

# Frontiers

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The frontier is one of the most anarchic, unstable, liberating, fertile, and, because of this bewildering ambiguity, also one of the most contested concepts in geography. Within classical border typology, a frontier is a particular kind of border and thus, in its most basic aspect, a criterion for spatial differentiation, both material and ideological. A primary and crucial distinction is the one made by the Polish geographer Ladis Kristof (1959) in his seminal work on the nature of boundaries and frontiers. He scrutinized frontiers through the revealing method of contrasting them to their most antagonizing opposite: unlike the boundary, which summons images of well-defined lines and limits aimed at fixing and disciplining bodies and minds, the frontier is a blurred area of “variable width” (see also Semple 1911, 208) whose moving contours remain beyond anyone’s control, open to all kinds of either friendly or violent encounters. While the boundary is a manifestation of the state’s “centripetal forces,” the frontier is not the imprint of a political project’s claim over space but a “phenomenon of the ‘facts of life,’” “a manifestation of *centrifugal forces*,” a decentralizing circumstance and thus a challenge to the nation-state (Kristof 1959, 270, 273).

The frontier is what lies “in front” and thus a world yet unknown (Kristof 1959, 269–270). As the vision of what lies ahead, the frontier is precisely the antithesis of a limit: a permanently open horizon; a world more firmly grounded in our imagination and aspirations than in reality – the *world but not yet*. The frontier is promise, hope, and the opportunity of forward-moving space, which are alluring enticements for the pioneer and the adventurer. A frontier hence suggests a zone of transition whereas a limit marks clear delimitations decreeing the end of something and the beginning of something else. Frontiers’ outer orientation “toward the outlying areas that are both a source of danger and a coveted prize” (Kristof 1959, 271) may be a remedy against the claustrophobia of the boundary: the “desire to distance oneself from the other in order to uphold the (fantasy of the) self during feelings of fear and anxiety” (van Houtum 2005, 677). The frontier stirs vibrating feelings that pulsate to the beat of foreign influences reverberating across space in waves of cultural shudders (Kristof 1959, 271; see also Ferguson and Raffestin 1986). Frontiers give rise to raptures of improvisation, spontaneity, and resourcefulness. In opposition to the promised immobility of the boundary, the frontier threatens with imminent change. While the boundary’s aim is to erect a self-fulfilled prophecy of clearly marked difference and incompatibility, the frontier’s confusion prevents the formation of the very categories that make such division clear-cut or even thinkable. Seen in this way, the frontier may be a conceptual antidote against pernicious expressions of ossified politico-territorial affiliations that find their epitome in the nation-state, as well

as in the clearly defined identities it promotes and the neatly severed allegiances these identities inspire.

Although it is as geopolitically malleable as the boundary, the frontier is arguably a better representation of incessant flows and thus a more accurate conceptualization of the continuous transformations that are the concern of human geography. Despite the exact nation-state boundaries that make up the basic grid of our modern maps, by zooming from the dishonestly large scale of maps into the smaller scales of spatial interaction, it is hard not to feed the suspicion that cartographical borders would better illustrate the morphology of lived borders with the rough brushstrokes of a frontier than with the terribly executed portraits of linear boundaries (Febvre 1947, 204). Thus, although “For convenience’ sake, we adopt the abstraction of a boundary line ... the reality behind this abstraction is the important thing in anthropo-geography” (Semple 1911, 205).

Their partnership with openness is thus a liberating aspect of frontiers: they endow eyes and feet with the feeling that they can wander aimlessly for days or months without finding a drastic change in the spatial-cultural landscape. Arguably, its imprecision and relentless space of possibility make the frontier’s morphology more exciting than the disciplining customs’ booths, passport controls, and waiting lines associated with the highways and airports of boundaries.

