

THE IDEA OF THE BORDER IN HUMAN WORLD (SELECTED ASPECTS)

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Abstract: The paper discusses the functions and the role of the border, interpretations of the concept of the border in selected research disciplines and its relationships with the centre and the periphery. The spatial aspect of the border is examined in connection with its symbolic dimension. The argument starts with a hypothetical vision of a world without borders and then focuses on the real world abundant in borders. One of the paper's conclusions relates to the status of the border, and specifically its mental precedence with regard to the material reality.

Key words: border, identity, world limited, being-between category

In my end is my beginning (T. S. Eliot)

1. THE WORLD WITHOUT BORDERS

Let us imagine a world without borders. Then, the reality around us would not have any permanent points or frameworks of reference or orientation points stable enough to be used to construct a private or public hierarchy of places, to measure distances (because the questions "where from" and "where to" would lose any relevance), to set boundaries in time (again, the questions "since when" and "till when" would be unfounded). Such a hypothetical, virtual – that is potential, existing in the mind – amorphous, unstructured world would remain uniform, homogenous, devoid of any points of support or breakage. Each and every fragment of space would have a similar value, and there would be no difference between the potentials because what would be there in between?

In our imagined world, the only borders which must be understood as such are determined by nature and psychology. The former, by implying a physical opposition between land and water, distinguishing the coastline or imprinting territorial behaviours in animals. Other stable natural determinants certainly include the climate or altitude. In

the latter, we can speak about one more motif of the border (while still remaining in a world without borders) – about the evolutionary transformation of the relation between man and the surrounding reality. Freud (1995) would say that the primary ‘self’ (which we all experience in the infancy period) has contained everything; only later during our life a form of external world has been separated from it. Therefore, our sense of self today is merely a dwarfed residue of the vast, all-encompassing “self”. This may lead us to the conclusion that differentiation can be regarded as a dissociation, while the presence of a border will not always result in physical distancing.

Another border functioning in a world without borders proposed by man seems to be time, because both the evolution of the body and of thought requires time. Initially, there would be no straightforward references to time, with the higher-order temporal orientation imposed by the universe: revolution of the earthly globe around the Sun, with its constant alternation of night and day, and the sequence of the seasons.

Has man created the border as it is contemporarily understood? To some extent, the answer is positive – through atavistic territorial behaviours (as human beings are animals in many respects), conceptualization of selected fragments of space and construction of the centre, the periphery and the borders themselves... But why have borders become necessary? Were they only intended to organize the environment of man? Have people filled the world with borders to be able to cross them and in this way incessantly prove their abilities, power or worth and confirm their conviction that in every end there is a beginning? What meaning and what functions have we ascribed to borders?

The border in our life – in the life of both individuals and societies – operates as a spatial category providing a sense of direction. Usually a zone, region, place, less frequently a line, it both unites and separates, if not the neighbouring organizational entities in their entirety, then certainly their selected aspects. Nonetheless, such an understanding of this unique spatial phenomenon seems incomplete and narrow. Since time immemorial the border has implied an opposition between the specific and the non-specific, the inside and the outside; it has strengthened the opposition between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between “us” and “them”, and suggested a passage between two differently structured sub-spaces. The border represents an enduring spatial archetype particularly with regard to the centre of a territory. Firstly, the border is a point (place, zone, region) of reference for the reality it determines. Secondly, the border denotes affiliation of the world’s fragments. Thirdly, the border is a sign of the end and the beginning.

2. THE FUNCTION AND MEANING OF THE BORDER

There are many names that the border goes by. Many types of borders exist, and each of them can perform various functions. Moreover, the border has never been and will never be unanimously interpreted. Then, the implications of the borders’ existence are usually subject to scrutiny; such issues as the results of borders’ delimitation or chances of their overcoming are much more frequently explored than the reasons for their creation, that is, the origin of the division. The classification concerning different ways in which the role of the border can be understood, proposed below, suggests some pairs of premisses. Sometimes the phenomenon of the border is conceived as follows:

- a) **delimitation/enclosing** – to determine means to delimit, limit, delineate or define. Only defined entities (even if they are defined by negation or implicit statements as in the case of imponderables) can be consciously experienced by man. What has no name does not exist, and the border as an integral feature of things and a *sine qua non* condition of their existence indicates an opposition between reality defined (by man) and undefined. Therefore, the internal is completed by the external, "us" by "them", familiar by unfamiliar, *intra muros* by *extra muros*, and, in axiology – good by evil. The biblical question rebounds: what would be your good without our evil?
- b) **orientation** – by introducing a differentiating point, a contrasting sign in the space which has been uniform so far, we establish a point of reference so that we can find it later and in this way determine where we are. Orientation provides a direction and an ontological presence in the world. When we encode a sign once written, we learn where we are but also who we are. If there is no breakage point we are doomed to roaming without any definite purpose (cf. Eliade, 1996). In such a case, the border (just as the centre) is one of the limits of our world.
- c) **identity** – to cross the border is an irreversible step for the crosser, because the passage is a transformation of identity: not one of 'us' but one of 'them', a stranger; it is a symbolic verification of individuality (leaving, for a shorter or longer time, the social, cultural and mental context in which we have lived before and which has synecdochically defined us, on a *pars pro toto* basis). Rivers are commonly regarded as borders; let us recollect at this point the meaning that the crossing of the Rubicon (a river in northern Italy which Julius Caesar crossed contrary to the Senate's order in 49 BC, starting a civil war) or of the Styx had (the river winding across the mythical Hades by which Charon transported the dead and both people and gods would take oaths by mentioning its name).
- d) **spatial dynamics**, but also dynamics in space – every intersection or bifurcation of the roads where a decision needs to be made; an intersection, a border in a sense means a confrontation, but also, firstly and foremostly, an encounter, a meeting, which the border implies *expressis verbis*. The dynamics of space are related to the question of distance, measured by metric or psychological distances. Crossing the border requires appropriate forms of behaviour, as greater and greater distance is covered, both formal or informal (intimate, individual, social, public, critical) (cf. Hall, 2001). We decide about the character and progress of the encounter. Nonetheless, the border is perceived as a challenge, a symbol of transgression; by its very existence it encourages overcoming barriers (cf. Cirlot, 2000).
- e) **structuralization of reality** – from the centre of the familiar world to the merely intimated peripheries... In the spirit of semiotics, we can regard the reality of man as a concentric system whose centre is occupied by the most obvious and coherent structures. (...) On the other hand, closer to the periphery such entities are located whose structurality is not obvious or proved, but which have been included in a general sign and communication context' (Łotman, Uspieński, 1977, p. 150). The border therefore functions as a spatial password; the further it is written the more extensive the realm of the familiar, known and assimilated world.
- f) **presence** – that is a proof of existence, a sign of ownership and subordination. The border refers to what it delimits, and summons the owner or the host.
- g) **danger** – the border is a break in the journey, hence the custom to place crosses, wayside chapels, symbols of safety or familiar signs (coat of arms, emblems, plaques with names) in the most dangerous places. The danger of the border is evoked by the

symbolism of the wall, such as the Berlin Wall (abnormality in the functioning of one organism – a severed city), the Jewish Ghetto Walls in many cities (a substitute of freedom in the "city within a city", exclusion, stigma, restriction, ascribed identity).

3. THE WORLD FULL OF BORDERS

Historically, the borders gained in importance when humankind changed from nomadic to settled way of life; it was then that people began to feel attached to place. As mentioned above, the culture of a given community acts as a concentric system, where the central structures are the most coherent and distinctive, and the more peripheral are not as obvious or familiarized. Anthropologically speaking, the border has always aspired to be a place near which both the status and characteristics of the neighbouring areas are strengthened, where the representation of individuality is clearly marked, so as the manifestation of identity and unambiguity of affiliation, and where at the same time a peer dialogue is possible (Figure 1). Thus, we can speak of two places of critical significance: the centre and the border. Both these categories belong to one concentric system. According to some beliefs, the universe is created and expands from a core, a central point, while the establishment of a fixed central point is the sacred construction of the world's centre (axis mundi), and at the same time a re-creation of hierophany (appearance of the sacred); the ontological constitution of the world takes place along with the delineation of a given territory (which from this moment onwards is ours, familiarized), with a sacred circle, that is, a border (cf. Eliade, 1996). We introduce characteristic symbols of the border (end) of our world and its centre (beginning), being aware of the fact that for the native the border is the end, and for the visitor – the beginning.

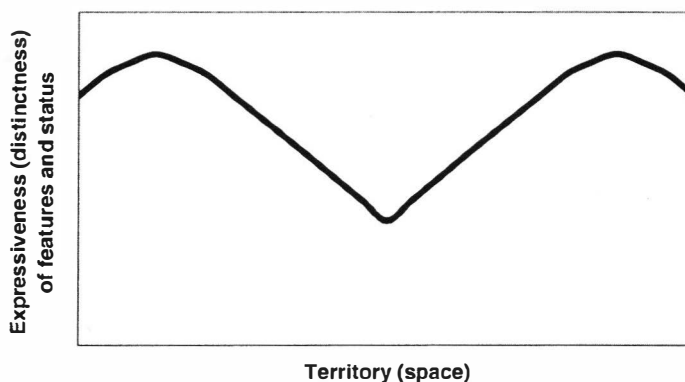


Figure 1 Relation between the Centre and the Border

We can say therefore that we live in a world full of borders. The border must always separate something from something else, in relation to something or someone. We experience a plethora of ways in which the border is expressed: doors, thresholds, windows, gates, lintels, openings, tollbooths, staircases, flights of stairs make the passage

easier, while walls, grills, fences, moats, banks or coasts, precipices make it more difficult. Border crossings, bridges, triumphal arches, mirrors, horizons, entrance tickets, passes, passports, visas or certificates are also different aspects of the same phenomenon of the border. All these forms have one feature in common – as symbols and means of passage they annul the continuity of space and facilitate threshold experiences. The threshold makes possible an entry into a differently organized reality, and therefore has ritual associations. Only those who are competent can be granted the honour to traverse, and their competences will be tested by guardians, gatekeepers, publicans... As the threshold was also considered an area of equilibrium (for instance in the ancient cultures of Babylon, Egypt or Israel), it was customary to hold trials on the threshold.

