

Violence at the margins of the state: concepts, critiques and contributions

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Contents

Executive summary	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Theoretical foundations: power, violence and territory	9
3. From methodological territorialism to borderworlds	13
4. Competing views on violence in the margins of the state	21
Conclusion	33
Bibliography	35

Executive summary

The ability to define borders is crucial to establishing territory and governing communities. As such, the question of violence at the margins lies at the heart of modern state projects. Over the past three decades, a diverse body of literature on borderlands, borderworlds and frontiers has sought to de- and re-spatialise power, throwing up alternative histories and geographies of communities residing at the supposed edge of the state. This paper provides a review of that literature, which encompasses diverse disciplines, from geography to international relations, political science to anthropology.

In doing so, the paper touches on a number of fundamental questions, such as: Where does the state end? How is power and political authority configured at the so-called 'margins'? And what can we learn about state formation by studying these areas? Complicating matters further, margins are not merely spaces that must submit to land dispossession or territorial expansion. Rather, such projects are often countered by overlapping political authorities that compete with state rule.

Building on this, the paper explores how scholars have made sense of violence in state margins, which manifests in two main ways, both of which are central to the (re)production of political margins. First, there is the direct violence of coercion, which relies on force or intimidation. And second, there is the indirect violence of control, which relies on 'voluntary' submission or 'hidden' control mechanisms.

Having sifted through the wide-ranging literature, the paper distils five recurrent explanations for violence in borderlands. While explanations 1–3 are primarily concerned with *why* violence characterises spaces at the margins, explanations 4 and 5 focus on the effects of violence (i.e. the *how*) at and from the margins. More specifically, explanation 1 posits that violence at the margins is mainly due to state expansion, with state authorities often identified as the culprit. Explanation 2, by contrast, paints violence as resulting from a lack of state control or capacity, with a host of alternative (e.g. armed, criminal, illicit) actors also practicing state-like authority. Explanation 3, meanwhile, foregrounds infrastructures and materiality as underlying the violence. Turning to the two *how* explanations, explanation 4 points to the global networks that sustain violent processes at the margins, while explanation 5 looks at how people navigate violence in borderlands and frontiers.

In terms of policy implications, explanations 1–3 suggest a need for state reform. For instance, if one believes that explanation 1 is the prime cause of violence, the logical response is to 'democratise' state institutions and facilitate political inclusion. If, however, one subscribes to explanation 2, which implies that political centres have the right to 'pacify' their peripheries, there is a strong argument in favour of supporting repressive state capacities. Explanation 3 suggests an entirely different set of policy recommendations again, based around supporting local forms of organising and enabling greater autonomy from the central state.

By contrast, explanations 4 and 5 suggest that state (and state-like) institutions require transformation. Thus, policy responses prompted by these perspectives will likely privilege bottom-up solutions that call for a rethinking of key institutions such as property, police, prisons, borders and the military. In a nutshell, the paper highlights how divergent accounts of violence in borderlands are not 'innocent': while some explanations suggest a need for state reform in borderlands, others demand a more radical transformation of state institutions and policies.

At the same time, the five explanations are not – from a conceptual viewpoint – mutually exclusive. On the contrary, combining them provides a more nuanced understanding of violence at the margins. Considerable scope for deepening our understanding of the dynamics explored in this paper remains. In doing so, we should no longer pretend that explanations of violence are without consequences. Rather, we must openly acknowledge that each explanation privileges a different normative assumption and causal perspective on violence at the margins.

1. Introduction

How are we to make sense of violence at the margins of the state? In the aftermath of the 2021 coup in Myanmar – where the author has conducted most of his work – this question loomed large over debates around what constitutes a ‘just war’.¹ Bamar populations in Myanmar’s central areas were for the first time experiencing mass violence at the hands of the state military. Prior to this, these areas had been spared the treatment meted out by successive military regimes to the country’s borderlands over seven decades of warfare.

Solidarity between social and ethnic groups reached unprecedented levels following the coup and ensuing state repression. As armed resistance took shape in central Myanmar, many ethnic minority activists and organisations from the borderlands argued that the Bamar majority was finally getting a taste of what they had endured for decades. According to this view, the fact that Bamar populations in Myanmar’s central areas now regarded state violence as unjust marked a break from the past, when many viewed military operations in the frontiers as part of a just war waged against revolutionaries whose motives they struggled to understand.

Post-coup ‘just war’ debates gave members of the Bamar majority an opportunity to distance themselves from the military violence previously inflicted in their name on the country’s frontiers, and to reconsider the long years of struggle in the borderlands. Such debates highlighted how Myanmar’s borderlands are not merely areas adjacent to or traversed by an international boundary, but frontier spaces where militarised violence has profoundly shaped identities and political communities.

This paper provides a review of the literature – spanning several decades and encompassing geography, international relations (IR), political science and anthropology – on violence at the margins of the state. Scholars have variously framed the relationship between the state and its so-called ‘margins’ as borderlands, liminal zones, grey areas, frontiers or no man’s lands.² Such a complex array of concepts is bound by a common thread: the centrality of violence to the (re)production of these margins.

1 F. Buscemi, *Arms politics: becoming and being a weapon in the borderlands of Myanmar* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2025), pp. 16–18.

2 On borderlands, see M. Duffield, *Global governance and the new wars: the merging of development and security* (London: Zed, 2001); I. Abraham and W. van Schendel, *Illicit flows and criminal things: states, borders, and the other side of globalization* (Indiana University Press, 2005); J. Goodhand, ‘War, peace and the places in between: why borderlands are central’, in M. Pugh, N. Cooper and M. Turner, eds, *Whose peace: critical perspectives on the political economy of peacebuilding* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 225–244. On liminal zones, see E.W. Soja and B. Hooper, ‘The spaces that difference makes: some notes on the geographical margins of new cultural politics’, in M. Keith and S. Pile, eds, *Place and the politics of identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 183–205; V. Das and D. Poole, ‘Anthropology in the margins of the state’, *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 30: 1, 2004, pp. 140–144; B. Korf and T. Raeymaekers, eds, *Violence on the margins: states, conflict, and borderlands* (London: Palgrave, 2013). On grey areas, see B. Korf and H. Fünfgeld, ‘War and the commons: assessing the changing politics of violence, access and entitlements in Sri Lanka’, *Geoforum* 37: 3, 2006, pp. 391–403; O. Yiftachel, ‘Critical theory and “gray space”: mobilization of the colonized’, *City* 13: 2–3, 2009, pp. 246–263; E. Weizman, *The least of all possible evils: humanitarian violence from Arendt to Gaza* (New York: Verso Books, 2011). On frontiers, see C. Raffestin, ‘Elements for a theory of the frontier’, *Diogenes* 34: 1, 1986, pp. 1–18.; T. Hagmann and B. Korf, ‘Agamben in the Ogaden: violence and sovereignty in the Ethiopian–Somali frontier’, *Political Geography* 31: 4, 2012, pp. 205–214; M. Eilenberg, ‘Frontier constellations: agrarian expansion and sovereignty on the Indonesian–Malaysian border’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 41: 2, 2014, pp. 157–182. On no man’s lands, see N. Leshem and A. Pinkerton, ‘Re-inhabiting no-man’s land: genealogies, political life and critical agendas’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41: 1, 2016, pp. 41–53; B. Korf, T. Hagmann and M. Doevenspeck, ‘Geographies of violence and sovereignty: the African frontier revisited’, in B. Korf and T. Raeymaekers, eds, *Violence on the margins: states, conflict, borderlands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 29–54; N. Leshem, *Edges of care: living and dying in no man’s land* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025).

The question of how to make sense of such violence is intertwined with the relationship between state, violence and territory. Prominent voices from anthropology, political science, geography and historical sociology have long argued that territory functions as a spatial container for the nation-state.³ The very emergence of the modern sovereign state is bound up with the use of 'territory' to define political space.⁴ At its heart, the modern state is a configuration of power designed to centralise – and so unify – people and space. State territory can therefore be understood as the ensemble of administrative, judicial, fiscal, cartographic and military measures needed to achieve this. The *creation* of territory, meanwhile, is intimately linked to the violent moulding of the state's 'limits' by its 'centre'.

By its nature, the creation of territory relies on defining where said territory ends.⁵ At the same time, the very processes driving state formation – e.g. public goods and services provision; infrastructural expansion and territorial control; enforcement of law and order; defence – produce areas at 'the margins of' state and political authority.⁶ This ambivalence has proved challenging to both what this paper refers to as the 'conservative' literature (e.g. the 'failed states' literature) and more critical approaches to statehood,⁷ prompting such questions as: Where does the state end? What 'happens' where the state ends?⁸ How is power and political authority configured at the margins? Which social phenomena are obscured when we confine ourselves to the lens of 'marginal' territory? And what can we learn about state formation by studying these supposed margins? Complicating matters further, margins are not merely areas that – in playing host to sovereign and capitalist projects that turn 'nature' into extractable resources – must submit to land dispossession or territorial expansion. In fact, such projects are often countered by overlapping political authorities striving to compete with state rule.⁹ In this way, the margins act as an arena where the definitory, destructive aspects of political violence run up against its transformatory, productive dimensions.

Throughout this paper, the terms 'margins' and 'spaces at the margins' are used to denote a range of state and non-state spaces at the limits of political authority. For example, margins can be borderlands (i.e. spaces crossed by an officially designated borderline) and/or frontiers of a particular political

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- 3 While acknowledging the colonial and European roots of the modern nation-state as a political project, the term 'modern nation-state' or 'modern state' is nevertheless used throughout for the sake of simplicity. For anthropology, see A. Sharma and A. Gupta, *The anthropology of the state: a reader* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006). For political science, see T. Mitchell, 'The limits of the state: beyond statist approaches and their critics', *American Political Science Review* 85: 1, 1991, pp. 77–96. For geography, see S. Elden, *The birth of territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). For historical sociology, see C. Tilly, *Coercion, capital and European states, AD 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2003).
 - 4 J. Agnew, 'The territorial trap: the geographical assumptions of international relations theory', *Review of International Political Economy* 1: 1, 1994, pp. 53–80; S. Elden, 'Land, terrain, territory', *Progress in Human Geography* 34: 6, 2010, pp. 799–817; J. Painter, 'Rethinking territory', *Antipode* 42: 5, 2010, pp. 1090–1118.
 - 5 A political and geographic process that has assumed various forms throughout history, whether colonies or settlements, Bantustans or borders. L. Veracini, *The world turned inside out: settler colonialism as a political idea* (London: Verso Books, 2021).
 - 6 P. Lottholz and N. Lemay-Hébert, 'Re-reading Weber, re-conceptualizing state-building: from neo-Weberian to post-Weberian approaches to state, legitimacy and state-building', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29: 4, 2016, pp. 1467–1485.
 - 7 On the former, see R. I. Rotberg, ed., *When states fail: causes and consequences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). On the latter, see T. A. Börzel, T. Risse and A. Draude, eds, *The Oxford handbook of governance and limited statehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 3–26.
 - 8 T. Asad, 'Where are the margins of the state?', in V. Das and D. Poole, eds, *Anthropology in the margins of the state* (School of American Research Press, 2004), pp. 279–288.
 - 9 C. Schetter and M. Müller-Koné, 'Frontiers' violence: the interplay of state of exception, frontier habitus, and organized violence', *Political Geography* 87, 2021, pp. 1–10; M. Watts, 'Resource curse? Governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria', *Geopolitics* 9: 1, 2004, pp. 50–80; J. Cons and R. Sanyal, 'Geographies at the margins: borders in South Asia—an introduction', *Political Geography* 35, 2013, pp. 5–13.

community (canonically understood as a group of people within a given space who share common characteristics).

Against this backdrop, this paper explores how scholars have made sense of the violence – defined here as the direct or structural curtailment of a subject's autonomy – seen in state margins.¹⁰ Such curtailment manifests in two main ways: first, as the direct violence of coercion, which relies on force or intimidation; and, second, as the indirect violence of control, which relies on 'voluntary' submission or 'hidden' control mechanisms.¹¹ As the following sections demonstrate, both forms of violence are central to the (re) production of political margins.

