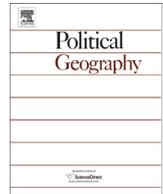




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Guest Editorial

Rethinking frontier and frontier studies



Keywords:

Frontier
Imaginary
Metaphor
Narrative

Studies of the frontier have been in a peculiar state of stagnation for some time. While border studies continues to grow, we are hard pressed to identify any developments in frontier studies. *The Dictionary of Human Geography* in the latest (2009) edition presents only a short (half-page) entry for “frontier,” identifying two suggested readings: *Frontiers: A Study in Political Geography* by Fawcett (1918) and *The Frontier in History* by Lamar and Thompson (1981). Its previous (2000) edition too offered only a brief article, stating that “most [frontiers] have disappeared ... to be replaced by boundaries” (Blacksell, 2000:282). It identifies only one suggested reading: *Political Frontiers and Boundaries* by J. R. V. Prescott, originally published in 1966. Prescott himself, in his 2008 study titled *International Frontiers and Boundaries: Law, Politics and Geography*, has made the same observation: “By 1900 frontiers had almost disappeared and had been replaced by boundaries that are lines” (2008:1, emphasis in original).

“Frontier” has come to refer to a pre-modern and zonal form of boundary. As a result, the frontier as an academic subject today belongs to historians. The only explicitly multi-disciplinary study of the frontier published in the past decade, *Untaming the Frontier in Anthropology, Archaeology, and History* edited by Bradley Parker and Lars Rodseth (2005), is entirely a historical study; there is not a single geographer among its contributors. Scholars who want to discuss contemporary cases of zonal boundaries generally prefer the term “borderland.” This approach to the frontier, however, neglects the simple fact that we still use the word “frontier” to refer to a place in the contemporary world.

In this guest editorial, I wish to suggest a new kind of frontier studies. Following the set of interventions on rethinking the “border” in border studies that appeared in these pages (Johnson et al., 2011), I propose that we reexamine the “frontier.” While Rodseth and Parker (2005) propose a new definition of “frontier” (e.g. Rodseth & Parker, 2005), I submit that we begin inquiry into the concept by observing how the word “frontier” is used in ordinary speech. As Wittgenstein put it, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein, 2001:25e). What do we talk about when we talk about the frontier today?

In what sense is Myanmar a frontier?

While the “frontier” as an academic topic has undergone a remarkable decline, the word “frontier” is still used frequently outside academia. As a researcher of Southeast Asia, I have noticed this in reading news articles about Myanmar (Burma). On April 17, 2014, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce hosted an event titled “Myanmar: the Frontier.” *The Wall Street Journal* had already reported “Firms see Myanmar as Next Frontier” (November 30, 2011), and *Forbes* too had asked “Myanmar, the Last Frontier?” (November 9, 2012). It is not only the Americans who talk about Myanmar as a “frontier,” however. The British media are equally fond of the geographical metaphor: *The Daily Telegraph* has called Myanmar “Asia’s Next Economic Frontier” (December 17, 2012); the *Financial Times* has announced “Myanmar Opens up New Telecom Frontier” (April 4, 2013); and the BBC has broadcasted “Burma: Asia’s Last Frontier is Opening up. Investors Call the Country the ‘Final Frontier’” (June 2, 2013). Australian, Singaporean and Japanese media too have been repeatedly portraying the country as a frontier. *The Strait Times*, run by the Singaporean government, uses “frontier” frequently. The Singaporean government has published a 26-page brochure titled “Myanmar: Opportunities in Asia’s Last Frontier Economy,” describing the country as “the last sizable economy and market in Asia that remains untapped.” Once strongly associated with the American West, today the “frontier” can easily refer to places far away from the United States.

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, “frontier” can mean “an undeveloped area or field for discovery or research.” *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines the “frontier” as “a new field for exploitative or developmental activity.” Databases of English-language news articles from around the world show that term “frontier” is in fact used almost exclusively in this sense today, to connote a space of opportunity. The imagery of the “frontier” has spread beyond the English language. Every Japanese dictionary today has an entry for “*furontia*”; the transliterated term has joined the common vocabulary in Japan. Nissan has been making pickup trucks named “Frontier” and selling them globally for decades.

We should not hastily conclude that the frontier imaginary is driven solely by global capitalism. It is not only the multi-national corporations and powerful states that are so fond of frontier rhetoric. Christian missionaries have been using the metaphor enthusiastically for a long time. The website “www.frontiers.org” is not run by a capitalist enterprise; it belongs to an evangelical operation that specifically targets Muslims around the world. While investors have been characterizing Myanmar as the “next frontier” for the past few years, evangelical Christians have been running what they call “frontier missions” and building “frontier churches” in

the country for decades already. Furthermore, the “frontier” is not necessarily across the border in another country. “Frontier Burma Mission” (with the website www.frontierburmamission.org) is a Christian group led by a Burmese couple, with “a vision for reaching the unreached people in Myanmar.”

