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### David N. Gellner (ed.), *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*

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# *David N. Gellner (ed.), Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*

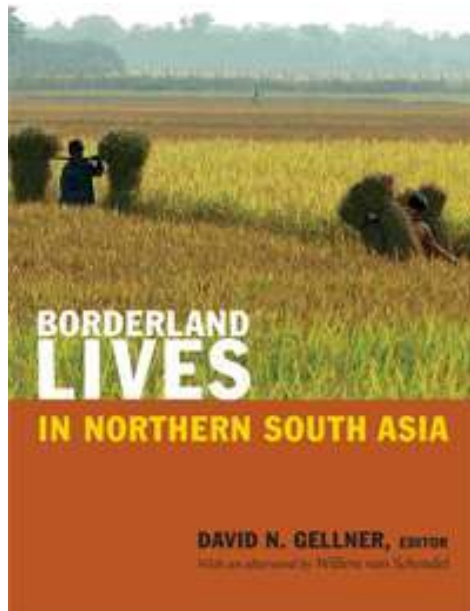
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David N. Gellner (ed.) (2013) *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 310 pages.

- 1 This book is part of a growing scientific interest in South Asian borderlands, a geographical domain that has not been studied much despite researchers' 'long fascination for national borders' (Cons & Sanyal 2013).<sup>1</sup> Its ten contributions—along with an introduction and foreword—written by twelve specialists of these regions, pave the way for new approaches of borderlands, at the crossroads of the study of the state or of the *idea* of the state (See Fuller and Bénêi 2001; Gupta 1995), of the concept of Zomia developed by Van Schendel (2002) and adopted by Scott (2009) and of borderland studies. The anthropologist David Gellner, renowned for his works on Nepal (Newar society, nationalism, political activists and diaspora are a few of his interests) has edited this volume, which stems from a conference held in Edinburgh in 2009. The result is a fascinating account of life in peripheral spaces and a reflexion on the centrality of borderlands in the construction of states. The main hypothesis is that borderlands are relevant sites of observation of the Nation-State's power as well as limits to it. Another key notion is that contradictions and oppositions between state and society are particularly acute in border regions, where issues of livelihood, belonging and allegiance can prove complex.
- 2 The book spans a 'new subregion: Northern South Asia'<sup>2</sup> (Gellner 2013: 1), that is to say the terrestrial borderlands of India, because of the absence of a case study about the Nepalese-Chinese border,<sup>3</sup> and, obviously, the difficulty of studying the maritime borders of a would-be Southern South Asia. It brings together case studies carried out both in the highlands (Arunachal Pradesh, Kargil, Uttarakhand, Nagaland) and in the lowlands (Indo-Nepalese border, Bengal, Rajasthan).<sup>4</sup> The unity of the region, where transborder connections have been an inherent feature of livelihoods, lies in the post-colonial moment and in the heritage of the Partition.
- 3 Under the auspices of Willem Van Schendel (the author of the afterword), the book illustrates 'the need for comparative historical research into the history of *borderlands*' (Baud and Van Schendel 1997: 212). The ambition to compare and bring closer together different case studies is a rare endeavour which needs to be emphasized. It is reinforced by the multiple cross-references between the chapters. What may be considered as a bias, and is acknowledged as such by Gellner, is that nine out of the ten articles are interested in Indian international borderlands, covering all Indian borders to the exception of the Bhutanese one. Only Piliavsky deals with internal borderlands in Rajasthan. For a better understanding of local stakes, the reader is introduced to the history of each micro region, re-placed in the broader perspective of South Asian and Southeast Asian history. The study of the relations between the state and the borderlands' common people and elite is fodder for the social history of the subregion. Indeed, the commonalities of the articles follow along post-colonial lines, where issues of separation, loss and memory are shared by almost all borderlanders.



