

University of Victoria

**POLITICAL SCIENCE 533/633(F01)
CSPT 500/600 (F01)**

Boundaries, Borders, Limits

Fall 2014 Rob Walker

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This is an advanced graduate course on the politics of boundaries, especially boundaries that take the form of (geographical but also other kinds of) borders and (legal but also other kinds of) limits.

It is thus a course about distinctions, discriminations and classifications, not least among literatures seeking to understand the politics of boundaries, borders and limits. Or perhaps it might be better to say that it is a course about beginnings and endings, and the diverse ways in which claims to origin and destination are inscribed in boundaries, borders, limits, distinctions, discriminations and classifications.

Plato sought to cut nature at the joints; we tend to draw the line. We have drawn a line between nature and ourselves, and now find many of our most naturalized lines to be under erasure and subject to puzzling reinscription. The course is thus also conceived as an engagement with some exemplary and provocative literatures seeking to make sense of the consequent disorientation.

While it may draw upon a wide range of empirical material, the course will work primarily with questions about theoretical principle, and will assume a capacity for theoretical reasoning, broadly understood. The seminars in particular will focus on a narrow but exemplary range of topological forms and practices of distinction and discrimination that shape the politics of contemporary boundaries and the boundaries of contemporary politics. The question guiding these seminars will concern the different ways in which boundaries *work*, and the possibility of classifying different forms of boundary and the practices through which they are enacted. Particular attention will be paid to: the regulative ideal of the (Euclidean) straight line and the point enabling and disabling it; logics of marginality, exceptionality and alterity; claims about the presence/absence of boundaries under changing historical and structural conditions; and attempts to understand boundaries as somehow more complex than the regulative ideal of a straight line of zero width on and within which nothing happens. Attention will also be paid to some of the pervasive distinctions enabling various literatures on boundaries, including distinctions between form and substance, theory and practice, topology and sociology, and sovereignty and governmentality; and to the boundaries we presume in trying to compare different forms of boundaries and boundary practices.

While the course will focus on the *politics* of boundaries, it will be explicitly interdisciplinary in character: it will not assume much background in political science. However, it will assume a broad background in modern intellectual and cultural history as well as some familiarity with the main currents of contemporary social, political and cultural thought. Most scholarly conventions and academic disciplines, including political science, take boundaries more or less for granted, usually for understandable but also obviously contestable reasons. By contrast, many influential currents of critical thought for at least the past century have insisted that boundaries constitute and reproduce the substantive entities that are thereby taken for granted. Moreover, they have also insisted that what has come to be called “the modern” is characterized by very specific forms of boundary formation: practices that have been subjected to increasing critique on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Despite the continuing rhetorical force of claims that established boundaries are either here to stay or are about to disappear in some brave new global or cosmopolitan order (claims that are themselves understandable as an exemplary form of modern boundary practice), it seems reasonable to assume that the assumption that boundaries can be taken for granted, or simply stepped over, will be challenged by claims that boundaries are precisely what must be examined, and (re)politicized. This course is intended to explore what this might involve in terms of theoretical principle, with an eye on, or an ear open to many specific instances and trajectories that interest students in the class.

The course will begin with some introductory material in lecture form but then continue with a sequence of seminars, starting with the boundaries of modern subjectivities, both macro and micro. From there we will consider patterns of enclosure, exceptionality, marginality, and various forms of politics “on” or “within” the line. Along the way, it will consider various theoretical figures, like Derrida and Bourdieu, as exemplars of what might be called topological and sociological modes of analysis.

Students will be expected to introduce specific seminar topics with a 10-15 minute presentation, including a two or three page summary of the problem being identified, the argument being made, the conclusion being reached, the implications for a broader understanding of how boundaries work (both in form and in practice), and the literature found to be most useful/provocative.

While I want the seminars to stay attuned to a common theoretically-oriented agenda, students will be encouraged to develop their research papers in whatever directions seem relevant for their own interests and expertise – subject to consultation, and as long as a theoretical problem is identified and an argument of some theoretical consequence is sustained. I am open to papers that are heavily empirical, rigorously abstract, or anywhere between these perhaps profoundly dubious extremes; and to papers that engage any recognised field of scholarship, from, just to tempt the fates, cosmologies to aesthetics. However, in order to help prevent mere term papers expanding into sufficient work for three lifetimes, I would like to receive from each student, by the beginning of October 2014, a two page paper-proposal, including a short bibliography.

Please note: Class presentations should not be early versions of a research paper, although they may address a similar thematic. Presentations are intended to facilitate, provoke and contribute to a collective discussion – to have a pedagogic function – and will be evaluated accordingly.

Course Requirements:

Research paper	70%
Class presentation (oral and written):	15%
Class participation:	15%