

The co-mingling of rebordering and debordering in territorial configurations. A field theory approach

La combinación de la refteronterización y la desfteronterización en la configuración territorial. Un acercamiento desde la teoría de campos

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Abstract

The article aims to explain the mingling of two opposing processes, debordering and rebordering, and their territorial implications. Field theory, specifically external relations between fields (intersection and interaction), is used to explain this. In order to test it, a qualitative methodology is applied to the analysis of a case related to the configuration of the US-Mexico border perimeter: the planning of a binational park in the twin cities of Nuevo Laredo and Laredo (2021-2022). As it is shown, the park is both a space that is jointly managed by and for both cities and a space for border surveillance. It is concluded that mingling is the result of the intersection of three fields (the environmental movement, the twin cities, and border security) on the basis of several elements common to all three (a geographical location, a plant species, and a narrative).

Keywords: rebordering, debordering, fields, binational park, Mexico-US border.

Resumen

El objetivo del artículo es explicar la combinación de la desfteronterización y la refteronterización, dos procesos opuestos, y sus efectos en la configuración territorial. Para explicarlo se recurre a la teoría de campos, en particular en cuanto a las relaciones externas entre campos (la intersección e interacción). Para probarlo, se emplea una metodología cualitativa para analizar un caso referido a la configuración del perímetro fronterizo de México y Estados Unidos: la planeación de un parque binacional en las ciudades gemelas de Nuevo Laredo y Laredo (2021-2022). Como se muestra, el parque constituye a la vez un espacio gestionado conjuntamente por y para ambas ciudades y un espacio de vigilancia fronteriza. Se concluye que esta combinación

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es resultado de la intersección de tres campos (el movimiento ambientalista, las ciudades gemelas y la seguridad fronteriza) a partir de varios elementos compartidos por los tres (una localización geográfica, una especie vegetal y una narrativa).

Palabras clave: refteronterización, desfteronterización, campos, parque binacional, frontera México-Estados Unidos.

Introduction

The territorial configuration of the border areas of modern states is explained, at least in part, by the influence of two opposing processes: debordering and rebordering. These processes reflect the reduction and hardening of border functions exercised in ports of entry and along the perimeter of a territory. According to the most common explanations, territorial configuration is the result either of the dominance of one process and the annulment of the other, or of the simultaneous action of the two processes that exist in independent fields of each other. In this dualistic conceptual framework, these processes are understood as self-contained, autonomous and independent and, therefore, in opposition to each other. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that debordering and rebordering are interactive processes rather than mutually exclusive (Decoville et al., 2022; Herzog & Sohn, 2019; Leandro, 2019; Oliveras González, 2020). This idea is based on the relationship between and interdependence of these processes, with the resulting configuration integrating aspects pertaining to both of them.

Initial research on the combination of debordering and rebordering has focused mainly on observations and empirical descriptions. However, progress is needed to explain the causes and circumstances under which these processes are combined. In this article, a realistic epistemological perspective is taken (Sayer, 2010; Yeung, 2024) to describe the combination of debordering and rebordering as a contingent product: that is, their combination is subject to interactions in a specific spatiotemporal context. In this sense, a causal explanation based on a case study related to the configuration of the perimeter between Mexico and the United States is proposed. According to Longo (2017), the perimeter corresponds to the boundary between neighboring states and their areas in close proximity (that is, areas that are observable from either side). Unlike ports of entry, the perimeter is not a legally configured space for the crossing of people and goods.

Field theory is useful for not only describing phenomena but also explaining causes and circumstances. Like other mesolevel theories, field theory allows the analysis of territorial and social complexity by placing it at an intermediate level between individual action and social institutions as well as between theoretical abstraction and empirical observation (Yeung, 2024). Field theory, far from being homogeneous, is a set of similar approaches whose common element is the concept of the field (Martin, 2003; Swartz, 1997). In the absence of a consistent definition, a field is understood to be a space or a social order characterized by its relationships, both internal (or necessary) and external (or contingent), according to Sayer's (2010) distinction of relationship types. Considering this distinction, some approaches, such as that of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2005; Chihu Amparán, 1998) and that of Warren (1967) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), consider fields to be autonomous and self-contained

entities, so that the object of a study is internal relations: the relations between the actors that constitute the field. In contrast, other approaches, such as that of Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) and that of Nail (2019), understand fields as interrelated entities and consider to their external relationships: the intersection and interaction between fields. Although it is true that some authors of the first group were aware of the interrelation of the fields, as Bourdieu (1996) himself did, they did not theorize it; moreover, they saw it as a problem (Thomson, 2008). Instead, the latter group departs from the existence of multiple fields whose stability and change are based precisely on their interdependence and interaction.

Based on this second perspective, debordering and rebordering can be understood as two interrelated fields, the combination of which (the consequence; referred to as a knot in field theory) is the result of their intersection (the cause). As will be explained later, this intersection is due to the existence of at least one element that is shared between the two processes, the knotting of which integrates the characteristics of both fields and affects them.

This explanatory approach is tested by analyzing the recent cross-border planning of an urban river park on the perimeter between the twin cities of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, and Laredo, Texas. The “binational park”, as local actors call it, was planned in 2021 through cooperation between the governments of both cities, local environmental associations and the United States Embassy in Mexico; as of 2023, its construction had not started. As will be shown, its planning is the result of the intersection of three fields: two associated with debordering (the conservation and restoration of the Rio Bravo/Grande river and the cross-border cooperation of the twin cities) and one associated with rebordering (border security). In 2021, these fields shared three elements: the fluvial-border location, the interest in eradicating a plant species (carrizo cane, *Arundo donax*) and a border security narrative. As a result, plans for the park integrated objectives linked to both processes. On the one hand, local governments and environmental associations promote social coexistence, economic and tourist development and support for the riverbank environment. On the other hand, the national actors of the United States seek a perimeter, both on the United States side and on the Mexican side, that is as observable as possible by the agents and sensors of the United States Border Patrol (USBP) as a way to increase the detection and interception of irregular flows (migration and drug trafficking).

The theoretical approaches to debordering and rebordering are presented below, as well as the intersection and interaction of the fields, followed by a description of the methodological strategy used in this research. The results of the analysis are then presented: first, the knotting process (that is, the planning of the park), followed by the fields and the shared elements. Finally, conclusions regarding the combination of these two processes are presented.

