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DEVELOPMENT CONTRIBUTING TO PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

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TO NORTH-SOUTH CO-OPERATION IN A DIVIDED ISLAND

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STUDYING BORDER CHANGE IN IRELAND

A BRIEFING PAPER

John Coakley and Liam O'Dowd
Institute for British Irish Studies, UCD
and Centre for International Borders Research, QUB

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Introduction

When deciding on areas in which to conduct their research, academics do not always choose topics that are of immediate, obvious interest to informed opinion, still less to the general public. It is not likely that non-specialists will be fascinated by such issues as the impact of lower preference transfers in elections fought out by the single transferable vote, the factors that influence the effectiveness of competition policy, or the debate on embodied versus symbolic meaning—important though some of these issues might be, in the longer term, for daily life.

On the other hand, there are many areas of great social and policy significance that appear not to attract the interest of researchers. Some of these are big questions—so big, perhaps, that few are bold enough to tackle them; or, if they do tackle them, there may be no agreement on the answer. Why do wars occur? How do we account for large-scale economic and social transformations? How can we explain the rise (and fall) of democratic systems of government? These are important questions that relatively few researchers have tackled, and that even fewer claim to have answered.

In the project being presented here, we have tried to bridge these perspectives—to tackle an area in which there already exists a substantial body of writing in the various social sciences, but an area that is also of considerable social importance, in that it has an impact on the everyday lives of thousands of people, and they therefore have a great deal of interest in studying and explaining it. This is the issue of the Irish border, and its consequences, negative and positive. Our starting point is that, like other borders within and outside the European Union, the Irish border is not just a line on the map: it has continuing social, economic, and, obviously, political significance. But, to a greater extent than other borders, it amounts to much more than this. Since its creation it has also been of great symbolic significance, representing for some the violation of the historic integrity of the island of Ireland, but standing in the eyes of others as a bulwark against culturally alien, politically menacing and economically damaging forces on the other side. The Irish border is, then, not just an important administrative marker; it is also deeply embedded in the emotional lives of those who live along it and, indeed, those who are far removed from it.

In this introductory paper, then, we provide a preliminary overview of a project designed to explore these complex aspects of the Irish border. We hope, on the basis of reaction from those with a more detailed, everyday experience of its effects, to refine this outline to ensure that we minimise the potential gap between the preoccupations of academics and the concerns of those for whom the border is not an abstract object of study but a living reality. We begin by making some general remarks on the nature of the Irish border, we continue by describing three phases in its evolution, by looking briefly at the international dimension and by commenting on the complex impact of the border at local level, and we conclude by outlining the set of questions to which we hope this project will provide at least partial answers.

Studying the Irish border

Borders are ambiguous and contradictory constructions. At one level, state borders often seem “fixed” and durable. We come to take them for granted as shaping our everyday activities, identities and reference points. Yet, border change in general is one of the constants of contemporary life. The primary focus of the *Mapping frontiers* research project is on **how the significance of the Irish border has changed, and how this change has affected** the prospects for mutually beneficial cross-border co-operation and for overcoming the malign legacy of division and conflict on the island. Change in state borders can be manifested in two forms:

- in the geographical location of state boundaries;
- in the functions and meanings of fixed geographical boundaries.

There is no automatic link between these two types of change—for example, functions and meanings can change while boundaries remain fixed in geographical terms. It must, of course, be conceded that when boundary location changes it is likely that the function and meaning of the boundary, too, will change.

The first type of change happens only in exceptional circumstances (such as conquest, dynastic bargains, post-war treaties or local plebiscites). Nevertheless, such geographical change is more prevalent than might be imagined, especially if one examines the history of state borders in Europe in the 20th century. The “upgrading” of formerly internal boundaries to the status of state borders in the wake of the collapse of the USSR was only latest wave of border drawing in a century characterised by the disintegration of the great empires and the proliferation of national states. In fact, the state borders of the UK and the southern Irish state as defined in 1920 have proved rather more durable than most of the state borders constructed in Europe over the last 100 years.