Inevitably, several authorial choices had to be made in making sense of what is a large and diverse body of literature. First, in attempting to simplify the subject's key theoretical ideas, the paper inevitably glosses over some of the conceptual complexities involved. Second, the paper spotlights five contrasting explanations that exemplify different ways of accounting for violence in borderlands. Whereas some embed violence in structural centre–periphery relations, others are interested in the specifics of how violence manifests itself in particular circumstances; while others still focus on the ways in which social actors deal with violence. Third, for reasons of limited space, the paper makes only minimal and selective use of empirical illustrations, often privileging those contexts the author is most familiar with (that is, Myanmar).

With these caveats in mind, the paper guides the reader through a dense array of scholarly work on 'violent' borders and borderlands. First, section 2 sets out the literature's normative and theoretical foundations, drawing on the work of Italian political theorist Roberto Esposito to highlight a number of implicit and explicit assumptions about the power–territory nexus. Section 3 proceeds to an intellectual genealogy of the literature on spaces at the margins of the state, charting its shift from a state-centric focus to a critique of 'methodological territorialism'. In doing so, it elaborates on the key concepts – borderlands, frontiers and borderworlds – present in much of the literature reviewed. Next, section 4 distils the five recurrent explanations proposed by scholars attempting to make sense of violence in borderlands. These are: 1) expansion of sovereign authority into marginal spaces; 2) lack of state control or capacity by the political centre (including a monopoly on violence); 3) the role of infrastructures and materiality; 4) effects of global militarism networks and war; and 5) how people at the margins experience violent settings. As the conclusion explains, accounts of violence in borderlands are never 'innocent'. Rather, very different policy recommendations arise depending on which dimensions are privileged: while some of the identified explanations suggest a need for state reform in borderlands, others demand a more radical transformation of state institutions and policies.

10 Whether materially or discursively. b. hooks, *Feminist theory: from margin to center* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

11 I. Buchanan, 'Gilles Deleuze', in B. Evans and T. Carver, eds, *Histories of violence: post-war critical thought* (London: Zed Books, 2017), pp. 108–113.

2. Theoretical foundations: power, violence and territory

To understand how the relationship between violence and state margins has evolved in academic debates, we must first clarify how the state itself – as a modern political form of power – relates to violence and territory. Given that the borderlands literature features a diverse, often competing array of conceptions concerning power, violence and territory, a short theoretical detour via political theory is in order.

The section draws especially on the work of influential Italian theorist Roberto Esposito, who foregrounds community as a political technology central to the modern nation-state. In doing so, he not only demonstrates that the management of violence impacts how political identity and space are reproduced, but reminds us that the state is but one among many forms of political authority. In terms of the focus of this paper, Esposito's key point is that, through violence and war, the modern nation-state produces spaces at the margins of its imagined political community, thereby instituting (political and geographical) boundaries that define the human subjects and sovereign powers 'within'.

Violence and political community

State-centric perspectives often essentialise spaces defined as borderlands, frontiers or margins as inherently violent. In this respect, Esposito's work on the modern political project – to which we will return – provides a powerful critique.¹² More broadly, the transdisciplinary literature on violence at/in the margins is largely situated in debates about sovereign and biopolitical power – the two main modalities by which modern politics organises power relations.

Put simply, *sovereignty* represents a form of power organised around the right to decide on exceptions to the rules, while *biopolitics* regards the government's primary object as the care and fostering of life.¹³ In both cases, power can be viewed as the consequence of attempted inter-relational domination¹⁴ – or, put another way, the effects of the political interactions and institutions used by hierarchical authorities.¹⁵ Thus, rather than assuming a 'thing-like' quality, power becomes an effect driven by the idea it is acceptable for a dominant party or group to subdue others using coercion.¹⁶

Violence produces and maintains social hierarchies in the form of 'alterity' – human life charted along classist, gendered, ableist, racist and ethnonational lines – with social institutions such as the family, police or military helping institutionalise coercive authority. Here, one of the main differences between sovereign and biopolitical power relates to how they view violence and death.

12 R. Esposito, *Bios: biopolitics and philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

13 M. Ojakangas, 'Impossible dialogue on bio-power: Agamben and Foucault', *Foucault Studies* 2, 2005, pp. 5–28.

14 hooks, *Feminist theory*.

15 B. Korf et al., 'Geographies of limited statehood', in A. Draude, T. A. Börzel and T. Risse, eds, *The Oxford handbook of governance and limited statehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 170.

16 T. Mitchell, 'Society, economy, and the state effect', in G. Steinmetz, ed., *State/culture: state-formation after the cultural turn* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 76–97; hooks, *Feminist theory*, p. 118.

If the sovereign is understood to be, as Schmitt famously puts it, ‘he who decides on a state of exception’ to social or legal norms – ‘he’ being the king, government or other source of authority – then sovereign power can be seen as the effect of having the ability to act violently.¹⁷ If, on the other hand, biopolitics is understood as managing large-scale social relations in order to foster life,¹⁸ then biopower translates into the ability to organise and sustain ‘human’ life (and, by implication, allowing death) at aggregate scales.¹⁹ Despite these differences, sovereign and biopolitical power sometimes coexist within contemporary political spaces.

As Esposito argues, key to the organisation of power relations is the relationship between violence and the community. This holds particularly true for the political projects pursued by the modern nation-state, their diffusion through colonial and imperial endeavours, and their re-formulation via postcolonial forms of rule.²⁰ In his work on sovereignty and biopolitics, Esposito traces out how, on the one hand, violence constitutes political communities, while on the other, political communities constitute violence.²¹ Accordingly, one of the most important features binding people together is the human condition of being both a potential victim and perpetrator of violence.

Zones of distinction, including frontiers, boundaries, liminal spaces and margins, are key to the co-constitutive relations between violence and community. In the discourse of modern nation-states, the construction of a political community requires a moment ‘before’ history where no such zone of distinction can be drawn between the victims and perpetrators of violence.²² Here, the lack of ‘distance’ – both metaphorically in terms of identity relations, and geographically in terms of boundaries – with which to distinguish human subjects in a place/time of potential violence is constructed as inherently threatening.

According to Esposito, both sovereign and biopolitical power employ socio-political and juridical mechanisms that constitute a ‘common’ way of regulating violence and waging war. The spaces of political community produced by these processes are characterised by zones of distinction designed to neutralise any threat of violence originating from outside that perceived community. Esposito’s insights thus emphasise how violence forms a constitutive element of the modern nation-state, and how the organisation of space is central in the organisation of violence.

Violence and territory

Clarifying the nexus between violence and political community makes clearer the linkages between physical violence and territory.²³ The mechanisms that articulate a political community’s territory – with its frontiers, borders and borderlands – serve to distinguish between an internal ‘us’ and an external ‘them’.

17 C. Schmitt, *Political theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985; first pub. 1922); M. Foucault, *The history of sexuality, volume 1: an introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); see especially D. Johnson and B. Korf, ‘The predicament of pastoral sovereignty’, *Political Geography* 87, 2021, p. 3.

18 M. Foucault, *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978* (New York: Picador, 2007).

19 For an overview, see E. Prasse-Freeman, *Rights refused: grassroots activism and state violence in Myanmar* (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2023), pp. 65–70.

20 F. Devji, *The impossible Indian: Gandhi and the temptation of violence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); L. Veracini, *Settler colonialism: a theoretical overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

21 R. Esposito, *Immunitas: the protection and negation of life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

22 Ibid., p. 28.

23 Elden, *The birth*.

Esposito underlines how a political community's juridical and security apparatuses reproduce protective zones as a means of distinguishing between victims and perpetrators of violence. Thus, in delineating a community's boundaries, state apparatuses produce frontiers, margins and edges.

The transition to modern forms of governing has seen the production of politico-administrative boundaries assume two main forms.²⁴ The first utilises bordering processes to delineate the peripheries of states and political entities, while the second draws boundaries based on individual property.²⁵ In the latter case, individual property can be understood not only in an economic-legal sense, but as relating to gender, class, racial and national identity. Beyond the mere defining of boundaries, individual property requires that the notion of a rights-bearing individual be established.²⁶ Borderlines therefore draw a distinction between the political community on the 'inside' and the world 'outside'. Individual property, meanwhile, both produces the forms of subjectivity upon which a community is founded and draws boundaries between community members.

These two manifestations of boundary construction rely on zones of distinction – or 'contamination' – separating the 'civilised' from the 'not yet' civilised, with the latter understood to be a potential threat to the former.²⁷ As Esposito's analysis demonstrates, political communities deploy violence to establish political and geographical boundaries that define the rights-bearing human subject and the sovereign.²⁸

Violence also reflects power differences among the members of a political community within its delineated boundaries. Remoteness from a state centre becomes associated with danger, while the margins are portrayed as spaces where the political community's integrity is challenged. In embracing both sovereign and biopolitical power, the modern nation-state runs the risk of the mechanisms it employs to shield the political community from violence assuming a destructive rather than protective role. In this way, state actions premised on regulating violence for the benefit of those within political community become geared towards inflicting violence on those outside of it.²⁹ This dynamic is particularly apparent when ethnonationalist or racist movements assume control of sovereign and biopolitical government apparatuses. Such movements often portray their preferred form of life as being the form of 'Life', to be protected from external contamination at all costs.³⁰

Geographical underpinnings of 'the margins'

Geographical and anthropological theory helps frame two propositions that not only underpin modern nation-states, but explain the prominent role played by violence at state margins. The first is that each life, and each political community, has its own geographic margins. The second is that life is to be made use of.

24 R. Esposito, *Dieci pensieri sulla politica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011); Esposito, *Immunitas*.

25 On the former, see N. Vaughan-Williams, *Border politics: the limits of sovereign power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). On the latter, see Devji, *The impossible Indian*; Esposito, *Dieci pensieri*.

26 Esposito, *Dieci pensieri*, p. 236.

27 Korf, Hagmann and Doevecke, 'Geographies of violence', p. 31.

28 Property and boundaries feature prominently in some of the literature discussed later in this paper. For instance, scholars have researched violence as both productive of and resulting from: identity conflicts; property conflicts; gendered violence; unregulated capitalist expansions; state economic and political enforcement of borders; and alternative political projects willing to redraw borders.

29 A. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15: 1, 2003, pp.11–40.

30 Ibid.

Biopolitical power is, in essence, focused on demographic and spatial aggregates. According to this conception, a population represents a demographic-spatial entity that needs to be defended.³¹ Here, nineteenth-century Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén, building on the work of German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, went as far as ascribing the nation-state its own biological and geographic ‘vital’ space.³² To preserve and militarily defend its ‘vital’ space, a state must govern matters of life and death in ways that foster the polity’s society.³³

This approach lies at the heart of geopolitical discourse on the colonial past and present of state and imperial projects. Political theory emphasises the ‘geo’ aspect in two important ways: first, through understanding space in terms of ownership and vital needs, which politicises biological life and geological space; and, second, viewing life as a struggle for survival against other forms of life – whether ‘human’ or not – thereby promoting a certain martial character of life.

The idea that life is based on exclusive ownership and rights – maintained by dominating geographic space – has problematic implications. Historically, it has led to the racial profiling of individuals and populations according to their (in)ability to mould their ‘vital’ space to their ‘vital’ needs.³⁴ For example, European colonial thinkers deemed indigenous populations in what was re-named America to be inferior on the basis that they were incapable of shaping the land to their own needs.³⁵

Crucially, this idea also treats geographic peripheries as functional margins necessary for the defence or sustenance of the polity as an organic entity. As anthropologist Ghassan Hage sees it, state and colonial projects support capitalist expansion into the margins by endorsing – formally and informally – racism and speciesism, both of which essentialise a particular form of life in order to establish ‘evolute/backward’ and ‘dominant/dominated’ binaries.³⁶ Their roots lie with what Hage terms ‘domestication’: a mode of experiencing the world that involves ensuring one’s ‘own’ environment yields value in ways that serve the dominant’s well-being.³⁷ Domestication thus produces differentiated spaces of exploitation, whether between the ‘centres’ and ‘margins’ of a territorial state; between the ‘metropole’ and the ‘colony’; or at the level of the plantation, with its houses and fields.

To reiterate: any analysis of violence at the margins must take account of the constitutive relationship between state, violence and territory. Political power, whether sovereign or biopolitical, produces zones of distinction that enable the exploitation of populations positioned at the polity’s edge. In this way, the above detour into political theory helps clarify how much of the literature examined below stems from two often overlapping conceptual standpoints. Whereas some authors are preoccupied with how centralised political power mobilises violence in the process of territorial expansion, others are focused on the dynamics at play in the margins themselves, placing them at the centre of analysis.

