Alexis Bhagat
Regarding the words BORDER and REGION
Originally Published Perspectives on Anarchist Theory, Fall 2006
NOTE: This was the final draft text – not identical to the actual published version.

Let's place two words next to each other: *Border. Region.* They are separated by a margin (a space) and a mark (a period). Let's remove the separators and make them one word: *Borderregion.* "In the past many borders were not clearly defined lines, but were neutral zones called *marchlands*." The word comes from Frankish, the tongue of Charlemagne, and castled marchlands were first established by the Carolignian Empire. *Mark* is the edge, akin to the English word *border*, (which passively denotes a margin as compared to the binding action tied up into *boundary).* The older root, *mereg* flourished into the Latin *margo* ("margin"), Old Irish *mruig* ("borderland"), Persian *marz* ("border, land"), and English *mark* ("boundary" or "sign of a boundary").[i] *Marchlands* go by other other names in other parts of the world, e.g., *Ukraine* ("the land at the edge"), the *Matsumae frontier* in Hokkaido, the *Northwest frontier* of British East India. [ii] Frequently such terms are translated as *frontier*, a word which had meant the "frontline of the army" but came to mean "borderland" during the age of imperial expansion, or a territory sparsely inhabited by a settler population.

Let's disjoin our words now: Border & Region. The appearance of nation-states requires clear *lines of demarcation,* or what we now refer to as *borders*. Such lines are said to come in three varieties: those which obey topography, those which obey ancestry, and those which obey straight lines. Political geographers claim that the first and second variety are 'natural,' contending that mountains, rivers and languages produce clear and 'natural' boundaries between regions. The last variety is claimed to be 'artificial'; however, all such indelible borderlines, being derived from the ideal of permanent demarcation, are equally artificial.

What is this ideal demarcation, this ur-border? In 1493, *mal muchacho* Rodrigo de Borgia, better known as Pope Alexander VI or "the Scandalous Pope," was called upon by the monarchs of Spain and Portugal to intervene in territorial disputes resulting from Columbus's successful voyage to "India." Borgia issued a *Papal Bull* which laid down *la linea de demarcacion* (lesser known as *linha de demarcaçao*), a line from north to south, allocating all territory to the east of the line to Portugal and west of the line to Spain, excepting of course "lands already ruled by a Christian monarch."[iii] This first *linea,* a monumental drawing, remained at sea. Borgia perhaps was only practicing, as it is much easier to ignore the rights of stupid fish and even clever dolphins than those of people, especially people with weapons. The next year Borgia took giant steps and shifted the line
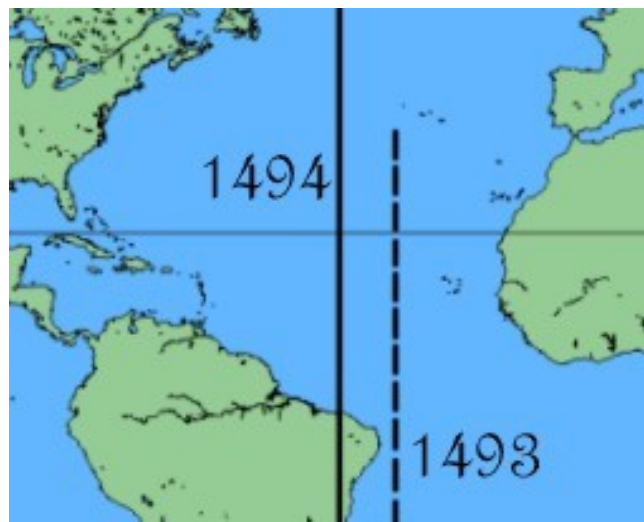
west a hundred leagues or so to cut through what we now call Brazil. *Demarcation* had landed.

As is the case with any serious *bull*, only believers obey. Protestant Kings and Queens of Northern Europe ignored the Papal line and sent off their own sailors and buccaneers. Yet Borgia's gesture demanded imitation.