Theoretical framework

Debordering and rebordering

To understand debordering and rebordering, it is necessary to start with a more general concept: bordering. In fact, it can be said that debordering and rebordering are only variations of bordering. The concept of bordering has been used to denote the social construction of borders (Kolossoff & Scott, 2013); that is, borders, as dependent of human beings, are continually made and remade through social practices (from everyday life to international relations) (De Genova, 2017; Paasi, 2022; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). In this research borders are understood as sociopolitical constructions associated with modern nation states. From this perspective, bordering is materialized through the functions established and exercised by the State, although not exclusively, over its territory. There are four basic border functions: the delimitation and demarcation operations of the state territory (in other words, of the territory over which the State has sovereign authority); the control and regulation of the access, permanence and exit of mobile and movable objects (people, other living beings, goods and merchandise) through state agencies, bureaucratic procedures and infrastructure; territorial differentiation from other nation states through the ordering and organization of territory and bodies, landscaping and spatial and cultural practices, among others; and, finally, the formation of a national identity, consciousness and loyalty and a sense of inclusion associated with the territory and/or the State, in which the boundaries (and their representation, such as cartography) are intimately linked to those feelings and commitments (Benedetti, 2014; Herzog & Sohn, 2019; Popescu, 2011).

As a social construction, functions are transformed and adapted according to the challenges that emerge at borders and in territories (such as changes in the States and in territorial governance, migratory and refugee crises, and pandemics; in relation to their transformation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, see, for example, Martínez-Cantú et al., 2022). For this reason, bordering is not a homogeneous process throughout space and time, but its trajectory and intensity vary. It is in this sense that we can speak of rebordering and debordering. The first notion refers to the reinforcement of those functions (for example, through the erection of border walls) and the creation of new functions and borders (Andreas & Biersteker, 2003; Dunn, 1996; Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008; Rosière & Jones, 2012), while the second implies the reduction in and even elimination of those functions (for example, the reduction in access controls of people and goods in the framework of suprastate integration processes) and even the physical, legal or symbolic elimination of borders (Albert & Brock, 1996; Ohmae, 1990). In other words, the first emphasizes the practices of control, protection and differentiation, while the second suggests openness, exchange and integration. In this sense, debordering and rebordering describe two levels of intensity in the establishment and exercise of border functions. However, these are not absolute categories but are relative to a previous level of intensity; that is, with respect to the preceding level of bordering, there is an increase or a decrease. Thus, conceptually, these processes are understood as representing opposing influences.

Although there is consensus regarding the characteristics of debordering and rebordering, the ways in which these processes are related continue to be debated. Their

relationship has been interpreted in three different ways: mutual exclusion, complementarity and combination. First, in a binary framework, debordering and rebordering are understood as absolute, autonomous and independent processes; thus, under a zero-sum logic, they appear to be mutually exclusive. In this sense, for a particular border (in a specific spatiotemporal context), only the deployment of a single trend is conceivable: the State either increases bordering or decreases it, but not both (Albert & Brock, 1996). From this perspective, the coexistence of debordering and rebordering on the same border is illogical (Coleman, 2005).

Second, considering an alternative binary framework, it is postulated that debordering and rebordering are complementary and, therefore, coexist on the same border (in a specific spatiotemporal context) in such a way that they act simultaneously and even uniquely as a pair (Nevins, 2010; Sparke, 2006). This complementarity occurs because a State territory is affected by diverse social, demographic, economic, political and ecological processes, causing the State to opt for individualized strategies. Thus, for certain phenomena, the State increases control and regulation, and for others, it decreases them. The result is what has been called *swinging borders* (Colin, 2013). For example, the flows of people are rebordered or debordered according to the sociopolitical profile of the people (nationality, skin color, socioeconomic level) in such a way that international mobility is facilitated for certain profiles and restricted for others. The result is that, for a same border, some people are placed in a privileged position and others are in a precarious situation.

Finally, the third perspective is relational and tries to overcome the binary framework used in the previous two perspectives to capture the ways in which both rebordering and debordering influence each other. In this framework, these processes are interrelated: they interact and mix together, forming a continuous field. In other words, there is debordering in rebordering, and rebordering in debordering. This perspective supposes their combined operation in the same border area and territory, which has been called *co-mingling* (Decoville et al., 2022; Herzog & Sohn, 2019). In this case, following the previous example, the tension between the control and ordering of the flows of people in a precarious situation and the need for greater fluidity of the flows of privileged people in the same spatiotemporal context has led to the establishment of segregated areas for each type of flow at ports of entry (border crossings and international airports) (Oliveras González, 2020). In this case, the configuration of the ports of entry combines debordering and rebordering.

Intersection and interaction between fields

As mentioned in the “Introduction”, field theory and, in particular, the approaches of Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) and Nail (2019) to assess the intersection and interaction of fields are helpful for explaining the combination of debordering and rebordering. Although those authors each used their own terminology, they defined fields based on the continuous change (or the succession of more or less ephemeral or permanent stabilities) resulting from the tension, conflict and cooperation between actors within them (internal or necessary relations) and by the interrelationships between fields (external or contingent relations).

For Fligstein and McAdam, the field is

(...) a constructed mesolevel social order in which actors (who can be individual or collective) [...] interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field. (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, p. 9)

From this perspective, fields are constituted by internal relations, particularly between social actors. According to Sayer (2010, pp. 60-61), they are internal insofar as one actor depends on the other. In this sense, Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p. 13) distinguish two types of actors, *incumbents* and *challengers*, between whom there is a power dynamic. Thus, while the former dominate and control the resources of the field so that their interests and visions are reflected in the structure of the field, the latter occupy, voluntarily or involuntarily, a lesser position and, therefore, their influence is also minor. The challengers, while recognizing the dominance of the incumbents, articulate an alternative vision of the field, thus seeking to transform its structure and wish to become incumbents.

Two other properties of the fields derive from the relationships between actors: one related to its temporality and the other to its extension. First, since incumbents and challengers and their interactions change over time, fields are also dynamic. This suggests that temporary cuts cannot be established *a priori*; rather, they depend on their own dynamics. In this sense, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) distinguish between stable and unstable fields based on the incumbents' capacity to perpetuate themselves and to reproduce the purposes and rules of the field. Thus, a field is considered stable when those objectives are achieved, at least for a socially perceived long period. Instead, they are unstable when they are not achieved; therefore, challengers question the legitimacy of the incumbents and initiate the transformation of the field. The second property of the fields is that they are not closed and clearly bounded units; in contrast, actors, purposes, relationships and rules can be integrated and connected with other fields. From this, Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p. 18) conclude that a particular field is "embedded in complex webs of other fields". Fields are therefore connected and even partially overlapping.