31 I. Klinké and M. Bassin, ‘Introduction: Lebensraum and its discontents’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 61, 2018, pp. 53–58; Esposito, *Bios*.

32 Esposito, *Bios*; I. Klinké, ‘Vitalist temptations: life, earth and the nature of war’, *Political Geography* 72, 2019, pp. 1–9; I. Klinké, *Life, earth, colony: Friedrich Ratzel’s necropolitical geography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023); C. Minca, ‘The biopolitical imperative’, in J. Agnew et al., eds, *The Wiley Blackwell companion to political geography*, 1st edition (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 165–186; M. Proto, ‘Applying Friedrich Ratzel’s political and biogeography to the debate on natural borders in the Italian context (1880–1920)’, *Geographica Helvetica* 78, 2023, pp. 41–52.

33 Klinké, ‘Vitalist temptations’; Proto, ‘Applying Friedrich’.

34 M. Proto and F. Buscemi, ‘On the natural border: a bio-geo-political reading’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, published online 2025.

35 Veracini, *The world turned*.

36 G. Hage, *Is racism an environmental threat?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

37 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

3. From methodological territorialism to borderworlds

How best to overturn the longstanding statist assumptions of mainstream political science and IR? Beginning in the 1990s, critical scholars took up this challenge by conceptualising the ‘margins’ as borderlands, borderworlds and frontiers. The following presents a succinct genealogy of this interdisciplinary literature by, firstly, analysing the historical and conceptual premises that shaped the field; secondly, highlighting how state-centric scholarship’s erasure of alternative histories and geographies relates to the social construction of the state’s main spatial metaphors (the ‘regions’ and the ‘area’); thirdly, examining how margins became a privileged site for studying both non-state political projects and violent state formation trajectories; and, lastly, expanding on the borderland, borderworld and frontier concepts.

Beyond the ‘territorial trap’

State territorialisation had, by the close of the twentieth century, been profoundly affected by globalisation and its associated socio-economic restructuring. While the so-called ‘crisis of the territorial state’ led some scholars to dismiss the ‘methodological territorialism’ of mainstream IR approaches,³⁸ subsequent ‘de-territorialisation’ arguments were in turn criticised for neglecting the physical-material dimensions of borders.³⁹ Both positions, however, share a theoretical point of departure in how they perceive territory, which Edward Soja encapsulated in his call to ‘spatialise the historical narrative, to attach to *durée* an enduring critical human geography’.⁴⁰

This outlook is grounded in the spatial dimensions of Foucault’s work, who famously argued that ‘Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic’.⁴¹ Alongside Foucault’s work, Henri Lefebvre’s 1974 book *The Production of Space* provided the conceptual basis for an ontological, epistemological and methodological project pitched in this direction.⁴² Rooted in Marxism and Marxist critical geography,⁴³ similar pushes emerged in postcolonial thought and subaltern studies.⁴⁴

Three main elements characterise this body of literature, which reject the conception of states as natural territorial containers. First, the de-construction of historicism as a ‘mode of thinking about history in which one assumed that any object under investigation retained a unity of conception throughout its existence

38 Agnew, ‘The territorial trap’; N. Brenner, ‘Beyond state-centrism? Space, territoriality, and geographical scale in globalization studies’, *Theory and Society* 28, 1999, pp. 45–56; A. Mbembe, ‘At the edge of the world: boundaries, territoriality, and sovereignty in Africa’, *Public Culture* 12: 1, 2000, pp. 259–284.

39 M. Baud and W. van Schendel, ‘Toward a comparative history of borderlands’, *Journal of World History* 8: 2, 1997, pp. 211–242.

40 E. W. Soja, *Postmodern geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory* (London: Verso Books, 1989), p. 1.

41 M. Foucault, *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*, C. Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 70.

42 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, first pub. 1974).

43 Ibid., p. 43.

44 D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

and attained full expression through a process of development in secular, historical time'.⁴⁵ Second, the exploration of spatial configurations previously neglected by most IR scholarship. Third, the investigation of how space is socially produced by, and in turn shapes, society. These elements can be boiled down to two critiques that have marked the interdisciplinary literature on margins, border(land)s and frontiers: the first addressing the so-called 'territorial trap' of 'methodological territorialism';⁴⁶ the second criticising 'region' and 'area' as spatial metaphors.

Mainstream social science – as well as vernacular discourse – tends to make sense of socio-political phenomena from the perspective of state power. This points to just how entrenched the modern nation-state is within our imaginations. In line with standard IR and legal definitions, critiqued by Agnew in his idea of the 'territorial trap',⁴⁷ the state is conceived of as a political entity that: 1) has fixed borders and a discrete space, within which sovereign power radiates from the centre; 2) is functionally divided between a domestic and an external sphere; and 3) both historically precedes and contains the societies resident throughout its territory.

This state-centric perspective not only produces and conceals 'marginal' spaces, but has normative implications for how such spaces are viewed. In the majority of cases, the state and its political institutions are regarded as the most advanced, successful and 'civilised' form of spatial organisation.⁴⁸ This view of state modernity reiterates broader civilisational discourses that tend to be dismissive of non-state socio-political authority and organisation.⁴⁹ Moreover, it reifies an image of margins – whether borderlands, peri-urban edges and peripheries, slums or ghettos – as spaces of disorder, decay and illegality. This flawed 'methodological territorialism' reflects an understanding of state–society relations in which 'full' state sovereignty is achieved through the provision of public goods and services,⁵⁰ mediated by territorial dominion and monopolistic control over the means of violence.⁵¹ Meanwhile, forms of authority that do not fulfil these criteria are seen as absent, negligible or incomplete.⁵²

The political and moral implications of this worldview are wide-ranging. In construing the 'margins' as spaces in need of state and capitalist domestication, sovereignty becomes a 'thing-like' force that proceeds outward from the centre, and from top to bottom. Moreover, it discounts any manifestation of political power not built on the standard model of territorial sovereignty.⁵³ The modern state thus becomes the model of governance against which every other form of political organisation is judged, with the absence of one or more features (e.g. territorial control; public goods and services provision; monopoly over security and violence) taken as evidence of inadequacy.

45 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. xiv.

46 Agnew, 'The territorial trap'.

47 Ibid.

48 J. C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

49 W. van Schendel, 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, 2002, pp. 647–668; M. Sadan, *Being and becoming Kachin: histories beyond the state in the borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: British Academy and Oxford University Press, 2013).

50 J. Agnew, 'Still trapped in territory?', *Geopolitics* 15: 4, 2010, pp. 779–784.

51 J. Goodhand, 'Epilogue: the view from the border', in B. Korf and T. Raeymaekers, eds, *Violence on the margins: states, conflict, and borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 249.

52 Lottholz and Lemay-Hébert, 'Re-reading Weber'.

53 Scott, *Seeing like a state*; Agnew, 'Still trapped'; A. Jones and J. Clark, 'Political geography and political science: common territory?', *Geopolitics* 25: 2, 2020, pp. 472–478.

‘Regions’ and ‘areas’ as spatial metaphors

‘Methodological territorialism’ is closely intertwined with the spatial metaphor of the ‘region’ or ‘area’. On this subject, influential historian-anthropologist Willem van Schendel highlighted how the construction of ‘regions’ and ‘areas’ relates to the ways in which the ‘territorial trap’ renders certain social phenomena visible while blotting out others.⁵⁴ ‘Regions’ and ‘areas’ can be understood as, respectively, the building blocks and containers of the territorial state. Following van Schendel’s critique of area studies, they bear three distinctive characteristics that, historically, have led to certain places being designated socio-political centres and others margins. First, the region/area is delineated via the politicisation of a physical space’s geological or morphological characteristics, as well as its biological or zoological traits. These purportedly mark out a ‘region’ or ‘area’ as a discrete space within which – due to riverine, mountainous or other natural configurations – life has developed fairly uniformly. Second, these natural dimensions are represented as having led to the consolidation of certain socio-cultural traits, with all the problematic corollaries this brings. Lastly, the ‘region’ or ‘area’ is symbolically associated with a particular set of socio-economic characteristics – in doing so, it is both produced by and productive of institutional spaces.⁵⁵

These three features are indicative of how nation-states have attempted to build up territory by reifying and homogenising their margins. For the most part, mainstream approaches to area studies, history and IR/political science have reflected this outlook. By contrast, the literature on spaces at the margins stresses that turning places into ‘regions’ or ‘areas’ is never a neutral endeavour, as it inevitably entails power relations and politics of knowledge production.⁵⁶ In the wake of popular upheavals, mountainous areas, shatter zones and suburbs have often become privileged sites for monitoring and studying political dissent. Meanwhile, western European peri-urban edges – for instance, the infamous *banlieues* or urban ghettos – have long been depicted as at risk of religious and terrorist radicalisation. Perceptions of what constitutes a social problem, as well as where such problems are located, are the result of power relations founded on territorial categories.

From borders to borderlands

In the late 1990s, amid an already burgeoning literature on borders and borderlands,⁵⁷ several scholars turned to the experiences of ‘subalterns’ living in border spaces. Doing so meant adopting a ‘peripheral’ vantage point, in line with work being carried out at the time across cultural studies, IR, subaltern studies and geography.⁵⁸ The terminology used was reflective of a desire to conceive of ‘the margins’ in different ways, with borderlands looked at as regions traversed by a borderline, rather than simply areas of the adjoining nation-state.⁵⁹ Van Schendel, inverting the assumptions of the ‘peripheralising’ approach he identified as mainstream social sciences’ *raison d’être*, rejected the idea that border areas necessarily have stronger links to their putative cores than they do to adjoining ‘peripheral’ zones or alternative cores.⁶⁰

54 van Schendel, ‘Geographies of knowing’.

55 Ibid.

56 van Schendel, ‘Geographies of knowing’; Sadan, *Being and becoming*.

57 H. Donnan and T. M. Wilson, *A companion to border studies* (Malden: Wiley, 2012).

58 G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); M. Albert, D. Jacobson and Y. Lapid, eds, *Identities, borders, orders: rethinking international relations theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); H. K. Bhabha, *The location of culture* (Routledge, 1994).

59 Baud and van Schendel, ‘Toward a comparative’, p. 216.

60 van Schendel, ‘Geographies of knowing’.

This raised a number of important ontological and epistemological questions, such as: How are areas, including states, imagined? How are they lived? How are specific grids of knowledge structured into 'heartlands' and 'borderlands', 'cores' and 'peripheries'? Rather than viewing spatial categories as static containers, van Schendel showed how they could be productive of social processes. In doing so, his work reflected the very spatialised historical approach – attaching 'durée to an enduring critical human geography' – that Soja had previously advocated for.

New methodological possibilities opened up as a result. In particular, scholarly attention shifted from the border as a 'made' entity to how the people, things and networks flowing across borders both generate and are generated by socio-political orders.⁶¹ Rather than treating formal and informal authorities as a strict dichotomy, this new approach inspired scholars to explore the social and political spaces created by interactions between the two.⁶²

More recently, the terms 'borders' and 'borderlands' have also been applied to spaces at the interstices of competing authorities – that is, not necessarily traversed by international boundaries.⁶³ Korf and Raeymaekers have proposed using the concepts of borderlands and frontiers – conventionally used to designate different phenomena⁶⁴ – jointly. Accordingly, while borderlands and frontiers denote different phenomena, these may become entangled in specific sites – for example, when frontier dynamics take place in borderlands. This, they argue, casts light on the (un-)making of authority in zones located at the edges of different political systems, particularly those caught between state institutionalising and rival societal projects.⁶⁵

Korf and Raeymaekers's approach has helped challenge the idea that frontiers and borders are simply the product of civilisational projects conducted by states. Put another way, frontier dynamics are not exclusively found at the international boundaries of territorial states – rather, borders may encompass other, not-strictly-cartographic lines, many of which provoke relational divisions between social groups.⁶⁶ Recent scholarship has highlighted the complexity of spaces at the margins of power, many of which feature geographies of socio-political (dis)order that, despite existing 'beyond the state', simultaneously re-affirm and negate state-making processes.⁶⁷

This body of literature has been particularly critical of studies informed by 'methodological territorialism'. Contrary to the latter's portrayal of certain geographical areas as 'weak' or 'failed',⁶⁸ recent scholarship argues that political order does exist in areas where the state is absent, challenged or only contingently

61 Abraham and van Schendel, *Illicit flows*.

62 Abraham and van Schendel, *Illicit flows*, pp. 7, 19; W. Reno, *Warlord politics and African states* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998); N. Bagayoko, E. Hutchful and R. Luckham, 'Hybrid security governance in Africa: rethinking the foundations of security, justice and legitimate public authority', *Conflict, Security & Development* 16: 1, 2016, pp. 1–32.

