

Interpretative borders and paradigms

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Introduction

Border(s), mobility, map, plan, space, real, imaginary, natural, artificial, real, virtual, utopia, anti-utopia, near, far, certain, uncertain, national, international, repetitive, creative, mundane, artistic, are all keywords and / or contradictory crosswords that appear to characterize the paradigms of borders. Like translators, they help us when crossing language and linguistic boundaries. The ever-present data remain to be understood, developed, explained.

Research and experience overlap: to this regard, the international conference held in Rome in 1993 (July 12th-16th) entitled “*Religions without Borders?*” provided, probably for the first time, an opportunity of meeting, regardless of ethnic and disciplinary boundaries, and of enabling scholars of Judaism, Catholicism, the Orthodox churches, Protestantism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, the Chinese religions, Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism, and the new religious movements to compare their different perspectives.

Nowadays, there is a tendency, within the world of sociology in particular, to join forces, to foster international cooperation in order to engage in research, in exchange programmes, in joint ventures. In Southern Europe, for example, we find the initiatives of RÉSU (*RÉseau des associations de sociologie de l'Europe et des pays du Sud*) founded in 2003 to bring together the sociologists of Spain, France, Greece, Italy and Portugal. In Northern Europe, the Nordic Sociological Association l'Association unites the sociologists of Finland, Norway, Sweden and publishes the *Acta Sociologica*. In Eastern Europe we find the *Balkan Forum*, founded in 2011, to associate the sociologists of Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia. There are also other more specifically discipline-related associations like ISORECEA (*International Study of Religion in Central and Eastern Europe Association*) which takes an interest in the sociology of religion in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. At continental level, the Association Européenne de Sociologie stands out for its perseverance in organizing, every two years, an international conference in a European city on a theme of interest to all and, thus, providing a landmark for thousands of sociologists whom it involves in a scientific event, remarkable for the number and quality of the researchers who take part.

The issue of borders regards the sociological profession and its practice directly. It is to the initiative of two sociologists, Judith Blau and Alberto Moncada, that we owe the foundation, in 2006, of the “Sociologues sans frontières” (*Sociologists without borders*) association and the creation of the *Societies Without Borders* half-yearly review. Its purpose is to bring the sociology of all continents together and compare approaches and research results, especially those accruing to human rights, public welfare and/or the common good. In general, we find that researchers in developing countries tend to favour a utopian position while representatives of advanced countries are prepared to adopt a more critical stance. This helps us to grasp the significance of the effort being made by the association and the journal to overcome differences, build up relationships, establish virtuous links, to promote cordial agreements and effective cooperation. The intention to eliminate the barriers between the social sciences and human rights, as well as those between the environmental sciences and the humanities, already formulated by the United Nations, also emerges. A commitment of this kind goes well beyond the scientific context and points, clearly, to an effort aimed at changing the given situation, by means of the diffusion of reliable scientific knowledge. This is the case, for example, of Mexican immigration in the United States and the issue of *Apartheid* in the Republic of South Africa. In both cases, the aim was to improve social policies in favour of people in difficulty, availing of a common language between competing groups. This

establishes a non-hierarchical form of communication and of mutual recognition between the social actors involved¹.

Beyond conflict

Borders do not divide nations only but cities too. In this instance, the case of Jerusalem is emblematic. A long political and religious history has led to the partition of the city into four sectors: Christian, Armenian, Muslim and Jewish. A division which, moreover, has not solved the problem of the presence of other groups like the Roman Catholics, Melkites, Maronites, Syrians, Chaldees, Copts, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Gregorian Armenians, Jacobites, Druses, Samaritans and the Baha'i.

There is also the issue, yet again in Israel, of the city of Haifa, which contains many different cultures and religions. In this city a winter festival is held in the month of December: *The Holiday of Holidays Festival*. This event, since 1993, permits the celebration of three different fundamental religious festivities at the same time (Hanukkah, Christmas and Ramadan) by means of a programme drawn up by the Beit HaGefen Arab-Jewish Cultural Centre. This centre, founded in 1963 is run by seven Arabs and seven Jews; it organizes "coexistence walks" during which various initiatives take place like art exhibitions, concerts, fairs, performances, artistic and cultural happenings, shows, social meetings, book and art presentations, *workshops*. This is an example of coexistence between different disciplines, cultures and religions, the one alongside the other without intermission.