The consequence of this second property is that the actions in one field are influenced to a lesser or greater degree by the other fields. That is, they can change due to external (or contingent) relationships. In this context, Fligstein and McAdam's approach makes it possible to explain the influence or effects caused by other fields in a particular field (the one that has been selected as an object of research is called the "strategic field"). From this perspective, the strategic field is affected by other fields, while those other fields have the capacity to affect the strategic field. Precisely because of this type of relationship, the group formed by the strategic field and the fields that affect it constitute the "broader field environment" (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 18), which is characterized by three types of interrelationships (two are based on a topological logic and the third on the type of actors). Taking the centrality given to the strategic field, the other fields become proximate or distant, depending on the degree of influence they exert: the former often affect the strategic field, while the latter rarely or have no capacity to affect it. Similarly, the other fields are characterized by be-

ing dependent or interdependent (or, vertical or horizontal, in Fligstein & McAdam, 2011) in relation to the existing hierarchical order with respect to the strategic field and the directionality of influence: while the former are affected by the hierarchically superior fields, the latter are affected more or less equally.

According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p. 19), the stability and the internal change of the strategic field are dependent on the changes in the fields integrated in the broader environment (the proximate fields, both vertical and horizontal). Thus, “exogenous shocks”, the term used to refer to such changes, have an effect on the strategic field since they represent an opportunity for both challengers to question incumbents and incumbents to strengthen their dominance. However, at this point, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) do not explain or, rather, they do so only partially how or under what circumstances the proximate fields affect the strategic field. One of the limitations is that, as shown, their approach pays attention only to the effects produced by the other fields in the strategic field but not to reciprocity. That is, the interaction and capacity of the fields to affect and be affected remain unexplained.

To address this knowledge gap, the approach of Nail (2019) is helpful; in his approach, the proximate and interdependent/horizontal fields become mutually influential as long as they share at least one element. In other words, when at least one internal element is integrated into the composition of two or more fields, that shared element can be, in the abstract terms of Nail (2019), a flow, a fold or a circulation, or, in those of Fligstein and McAdam (2012), an actor, a purpose, a resource, and so on. This shared element becomes entangled, forming what Nail (2019, p. 145) metaphorically calls a “knot”. In this sense, the knot internalizes the external relations between fields. That is, on the one hand, it is the intersection of the fields (which together constitute compound fields), and on the other hand, it becomes a new field, superimposed on the others. In this way, the knot shares elements with the other fields and makes possible the emergence of new properties and effects, either quantitatively or qualitatively. The emergent properties affect all the knotted fields, although to a different degree or in a different sense in each one. In other words, the tied fields transform each other through the coordination of their shared elements.

Thus, the stability of the knot, like any other field, is only temporary. It remains as long as the elements that gave rise to it continue to be shared, but is undone as soon as that ceases to be the case. It follows that the more elements the fields share and the more fields are entangled, “the stronger their knot” and the more stable it is (Nail, 2019, p. 148). On the other hand, the dissolution of knots (or unknotting) also affects untangled fields, although not all dissolution causes the same type of transformation. Nail (2019) identifies four types of dissolutions: destructive, when the shared element ceases to be so for all knotted fields; expansive, when a knot is undone and retied based on another shared element, allowing the integration of more fields; eventual, when at least two of the unknotted fields are tied again to form a new knot; and constructive, in which new fields are knotted following eventual dissolution. As seen above, the dissolution of knots does not imply the end of intersections or interactions between fields but rather the possibility of new intersections and the emergence of new interactions.

Methodology

In this research, a qualitative strategy was used to obtain and analyze the data.

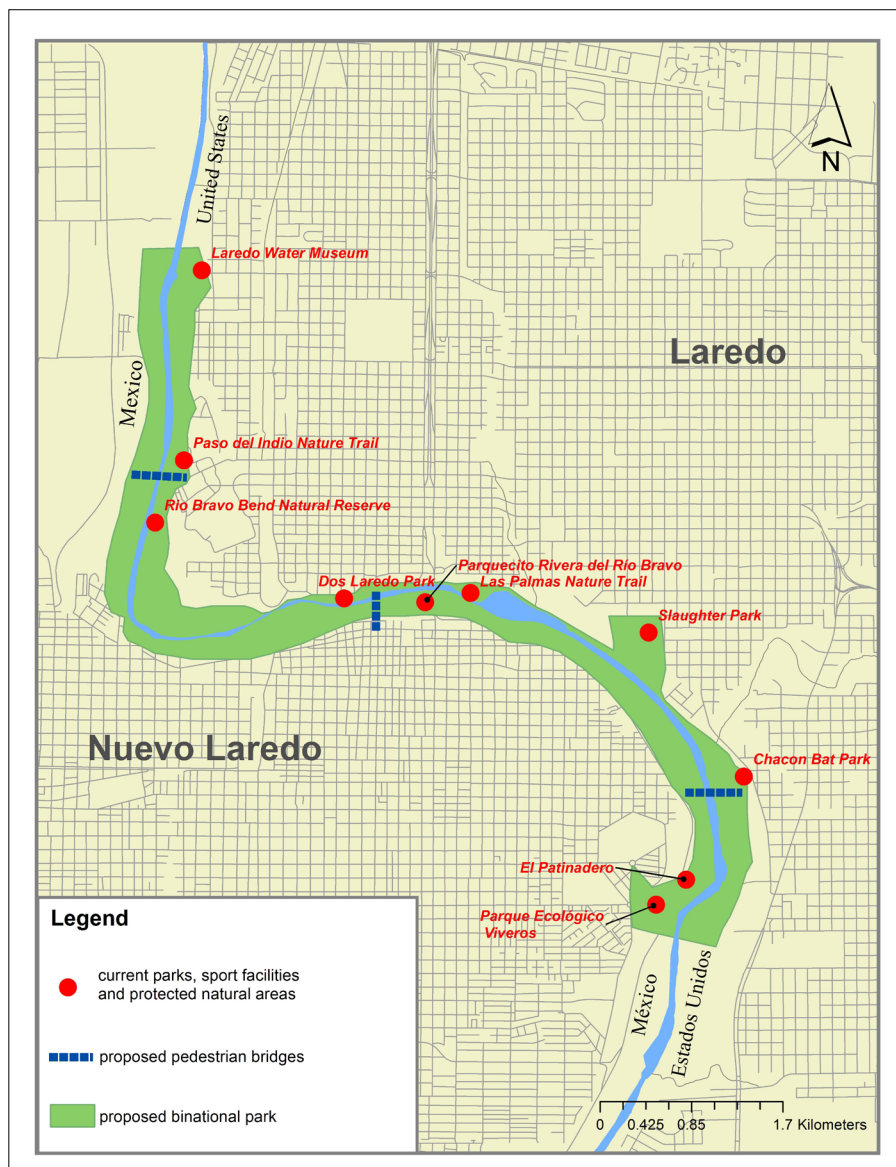
To obtain the data, three techniques were applied. First, data on the binational park project were compiled from news and press releases published in the local and regional media (Nuevo Laredo and Laredo) and on the social networks (Facebook and Twitter) of the actors involved. These sources made it possible to collect data related to several of the categories analyzed: the actors and the fields to which they are assigned; the binational park (spatial planning, uses, design, etcetera); the geographical and chronological location of the intervention, participation of the actors, and phases of implementation of the park (including the proposal, lobbying, planning, design and, even, the dissemination of these actions through the media and social networks); and the legitimation and representation of the park and its creation, according to the actors themselves. Second, to supplement that data, semistructured interviews were conducted with the previously identified key actors. In total, six interviews (local governments of the twin cities, civil associations and international organizations) were conducted between November 2022 and January 2023. Third, the places where the binational park was planned were visited to collect data on its sociospatial configuration.