63 T. Wendl and M. Rösler, 'Frontiers and borderlands: the rise and relevance of an anthropological research genre', in T. Wendl and M. Rösler, eds, *Frontiers and borderlands: anthropological perspectives* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 1–27; D. Gerhard, 'The frontier in comparative view', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 1: 2, 1959, pp. 205–229.

64 M. Watts, 'Frontiers: authority, precarity, and insurgency at the edge of the state', *World Development* 101, 2017, pp. 477–488.

65 Korf and Raeymaekers, *Violence on the margins*, p. 11.

66 Watts, 'Frontiers: authority', p. 480; Korf, Hagmann and Doeverspeck, 'Geographies of violence', p. 30.

67 Watts, 'Frontiers: authority'.

68 R. D. Kaplan, 'The coming anarchy: how scarcity, crime, overpopulation, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet', *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, pp. 44–76; M. Duffield, 'Post-modern conflict: warlords, post-adjustment states and private protection', *Civil Wars* 1: 1, 1998, pp. 65–102; D. Chandler, 'Review article: theorising the shift from security to insecurity—Kaldor, Duffield and Furedi', *Conflict, Security & Development* 8: 2, 2008, pp. 265–276.

present.⁶⁹ According to this view, political orders labelled ‘limited’ or ‘marginal’ from a Weberian perspective are in reality an ensemble of historically and geographically specific forms of authority. They are neither pre- nor post-state, neither ‘outside’ nor ‘below’ the state, with state authority just one among many forms of authority.⁷⁰

Contrary to state-centric assumptions, this literature argues that power, governance and state-building are often tentative and incomplete.⁷¹ Here, state-centric terms such as ‘areas of limited statehood’ – which political scientists often apply to peripheries and margins – are not simply of limited analytical value, but serve to reproduce ‘dominant’ views of state power.⁷² Instead, political geographers have proposed that the control of people, infrastructures, capital and resources by different authorities should be explored using concepts such as ‘governable spaces’ (spatial configurations of territorialised regimes of rule) or ‘governable orders’ (multiple, overlapping systems of power, norms and rules).⁷³ To a certain degree, this literature on borderlands and frontiers coincides with studies on hybridity, ‘hybrid political orders’ and ‘twilight institutions’, critiquing the normative assumptions and analytical value of discourse around state ‘failure’ and ‘collapse’.⁷⁴

The insistence on a multiplicity of orders beyond the state has led the abovementioned scholars to stress two important points. First, not all forms of authority are linked to territory, although they may be involved in territorialisation processes or territorial control.⁷⁵ Second, the (trans)formation of state and non-state orders should not be seen as predominantly centrally driven and top-down, but rather shaped by ongoing power contestations at the state’s putative margins.⁷⁶ To summarise, the main contribution of this literature is an understanding that space is both produced by and productive of social relations. This in turn has allowed scholars to extend their spatial analysis beyond normative categories such as the ‘postcolonial world’ or ‘global South’.

Borderlands, borderworlds and frontiers

The ‘borderlands’, ‘borderworlds’ and ‘frontiers’ concepts are not only useful for understanding politics at the margins, but conceptualising how spaces at the interface of different governance orders operate.

69 K. Schlichte, *In the shadow of violence: the politics of armed groups* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2009); T. Hagmann and D. Péclard, ‘Negotiating statehood: dynamics of power and domination in Africa’, *Development and Change* 41, 2010, pp. 539–562.

70 Goodhand, ‘Epilogue’, pp. 250–252.

71 C. Lund, ‘Twilight institutions: public authority and local politics in Africa’, *Development and Change* 37, 2006, pp. 685–705; Hagmann and Péclard, ‘Negotiating statehood’.

72 A. Draude, T. A. Börzel and T. Risse, *The Oxford handbook of governance and limited statehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

73 M. J. Watts, ‘Development and governmentality’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24: 1, 2003, pp. 6–34; B. Korf, T. Hagmann and M. Engeler, ‘The geography of warscape’, *Third World Quarterly* 31: 3, 2010, pp. 385–399; B. Korf et al., ‘Geographies of limited statehood’, in A. Draude, T. A. Börzel and T. Risse, eds, *The Oxford handbook of governance and limited statehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 167–189.

74 Lund, ‘Twilight institutions’; T. Hagmann and M. V. Hoehne, ‘Failures of the state failure debate: evidence from the Somali territories’, *Journal of International Development* 21: 1, 2009, pp. 42–57; O. Gbla, ‘Hybrid security governance responses to crises: the case of the Ebola response in Sierra Leone’, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7: 1, 2018, pp. 1–11.

75 Agnew, ‘Still trapped’.

76 Lund, ‘Twilight institutions’.

The first of these concepts, *borderlands* – defined as regions traversed by a line that both divides and connects (i.e. the border) – allows for a more nuanced, spatialised take on sovereignty.⁷⁷ This ‘line’ entails a range of strategies designed to project state and non-state sovereign power.

On the one hand, the border is marked by the logic and practice of sovereign power, which unfolds through circumscription, demarcation and enclosure.⁷⁸ On the other hand, in acknowledging the border as a line that traverses and shapes land, borderlands reveal the historical and geographical connections binding such areas together.⁷⁹ Borderland areas often have more in common with their counterparts across the border than the political centre or core to which they are nominally attached. In this way, the borderlands concept re-spatialises the territorial metaphors of ‘regions’ and ‘areas’.

While the borderlands concept challenges mainstream understandings of the margins, it nevertheless clings to a notion of the border as the key factor affecting social phenomena.⁸⁰ In reality, supposedly marginal spaces are pivotal to global political processes that extend well beyond a particular border area, borderland or margin. As such, spaces at the edge of the state cannot be understood through a borderland lens alone. Rather, they should be seen as part of broader *borderworlds* characterised by complex, mutually constitutive orders. Here, the scale of analysis is not set by the prefix (‘border-’), but rather the suffix (‘-world’).⁸¹

The borderworlds concept draws attention to the heterogeneity of seemingly simple socio-political spaces. In doing so, it demonstrates how these diverse political orders evolve by mimicking or building on existing systems of rule, and that complexity does not diminish in the move from one socio-spatial scale to another.⁸² Put simply, the terminology of borderworlds places borderlands in dialogue with each other across regions, state territories and beyond.

Last but not least is the concept of the *frontier*, which, by decoupling such areas from the institution/apparatus of the border, further de-spatialises the margins from the grid of territory. Frontiers have been the subject of an extensive, often kaleidoscopic, body of work. Here, what emerges above all is that frontiers are central to the very making of modern rule.⁸³ While the list of relevant studies is too extensive to reconstruct here, the following summarises some of the key points raised in the frontier literature.

As both a concept and space, the frontier implies a certain fluidity and duality: it delineates an inside and outside; a centre of power and its margin; the yet-to-be-mapped and already-mapped.⁸⁴ It expresses order and disorder; civilisation and savagery; law and lawlessness. Although frontiers are intertwined with global processes of state and capitalist expansion, they are also the product of specific historical and

77 A. Visan and A. Mountz, ‘Conceptualizing the borderlands: a geographical reclamation’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, published online 2025, pp. 1–21.

78 Korf, Hagmann and Doeverspeck, ‘Geographies of violence’, p. 30.

79 J. Adelman and S. Aron, ‘From borderlands to borders: empires, nation-states, and the peoples in between in North American history’, *The American Historical Review* 104: 3, 1999, pp. 814–841.

80 Adelman and Aron, ‘From borderlands’.

81 Sadan, *Being and becoming*.

82 Ibid., p. 24.

83 Wendl and Rösler, ‘Frontiers and borderlands’; Watts, ‘Frontiers: authority’.

84 M. B. Rasmussen and C. Lund, ‘Reconfiguring frontier spaces: the territorialisation of resource control’, *World Development* 101, 2018, pp. 388–399.

geographical state-building processes.⁸⁵ Moreover, the frontier designates a liminal space connecting a person, group or system of knowledge with something beyond it.⁸⁶

The frontier is therefore a space defined by a specific perspective and value system, pitting something on 'this' side against something on the 'other' side: known against unknown. In this sense, a frontier seems akin to a border. At the same time, going all the way back to the work of Frederick J. Turner in the nineteenth century, the frontier incorporates a prominent temporal dimension as a space that will sooner or later be incorporated.⁸⁷ Defined as both at the margins of and beyond a system of norms and values, the frontier functions as a political technology for expanding the rule of dominant, expanding centres.⁸⁸

'Frontier' is a term with broad semantic application, from history (imperial frontiers) to law (frontiers of legality), economics (resource frontiers), and science and technology (frontiers of knowledge). As such, clarity regarding the concept's political geographic dimension is crucial. The contemporary frontier literature has converged on a definition of the frontier as: 1) a politically defined space related to, and underpinning, an ideological project that 2) delineates a concrete geographical area as a zone of violence and disorder for 3) the purposes of (re)territorialising modern state and capitalist power.⁸⁹ Importantly, this viewpoint highlights the tendency to cast frontiers as violent, disordered spaces precisely because they stand between civilisation and the 'savage'.

A supposed lack of order 'over there', leading to 'endemic' violence, invites the taming and exploitation of a frontier's inhabitants and resources. Added to this, the very deployment of state violence as a means of imposing order effectively designates the target area as a frontier. There is considerable analytical value in using the frontier as a prism to study social and political phenomena at the margins. In terms of the constitution, negotiation and contestation of vertical and centralising forms of political power (i.e. the modern nation-state and capitalist power), the frontier concept places the margins at the centre much more explicitly than is the case for borderlands or borderworlds. Similarly, the frontier terminology is much more explicit in spotlighting the centrality of violence, including its regulation, at the margins.

The literature on spaces at the margins has, from its inception, sought to provide an alternative paradigm for thinking about power at the limits of state authority. This body of scholarship emerged from a critical interrogation of the geographic assumptions underpinning state-centric approaches to IR, area studies, history and geography – many of which sprang from the political theories explored in section 2. In doing so, scholars have developed a conceptual terminology that encompasses, most prominently, borderlands, borderworlds and frontiers. These approaches reject a reductive 'methodological territorialism', instead seeking alternative ways of understanding the linkages between power and violence both at the margins and the putative centre. While the borderlands and borderworlds concepts primarily serve to rescale the analysis – shifting attention from bounded areas crossed by a border to their entanglements with global processes and other marginal spaces – the frontier concept offers a means of detaching analytical frameworks from state borders altogether. Here, spaces at the margins are not treated as peripheral anomalies, but constitutive elements of the modern nation-state project.

85 Veracini, *The world turned*.

86 Korf, Hagmann and Doeverspeck, 'Geographies of violence'; F. Buscemi, 'Powers of the gun: on violence, frontier and community', *Geopolitics* 30: 2, 2024, pp. 613–640.

87 F. J. Turner, 'The significance of the frontier in American history', paper presented at the meeting of the American Historical Association, Chicago, 12 July 1893.

88 Rasmussen and Lund, 'Reconfiguring frontier'.

89 Korf, Hagmann and Doeverspeck, 'Geographies of violence'; Rasmussen and Lund, 'Reconfiguring frontier'; Buscemi, 'Powers of the gun'.

4. Competing views on violence in the margins of the state

Five distinct threads can be discerned in the existing literature on violence in borderlands, each of which reflects a distinct disciplinary, conceptual and normative standpoint. While the first three bodies of literature are primarily concerned with *why* violence characterises spaces at the margins, the remaining two focus on the effects of violence (i.e. the *how*) at and from the margins.