Frontiers are also present in the mesmerizing space-altering consequences of the body’s political implications. Markers of socioeconomic status such as skin color and phenotype; accents and language; religiosity and its behavioral manifestations; fashion, diet, manners, material possessions are sociological borders with spatial contexts and consequences. Their political interpretation may turn them into expected, manageable, or even desirable elements of socialization – for example,

multiculturalism – or into obstacles for people’s spatial and social movement – for example, xenophobia or racism – and so transform a frontier’s embracement of inevitable variation into the boundary’s objection of difference (van Houtum 2010a). The political implications of thinking more in terms of boundaries than of frontiers are thus far-reaching, for frontiers animate the sort of imagination that boundaries may smother.

Yet, the free-spirited and bohemian interpretation of the frontier should not seduce us into ignoring the concept’s pitfalls. As with the terms “borders” and “boundaries,” which feature a Janus face (van Houtum 2010a), showing excluding closure on one side and resourceful opening on the other, the term “frontier” clearly has another side too. The frontier has been used to justify brutal expansionism, predatory colonization, and exploitative imperialism. The frontier’s inherent vagueness has dark drawbacks. The unsettledness and lack of rigor to establish the limits of space, culture, identity, and ultimately political space and emotional allegiances may give free rein to the worst tendencies, namely the colonial explorations and oppression brought by the experiences of colonization, African enslavement, and the world wars of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the theory that best illustrates the emancipatory and oppressive tension contained in the frontier is Jackson Turner’s highly influential work. In his collection of essays, *The Frontier in American history* (Turner 1921/1893), he repeatedly referred to the western American frontier as “an area of free land.” Turner’s could be either an oppressive or an emancipatory idea depending on whether you were an American pioneer in search of property, fortune, and religious freedom or the unlucky Native American, the demise of whose lands, community, and culture was necessary for the constitution of the

pioneer's apparently "free" land. The tension between liberation and oppression contained in the concept of the frontier is related to another tension about its population density. Unlike Turner's empty frontier, authors like Kristof considered liveliness a *sine qua non* characteristic of the frontier, which he thought of as a place swarming with people and which would be "inconceivable without frontiersmen" for "an 'empty frontier' would be merely a desert" (Kristof 1959, 272). The debates about whether the frontier is liberating or oppressive, empty or populous, show that, like any other concept in geography, the historical interpretations, morality, and political implications of the frontier are contested by power.

### Imperial frontiers

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As already hinted at, the term "frontier" has been often associated with empires seeking to legitimize their expansionism or universal ambitions (Kristof 1959, 271). In the frontier thesis of Jackson Turner, for instance, the western frontier of North America provided the space for a rugged individualism to prosper, and thus the basis of democracy and the American political ethos. The frontier was a metaphor for a steady movement away from the influence of Europe and thus the detachment necessary to justify the American exceptionalism Turner saw in America and its development.

A more critical gaze at the frontier thesis would, however, render a different analysis. The frontier in Turner's sense provided the distinction between civilized and not civilized, inhabited or "empty," wild land. The geographical imagination evoked by the idea of "free land" behind Turner's "frontier thesis" glorified the creation of the American West by providing a morally digestible geopolitical narrative for what

more impartially could be told as the forceful colonization of Native American territory.

Because of its neglect of the frontier's meaning for Native Americans, Turner's understanding of the moving and pioneering frontier across the North American West as the ethos of American democracy has acquired a disreputable rust. This, however, has not prevented the imperial logic underlying Turner's frontier thesis from becoming widely adopted by political projects with expansionistic ambitions even up to this day. The geopolitical rationales that the United States, Israel, Russia, and even the European Union, for example, present as vindication for the seizure and control of their respective spheres of influence typically characterize their ambitioned territories as lands that lie "in front" and whose emptiness in physical or ideological terms requires – or at least justifies – the kind of management that would be unacceptable in populated lands – for example, drone strikes, armed invasions, fences. Awareness about the frontier's colonizing pedigree is crucial for its historical understanding and political analysis. Frontiers have been associated with freedom as much as they have been associated with colonizing notions of people without history, without culture, and consequently with no right to space. Holding one or another passport can either increase or decrease the number of frontiers in people's minds. The carrier of a privileged passport whose country is seen as part of a familiar world can travel unhindered and easily experience the sensation of a seamless world of frontiers as open spaces of possibility, whereas someone who, as a result of a misfortune dealt by the lottery of birth and cannot travel unhindered, may more likely experience a world of prejudice and obstacles in whose boundaries he or she is trapped (van Houtum 2010b). This dark side of imperial frontiers divides the world into geopolitical allies, enemies, and

