

The Border as a Cultural Idea in Europe

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This paper proposes some reflections on the symbolic and even emotional status of mapped borders in Europe. It is argued that since the general use of maps in teaching programs in the XIXth century, the spatial representation of ones territory has become one of the important ingredients of identity construction. Not (politically) authorised mappings of borders, of for example cultural items, have sometimes caused important reactions, not only on behalf of authorities, but also from ordinary people feeling aggressed by them. Has the graphic contour of maps of one's territory become in European cultures a second form of selfrepresentation?

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This paper would like to propose some reflections based on my research done in the fields of “anthropology of space”, of (European) ethnocartography and of the history of cartography and mapping. To avoid any misunderstanding, I will mainly consider here the spatial, geographical, cartographic dimension of the ideas of boundary and border, thus leaving aside other conceptions of boundaries developed in social sciences and humanities like social boundaries or ethnic boundaries (Barth 1969, Vermeulen & Govers 1994). And I should like to stress the linguistic problems one encounters when writing in English about this topic, as the English language has several words like border, boundary, frontier (or even end) where other European languages use often only a single term like *frontière* in French or *Grenze* in German. I will use here the term of border to designate the idea of a “line” separating two (or more) different spatial entities, while I will use terms like borderland or frontier to indicate “territorially and temporally defined zones [that also] have heuristic utility beyond the metaphorical” (Wilson & Donnan 1998: 25). The term boundary, defined in the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995) as “an often imaginary line that marks the edge or limit of something” seems to rely on human perception or consciousness in order to exist. As

Anthony Cohen (1994: 65) has written: “the concept of boundary must be regarded as central to anthropology, precisely because it addresses the essence of our task: to extend our own limited consciousness in order to comprehend another’s”. Studying anthropologically the boundary-consciousness of a particular group consists thus also in trying to understand its cultural-specific ways of putting order into its environment. The same author has also rightly noted: “The confusion among these words, all of which express the conditions of contiguity, are those of ordinary language rather than science. It might be helpful to think less in terms of discriminating among them on the grounds of putative referents – since ordinary language will not honour such precision – than in terms of how they are used and what they are used for” (*op.cit.*:63). In social anthropology and also European ethnology of more recent years (cf. for example Cox (ed.), 1993) borders and boundaries are generally considered as places of encounter and interaction generating their proper cultural specificity, where “the study of territorial borders is part of a wider ensemble of studies of border-crossing and frontiers of identity” (Wilson & Donnan 1998:25). But my aim in this paper will be slightly different as I should rather like to question here borders and boundaries as conceptual tools used to construct a

specific worldview essentially based on "spatialised" taxonomies.

All border and boundary terms and concepts relate to a "spatialised" perception of the world. Both historical and ethnographic data show the universal presence of spatialised perceptions of their environment in all human societies, often in a self-centred, ethnocentric way (cf. for example: Leroi-Gourhan 1965:138–159 or Paul-Lévy & Ségaud 1983). Especially the development of agriculture by its transformation of parts of "savage nature" into cultivated plots of land, seems to have been one of Man's first "boundary-creating" activities by excellence as it generates the spatial differentiation between the cultivated *ager* or *hortus* and the *silva* in the form of various types of *saltus* (wastelands). A cultivated, domesticated landscape with its patchwork of fields, paths, roads, canals etc. can in this perspective be considered as one of society's oldest forms of inscribing its presence by a kind of full scale mapping. Together with the construction of habitat, the practice of agriculture is literally one of the first forms of "land-writing" or geo-graphy that allows spatial perceptions of borders between humanised, cultivated, domesticated areas and those which are not.

As archaeology has shown in various parts of the world but especially in Mesopotamia, one of the oldest known forms of statehood has expressed itself by measuring and registering land. More or less buried boundary markers and their associated written land registers or *cadasters* have been one of the distinctive traits of most "great civilisations" since at least 4,000 years. By measuring and establishing engraved landmarks and by registering titles of property, the Roman *agrimensores* not only allocated plots of land to those who had served the Empire, but they also created a (mental) model of appropriation and control based on space which ever since has been dominant in European conceptions of property both individual and collective. While ancient Greeks, with scholars like Ptolemy (AD 100–170), have been among the first societies to develop cartographic "world-views", the Romans, more pragmatic, have literally been mapping out their conquests by physically enscribing its various *limites* with

walls, dykes, fortifications or more simply with boundary stones or by "natural" limits like rivers or seashores.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, cartographic practice seems to have disappeared in Europe except for the so-called medieval *mappae mundi*, circular images of the world divided in three parts (Asia, Africa and Europe) by a T-division and encircled by an ocean. These maps, on which one can often see the location of the Earthly Paradise and other biblical elements, are clearly more religiously inspired than geo-politically. Since the XIIIth century, a pragmatic form of cartography was developed in Italy and on Majorca by mathematicians in order to draw precise maps of the Mediterranean Sea for the use of navigation with the help of a compass. It was these cosmopolitan Mediterranean cartographers of the so-called *portulans*, who, after de re-discovery of the Ptolemaic cartography (transmitted by Arab manuscripts), have greatly contributed to development of scientific cartography and mapping. This new form of cartography seems to have served at first during the age of exploration to "describe" the newly discovered (coastal) regions of Africa, Asia and of course America to those who had sponsored the voyages.

