

BORDER-CROSSING BETWEEN ANGUISH AND EXCHANGE: APPROACHES TO THE DUALITY OF BORDERLINES AND BORDERLANDS

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Abstract. The paper aims to discuss borderlines and borderlands, focusing on aspects connected to the cultural identity of the communities living on borderlands or divided by frontiers of some kind, yet united through other means. Various approaches concerning what we have discussed as the dual nature of borders are presented, the examples supporting the theoretical background being drawn from Ireland, physically divided between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The conclusion emphasizes the necessity of a unifying vision, meant to accommodate identity and otherness across border.

How do “special” spaces and places trigger one’s interest? And why could one describe borders, borderlines and borderlands as complex concepts? Foucault stated that “a whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – these terms and in the plural – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat” (qtd. in Barker 2005: 347). Space in general has been seen by contemporary theoreticians as socially constructed, dynamic and implicated in questions of power and symbolism. According to Massey, for instance, space implies “a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradoxes or antagonism” (qtd. in Barker 2005: 350). Thus, borderlines and borderlands could be seen as a particular example of spaces, as both barriers and places of exchange and communication, “places of separation and articulation” (G. Bannington qtd. by Sarup 1996: 7), constitutively crossed and transgressed, ambivalent, part of the inside and the outside.

A borderland may be associated with a kind of “no man’s land”, a fluctuating space between two scenes whose frontiers can often be hard to decipher. Border-crossing often involves a kind of break and may imply physical or psychological suffering. Yet, borderlines and borderlines also trigger encounters and exchange (cultural, personal, etc.). Consequently, they make us reflect about the unknown beyond borderlines and about the figure of the order across border. One may consider various perspectives on borders, i.e. geographical, political, religious,

linguistic and cultural. The recent move has been towards the symbolical and metaphorical use of this physical entity, as a concept including all kinds of cultural encounters. Among the contemporary theoreticians focusing on the issues of borders and borderlands, we may refer to the ones mentioned by Hastings Donnan and Wilson M. Thomas (1999) in their study entitled *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*; Cohen (1986), *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures*, dealing with the symbolism [of communities] rather than their structure, where we must seek the boundaries of their worlds of identity and diversity; Heyman (1994), 'The Mexico–United States Border in Anthropology: A Critique and Reformulation', a study published in the *Journal of Political Ecology*; Gupta and Ferguson (1992), 'Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference' in *Cultural Anthropology*; G. Anzaldúa (1987), *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Borderlands are important in the conceptualization of the "normal" locale of the postmodern subject, identities being places of borders and hybridity rather than of fixed stable entities.

Borderlands have been read as zones of cultural play and experimentation, of domination and control, a liminal space, interstitial zones of displacement and deterritorialization, which shape the identity of the hybridized subject. Under the circumstances of a postmodern explosion of identities, proliferating and fragmenting identities, the dilemma of negotiating identity is magnified there; the representation of power relations between centre and periphery becomes more problematical than somewhere else, according to Donnan and Wilson. Regarding the pervasive use of the metaphor of boundaries, Bhaba (1994, in Baker 2005: 258) reached the conclusion that it is a matter of cultures and all cultures are zones of shifting boundaries and hybridization.

Boundary marking includes self-ascription and ascription by the other – the risk is to focus on one side only. Since identity is often perceived as difference, the relationship to the other is one of interdependence and / or exclusion of self and other. Difference is thus valorized negatively and / or positively and identity functions as a discourse of inclusion and exclusion; what has to be acknowledged is the fact that there is otherness at the heart of the self. There is tension between self-closure, unified identity (with absolute, mythological roots) and identity as plural since it is conferred in and by discourse, which is plural by nature.

Borders can be re-drawn. Among the general characteristics of nations / cultures which are more likely to resort to partition and re-draw borders in order to solve their (cultural / ethnic / political / religious) conflicts and tensions, the major one points at territories previously subject to colonial rule. The impetus for partition stems from a minority community that fears that the anti-colonial movement or the majority will endanger its identity. But the partitionist solution proves to be deficient in regions where the peoples concerned are geographically intermingled and the attempt to manufacture ethnically homogeneous states cannot be accomplished without violence. With national minorities left on the “wrong side”, partition becomes a temporary solution smouldering hot “civil war” only to be resumed later as a “cold war” between and within states.

Blood, kinship and homeland function as metaphors implicated in the formation of ethnic boundaries; i.e. according to essentialist views, there is a sense of belonging, a sense of common mythology. The anti-essentialists claim that ethnicity is actually formed by the way we speak about group identities and identify with signs and symbols that constitute it. Thus Barth (1969, qtd. in Barker 2005: 250) sees ethnicity as a process of boundary formation, constructed and maintained under specific socio-historical conditions. Cultural narratives – the grand, capitalized narratives that Lyotard rejected, could be used, in case of borderlands deterritorialization, as one of the media through which the trauma of partition is memorialized and understood. They help ratify the state division produced by partition or to contest partitionist mentalities generated by it.

Borderlands have been considered sites of power, involving elements such as agents of state power, victims of the abuse of power, subverting state power, border acceptance as an ideologically hegemonic belief that has to be broken in order to redraw borders. We are confronted to a duality of nations: as products of modernity and their definitions in pre-modern terms – the “blood, kinship and homeland” metaphors should be remembered. Nations are Janus-faced, split between the enlightenment of the other and violent forms of aggressiveness. Every nation enjoys cultural monopoly when it thinks itself alone but it is also haunted by the fear of dislocation, thus, a non-conflictual resolution of the opposition between self and other is hard to achieve.