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buffer zones and has helped justify unjust wars and war crimes, ethnic cleansing, genocides, and the systematic oppression of peoples and cultures whose second-class humanity empires have deemed unworthy of owning the very lands they inhabit and even the very lives they embody.

### Frontiers of imagination

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Apart from its imperialistic notion, in a geopolitical sense the frontier is also a geographical imagination. Frontiers are as material as they are imaginary. Frontiers can be recognized and studied not only on the basis of their location but, perhaps more importantly, on the basis of their perception. Space is more than a physical location; it is also a political and an ideological position. There is a whole travel, touristic, and migratory industry for which these imaginary worlds matter. Also geopolitically, frontiers of imagination have far-reaching, life-altering consequences for the self and outer perception of entire nations. The Americas and Russia, for example, have been European frontiers as much as Europe has been theirs in each other's cultural imaginary. Ukraine has been a frontier for both Europe and Russia, a vague transition zone between their mutual frontiers. The United States has been a frontier of economic opportunity for poor Mexicans searching for better conditions that their own country fails to offer them. Africa was the frontier for the expansion of the European *mission civilisatrice* during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as much as Europe was a frontier of conquest for the medieval Arab caliphates that colonized its south. Scandinavia was a frontier of the unknown for the Mediterranean civilizations of antiquity as much as the Mediterranean was a frontier of plunder and trade for Nordic raiders during the

Middle Ages – when Scandinavia had not even been detected or charted on maps.

The frontier is related to geographical exploration and a sense, an acknowledgment, of ignorance and wonder about what lies beyond the ecumene, that is, the “known world.” Since frontiers are characterized by a “certain width,” the question then is how much width these zones of transition can bear before the places they separate are imagined to be so far apart as to be noncontiguous. This idea of frontiers as moving zones of influence can and has been most dominantly applied in physical-geographical terms to denote spatial contiguity, in the sense of natural frontiers, but even more so in political geography to depict ideological, geopolitical, and culturally moving zones of power.

Yet, frontiers can sometimes be as wide as the Atlantic. The American continent was the first European periphery – in the sense that it was the first significant other from which the idea of Europe as a cultural and political unity distinguished itself when it first emerged in the sixteenth century (Wintle 1999) – and was considered as “difference within sameness” (Mignolo 2000, 58). The anthropocentric focus of geography and cartography has played a crucial role in the definition of the frontier. The frontier, being what lies beyond, only makes sense once a center has been defined. The frontier is thus culturally contextual and as such can be subordinated to particular kinds of knowledge, dependent on civilization and a manifestation of ethnocentrism.

Perhaps some of the most fascinating frontiers are those of a dislocated nature whose lack of geographical contiguity makes them among the most complex. They are best understood as what Michel Foucault called heterotopias, that is, a sort of “effectively enacted” utopia (Foucault 1986, 24): places within places whose atmospheres carry our senses into faraway locations.

They are factories of disconnected experiences whose atmosphere bears little or no relation at all to the contexts in which they are inserted. They snatch our emotions the moment we go past their gates into an ambience different from that we left behind.

Colonies, schools, hospitals, cafes, and brothels are examples of such frontiers. Certain means of transportation, such as trains and particularly boats, as can be seen in the refugee crisis of the 2010s, are among the most epitomical heterotopic frontiers:

the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens ... the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development ... but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police takes the place of pirates. (Foucault 1986, 27)

The boat as a heterotopia is a frontier that, even if rarely conceptualized as such, has persistently awakened the fascination of geographers: “After the discovery of fire the next most important step in the progress of the human race was the invention of the boat. No other has had so far-reaching results” (Semple 1911, 332–333).