But most importantly for my perspective here, these technical improvements in the arts of cartography allowed maps to become acceptable graphic representations of (parts of) the world not only as it was supposed to be, but also as it should be. As far as I know, the choice (in the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494) of the meridian line 370 "leagues" West of the Cabo Verde Islands to separate present and future possessions of the King of Portugal and the King of Castillia (Spain) is probably one of the earliest examples of the ways in which European nations "invented" boundaries to separate themselves by the use of a map-based conception of space. Ever since cartography and map-making have become arms in the hands of the powerful not only allowing conquest and possession, but also subject to fraud and cheating. Maps have progressively become providers of "territorial propaganda" (Harley 1995:24) as they not only registered actual borders and frontiers but also anticipated colonial empires and legitimised

the realities of conquest. As the British geographer and historian of cartography Brian Harley has suggested, from the XVIth century on, maps have become for Europeans (at first only the powerful, but from the end of the XIXth century on for all schooled people) part of what he calls "the arsenal of psychological international warfare" (*op.cit.*:33) between nations.

Critical analyses of the history of cartography as those by Brian Harley, have shown during the last decades in which ways maps have gradually become in Europe since the XVIIth century a particular form of *discourse about the world* based on specific codes and conventions. Presence or absence on maps mean information or "silence" which are to be related to the maker's (or his sponsor's) conscious or unconscious choices or wishes. Behind their apparent "neutral", scientific outlook, all maps remain as Harley writes "talisman of authority" (*op.cit.*:47), especially since the rise of the modern nation-states in the XIXth century and the mass diffusion of maps in schools and by the media. After having represented more or less accurately kingdoms and empires since the XVth century, the more precise, large scale maps based on topographic measurements, have increasingly become the privileged tools not only to direct armed conflicts at distance, but also to settle them far away from the battlefields during international conferences.

This has led to a situation where "the distinctiveness of societies, nations and cultures is based on a seemingly unproblematic division of space [...] The premise of discontinuity forms the starting point from which to theorise contact, conflict and the contradiction between cultures and societies. For example, the representation of the world as a collection of 'countries', as in most world maps, sees it as an inherently fragmented space, divided by different colours into diverse national societies, each 'rooted' in its proper place" (Gupta & Fergusson 1992:6, cited by Rabinowitz 1998:6).

While old nations or empires were surrounded by more or less controlled areas and buffer zones called *marches* (Fr.) or *marken* (Ger.) – which inhabitants often benefited special privileges – the constant improvements in topographic and cartographic techniques and skills

have led since the XIXth century more and more often to quite arbitrary situations "in the field". As series of more or less recent ethnographic monographs have shown, these apparently simple borderlines drawn on maps by rulers and politicians – after periods with or without the use of armed violence – have usually needed decades to become social-cultural realities. On the other hand, studies on the "dissolution" of national borders like the ones by Korff (1995:248–264) or by Borneman (1992) about the German-German border show how the vanishing of spatial markers of belonging provokes uncertainties about one's own identity, which results sometimes in regionalistic or nationalistic activism. These observations seem to prove *in contrario* the importance for many Europeans of the spatial limits as essential ingredients of self identification.

During the last decade, the "nature" of many borders within Europe has known important changes: some national borders have lost their traditional signs and personnel like inside "Schengenland", while on others the presence of police, custom and even armed officers has changed from one side to the other, like on the frontiers of the former "Iron curtain" where they have become EU-borders. In other places, regional or provincial borders have become national borders (like in Spain or in the Russian Federation) or even international ones like between the Czech and Slovak Republics or between the new states of former Yugoslavia or the former Soviet Union. These ontological changes of many European borders have modified for many people their personal "ethno-national" taxonomies as new We-groups and Others have emerged not only in border-crossing experiences, but also in everyday life: national and regional emblems have flourished in supermarkets, weather forecasts tend to transcend national boundaries, in many countries the rules concerning the acquisition of national citizenship are at the centre of public debate etc.

In the background of many of these actual changes and discussions we find explicit or more often unconscious references to a bi-dimensional, cartographic worldview. Since the

second half of the XIXth century, the use of so-called "thematic-cartography" has been developed in many Western scientific disciplines as a powerful heuristic tool. Mapping not only allowed to model the locality of various phenomena in a bi-dimensional synchronic space, but it also offered possibilities, when data were available, to trace the diachronic spatial extension of the most various phenomena. In many European countries, statisticians have been prompt in using this new type of heuristic tool – originally developed by meteorologists – to synthesise and communicate their data. Especially in Central and Eastern European empires, like Austria-Hungary or Russia, statisticians have tried to elaborate ethno-linguistic and/or religious categories to classify the inhabitants and to map down the results (cf. for example Blum & Gousseff 1997:49–71). In Western Europe, first linguists soon followed by anthropo-geographers and ethno-cartographers (cf. Bromberger, Dossetto & Schippers 1982–83, Schippers, 1998), have also largely used the cartographic tool in order to map dialect-areas and cultural *realia*. This thematic cartography has of course put into evidence many more or less homogeneous areas and also boundaries and areas of transition between them, which (of course) do not always correspond with the geo-political frontiers established by central powers.