The creation, drawing or re-drawing of state borders in geographical terms is typically a “top-down” exercise—a project of political and military elites. Of course, the consequences of border creation are often very different from those originally intended. Likewise, even powerful elites can be influenced by the disposition of those on whom the border is imposed—people living in the borderland can make a difference, if not always to the location of the border, at least to its function and meaning.

The second type of change—i.e., in the functions and meanings of the border—is more intangible and invisible but also more continuous. Here the “bottom up” influences interact with the “top-down” influences. The functions of borders change over time, in terms of how they regulate the movement of people and commodities. These functions can be affected by wider influences such as state policies, economic, political and cultural globalisation, new forms of economic development, technology, changing inter-governmental arrangements or emerging transnational entities such as the EU. But border functions are also affected by the informal border regimes created by those who regularly police and cross borders and by those who live in borderland regions. Here the symbolic meanings of the border are also important for those who live in the border region as well as for the states on either side. Critical here is the extent to which the border is effective as a means of separating “us” from “them”, whether it is a symbol of deep-rooted, irreconcilable division or an insurmountable barrier—or alternatively, if it may be seen as a bridge or even as a positive resource. Borders can evoke a wide range of complex meanings on the part of those living in border regions—such as fear, distrust, a sense of threat, abandonment, displacement, marginality, or a place of opportunity or escape. The changing functions of borders may have implications for their changing meaning over time. While the Irish border has demonstrated a high degree of spatial fixity, like many other borders internationally its functions and meanings have remained far from static from the perspective of the groups on either side.

The main focus of this project is on how the functions and meanings of the Irish border have changed over time—first, during a period of relative stability from the 1920s to 1972, but especially since 1972. Of particular importance to us are the changes resulting from the deepening of European integration from the mid 1980s onwards and those occurring in the post 1998 period after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The core of the research project will analyse the functions and meanings of the border under four headings—the border as:

1. a barrier
2. a bridge
3. a resource
4. a symbol of identity

We recognise, however, that the border will be viewed differently by different groups — since its inception, it has been a contested border. Moreover, the border and its hinterland are not

homogeneous, and the changes may manifest themselves differently in different parts of the border region such as the eastern, central and north-western regions. Given that the creation of the border in 1920 has left a material legacy and a set of memories which still have an impact on the present, we also devote a section of the project to a historical analysis of the formation of the border between 1880 and 1925. Throughout, therefore, our approach is inter-disciplinary, historical and comparative.

We have identified three broad phases in the evolution of the Irish border to help organise our research. In each phase we try to acknowledge that the British and Irish states are part of a wider, and changing, international context within which the particularities of the Irish border must be understood.

Border creation, 1880-1920

The emergence of partition between 1880 and 1920 must be understood against a background in which the great European empires, and the British empire in particular, reached their zenith. By the end of first world war the first signs of imperial disintegration were evident. This period also saw the establishment of the principle of national self-determination and the emergence of a more complex system of successor states. It is worth noting the extent to which imperialists and nationalists appealed to different criteria when drawing or creating borders. For the former, territorial aggrandizement was seen to be a necessary requirement of state policy (Caplow 1998). Imperial statesmen claimed the right, duty and expertise to divide up the globe politically.¹ Of course, both imperialists and nationalists drew on a common fund of older justifications and post hoc rationalisations for particular state boundaries. These included appeals to divine providence, to the authority of religion and to markers in the physical world (such as mountains, rivers and seas).²

The gradual disintegration of the British Empire and the subsequent nationalisation of politics in the British and Irish states have obscured the extent to which both home rule and partition were imperial solutions to imperial problems—a fact made clear in the detailed histories of the home rule crisis and the events leading to partition (Gallagher, 1957; Laffan, 1983; O’Callaghan, 1999; Phoenix, 1994). In a recent comprehensive examination of the Boundary Commission, Margaret O’Callaghan (1999: 32) confirms that contemporary documents show clearly that the division of Ireland was a chapter in British imperial history after the Versailles settlement and part of an emerging Commonwealth history. She urges the restoration of partition to its broader international context in the face of subsequent attempts to see it in terms internal to Ireland or **Ulster**. We would add the need also to consider the extent to which it represented a form of “victor’s justice”—unlike state-building experiments elsewhere in Europe after the first world war, that in Ireland was internal to the United Kingdom, with no formal external involvement or arbitration.