Since the sensorial experience is crucial for their conceptualization and location, heterotopic frontiers do not need a fixed or graspable place to exist. Languages and dialects; ways of doing and being such as culinary traditions and folkloric customs; nonverbal communication such as body language and gestures; behavioral paradigms and social facts; sexual and political

taboos; political aspirations; artistic canons; intellectual discourses; religion and ethics – all of these are criteria for spatial differentiation of a nontangible nature. In this sense our own bodies are also frontiers: by means of their mere presence, movement, and interaction with others, they create heterotopic imaginaries that can always be explored and challenged.

### Frontiers of exploration

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Since the boundary resulted from advancements in the techniques for territorial demarcation, the frontier is intimately related to the history of technology. The frontier is a historical concept whose disappearance from the map follows cartographical development, which is a testament of frontiers that have been and are no more – at least on maps and in geopolitical discourse. Map-making is the technique that has tried to put the taming leash of boundaries around frontiers. Medieval Muslim cartography is proof that frontiers, not boundaries, were once the borders represented on maps. Muslim cartography from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries shows boundaries between distinct political projects as “zones of transition” and of “uncertain sovereignty” rather than “sharply defined boundary lines” (Brauer 1995, 5–6). The frontier belongs to a time whose technology did not allow for precise territorial demarcation, or perhaps to cultures whose environments, such as mighty indistinctive deserts, made the very notion of clearly defined boundaries pointless. Beginning in the fourteenth century, improvements in navigation and world travel by the Muslims, the Chinese, and, most influentially, the Europeans expanded the physical frontiers of each of these civilization’s known worlds and shook the very foundations of mental frontiers around the world. Perceptions of identity and

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politics, race and religion, and even of humanity itself were altered by the revelation of uncharted lands and peoples.

It would be a mistake, however, to consider the frontier as a thing of the past and a relic of politico-territorial arrangements that did not have the technology to clearly demarcate the legal-territorial boundaries of their power. Not only is the European Union a political project that has found a way to maintain the national boundaries of its member states while opening frontiers between them, but its most powerful foreign policy tool has been the frontier-based geopolitical promise of enlargement. This propensity to expand has been the core of the European Union's diplomatic and geopolitical strength; and, in itself as well as because of its destabilizing consequences in preventing the coagulation of an EU-wide identity, it remains a robust dam against the recurrent waves of nationalism.

In spite of geographical exploration and the amazing sophistication of instruments of navigation, frontiers have not disappeared. Many of the features and perceptions associated with frontiers remain. For tourists, the frontiers of either new (e.g., a road trip to an unknown destination) or mass-produced happenings (e.g., having one's photo taken by the Eiffel Tower) are the coveted experiences of their travels; however, the ubiquitous and highly detailed worldwide cartography provided by global positioning systems (GPS), mobile phones, and the Internet may have anesthetized the sense of wonder and appeased the hunger for untrodden paths by providing the misleading impression that maps can capture the world and that there is nothing left to discover.

Since antiquity, concepts like *terra nullius*, *terra incognita*, and *hic sunt dracones* have denoted emptiness, a zone of transition between settled

and unsettled, cultivated and uncultivated, civilized and uncivilized. Historically, the frontier has conjured the unknown. When the world was limited to the realm of the ecumene (the Greco-Roman known world), the military imaginary perceived the front as the unexplored danger, excitement, and possibility. The frontier is perhaps the most exciting of borders because it is always expectant. Frontiers still evoke a sense of both danger and adventure, glory and perdition.