- 4 Gellner asserts the need for ethnographic methods and a bottom-up perspective that ‘must engage with both practices and ideas’ (Gellner 2013: 3). This injunction is followed by many authors of this edited volume. The transcription of vernacular words and discourses enables readers to understand how the pervasiveness of state constraints, materialised by forced flows of people, border controls or the inaccessibility of particular zones, translates into narratives of loss or of grievance towards the elite, mostly towards politicians from the States’ capital cities. Some of the most poignant descriptions are those by Annu Jalais about the tragedy of separation in Bengal, from the perspective of the seldom heard voices of subaltern Muslims and Hindus instead of those of the *Bhadralok*’s (especially high caste Hindus who have taken refuge in Kolkata). Poems written by common people in Bengal or in Kargil, which cross borders and generations, are part of cultural objects that also constitute the borderland and often represent some kind of counter-political narrative. As such, Cons considers that the past, understood through local narratives of belonging, is linked to the present through ‘ongoing struggles over how such spaces and their residents fit or do not fit into constructions of nation and state’ (p. 239). The willingness to stick to people’s oral histories is actually a way to ‘allow an alternative story to be told’ (p. 139).
- 5 The call to go beyond methodological nationalism in social and cultural anthropology (Gellner 2012), and particularly in border studies, is followed by Cons, Hausner and Sharma, Jalais, and Farelly. The main limit of such an invitation to develop transborder multi-sited ethnography is, of course, states’ restriction on movements across the border. The intention to treat ‘the region on both sides of the border as single unit’ formulated by Baud and Van Schendel (1997: 231), and taken for granted by Gellner, collides with the object of study. Researchers are human after all, also under the mundane duress of states’ controls. Borderlands are also divided by almost insurmountable borders. Farelly makes a strong point that ‘area scholars’ (Gellner 2013: 196) should not endorse diplomacy-made borders, nor should they cease their studies at any border. He is one of the few authors to have had the opportunity to compare both sides of the border, in India and in Myanmar, and the only one who explicitly frames his analysis in relation to Van Schendel (2002) and Scott (2009). Thus he shows at the local level how a region moved on from having Zomia features (at the margins of States, in the highlands, the population resisting the States’ control and domination) (Van Schendel 2002) to now being placed under ‘muscular nodes of government authority’ (Gellner 2013: 200).

## To be a borderlander: living in peripheries

- 6 Living in a borderland is envisaged by the authors as tackling a line (the border) drawn by an elite, by a state, that is by institutions far from the ground realities. How politics engender daily challenges to normal life, and *in fine*, how borders have to do with biopolitics is one of the main contributions of the volume. As Gellner puts it, ‘the interpretation of life at borders cannot be deduced from state classifications or nationalist ideologies’ (p. 20). That’s where the methodology—the ethnography of borderlands—converges with the research objectives.
- 7 The fragility of life in South Asia for villagers, underlined by all the articles, is accentuated in borderlands by state controls, by changes of policy and by major geopolitical turmoil. The more symbolic or memory-laden the border, the more difficult daily life appears to be. Where states are more active, the insecurity of life for common

people is at its peak. Jason Cons shows well how daily life, in its most intimate aspect, is 'linked to broader conceptions of national space' (p. 226): to live in the Bangladeshi Dahagram enclave is equivalent to living in a prison. The 'daily indignities' (p. 253) of life at the time of the Partition are lived through again today. The closing of the border for Dahagram people and the pressure from the Indian people and army mean that locals' movements depend on geopolitical issues and political manipulation. The weight of the army as representing the state is definitely more oppressive on the Line of Control between Pakistan and India. In Kargil, it reaches a point where the army 'is the predominant face of the Indian state' (p. 56), particularly because it gives local people work. Conversely, the absence of major border-related issues on the Indo-Chinese border in Uttarakhand makes the borderland a peaceful place, only disturbed by Nepali smugglers (p. 87).

