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Evaluation of the PhD thesis[1]

Bastian Küntzel
"From Openness to Closure: The Transformative Effects of Pandemic-Induced Border Closures on Identity in Border Regions"

The thesis created in the framework of the joint (cotutelle) doctoral procedure between Technische Universität Chemnitz and the University of Wrocław.

General assessment of the thesis

The doctoral thesis by Bastian Küntzel, entitled "From Openness to Closure: The Transformative Effects of Pandemic-Induced Border Closures on Identity in Border Regions", addresses a highly relevant and timely research topic, exploring the complex and far-reaching consequences of pandemic-related border closures on identity formation in European border regions. He employs the example of the German-Polish border(land). This subject is of clear importance not only due to its topicality, but also because of its multidimensional character - cutting across political, social, economic and cultural domains. Mr. Küntzel presents an original and innovative approach, combining qualitative social science methods with a nuanced theoretical framework to investigate how individuals living in the Polish-German borderland navigated sudden shifts in mobility and belonging. Consequently, the thesis is of high importance within the fields of political science, European studies, and - especially - border studies, where it offers a valuable contribution to research on cross-border dynamics and identity. In particular, its empirical focus on the Polish-German border region fills a gap in

[1] The language of this document has been reviewed for correctness with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools; responsibility for the content and its interpretation remains solely with the author.

existing academic reflection and enhances understanding of (cross-) border relations in this area.

While the structure of the thesis is generally well designed and thoughtfully laid out, the coherence of the paper shows several deficits, particularly in the introductory and conceptual sections, which would benefit from further refinement and clearer argumentative progression. The readability of the thesis is likewise diversified: the empirical part is well written, engaging, and methodologically sound, whereas some other sections - especially theoretical framing and contextual background - are marked by less academic precision and stylistic consistency.

Organization and coherence of the thesis

The thesis is structured in a clear and comprehensive way, reflecting both theoretical dinmension and empirical investigation. It begins with standard front matter, including a list of tables and graphs, as well as summaries in English, German, and Polish languages, underscoring its international orientation. The first chapter provides an Introduction, setting the parameters for the research. Chapter two engages with identity from multiple disciplinary perspectives - social psychology, linguistics, political science, sociology, and narrative approaches - culminating in a discussion of European identity and identity as potential. The third chapter shifts focus to space, particularly border regions, with detailed exploration of the Polish-German borderscape, Euroregions, and metropolitan areas, enriched by concrete case examples. Methodology is outlined in chapter four, covering diverse qualitative tools such as ecomaps, narrative interviewing, and network analysis, ensuring a robust foundation. Chapter five presents the analysis, beginning with typologies of border-dwellers (phenotypes), followed by their experiences, strategies, and case studies of individuals living across borders. The conclusion synthesizes findings, highlights systemic influences on identity formation, and discusses the fragility of European identity in crises, before offering implications for identity studies in border spaces and suggestions for further research. Finally, the work closes with a bibliography, grounding the study in a broad scholarly context.

Research objectives and questions

The author formulates the aim of his PhD research as an attempt "to establish what can be learned about identity. Specifically, about trans-categorical identities such as trans-national, European, or border-space identities, by analyzing the accounts of persons who live and work across the Polish-German border; and, whose lives were directly impacted by the border closures during the pandemic" (p. 17). While these objectives appear to have been achieved in the thesis, what may be contested is the extent to which they were appropriately formulated and how well they correspond to the research gap identified by the author. The author addresses two main research questions: 1. "In which ways have persons who live at the Polish-German borderland experienced the pandemic-related border closure and how has it impacted their identity?" And 2. "What is the impact of crises on grassroot/bottom-up European identity? Does it foster or weaken it; or perhaps does it not have any impact at all?" (p. 18).

Theoretical framework and literature review

The dissertation is marked by its ambitious and systematic engagement with the interdisciplinary landscape of border studies. The author begins (p. 19) by mapping how the research topic has been addressed across a wide spectrum of disciplines, including political science, history, psychology, anthropology, applied linguistics, and sociology. This broad review situates the study within a genuinely dialogical space between fields. Out of this survey emerges the guiding principle of collaborative interdisciplinary research, which the author does not treat as a mere slogan but as a substantive orientation that shapes the analysis. However, this section would have benefited from a more systematic engagement with the existing literature, as references to key scholarly debates and foundational works remain relatively sparse. This, on the other hand, is (to some extent) done in the following two chapters:

In Chapter 2 the concept of identity is explored. In outlining the dimensions and disciplinary approaches to the central concept, the author opts to explore psychological, sociological/cultural, political, historical, and geographical perspectives in greater detail. While this selection certainly covers relevant areas, the reasoning behind privileging these particular dimensions over others remains underdeveloped and ultimately unconvincing. The subsequent disciplinary overview of "identity debates" illustrates both strengths and weaknesses: on the one hand, the author rightly identifies in each disciplines a number of important theoretical approaches; on the other, several significant strands of scholarship are missing, and the treatment of certain perspectives (e.g. from political science), is strikingly ascetic. Overall, the level of engagement with reference to the academic literature in this section can only be described as unsatisfactory. The conclusion of the chapter, in which the author offers a working definition of identity for the dissertation, is likewise problematic: it is presented in a very brief manner, lacks sufficient justification, and engages only selectively with the preceding discussion, missing especially critical arguments.

In Chapter 3, the author turns to the classical field of border studies and develops the conceptual framework of space, focusing on borders, borderlands, and their specific manifestations along the German–Polish frontier. This part demonstrates the author's solid orientation in the academic debates on borders as well as a nuanced familiarity with the empirical realities of the German–Polish border region. At the same time, some important shortcomings are evident. Most notably, a map of the border and the investigated territorial structures is missing, which would have provided readers with a clearer spatial reference. The section is written in a partly essayistic style and occasionally bypasses conceptual fundamentals that one would expect - such as a more systematic engagement with the notions of "border" and "borderland." Although the author emphasizes the relevance of Polish–German history and shared border experiences for understanding how actors make sense of the region, the subsequent historical overview remains superficial, scarcely engages with sources, and therefore falls short of its stated objectives. The discussion of Euroregions is similarly problematic: the absence of clear analytical or comparative criteria results in a rather

chaotic presentation that is again weakly supported by references. A parallel issue arises in the section on border twin towns: while the case of Słubice–Frankfurt (Oder) is well contextualized and supported by literature, the case of Szczecin receive insufficient attention, leaving an impression of imbalance and lack of systematic coverage. Finally, the analysis of the border closure during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–June 2020) - arguably the key contextual frame of the entire study - remains significantly underdeveloped. In particular, a stronger focus on institutional dynamics and cross-border governance responses would have been highly desirable to substantiate the relevance of this period for the dissertation's central argument.

At the same time - when tracing the Bibliography section - the dissertation demonstrates a strong engagement with existing scholarship through a list of sources that encompasses over two hundred positions, reflecting a broad and comprehensive survey of the field. The literature review incorporates most of the key contributors to contemporary debates in border studies, with particular attention given to works focusing on the German-Polish borderlands. While certain texts are absent, the scope remains sufficient to establish a solid foundation for the analysis. The inclusion of a wide range of international authors highlights the global relevance of the research, ensuring that the work is embedded in cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural scholarly conversations. English- and German-language publications are particularly well represented, which reflects both the international discourse on border studies and the specific regional context of the thesis. In contrast, Polish-language contributions are comparatively underrepresented, which slightly narrows the local perspective but does not diminish the overall academic rigor of the literature engagement. While the thesis engages well with the literature, some parts of the text are insufficiently referenced.

Methodology

Whereas the introductory chapters reveal a number of shortcomings, the methodological section stands out as evidence of the author's academic advancement and intellectual maturity. The stated aim - "to explore a phenomenon with fuzzy edges and propose a categorization" (p. 71) - is both ambitious and appropriate for the complexity of the research topic, and it has been convincingly achieved through an innovative and courageous combination of research methods and techniques. The choice to refrain from formulating testable hypotheses and instead to articulate expectations (p. 71) represents a risky methodological decision; however, in this case, the risk was justified and ultimately produced fruitful results. Particular appreciation is due to the author's awareness and careful handling of ethical aspects throughout the research process, which lends credibility to the study. The integration of ecomaps, biographic narrative interviewing, the twenty statements test, and the network analysis into a coherent research strategy is both well thought out and effectively operationalized. Importantly, the author demonstrates reflexivity by acknowledging the limitations of each method and of their combined application to this particular research context (p. 83). This balance between innovation, rigor, and self-critical awareness marks the methodological chapter as one of the most accomplished parts of the dissertation.