The first of the three *why* explanations posits that violence at the margins is mainly due to state expansion, with state authorities often identified as the culprit. The second explanation, by contrast, paints violence as resulting from a lack of state control or capacity, with a host of alternative (e.g. armed, criminal, illicit) actors also practicing state-like authority. The third, meanwhile, foregrounds infrastructures and materiality as underlying the violence. Turning to the two *how* explanations, the first points to the global networks that sustain violent processes at the margins, while the second looks at how people navigate violence in borderlands and frontiers.

Violence arising from state expansion

The first explanation posits that state expansion generates violence in various ways, including dispossession and militarisation; routine assassinations of activists and resistance groups; and the creation of proxies, vigilante groups and militias.⁹⁰ These techniques shape spaces at the margins via the construction of protective enclosures or endorsement of smaller-scale land grabs.⁹¹ At the same time, the violent capitalist expansion involved in fostering military, administrative and political governance at the margins often leads to the erasure of local forms of knowledge concerning history and place, thereby perpetrating epistemological violence.⁹²

In this way, the relevant body of literature paints violence as a distinctive, even constitutive, trait of spaces at the margins of state sovereignty.⁹³ This violence is rooted in the historical relationship between the state's role in establishing political order and the coercive means employed in imposing such order (as well as state-building more generally).⁹⁴ From a conventional core–periphery perspective, one of the main reasons why margins are prone to violence is their physical distance from state centres.⁹⁵

90 On the first point, see P. Vandergeest and N. L. Peluso, 'Political ecologies of war and forests: counterinsurgencies and the making of national natures', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101: 3, 2011, pp. 587–608; K. M. Woods, 'Smaller-scale land grabs and accumulation from below: violence, coercion, and consent in spatially uneven agrarian change in Shan State, Myanmar', *World Development* 127, 2020, pp. 1–54; K. Dean, J. Sarma and A. Rippa, 'Infrastructures and b/ordering: how Chinese projects are ordering China–Myanmar border spaces', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 12: 8, 2024, pp. 1177–1198. On the second point, see W. H. Dressler and W. Smith, 'Blood, timber and plantations: the violence of enclosing lives and livelihoods in the Philippines', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 50: 6, 2022, pp. 2406–2436. On the third point, see P. Meehan and Dan Seng Lawn, 'Brokered rule: militias, drugs, and borderland governance in the Myanmar–China Borderlands', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53: 4, 2022, pp. 561–583.

91 Woods, 'Smaller-scale'; Dressler and Smith, 'Blood, timber'.

92 A. Mitchell et al., 'Dukarr lakarama: listening to Guwak, talking back to space colonization', *Political Geography* 81, 2020.

93 Schetter and Müller-Koné, 'Frontiers' violence'.

94 C. Tilly, 'War making and state making as organized crime', in P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol, eds, *Bringing the state back in* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 169–191; Abraham and Van Schendel, *Illicit flows*; I. Madison, 'Staking claims: hybrid governance and state-making on the North Kosovo frontier', *Political Geography* 99, 2022.

95 Madison, 'Staking claims'.

Where state governance is weak and less consolidated, violence emerges as a way of imposing order, domesticating contestation and incorporating frontier spaces into state territory. Thus, a peripheralising praxis of state sovereign power frames such spaces as places where unlawful, illegitimate or otherwise prohibited violence is tolerated, with a longer-term view to reinstating sovereign order.⁹⁶

Mobilising concepts such as Anthropocene, Capitalocene and Plantationocene,⁹⁷ some scholars have argued that state expansion premised on supporting capitalist ventures inevitably leads to exploitation by the few at the expense of the many.⁹⁸ This understanding of why violence plays a prominent role in the margins has been embraced by, among other lenses, political ecology, assemblage thinking and 'more-than-human' approaches.⁹⁹ In the view of these authors, the expansion of sovereign power proceeds hand-in-hand with violence: from the state's rhetoric and practices being mimicked by non-state actors (e.g. militias)¹⁰⁰ to situations in which places at the margins are selectively connected to/disconnected from broader capitalist processes (e.g. the Philippines' Subic Bay).¹⁰¹

Internal colonisation processes are a common characteristic of borderlands, taking the form of frontier openings designed to facilitate resource extraction, including agricultural expansion. Moreover, a common consequence of the union between security- and sovereignty-related national discourses and state-sponsored economic expansion is heightened violence along and across borders.¹⁰² In the case of long-term settler colonialism, nationalist narratives justify extraction as necessary for homeland security (as can be seen in Chile, Canada and Bolivia).¹⁰³

Considerable attention has been paid to how the quintessential form of sovereign power – the right to impose death, permit life or allow exceptions – is carried out by state apparatuses.¹⁰⁴ In this respect, the 'margins' are shaped by the delimited time-spaces of military 'force', as deployed by 'civilised' nations.¹⁰⁵

96 Hagmann and Korf, 'Agamben in the Ogaden'; Schetter and Müller-Koné, 'Frontiers' violence'.

97 D. Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: making kin', *Environmental Humanities* 6: 1, 2015, pp. 159–165; T. M. Li, *Plantation life corporate occupation in Indonesia's oil palm zone* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); M. Barua, *Plantation worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

98 N. X.M. Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

99 A. Dunlap, "Agro sí, mina NO!" the Tía Maria copper mine, state terrorism and social war by every means in the Tambo Valley, Peru', *Political Geography* 71, 2019, pp. 10–25; I. Rogelja, 'Concrete and coal: China's infrastructural assemblages in the Balkans', *Political Geography* 81, 2020; R. Squire and K. Dodds, 'Introduction to the special issue: subterranean geopolitics', *Geopolitics* 25: 1, 2020, pp. 4–16.

100 T. Ballvé, *Frontier effect: state formation and violence in Colombia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

101 V. Reyes, *Global borderlands: fantasy, violence, and empire in Subic Bay, Philippines* (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2021).

102 Eilenberg, 'Frontier constellations'; J. E. Correia, 'Soy states: resource politics, violent environments and soybean territorialization in Paraguay', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46: 2, 2017, pp. 316–336.

103 J. J. Schmidt, 'Settler geology: earth's deep history and the governance of in situ oil spills in Alberta', *Political Geography* 78, 2020; A. Marston, 'Strata of the state: resource nationalism and vertical territory in Bolivia', *Political Geography* 74, 2019; Rogelja, 'Concrete and coal'.

104 C. Flint, *The Geography of war and peace: from death camps to diplomats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); S. Danielsson and F. Jacob, eds, *War and geography: the spatiality of organized mass violence* (Lübeck: Schöning, 2017); Schetter and Müller-Koné, 'Frontiers' violence'.

105 D. Gregory, 'War and peace', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35: 2, 2010, pp. 154–186; M. Griffiths, 'The geontological time-spaces of late modern war', *Progress in Human Geography* 46: 2, 2022, pp. 282–298.

Moulded by the logics of late-modern warfare, this casts the margins as backwards, uncivilised spaces.¹⁰⁶ Such areas have long been exploited as testing grounds for military strategies and technologies.¹⁰⁷ The occupied Palestinian territories are a case in point, with violence in these ‘margins’ dependent on global demand-and-supply networks often extraneous to, but nevertheless mobilised by, the Israeli state.

Beyond military technologies and processes, violence at the margins is often explained in terms of the state’s enforcement capabilities, as well as the corresponding capacities of competing non-state actors. Here, the permeability of borderlands and borders is a key factor impacting the propensity for violence.¹⁰⁸

Violence arising from lack of state control or capacity

Contrary to the above, the second explanation posits that violence at the margins is primarily due to incomplete state control and capacity. This perspective sees state authority as challenged by a broad array of actors, including criminal organisations and illicit networks, with the resultant confrontations provoking violent flare-ups. In other words, it is because the political centre has lost – or never had – a monopoly over violence in its margins that violence arises. Paradoxically, this explanation is not incompatible with the first. In some circumstances, the tentative expansion of sovereign state power into its margins may act as the initial disruptive event, or state authorities may benefit from the existence of politically, militarily and economically unstable areas.

Under this second explanation, the margins are characterised as spaces where multiple actors deploy violence as an instrument of governance and resource accumulation.¹⁰⁹ Here, a lack of state authority gives various actors the opportunity to either evade the state or engage in active opposition to state rule. This in turn paves the way for multiple political projects beyond the state, including the empowerment of extra-legal actors.¹¹⁰

Recent qualitative case study research has highlighted how the use of coercive means, weapons in particular, influences the dynamics of violence in borderlands and frontiers. Two recurring themes in this regard are, firstly, firearms and armed violence, and, secondly, rebel governance.¹¹¹ Such studies tend to

¹⁰⁶ On time, see S. Graham, *Cities under siege: the new military urbanism* (London: Verso, 2010). On space, see E. Weizman, *Hollow land: Israel’s architecture of occupation* (London: Verso, 2007). On subjectivity, see D. Gregory, “‘In another time-zone, the bombs fall unsafely ...’: targets, civilians and late modern war”, *The Arab World Geographer* 9: 2, 2006, pp. 88–111; Griffiths, ‘The geontological’.

¹⁰⁷ V. Kuletz, ‘Invisible spaces, violent places: Cold War nuclear and militarized landscapes’, in N. Peluso and M. J. Watts, eds, *Violent environments* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 237–260; A. Loewenstein, *The Palestine laboratory: how Israel exports the technology of occupation around the world* (London: Verso, 2023).

¹⁰⁸ Although it is important to acknowledge variations arising from larger-scale spatial and political conditions, as in, for example, North and West Africa. S. M. Radil, I. Irmischer and O. J. Walther, ‘Contextualizing the relationship between borderlands and political violence: a dynamic space-time analysis in North and West Africa’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 37: 2, 2021, pp. 253–271.

¹⁰⁹ Madison, ‘Staking claims’.

¹¹⁰ E. Han, *Asymmetrical neighbours: borderland state building between China and Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹¹¹ For reviews of firearms and armed violence research, see O. Greene and N. Marsh, eds, *Small arms, crime and conflict: global governance and the threat of armed violence* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012); F. Buscemi, ‘Armed political orders through the prism of arms: relations between weapons and insurgencies in Myanmar and Ukraine’, *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 5: 1, 2019: pp. 189–231. On rebel governance, see A. Arjona, N. Kasfir and Z. Mampilly, *Rebel governance in civil war* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); K. Hoffmann and J. Verweijen, ‘Rebel rule: a governmentality perspective’, *African Affairs*, 118: 471, 2019, pp. 352–374; D. Brenner, *Rebel politics: a sociology of armed struggle in Myanmar’s borderlands* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

paint arms as autonomous technology artefacts subject to the will of individual or collective agencies, actions and interpretations. Thus, control over the means of violence is mostly seen as the prerogative of the armed authorities, sometimes intertwined with spatial forms (e.g. territorial) of rule. Thus, non-state armed actors may produce marginalisation dynamics similar to those observed in state territorialisation.¹¹² Studies on weapons availability, acquisition and control at the margins illustrate how violence cannot easily be attributed to state absence or the mere presence of multiple political orders. In peace and conflict studies, for instance, no clear-cut correlation has been found between levels of weapons availability and levels of armed violence or political ‘disorder’.¹¹³

Resource extraction and the uneven distribution of rents is another thematic area where the literature has indicated a lack of state control is at the root of violence in the margins. Examples include natural gas in Bolivia and Peru, or oil in Nigeria, where resource extraction has provoked political mobilisation and demands for territorial autonomy.¹¹⁴ Moreover, insurgencies frequently coalesce around natural resources and ethnonationalist motifs for environmental conservation, as seen in northern Myanmar’s Kachin state or Sierra Leone.¹¹⁵ In the latter case, research highlights how diamond extraction has helped fund and boost the legitimacy of politico-armed activities, while also presenting rebel movements as state-like should they fail to redistribute the benefits equitably. Besides resistance to the state, the complex linkages between extraction and violence have been analysed with reference to how humans (and non-humans) are dislodged from their life spaces amid violent extractive processes targeting not only resources, but knowledge, bodies and identities.¹¹⁶

The empowerment and at times outsourcing of state prerogatives to extra-legal actors helps explain why the latter become involved in, among other things, mobility management, border-crossing deterrence and deportations.¹¹⁷ Such is the case not only with the drug cartels operating in the Mexico–US borderlands, but the formal, though extra-legal networks connecting the Libyan coastguard to the EU’s maritime frontiers.¹¹⁸ Although border management is in theory shouldered by police forces tasked with imposing

112 F. Buscemi and M. Proto, ‘Telluric geographies of the means of violence: on alterity, weapons, and space at the margins’, *Political Geography* 109, 2024, pp. 1–10.