Another example is that of the Arab neighbourhood of *Wadi Nisnas*, again in Haifa, where everyone tries to avail of the opportunity of joining in shared events. The protagonists of the shows, the music, dancing, games, food and crafts, take part in the various ideological and political events even if they belong to different religious and/or social groups. They are there simply to enjoy the opportunity of interaction without fear of danger: an experience probably very difficult to achieve elsewhere.

This kind of experience is not limited to December; there are others aimed at creating that atmosphere of dialogue within the town, like the month of Arab culture held in May, a fair where books written by Arabs are presented to readers and accompanied by art exhibitions and performances by groups of Arabs. Thus, the socio-cultural climate becomes international and creates an opportunity for real cooperation centred on a project both ambitious and utopian. Conferences for women are held, activities for young people, both Jews and Arabs, along with multicultural events.

At the Beit HaGefen centre stands Israel's oldest Arab theatre: *Al karma*, the site of performances by numerous Arab actors, where shows are held for children and young people. To these we may add other places like an art gallery, a dedicated children's and adolescent's library, a centre of educational programmes.

As the recently produced film (www.haifasanswer.it) clearly shows, Haifa provides a positive answer to the question of borders of all kinds. The town of Haifa offers a cosmopolitan picture situated as it is on the borders of the Golan Heights, a transit point for those who arrive from outside. According to the famous Jewish novelist Abraham B. Yehoshua, this city is a place where ideals mingle, as testified by the co-presence of the Baha'i movement's gardens, the Catholic Church of Stella Maris on Mount Carmel, the Ahmadiyya Mosque, the so-called cave of the prophet Elijah, the Druse community and many other landmarks.

¹ See Edward Murguía, Kin Díaz, "Mexican Immigration Scenarios Based on the South African Experience of Ending Apartheid", *Societies Without Borders*, 3 (2), 2008, pp. 209-227.

The recent dynamics of religion underlines its ability to reach beyond borders. In Europe, for example, one witnesses an increase in the presence of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, which, as in the case of Christianity, avail of the cyber networks to spread as far as they can. The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 marks the beginning of a permanent migratory flow from Eastern to Western Europe which favoured the diffusion of Christian Orthodoxy throughout the continent, especially after the opening of the frontiers between Rumania and Bulgaria and the rest of the European Union.

Post-Communist Europe is a checkerboard of enclaves without borders; there are Hungarians living in Rumania, Germans in the Volga region, Kurds in Turkey, Armenians in Hungary, Rumania, Turkey and Iran, 26 indigenous groups in northern Russia, Croatians in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbs in Krajina and Slavonia, Saxons in Rumania. Some cities are even more complicated. According to Srđan Vrcan², nation, culture and religion have always nurtured a composite mix, especially within ex-Yugoslavia. He makes a distinction, however, between *borders* and imposed *borders*: “the most important distinctive feature of today’s borders is that they are becoming more volatile and permeated by ideology in the guise of de-ideologized culture than ever before. But they are less territorialized than before. This means that borders have now become a strange type of boundary that generates *hostis* or an enemy. This stranger or enemy can be everywhere and nowhere, internal as well as external, highly visible and barely discernible, to be defeated here and now as well as in the distant future - but invariably suitable for extermination”³. In this case, churches and religions have emphasized these distinctions by underlining the importance of religious heritage and failure to accept difference: “Catholicism in Croatia was obsessed by the idea of Croatia because, for centuries, it had been an *antemurale Christianitatis* under pressure from the East either from aggressive Serbian Orthodoxy or from encroaching Islam. Orthodoxy in Serbia was obsessed by the idea of being situated on the western borders of the entire world of Eastern Christianity... Islam in Bosnia was convinced that, since the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1878, ‘the entire cultural, political and social life of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina had been marked by a desire to survive in the new context’”⁴. In Herzegovina, Catholicism which has been a “religion in a border region” has become today a “border religion”⁵. This because of lack of openness towards dissimilarity is a dominant aspect of the nationalism and activism of the church. In the case of Islam, the Moslems ousted from Bosnia and Herzegovina have a great influence in other areas. In actual fact, “nowadays, owing to the drastic politicization of religion and the ‘religionization’ of politics everywhere - as well to the radical politicization of culture - the re-Islamization of Bosnia has made significant progress. This has helped to homogenize Bosnian Islam and to strengthen the feeling that Bosnia belongs to the Islamic world”⁶.

