

Book Review: Border Encounters: Asymmetry and Proximity at Europe's Frontiers, edited by Jutta Lauth Bacas and William Kavanagh

*Among the tremendous changes affecting Europe in recent decades, those concerning political frontiers have been some of the most significant. International borders are being opened in some regions while being redefined or reinforced in others. **Border Encounters** is rich in empirical detail, writes **Anne White**, and is also an excellent introduction to border theory, with a helpful literature review. Anthropological case studies from a number of European borderlands shed light on the questions of how, and to what extent, the border context influences the changing interactions and social relationships between people at a political frontier.*



Border Encounters: Asymmetry and Proximity at Europe's Frontiers.
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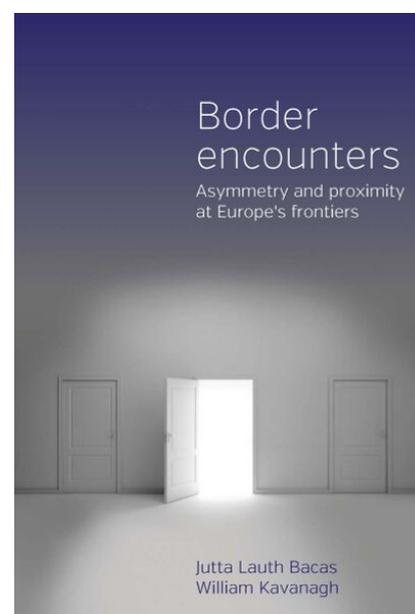
When hundreds of migrants [drowned off Lampedusa on 3 October 2013](#), politicians, the Pope and the public focused their attention on the terrible risks people take to cross the EU border. Once again, the paradox of the border was thrown into sharp relief. As an institution committed to spreading humanitarian values beyond its borders and across the world, the EU was called upon to provide assistance to desperate migrants stranded in the sea. Yet the EU had created the problem in the first place by enforcing strict security on its [Schengen border](#) and closing the door to legal immigration.

It is only when such dramatic events take place that border areas are remembered. They are typically poor regions far from the capital city and its landmarks, which symbolise the nation-state. *Border Encounters* presents a view of Europe looking in at the state and the EU from its edges. [Jutta Lauth Bacas](#) and [William Kavanagh](#) have brought together a team of anthropologists from across Europe, and the border encounters analysed in the book take place along eleven intra- and outer EU borders, stretching from Portugal to Ukraine. The editors claim that 'border studies has turned out to be one of the fastest growing and fruitful branches of the discipline of anthropology, as well as of other political and social sciences' (pp. 8-9); their volume illustrates the fruitfulness of border encounters as a research area.

As the contributors to *Border Encounters* show, it is on the border that the power and identity of the nation-state and the EU is put to the test; that power is often subverted, and strict distinctions between 'us' and 'them' are blurred. As Lauth Bacas and Kavanagh write in their introduction (p. 2), 'in the changing Europe of recent decades, a new and multifaceted reality – far from the metaphorical figure of the omnipotent guard in front of Kafka's castle – has developed in the border encounters the present volume aims to investigate'.

The fragmentation of Europe's ethno-federal states in the early 1990s created 8000 kilometres of new national borders in Europe and, according to Milan Bufon, more than 50 million people in Europe live within twenty-five kilometres of a border.

Moreover, the Schengen process and EU enlargement have fundamentally changed the meanings of borders across Europe. Borders were 'redefined, radically reshaping the "inside" and "outside" of the EU' (Lauth Bacas and Kavanagh, p. 1).



The editors state that ‘the aim of the present volume is to investigate ongoing developments at some of these borders from the ground up, taking a local perspective’ (p. 1). Much of the book’s fascination derives from the contributors’ ability to chart the impact of change on the face-to-face interactions among people whose lives are shaped by the border. Mathijs Pelkmans, for example, traces the history of a Georgian village next to Turkey which transformed in 1991 from being an isolated community on the Iron Curtain into a ‘gateway for international trade’. ‘The tiny village of only a thousand inhabitants soon got the nickname of little Kuwait... “all the furniture, the cars and the televisions, those are all from that period”’ (p. 100).

As Pelkmans shows, the Georgian authorities eventually managed to impose a measure of control on the border, not by abolishing smuggling, but by extorting bribes. The new border regime evolved as a hierarchy based on travellers’ ability to pay. ‘Passports provided customs officers with the information to judge each traveller’s strength or weakness’ (p. 104). Foreigners were charged less, in case they complained to their embassies; ethnic minority Georgian citizens were charged the most, and Pelkmans speculates this was because ‘ethnic Georgians were more likely to have contacts that could visit reprisals on the customs officers’ (ibid).



Migrants arriving on the island of Lampedusa in August 2007. Credit: [noborder network](#) CC BY 2.0

In another chapter, Lisa Dikomitis explores how attitudes to the Green Line have evolved differently among Turkish and Greek Cypriots since the border became more open in 2003. Turks often took the opportunity to visit their abandoned birthplaces once, but then adopted a more pragmatic and unsentimental approach to border crossing, sightseeing, shopping and working in the Greek section. By contrast, Dikomitis’s Greek interviewees were reluctant even to cross the border.

As befits anthropology, *Border Encounters* is rich in empirical detail. However, it is also an excellent introduction to border theory, with a helpful literature review. The theoretical framework clearly set out in the Introduction and the individual chapters do collectively illustrate why borders should be seen as constructs and as sites of asymmetrical social relationships.

As border theorists highlight, there is no such thing as a ‘natural’ border: borders are always social and political constructs. As such, they fulfil a range of practical and symbolic functions, which alter as the border itself becomes harder or more porous.

Border zones typically have long experience of conflict but are also places of cultural overlap, where, for example, similar local dialects are spoken on either side. At the same time, as the editors discuss and the chapters amply illustrate, another almost universal feature of border zones is their asymmetry. If borders divided two places which were the same there would be no point in crossing the border; in practice, one side is usually richer, more expensive and more powerful than the other, leading to cross-border labour migration, trade and shopping. In their border encounters, people act out and also create new social relationships based on these asymmetries.

All in all, this is an intriguing and well-structured volume which will be of interest to students and scholars from a variety of academic disciplines.

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