



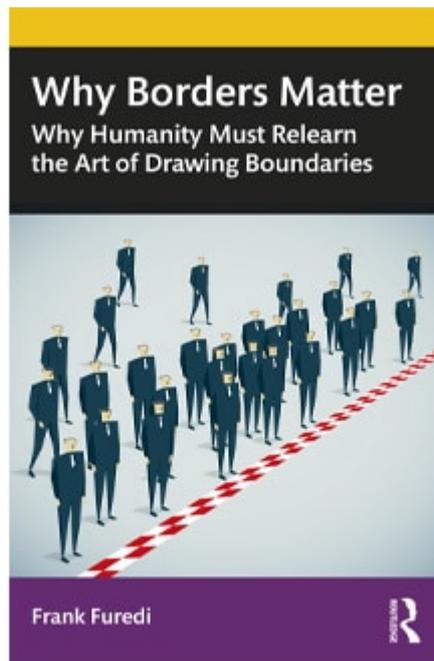
Borders Are Back

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The many new borders drawn recently make a mockery of rhetoric about a world without boundaries, argues theologian Phillip Tolliday.

‘Papers, please.’ In my imagination I connect this request to a scene from one of those Cold War movies. A long line of people, some anxious, many cold and shivering—because the scene in my mind is always cold and drizzly—all battered by a sense of stoic resignation, wait to be summoned to the border crossing, hoping to be permitted to cross. But that is the world of the past, isn’t it? Not so. In today’s Australia the once-simple undertaking of crossing into another State has become fraught. It is now entirely likely that domestic airline travellers may be advised of a change of rules while they are still in flight: turnaround immediately upon landing and go back to where you came from, or do a 14-day quarantine at your own expense. While on the ground a huge line of traffic snakes its way to the border checkpoint as weary travellers hasten at a snail’s pace to get into their home State before the border is slammed shut. Borders, it seems, are back; many of them policed with a diligence unparalleled in the experience of most of us.



Why Borders Matter: Why Humanity Must Relearn the Art of Drawing Boundaries
Frank Furedi
Routledge, 2020,
pp202

A border is much more than a ‘national fence’.

In *Why Borders Matter*, sociologist Frank Furedi observes that the “prevailing narrative presents borders as oppressive, discriminatory, exploitative, and characteristically violent”. This cosmopolitan temperament has been on the rise—at least among elites and global institutions—yet it is not as if this prevailing view has made the world into a place without borders and boundaries. Quite the opposite, as the opening paragraph demonstrates. The temperament has, however, re-drawn many of the traditional borders and boundaries in such a way as to make ‘draconian’ an apt if depressingly repetitive descriptor.

We have seen in debates such as Brexit the animosity directed against geographical borders with their attendant claim of national sovereignty, in favour of various forms of cosmopolitanism and openness. The EU was presented as the embodiment of these progressive values and of a new model of governance. Yet, as we have recently seen in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the experience of the EU was a salutary lesson about the importance of national borders between nation states. For example, despite consistent advice against border closures from the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) and the WHO, national responses to the pandemic in the EU included a high level of travel restrictions and bans. There was, therefore, a lack of correspondence between the scientific health advice at the EU level and the national political decisions that were made to mitigate the pandemic. Did borders matter? Yes, they did.

Given this confusion between values and reality, and the inherent limitation of the progressive globalist view, Furedi's analysis of the roots of how we think about borders, and their meaning to individuals and societies, is timely. As discussed later in the review, he demonstrates that a coherent conception of boundaries and categories is essential to developing a moral code and a moral sense.

Advocates of openness, particularly in regard to immigration, sometimes argue that geographical borders are artificial human constructions; and moreover, that they are recent historical creations. Furedi identifies a scholarly consensus that "borders ... were 'invented' in 1648, with the signing of the Treaties of Westphalia" (the settlement which ended the Wars of Religion and created systematic rules for diplomacy between nation-states). But, while it is true the borders that form the boundaries of the nation-state are not (necessarily) ancient, and they are sometimes invented, the idea of them is not particularly recent. Furedi dismisses the whole line of argument, observing that:

Many of the most important customs and institutions that shape life in the contemporary world are recent inventions. The ideal of tolerance or of human and sexual equality or even the recognition of the status of childhood are relatively recent inventions. Very few critics of invented borders are likely to argue that because sexual equality was not practised in ancient times it is not normal or morally meaningful.