Furthermore, borders apply to space within the meaning of physics. Space can be limited yet boundless, as Einstein would see it (1999). According to ancient Greeks, finiteness was far more perfect than infinity because for them the latter was tantamount to indeterminacy and chaos. St. Augustine had utterly dissimilar views because he regarded infinity as the key attribute of God (cf. Tatarkiewicz, 1999). Obviously, the border should not be identified with the end.

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4. DOUBTS/CONCLUSIONS

- a) **Is the border a mental fact** (the border in the mind), **or a physical one** (e.g. the spatial or temporal border in reality)? Most probably, the mental border is primal in relation to the real border owing to the arbitrariness of the sign convention (the border is a sign par excellence).
- b) **The problem of the stability of borders.** It is commonly acknowledged that economic, political or administrative delimitation does not have to be identical with so-

- cial or cultural delimitation. We should consider however which border seems to be the most lasting, that is one which is likely to have most enduring consequences.
- c) **The border as a "being-between" category.** All places of transition are ascribed a strategic function: they operate as a space of transmission and exchange, as a buffer zone, as a common field, which is sometimes appropriated, as a new spatial quality consisting of selected features and activity of the surrounding areas. As a result, the border has become a magnet attracting more and more people nowadays. It might as well be a new form of a platform for INTER-national dialogue ("inter" is the catchword of the contemporary era).
 - d) The first **cognitive border** that man dared to transgress was picking the apple from the tree of knowledge, against God's will. Another important step in this respect was the Copernican revolution. Since that time, humankind has endlessly crossed the boundaries of cognition, expanding the horizons of imagination and knowledge. Let us only mention the discoveries made in physics, chemistry, biology, or great geographical discoveries. Becoming conscious of what is unconscious, knowing the unknown, discovering the undiscovered means getting rid of habits and dogmas.
 - e) **Are borders taking over the role of the centre?** No, because the borders cannot exist without the centre, and vice versa. They are like the two sides of the same coin.
 - f) **Will borders disappear over time?** No, they will not. Despite the idea of spatial integration, regionalization, globalization, internationalization – the border will remain an archetype that is an inherent constituent of human space (just like the road, place, circle, cross, line, polygon, chaos, centre). The border is the basic sign epitomizing the completion of a given distance.
 - g) **Is the border as a spatial category that man absolutely needs?** Yes. Human beings, by knowing their limitations, are aware of their integrity. Spatial dimension is of cardinal importance in this respect, and the need for borders or frontiers should be regarded as a fundamental need (territoriality).

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Idea granice w swiece ludzej (wybrane atrybuty)

Resume

Granica w życiu człowieka funkcjonuje jako orientacyjna kategoria przestrzenna. Przeważnie będąc strefą, regionem, miejscem, rzadziej linią – dzieli i łączy: jeżeli nie całości dwóch sąsiadujących bytów organizacyjnych, to z pewnością ich wybrane atrybuty.

Granica implikowała od najdawniejszych czasów opozycję między określonością i nieokreślonością, wnętrzem i zewnątrzem, relację: swój – obcy, znajome – niezajome;

sugerowała przejście pomiędzy dwoma inaczej urządzonymi sub-przestrzeniami. Zwłaszcza w kontekście centrum danego terytorium granica wydaje się trwałym archetypem przestrzennym. Po pierwsze, granica stanowi punkt odniesienia (dla rzeczywistości, którą determinuje). Po drugie, granica znaczy przynależność fragmentów świata. Po trzecie, granica jest znakiem końca i początku, a zarazem symbolem przejścia i przekraczania, z czym wiąże się doświadczenie progowe (przekraczając granicę ulega człowiek przemianie tożsamości: przestaje być swój, zaczyna być inny, więc granica weryfikuje indywidualność).

Historycznie granice zyskały na znaczeniu, kiedy ludzkość zrezygnowała z koczowniczego trybu życia na rzecz osiadłego, wówczas bowiem człowiek zaczął przywiązywać się do miejsca. W perspektywie semiotycznej kultura danej społeczności działa jak system koncentryczny, z centralnymi strukturami najbardziej konsekwentnymi i wyrazistymi oraz tymi coraz bardziej peryferyjnymi, które nie są tak oczywiste bądź rozpoznawalne. Antropologicznie problem ujmując, granica pretendowała zawsze do roli miejsca, w pobliżu jakiego następuje wzmocnienie statusu i cech obszarów sąsiadujących, gdzie zaznacza się reprezentacja odrębności, manifestacja tożsamości i jednoznaczność przyporządkowania, ale jednocześnie gdzie możliwy jest dialog partnerski, na równych prawach.

Pytanie o to, czy granice nie przejmą roli centrum, okazuje się jednak kwestią wtórną wobec tego, czy granice nie zanikną, bądź ogólniej – dlaczego granica? (w domyśle: czy jako kategoria przestrzenna jest konieczna?). Odpowiedzi kolejno brzmią: nie, nie, tak.