Across borders: ADN microflora

² See Srđan Vrcan, “A Preliminary Challenge: Borders or Borders?”, *Social Compass*, 53 (2), 2006, pp. 215-226 (see also Dinka Marinović Jerolimov and Siniša Zrinščak, “Religion Within and Beyond Borders: The Case of Croatia”, *Social Compass*, 53 (2), 2006, pp. 279-290).

³ *Ibidem*, p. 218.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 219.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 222.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 223. See also Andras Mate-Toth, Cosima Rughinis, *Spaces and Borders. Current Research on Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*, New York, de Gruyter, 2011, pp. VI + 278; in one particular chapter Onder Cetin writes about Bosnian political and religious identity and interaction between Muslims and Bosnians in Sarajevo, Sandzak and Belgrade during the uprising. Srđan Vrcan again states: “A Christian Confession seized by Nationalistic Paroxysm: the Case of Serbian Orthodoxy”, in Roberto Cipriani (Ed.), *Religions sans frontières? Present and Future Trends of Migration, Culture, and Communication*, Rome, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri-Dipartimento per l'Informazione e l'Editoria, 1994, pp. 150-166.

At sociological level it is probably Victor Turner⁷ who provided the best theoretical approach to explaining the dynamics required to go beyond, to cross borders, to overcome the liminality of a situation of transition and of differentiation between structure and anti-structure, between before and after.

The passage from one side to the other requires a change of perspective. The elimination of the border, which means no more separation, creates a new vision of reality within another context (we can think of German unification). The reasons for this transition may derive from a challenge or conflict, as in the case of an opposition movement seeking to occupy an institution, cancel distance, break borders to uphold a point of view: *occupy Wall Street* is an example of the cancellation of borders between the population, ordinary people, and the financial officialdom of the New York Stock Exchange. This kind of contestation will upset the *status quo*: this is what happens during carnival, popular festivals, when the barriers between the social classes, between the people and the powers that be, are not taken into consideration.

The same appears in a more or less evident fashion in the case of interdisciplinary collaboration, which emerges during meetings involving researchers from different areas, different educational, language, methodological, ideological or religion backgrounds. In this context, it is not surprising to come across cases of coexistence between sociological analysis, photography, geographical studies, art, epistemology, history, medicine, socio-political research and architectural perspective.

If we think of microflora DNA, the idea of boundary becomes even clearer. Microflora DNA is added to our skin only after birth; it is not there from the onset of life. Our immune system, derived from our mother's, is our only defence at birth. Microflora DNA is a kind of border because it acts as a guarantee against illness. Its DNA does not belong to that of the individual and shows striking differences with his/her specific DNA. It is "another" DNA with microflora from without, alien to the subject. Another point to underline is the interdependence existing between germs (or bacteria) and microflora DNA: if one of these withdraws, the rest of the system suffers, causing, in some cases, disintegration of all the microflora. The risk is real and confirms the importance of each contributing factor in the maintenance of balance within this specific microflora community. Distance and proximity are key factors in the creation, maintenance and elimination of the boundaries between microbes. This more or less unstable microflora balance guarantees the survival not only of the community of microbes but also of the individual. A shift in the balance of the microflora influences individual health, whether in the oral cavity or the female genital tract. It is the skin, most of the time that discerns or creates separation between the host subject and other individuals and other skins.

Without forcing this issue of biology (which points towards a new kind of socio-biology) the dynamics of biology might well suggest new ways of reaching a better understanding of human behaviour and management of various forms of boundaries, barriers and borders.

