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## Political Geography

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## Guest editorial

## Borders on steroids: Open borders in a Covid-19 world?

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After the fall of the Berlin Wall, some globalisation theorists wrote confidently of the coming 'borderless world' (for an overview, see [Paasi & Prokkola, 2019](#)). Yet three decades on, the world has become more fenced and bordered than at any time in human history. If populist movements, epitomized by the UK's Brexit vote and the USA's Trump presidency, accelerated this process, then Covid-19 has brought us what we might call 'borders on steroids'—that is to say, an unprecedented and rapid proliferation and intensification of border controls with strikingly little critical debate or democratic deliberation. More bordering looms on the horizon: for example, the UK government's recent foreign policy review, *Global Britain*, promises 'the most effective border in the world by 2025' ([HM Government, 2021](#)).

Border controls on movement are a form of global apartheid that killed over 3000 people worldwide in 2020 alone ([International Organization for Migration, 2020](#)). The need to make the case for open borders has never been greater, but arguments by academics and activists in favour of open borders not only have come under sustained attack both from right and left but have also been overtaken by a series of recent political and intellectual developments. This intervention calls on political geographers to rework and restate the case against borders and migration controls and suggests some ways to do that.

The arguments for open borders go back to the xenophobia-driven rise of modern migration controls at the *fin de siècle*. One early statement of support for open borders, at the 1899 International Conference on Emigration and Immigration in London, affirmed the 'fundamental liberty' of every individual 'to come and go' as they pleased ([Harris, 2002](#), 131). Open-borders arguments have become more common as the deadliness of post-Cold War borders has become more apparent. The case for open borders can reference a range of moral, ethical, economic, political and pragmatic arguments ([Megoran, 2005](#)). Reece Jones has articulated this position most clearly within political geography. Based on his studies of border walls worldwide, and the politics of migration controls in the USA, he argues that 'Borders are at the vanguard of the security state because they are spaces of hyper-sovereignty where the

most extreme, violent, and exceptional practices are implemented' ([Jones, 2012](#), p. 179). His landmark 2019 collection, *Open Borders*, brought together activists and thinkers from a range of disciplines and positions to reiterate the argument for 'a borderless world of free movement' ([Jones, 2019](#), p. 267).

This case for open borders appears morally compelling but has received significant criticism from both right and left. On the right, Republican politicians repeat claims Donald Trump made as President that the Democrats are 'intent on furthering their agenda of open borders and trying to release all illegal alien families and minors who show up at the border' ([White House, 2018](#)). According to Trump, 'open borders' allow not only illegal aliens but also drug dealers, gang members, rapists and murderers to roam freely in the country. In his book *Why Borders Matter*, Frank [Furedi \(2021\)](#) attacks not only progressive arguments for open borders but also left-wing 'identity politics' that question the traditional social boundaries between male/female, young/old, and human/animal. Furedi contends, in the subtitle of his book, that because these various debordering processes close down debate and undermine the coherent functioning of society, 'humanity must relearn the art of drawing boundaries.' Opposition to open borders has also come from the liberal left. In articulating a theory of 'just borders', leading liberal philosopher Onara ([O'Neill, 1994](#), 84-6) argues that bounded states are prerequisites for democratic societies. This endorsement of the limited violence of state migration controls has been echoed by Yael Tamir, who opines that a borderless world 'can neither be democratic nor just' ([Tamir, 2019](#), 33).

Advocates of open borders continue to rebut the claim that borders are necessary for societal cohesion and democracy (eg [Sager, 2020](#)). But I contend that the open borders position has been overtaken by four recent political and intellectual developments. The first is greater sensitivity to the rights of indigenous communities and the challenges to their survival posed by migration ([Carlsson, 2020](#)). Many communities have struggled to claw back sovereignty over historic lands, and this implies the ability to enforce bordered control of migration into them.

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Strikingly, however, ‘indigenous rights/sovereignties/peoples’ are absent from the indexes of virtually all the recent books making the case for open borders. Walia’s *Border Rule* (2021) is the exception, but her important recognition that both migrants and indigenous peoples are subject to violence from a bordered, racist capitalist state system does not properly grapple with the tensions between free movement and indigenous rights.

Second, and linked to this, is settler colonialism and, in particular, the gross mistreatment of Turkic minorities in China’s Xinjiang province under its post-2017 ‘De-Extremification Policy’ (Anand, 2019). In 2005, I argued that free movement is an important way to enable people to pursue livelihoods. China’s remarkable economic development has been held up as the prime example of this. However, this claim ignores how part of China’s migration-fuelled ‘economic miracle’ has been predicated on a form of settler colonialism – the mass resettlement of Han Chinese in Xinjiang – that has laid the foundation of the present genocide. We have thus come to see more clearly since 2017 how borderlessness can abet settler colonialism.