Finally, the data were analyzed using an inductive open coding, and later it was categorized. By taking the knot (the binational park project) as a departure point, the analysis followed an inverse route to identify underlying causes. First, the intersecting fields were identified and delimited according to their internal relationships. For this step, a criterion of internal coherence was fulfilled between the elements that make up the fields (purposes, actors, etcetera). Finally, the field intersections and shared elements were established through their comparison.

The knot: the Laredo-Nuevo Laredo Binational Park

In March 2022, the mayors of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo publicly presented one of the most ambitious projects in recent decades, which has exceeded the highest expectations: a binational park along the Rio Bravo/Grande river. Through different phases, the park long-term project entails the creation and integration of mirror parks on opposite banks of the river as it passes through the urban centers of both cities over an area of 10 km (6.2 miles) (see Figure 1). Due to its location, the binational park is designed to become the face of both cities, and it is designed to coincide with two urban landmarks that distinguish the city-river interaction: upstream in Laredo, the Water Museum and the wastewater treatment plant, and downstream in Nuevo Laredo, Parque Viveros. The park is bounded by two geomorphological elements, recognized locally for their natural and historical value: at one end, the ford of Paso de los Indios, and at the other end, the Chacón Creek.

Figure 1. Laredo-Nuevo Laredo Binational Park project



Source: adapted from “A Binational Park: los dos Laredos” (Overland Partners & Able City, 2021)

As shown in Figure 1, there are currently some urban parks, sports and recreational facilities, and nature reserves and wildlife sanctuaries along the riverbank. Most of the land subject to intervention remains undeveloped, but the natural habitat is subject to a high level of degradation. The project aims to create new parks, sports and cultural facilities and sanctuaries, all of which will be integrated with existing areas through paths parallel to the river and pedestrian bridges across it. However, the inclusion of these bridges is for aesthetics and is symbolic rather than an infrastructure to facilitate cross-border mobility since their use would be subject to the regulation of access to the

United States and Mexico. Thus, hypothetically, the bridges would allow “families [on both sides] to visit the entire park”, but “the point is just to meet there [in the middle of the bridge] and return” (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022). In this sense, the main pedestrian bridge, designed in the shape of a hug, is designed to host formal cross-border events (such as the Hug Ceremony, which will be discussed later). In short, from a symbolic point of view, the park represents “the brotherhood of the two Laredos. We are a single region that the river does not divide, but historically unites us through ties of blood on both sides of the border” (Nuevo Laredo President, personal communication, January 21, 2023). Finally, the project also includes the restoration of the river and its habitats (wastewater treatment, elimination of invasive species and vegetation that consumes large amounts of water and reforestation with native species).

This project—the knot—emerged from the continuous knotting of three fields. According to Nail’s typology (2019), the project reflects an expansive knotting. First, two fields were tied (the two associated with debordering), and later, they were dissolved and retied with a third field (the one associated with rebordering). The first park proposal was formulated by the local environmental movement, and the first knotting took place when the local governments of both cities joined through cross-border cooperation. Later, the proposal was transformed again when it was retied with the national actors from the field of border security.

Thus, the first park proposal was proposed by a Laredo civil environmental association, the Rio Grande International Study Center (RGISC), whose original idea consisted of restoring the river and the riparian habitat due to environmental damage (for example, ecological degradation and pollution and water shortage). The RGISC presented the plan to other local actors, both political and economic, during cross-border meetings between the two cities. This interaction marked the first knot, so the plan to use river front areas (as shared spaces or axes of urban improvement, economic and tourist development and social coexistence as well as to support the environment) was then integrated into the original proposal. To a large extent, local governments and economic actors brought back previous proposals intended for the same area, which were formulated at least since the 1990s, both in Nuevo Laredo-Laredo and in other twin cities; such proposals were inspired by the River Walk of San Antonio, Texas. In fact, the River Walk, which contributed to the revitalization of Downtown San Antonio, has become a paradigmatic model for urban and economic development of riverfront areas in Northeast Mexico and South Texas, and several local governments have been inspired by it (Prieto González, 2011). In this vein, the mayors of both cities met with the mayor of San Antonio to seek their opinion and suggestions.

To consolidate the project, both local governments and the RGISC launched two lines of action. First, the creation of a binational working group with the aim to develop and supervise the project, and second, the lobbying of state, federal and binational administrations and the private sector to attract financing. Regarding the latter, of all the meetings and encounters, the one that the interviewed actors considered the most relevant was the meeting held in December 2021 in Laredo between both mayors and the ambassadors of Mexico in the United States and of the United States in Mexico. This meeting was conducted through the mediation of the consuls of Mexico

in Laredo and of the United States in Nuevo Laredo. The ambassadors pledged to support the binational park project by obtaining funds and approaching other national and binational actors (such as the United States Customs and Border Protection and the Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas), whose border regulations the project had to adapt to. That meeting was relevant not only because of the commitment obtained from national actors but also because it expanded the knot. In this sense, the United States Ambassador, Ken Salazar, “fell in love with the idea” (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022) and opted to expand it to the other twin cities of the Mexico-Texas border. Thus, during the first months of 2022, he launched a “binational plan” through his social networks, and he visited several pairs of cities (Matamoros and Brownsville, and Reynosa and McAllen, in addition to Laredo and Nuevo Laredo again) to promote the project and learn about similar experiences.