- 8 Hausner and Sharma's study of border-crossing by Nepali men and women on their way to or from India demonstrates perfectly the existing anxiety inherent in borderlands. To cross the border is never a neutral experience. Borderlands are places where common people are subject to the arbitrary decisions of people representing the States or of private agents, in the form of anti-trafficking NGOs or transport entrepreneurs for example. Even though the border between India and Nepal is open, the categorisation of people through state policies (migrant worker, trafficker, smuggler, victim) creates both tension and corruption. What Hausner and Sharma also show in particular is that border crossing is a ritual (which also begins at the home) and that entering India may be viewed, in the life of migrants, as a spatial rite of passage. The case of the Lhotshampas, Bhutanese of Nepali origin who have been expelled from Bhutan, best illustrates how the impossibility of crossing a border engenders not only a tough and hopeless daily life but also mental problems among the refugees (Gellner 2013). When the former mobility of borderlanders turns into forced immobilisation, victimisation becomes a central narrative to describe one's life spent between a mythical birthplace and an unknown future.
- 9 The question of the exceptionality of life in a borderland is sometimes taken for granted. The article by Piliavsky somehow aims at making international borderlands not so exceptional, given that hinterland life too can be crossed by multiple limits which mould its inhabitants' state of mind and life. Her case study focuses on the Kanjar, a community located in south Rajasthan and practising 'thieving (cattle rustling, household burglary, roadside burglary, opium theft) as a hereditary, caste-based occupation' (p. 28). Her breathtaking account of the overlapping of Kanjar thieving—and living—territories with administrative police borders proves that the 'effect of borders is not confined to the fringes of national states' (p. 28).
- 10 Another aspect of the anxiety of life in a borderland is related to the spatial dimension of livelihoods. National territories do not match borderland territories. On the contrary, borders hinder social spaces. It is commonplace to say that borders cut into traditional or long established connections. But in Northern South Asia, the cutting up of social space has been particularly violent. The imposition of borders by state forces correlates with the shrinking of the available social space for populations, as demonstrated by Jalais in Bengal, where family networks have often been divided between Bangladesh and India. Poor refugees have little resources to go beyond the border or engage in virtual transborder connections (through phone or internet communication), as some people do in Kargil. In any case, most physical connections, such as those of the Lhotshampas

entering Bhutan illegally, add to borderlanders' feelings of insecurity and loss. Today's social space relies partly on memories, which are also the ground for contestation and resistance. The ultimate experience of resistance against the state is depicted in the Lhotshampa case as a major conflict between the local Nepali-speaking elite, on the one hand, and common people and the Bhutanese state on the other. What is interesting, and a perspective rarely taken, is the focus on the responsibilities of some Lhotshampas themselves. While providing a space for some diverging discourses, the author shows how both militants of the Bhutan People's Party (BPP), created and run by Nepali Bhutanese, and the Bhutanese government are responsible for the eviction of nearly 80,000 people from Bhutan: 'the BPP violence played a significant role in hardening the government's attitude toward all southern Bhutanese' (p. 128). Testimonies and oral histories collected in Lhotshampas refugee camps constitute a popular geopolitics that enables the production of alternative discourses. From a different angle, Farelly proposes an example of the end of resistance. In Eastern Zomia, the region where South Asia and South East Asia meet (at the Indo-Myanmar border), both governments have now regained control over once unstable places. The region is thus in a 'post-Zomia' situation where the states control borderlands through unofficial alliances between a few local trading elites and the army. The spatiality of 'nodes of control' towns in India and in Burma reveals that these towns are decisive for understanding how the central power minimises conflicts. They are also the sign that resistance against the State is almost over, and that 'quasi-colonial rules' (p. 209) rely on the control of a few places to earn a greater power over the region.

## Are borderlands peculiar spaces?

- 11 By studying the borderland as a special space, opposed to the mainland or heartland, all articles, to the exception of Piliavsky's who eventually asserts that 'state is borderland', maintain an exceptionality stance. The understanding of the 'process of territorialisation' (p. 5) of the borderland goes through the study of both state dynamics and local representations and practices. The proposal of Shneiderman, who asserts—with regard to the Nepal-Tibet Autonomous Region border—that borderlands are more 'multiple-state spaces' than 'non-state spaces' (Shneiderman 2013: 28), is unfortunately not discussed.
- 12 There is sometimes a contradiction in the book, due to the nature of the places studied, between borderlands viewed as exceptional and other territories considered as banal. Not all borderlands are *hauts-lieux*. Interrogating life in a symbolic place, *i.e.* one that plays a key role in the representation of the nation-state, makes it possible to decipher situations where the logics of the state and the common people are confronted with one another. If Kargil is definitely iconic at the state level (Gellner 2013: 47), local people believe that their symbolic position, and their fierce allegiance to the Indian State (they feel like 'the last sentinels of India'), is not rewarded with recognition. Because they are situated near the Line of Control, Lato and Badgam villages are erased from Indian maps, which do not give any details on the region. For their inhabitants, this invisibilisation is an alienation which makes them feel they are 'incomplete citizens' and 'excluded from the geo-body of the nation' (p. 59).
- 13 The borderland is definitely a meaningful place. Without essentialising it, it has special imaginary dimensions both for its inhabitants and for national narratives, as shown by Mathur who describes, following Anderson (1991), how maps participate in the