Especially when thematic ethnographic cartography shows the existence of areas or boundaries which *do not correspond* to geo-political borders, these maps have been perceived as *treats* to modern nation-states. This highly provocative potential of mapped boundaries is sometimes able to generate violent reactions on behalf of those who feel challenged by it. For example national majorities may feel challenged by maps showing areas of cultural minorities, especially in border zones, while minorities may feel oppressed by cartographic "silence". All these cases show the importance attributed not only by politicians and generals, but also by most Europeans to the symbolic values of mapped (spatial) limits.

This specific way of thinking "we" as opposed to "them" with the help of spatial criteria and especially borders and limits can be found in many cultures where specific cultural groups

occupy particular territories or urban quarters. But the invention and use of precise maps as acceptable representations of expanses of land seem to have developed only for Europeans a kind of cartographic perception of self and belonging. For example the use of blank maps in teaching programs have familiarised generations of children with the "graphic morphology" of *their* home land. Any modification of the contour of this embodied images of ones identity is here perceived as a modification – for better or for worse – of ones perception of belonging. The actual multiple territorial clusters in (Western) Europe like those of the 15 countries of the European Union, the 10 or 15 countries of "Schengenland", the 18 countries of the European Economic Alliance, the 11 countries of "Euroland" and the more than 35 countries of the Council of Europe, etc. have blurred the possibility of any "simple" spatial representation, which may be one of the reasons why most Europeans still seem to prefer regional or national territories to identify themselves with. On the other hand especially the media of the "newly" independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe tend, with the use of "island-like" mapping of the new national contour, to familiarise their citizens with the shape of their new territory of belonging. Here again the borderlines show their symbolic and even emblematic potential in the definition of one aspect of one's self.

To conclude, I should like to suggest that the invention and the development of more and more accurate cartography in Europe have, especially since the generalisation of schooling, contributed to a particular European view, which of course has been largely diffused outside this continent, especially in colonial contexts. Being of and belonging to seem for many Europeans to be intimately related to a spatial/cartographical perception of inscription and identification. This roomy form of (self)identification often relates territory, landscape and cultural particularities into pseudo-homogeneous ideological fictions of which borderlines are supposed to be the limits. The tragic events known as "ethnic cleansing" or "politics of apartheid" are examples of this particular spatial form of identity

construction which contrasts with other forms of expression of identity like religious or ethnic belonging. On the other hand the so-called *ius soliis* conception of nationality which prevails in more and more modern European democracies is another more positive illustration, of this "cartographic", borderline based vision of identity, especially when confronted with *ius sanguinis* rhetorics based territorial cultural substantialism.

The history of European ethnology has shown the uncomfortable situation of some of its practitioners not only when they have tried, like in many other disciplines, to establish maps of cultural facts, but especially when they have tried to draw borderlines on these maps. As long as these "experimental maps" remained hidden in little known academic *bureaux*, nobody seemed to have bothered much about them, but in the rare occasions where they have become publicly known or even worse – politically used, these maps, and especially when their borderlines did not correspond with the political ones, have often provoked both official as well as scientific indignation.

This illustrates in another way the very particular status the mapped borderline has acquired in European culture. Scholars seem to be free to make maps and even draw borderlines on them *as long as they do this "privately"*, while the maps used in public situations are supposed to correspond, like national ensigns, to a very specific graphic image that does not tolerate any change other than by official agreement. Modifying the contours of a map or suggesting other limits than the officially approved ones, can generate emotional reactions comparable to the staining or burning of a national flag. The map as a bi-dimensional graphic construct of (border)lines and differently coloured surfaces has become since the XIXth century one of the basic cultural ingredients of European identity construction, which has imposed itself to the rest of the world as an acceptable representation of the – not only spatial – belonging of individuals. The border contour has become like the shadow of one's second skin and as European ethnologists know, in many popular traditions one ought to be careful about what happens to one's shadow.

Notes

1. This type of property can be compared with so-called hydraulic states, where quantities of water determine property.
2. Besides land registers, the only known cartographic documents produced by the Romans seem to have been the so-called *itineraria picta*, long but narrow rolls describing the routes from one place to another (Minelle, 1992:22-23).
3. See e.g. Harley, 1991/1995:100 or Minelle, 1992:53.
4. Like the pioneering study by Cole and Wolf (1974) or more recently the studies edited by Wilson and Donnan (1998) which contains a large (mostly English) bibliography on this topic.
5. While linguists and statisticians largely continue to use the cartographic tool, most ethnologists in Western Europe have abandoned it in the 1950-60, and in Central Europe in the 1980, for both methodological but also practical reasons (cf. *Ethnocartographie en Europe*, 1982-83).
6. Cf. for more detailed examples Schippers (2000).

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