113 At present, research is moving towards a position that sees states not considered ‘fragile’ as capable of limiting the ability of individuals/groups to acquire arms and pursue violent objectives within state territories. These non-fragile states therefore experience relatively low levels of violence relative to weapons availability. Conversely, states considered ‘fragile’ are unable to limit weapons availability within their territories and experience high levels of armed violence, pointing to a causal relationship between the two. See N. Marsh, ‘The availability puzzle: considering the relationship between arms and violence taking place within states’, *History of Global Arms Transfers* 6, 2018, p. 15.

114 On Peru and Bolivia, see F. Irazazaval, ‘Contesting uneven development: the political geography of natural gas rents in Peru and Bolivia’, *Political Geography* 79, 2020. On Nigeria, see M. Watts, ‘The sinister political life of community: economies of violence and governable spaces in the Niger Delta, Nigeria’, in G. W. Creed, ed., *The seductions of community: emancipations, oppressions, quandaries* (Oxford: School of American Research Press, 2006), pp. 101–142; Watts, ‘Frontiers: authority’.

115 On Myanmar, see L. Kiik, ‘Cry with the promised land: singing for nationalist and religious environmentalism amid Burma’s war’, *Ethnomusicology Forum* 33: 2–3, 2024, pp. 159–181. On Sierra Leone, see Z. Marks, ‘Rebel resource strategies in civil war: revisiting diamonds in Sierra Leone’, *Political Geography* 75, 2019.

116 J. L. Fluri, ‘Political geography 1: extractions’, *Progress in Human Geography* 45: 4, 2020, pp. 855–865.

117 M. Sur, ‘Through Metal Fences: Material Mobility and the Politics of Transnationality at Borders’, *Mobilities* 8 (1), 2013, pp. 70–89; M. Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India–Bangladesh Border*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

118 J. Slack and D. E. Martínez, ‘Postremoval geographies: immigration enforcement and organized crime on the U.S.–Mexico border’, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111: 4, 2021, pp. 1062–1078; E. Papada, ‘Engaging the geopolitics of asylum seeking: the care/control function of vulnerability assessments in the context of the EU–Turkey agreement’, *Geopolitics* 28: 1, 2021, pp. 257–281; L. Achilli, ‘The missing link: the role of criminal groups in migration governance’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50: 20, 2024, pp. 5045–5066.

order, in practice violence is often re-arranged rather than removed.¹¹⁹ Hence, this body of literature views the management of people on the move by illicit transnational networks as part of the violence present in borderland spaces.¹²⁰ The thriving presence of such networks is often explained in terms of a loss of state control over large-scale processes or specific areas; state corruption/collusion; or crime network dynamics.¹²¹

Some studies have framed transnational organised crime and violence in public health and epidemiological terms, with violence seen as the outcome of, among other things, individual behaviour; proximate relationships (e.g. family, friends, work, school); ‘environmental’ factors (e.g. living in drug cartel areas); and social factors related to the legal/criminal system in question.¹²² However, applying this lens to violence in borderlands runs the risk of politicising environmental factors, promoting a perception that certain groups of people (or areas) must be sacrificed in order to ‘solve’ a public problem. It also risks overlooking the potential of more radical, abolitionist approaches to institutions responsible for replicating violence and marginalisation, such as prisons and borders.¹²³

The US–Mexico and Myanmar borderlands offer useful illustrations of the above dynamics.¹²⁴ Historically, these shatter zones have provided refuge from the violence inflicted by sovereign power. More recently, however, these borderlands have been painted as non-state spaces awash with illicit activity, inhabited by criminalised subjectivities (in the case of the US–Mexico borderland) or groups evading Chinese sovereign power (in the case of the Myanmar borderland).¹²⁵ Such depictions have been robustly critiqued, above all because they tend to homogenise highly variegated spaces and processes.¹²⁶ Research into the nexus between drugs, development and conflict has, for instance, highlighted that sharp declines in drug production in borderlands tend to come at the cost of social instability, precarity and heightened violence.¹²⁷ Often, the state partners with non-state actors in a bid to stem – or alternatively boost – the drug trade in spaces at the margins. Moreover, these spaces frequently generate their own ideas, practices and movements aimed at halting armed violence, extractive development and drug production/smuggling.¹²⁸

119 J. Fluri, ‘Political geography II: violence’, *Progress in Human Geography* 46: 2, 2021, pp. 698–704.

120 F. Allum, ed., *Routledge handbook of transnational organized crime*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022).

121 G. Correa-Cabrera, ‘Violence on the “forgotten” border: Mexico’s drug war, the state, and the paramilitarization of organized crime in Tamaulipas in a “new democratic era”’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29: 4, 2014, pp. 419–433.

122 For a review, see F. A. Chinchilla and T. Payan, ‘Changing minds: understanding collective violence in the southeastern US–Mexico border from a public health perspective’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 34: 2, 2017, pp. 281–297; World Health Organization, *World report on violence and health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002); D. D. McDaniel, J. E. Logan and J. U. Schneiderman, ‘Supporting gang violence prevention efforts: a public health approach for nurses’, *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing* 18: 4, 2014, pp. 1–19.

123 See O. Camarillo, ‘Who are deemed the “worthy” and “unworthy” victims of Mexico’s drug-related violence?’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 36: 1, 2018, pp. 1–15; A. Y. Davis, *Abolition democracy: beyond empire, prisons, and torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005); M. Minch-de Leon, ‘Border abolition is decolonization: indigeneity, border coloniality, and the inhuman’, *Critical Times* 7: 2, 2024, pp. 326–331; M. Tazzioli, *Border abolitionism: migrants’ containment and the genealogies of struggles and rescue*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023); B. Bhandar and R. Ziadah, eds., *Revolutionary Feminisms: Conversations on Collective Action and Radical Thought*. (London: Verso, 2020).

124 Camarillo, ‘Who are deemed’; Dan Seng Lawn et al., ‘The Pat Jasan drug eradication social movement in Northern Myanmar, part one: origins & reactions’, *International Journal of Drug Policy* 89, 2021.

125 P. Laungaramsri, ‘Dark Zomia: Myanmar frontier and the Chinese enclosure’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, published online 2025, pp. 1–16.

126 Dan Seng Lawn et al., ‘The Pat Jasan’.

127 J. Bhatia et al., ‘Drugs, conflict and development’, *International Journal of Drug Policy* 89, 2021.

128 Dan Seng Lawn et al., ‘The Pat Jasan’.

Local militias and paramilitary groups constitute another important category of non-state actor associated with violence at the margins.¹²⁹ Recent research has challenged the idea that they emerge mainly in response to governance deficits, or that they are merely appendages of the state.¹³⁰ In fact, the violence deployed by paramilitaries and militias establishes politico-economic order amid an environment of protracted conflict. This allows militia groups to engage in coercive brokerage across various scales and jurisdictions, shaping power relations by mediating between state authorities, private entrepreneurs and international actors.¹³¹

Violence arising from infrastructural and material sources

While the previous two explanations reflect a ‘processual’ understanding of violence – with a focus on the ‘before’ and ‘after’ – this third body of literature centres on materiality, including the contested building and use of infrastructures in borderlands. Here, infrastructures and materiality refer to technologies and technical artefacts used to govern people, things and ‘nature’, encompassing everything from roads and conservation zones to refugee camps and military bases. The literature rests on two key observations. First, violence is often engrained in the making and management of infrastructures that are seemingly unrelated to said violence. Second, a multiplicity of actors govern the infrastructures and material artefacts required to turn spaces at the margins into territory, which inevitably involves some form of violence.

The concept of ‘resource frontiers’ spotlights political and economic projects geared towards the extraction of both material and immaterial goods.¹³² Proponents of this approach privilege an instrumental understanding of violence, which is seen as a tool for transforming ‘illegible’ and ‘insecure’ frontiers into ‘secure’, economically and politically ‘legible’ borderlands.¹³³ The violent governing of people at the margins relies heavily on technologies and infrastructures, which in turn shape societies and political communities. This process also defines what is considered ‘nature’ or ‘human’, working to structure identities, hierarchies of life and geographical space (as demonstrated in contexts as diverse as Palestine, Myanmar, Europe and the US).¹³⁴

The security infrastructures of both state and non-state actors cause violence by politicising ‘nature’ discursively and materially. This occurs when natural geographic features (e.g. rivers, deserts, waterbodies) are used as barriers or forces of attrition, or when human-made environments (e.g.

129 Meehan and Dan Seng Lawn, ‘Brokered rule’.

130 P. Meehan and J. Goodhand, *Coercive brokerage: the paramilitary-organized crime nexus in borderlands and frontiers*, Research Paper 26, SOACE Research Programme, 2024.

131 Meehan and Dan Seng Lawn, ‘Brokered rule’; Meehan and Goodhand, *Coercive brokerage*.

132 A. Tsing, *The mushroom at the end of the world* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

133 Woods, ‘Smaller-scale’; J. Cons and M. Eilenberg, eds., *Frontier assemblages: the emergent politics of resource frontiers in Asia* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2019); Dean, Sarma and Rippa, ‘Infrastructures and b/ordering’. In response, other scholars have proposed delving further into the political dynamics at play in the actual governing of violence; see R. Hammami, ‘Destabilizing mastery and the machine’, *Current Anthropology* 60: S19, 2019, pp. 87–97; Buscemi and Proto, ‘Telluric geographies’.

134 On Palestine, see N. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, ‘Necropenology: conquering new bodies, psychics, and territories of death in East Jerusalem’, *Identities* 27: 3, 2020, pp. 285–301; J. Puar, *Right to maim: debility, capacity, disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). On Myanmar, see Buscemi, ‘Powers of the gun’. On Europe, the US and beyond, see A. P. Harrison and M. Eilenberg, eds, *Fences and biosecurity: the politics of governing unruly nature* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2025).

plantations or checkpoints) are engineered to produce violence in the service of political or economic projects.¹³⁵ Infrastructures related to mobility governance offer a case in point: scholars have analysed camps,¹³⁶ as well as the broader migration management networks inhabited by state authorities, international organisations and third countries onto which violence is externalised.¹³⁷ Border violence generates hierarchies of life, including subjectivities such as the ‘vulnerable migrant’ or criminalised ‘smuggler’. As part of this process, internal political dissent may be suppressed,¹³⁸ while the living conditions and access to resources of borderland inhabitants are often constrained.¹³⁹

Violence at the margins is, according to this perspective, often a medium-to-long-term effect of militarised border security policies and infrastructures, such as those arising from the externalisation of US or EU borders.¹⁴⁰ These infrastructures hamper historical mobility patterns while criminalising specific groups and regional economies. In addition, border mobility management can trigger or intensify economic decline, thereby fuelling conflict.¹⁴¹ Such explanations have a long tradition, inasmuch as they echo the drawing of colonial borders and their consolidation by postcolonial states, both of which contributed to violence.¹⁴² Thus, decolonial scholarship posits that colonial histories have shaped contemporary migration and regimes of control.¹⁴³ Even so, it is important to tease out the particular logics and tactics undergirding the present-day processes harnessed by border regimes beyond mere reference to colonial precedents.¹⁴⁴

Conservation and territorialisation provide further examples of how infrastructural interventions in borderlands drive conflict. Here, infrastructures designed to conserve natural resources often become

135 D. Ifor and S. Levidis, ‘Weaponizing a river’, e-flux Architecture, April 2020; L. Lo Presti, ‘Terraqueous necropolitics: unfolding the low-operational, forensic, and evocative mapping of Mediterranean Sea crossings in the age of lethal borders’, *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 18: 6, 2019, pp. 1347–1367; Barua, *Plantation worlds*; P. Schouten, *Roadblock politics: the origins of violence in Central Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Weizman, *The least*.

136 R. Carter-White and C. Minca, *A spatial theory of the camp: geopolitics, biopolitics and the immunitarian state* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2025).

137 A. Spathopoulou, A. Carastathis and M. Tsilimpounidi, ‘“Vulnerable refugees” and “voluntary deportations”: performing the hotspot, embodying its violence’, *Geopolitics* 27: 4, 2022, pp. 1257–1283; A. Casaglia, ‘Pornography at the border: ethnosexual borderscapes, gendered violence, and embodied control’, *Geopolitics* 27: 1, 2020, pp. 185–205.