Conflict and agreement

On the basis of this knowledge regarding the microflora of the skin it is possible to apply certain processes found in the domain of biology to states and cities divided on the basis of ethnic, cultural, political and religious difference. The cases are numerous: the division of the island of Cyprus (inhabited by Greeks and Turks, that is, by Orthodox Christians and Moslems), that of Gaza (where Palestinians and Israeli confront each other), of Seville (inhabited by Jews, Moslems and Christians), even the Vatican (which avails of the criterion of extraterritoriality within the city of Rome). One may also refer to contested no-man's-lands, to enclaves and reservations inhabited by

⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago, Aldine, 1969.

nomads or Native Americans, *no flight* zones, concentration camps (Auschwitz, Dachau, etc., separate places par excellence).

We are inclined to judge negatively the “Balkanization” of certain connections, zones of influence, reference contexts as well as solutions for resumption of collaboration together with proposals for a different future, that have been formulated. Thus, for example, the sociological *Balkan Forum* of Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia, with a view to creating an efficacious alliance aimed at cancelling age-old divisions and preparing a new generation of researchers for entry into the field in the Balkan Peninsula, has fostered knowledge without interference caused by linguistic and cultural borders. Linguistic barriers need to be eliminated in favour of the international community. Furthermore, at infrastructure level, the work carried out pays particular attention to continental issues regarding scientific research within the European countries on the whole: notably that of the European Research Council (ERC).

Recently, what has been called the “springtime” of North Africa, Tunisia and Egypt, indicates how close the African continent is, how permeable a border – that of the Mediterranean – may be, and how easily it may be crossed, as the often tragic, frequent landings in Europe of people from those countries show. The globalization of the markets, and a desire for better living and economic conditions, for a new political system, for a true democracy capable of fostering liberation from centuries-old slavery, urge them to risk their lives. *Internet* and the other networks do the rest, by favouring communications at worldwide level. And yet, inequality persists, increases, because the *unconnected* world is at a disadvantage compared to that constantly connected to the net and knowing neither delay nor difficulty. The problem is for those afflicted by the hardships and woes of everyday life. The possibility of thinking globally and acting locally is not for all.

We should also mention the public domain where churches and states meet. How many limits can be set? By whom? To what extent and in what manner? This leads us into Alfred Schütz’s well-known domain of “finite provinces of meaning”⁸.

Although it is true that globalization tends to widen the *digital divide*, new technological solutions also facilitate contact as well as a blending of cultural, religious and social relations. It should be noted, nevertheless, that the information network, characterized by the virtuality of its world devoid of individuality and humanity which renders it almost imperceptible, is a land without borders, and a border without a territory. Freedom exists but it is subject to restrictions in terms of language, symbols, formats and standards, fostering the hegemony of a sole company (be it the *Google* search engine or *Windows* software). *Internet* is a place of creation, of cross-border communications, but it poses a problem for those unable (due to lack of sufficient economic and cognitive resources) to cross the borders of technology. However, it is the cyber network that has made it possible to spread news, otherwise inaccessible, to countries like China and Iran. This warless invasion gives dissidents a way. Within the limits conceded by governments, borders are eliminated and, at times, the intelligence of individuals manages to bypass the constraints of the states. Some claim that we have reached a point of no return and that it will become increasingly difficult to define borders, within the clouds of contemporary technology.

An interesting example comes from the female world and the complex issue of women’s health: in 1984 Joan Dunlop and Adrienne Germain founded the *International Women’s Health Coalition* for the safeguard of the rights of women at medical and procreation level. It is possible to win the battle against the marginalisation of women and their movements by going beyond the

⁸ See Alfred Schütz, *Le chercheur et le quotidien. Phénoménologie des sciences sociales*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1987.

bounds of national territories and of research carried out within restricted fields with limited dynamics. Laura Corradi and Giovanna Vingelli have published the results of a quantitative and qualitative survey of 48 international organizations that deal with health and gender difference⁹.

Boundaries and borders

The distinction between boundaries and borders is of great importance, as by boundary is meant an outline, something that does not necessarily entail duties, armed guards, fences, walls, gates, barriers, all terms indicating an obstacle, an obligation, a prescription, a ban.

