contemporary discussions of transgressive, transnational identities, the

emergence and form of which is said to be linked to the 'speed and density of border-crossings between nation states' and to persisting sharp boundaries of law and citizenship (Yeoh, Willis and Abdul Kahader Fakhri, 2003, p. 207; Alba, 2005). State borders are key sites for analysis of these questions: they define where state power begins and ends and constitute the boundaries of acceptable interactions, the relevant power-holders, life and career- paths, allies and enemies, for whole populations. It is at these borders that the contingency of state institutions and the impact of state institutionalization on identity are most clearly visible. In this article we use data from an interdisciplinary qualitative research project on the Irish border to argue that the impact of states on identity-formation may be highly uncertain and contingent.

The theoretical literature deals with state borders in broad strokes. The classic periodisation begins with phases of state-expansion, when boundaries are pushed forward and asserted by force and may be resisted, contested or subverted; it continues through phases of institutionalization, when they are accepted as part of the normal framework of daily life, economic and social interaction and civic organization; it reaches, in the contemporary period, the phase of Europeanisation or globalisation, when their relevance declines as political, economic and cultural processes criss-cross state boundaries and provide a spatially multi-levelled arena of policy making and interaction (Rokkan and Urwin, 1983; Keating, 2001; Yeoh et al, 2003). In some cases, the phase of institutionalization fails or is reversed and a process of 'state contraction' occurs involving de-institutionalisation and de-legitimation (Lustick, 1993).

This broad theoretical framework has informed scholarly discussions of the Irish border. After the present boundaries had been asserted and resisted by force (and this itself was but one phase of a longer process of British state-building, see Kearney, 1989) it is argued that a period of institutionalization occurred during which, at least in the Irish state, the border became the accepted frame and limit of civic life and of national community (O'Halloran, 1987, Mair, 1987; see also Coakley, 2001). More recently, Europeanisation and the Irish peace process have allowed a 'normalisation' of the border, where it becomes less relevant in daily life, less contested, and compatible with hybrid, plurinational or transnational identities (Laffan and Payne, 2001).

Is this how borders are actually experienced? Does the progression from contest through institutionalization to transnationalisation (and/or normalization) accurately describe the trajectory of individual experience? Might these theoretically-informed categories mislead us as to the ways in which ordinary people construe the border and understand its impact on their lives? Our research findings suggest that institutionalization has had much less effect than the literature suggests. State-ness does not have a prominent place in the narratives and discourse of people in this area. The Irish border is defined not as in the map image but as a broad and fluctuating area of danger and protection against danger and as an economic resource; its wider political significance is denied and political and national differences are seen to cross-cut rather than coincide with the official boundaries of the state.

Our discussion is based on the findings of four strands of an interdisciplinary research project on inter-generational transmission and ethno-national identity in the Irish border area; the research was undertaken in 2004 and includes a school essay project undertaken by 89 pupils in three schools,[1] three months participant observation in one border location and over 50 in-depth interviews. The interviews were part-narrative, part-semi-structured in format; all followed a common 'topic guide' which included individuals' experience of the border, its impact on their lives and identity, and their perceptions of 'the other side' of the border.[2] The clear convergence of findings between the sub-parts of the project suggest that borders, and perhaps also states, may have a rather different impact than stated in the theoretical literature. After a brief historical contextualisation, data from each of the strands are presented separately, prior to analysis of their significance for the wider questions raised in this introduction.

The Irish border

The Irish border was created by the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 which granted devolved powers within the United Kingdom to the North-eastern six counties of Ireland, which would become Northern Ireland. The other 26 counties were, with the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, granted a limited form of independence within the Commonwealth; this was later developed into full independence. That a border was drawn *at all* was a product of the military resistance of the Protestant (unionist) population concentrated in the north-east of Ireland to a home rule parliament for all of Ireland where they would be a

minority in a predominantly Catholic and nationalist polity. That the border was drawn

where it was (rather than including only the four majority Protestant counties of the

North-east, or the historic nine counties of Ulster, or attempting to follow more precisely

religio-political demography) was a direct product of unionist mobilization and will.

Unionists successfully campaigned for control of a region defined not on the basis of

population or history or geography, but as the largest territory which they could safely

hope to control (Whyte, 1983a; Mansergh, 1991). The British government legislated for

and enforced this boundary. Large pockets of majority Catholic areas were included in

Northern Ireland, with smaller enclaves of Protestants in what became the Irish state.

This complex land border - 499 kilometers in length - effectively cut off many areas

from unrestricted economic access to their hinterlands (Boundary Commission, 1925).