138 K. Augustova, H. Carrapico, and J. Obradović-Wochnik, ‘Becoming a smuggler: migration and violence at EU external borders’, *Geopolitics* 28: 2, 2021, pp. 619–640; T. Tyerman, ‘Everyday borders in Calais: the globally intimate injustices of segregation’, *Geopolitics* 26: 2, 2021, pp. 464–485.

139 S. Strong, ‘The vital politics of foodbanking: hunger, austerity, biopower’, *Political Geography* 75, 2019; S. S. Morsalin, ‘Marks and mobility: a photographic exploration of cattle smuggling across the India–Bangladesh border’, *South Asian History and Culture* 16: 4, 2025, pp. 467–479.

140 K. Donko, M. Doevenspeck and U. Beisel, ‘Migration control, the local economy and violence in the Burkina Faso and Niger borderland’ *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 37: 2, 2021, pp. 235–251; T. Miller, *Empire of borders: the expansion of the US border around the world* (London: Verso Books, 2019).

141 Donko, Doevenspeck and Beisel, ‘Migration control’.

142 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*; P. F. Neto, ‘The consolidation of the Angola–Zambia border: violence, forced displacement, smugglers and Savimbi’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 32: 3, 2016, pp. 305–324.

143 T. Cappiali and A. Pacciardi, ‘Reorienting EU border externalization studies: a decolonial intersectional approach’, *Geopolitics*, 30: 1, 2025, pp. 300–324.

144 Cappiali and Pacciardi, ‘Reorienting EU’; M. Stierl and M. Tazzioli, ‘Mare nero? Undoing the *decolonial redux*, multiplying (post)colonial legacies and struggles’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51: 11, 2025, pp. 2695–2714; R. Ziadah and A. Hanieh, ‘Misperceptions of the Border: Migration, Race, and Class Today’, *Historical Materialism* 31(3), 2023, pp. 33–68.

weaponised in the service of population control or counterinsurgency aims.¹⁴⁵ For instance, Dressler shows how infrastructures designed to optimise forest conservation in the Philippine uplands impose political and religious ontologies on local/indigenous populations, violating lives and livelihoods.¹⁴⁶ In this way, nature conservation infrastructures impose human, 'less-than-human', and 'non-human' divides, leading to certain people and areas being racialised as less valuable, or even disposable.¹⁴⁷

Even when local communities are allowed to participate in the creation of conservation areas, the attendant narratives and practices may amplify epistemic violence, legitimise displacements and increase the risk of physical violence.¹⁴⁸ As a consequence, conservation efforts arising from alliances between states, communities, corporations and humanitarian organisations often end up intensifying, rather than mitigating, violence.¹⁴⁹ In the case of Virunga National Park, Verweijen and Marijnen show that law enforcement operations by the Congolese army and conservation park guards have exacerbated armed mobilisation.¹⁵⁰

Violence arising from global networks of war and militarism

In recent years, considerable research has gone into learning how global capitalist networks, as purveyors of military force, drive violence at the margins of the state. This scholarship privileges a transnational perspective, emphasising how connections across space and time shape armed conflict in borderlands. From this perspective, it is not states – either through their expansion or absence – that sustain conflict in borderlands, but rather global capitalism and supply chains.

Griffiths, for instance, has critically assessed the enduring, terranean and proximate traits of violence deployed in the margins of western and postcolonial political projects.¹⁵¹ Exploring the impacts of weaponry on environments sustaining human and non-human life – the soil on which we live, the water we drink, the air we breathe – illuminates the deferred and dispersed character of such violence.¹⁵² The earth's materials are harnessed for the production of munitions, then later released in order to control

145 M. Ramutsindela et al., 'The geopolitics of protected areas', *Geopolitics* 25: 1, 2020, pp. 240–66; K. M. Woods and J. Naimark, 'Conservation as counterinsurgency: a case of ceasefire in rebel forest in southeast Myanmar', *Political Geography* 79, 2020.

146 W. H. Dressler, 'Governed from above, below and dammed in between: the biopolitics of (un)making life and livelihood in the Philippine uplands', *Political Geography* 73, 2019, pp.123–137.

147 R. Muralidharan and N. D. Rai, 'Violent maritime spaces: conservation and security in Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park, India', *Political Geography* 80, 2020; U. Ozguc and A. Little, 'The politics of temporality and the ethos of open societies: transfrontier conservation areas as spatio-temporal chokepoints', *Geopolitics* 28: 2, 2023, pp. 570–592.

148 J. Milgroom and P. Claeys, 'Participation is not the answer: epistemic violence and authoritarian practices in conservation-forced displacement', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 52: 1, 2024, pp. 74–100.

149 J. Verweijen, 'A microdynamics approach to geographies of violence: mapping the kill chain in militarized conservation areas', *Political Geography* 79, 2020.

150 J. Verweijen and E. Marijnen, 'The counterinsurgency/conservation nexus: guerrilla livelihoods and the dynamics of conflict and violence in the Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45: 2, 2016, pp. 300–320.

151 Griffiths, 'The geontological'.

152 On sound/sound-spaces, see S. Goodman, *Sonic warfare: sound, affect, and the ecology of fear* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

life – via death and injury – and the environment sustaining it.¹⁵³ In this way, the ‘geo’ is manipulated so as to both demarcate and collapse the distinction between life and non-life. This understanding provides a clearer sense of the ways in which power and military violence operate before, through and beyond battlespaces. Violence in the margins can therefore be seen as resulting from certain materials being turned into weapons in one place; being made legal and subsequently deployed in another (the ‘margin’); and then remaining in place, leading to long-lasting effects.

Whereas the previously offered explanation saw resources and extraction in terms of how they help finance economic-political projects with violent consequences, this literature ascribes them a more direct role: specifically, that they are strategically managed by military actors to marginalise populations and spaces.¹⁵⁴ In Palestine, for instance, the Israeli state employs resource extraction and management strategies designed to subjugate, oppress and impair the possibility of living.¹⁵⁵ Casting the net wider, the strategic management of resources is not bound by state/non-state distinctions. Applying a feminist reading of war dynamics, Faxon et al. show that the effects of violence in Myanmar’s armed conflicts are disproportionately concentrated on female bodies in rural areas removed from the borderland’s frontlines.¹⁵⁶ These rural hinterlands are not only sites where counter-hegemonic political projects emerge, but key agricultural production areas threatened by disruption should conflict escalate. Thus, state and non-state actors are driven to inflict military violence not only because they are sites of resistance themselves, but because they produce the sustenance needed to give ‘life’ to such resistance.¹⁵⁷

The effects of targeting specific bodies and resources at the margins of the state are compounded by long-term conflict dynamics. Studies highlight a link between ceasefires (and peace processes more generally) and legal-economic reforms that favour foreign investment while simultaneously empowering non-state armed actors.¹⁵⁸ Such processes open up extractive frontiers to state and private actors keen to encroach into rural areas previously (or currently) under the influence of insurgent groups, potentially sparking renewed armed conflict or generalised structural violence, land-grabbing and forced labour.¹⁵⁹

Various corporate security technologies are deployed in these sites of extraction – for instance, coalmines in Colombia and their associated railway networks – regulating life and death in ways that

153 P. Bigger and B. Neimark, ‘Weaponizing nature: the geopolitical ecology of the US Navy’s biofuel program’, *Political Geography* 60, 2017, pp. 13–22; O. Belcher et al., ‘Hidden carbon costs of the “everywhere war”: logistics, geopolitical ecology, and the carbon boot-print of the US military’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45: 1, 2020, pp. 65–80; M. Griffiths and K. Rubaii, ‘Late modern war and the geos: the ecological “beforemaths” of advanced military technologies’, *Security Dialogue* 56: 1, 2024.

154 K. Rubaii, ‘“Concrete soldiers”: T-walls and coercive landscaping in Iraq’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54: 2, 2022, pp. 357–362.

155 I. Slesinger, ‘A cartography of the unknowable: technology, territory and subterranean agencies in Israel’s management of the Gaza tunnels’, *Geopolitics* 25: 1, 2020, pp. 17–42; M. Mason, ‘Hydraulic patronage: a political ecology of the Turkey–Northern Cyprus water pipeline’, *Political Geography* 76, 2020.

156 H. O. Faxon et al., ‘Revolutionary countryside: a feminist counter-topography of war in Myanmar’, *Geoforum* 159, 2025.

157 Ibid.

158 K. Woods, ‘Ceasefire capitalism: military–private partnerships, resource concessions and military–state building in the Burma–China borderlands’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38: 4, 2011, pp. 747–770; T. Kramer, ‘“Neither war nor peace”: failed ceasefires and dispossession in Myanmar’s ethnic borderlands’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 48: 3, 2020, pp. 476–496; Meehan and Dan Seng Lawn, ‘Brokered rule’; T. Than, ‘Mongla and the borderland politics of Myanmar’, *Asian Anthropology*, 15:2, 2016, pp. 152–168.

159 Korf and Fünfgeld, ‘War and the commons’; Woods, ‘Ceasefire capitalism’; Kramer, ‘“Neither war nor peace”’.

pacify, inflict retribution on, or otherwise harm people living in their surroundings.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, prolonged armed insurgency/state counterinsurgency allows patriarchal frameworks and sexist relations of domination to mingle with wider societal militarisation, generating violence that impacts women and LGBTQI+ persons especially.¹⁶¹

Violence as a daily reality in the margins

The fifth and final body of literature is concerned with how people at the margins of the state navigate violence in their daily lives. For many borderland residents, violence is a daily reality rather than an exception, often shaped by gender, class and other identity categories. This experiential aspect of violence at the margins has been at the forefront of feminist work on violence at the global margins, as well as anthropological research on how ordinary people navigate ‘warscapes’.

Feminist scholars have long been preoccupied with this topic, as the very fact of being socialised along gendered lines entails a marginalisation that often unfolds violently.¹⁶² Given that war is but one extreme on a continuum of gendered violence, feminist approaches have also investigated how female bodies are weaponised as sites of labour extraction or through social reproduction for purposes of fighting.¹⁶³ A key finding of this literature is that violence in the margins – and resistance to it – are experienced differently according to gender and generation.¹⁶⁴

For those displaced by conflict, war is present both as remembered violence tied to one’s place of origin and a lived reality in which one’s body may be racialised in places of arrival or transit. Such experiences vary, however, depending on local gender norms.¹⁶⁵ In her research on the South Sudanese diaspora, Faria shows how violence in South Sudan not only shapes how war itself is experienced, but the dynamics of violence formed in the new ‘home’.¹⁶⁶ The psychosocial effects of violence stratify in complex ways across generations and spaces, extending well beyond a conflict site’s geographical perimeter. Here, Pain suggests that the psychological trauma induced by political, social, urban or ecological violence produces memorial places, retraumatising places, layered places, hardwired places, mobile places, places of repossession, and healing places.¹⁶⁷ Grief, trauma and embodied memories of violence at the margins are narrated and passed on, as is knowledge concerning survival and making a living in the face of repeated violence.¹⁶⁸ Work on social reproduction should not restrict itself to a care or healing lens when examining women in prominent roles. The everyday space of the gendered household

160 L. J. Jakobsen, ‘Corporate security technologies: managing life and death along a Colombian coal railway’, *Political Geography* 83, 2020. Beyond war-related literature, see also T. Raeymaekers, *The natural border: bounding migrant farmwork in the Black Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024).

161 D. McDuié-Ra, ‘Violence against women in the militarized Indian frontier: beyond “Indian culture” in the experiences of ethnic minority women’, *Violence Against Women* 18: 3, 2012, pp. 322–345.

162 hooks, *Feminist theory*.

163 J. Hyndman, ‘Feminist geopolitics revisited: body counts in Iraq’, *The Professional Geographer* 59: 1, 2007, pp. 35–46; J. Fluri, ‘Feminist political geography’, in J. Agnew et al., eds, *The Wiley Blackwell companion to political geography*, 1st edition (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 235–247; J. Sharp, ‘Materials, forensics and feminist geopolitics’, *Progress in Human Geography* 45: 5, 2020, pp. 990–1002.

164 S. Loong, ‘“We have big ideas, but only small words”: the post-war geographies of civil society and community in Karen State’, *Geoforum* 147, 2023; Faxon et al., ‘Revolutionary countryside’.