It is contradictory and sometimes hypocritical to argue one may dismiss borders as artificial; no more than invented human constructs, while not holding the same true of other things we value. A geographical border is much more than simply a 'national fence'. Borders serve as symbolic boundaries as well as administrative ones. As Furedi notes, "they help people understand 'who we are' and 'who we are not'." They provide a sense of belonging to a particular people; the 'we' often referred to by the late Roger Scruton. To refer to 'we' is to distinguish ourselves from 'they'; but this in a world in which borders are under threat is to commit the cardinal sins of exclusivity and 'binary thinking'. Critics of national borders tend to regard national sovereignty as "an outdated myth if not always a coercive instrument of exclusion".

Furedi does valuable service by confronting the overused slur of "binary thinking"—overused by progressives to denigrate anyone with whom they disagree. In fact, binary thinking and binary categories have played a central role in the evolution of human thought. Although dualist thought seems to have fallen on hard times and is often denigrated by academic elites, it is difficult to escape the importance and utility of distinctions such as sacred/profane; male/female; good/evil; adult/child, and spirit/material. In the social sciences couplets such as traditional/modern, illiterate/literate, and inclusive/exclusive have formed the grids through which we gain understanding of the subject under consideration.

Until recently, binary distinctions and systems of classification were perceived as integral to the maintenance of a moral order and culture by conservative, liberal, and radical thinkers alike. Again, the objection is raised that binary thinking and conceptual categories appear to be unnatural and inflexible ways of developing knowledge. But Furedi claims "boundaries are the

condition of intelligibility of ourselves and of our world” and might therefore seem less tractable than objections against them suggest.

In any case, opponents of binary thinking are not beyond engaging in binary thinking themselves to exert their own preferences. Among binaries they prefer are openness not judgement, transparency not privacy, cosmopolitan not national, and fluid not stable. This is not “going beyond the binaries”; rather it is attempting “to displace traditional forms of binary categorisation with new ones”. Moreover, it parallels the project of “delegitimizing conventional borders and inventing new ones” such as, for example, safe spaces at universities and conferences, or gated communities for rich elites.

One of the traditional boundaries most under threat at the present time is the one that has separated the private sphere from the public. People feel under pressure not to claim that certain areas of their life are private and therefore should not be open to public scrutiny or interference. Instead we find ourselves in a time when transparency is the great and largely unquestioned virtue:

From the standpoint of the ideology of openness, the private sphere represents an alien, even hostile territory.

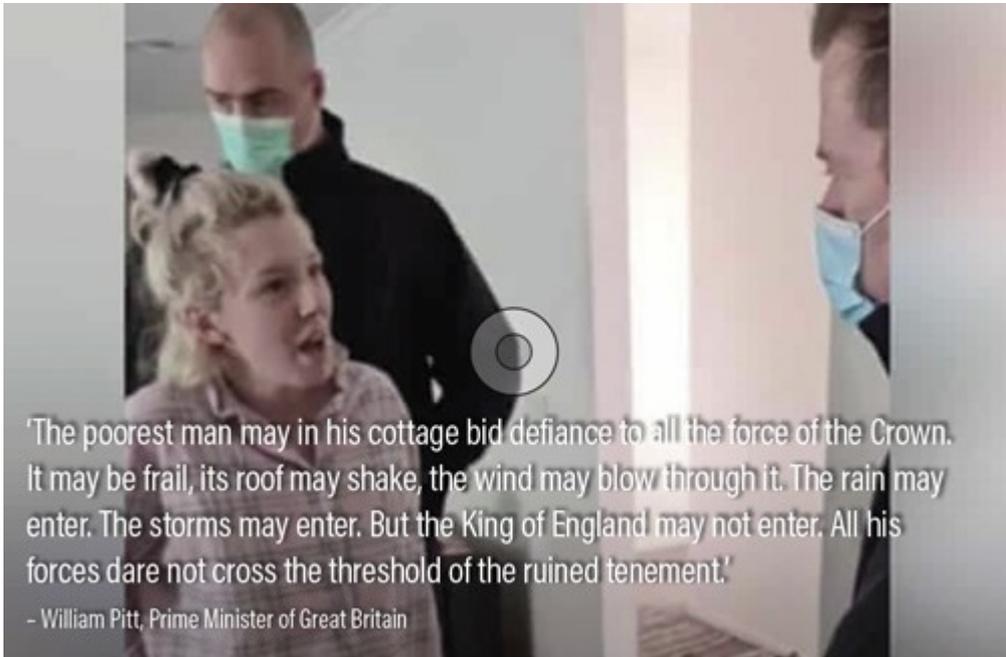
Furedi noted the right-wing German philosopher and jurist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) criticised Thomas Hobbes because the latter “incorporated a distinction between inner and outer, private and public, personal faith and outward confession”. Such distinctions between public and private had by the 19th century become accepted and respected. In the 1930s Schmitt claimed the protection “afforded to people’s inner and private life served to undermine the authority of the state” and he therefore argued against those protections. Schmitt was a prominent Nazi who remained unrepentant after the war, but it is important to note his concern about the flourishing of a private sphere immune from state scrutiny was of a logical piece with a totalitarian state—in his case, Nazism.