Yet it could not effectively be policed, informal bypassing of the border was widespread,

and smuggling became an important component of some local economies (O Gráda,

1994).

The border was opposed by nationalists and Catholics throughout Ireland and was

particularly resented by those within the new Northern state (Phoenix, 1994; Harris,

1993). Our interest in this paper, however, is with the population on the Southern side of

the border.[3] From 1921, the Irish state developed its own institutions and political culture

– distinctive political parties and a party system, educational institutions and a state

system were set up and politics and much of civic life took place within these limits.[4]

Some key civil society institutions – churches, sporting associations – continued to be

organized on an all-Ireland basis, and some new cross-border and all-Ireland voluntary

organizations were set up, but much civic activity followed state boundaries (Whyte, 1983b; Tannam, 1999). Cross-border linkages and institutionalization increased with EU integration and support for peace in Northern Ireland (Laffan and Payne, 2001; Coakley, 2004; Tannam, 2004). One might hypothesise that the institutionalization and growing legitimation of the Irish state would have led the Southern population to accept the border as a normal and stable boundary of social, cultural and national life.[5] As we shall see below, however, the reality was more complex, at least in the Southern border counties.

Changing perceptions of the Armagh-Monaghan Border

Participant observation and over thirty in-depth interviews on the Armagh-Monaghan border show that the border is far from a stable and immutable entity. It is perceived, rather, as malleable, changing its significance, presenting new challenges, limits and opportunities to the inhabitants of this region, and being transformed in turn by their practice. The changing character of the border was brought out clearly in the perceptions and memories related in interviews and discussions. A distinctive periodisation was evident in the narratives of the inhabitants of the region: a) The 'emergency' period, from the foundation of the state to the beginning of the 1950s IRA border campaign[6] b) the 'troubles' period, from the border campaign to the paramilitary ceasefires of the 1990s; c) the 'EU' period.[7] It is significant that the periodisation emphasised in memory does not coincide with that of historians concerned with macro-politics.[8] In each phase, the experiential periodisation throws into question state sovereignty with respect to the flow

of people and goods, the activities of armed organisations, and the role of the EU. It reveals the limits of the state in core aspects of its territorialization, its claim to the monopoly of legitimate violence, and as source of legitimacy and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1998, chapter 3).

The first period, which starts with the marking of the border, moves through the economic war with England and World War II until the start of the IRA border campaign in the 1950s. Memories of the border during this period are characterised by the presence of Irish state customs officers: the border was dotted with fixed checkpoints and customs offices and mobile officers patrolled other roads. As one of the interlocutors related: 'County Monaghan has no natural resources, well, the border is its natural resource, and its inhabitants have always mined it'. The economic war with England in the 1930s prevented the legal traffic of products across the border, while WWII prevented Ireland from acquiring wheat from the international market. 'English white bread' was preferred over the available brown bread (which becomes hard and stale quickly) and often children were sent across the border to procure it. White bread and tea from the north, in exchange for dairy products (mainly butter and cheese), formed the bulk of petty everyday smuggling, whereas major commercial enterprises involved cattle crossing. In these narratives, the border is represented as an opportunity for the acquisition of otherwise unavailable or cheap goods for domestic consumption.

The violence which characterised the early 1920s is absent from the vast majority of narratives. It is instead the second stage which is marked by violence. This period starts

with the IRA border campaign in the border in the 1950s and, punctuated by cease-fires, stretches until the peace process of the 1990s. Whereas memories of border crossing in the first period focus on the return into the Irish state, with Irish custom officers questioning individuals on the products they were carrying, in the second period, memories emphasise the opposite movement: the crossing into Northern Ireland and the control exerted by the British security forces.

In these narratives, the border is transformed from a zone of transition between economic arenae into an area of differential gradients of danger. The level of danger rises as one moves from towns close to the border, where safety is assured by the dependency of the IRA on the support of the local population, to a core border-area that is plagued with danger. Entering this area was dangerous. In fact and in memory, the IRA might control 'unauthorised' and 'concession' roads. Interlocutors reported encounters and fear of encounters with paramilitary checkpoints (where the car might be hi-jacked and used as a car-bomb). These were areas with 'snipers at work' (to quote the signs that were once on the side of the roads). Delays and questioning when stopped by the British security forces were common occurrences. Beyond the border area, Northern Ireland itself was (and for some people still is) perceived as dangerous territory. Having an Irish registration plate could be dangerous in certain Protestant majority areas. Motorists would modify their registration plates as a strategy to avoid being singled out, using the same number on a yellow background so that, at first glance, the car appeared to be registered in Northern Ireland. During this period the border became Janus-faced; on the one hand an area of

danger, on the other, a distancing device from the troubles. 'That was in the North' or 'the troubles were not here, but over there' are common references to that period.[9]