¹ A classic example is Lord Curzon of Kedleston. After his retirement as Viceroy of India in 1905, he addressed the University of Oxford in 1907 in his famous Romanes Lecture on “Frontiers”. Here, he expounded on the importance of the “Frontier” for the British Empire for shaping the character of the Anglo-Saxon race while celebrating the capacity and skill of European imperialists in creating and managing frontiers all over the globe. He noted the British land frontier of 3,000 miles with the US, the nearly 6,000 mile long frontier in India with Persia, Russia, Afghanistan, Tibet, China, Siam and France, and frontiers of over 12,000 miles in Africa with other European powers and native tribes. Later he was Foreign Secretary in the coalition government that confirmed Irish partition in 1920, although his involvement was minimal. His career illustrates the point that the imposition of borders and partitions was deemed to be a natural part of imperial statecraft and many imperial politicians were intimately involved in the Irish situation. In contrast, nationalists in Ireland, and elsewhere, laid claim to bordered homelands in the name of the “nation” or the “people”.

² See Buchanan and Moore (2003), who explore the ethics of boundary making in the great religious traditions of the world and identify five types of boundary creation or alteration: conquest, settlement, sale/purchase, inheritance and secession.

The range of methods used to fix, impose or change state borders were various in the absence of agreed criteria for border delimitation. Military conquest, local balances of power and coercion between contending groups, occasional local plebiscites, the arbitrations of victorious war-time allies or, in the case of nationalists, democratic claims to the right of self-determination, were all advanced singly, or in combination, as a means of border formation. Both imperialists and nationalists lacked systematic or widely accepted criteria for drawing political borders. Where there was a direct conflict between imperialist and nationalist positions as in Ireland, the capacity of local groups to mobilise political resources to control territory became crucial.

The Irish border's precise location was the outcome of a complex struggle over home rule rather than the initial project of any of the key protagonists. The status quo of the Union and limited home rule for the whole island were both compatible with imperial solutions to the Irish problem in that both retained the island within the Empire. In fact, until the 1916 rising, perhaps the majority of Irish nationalists envisaged home rule within the Empire and urged that Ireland be accorded equal status with Britain at its core. Unionists feared, however, that home rule, as operated by a Catholic majority, was only a stepping stone to ever-greater autonomy and independence from the UK and the Empire. Clearly, advanced nationalists and republicans did pursue an anti-imperialist line, especially after 1916. The deadlock between the broad unionist and nationalist positions was eventually arbitrated by the Imperial parliament in the aftermath of the first world war. The settlement encapsulated in article 12 of the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921 remained open to contradictory interpretations and hopes—for many Irish nationalists it was a stepping stone to unity and greater independence, for many imperialists and unionists, it retained the island of Ireland within the British sphere of influence and ensured the creation of a political unit in Northern Ireland aimed at maintaining and strengthening the links between the two islands.

Border consolidation, 1920-1972

The precise delimitation of the border, however, was at least as important as the overall issue of partition. The exact geographical border was determined by the balance of local realities—notwithstanding British preference until a late stage for exclusion of all of Ulster—and the insistence of unionists and their allies in Britain on retaining the largest possible area within the UK that had the best long-term chances of survival, or, in other words, that had a “permanent” majority in favour of the Union. Lustick's specification of the importance of border delimitation is highly apposite in the Irish case:

[State] boundaries specify who and what are potential participants or objects of the political game and who are and what are not. Different borders have different demographic implications and different political myths associated with them. The territorial shape of a state thus helps determine what interests are legitimate, what resources are mobilizable, what questions are open for debate, what ideological formulas will be relevant, what cleavages could become significant and what political allies might be available (Lustick, 1993: 40).

