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COMMENTARY

Covarrubias: Four Apartments, Two Countries, and Fifty Years of Asking Why



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Dr. Daniel Covarrubias, director of the Texas Center for Border Economic and Enterprise Development. (Photo courtesy: TAMIU)

Posted Monday, March 30, 2026 8:35 am

By Dr. Daniel Covarrubias

In a small town straddling the border between Belgium and the Netherlands, there's an apartment building with two front doors that open into the same atrium. One door is in the Netherlands. The other is in Belgium. The owner, who ran a bakery on the ground floor, wanted to build four apartments above it. The Dutch side denied him permission for more than two. So, he walked across the hallway, applied to the Belgian municipality, and got the other two approved. Same building, same staircase, two countries, four apartments.

The town is called Baarle. Half of it is Belgian (Baarle-Hertog), half is Dutch (Baarle-Nassau). It contains 30 enclaves: 22 Belgian parcels within the Netherlands and 8 Dutch parcels within Belgium, some of which are nested within one another like geographic Matryoshka dolls. The border runs through shops, restaurants, and living rooms. Where your front door sits determines your nationality, your tax code, and your electricity provider. One family famously moved their front door a few meters to switch countries and get a better deal. During COVID, Belgian lockdown rules shut down businesses on one side of a street while Dutch shops across the hallway stayed open.

I learned about Baarle over dinner at the Association for Borderlands Studies' 50th-anniversary conference in Albuquerque last week. A European colleague told the story between courses in Old Town, and the table couldn't stop asking questions. That's what these conferences do: the panels are good, but the best material surfaces over meals. And it struck me: this is what border scholars actually spend their time thinking about. Not walls and checkpoints (though those came up too), but the infinitely strange, creative, sometimes absurd ways that human beings organize life around lines drawn on maps.

The conference brought together over 150 researchers from more than 20 countries across 40 sessions. The range tells you something: panels on border trauma and self-deportation sat alongside sessions on cross-border semiconductor talent pipelines in Sonora-Arizona, water diplomacy on the Rio Grande, the economic cost of non-cooperation at EU borders, and how the Cucapá indigenous community in the Colorado River Delta has navigated a line its members never drew. Someone mentioned that border studies, once considered a dead subfield, isn't anymore.

Here's why. Most people think of a border as a line. A wall, a river, a checkpoint. Something you cross or don't. But spend a few days with border scholars and you realize that a border is

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actually several things stacked on top of each other. It's a legal boundary (which laws apply to you). It's an economic membrane (which goods move freely and which don't). It's a cultural seam (where languages, customs, and identities overlap or collide). And it's a lived experience (how real people organize their mornings, their commutes, their kids' schools around that line). Baarle isn't strange because its border is complicated. Baarle is just honest about what every border really is: multiple systems layered on top of each other, often in contradiction.

Think about the Texas-Mexico border. A truck driver crosses the World Trade Bridge in Laredo, TX. carrying auto parts manufactured in Monterrey, bound for a plant in San Antonio. In the span of 20 minutes, that driver moves through Mexican commercial law, U.S. customs jurisdiction, USMCA rules of origin verification, Department of Transportation safety standards, and Texas state regulations. The cargo doesn't change. The truck doesn't change. But the legal, economic, and regulatory reality shifts with every step. That's not one border. That's multiple borders stacked on top of each other at the same GPS coordinate.

In Baarle, they solved this by building shared institutions. The two municipalities hold joint sessions. Their police share a station. The fire departments merged. The library has staff from both countries. The border still runs through every building, but the governance crosses it too. The lesson is almost too simple: the line stays, but the institutions learn to work across it.

I participated in a roundtable on the U.S.-Mexico border economy under neoprotectionism, alongside colleagues from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, the University of California San Diego, and Arizona State University. The discussion centered on critical trends heading into the 2026 USMCA Joint Review. One colleague made a point that stuck with me: trade flows don't equal integration. The fact that trucks cross a bridge doesn't mean the economies on either side are actually integrated. Real integration requires institutional, environmental, and social infrastructure, not just commercial volume. Without it, you get what another panelist called "savage integration," growth without the architecture to sustain it. That distinction matters. The manufacturing ladder that lifted previous generations of countries into high-income status is plateauing for middle-income economies like Mexico, just as AI begins restructuring the service sectors they're supposed to transition into. The rules aren't the problem. The institutional and educational infrastructure to manage that kind of structural shift doesn't exist yet.



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This was my last conference as the ABS Executive Secretary and Treasurer, a role I've held since 2022, but I'll remain an active member. The ABS was founded in 1976 by Ellwyn Stoddard, Richard Bath, Oscar Martinez, and Anthony Kruszewski at a WSSA meeting in Tempe, Arizona. What started as a small group focused on the U.S.-Mexico border has grown into the leading international scholarly association on border issues, with members across 55 countries spanning the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The Journal of Borderlands Studies, first published in 1986, is now 40 years old and remains the primary forum for interdisciplinary border research worldwide.

There was also a tribute to honor Dr. Joan B. Anderson, who passed away in February. Joan was the first woman to serve as both ABS president and editor-in-chief of the Journal of Borderlands Studies. She once described the field perfectly: "A macroeconomist is working with sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers. That's like the definition of border studies."

She was right. And Baarle proves it. The town works because people stopped pretending the border wasn't there and started building around it instead. That's the shift border studies has been documenting for 50 years: from arguing about where the line should be, to figuring out how life works once it's drawn.

That's the work. Not erasing borders, but building the institutions that make them functional. Whether it's a house on Loveren Street with two addresses or a port in Laredo processing \$400 billion in trade, the question is the same: once you draw the line, how do you live with it intelligently?

The 150 researchers in Albuquerque last week are working on that answer. Fifty years in, the field has never been more relevant.

Editor's Note: The above commentary was penned by Dr. Daniel Covarrubias, director of the Texas Center for Border Economic and Enterprise Development at the A.R. Sanchez, Jr. School of Business at Texas A&M International University. The commentary appears in the RGG Business Journal with the permission of the author.

Dr. Covarrubias' research focuses on cross-border trade, logistics, and the convergence of exponential technologies with North American economic integration. He served as Executive Secretary

and Treasurer of the Association for Borderlands Studies from 2022 to 2026.

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