Although smuggling continued through the 'troubles', it was now controlled and transformed into a source of funding for the IRA. Petty smuggling for domestic consumption continued, either as 'novelty shopping' or as a way of stretching the household budget. But the dangers of venturing into 'bandit country' (as the area was sometimes described by locals) made such activity less common. At the same time, this is remembered as a period when a good profit could be made out of large-scale smuggling of merchandise differentially affected by taxes and (after 1979 when the link between the Irish punt and sterling was severed) by fluctuation in the relative values of the currencies.

The last period encompasses the IRA ceasefire, increasing EU economic support for the region, the Good Friday Agreement and the institutionalisation of cross-border cooperation. The ceasefire eased border crossing by reducing danger from paramilitary activity. Progressively the overt signs of the border were removed. Today, as one drives from Dundalk to Monaghan, the point where the main road leaves county Louth and enters Armagh is formally unstated. What tells that one has crossed the border into Northern Ireland are the Irish tricolours on the top of posts (local nationalist assertions of their Irish identity and loyalty), license plates with black lettering on yellow backgrounds and prices indicated in sterling. As one continues westwards, the texture and colour of the road surface change and a sign indicates the entry to county Monaghan; these are the main clues that the border has been crossed once again. There is an absence of the usual

formal indications of its existence such as barriers, checkpoints and fences (or their remnants in most EU border crossings). The locating of the line that on the map separates the two states has become an interpretive exercise where what is being represented cannot be found, and what marks the difference is not necessarily on the map.

The period since the cease-fires has also seen the profitability of smuggling reduced; now it is mainly petrol that is smuggled to the North, diesel to the South. 'There is no more smuggling, the fun is gone' summarised another interviewee. A series of subsidies for the agricultural sector on both sides of the border means that 'double claiming' now competes with smuggling as one of the most important informal economic resources of the border area, with an important formal resource now constituted by grants offered to cross-border bodies. Shopping trips are now easier and safer, but the globalisation of brands has made 'shopping for novelty' obsolete; almost every product can be found on both sides of the border, often at very similar prices. This period, too, is marked by affluence and increasing individualism: 'before we had big families and small houses, we had to all cram into a room; now we have big houses and small families'. 'Border, there is no border here' said one man, while another said 'we never wanted the border (…) but the border will cease to exist when it becomes meaningless', proceeding to suggest that the EU and the eventual acceptance of the Euro by the UK would eventually bring about such situation.

Border discourses and identity narratives in a Southern border town

Individual in-depth interviews were carried out with thirteen members of three-generational families in a large town some 6 km south of the border with Northern Ireland. They were designed to elicit narratives on changing forms of ethno-national identity and on the role of the border in identity definition.

'The border is not an issue – now'

All the individuals interviewed were aware of the topic of research which focussed on transmission and change of identity in the border area. Yet no-one spontaneously mentioned the proximity of the border or its potential impact on their self-perception and self-definition or, more generally, on their lives. When specifically questioned on the subject, all but one emphasised the lack of impact the border had on their self-perception and identity definition apart from the fact that it made them more aware of the situation in Northern Ireland than people who lived further away in the south, 'more aware of the bigotry that can exist'.

Overall, it seemed that the respondents did not think of their town as 'a border town'. They all said they were happy to live there and talked quite highly of their town – a 'good size town, not too big, not too small… close and with good connections to Dublin…'. They would not like to live anywhere else. When specifically probed about their feelings regarding the proximity of the border**,** most interviewees, at first, emphasised the relative

'peacefulness' of the area in comparison to other border locations (many references and comparisons were made with South Armagh and to the Monaghan bombing of 1974). All seemed eager to highlight the good relations between the ethno-religious communities in the town and the lack of 'spill-over' of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in their locality. However, off tape, several individuals recalled specific, sporadic events, clandestine immigration from the North, shootings, and small IRA operations but all of those were firmly located in the past.

When specifically questioned about the border, individuals swiftly and almost systematically turned to history, to discourses about Northern Ireland and the Troubles. While the border and its current status were not directly discussed, partition (the establishment of the border), was evoked by many individuals and seemed to represent a significant traumatic event of the past obviously still clearly present to them: 'it was the best we could get out of Britain', 'Partition divided the land, divided families'.