The Irish border did not, of course, just separate Protestant from Catholic. As is very well known, it left a large Catholic minority (amounting at the time to about 35 per cent of the population, to rise eventually to about 45 per cent) on the northern side; as is less well known, it left a smaller but still substantial Protestant minority (amounting originally to about 10 per cent, reducing quickly to 7 per cent and ultimately to 3 per cent) on the southern side. The new minorities created—northern nationalists and southern unionists—now found themselves relatively powerless in the “political game”; their political myths were marginalised, their mobilisable resources limited, and their stated political interests deemed illegitimate.

In the event, two highly asymmetrical political units were created in Ireland, with different powers, economies, rationales and with opposing official views of history and religious affiliations. One was committed to both the building of a distinct state and nation, the other to the status quo of Union and Empire. With the failure of the Boundary Commission in 1925,

the dominant parties in each jurisdiction sought to consolidate their respective territories at the expense of a shared all-island space. In effect, they “closed” the border, gradually accentuating its role as a barrier and symbol of the antagonistic identities of unionists and nationalist/republicans alike. The Irish jurisdictions were to develop in a back-to-back fashion—the North as a part of a still powerful British state and empire, and the South as a relatively poor, peripheral country committed to a separatist path. Policies on health, education, welfare, agriculture economic development, roads, railways and policing, no longer operated on an all-island basis. Divergences between the two jurisdictions became cumulative as both state institutions and policies followed different trajectories. Within Northern Ireland itself, the boundaries between “Protestant” and “Catholic” communities now served as proxies for the border between North and South.

What emerged was a prolonged “cold war” between the unionist administration in the North and successive administrations in the South. Both sides were committed to self-fulfilling prophecies about the intentions and behaviour of the “other”. For unionists, southern state- and nation-building was seen as inevitably enhancing the border as barrier while providing a permanent incitement to minority disaffection within Northern Ireland. For Southern administrations, unionist insistence on monopolising power in Northern Ireland was rooted in British support. Southern governments, therefore, sought in vain to persuade British governments to modify or end partition. A dialogue of the deaf ensued between Ulster unionists and Southern nationalists, a dialogue generally routed through a detached and sometimes apathetic British government.

Among the factors consolidating the border between 1920 and 1972 were the creation of customs posts (1923), the rejection of the Boundary Commission Report (1925), the economic war of the 1930s, the new Irish constitution of 1937, the second world war, the declaration of the Republic in 1949, the IRA’s border campaign 1956-1962 and associated cratering of border roads, and the prolonged conflict between 1968 and 1998 largely, but not exclusively, within Northern Ireland. Border road closures and fortifications and the deepening of communal division emphasised the image of the border as a barrier and as a symbol of antagonistic identities. Even when working together, the divergent economic interests and policies of the British and Irish states helped consolidate it. For example, the currency union, which had lasted from the early nineteenth century, ended in 1979 when the parity between the Irish pound and sterling was broken.

Not all of the trends in this period pointed in the one direction (Kennedy 2000; Tannam 1999). The border proved to be a resource for those involved in the extensive smuggling trade and there was some low-key collaboration on specific projects between the two jurisdictions—a trend the Lemass-O’Neill contacts in the mid 1960s sought to encourage (Kennedy 2000). Since 1972, the factors serving to maintain and transcend the border have intensified, creating a far-reaching process that re-configured rather than abolished the border.