The spatial metaphor of the “frontier” has been popular among scholars as well. Already in 1945, the United States government issued a report titled “Science: the Endless Frontier,” which proposed public funding to science research. (This proposal resulted in the establishment of the National Science Foundation.) Today, scholars across disciplinary boundaries have embraced this spatial metaphor, which stands for discovery and advancement. Academic publications and conferences are littered with the phrases “new frontiers” and “next frontier.”

Frontier: concept, metaphor, and narrative

While geographers have been aware of the metaphorical sense of the “frontier,” Livingstone and Harrison appear to have written the only substantive analysis of this metaphor. In their insightful 1981 paper “Meaning Through Metaphor: Analogy as Epistemology,” Livingstone and Harrison pointed out that studying a geographical metaphor could be fruitful because it would help us understand how we make meaning through spatial analogy. By understanding our analogical imagination we might gain “initial, embryonic insights” into spatial epistemology (Livingstone & Harrison, 1981:95). Paul Ricoeur, who produced seminal studies on metaphor about the same time as Livingstone and Harrison, also argued that studying metaphor “allows us a glance at the general procedure by which we produce concepts” (Ricoeur, 1978:149).

Livingstone and Harrison also showed that a metaphor typically emerges out of a narrative, especially a mythical narrative. They illustrated this with the example of the “frontier,” because, as we all know, this metaphor gained popularity in the United States through the circulation of a mythical narrative. Frederick Jackson Turner articulated this narrative as the story of American democracy in his 1893 paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” and it became a national myth. Although countless historians of the United States have disputed Turner’s “frontier thesis,” this popular American sense of the “frontier” metaphor has travelled widely—even among academics and non-Americans. How this spatial metaphor has travelled beyond the United States and caught the imagination of non-Americans deserves scholarly attention.

In the narrative of spatial expansion, a “frontier” refers to a place that is facing an expansive force. This force could be anything so long as it is commonly understood to be expanding in a rapid and overwhelming manner: it could be neoliberalism, urbanization, democracy, Christianity, terrorism, nuclear science, or digital technology. It is a force that evokes the power of the United States of America, a force that has conquered and continues to dominate a vast terri-

tory. When we say, for example, “Myanmar is a frontier of global capitalism,” we are saying that Myanmar is facing an external, powerful force and that the place is about to be transformed. We also imply that this place is not going to remain a frontier for a long time because the force (of global capitalism, in this case) keeps pushing its frontiers outward continuously. A frontier is by definition always moving; if it is fixed in one place, it is not a frontier. The rhetoric thus discursively projects power onto the space characterized as a frontier. It is a projection of a political imaginary.

More than thirty years ago Livingstone and Harrison called our attention to the foundational role of analogy in human cognition, and they urged us to investigate “the role of metaphor in the development of geographical epistemology” (1981, 95). Unfortunately, their inquiry did not gain much traction. It is time that we followed their initiative and investigated the “frontier” as a popular modern rhetoric and imaginary. It will be worthwhile to examine it as a political imagination of our time.

References

- Blacksell, M. (2000). Frontier. In R. J. Johnston, D. Gregory, G. Pratt, & M. Watts (Eds.), *The dictionary of human geography* (p. 282). Oxford [etc.]: Blackwell.
- Fawcett, C. B. (1918). *Frontiers: A study in political geography*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon.
- Johnson, C., Jones, R., Paasi, A., Amoore, L., Mountz, A., Salter, M., et al. (2011). Interventions on rethinking “the border” in border studies. *Political Geography*, 30(2), 61–69.
- Lamar, H. R., & Thompson, L. M. (1981). *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared*. New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press.
- Livingstone, D. N., & Harrison, R. T. (1981). Meaning through metaphor: analogy as epistemology. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 71(1), 95–107.
- Parker, B. J., & Rodseth, L. (2005). *Untaming the frontier: In anthropology, archaeology, and history*. Tucson, AZ, USA: University of Arizona Press.
- Prescott, J. R. V., & Triggs, G. D. (2008). *International frontiers and boundaries: Law, politics and geography*. Leiden; Biggleswade, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff; Extenza Turpin [distributor].
- Ricoeur, P. (1978). The metaphorical process as cognition, imagination, and feeling. *Critical Inquiry*, 5(1), 143–159.
- Rodseth, L., & Parker, B. J. (2005). Introduction: theoretical considerations in the study of frontiers. In B. J. Parker, & L. Rodseth (Eds.), *Untaming the frontier in anthropology, archaeology and history* (pp. 3–21). Tucson, AZ, USA: University of Arizona Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Philosophical investigations* (3rd ed.). Oxford, UK; Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell.

Masao Imamura*

Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan

National University of Singapore, Singapore

* The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan.

E-mail addresses: imamuramasao@gmail.com,
imamura@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp.

Available online 16 October 2014