North and South – 'It's all the same, we're all the same'
Those interviewed did not appear to perceive the border as a real separation between two different countries, two different states, and all seemed to consider Ireland as one unit. This was clearly and unequivocally exemplified in one woman's statement: 'because it's one island, just because there's a treaty… written… all those years ago…' and present in all the other interviewees' discourses. In fact, the most remarkable finding emerging from their narratives was the tendency of individuals to define and locate themselves (and others) in terms of counties rather than in terms of town or state: 'we are from Co.

Cavan', 'my father married a Fermanagh woman', 'I grew up in Co. Monaghan', 'we've lived in Dublin then moved to Louth', etc… Their sense of belonging appears strongly tied to a county which, in part, explains and (for them) justifies their lack of emphasis on the border. They speak of Ireland in terms of counties ('the 6 counties', the '32 counties', the '26 counties'), sometimes in terms of provinces ('we're in the province of Leinster but we would go and play football in Ulster because it was easier to travel') and this has the function of bypassing the significance of the border, avoiding the need to give legitimacy to it as a dividing line.

Ethno-national identity did not appear to be construed in an oppositional manner. None of the interviewees expressed explicit 'comparison' or 'contrast' either between Irish and British, Catholic and Protestant, or Northerner and Southerner. Only one Protestant family made an explicit reference to the communities in the north and expressed some perplexity regarding (some) Northerners' claim of 'Britishness'; they seemed to think that people in the North who thought they were - and presented themselves as - 'British' were mistaken or misled as, for them, everyone living on the island of Ireland is by definition Irish. Although it was not always so clearly expressed, the narratives of all the respondents in this town seemed to be underpinned by a similar assertion of 'natural', 'innate' Irishness. Typical comments were: 'I know no other way of living, you know...', 'We know nothing else [than being Irish]', 'We have the Irish way in us... that's just the way it is', 'We take it for granted... the kids take it for granted'..

For most people, travelling, shopping, and socialising North of the border was presented as 'not an issue' and indeed there was even an element of surprise that it might be considered one. However, while it was emphasised that 'going up North' was not problematic, very few people admitted to actually crossing the border. Almost all of them recalled going to the North as children to visit relatives, and, generally, these were good memories. However, most of them said that they did not cross the border very often now, even since the ceasefires; they preferred to stay in their area, go to Dublin rather than Belfast or even Newry for shopping trips or travel to other places in the south (especially on the west coast) for short trips and holidays.

Old border – new 'Europeanised' island?

Questions on North-South institutions and enhanced cross border co-operation generated opinions on a variety of social and political issues, ranging from increased economic exchanges to the peace process, and from the economic future of EU members to fears of mass immigration in Ireland.[10] There was substantial agreement on the positive aspect of increased exchange and cooperation across the border and all interviewees seemed to think that these would be hugely beneficial to the area in terms of both community relations and economic rewards.

European identity did not readily feature in people's narratives, even when prompted. It might have been anticipated that individuals in the border area would express strong opinions and emotions about the role of Europe and of the opening of Europe's borders,

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given their proximity to Northern Ireland. However most interviewees in this town seemed to lack a sense of belonging to Europe – one man summarised the general feeling: 'we're Irish and pro-Europe [rather than] European'. Indeed, all the interviewees seemed to think about themselves first and foremost as 'Irish' and then as people from the county and/or town. Despite their physical proximity to a state border, none of them actually associated the opening of Europe's borders with a sense of increased closeness with Northern Ireland. The EU is still regarded primarily as an economic entity rather than a social/cultural one. Narratives about Europe expressed the positive effect of European funds and investments (in Ireland in general and in the border area in particular) and the positive repercussions of becoming an integral - and recognised - part of a large economical and political entity, rather than a sense of 'unification', 'integration' or even increased connection with Northern Ireland or, for that matter, with any other European state.

Donnan & Wilson (2003: 12) have emphasised that 'borderlands cannot be studied in isolation from that which they separate, both spatially and culturally' and it seems that this assertion finds an echo in these interviewees' narratives on the border as they do not seem either willing – or able – to talk about 'the border' as such, but tend to digress, wander away, and discuss other (related) issues (e.g., Northern Ireland, the Troubles). Their narratives 'around the border' are ambiguous, hesitating, even contradictory: most significantly, while individuals do not seem willing to acknowledge the border as a limitation to their lives (or to their country), very few admit to actually crossing the border these days.