With the integration of national actors and border regulations, a new objective was added to the project: to achieve riverbanks easily observable and defensible by the USBP. In short, the general objective became the creation of a riverfront/perimeter that was environmentally sustainable, socially comfortable, business friendly and nationally secured.

The fields

The objectives of the binational park combine elements associated with debordering (cross-border cooperation, the integration of riverfronts and the ecological restoration of the river) and rebordering (the transformation of perimeters to guarantee border security). To untangle the knot, that is, to analyze their combination, it is necessary to identify the fields and their intersections. The three interrelated fields are presented below in the order of their intersection with the project: the field of the local environmental movement, that of the twin cities and, finally, that of border security of the United States.

The environmental movement

In the last 30-40 years, the United States-Mexico border region has become a field of environmental conflict and social environmental responses (see, for example, Alfie Cohen & Méndez B., 2000; Fernández & Carson, 2003; Herzog, 2000). It is, however, an asymmetric field with significant differences at the regional level and between the two sides of the boundary (Alfie C. & Méndez B., 2000; Sabet, 2008). This asymmetry is clearly reproduced in the Dos Laredos region, where activism is practically nonexistent on the Mexican side but thrives and has a greater incidence, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in the United States.

The environmental activism of these cities is characterized by the defense of the Rio Bravo/Grande and its water, which are elements that are inseparable. Different civil associations participate in the defense of the river and its resources, with the Laredoan RGISC being the main actor. The RGISC bases the defense on two main arguments. First, because this river is the only source of drinking water in a region with a semiarid climate, so human communities and natural habitats and ecosystems depend on it. Second, it is “one of the ten most endangered rivers in America” (American Rivers, 2018; RGISC Director, personal communication, December 12, 2022) as a result of human actions, including the dumping of urban and farm wastewater, regulation works (dams, reservoirs, levees, canalization, etcetera), overexploitation of water, population growth, clearing of riverbanks for urban and agricultural growth, invasion of nonnative plant species and construction of border infrastructure. Both arguments reflect the material interrelation of the river and water with human communities and nature and the symbolic interrelation, since “this river is iconic for the identity of the region”. (Muñoz, 2018; RGISC Director, personal communication, December 12, 2022).

Since the inception of the RGISC in the late 1980s, its objective has been to preserve and protect the river through citizen awareness, lobbying with authorities, research, environmental education and cross-border and binational collaboration. One of its basic strategies consists of allying with other local and regional actors in both cities, with whom it shares similar or convergent objectives. In this sense, one of its most recognized actions is the celebration of “Día del Río” (River Day), an annual event that has taken place since 1994 to promote respect and care for the environment. Civil associations, schools and universities participate in this event, as do local governments. The event, which has taken place over at least three weeks since 2017 involves cultural, educational and recreational activities in both cities (measurement of water quality and habitats, waste collection, kayak tours, conferences, exhibitions, etcetera). Many of these activities are carried out in existing parks and natural reserves on both riverbanks, and some are carried out in the middle of the river.

In addition to this event, since 2019, the RGISC has launched two projects, one together with the No Border Wall Coalition (NBWC) and the Carrizo-Comecrudo Tribe of Texas, and the other in collaboration with another local environmental association, the Monte Much Audubon Society (MMAS). In the first project, climate, environmental and racial justice was highlighted through art and culture (workshops, a documentary, murals painting and artistic interventions in parks by the river). The second project promoted the creation of two protected areas on municipally owned lands along the riverbank: the Rio Bravo Bend and the Las Palmas Nature Trail (see Figure 1). Both areas were finally approved in 2021 by the city council and thus became the first nature reserve and the first bird sanctuary, respectively, at the municipal level. As the RGISC explains, these actions allowed the idea of the:

(...) enormous project of the binational park (although that is not the appropriate term, but that is what everyone calls it now) to conserve and restore our precious river and its creeks, to have more diverse habitats, improve water quality and increase water quantity, and reduce shoreline erosion. (RGISC Director, personal communication, December 12, 2022)

The twin cities

Nuevo Laredo and Laredo have a long history of cooperation and disputes dating back to the very origin of both cities in the mid-nineteenth century (Adams, 2008; Herrera, 2017). This condition is reflected, for example, in the history of the Hug Ceremony (Peña, 2020), a formal event held annually since 1898, in which the mayors of both cities hug in the middle of one of the international bridges to reaffirm friendship and good neighborliness, boost cooperation and resolve disputes. In addition to the local affairs, and the affinities, rivalries and personalities of local actors, this field has been highly dependent on other fields, especially the binational situation between Mexico and the United States. The interviewed actors agree that in the first quarter of the 21st century, relations between both cities were characterized by cordiality and cooperation aimed at social and economic development, regardless of the border or their national affiliations (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022; President of Nuevo Laredo, personal communication, January 21, 2023; Secretariat of Economic Development of Nuevo Laredo, personal communication, January 22, 2023).

From 2021-2022, the period during which the binational park was conceptualized, the interviewees reported four cross-border cooperation actions: the binational vaccination campaign against COVID-19, with vaccines being donated by Laredo to Nuevo Laredo; advances in the planning of two new international bridges, one for trains and one for vehicles (the so-called “4/5 bridge”); the drafting and signing of the cross-border contingency plan; and regional and urban planning, including the binational park. Some of these actions arose at the level of local governments (such as binational vaccination), while others are the result of cooperation with actors from other fields, including local, binational, and even international actors.

In this last sense, the role of the consuls (of Mexico in Laredo and of the United States in Nuevo Laredo) should be highlighted; since 2019, consuls have sponsored and annually convened the “Binational Dialog of the Dos Laredos Region”. This meeting is held in Laredo and brings together local governments, immigration and customs officials, businessmen and universities from both countries, to coordinate and arrange actions. It is based on “seeing cities as a single region” (Nuevo Laredo Economic Development Secretariat, personal communication, January 22, 2023). A wide variety of topics have been addressed, the result of which has been the installation of several binational monitoring committees.