For us to criticise Schmitt and the regime he served is easy, but more disturbing and sometimes more difficult for us to see are the ways in which the private world of individuals is presently being subject to ever-greater public and state scrutiny. Furedi quotes William Pitt (the Elder), later one of Britain’s great Prime Ministers, writing these words in 1760:

more difficult for us to see are the ways in which the private world of individuals is presently being subject to ever-greater public and state scrutiny.

This is a vanished world. The protection formally vanished in the UK in 2004 when the relevant provisions were repealed by the Labour Government, supported by the Conservative Opposition. Here in Australia emergency legislation—at least in many States—gives the police the authority to enter a private home without a warrant. We have seen, for example, Zoe Buhler, a pregnant mother of two, arrested by Victorian police in front of her own children in her own kitchen, for a Facebook post. This is just one example of how far we have strayed from principles once at the heart of the legal system (Buhler was arrested in September 2020 but is yet to have her day in court, which also violates the principle of ‘justice delayed is justice denied’).

We must seek to recover a sense of moral authority.



Zoe Buhler being arrested by Victorian Police, in her own home.
Photo: Facebook/Zoe Buhler

At the time of writing, the idea of a vaccine passport is not only being mooted, but is receiving support and impetus from the Government. The so-called 'passport' is something that needs to be considered separately from the vaccine. The latter is a decision to be made by the individual; the 'passport' and the demand to produce it in order to gain access to a range of activities belonging to public life is a breach of one's private—and once thought to be confidential—information. It is one more example where the privacy of the individual is encroached upon for the sake of the public good. People may not particularly like it, but many feel the end justifies the means: which as Jonathan Sumption has written is "the motto of every totalitarian government that has ever been". (Lord Sumption was interviewed by IPA Executive Director, John Roskam, in March 2021.)

Furedi's book is essentially an essay concerning the roots of moral judgement. At the beginning he tells readers his conclusion that "the problem of identity was a sublimated expression of society's alienation from the making of moral judgements and the drawing of lines". He constructs a sustained argument to show a relationship between the drawing of distinctions and the construction of moral codes. In our failure to take boundaries seriously we find ourselves in situations in which things we thought to be "true until yesterday" (to use Douglas Murray's memorable phrase) now turn out to be wrong, and those who question the 'new truths' are liable to be marginalised. He quotes with approval American sociologist Robert Wuthnow's observation that:

Any eroding or blurring of each boundary, therefore, constitutes an area in which one might look to



identify potential crises in moral authority.

An equally pertinent area to explore would be the new boundaries we have drawn for ourselves. It is a curious world; one that is somehow colder. A world in which proclaimed openness leads to many feeling isolated; in which broadcast diversity and inclusiveness leads to exclusion and marginalisation for some; in which measures adopted to keep us safe lead to many feeling anxious and insecure; in which privacy laws abound but in which the right to individual privacy and choice are increasingly constrained. It is a world increasingly under thrall to double-speak; in which moral judgement and rationality are under pressure. Furedi gives us clear warning of a world in which we must seek to recover a sense of moral authority. It is an important book, written in accessible language, and deserves a wide readership.

Dr Phillip Tolliday is a retired Anglican cleric who taught theology in the Diocese of Adelaide. He was part of the School of Theology at Flinders University, and later at Charles Sturt University. He has collaborated in multidisciplinary work at the Carl von Ossietzky University in Oldenburg, and since 2012 at the Friedrich Schiller University, in Jena, Germany.

This article from the [Spring 2021 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by theologian Phillip Tolliday.