Border reconfiguration, 1972-

The retirement of both de Valera and Brookeborough from active party politics opened the way for more pragmatic modernisers such as Lemass and O’Neill. The prospect of EEC membership and greater free trade between Ireland and Britain meant that the protectionist economic policies in the South had outlived their usefulness. In the North, the rapid decline of the traditional shipbuilding, engineering and linen industries in the early 1960s created pressures for the restructuring of the economy. In the South, the main problems were mass emigration, rural decline, unemployment and underemployment. The promotion of foreign direct investment emerged as a common plank in the policies of northern and southern governments to combat their respective socio-economic problems. The Lemass-O’Neill contacts in 1965-66 initially promised a peaceful and more co-operative transition to a new era of cross-border co-operation.

In the event, the Lemass-O'Neill initiatives proved to be a "false dawn"—conflict and instability in Northern Ireland were to radically change the context of cross-border co-operation for the next three decades. With the suspension of Stormont in 1972, the British government gradually accepted the Irish government as a partner (albeit with junior status) in attempts to reconfigure the partition settlement of 1920. The agreements reached in December 1973, November 1985 and April 1998 are the obvious high points of formalised inter-jurisdictional co-operation, with the last of these the most far-reaching, given the administrative architecture that it has generated. Over the last two decades these agreements and the accelerating pace of European integration have promoted a climate of enhanced cross-border co-operation funded by EU, inter-governmental and philanthropic agencies. Under the Good Friday Agreement, the cross-border strand of co-operation is part of a more comprehensive attempt to build co-operation across sectarian borders within Northern Ireland and between Ireland and Britain.

At the root of the Northern Ireland problem are mutually contradictory claims to exclusive forms of territorial sovereignty. The strengthening of the Irish border as a barrier between 1920 and the 1960s underlined the intractability of the competing claims. The growing significance of the Irish border in this period was in line with the increasing importance of national states in shaping the everyday life of their citizens. In Europe, growing state intervention in the economy, mobilisation for war, the development of state socialism and the welfare state all combined to enhance the significance of national states and of the differences between them. Since the early 1970s, however, economic, political and cultural globalisation, and the steady growth of transnational governance, represented in its most advanced form by the EU, has undermined notions of exclusive sovereignty. Shared sovereignty, co-decision making, joint citizenship and enhanced cross-border co-operation between governments and civil society organisations have become more common within the EU. These trends have served to counter the border strengthening effects of the Northern Ireland conflict and to relativise absolutist claims over sovereignty. At the same time, intergovernmental co-operation between the British and Irish governments and the EU sponsorship of cross-border economic co-operation and of the Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation have helped re-configure the border and relationships across it.

But this shift from political and administrative estrangement in the 50 years after partition to new patterns of co-operation since 1972 has not been unproblematic, predictably enough. It has co-existed with growing spatial segregation of both communities within Northern Ireland and a deepening of internal sectarian borders—the product of 30 years of violent conflict. At various times, different British and Irish approaches with respect to the conflict and the EU have inhibited or pre-empted cross-border co-operation. Different economic, social and cultural policies and priorities, as well as mismatched institutional competencies and cultures, have served to limit cross-border ties. They have also influenced the prospects for cooperation between firms and civil society organisations on either side of the border.

Towards a research agenda

The third "re-configuration" phase identified above—characterised by the exploration of new and emerging pathways to cross-border co-operation since 1972 and especially since the Belfast Agreement in 1998—deserves special attention (see Ruane and Todd, 1999; Wilford, 2001). To address this task adequately, however, it is necessary to assess the legacy of the two previous phases of border creation and border consolidation. The structures and myths generated by this legacy continue to shape the prospects for contemporary cross-border co-operation. In adopting an inter-disciplinary comparative and historical perspective we hope to provide new perspectives of the past and present of the Irish border on which might be built a more constructive complex of cross-border relationships. These perspectives will also be informed by the developing theory of state borders and by locating the Irish situation in a range of comparative contexts. A fully comprehensive approach to these topics is beyond the scope of any single research project. Our three-phase categorisation of border change in Ireland is preliminary and tentative. At the very least, it needs more specification and

qualification. It suggests no more than one possible research framework for addressing the central themes of the project.