Third is the rise of Islamic State/Daesh. On proclaiming the establishment of its ill-fated caliphate, Daesh released a striking video message entitled ‘The end of Sykes-Picot’. This referenced the 1916 Anglo-French pact that carved the contemporary boundaries of the Middle East out of the collapsing Ottoman Empire. Daesh aspires to replace the capitalist nation-state system with a global, borderless community (Cockburn, 2015). It is a reminder that what we might call ‘actually existing borderlessness’ can be deeply problematic, yet this awareness is not reflected upon in the literature.

Fourthly and finally is the Covid-19 pandemic, which has seen the materialization of national, regional and local borders in previously unimagined ways. A study comparing the success of different states in controlling the first wave of the disease identified ‘firm international border controls’ as one of the key factors in mitigating infections (Hale, 2021). Do we really want a world in which we cannot contain deadly communicable diseases by temporarily halting movement?

Our increased sensitivity to indigenous people’s struggles, settler colonialism, communicable diseases, and the role of borderlessness in facilitating genocide, means that the debate in 2021 looks different from that just five years ago. The extant arguments for open borders do not sufficiently get to grips with these challenges, making them vulnerable to superficial dismissal. Yet the current global system of bordered migration controls, which act to prevent some fellow humans from sharing the benefits of plenitude and safety on no basis other than the arbitrary accident of birth, is morally indefensible. The case against migration controls is so important that it needs reworking. I suggest that that political geographers are in a unique position to do this, for two reasons.

The first is our disciplinary attention to terminological precision. Almost the entire literature on the debate about ‘open borders’ falls prey to significant and frequent category errors, in that ‘borders,’ ‘boundaries,’ ‘border walls’ and ‘migration policies’ are frequently confused or conflated. For example, Furedi’s defence of ‘borders’ starts as an attack on advocates of ‘open borders’ but is really a discussion of a range of otherwise unconnected social conventions linked only nominally by being termed ‘symbolic boundaries.’ Similarly, Jones’s argument for ‘open borders’ is rhetorically structured around tangible barricades like the US-Mexico border wall, but at its core it is primarily a critique of racist migration policies, some of which are bolstered physically and discursively by walls. As political geographers, we need to be careful to distinguish between *international boundaries* as the invisible and intangible vertical planes delimiting the horizontal extent of formal legal state sovereignty, and *international borders* as social institutions and practices associated with them. These may or may not include walls, fences, border checkpoints, migration policies/international treaties, and nationalist iconography and discourse. Borders increasingly re-materialize away from the literal edges of states—internally in the policing of migration in classrooms, hospitals, workplaces and other everyday

spaces (Yuval-Davis, Wemys, & Cassidy, 2019), and externally in the pressure placed on weaker states to implement, on their own territories, the border policies of more powerful ones (Böröcz, 2016). Carefully using these distinctions between international boundaries and borders allows us to clarify precisely what we are arguing for or against, and to move away from over-simplifications like arguments for ‘open/no borders’ or ‘borders matter.’

Secondly, having disaggregated borders and boundaries in this way, political geographers’ openness to theoretical diversity should enable us to devise creative reworkings of open-borders arguments. As one example, I draw on the rejuvenation of anarchism within geography (Springer, 2016). Elsewhere (Megoran, 2020) I have sketched out a preliminary framework using Christian anarchist thought that conceptualises borders and boundaries as examples of *archē* (New Testament Greek: ‘powers and authorities’) having a legitimate role only in so far as they promote human flourishing. Thus, for example, boundaries may be useful for delimiting who is responsible for providing healthcare, maintaining fire-fighting services, monitoring pollution, clearing rubbish, and so on, in certain spaces. Border controls may be legitimately exercised in activities such as interdicting people-traffickers, containing the spread of communicable diseases, or protecting vulnerable lands and communities from capitalist and settler colonialisms. But there is no legitimate place for migration controls that perpetuate wealth inequalities or prevent vulnerable people moving from places ravaged by disasters such as capitalist crises, armed conflicts, oppression, and the effects of climate change. And even the apparently reasonable uses of borders can be delegitimised if they are deployed in ways that curtail human flourishing.

There will be different ways that political geography, as a diverse field, will rise to the challenge that I have identified here. But, however we do so, the importance of questioning the basic morality of borders and bordering practices should not be underestimated at a time when politicians of all political stripes presuppose the inadequacy of border controls. In April 2021, as the most right-wing British government in recent times imposed the toughest border controls in peacetime history, Labour Party opposition spokesperson Alex Norris warned that “We still have gaping holes at the border” and called for even tougher measures (BBC, 2021). Under such circumstances, it is naïve to think that these new borders and migration regimes will simply dematerialise when the world tames Covid-19. To put it another way, it is unlikely that borders will come off steroids any time soon. It is imperative that political geographers find new ways to challenge them.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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