Urban cooperation is part of a broader binational metropolitan governance initiative promoted by UN-Habitat and the Colegio de Jurisprudencia Urbanística Internacional (CJUR). For more than a decade, both organizations have led cross-border encounters and meetings in the cities along the United States-Mexico border, including Nuevo Laredo and Laredo (CJUR President, personal communication, November 16, 2022; UN-Habitat consultant, communication personal, December 1, 2022). In this vein, in November 2021, “Vision: Binational Forum for Metropolitan Management” was held in Nuevo Laredo and concluded with the signing of the *Binational Metropolitan Declaration*. To give continuity to the agreements, the “Binational MetroLab”, made up of experts and representatives of the private, public and civil sectors of both cities,

was created. Under the auspices of the UN-Habitat and the CJUR, in June 2022, the “Roundtables of Binational Metropolitan Management Actors” were held, in which a dozen topics were discussed, including those related to water, biodiversity, sustainable habitats and sanitation of the Rio Bravo/Grande.

According to the interviews with local actors, these cross-border actions appear to have been legitimized by a narrative of cross-border unity formed by four imaginaries: the shared origin of both cities, as a result of the separation or partition that the establishment of the United States-Mexico border entailed in 1848 (historical imaginary); the coexistence on both sides of the Rio Bravo/Grande, an axis that articulates the region (geographical imaginary); the intense daily cross-border mobility derived from family and friendship relations between the two cities (social imaginary); and the scale of international trade, represented by considering themselves the most important land customs office on the United States-Mexico border (economic imaginary).

Security at the border perimeter of the United States

Since the late 1970s, border policy in the United States has been characterized by an increasing rebordering to detect and stop irregular flows into the country, especially those associated with undocumented immigration and drug trafficking (Dunn, 1996). Along the perimeter with Mexico, this policy has materialized in three main strategies: the installation of fences (the “wall”), the presence and patrolling of border agents and military personnel, and the deployment of surveillance technology (cameras, sensors, drones, etcetera), the so-called “virtual wall” or “smart border” (Longo, 2017; Maril, 2011). All three have been controversial for a wide variety of reasons (impacts on human and civil rights, impacts on the environment, militarization, economic costs, financing, etcetera), although the largest dispute between incumbent actors and challengers occurred in relation to the construction and extension of the border wall, which has even led to social polarization and a widening of the gap between the Republican and Democratic parties.

The greatest boosts to its construction have occurred when Republicans were in office, with Presidents George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Donald Trump (2017-2021). On the other hand, when Democrats were in office, namely, Barack Obama (2009-2017) and Joe Biden (2021-present), work on the wall stopped. However, after a Republican presidency, the field maintains a certain inertia, and work stoppage is not achieved without difficulty. Thus, President Biden’s first year, in contrast to what was promised in his campaign, was characterized by the burden left by Trump. During this period, the United States Customs and Border Protection (USCBP) concluded the works and technical studies that were in progress and for which a budget had been approved. For example, during 2022, USCBP continued surveys needed for the construction of the wall in Webb and Zapata counties, both upstream and downstream of Laredo (CBP, 2022; RGISC Director, personal communication, December 12, 2022). On the other hand, President Biden’s security policy for the perimeter has prioritized the extension of the virtual wall and the increase in the presence of the USCBP and the

National Guard while attempting to repair, to some extent, the environmental damage caused by the construction of the wall (Aizeki et al., 2021; The White House, 2023; Vereza, 2022).

The disputes in this field have also been transferred to other actors in the public, social and private sectors. The role played by We Build the Wall, an organization linked to the far right, in supporting the construction of the wall stands out; during President Trump's term, this organization erected two private walls (We Build the Wall [WBTW], 2020). Similarly, during President Biden's term in office, the governors of Texas and Arizona, both Republicans, have erected barriers along some sections of the perimeter by installing maritime containers, chain-link fence, concertina wire, steel panels and buoys in the river (De la Sotilla, 2023; Findell, 2023; Miller, 2023).

In contrast, during President Trump's time in office, a resistance movement also emerged. This is a grassroots movement articulated horizontally through the No Border Wall Coalition (NBWC), in which a wide variety of actors (environmental, civil rights, promigrant activists, feminist and LGBTQ activists, religious and indigenous rights groups, and local border governments) were involved (Correa & Thomas, 2023; Oliveras González, 2019). This movement opposed the border infrastructure and its pernicious effects on communities and their living spaces, the migrant population and the environment. Efforts included a wide variety of operations, such as demonstrations, boycott campaigns, occupations and camps, humanitarian support, festivals and expressions of border art.

The RGISC, in collaboration with the NBWC, organized several actions aimed at denouncing the environmental damage on the riverbank and near the river caused by the construction of the wall, and the restrictions placed on the population by the infrastructure and the USBP, including the loss of access to the river for recreational activities (walking, fishing, swimming, etcetera). As its director noted, "the wall would not only have denied Laredoans access to the shore but would have reduced these natural wonders to dust" (RGISC director, personal communication, December 12, 2022). Thus, the Rio Bravo Bend and Las Palmas Nature Trail areas were protected not only for their ecological value but also to prevent the construction of the wall and the related environmental damage. Similarly, the governments of the two Laredos are opposed to the wall, although they did not join the resistance movement "because President Trump told us: 'we are going to put up a wall', and it is very difficult to fight against the federal government" (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022). In his case, the rejection of border infrastructure is not due so much to environmental and social impacts but rather to symbolic impacts, given that it violates the narrative of cross-border unity. Furthermore, the wall is seen as an affront and a lack of respect from the United States to the border communities and to Mexico: "It is our destiny [of the two Laredos], they put us here. Mexico is not going away, neither are we. We do not want walls, we want to respect each other" (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022).

The intersections between the fields

Having identified the interrelated fields, the next step was to expose the intersections between them that gave rise to the binational park project. In other words, the knots allowed the combination of debordering and rebordering. In this sense, the project emerged from the intersection of three shared elements: the spatial overlap of the Rio Bravo/Grande and the Mexico-United States boundary, the desire to eliminate extensive and dense reed beds, and the acceptance of a narrative of border security. Although all three elements are shared, the motives are not necessarily the same for each actor. In contrast, each actor has their own motive, although the distinct motives are complementary (see Table 1).