The younger generation

Young people's views of the border were accessed and explored in an essay writing study. 89 young people, aged on average 14 years, were asked whether they thought the border had an impact on the people who live close to it. Seventy five percent - including roughly equal proportions of males and females, and of those who identified themselves as Protestants and Catholics, agreed with the statement. Twenty five percent of young people sampled believed that the border had no impact on those who live close to it. They were then asked to explain why they believed the border did or did not have an impact of those who live close to it, giving as reasons any personal experiences they may have had.

Living close to the border is dangerous.

By far the predominant theme in the responses of those who believed that the border had an impact was danger. Three different vulnerabilities were readily identifiable. First, some young people perceived a present threat for those residing South of the border. They believed this either because they had experienced or had heard of violence occurring in the border area in which they lived. For instance one young person wrote 'I have heard a lot of stories about what has happened to people living close to the border. E.g. bricks being thrown at windows of houses, cars being vandalised and people getting

beaten up or seriously injured.' Another stated '…there has been a load of men shoot

(sic) around the area because I live beside the border'.

Others believed that those residing in border areas were particularly vulnerable in the

event of 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland escalating. For instance one respondent stated

'I think yes because if there was ever anything which went wrong the people who live

next to the border would be the first to know about it'. Similarly another respondent

stated '…when you live near the border if anything happens you will be near it so

therefore it is having an impact on you. It is in my opinion dangerous as so many things

happen on the border. As the border is near the north were (sic) a lot of things take

place'.

 Implicit in many explanations of the danger associated with the border was the view that

'the North' represented that danger. In some cases young people interpreted the term

'border' as meaning 'the North', as exemplified in the following passage: 'Yes I do think

the border has an influence on us because every time you turn on the tv or listen to the

news you see all the riots and fights not to mention all the innocent people who's being

brutally kilt (sic) all over the years. Like for example look at the Omagh bombing.'.

A final point evident in some young people's responses was the lasting impact of their

own earlier 'border experiences'. British security force checkpoints at the border were

identified as threatening by a number of young people and were recalled as a particular

source of anxiety during childhood. For instance one young person wrote 'I live near the

border of Monaghan and Tyrone. I was going into Tyrone and we had to go through a check point I use to always think something was going to happen to me. I used to be so scared.'

The border is a source of division.

A second theme that emerged from young people's responses was related to division. Young people referred to the impact of isolation on the minorities both North and South, but particularly on Protestants in the South. The political division and difference that has resulted between North and South was also highlighted. Because they speak centrally to the issue of division, a number of responses relating to the perceived illegitimacy and impracticality of the border are also included in this category.

Young people often spontaneously referred to the issue of religious and national division when writing of the impact of the border on those residing close to it. For instance one young person stated that the main reason that the border 'affects people is because of their religion'. This view was often underpinned by a belief that those from the minority group in the North or South were those most adversely affected due to isolation or intimidation. For instance the Catholic respondent quoted above went on to state 'Catholics in the North are the people who get the abuse and the same for Protestants living in the South. The level of abuse nowadays isn't as bad as five years ago but people still get the torture.' It is interesting to note that both personal and apparently vicarious experiences appear to inform young people's views.

Others saw the border as creating division between North and South rather than as relating to the religious division. In some cases young people referred to the border as resulting in an 'us versus them' mentality between Northerners and Southerners. In other instances the division and difference created between Northerners and Southerners was implicit in what young people said.

The final issue associated with division was related directly to the existence of the border. Some young people stated they could see no justification for the border. A small proportion perceived the border as illegitimate (3 respondents). Others admitted that they did not understand all the issues but saw the border as preventing the divisions between Catholic and Protestants and the associated violence in the North from encroaching on the South. Contrary to the isolated perspective of some minority group young people outlined above, these young people saw relations between Catholics and Protestants in the South as good. For instance once young person stated 'We go to school were (sic) there is both religions. We work with each other and are friends with each other why can't people except (sic) each other in the North'.

The border has no impact

A significant minority of young people sampled (25%) believed that the border had no impact on the people who live close to it. Some asserted that living near the border was no different to living elsewhere in Ireland, whilst others saw issues relating to the border

such as proximity to sterling shopping areas as so minor that they had little impact on everyday life. On occasion, the perceived lack of influence of the border currently was evidenced by comparison to how relevant the border had been in the past, when security and customs increased both the visibility and the salience of the border. For instance one young person stated 'The only good impact living on the border at Monaghan is you can go shopping and get lots of things. Where as you couldn't a few years back. You were stopped and the car would be searched for any things you couldn't bring back home.'