165 M. H. Jacobsen, ‘Wars in refuge: locating Syrians’ intimate knowledges of violence across time and space’, *Political Geography* 92, 2022.

166 C. Faria, ‘Towards a countertopography of intimate war: contouring violence and resistance in a South Sudanese diaspora’, *Gender, Place & Culture* 24: 4, 2017, pp. 575–593.

167 R. Pain, ‘Geotrauma: violence, place and repossession’, *Progress in Human Geography* 45: 5, 2020, pp. 972–989.

168 Faxon et al., ‘Revolutionary countryside’.

is deeply entangled with militarised social reproduction via various forms of physical, emotional and symbolic labour, as well as discourses calling on women to symbolise and legitimise violence.¹⁶⁹

Daily experiences of violence are also central to the literature on ‘warscapes’, which straddles anthropology and geography. Nordstrom and Lubkemann proposed this term to define the war-infused time-spaces arising from widespread armed violence, volatility and insecurity.¹⁷⁰ Although primarily concerned with war, these studies also interrogate violence at the margins more broadly.¹⁷¹ Anthropological scholarship, for instance, notes that experiences of violence can vary not only between population groups and individuals, but according to an individual’s multiple positionalities (e.g. civilian, worker, casualty, activist, combatant, person on the move, refugee).¹⁷²

More recently, political geographers have added a spatial twist to the warscapes concept,¹⁷³ with Korf, Hagmann and Engeler arguing that living in a time and space of war is not simply a matter of constant, all-encompassing violence.¹⁷⁴ Rather, as well as identity, agency and the capacity to navigate a violent environment, a person’s everyday life is shaped by how they relate to the multiple political orders present in their warscape.¹⁷⁵ The organisation of space and time through militarised techniques creates unequal access to places, often differentiated according to racialised and gendered power relations.¹⁷⁶

Violence, beyond its immediate effects, pushes people into exploiting their body or surroundings as a means of improving their condition. Strategies arising as a result of war, border management or agribusiness investment include exchanging blood and plasma for cash (in the case of Ciudad Juárez/El Paso), and renting land to outside investors while reallocating common natural resources (in the case of China–Myanmar).¹⁷⁷ Despite often being violent sites through which sovereignty is practiced, borders act as spaces where lives are (re)shaped individually and via collective socio-economic, political and cultural practices.¹⁷⁸ In investigating these dynamics, scholars have highlighted how non-state political communities/polities pursue strategies that involve living and organising within – and from – the margins

169 J. Hedström, ‘Militarized social reproduction: women’s labour and parastate armed conflict’, *Critical Military Studies* 8: 1, 2020, pp. 58–76; J. Hedström, *Reproducing revolution: women’s labor and the war in Kachinland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2025).

170 C. Nordstrom, *A different kind of war story* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); S. C. Lubkemann, *Culture in chaos: an anthropology of the social condition in war* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

171 M. Khayyat, *A landscape of war: ecologies of resistance and survival in South Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).

172 Nordstrom, *A different kind*; Lubkemann, *Culture in chaos*. See also H. Vigh, *Navigating terrains of war: youth and soldiering in Guinea-Bissau* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn, 2006).

173 Loong, ‘We have big’; F. Buscemi, ‘The political geographies of community in warscapes’, *Geoforum* 164, 2025.

174 Korf, Hagmann and Engeler, ‘The geography of warscape’.

175 Ibid.

176 Palestinians subject to state violence have long experienced this state of affairs. R. M. Greenberg and N. Avni, ‘(Ad)ressing belonging in a contested space: embodied spatial practices of Palestinian and Israeli women in Jerusalem’, *Political Geography* 76, 2020; N. Abourahme, *The time beneath the concrete: Palestine between camp and colony* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2025).

177 On Ciudad Juárez/El-Paso, see N. Ebner and K. M. Johnson, ‘Blood and borders: geographies of social reproduction in Ciudad Juárez–El Paso’, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111: 2, 2020, pp. 498–514. On China–Myanmar, see X. Hua, Y. Kono and L. Zhang, ‘Excavating agrarian transformation under “secure” crop booms: insights from the China–Myanmar borderland’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 50: 1, 2021, pp. 339–368.

178 M. Sur, *Jungle passports: fences, mobility, and citizenship at the northeast India–Bangladesh border* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); A. Shah, *Nightmarch: among India’s revolutionary guerrillas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

and borderlands. Here, tactics include the mimicry of authority; strategic marginality; dissimulation through analogy; and tactical evasion of state encounters.¹⁷⁹

This final body of literature makes sense of violence at the margins by examining the places and temporalities within which life not only persists, but is transformed. Feminist perspectives have connected micro scales to global ones, demonstrating how embodied land and kin relations sustain survival and care work, over time revolutionising social norms.¹⁸⁰ Building on this, feminist counter-topographies have traced how large-scale processes are endured or resisted in specific places, and how alternative social futures are articulated.¹⁸¹ In doing so, they have advanced counter-hegemonic narratives of transformative change. Such change can also be achieved via agricultural practices aimed at building new ecologies of ‘home’ and creating life among destruction, as in the case of tobacco farming and goat-herding in southern Lebanon.¹⁸²

179 A. Ong, *Stalemate: autonomy and insurgency on the China–Myanmar border* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023); J. Tenzin, ‘Seeing like borders: convergence zone as a post-Zomian model’, *Current Anthropology* 58: 5, 2017, pp. 551–575; H. Steinmüller, ‘Para-nationalism: sovereignty and authenticity in the Wa State of Myanmar’, *Nations and Nationalism* 27, 2021, pp. 880–894.

180 Faxon et al., ‘Revolutionary countryside’.

181 A. Mountz, ‘Where asylum-seekers wait: feminist counter-topographies of sites between states’, *Gender, Place & Culture* 18: 3, 2011, pp. 381–399; J. MacLeavy, M. Fannin and W. Larner, ‘Feminism and futurity: geographies of resistance, resilience and reworking’, *Progress in Human Geography* 45: 6, 2021, pp. 1558–1579.

182 Khayyat, *A landscape*.

Conclusion

The ability to define borders is crucial to establishing territory and governing communities. As such, the question of violence at the margins lies at the heart of modern state projects. Over the past three decades, a diverse body of literature on borderlands, borderworlds and frontiers has challenged mainstream social science encumbered by the ‘territorial trap’ and ‘methodological territorialism’. This literature has de- and re-spatialised power, throwing up alternative histories and geographies of communities residing at the supposed edge of the state.

Utilising a broad range of conceptual and methodological approaches (encompassing geography, political science, IR and anthropology), scholars have explored violence in the margins from various angles, including: war and militarism; dispossession; land-grabbing; internal colonisation; the creation of proxies and militias by state apparatuses; capitalist extraction; exploitation of ‘nature’; conservation projects; migration management; and transnational organised crime. In sifting through these, the paper has highlighted five main explanations for why or how borderlands and frontiers are characterised by violence.

In terms of policy implications, the first three explanations – 1) violence arising from state expansion; 2) violence arising from lack of state control or capacity; and 3) violence arising from infrastructural and material sources – suggest a need for state reform. For instance, if one believes that the first of these explanations is the prime cause of violence, the logical response is to ‘democratise’ state institutions and facilitate political inclusion. If, however, one subscribes to the second explanation, which implies that political centres have the right – even obligation – to ‘pacify’ their peripheries, there is a strong argument in favour of supporting repressive state capacities. The third explanation suggests an entirely different set of policy recommendations again, based around supporting local forms of organising and enabling greater autonomy from the central state.

By contrast, the fourth and fifth explanations – 4) violence arising from global networks of war and militarism; and 5) violence as a daily reality in the margins – suggest that state and state-like institutions require transformation. Thus, policy responses prompted by these perspectives will likely privilege bottom-up solutions that call for a rethinking of key institutions such as property, police, prisons, borders and the military. In a nutshell, this paper highlights how divergent accounts of violence in borderlands are not ‘innocent’: rather, one ends up with very different policy recommendations depending on which causal explanation is favoured.

Even so, from a conceptual viewpoint, these five explanations are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, combining them provides a more nuanced understanding of violence at the margins. In a sense, each explanation can be viewed through the lens of one (or more) of the concepts outlined in section 3: frontiers, borderlands, borderworlds and margins. For instance, the state expansion explanation for violence applies a centre–periphery lens to the margins, which are seen as frontiers or areas adjacent to borders delineating the extent of state territory. Thus, we are invited to look at how political, economic and social relations at the centre lead to violence in the margins.

Explanations two (violence arising from lack of state control or capacity) and three (violence arising from infrastructural and material sources), meanwhile, highlight a different scale. Here, borderlands and frontiers are tied to multiple political centres, often but not always state capitals. To understand violence, we must therefore cast our eye on the flows of things and people; how they are managed; and the ways

in which nature is produced and managed through infrastructures. Adopting this perspective brings to the fore indigenous knowledge and forms of life largely neglected by the other explanations.

Explanation four (violence arising from global networks of war and militarism) adds another level of analysis through depicting the margins as borderworlds, thus making sense of violence by investigating events in seemingly faraway places and times. Explanation five (violence as a daily reality in the margins), which takes us even further away from a territorial grid, echoes explanation three in that it focuses on bottom-up processes. In this instance, however, the margins are not merely geographical spaces produced by violence and marginalisation. Rather, they are also a human condition differentiated by characteristics such as gender, class and race – opening up further possibilities for oppression. In this sense, violence is not something that characterises margins as spaces as such, but a process made visible by adopting a marginal standpoint. Doing so allows us to critically assess political institutions (state or non-state) and potentially transform them. The relationship between violence, community and territorial (state) rule – critically unpacked in section 2 – is central here, as articulating these relations is critical to transforming any sort of political institution.

The literature on spaces at the margins continues to birth new perspectives. Some, for instance, have stressed the importance of investigating forms of community that do not revolve around the paradigms of the modern political project: that is, militarism and war; organised coercive violence; property (in economic and/or anthropological terms); and borders. Here, the work of anthropologist Ghassan Hage offers a useful entry point.¹⁸³ In *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*, Hage explores domestication as a modality of existing in the world whereby the ‘other’ exists ‘for me/us’, and can thus be managed through violence, identity-making, property and borders. At the same time, he traces another, reciprocal, modality of being that relies on an understanding of the other (encompassing people, animals and plants) as existing ‘with’ me in a relational state of ‘giftedness’.¹⁸⁴

From an ontological viewpoint, the expansion of state, capitalist and other forms of authority entail forms of violence that not only repress life, but exclude entire modalities of living in the world. Scholars are paying increasing attention to how such processes are resisted, often through repurposing the very technologies deployed by economic and political power.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, the very indigenous knowledge that so often suffers violence at the hands of territorialisation processes is now being engaged as a means of understanding and transforming current contexts of oppression.¹⁸⁶ In Myanmar’s Salween river basin, for instance, different ideas and practices of what water ‘is’ have become an arena for the competing interests of human actors.¹⁸⁷ Elsewhere, more-than-gender and more-than-human analysis of resistance movements has highlighted how activists are mobilising ‘positive’ identity markers based on mutuality and reciprocity.¹⁸⁸

Considerable scope for deepening our understanding of the dynamics touched on in this paper remains. In doing so, we should no longer pretend that explanations of violence are without consequences. Rather,

183 Hage, *Is racism*. Similar perspectives have also been articulated by, among others, Palestinian poet/researcher Rafeef Ziadah and Filipino scholar/critical theorist Neferti Tadiar.

184 Hage, *Is racism*, p.120.

185 Such as the drone; see N. Millner, ‘As the drone flies: configuring a vertical politics of contestation within forest conservation’, *Political Geography* 80, 2020.

186 Mitchell et al., *Dukarr lakarama*.

187 M. J. Götz and C. Middleton, ‘Ontological politics of hydrosocial territories in the Salween River basin, Myanmar/Burma’, *Political Geography* 78, 2020.

188 Cappiali and Pacciardi, *Reorienting EU border externalization studies*; N. Bagheri, ‘Avoiding the “F” word: feminist geography in Iran’, *Gender, Place & Culture* 26: 7, 2019, pp. 1128–1136.

we must openly acknowledge that each explanation privileges a different normative assumption and causal perspective on violence at the margins.

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