Table 1. Intersection between fields: shared elements

Field	River-boundary overlap	Elimination of reed beds	Border security narrative
Environmental movement	River defense	Biodiversity and fluvial dynamics	Nonharmful border security for the river
Twin cities	Comanagement of the contact space	Water quality and landscape aesthetics	Nonharmful border security for cities
Border security	Transformation of the river for security	Efficiency of security operations	Smart and nonharmful border security

Source: own elaboration

The river-boundary overlap

Although it is evident, the first and most basic intersection between the three fields should be stated: the spatial overlap of the intervention areas of each field, that is, of the Rio Bravo/Grande (and its banks) and the perimeter. The first instance of this overlap derives from the delimitation between the two countries; the boundary was established in the middle of the river after the United States intervention in Mexico (1846-1848). This spatial delimitation was not accidental but rather the result of a political decision. In negotiations with Mexico, the United States government managed to impose a political doctrine (that of discovery) based on so-called natural law (Miller, 2011). According to this doctrine, the limits of a territorial possession with a coastline, as was the case in Texas, are marked by the river courses that flow into said coastline and that extend to its source. Without going into historical detail, the United States claimed that the southern limit of that coast was the Rio Bravo/Grande, so the boundary was set by following the river upstream from its mouth. In the second instance, the overlap derives from the United States rebordering, which has progressively widened the perimeter, turning a line, coinciding with the boundary, into a surveillance zone extending into the interior of the United States and Mexico. In other words, the

area from the middle of the river to both riverbanks and beyond coincides with the observable extent, either by the human eye or by sensors. The spatial overlap between the river channel and the perimeter has caused them to become interconnected and inseparable to such an extent that any intervention in one affect the other and vice versa (see, for the case of delimitation, Alvarez, 2019; Mueller, 1975).

For the environmental movement, this overlap is manifested in the protection and restoration of the river and its habitats and in the rejection of any border infrastructure, like the border wall, whose construction and operation entails the destruction of habitats, the alteration of the river channel or increased damage to the banks. Second, for the twin cities, cross-border cooperation involves jointly planning and designing a shared continuous space (that is, the river and its banks) while adjusting to national, binational and international regulations in relation to the border (for example, through the CILA-IBWC). Finally, for national actors, border security involves using terrain (like the flow of the river) for their own benefit as a deterrent of irregular flows. Alternatively, when the use of terrain is not possible, national security agents will transform hydrological dynamics, topography and riparian vegetation so that they do not affect security operations or border infrastructure.

Elimination of carrizo cane (*Arundo donax*)

The second element shared by the three fields is the elimination of a plant species, namely, carrizo cane. This species occurs in areas with a subtropical climate and grows near water sources, both surface and underground sources. It is characterized by long, hollow stems (canes) (up to 7.5 m high), long leaves and a base formed by a tangle of roots (rhizomes). The plant absorbs water and nutrients through the rhizomes and reproduces by cloning itself and forming extensive and dense colonies (reed beds), which can extend for several kilometers along rivers, lakes and aquifers. Globally, it is considered one of the most widespread and harmful invasive species (Briggs et al., 2021). *Arundo donax* was directly and indirectly introduced into the Rio Bravo/Grande basin through human mobility. Specifically, it was brought to Mexico and Texas from the Iberian Peninsula during colonial times. Its introduction and expansion threaten biodiversity. Due to its high demand for water and soil, it competes with and displaces native plant and animal species. Its growth and expansion alter the fluvial dynamics and topographic profile of the river channel (it favors sedimentation in riverbeds and damages and erodes slopes and banks), damage hydraulic infrastructure (intakes, canals and bridges) and increase the flood potential.

Given these characteristics, the elimination of carrizo cane and reed beds has become a common aim by the incumbent actors of the three fields, although for different reasons. For the RGISC, reed elimination is key to achieving three objectives: restoring ecological function, degraded riparian habitats and river biodiversity, improving the flow of the river and reducing the alteration of the topographic profile; and increasing the availability of water by reducing the consumption and evapotranspiration of reeds. For local governments, its eradication is motivated by the need for greater water reserves for human consumption:

We focus on removing vegetation that is not good and that steals water from the river despite its current importance. This has always been the case, but now it is more so because the demand for drinking water is much greater: there are many more people on the border, demand for industry... and to for life in general. (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022)

In addition, reed beds are unattractive, causing the landscape to be perceived as ugly; thus, their elimination facilitates the planning and organization of riverbanks with more aesthetic criteria and thus the potential to attract visitors and businesses (Secretariat of Economic Development of Nuevo Laredo, personal communication, January 22, 2023). Finally, for USBP, the density and height of reed beds constitute obstacles to border security since they provide cover and hiding places for drug trafficking and irregular migration, as well as making patrolling and surveillance difficult. The eradication of reeds will increase the visibility of the shores in the United States and Mexico and, therefore, improve the detection of illegal activities, improve access to the river/the perimeter for patrols; and reduce hiding places for smugglers and migrants.

The convergence around carrizo cane occurred prior to the conception of the binational park. For example, the city of Laredo and the USBP have been collaborating since at least 2009: “we are already working on removing this type of vegetation with the assistance of the Border Patrol, which gave us their blessing and is also helping us” (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022). In fact, in the Rio Bravo/Grande basin, several research projects and control and eradication programs have been launched at the state, national and binational levels in the last twenty years (Briggs et al., 2021; Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board, 2015; US Department of Homeland Security, 2016), some of which have the same objectives and rationale as the binational park.

The border security narrative

The third and final shared element is the border security narrative, according to which irregular flows (human migration and drug trafficking) from Mexico are a threat to the United States. Based on this narrative, migrants are criminalized and represented as dangerous and invasive subjects—in a similar way as the carrizo cane—, threatening the security and integrity of the United States territory, society and population, and even the security of migrants themselves (Vega, 2018; Villa Sánchez, 2022). Following this logic, the State has the obligation to prevent those flows, either at its borders or in the territory of other countries. Thus, on the basis of this narrative, the United States is legitimized in its efforts to design and deploy a border and migration policy based on rebordering, securitization and militarization.

The fact that the incumbent actors of the three fields share this narrative may seem counterintuitive since the RGISC, the local governments of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo and the Biden administration have opposed the construction of the border wall. Notably, the RGISC characterizes the wall as the product of a “false security narrative” (RGISC

Director, personal communication, December 12, 2022). However, rejecting the wall is not equivalent to denying that narrative, much less denying the border between the United States and Mexico. In fact, the local actors assume those premises to be true in such a way that they are favorable to measures other than the border wall that guarantee border security.