Fortunately, the uncertainty of the frontier is still attainable for those who crave it. It is hard not to imagine the sense of wonder, spaciousness, controlled uneasiness, and exciting desperation when traveling to less familiar or unfamiliar places. It would be a mistake to believe that the full mapping of the world has brought about the end of geographical exploration (as Mackinder assumed in 1904). Frontiers as large, wide, empty spaces provoking fear, anxiety, enthusiasm, and whatnot have not disappeared. The possibility to imagine frontiers has been stifled with the advent of maps that create the misperception of a fully settled, fully bordered, fully inhabited, and fully controlled world. Yet, while their morphology has multiplied, frontiers still exist.

### Frontiers of integration

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Precisely because the term "frontier" is reserved for a not yet, a fearful yet tempting there, some authors see frontiers in terms of spatial integration. Much emphasis has been placed on borders of separation, and less (but growing) on borders of integration. Although the recognition of underlying domination structures within discourses has an emancipatory power, the perception of affinity has an indisputable emancipatory power. Much weight has been laid on coercion while bonds have been overseen. It is important to remember that frontiers are

integrating elements (Kristof 1959, 273). We recognize borders not only when we are confronted with difference and exclusion, but also when we come across unforeseen compatibility and inclusion. Whenever we unexpectedly find people with compatible or complementary beliefs, mores, phenotypes, architecture, food, and relationships to ours, we find frontiers of familiarity. When we find compatibility hidden behind an apparently different facade, when we recognize our endophenotype in someone in whom we did not expect to find ourselves, we feel suddenly rebordered into an abrupt familiarity. These are frontiers of inclusion. They are frontiers hidden in plain sight.

Seas are perhaps some of the most interesting among such eclipsed frontiers. In ancient cartography, the massive number of interactions that occurred between continents and civilizations was artistically depicted by traces of routes (such as in portolan charts), as well as by galleons and other kinds of ships, visually suggesting the migration, connection, and trade routes between merchant cities and between metropolises and their colonies. Today's satellite maps present seas as a mere background, thus dispossessing them of their historical and actual importance.

In the same vein, there are frontiers of transmission and translation, that is, contextually divergent practices and perceptions that nonetheless follow a similar spatial logic or entail an analogous sociological meaning. The illegal border crossing of migrants across both the Mediterranean and the Mexican–American border are a good example. The economic and living-standard disparities, as well as the imaginations of empowerment and emancipation that their destinations offer the migrants, speak of a shared geographical imaginary despite the migrants' disparate heritages and locations. The treatment African and Mexican migrants receive, the dramas and suffering they experience, the

prejudices of which they are the target, and the policy debates their movements arouse may be similar and subject to translation. Socioeconomic disadvantages among the black communities of America, as well as their plights as a minority and ways of coping with them, could be translated to the Turkish German communities of Berlin – a certain kind of protest music already does it. A translation implies an abstraction to identify commonalities. Yet, the uniqueness and diversity of border dramas makes any frontier translation and its validity inevitably controversial.

## Conclusion

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Precisely because of its conceptual openness as well as its conceptual relation to exploration, the frontier has been used dominantly as an oppressive term. Increasingly, however, the term's potential for constructing a more just interaction among a humanity that has become inexorably and irreversibly globalized has exposed the other side of the frontier's Janus-faced nature (van Houtum 2010a). As naturally curious explorers of the world and its relentlessly changing spatial and cultural sceneries, geographers have a hard time resisting this double-sided, discovery-arousing charm of the frontier. It is hard not to be conceptually allured by the range of possibilities evoked by the untamable attractiveness of the frontier's drama-laden history and its constantly mutating meanings. This attraction should be a motive for rejoicing among geographers, for a world of enthralling fields of joyful academic discovery lie in front of the further conceptualization, discussion, and exploration of the frontier.

**SEE ALSO:** Borders, boundaries, and borderlands; Cartographic design; Colonialism,

decolonization, and neocolonialism; Critical geography; Empire; Geopolitics; Governmentality; Imaginative geographies; Imperialism; Political geography; Postcolonial geographies; Territory and territoriality

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