The qualitative approach, based on 32 in-depth interviews with individuals actively engaged in their everyday lives across the German–Polish border, is a clear strength of the dissertation. By foregrounding lived experiences, the study captures the subtle complexities of borderland interactions that would remain invisible in (purely) quantitative analyses. While different categories (such as citizenship, workplace, or sites of socialization) were represented in uneven numbers, the inclusion of a balanced gender composition demonstrates methodological sensitivity and reflexivity. This sampling strategy ensures both diversity of perspectives and comparability, while remaining anchored in the authenticity of border residents' everyday practices. Overall, the design effectively supports situating cross-border phenomena in the context of individual agency and social embeddedness.

Analysis and findings

Chapter 5, dedicated to the analysis of the collected data, reflects the overall tendency of growing quality in the dissertation together with its development. The author creates diverse "phenotypes" of border dwellers along the analytical axes of benefit and ideology, leading to a convincing categorization into four types: *transborder harvesters, transborder actualisers, transborder workers,* and *transborder believers.* This typology, reinforced by excellent visualizations of identity types, represents a significant added value to the field of border studies and will likely prove useful beyond the immediate case of the German–Polish border.

The analysis of engagement with the border, and the broader impact of its closure, based on interview material, provides unique insights into the complexities of cross-border dynamics. It enables the construction of profiles for each of the identified types, considering their pathways to the German-Polish border, their experiences of the pandemic-related border closure, and the strategies they employed to cope with the challenges it imposed on their lives. This analysis is further enriched by in-depth interviews with four selected "cases," each representing one of the constructed categories. However, the criteria for selecting these interviewees are not explicitly enough articulated. Nonetheless, the analysis remains particularly valuable in examining how local, cross-border, national, and European identities intersect and interact. A critical question that remains, however, concerns the representativeness of the selected "cases" and the extent to which conclusions drawn from their accounts can be generalized (see, e.g., pp. 127, 134).

The analytical chapter is also commendable for its clear and systematic structure: the aims and analytical roadmap are explicitly stated, findings are thoroughly presented and discussed, and the qualitative insights are meaningfully supplemented with a quantitative dimension (p. 105). Particularly valuable is the application of the typology to the pandemic context, as the author demonstrates how the impact of the border closure was experienced across the categories and confirmed by case study examples. This section thus stands out as one of the most original and well-executed parts of the dissertation, combining conceptual innovation with empirical depth.

The conclusion part effectively summarizes the key findings and makes a commendable attempt to address the research questions. However, the usage of empirical material at this stage appears unnecessary (p. 165), and the clarity and purpose of certain paragraphs remain somewhat problematic (e.g. p. 166). While the inclusion of proposals for further research is appreciated, the closing sections of the dissertation give the impression of authorial fatigue, which somewhat diminishes the strength of the final reflections.

Other remarks

Several additional shortcomings can be identified in the paper. These include factual inaccuracies, oversimplifications, and imprecise formulations. For example: contrary to the claim on p. 33, most EU member states do not possess a "colonial past"; strong regional identification has long been evident in certain regions of Poland (p. 55); Collegium Polonicum was established in 1998 (p. 63); the current population of Szczecin is approximately 400,000, with the metropolitan area reaching nearly 800,000 inhabitants (p. 66); and the territorial shifts following World War II involved not only Belarus and Ukraine but also Lithuania (p. 129). Moreover, relevant literature on Polish-German marriages is not cited, despite the issue being addressed (p. 130). The paper also inconsistently employs the category of "country" instead of "state" (e.g., p. 138). The text occasionally adopts popular rather than academic language (e.g., pp. 48, 67, 148, 159). The overall editorial quality is also suboptimal: graphs and figures frequently lack proper source references, while formatting is inconsistent, with, for example, irregular spacing between paragraphs and subchapter titles often appearing compressed against the subsequent text.

Final Recommendation

Taking into consideration all the arguments presented in this evaluation, I am convinced that, despite the shortcomings listed, the PhD dissertation submitted by Mr. Bastian Küntzel, entitled "From Openness to Closure: The Transformative Effects of Pandemic-Induced Border Closures on Identity in Border Regions," makes a valuable contribution to research on the subject. It meets the formal requirements of a doctoral thesis as defined both in Polish and German academic systems. The thesis demonstrates the candidate's general academic knowledge, the capacity to conduct independent scientific research in the field of political science and European studies, and provides a persuasive and methodologically sound investigation of a relevant scientific problem.

Therefore, I recommend that the thesis be accepted and that Mr. Bastian Küntzel be admitted to the subsequent stages of the doctoral degree procedure.

Grade:

Poland: passed
Germany: cum laude (good)/ 2