*Knowe yee that of our especial grace, certaine science, and meere motion, we haue given and graunted, and by these presents for us, our heires and successors**, we giue and graunt to our trustie and welbeloued seruant Walter Ralegh,** Esquire, and to his heires assignee for euer**, free libertie and licence** from time to time, and at all times for euer hereafter**, to discover, search, finde out, and view such remote, heathen and barbarous lands, countries, and territories, not actually possessed of any Christian Prince, nor inhabited by Christian People,** as to him, his heires and assignee, and to every or any of them shall seeme good, and the same to haue, horde, occupie and enjoy to him, his heires and assignee for euer, with all prerogatives, commodities, jurisdictions, royalties, privileges, franchises, and preheminences, thereto or thereabouts both by sea and land, whatsoever we by our letters patents may graunt, and as we or any of our noble progenitors haue heretofore graunted to any person or persons, bodies politique.or corporate: and the said Walter Ralegh, his heires and assignee, and all such as from time to time, by licence of us, our heires and successors, shall goe or trauaile thither to inhabite or remaine, there to build and fortifie, at the discretion of the said Walter Ralegh, his heires and assignee, the statutes or acte of Parliament made against fugitives, or against such as shall depart, romaine or continue out of our Realme of England without licence, or any other statute, acte, lawe, or any ordinance whatsoever to the contrary in anywise notwithstanding.* [iv]

Elizabeth, Queen of England, France and Ireland,1584.

"...goe or trauaile thither to inhabite or remaine, there to build and fortifie…"[v] But what happens if someone else is trauailing thither, too? Building and fortifying, no less? *Demarcation* was on hand, ready to mediate. In 1762, the straight-line border becomes squiggly when a river (which heretofore had always been conjoiners, not dividers) becomes a *line of demarcation* between the overseas empires of England and France. In 1783, the Treaty of Paris establishes the Mississippi River as the western border of the United States of America. The southern border remained a


fuzzy *frontier* with Spanish Florida through a decade of low-level war. In 1795, Spain and the new United States of America settle their dispute by proposing a *line of demarcation* to be jointly surveyed along the "31st parallel" (31 degrees North). As the next century unfolded, European powers went on "scrambling" for territory until the world becomes so overclaimed that Cecil Rhodes curses the stars themselves for not also being annexable. By the time Rhodes dreams of a *Red Line*[vi] running from Cape Town to Cairo, Europeans have become expert at marking territory with precision, and settling disputes by means of mutual agreements on fixed borders along lines of latitude and longitude.

Thus *borders* are wars by other means. Patrick Geddes, the botanist who introduced to biology and to architecture the concept of the *region*, recognized this. *The boundaries of modern nations are essentially concepts of war, and of that potential war which is connected with expansion.*[vii] As part of reorienting industrial

society towards Life, Geddes proposed restructuring the Earth into *region-cities*, where an urban center anchors a region that stretches concentric from river valley to mountain ridge. While his concepts have dramatically affected architecture and urbanism and gave birth to the field of Regional Planning, questions are rarely asked about the implications of Geddes's thinking in regard to political formation. Regionalism is implicitly revolutionary, in that cooperation within and between actual regions undermines the abstract sovereignty of states. The *region-city* is an *alternative institution* in the dual-power sense to the modern nation-state. The empowerment of regions implies the dissolution of borders.

