

## Editorial

In 1944, the United States and Mexico changed the name of the International Boundary Commission, established in 1889, to the International Boundary and Water Commission, linking what I hope is not an exaggeration to state is perhaps one of the most studied border regions in the world to its natural features, which include its desert landscape and mountainous terrain, but most notably to the Rio Grande and Colorado Rivers, which make up the majority of the border. The commission is charged with implementing the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and subsequent treaties in 1853 and 1970. Although the area was not heavily populated, irrigation techniques in the late nineteenth century led to growth along the banks, and one of the early challenges was managing changes in the river's course as land and river shifted, bringing farmland with them. How should the water be used and who can use it? How much can the river be polluted and who should clean it up? What happens to the boundary when erosion or other natural changes occur? Does it matter if changes occur naturally or are manmade, and how do we measure the extent of human involvement in "natural" changes? These questions appear mundane next to the violence at the border and stories of human tragedy. But there are also practices that shaped not just the arrivals of migrants but the very course of the river and the international boundary itself. At least some of these questions have a longer precedent and can be found in other case studies, going back to much earlier historical periods, to places that were densely populated, but all shared a "natural boundary". While a natural boundary between the United States and Mexico had a certain imaginative and argumentative cleanliness when visualized on a map, like other such river boundaries, it has always been fraught in its actual implementation, thus requiring a standing commission to this day.

In the spatial turn in global history, no topic is as central as the question of drawing and making borders. How can one study processes of de- and reterritorialization, globalization projects, and the spatial reorganization of the world without dealing with borders, especially nation-state borders? And yet, the work on natural boundaries, *Naturgrenzen* and *limites naturelles* has been presented as an old debate. The new attention to the environment in global history has recently turned to the planetary, although, as this thematic issue brings to light, there are older debates that need to be revisited. What are the legal, cultural, and political dynamics of natural spaces? In fact, Peter Sahlins reopened this older debate as early as 1990, which received much attention in his monograph but never led, as these authors argue, to a systematic exchange on the vocabulary, imaginations and practices of natural boundaries, especially beyond the French sphere, in other words, of transcultural environmental spaces perceived and used as natural, when in fact they have long been subject to profound human intervention. This is what makes these rivers and mountain towns particularly interesting local sites for global historians to explore. I offer here several points of interest for *Comparativ*.

First, while much of the field of global history has been dominated by modern and contemporary history, or a period characterized by the global condition, it is worth exploring the period of globalization that preceded this global condition. When we think about territoriality, it is often located in political thought, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. But if you look at the evidence on the ground, many historians would date territoriality, or rather an intensification of territorialization processes (not just imaginations), to a much later period, linking it to the dialectics of de- and re-territorialization or globalization, often the end of the nineteenth century and the emergence of the nation. Early modern Europe, especially Central Europe, offers a pre-national focus on fundamental questions of how to effectively differentiate, demarcate, and connect societies. That is, in small case studies one can get to the heart of projects of de- and re-territorialization that continue to shape Europe today. Importantly, the authors in this issue are not only concerned with the vocabulary and cartographic visualizations of natural boundaries, but also with actors and their practices on the ground, which allows for a much better connection to move beyond the early modern period to the practices that have shaped borders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and today.

Second, several other key themes of global history can be explored here in the fine print of local areas or in the big picture of boundary negotiations in these articles. Boundary negotiations were and are, as the US-Mexico border demonstrates, about more than the emergence of territoriality as a form of organizing state space. For many actors, the border allowed for intense connections and exchanges, for the mobility of goods, people, but also animals and water itself. The placement of natural boundaries could symbolize deep historical roots or a radical erasure of local histories. They could have a linear or a boundary character. Not all negotiating actors shared an idea of what a natural boundary might mean, even as boundary commissions increasingly included experts, cartographers, diplomats, and later engineers who exchanged knowledge and science with their counterparts, likening this commissions to the expertise usually seen in later colonial projects that are often examined by global historians interested in transimperial knowledge exchange.

Third, the thematic issue brings the debate on natural boundaries into conversation with contemporary approaches to border studies in at least three important ways. By focusing not only on negotiations, but also on practices and bottom-up perspectives, the issue draws significantly on and contributes to current foci in border studies today by showing the regional character of the border region or borderscapes. The other major advancement is an environmental perspective that is fully integrated into the analysis of the political, economic, and social fabric of these regions. And from the perspective of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the most important lesson is that the study of borders is too often seen as a means of demarcating and controlling mobility. In this period, this is not necessarily at the forefront of each negotiation, which has more diverse aims than one might assume. Might there be layers of meaning missing to these later histories?

Finally, Franco-German exchange is a tradition at *Comparativ*, especially in the decades of discussions on cultural transfers, which led a few years ago to the establishment of the Franco-German doctoral program “Kulturtransfers: Beiträge zu einer transnationalen und transregionalen Geschichte der Moderne und Gegenwart”. The present thematic issue continues this long tradition of Franco-German exchange, making it more visible in the field of border studies and debates on natural boundaries. Moreover, *Comparativ* remains committed to publishing scholarship in global and transnational history in multiple languages and to making research visible across Europe’s linguistic communities. Viel Spaß beim Lesen et bonne lecture!

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