The idea of borders is evident and visible in the town of Tijuana, between Mexico (Baja California) and the United States (the State of California) a veritable cemetery where numerous people who tried to cross the *frontera* (border) lost their lives. This kind of problem is well known in the United States and especially to the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security seeing that the 50 States have 50 different laws regarding immigration, and lack a federal-level jurisprudence capable of unifying the norms concerning human rights. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops organized a national conference at Salt Lake City (Utah), from the 11th to the 13th of January 2012, entitled “Immigration: a 50-State issue”, on the rights of immigrants and border security, denouncing the extreme severity of the laws on some states, notably Alabama.

We should also consider the cultural and socio-political tradition of the United States which gave rise to the concept of enlargement of frontiers, conquest, virgin land, *bonanza* (a Spanish word for abundance, prosperity, indicating mines full of valuable minerals, gold or silver; in fact, Bonanza Creek is the name of the place that became famous due to the 1896 “Gold Rush”). The myth of the American frontier continues even today despite the complete settlement of the West and the wildernesses once inhabited by the Native Americans. Borders serve to justify national identity and that of the direct descendants of the nineteenth-century colonizers, who forget the relegation of the indigenous people to ghetto-reserves, to confined spaces devoid of adequate resources or shelter, a prey to the weather and food shortage. To this regard, the current Ute Indian Reservation in Colorado is an example of borders that were shifted from one end of Utah, Colorado and New Mexico to another, as new white settlers arrived to occupy Ute lands for agriculture and farming, and leading to long-lasting wars (between 1853 and 1868 and beyond). In 1858, gold was found in the Denver area on land belonging to the Indians. Despite a valiant defence against the invaders in 1881, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indian tribes were forced to leave this area and were confined to reservations. It was not until 1950 that the government of the United States decided to partially compensate the Ute for the loss of their lands and the elimination of their borders, by paying them the sum of 31.9 million US dollars.

Outside of Europe and above all outside of cities, there was an abundance of wealth and resources to be had for the asking. The new frontiers destroyed the old ones. The Native Americans posed no problem because, being savages, they were not a part of society and therefore “had no rights”. New areas were bought and the new *bonanzas* became cotton, wheat, livestock breeding, mining and railway construction. To obtain these resources a veritable war was waged: to exploit the weak Western frontier, cheap labour was imported from the East and South (African slaves) and the railway was built by immigrants from Europe and Asia. The Africans and Native Americans were not included in the American nation; they did not belong to civil society. Conflict between the two parts, the “savages” and the “non-savages”, arose whenever new frontiers, natural resources, new technologies, the conquest of extra-terrestrial space itself, appeared on the horizon.

⁹ See Laura Corradi, Giovanna Vingelli, “Women’s Health Transnational Networks”, *Societies Without Borders*, 3 (2), 2008, pp. 228-247.

Conclusion

The utopia of a world without borders seems to comply perfectly with Simmel's¹⁰ idea of sociability (*Geselligkeit*), that is, a tendency to come together in a permanent state of confrontation (leading, potentially, to agreement as well as to conflict) within a family or national, cultural or economic community, founded upon a relationship characterized by social interaction built on shared, universal bases.

On the contrary, beginning with places of work and leisure, we witness the creation of boundaries and borders. Sociability is at work but it does not always put an end to difference, exclusion, formal and informal separation and dissociation; it restores unity and sharing, though, at parties, celebrations, public rites, involving the majority of the members of a group, an association, a city, a nation. There are dialogues, conversations, and discussions that demonstrate and emphasize the character of sociability symbolically expressed by meetings, speeches and reconciliation beyond borders of all kinds.

To conclude, it is worth recalling the fact that the famous waterfalls of Iguaçu span three states, constituting a border in the concrete sense. However, its main component is shared: water flowing and continuing its path regardless of nationality, language, political system or religion. It is water, water again that marks two banks and two nations in the case of the Congo River which separates Kinshasa from Brazzaville: two areas characterized by a common Bantu culture, beyond borders.

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¹⁰12. See Georg Simmel, *Sociologie et épistémologie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1981.