The broad-brush characterisation of the evolution of the Irish border that we have given above is necessarily biased towards a “top-down” view of the creation, maintenance and re-configuration of the border. It therefore obscures the extent to which people living in the border region themselves have shaped the nature and evolution of the border and cross-border relationships. Nor can we assume that the experience of the border remained constant along its length. For example, there is much evidence of differences between the eastern border region, the middle border region and the north-west³ - differences which are echoed, if not represented, in the three local authority networks which span the border today. Nor, of course, should we fail to recognise that border region residents, from Lord Brookeborough to John Hume, were themselves represented among the political elites who took part in the top-down shaping and reconfiguring of the border.

Clearly too, there is considerable debate about how the border region should be defined. For residents in a relatively narrow band along the boundary line, the border is an integral part of their everyday lives. Its impact is directly felt in many towns at a greater remove from the border. In other parts of Northern Ireland and the Republic the “border” is not such a continuous issue, even if periodic cross-border relationships are significant. The EU imposes its own definitions. In recent EU programmes, the border region refers narrowly to the six southern counties, Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth. The Peace Programme is confined largely to the 12 northernmost counties on the island, and INTERREG refers to the same area minus the Belfast Urban Area. Other possible definitions of the border region incorporate the local authority areas contiguous to the border or, alternatively, the area covered by the three local authority networks: the Eastern Border Region, ICBAN and the North-West Region. Any research project therefore must recognise the elasticity of the border region and the fact that it might vary in size depending on the topic studied.

In the longer term, we propose to go on to explore a range of macro-level developments on the island of Ireland, which are likely to have a significant impact on the meaning of the border. Our immediate concern, however, is to try to assess the extent to which our large-scale generalisations survive scrutiny at local level. Do the reflections of geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and economists need to be modified in the light of local realities and the everyday experiences of those living close to the border? Our intention is to modify our broad blueprint to take account of these realities. Our areas of concern may be summarised more specifically in the following sets of questions (which, however, are not comprehensive):

1. To what extent does our three-phase conception of the evolution of Irish border as a whole fit the experience of the Eastern Border Region which includes Newry and Mourne DC, Down DC, Banbridge DC, Monaghan DC and Craigavon BC.
2. How has the significance of the border changed over the years at local level? What are the factors that have made it more “permeable” in the region, to the extent that it functions as a bridge linking people in Northern Ireland and the Republic?

³ Local Authority networks now represent three segments of the border region. The Eastern Border Region network encompasses: Newry and Mourne, Down, Banbridge, Louth, Monaghan and Craigavon local authorities; The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) includes the following local authorities: Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan, Armagh, Sligo, Omagh, Dungannon, Fermanagh and Cookstown. The North-West Region comprises: Derry City, Donegal, Limavady and Strabane. Note: Donegal and Monaghan are represented in two of the three local cross-border networks.

3. How does the border function as a barrier inhibiting cross-border interaction and mutually beneficial cross-border co-operation in this region? In what ways can the negative barrier function of the border be overcome? Is there any sense in which its barrier function is beneficial in the region?
4. In what ways does the border function as a resource, or as a source of opportunities, for people in the region?
5. What does the border symbolise for various groups in the region, and to what extent is it a key part of their respective identities?

While these are demanding questions, we hope that by discussing them we will be able to enrich our research plan by taking account of factors that are far from clear to the detached academic observer.

Conclusion

As we have mentioned, our immediate objective is to ensure that the sometimes too academic perspectives of researchers in studying the Irish border do not part company with the concerns and preoccupations of those for whom the border is not just an interesting phenomenon. Academic research in this area needs the benefit of local expertise. We hope, however, that this will not be an example of one-way trade. This project rests on the conviction that the academic community has much to contribute to the needs of society, even if this contribution is long-term and indirect rather than immediate and obvious. We look forward to exploiting jointly the mutual gains from this interaction between different perspectives and areas of skill and ultimately to producing a balanced and socially relevant analysis of a challenging issue that combines socio-economic importance with political sensitivity.

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