In some cases young people viewed the border as having no impact in part because they believed those who lived North and South had much in common. In direct contrast to the themes of division and difference evident in some responses, these young people saw their counterparts in the North as similar to themselves. In some cases, this belief was underpinned by an assertion that everyone living in Ireland, both in the North and in the South, was of Irish nationality. In other cases this belief was bolstered because of relatives who lived North of the border or because the respondent had significant contact with those living North of the border.

In summary, young people's views of the border would appear to be every bit as complex as those expressed by adults. There was disagreement and divergence evident in the responses obtained. Overall however it can be stated that for young people living close to the border, its presence represents danger at one level, but protection from this perceived threat at another. The border would also appear to be symbolic of the differences and divisions that remain in modern Ireland. In many cases these divisions were

characterised by the troubles in the North and were perceived to predominate there. However, these themes of difference and division were also evident in relation to young people's responses regarding their own experiences of living in border areas of the Republic. The young appear more conscious of the potential dangers that may continue to exist around the border or perhaps were more affected by these fears or were more willing to express them than were the adults sampled in these studies. .

Border crossings

One set of interviewees in our study who highlighted the border, talked much about border-crossings, and appeared the most 'European' in accepting the legitimacy but denying the relevance of the border, paradoxically lived farthest from it. These were the mixed-marriage families interviewed primarily to explore identity transmission across generations in situations where identity issues may have particular relevance or salience.[11]

We report here on thirteen in-depth interviews with individuals from four families, one in a Southern and three in a Northern city, each about 100 kilometers from the border. Each had connections which crossed the border or were situated near it: one woman presently living in the North grew up in the large border town where another part of our study was conducted (see above) and her father still lived in that town; a grandfather from the Southern family grew up in a village near that same town and had gone to school there; a

grandmother from another Northern family was a Dublin Protestant who, as a teenager, moved North with her family for economic reasons. These individuals retained strong linkages with their place of origin and spoke of the ways in which it had shaped their experience and identity. Members of the second generation in each family engaged in frequent border-crossings, in one case bi-weekly on work-related activity, in one case because of family connections, in another because of family and work, and in another for holidays. The youngest generation in the Southern family crossed the Irish border much more rarely – although they travelled frequently within Europe - and they showed no particular interest in so doing.[12]

In these interviews, the border was not seen as a national division – the other side of the border was not seen as 'a foreign country', not like England, which was emotionally distanced in the reports of some of the interviewees: 'I remember saying to dad why didn't we ever go to England on our holidays? …. There wasn't really a reason but it was like, why would you go there?' Members of the oldest generation had relatives on both sides of the border and described much 'to-ing and fro-ing'. For the mixed marriage couples themselves, territorial border-crossing was described in the same sorts of terms as was metaphorical border-crossing (marriage itself). The women described it in terms of openness to difference, 'I think the Irish explore each other's identities'. The men emphasized the similarities rather than the differences. Religion of origin made no difference to the way this was discussed.

The North was, however, seen as different. One grandfather, whose sense of a shared, indigenous Irish identity went back millennia and encompassed all parts of the island, said 'when the border was built it was like the Berlin wall, there was a wall built.. and the closer you got to that wall the darker the shadow was… [it] always appeared to me not to be the darkness of the land, it was the darkness that was created by that difference between the North and the South and it was strengthened when the border was erected…'. A young woman from the Southern border counties described her earlier perception of Northern Ireland: 'it was a place that you went to and did a bit of shopping and came home. It wasn't a place you chose to spend time, leisure time or socializing time, it was a place to go into and come out of, depending on the rate of sterling…' When she came to live in Belfast, she found 'there was a huge change in accent, a change in attitude, you know terminology'. In another case, the very frequency of contact with people in the North and of visits to Northern Ireland led a Southern woman to the view that Northerners were 'boxed' in their categories, that they were not 'open' in the way it was possible to be in the South, and that they would not change: 'I came back and I remember saying to John, never, ever, ever let the children go to the North of Ireland because if that hasn't changed before (sic) what's happened in the last few years, its never going to change'. The radical difference emphasized here, however, is not one of content but of form of nationality, not a difference in national categories but a difference in the mode of holding them.

Apart from the youngest generation, each of the adult interviewees had experience of violence associated with the Northern Ireland conflict, in most cases bombs and violence

in Dublin and Belfast. Grandparents from the South told of their own experience of violence in the border area, epitomized by the Northern security forces: 'you were amazed, probably even shocked by .. the colour of the uniforms.. the dark black uniform ... the first thing you noticed was the guns and you found that quite overpowering really'.[13] For this extended family, the safety of their present residence was contrasted to the danger of the border area in a number of personal and family memories of British security forces and armed police, of Orange marches in Newry, of the necessity to think in terms of precise oppositional distinctions as soon as one crossed the border.