Region, which essentially means "an area which is ruled, directed" (not unlike *dominion*), seems a strange word to oppose to the abstraction of boundary. The roots, *reg-* ("to move in a straight line") and *Rex, regio-* ("king, ruler" and "to rule"), proliferate into *rectitude, regulations* and *regalia*. But in feudal times, *region* was firmly fixed to location and came to mean "a district, a county," a territory which could be traversed in a day or two by foot. Contemporary use points to a much larger territory. For example, consider the *region* of the "South Asian Association for *Regional* Cooperation" which stretches from Burma to Baluchistan. Or, consider the following maps, produced by the World Trade Organization, wherein *region* denotes a bloc of countries, a portion of a continent, rather than a city plus its environs.
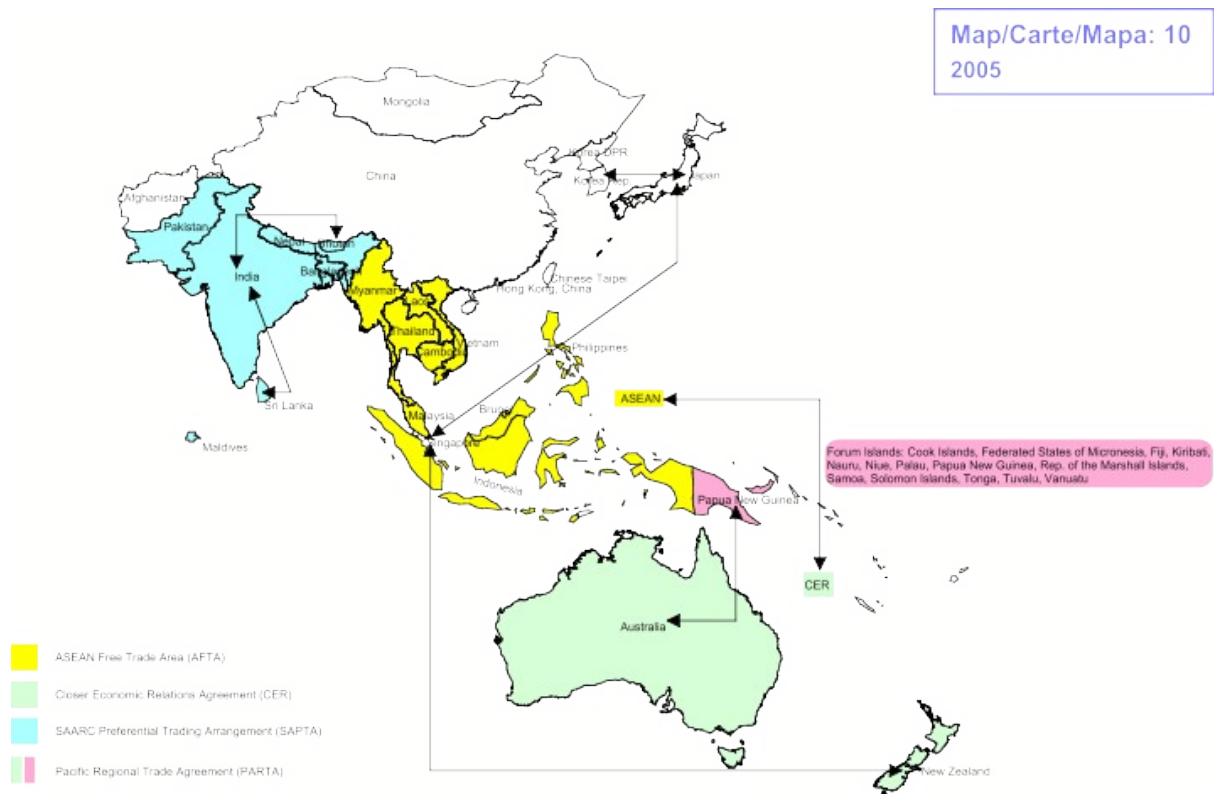
Regions here seem equivalent to the *areas* of the Cold War : "the Middle East," "the Balkans," "West Asia," "sub-Saharan Africa." While firmly persisting by means of *Area Studies*[viii] and *Free Trade Areas*, this use of the word *area* has often been replaced with *region*. Fundamentally, the words are not equivalent: *area,* a terrifically American word, is derived from the Latin term for a vacant piece of ground, a recently burnt field, a clearing, a bare space. Why should these super-national agglomerations suddenly be renamed *regions?*

Michael Keating, in "The Invention of Regions", speaks of regions "emerging [as] political arenas, in which various political, social, and economic actors meet and where issues, notably to do with economic development, are debated."[ix] Thus perhaps such *areas* do not constitute *regions,* but are rather constituted *by regions. Regional Trade Agreements* (RTAs) may precisely be pacts between the actors of such arenas, leapfrogging the jurisdiction of the nation-state. While such pacts are limited to their respective elites concerning matters of production and export, they still amount to effect dismantling of the state. Shouldn't revolutionary elements build on this precedent to form, for example, *Regional Mutual Aid Agreements?*

i See wikipedia/border and wikipedia/marchlands

ii Before the creation of the Reservation system, the fortified *Indian territories* of North America bear a striking similarity to marchland*s*. The protected Kingdom of Sikkim between India and China is arguably a vestige of the marchland, while the *Line of Control* between Indian Kashmir and Pakistani "Azad" Kashmir can be seen as a hybrid of the feudal *march* and the modern *demarcation.*

iii Never mind that if a line goes around a sphere, everything on the globe is both East AND West of it.

iv My apologies for the long quote.

v "…go to travel there to inhabit or remain, there to build and fortify…"

vi The "Red Line" was Rhodes proposed Trans-African Railway.

vii Welter, Volker M., *Biopolis: Patrick Geddes and the City of Life.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003

viii For more information, see David Ludden, "Area studies in the age of globalization" http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~dludden/areast1.htm

ix Michael Keating, "The Invention of Regions" in Brenner, Neil, Bob Jessop, Martin Jones and Gordon MacLeod, *State/Space: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, p264