

Interdisciplinary Approach to Global Studies

Seminar – PhD in Histories, Cultures, and Global Politics

The Frontier as Military-Political Technology

Francesco Buscemi

Abstract In recent decades, the frontier has garnered significant scholarly interest due to the flaring up of multiple war conjunctures connected to neocolonial political projects worldwide, as well as to the tides of giant infrastructure projects in the extractive industry, agribusiness, logistics and infrastructures. If the concept and space of the frontier is inherently characterized by a certain elusiveness this is reflected in the academic literature about it: across the transdisciplinary field of frontier studies a kaleidoscope of idiographic approaches has blossomed, generating productive but somewhat buzzing analytical lenses of resource, economic, agrarian, infrastructural, imaginary, extractive, or commodity frontiers. Questioning issues of semantic overstretch, conceptual “fatigue” and “burnout” that have invested the frontier as an hermeneutic device, in this seminar I would like to interrogate and explore it politically. Political geographical perspectives have ultimately converged in framing the frontier around three dimensions. The frontier is (1) a political space related to an ideological project that (2) defines a concrete geo-graphical area as a zone characterized by violence and disorder for (3) the continuous (re)territorialisation of modern state and capitalist power. In this sense, what kind of political work does the frontier do? How does the epistemological and practical politics of the frontier shape the configurations of power and political orders?

The seminar aims to reflect on how frontier spaces, and the violence that characterizes them, relate to the political geographic organization of space and society. I propose to think about the frontier as a transversal political technology. A technology that is central to the production and definition of three main elements around which politics and polities are built and ordered: relations of subjectivity (and thus of sovereignty); property and ownership – both in its economic and anthropological/socio-cultural dimensions; and community. In particular, the talk will focus on the frontier as a military-political technology and will do so by drawing on my work in/on Myanmar’s borderlands.

I argue that the frontier can be understood as a military paradigm and set of practices, techniques/technologies that have a specific function. The function of moulding spaces/moments into zones/times of blurred, jagged, distinction (a distinction that is always, at the same time, distinction-with-contact) between political life (and community) and natural/animal life. Military techniques like (for example) forced and less forced conscription of subjectivities at the margins of sovereign-capitalist power; the camouflaging of bodies and troops; zoning enacted through specific techniques of killing, maiming and targeting; vanguard forward settlements, encampments, or gated military communities; scorched-earth operations; the creation of frontline units, paramilitary or militia formations; or ethnocide can all be analysed in terms of a double feature that is both spatially and temporally connoted. One: These military techniques/technologies function to humanise forms of individual and collective life

that are defined and produced as not yet entirely human, not entirely life with capital “L” (for example economically subaltern, racialised, or sexualised subjectivities) through their deployment into the military machine and the projection of war towards the “outside” of the political community. In this sense, for instance, we could notice how the acts of war often become a potential social capital sold to marginalised subjectivities with the prospect of better integration. Two: These military techniques/technologies function to “naturalise”/animalize forms of individual and collective life that are defined and produced as a dangerous hybrid of human and animal, as something that is not quite fully human but also not quite fully animal, that threatens the very existence of life with capital “L”.

Possible Readings

Anzaldúa, G. 1987. *La Frontera. The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
<https://archive.org/details/anzaldua-borderlands-la-frontera>

Hage, G. 2017. *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

hooks, b. Hooks, Bell (2015). *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*. New York: Routledge.

Veracini, L. 2021. *The World Turned Inside Out. Settler Colonialism as a Political Idea*. London: Verso Books. – vedi anche: <https://gliasinirivista.org/una-logica-di-cancellazione/>

Kozłowska M, Lubina M. The Burmese road to Israeli-style cooperative settlements: The Namsang project, 1956–63. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 2021;52(4):701-725. doi:10.1017/S0022463421000977

Aung, G.R., Campbell, S. The Myanmar radical tradition: revolution, reaction, and the changing imperial world order. *Dialect Anthropol* **48**, 193–219 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-024-09716-0>