Clear generational differences were highlighted in the interviews. One Belfast grandmother noted that her own mother, a Dublin Protestant, had a strong British identity, 'but then all of Ireland was under British rule when she was brought up'. The life paths of earlier generations of one family were critically affected by political events from the 1920s to the 1950s. The middle generation in all the families, in contrast, were border-crossers, not for political but for economic reasons: partly because of the new organization of their (middle class) work, the economic linkages and mergers between firms North and South, partly because of mobility associated with prosperity and holidays. Despite frequency of travel and individual experience of trans-border economic, professional and familial linkages, there was little discussion of the European Union and no-one of any age volunteered a sense of 'European-ness' beyond Irishness or Britishness. The two teenagers had a clear and unquestioned Irish identity and explicitly denied any sense of European identity.

Conclusions

The convergence within the research results reported above is significant precisely because the class, ethno-national and religious categories of individuals interviewed, their place of residence, age and background, and the degree of 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' of the researchers differed.[14] Several conclusions stand out.

First, it is the whole area of the border that is relevant to perception and interaction, not a particular territorial line. Very specific experiences were recounted in interviews and essays which made the border 'real' for the individuals. But that reality was also experienced as fluctuating and on a continuum, with penumbra of danger radiating from core areas ('snipers at work') through to normally safe havens (border towns) and even to bombs in Dublin and Belfast. This was perhaps why both youth and adults had difficulty in precisely characterizing the border or describing its impact on their lives. For them, the border was not primarily a line on a map or a division between states but a continuum in everyday life experience that might constantly be negotiated or avoided for a variety of ordinary motives – shopping, profit from smuggling, work, family. The border-area fluctuated in extent, depending at once on the activity and the period. It incorporated large towns in narratives of IRA camaraderie in the 1940s and 1950s, it might be condensed to a few roads in areas of military contestation in the 1970s and 1980s, it could appear as liminal, vanishing until it had already been passed through, in the later 1990s with peace and European harmonization.

Second, a key aspect of perception of the border involves danger. That danger is at once past and (potentially) present, at once experienced and feared. In the narratives reported above, the perceived loci and bearers of danger vary, sometimes centred in the border area itself, sometimes with the border a protection against danger from beyond, sometimes embodied in the British security forces, sometimes in the IRA. The variation is independent of political views. Young people, much more than adults, emphasize the danger on the 'other side' of the border. This may have been how restrictions on their mobility had been explained to them; it may also have been related to the fact that, during the Troubles, young males were the category most likely to experience violence. Adults in the border-area tend to emphasise past danger rather than present. Indeed while those living in the Southern border areas typically deny the significance of the border, they have also effectively used it to distance themselves psychologically from the troubles in the North. Thus they reduce any perceived risk to themselves and the area in which they reside.

Third, the border has clear economic impact. In some respects it has a negative value - an economic barrier between different currencies, a division of older settlements. In others it is a positive resource, to be tapped illegally in smuggling or through double-claiming of benefits, or an area which would benefit from European investment and funding.

Fourth, national and ethnic identity appears untouched by the border. Ethno-religious differences and oppositions between Protestant and Catholic are said to exist on both sides of the border, and are not defined by it. Even amongst the most a-political, a broad

conception of national unity appears to span the border. One interviewee noted that his family had lived in the same local area which now spanned the border since long before the plantation or even Norman invasion: 'we were there from the start'. From this perspective of the *longue durée*, which he attributed to his own extended family and from which he and his wife also defined their own national identity, the state border was a very recent and contingent event without implications for identity. Where difference coincided with the border, it was not defined in national terms but in cultural and moral terms: 'openness' and 'boxedness'.

Fifth, there was little emphasis on state sovereignty and territorial control. The border is portrayed not as the clear limits of a state, but rather as the area where state-ness comes into question and contest, where it is continually reconstituted by armed police or subverted by everyday interactions. Even among the most law-abiding, there is a discourse which subverts state-ness from below in stories of past episodes of law-breaking, relatives involved in the IRA, smuggling. An emphasis on counties, towns and provinces, rather than states and boundaries, is as evident in the school essays as in the interviews with adults in the large border town. This is not, for the most part, a sign of irredentist nationalism as much as a recognition of the contingency of borders, a recognition that state institutions only partially constitute the bounds of everyday life and civic interaction and when they do, this is often experienced in brutal armed form. The '26-county' state-centred perspective so prevalent in the Irish media over the last two decades has not been elicited by these interviews or essay studies. The legitimacy of the

state's institutions is not contested, but their contingency is recognized in discourse and narrative.