imagination of belonging to the national community. The particular case of the Uttarakhand border in Chamoli district is due to the presence of the *car dham* pilgrimage sites, which transforms the sacred geography of the borderland as 'central and eternal in the Hindu nation' (Gellner 2013: 85). This is a good example of a peripheral space that is fully integrated into the national imagination, which is therefore part of the national project. As such, its inhabitants take pride in being 'sentinels of India'. The religious and long term historical recognition of the value of the place differs from what is observed in Kargil, perhaps also because no suspicion about weak national feelings exists in Uttarakhand.

- 14 The border is a place where state controls and actions crystallise in a confrontational mode through various police institutions (army, police forces, border special forces, etc.). In many articles of this volume, the state is described as oversensitive about the issue of the control of such spaces. States maintain borderlands as 'spaces of exception' (Agamben 1997) where the rule of law differs from that of the mainland. The exceptionality is state-made, as is shown by Joshi with regard to Nagaland, where even bona fide Indian citizens need a permit to enter.
- 15 Given this situation where space can be 'sensitive, contingent, and unstable' (Gellner 2013: 239) as in Dahagram enclave, the question of belonging is raised. The meaning of borders is embedded in local and global flows of people, of goods, and only partly determined by state ideologies. The book convincingly shows how state strategies more often than not converge with people's aspiration to belong. But, although partition has led to an essentialisation of national identities—the project of the nation-state relies on a fixed conception of citizenship—the book also demonstrates the ability of individuals and groups to try and go beyond such state-crafted categories. As far as issues of belonging are concerned, the Bangladeshi Dahagram *chhitmahal* (enclave) in India represents a liminal case. Being cut from one's country, surrounded by a hostile population and inimical police forces, the enclave's population (Muslims more than Hindus) asserts its belonging and allegiance to Bangladesh. According to Cons, this is what happens to inhabitants when they face attacks, famines and the denial of their dignity. The case is different for Bengal 'riot refugees' (p. 251) who have to reclaim their 'own' memories of the Partition, impounded by the *Bhadraloks*. Beyond national and religious identities, belonging to Bengal and being opposed to Kolkata's elite is a common denominator for these refugees. In the Sunderbans, refugees come to terms with the islanders, with whom they share the feeling of belonging to 'one big family' (p. 261), as opposed to the urban elite. About a local poet, Jalais states that 'the messiness of his Partition story was something he refused to share as, in a way, it did not fit the grander Partition narrative of the Bengali elite' (p. 262).
- 16 Finally, borderlands are sites where differences are exacerbated as the states' technologies of categorisation are often based on suspicion. Be it the crossing of migrants at the Indo-Nepalese border, the exit from Dahagram, the entry into Nagaland or the case of Lhotshampas, transborder populations confront the prevalence of institutional mechanisms based on the idea of fixity. Their belonging is ascribed to a particular place although it can be a *non-functional* belonging. Lhotshampas root their national identity (*i.e.* Bhutanese) in a now distant and unattainable land where they are unwelcome. Only the Bhutanese refugee identity is functional as resettlement in a third country is in progress: more than 90,000 refugees out of 110,000 have been sent, mainly to the US, Australia and Canada.

- 17 All in all, what the book demonstrates is that borderlands have similarities with any hinterland, but issues of otherness, allegiance, memories or belonging bear the weight of the distance to the centre of the states. Suspicion towards borderlanders of not adhering to the national ideology seems ever present in the state imagination.

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## NOTES

1. See the special issue of *Political Geography* about South Asian borders, edited by Jason Cons and Romola Sanyal (2013). See also Cons (2014) in the SAMAJ issue *Ideas of South Asia*.
2. The usefulness of a new regional division could be questioned. What is the future of Northern South Asia? In what way will it be appropriated in future works and how will it stand facing Zomia?
3. See Shneiderman (2013) for an in-depth study of this border.
4. Many places described in the texts are untraceable on maps, which is frustrating and disappointing for the reader. This is all the more unfortunate because borderlands are geographical objects *per se*.



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