Border-crossing has been theorized as dual, divided between an enabling and a disabling experience. Categories of border-crossers include migrants – immigrants and emigrants for whom the situation has evolved and now we may be confronted

with temporary migration, flexibility, an easier crossing and re-crossing of borders since travelling conditions have improved. There are also the refugees, for whom territorial displacement, transformation and cultural reworkings become key issues. Bodily and psychological experiences of people inhabiting borderlands are shaped by forces of power that give form to territorial borders themselves. That may mean experiences of pain, suffering, division but also exchange, communication and tolerance. Borders have also been connected to the diaspora – besides issues of travel, journeys, dispersion and homes – there is a dispersed network of ethnically and culturally related peoples across borders. The smuggler has also been theorized as an emblematic figure of this elusive geographic, cultural and symbolic space; he opens up the way and traces the pathway. This smuggler may help us build bridges across border.

Borders have also been linked to body politics and violence along the boundaries between communal areas. Elements of cultural “telling” are embodied in how people walk and talk, in body postures, clothes and hairstyle, these identifying an individual as one of “us” or one of “them”. Dehumanizing violence perpetrated on the body is a major element of identity formation in contexts where drawing the border round the nation is in dispute. Physical violence is a way in which the ethnic other is imagined, constructed, mapping onto the body itself as on a semiotic object the limits of inclusion and exclusion – i.e. political prisoners, who deploy their bodies as weapons, that coming from their understanding that the authorities are using their bodies to break their will.

Among the particularities of borders, we can mention both their visibility and invisibility.

An “invisible” border would be difficult to discern for outsiders because of forms of cross-border culture (e.g. sports, arts as an integrative devices). The border may be rendered invisible through logo-maps (for instance, certain areas presented as a whole, comprising territories across borders, for tourist purposes). For radical nationalists it is easier to invoke a united nation across border. Also, a border is rendered “visible” through various other means, such as, symbols: graffiti of political resistance and sectarianism on railway tunnels, bridges, government buildings, road signs, banners, streamers; murals, depicting scenes important to community life; flags; no-go areas; peace-lines cutting off mixed districts. Also,

there are the rituals – speeches, marching, manifestations of loyalism occasioned by various national celebrations.

Until the beginning of 2007, the two main Northern Irish parties, *Sinn Fein* (Catholic) and DUP (Protestant) will have to sign an agreement regarding a common semi-autonomous government and make democratic rules function. If not, the British authorities will continue to govern directly, the way they have been doing it since 1972, irrespective of numerous attempts at governing peacefully by reaching an agreement. Actually, the gap between the two political / religious / ethnic parties is growing even if there are no longer major clashes. The Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland have always lived in parallel worlds, as if divided by an inner border, this leading in time to a strengthening of the so called ethnic identities (Irish or British?). Northern Ireland is a political entity doomed to political instability because of its absence of legitimacy in the eyes of the Catholics. Briefly, the Protestants (about 53% of the population, descendents of Eighteenth century-English and Scottish colonists) want to preserve the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Catholics (about 44% of the population) are in favour of a union with the Republic of Ireland, which has been independent since 1921. Each side has its own moderate and radical supporters and it is of interest the fact that at in 2003 the radicals lost in the confrontation with the moderates. Since IRA handed over the arms, followed by Unionist paramilitaries decommissioning in 1994, Northern Ireland has disappeared from the international media. Yet, tension still reigns in the region because of the separate manner in which the two communities live.

Far from separating Northern Ireland from the Republic, the Irish border separates in fact the Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland. Residential areas, schools and sports are completely separated. The bus-stops, the buildings, the bridges are covered by graffiti (KAT -*Kill All Tags* or KAH - *Kill All Huns*); the houses display mural paintings; territories are ethnically marked by Irish tricolors or Union Jacks. This dual pattern applies to all city facilities. In spring, the Catholics celebrate St. Patrick's Day – the holiday of all Irish people, wherever they may live – and they also commemorate the ten IRA hunger strikers who died in jail in the eighties. In summer, the whole region is tense because of the Orange marches born two centuries ago to celebrate Wilhelm of Orange's victory in 1689 over Catholic James II and thus to consolidate the Protestant supremacy. Under the circumstances, it is strange that both the Irish (whose tourist maps or logos present the entire island

of Ireland or the province of Ulster as if the border were invisible) and the English (who never admitted that the violence and civil war are a British reality) have chosen to ignore the problem. Moreover, if GB decides upon 7 administrative units to replace the 26 existing ones, there is a possibility that the 3 western ones will become republican bastions and the 3 eastern ones, loyalist citadels. The solutions to these conflicts could be offered by politics (the agreement of November 24th 2006 should work) and by culture through various patterns (cultural translation, appropriation, biculturalism, contact culture, European and world opening).

The major tensions / dualities identified as forming a borderline identity could be labeled as “modernity and tradition”, “constitutional and revolutionary approaches to nationalism”, “present and past”, “conservatism and liberalism”, “segregation and integration”, “trans-nationality and regionalism”, “phases of opening out and phases of closing down (politically, culturally, economically)”. Borderline identities oscillate between entrapment in the nets of nationality, language and religion vs. identity as inclusive, open-ended, diverse, fluid, dependent on cultural and political reinvention, between the sense of belonging to a place and ideas of movement, displacement and decentring as important if centralities of cultural identification are challenged to produce alternative views of identity. Hence, the necessity of inclusion of voices and identities of alterity.

Borderland communities guided by artists, for example, or politicians should get involved in the perpetuation of a dual cultural tradition through a strategy of doubleness: a certain way of viewing the world and the self from two perspectives simultaneously. They ought to cultivate an awareness of dual tradition and consequent “doubleness of focus” and our capacity to live in two places at the same time and in two times at one place.

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