Sixth, where a European discourse is elicited, it focuses more on the practical than on the ideal-political European Union. It is most prominent in those areas and among those sectors of the population who directly encounter and benefit from European programmes. It is, for example, more evident in the border area itself, where considerable amounts of INTERREG and PEACE funding have been located, than among highly-mobile mixed marriage families in Dublin and Belfast.

Seventh, when we move from perception to (reported) practice, the permeability of the border appears to vary considerably. The participant observation study in Monaghan-Armagh showed considerable permeability; there was less among residents of the larger town, while the cross-border activity of professional people in mixed marriages on the Belfast-Dublin axis was remarkably high.

Our study suggests that state-centred perspectives and discourses oversimplify the densely experiential quality with which borders are perceived and their heterogeneity. The official 'map images' of the states or the border were not prominent in our research findings. We found little evidence of evolution from contested borders to institutionalization of borders to 'normalisation' of them, either within the life-span of individuals, or across classes or areas or generations. There is, however, much evidence of change in individuals'experience of the border over the life-cycle – typically related to

perceived changes in opportunities and in degrees of danger in the border area.

Generational differences were also highlighted by some of our interviewees. Attitudes to the Irish border in the (Southern) border counties appear, from our data, to be primarily experientially determined, with the border conceived as an area of fluctuating extent, rather than as a sharp demarcating line. Our respondents made subtle distinctions between different aspects and parts of the border area, and they were strongly resistant to a state-centred discourse of strict boundary-definitions, even when there appeared to be no strong resistance to the state(s) as such. Institutional and political structures became important in the narratives when they impinged on daily life. The EU has begun to become important, in an economic rather than political or cultural capacity. But this study shows that the relation between state-framed or EU-framed institutional interactions and identity formation is far from direct. The contingency of the Irish border has long appeared obvious to many of those who live beside it.

Our results raise new research questions, showing the need to problematise the periodisations common in the literature and to investigate empirically the relations and directions of causality between differing experiences and perceptions of borders, differing political ideologies and perceptions of state legitimacy, and differing modes of interaction. State-institutionalisation must become the object of study, not its premise. .

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[1] A number of schools in the border area were invited to participate and, in the Southern counties, three schools, each located in large towns, agreed: one a Roman Catholic secondary, another a Protestant secondary and the third a Roman Catholic vocational school. The pupils averaged 14 years of age and were asked if they thought the border had an impact on the people who live close to it, and why or why not.

Responses were read and re-read by three coders. Themes, often more than one per response, were identified and similarities in young people's responses identified.

[2] The research design involved interviewing members of three-generational families; the overriding criterion used to choose interviewees was their membership in such a family and willingness to participate in the interviews. There was a representative age- and gender-spread (with the exception of the youngest generation who were underrepresented in interviews but at the centre of the school essay study), Protestants were slightly over-represented in terms of their numbers on the Southern side of the border; the interviewees were predominantly but not exclusively middle class.

[3] Predominantly but not exclusively Catholic. See Bowen, 1983.

[4] Reflecting this, most textbooks on Irish politics and Irish society consider only the politics and society of the Irish state.

[5] This is the view put forward in much of the scholarly literature.

[6] The interviewees appeared to generalize their childhood memories of the war years (known as the 'emergency' in the Irish state) to the pre-war years.

[7] The periods are not strictly bound, they often overlap between and within narratives.

[8] It is, for example, typical to end the initial period in the late 1920s, and begin the 'troubles' period only in 1968-9.

[9] How exactly danger was perceived varied between respondents. Protestant respondents appeared somewhat less concerned about the dangers within Northern Ireland. On the other hand, one Protestant family had in the past experienced intimidation by neighbours when attempting to buy land.

[10] The latter were often discussed 'off tape'

[11] By 'mixed marriage families' we mean individuals in Protestant-Catholic marriages, their parents and their children.

[12] The teenage boy recalled only a few visits North of the border, one with his school to catch a boat to Scotland, another with friends to buy fireworks, still illegal in the South. The teenage girl recalled no trips to the North. In the Northern families, the children frequently holidayed in the South with their parents.

[13] The Irish security forces are unarmed

[14] The school study and participant observation study were cross-class; the interviews were predominantly (and in the case of the mixed marriage families, exclusively) middle-class. On 'insider' and 'outsider' status in qualitative research, see Ganiel and Mitchell, 2004.

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