Thus, the United States ambassador in Mexico, in a meeting with the mayors of the two Laredos, was receptive to the binational park project. According to the mayor of Laredo, the ambassador

(...) wanted to see a different perspective than what Trump wanted to do, other than the wall, and he told us: “We have to do something different, more gentle, that attracts and does not cause division. We have to continue with a virtual wall, with the agents [of the USBP] here, and with more paths [parallel to the river for the USBP]”. (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022)

Local governments and the RGISC fully agree, stating that “[border] security is needed, but we want to do it without a [physical] wall; we want to make it virtual. That has been my position, the position of us as a community” (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022). From this perspective, local actors view the binational park as an opportunity to test the border strategy of the Biden administration:

I told Ken Salazar, “The park is an opportunity for Biden’s concept of a virtual wall to be tested”. It gives us the opportunity to prove that it is effective [...]. We are asking for something that is not physical [like the wall], improves the river and brings more activities to the river banks and invites people to the shore. We also ask that Border Patrol has access and a lot of technology: lights, sensors and similar tools. (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022)

Furthermore, the RGISC argues that the binational park “can also be a solution since it creates an area of greater security due to the increase in the number of people on the shore who will see what happens and because it will reduce invasive vegetation” (RGISC Director, personal communication, December 12, 2022). That is, for local actors, the continuous presence of people in the park would imply an informal surveillance of the activities in the river, which, according to the “eyes on the street” theory described by Jane Jacobs (Jasso-López & Galeana-Cruz, 2021), would result in a decrease in irregular flows.

In short, the park allows the incumbent actors of the three fields to achieve the objectives of the Biden administration. On the one hand, it will create a surveillance zone with few visual obstacles (the reed beds) and facilitate the deployment of agents, watchtowers and other sensors. On the other hand, environmental damage can be remediated through the restoration of the natural habitats of the river.

Conclusions

In summary, in this paper I addressed bordering (the implementation of border functions by the State), a process in which two trends can be distinguished: debordering and rebordering. Both trends are often understood from a binary perspective, which is why they are conceptualized as mutually exclusive or as dominant in different autonomous fields. Instead, from a relational perspective, they are understood as interrelated and therefore subject to being combined. However, having confirmed their combination, it was not clear in the literature how or under what circumstances their combination occurs. Therefore, to offer a possible answer to this question, this article relied on field theory and, in particular, on approaches for examining external (contingent) relationships between fields (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011, 2012; Nail, 2019). From this perspective, debordering and rebordering can be understood as two fields, each with internal elements (purposes, actors, resources, motivations) that are interrelated and have the ability to interact.

According to Nail's approach (2019), the intersection of fields is possible only if they share at least one element, and this interaction allows the emergence of what has been called a knot—a particular configuration in which both fields are combined or, in other words, where their external relationships are internalized. Their combination does not occur in the abstract, nor does it always occur or occur in the same way; rather, it is contingent in that it depends on the context (the particular circumstances of the fields, the existence of shared elements and the stability of the knot).

In this sense, this research analyzed a specific case—a knot—resulting from the combination of debordering and rebordering in the territorial configuration of the Mexico-United States border perimeter: the planning of a binational park in the twin cities of Nuevo Laredo and Laredo. This project emerged from the intersection of three fields, namely, the environmental movement and the twin cities (associated with debordering) and border security (associated with rebordering). The intersection of these three fields was made possible by the existence, at least temporarily, of three shared elements: a geographical location (the spatial overlap between the river and the boundary), a plant species (the carrizo cane) and a narrative (border security). The condition of being shared does not mean that the interests and motives of the three fields are the same, but its adscription in every field depends on the internal logic of everyone. However, the factor that is important for their interaction is that the different motifs appear to be complementary.

The binational park project was made possible by the integration and adaptation of the objectives of the incumbent actors in the three fields (the environmental association, the local governments of both cities and the U.S. federal administration). The result is that the project combines debordering (the defense and cross-border management of a shared river; the creation of attractive spaces that connect both sides; and the restoration of the environmental, social and symbolic damage produced by the border wall) and rebordering (the creation of observable perimeters that allow efficient border security measures).

This conclusion raises several questions. First, given that bordering is dynamic, the combination of its components stabilizes only temporarily and for as long as the circumstances that allow it are maintained. It is worth considering how long the knot will remain tied or, in other words, when and how the binational park project will be

unknotted. The interviewed actors pointed to several possible answers: the financing and execution of the project and its replication in other twin cities along the border; the return of the Republican party to the federal government and, therefore, the resuming of the construction of the border wall; the extension of the wall by the Republican governor of Texas; and the change in priorities in local governments and the loss of trust as the authorities of the different institutions change. These responses point to several scenarios: at one extreme, they point to an expansive dissolution, leading to the addition of new fields and the strengthening of the project; on the other, they point to a destructive dissolution, in which changes in the fields of border security and the twin cities result in an end of the sharing of elements among the three fields. In one case, the combination of debordering and rebordering is strengthened, and in the other, rebordering is imposed.

Second, it is necessary to identify to what extent debordering and rebordering are compatible in practice, not theoretically, and under what circumstances they are in contradiction. Despite the compatibility reported by the environmental association between the recreational activities of the local population and border security activities, during field work on the riverbank, it was observed that these elements were sometimes in conflict. Incompatibility was evidenced in situations in which there was unequal vulnerability between the actors, such as when the USBP agents (and their vehicles and weapons) approached people in the water and on shore too closely and too quickly. It is also important to consider the nature of projects in which debordering and rebordering are combined. Thus, the planning of a binational park can be understood as the provision of a cross-border common goal and as an aesthetic operation. Perhaps, through the restoration of the river and the provision of recreational spaces on the shore, the “very beautiful wall that Trump promised us here” will be achieved (Mayor of Laredo, personal communication, December 6, 2022).

One last epistemological reflection before ending. Taking into account the interdependence and combination of debordering and rebordering, which ensures that there are no exclusively debordered or rebordered fields, the question arises about the relevance, usefulness and validity of both concepts. At first glance, the relational perspective seems to inevitably lead to a situation of inoperability of both concepts, while denying the self-containment and independence of one with respect to the other. It can thus be concluded that it is not useful to maintain them separate as separate concepts and that, on the contrary, a concept that encompasses them, such as bordering, is sufficient. However, as Yeung (2024) argues, the relational perspective draws on binary concepts for analytical purposes, which is why on certain occasions it is convenient to maintain two concepts to allow the analysis of their interactions and of the emergence of new properties.

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