At the Border

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Editorial

At the Border

More than ever before, processes of globalization and migration have turned border issues into a prioritized area of politics in practically every country. What happens at the border has become a subject of increasing political debate, ranging from discussions of how states should accommodate refugees to debates on security and the scope of moral and democratic responsibility. But while what happens *at* the border has become an area of intensified politics, much academic thinking on ethics and politics is still predicated on what happens *beyond* and *within* borders. It proceeds from a conflict between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, or between human rights and popular sovereignty. The contributions to this special issue of *Ethics & Global Politics* call attention to this gap in contemporary political thought. In different ways they seek new means of theorizing the political activity that currently takes place at national borders by problematizing some of its basic assumptions.

In the first article Jens Bartelson examines the paradoxical question of grounding that theorists face in their cosmopolitan attempts to legitimate democracy beyond the nation-state. Through a genealogical inquiry into the justificatory praxis of boundary making he aims to show that the paradox that we encounter today in trying to widen the scope of democratic legitimacy is predicated on two historically contingent assumptions: that political communities must be bounded and that they must be based on consent in order to be considered democratic. Once we let go of these requirements, Bartelson argues, the paradox will appear less of a problem and more of a category mistake due to a nationally permeated reading of the cosmopolitan democratic idea.

John Agnew takes issue with the current discourse on borders, arguing that it remains trapped in an overly rigid framework of either/or. Either borders are perceived as facts on the ground or they are understood as human artefacts open to change. According to Agnew, such a dualist view overlooks that borders have both practical merits and demerits that must be constantly addressed and reweighed. Borders or no borders is not the question. The question is what ethical purposes they serve and what political functions they have. What do borders do for and to people?

Hans Lindahl's article explores the relationship between theories of distributive justice and migration. He argues that while theories of justice are concerned with interrogating the distributive notion of 'to each their own', they often leave the word 'own'—and its corresponding indexicals of 'here', 'now' and 'we'—unproblematized. Showing that such distributive acts have no original referent to refer back to, he calls

into question the right to inclusion and exclusion that contemporary polities like the European Union claim for themselves with respect to immigrants. As he argues, a polity or a nomos is at once made possible and undermined by the invocation of an anomos that cannot be reduced to an empirical time and space.

It is often claimed that the contemporary world is boundless. Yet boundaries arise and are defended everywhere. Nationalist movements, border patrols, gated communities and physical walls as that between the US and Mexico or Israel and Palestine make it seem too premature to count borders out of the discussion of global politics. Rather, as the contributors to this issue demonstrate, it seems more urgent than ever before to understand and interrogate their historical, political and ethical significance.

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