

PART II: DECONSTRUCTING BORDERS

Those Who Belong and Those Who Don't: Physical and Mental Borders in Europe

By Nira Yuval-Davis



Europe promotes migration and mobility but new or “different” Europeans are still stigmatised and marginalised in our societies. Today, neither refugee status nor citizenship can tear down the mental borders between people who inhabit the same cities or neighbourhoods. Sociology professor Nira Yuval-Davis writes about the meaning of borders, and how they make us differentiate between “us” and “the other” in our daily lives.

There are different kinds of usages of the word “border”. Initially, I used to differentiate in my work between “borders” and “boundaries”, using borders for territorial and state separating lines, while by boundaries I referred to separating lines between collectivities. But more recently, in our work on everyday “bordering”, we found that it is getting more and more difficult to differentiate between them. This is partly due to a global trend in mainstream politics that makes a distinction between those who belong to us and those who do not, essentially making the borders that separate states reappear in people’s everyday interactions.

There are three major kinds of borders: those of territorial governance that can manifest themselves as borders between states, regions or supranational entities; economic borders; and borders of political identity. The latter relates to nationalism, patriotism, racism, religions and other issues which involve subjective identifications and associated emotions. More and more nations become ethnocracies, where the state can only be seen as a democracy for those who belong

to a particular ethnicity. One example is my country of birth, Israel. But it is fair to mention that Europe has nothing to brag about either: children and grandchildren of immigrants are deemed to live as second class citizens in Western Europe, while the Romani people in Eastern and Central Europe are still a marginalised minority, often living in horrible conditions, with no chance of finding employment and no access to proper education.

This differentiation is hardly going to fade as long as “otherness” is instrumentalised by populist and right-wing forces in Europe, who are demanding tougher border controls for the sake of protecting Europe’s “Christian identity.”

Not to mention that in some cases the borders are so rigid that even a “colour blind” approach cannot help overcome them: as research has shown, someone’s name alone can determine his or her prospects in life, so even if a prospective employer is not allowed to ask about an applicant’s ethnicity, birth place or citizenship, people called Lakisha or Jamal have a much smaller chance to be

selected for a job interview than an Emily or a Greg. And even Emily might face some serious challenges in her career, due to the hardly penetrable glass ceiling.

The Complexity of State Borders

In the EU Borderscapes project¹¹ we have found that state borders have been dislocated geographically and spatially. When your plane lands at an airport, or when you get off from the Eurostar, after traveling from the European mainland, you experience that the border control and thus the border itself is right there where you stand, even though you are deep inside a country. Another prominent example is the embassy, where you can ask for a visa thousands of kilometres away from a particular country. Or even for asylum, as the prominent example of Wikileaks-founder Julian Assange shows, who has been living in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, for years, in order to avoid extradition to Sweden, where he faces allegations of rape. In a similar fashion, but for different reasons, the Hungarian Cardinal, József Mindszenty has spent 15 years of his life in the U.S. Mission in Budapest as a refugee from the Communist regime.

“Untrained, Unpaid Border Guards”

The dislocation of borders is reinforced by current political trends. More and more people are asked to function as untrained, unpaid border guards. And they will be punished if

they don't do their jobs properly. Landlords in the United Kingdom have to check that the passport and the visa of their potential tenants is in order. They are, of course, unable to check whether this document is forged or original. Nevertheless, if it turns out that the tenants were not genuinely allowed to live in the country, the landlords are demanded to pay fines of several thousand pounds. And according to the 2015 Immigration Bill, they might even face prison sentences. Therefore, more and more people are reluctant to rent their flats to people who look as if they were not born in the United Kingdom. Not to mention that service suppliers (for example in the field of health, education and banking) face similar regulations.

So the difference between state borders and ethnic relations is becoming more and more blurred in these everyday acts of “bordering”. This undermines any kind of convivial pluralism and puts borders at the heart of the dynamics of social relations, which is very dangerous as well as inefficient.

The problem is exacerbated by some additional worrisome trends: citizenship used to be a secure status, just as the refugee status, but now they are all becoming conditional. In our research on refugees in London we have seen that their status now is only temporary, and as soon as their country of origin is deemed to be “safe” they can be

11 Borderscapes is an EU-funded international research project that brings together institutions from 17 states. It investigates conceptual changes in our understanding of borders in light of the social, economic, cultural and geopolitical transformations of the past decades.

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deported. Even citizenship is not safe anymore. There is an international obligation for states to not make a person stateless, but so many of us hold dual or even multiple citizenships, and in this case a state can take a citizenship away from us if it thinks that we are not “proper” citizens.

Economic Bordering

I am not one of those who would call for the abolishing of all borders. Ideally, of course, we would all want to live in an equal, borderless society where you have an equal distribution of resources. Unfortunately, the forces that are pushing the agenda of a borderless world forward have often less humanitarian motives than what we want to see.

It is usually the right-wing, neoliberal economic players who want the market forces of supply and demand to regulate the movement of people, and they don't mind if people who don't fulfill the demands of the economy starve or freeze. There are financial implications, and you cannot simply abolish any kind of decision making. This decision making, however, has to be non-racist and non-classist. In the end, the “borderless Europe” has already taken away the opportunity from Greece to take care of its citizens in the current economic crisis, thereby creating new, economic borders between the countries of Europe. This is also the reason why parts of the Western elite speak out for multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, but actually the whole process of globalisation is usually accompanied by growing economic

polarisations and stratifications in which migrants often become highly exploited.

Borderless Neoliberalism

It is also important to note that the main driver of a “borderless Europe” as we know it was the result of economic processes. Proof for this can be found in a recent working paper written by Bernhard Koeppen, a researcher at EU Borderscapes. He emphasises that a “fully-functioning internal market” is dependent on “the absence of any border or obstacle within the member states.” This is of course nothing new, as the EU has defined itself for many years by “four freedoms”: the free movement of goods; free movement of capital; free movement of services; and free movement of people. Nevertheless, his analysis shows that state border-related discourses are seen as inessential in the context of the single market, and are often purposely avoided, meaning that all decisions taken are founded on purely economic interests.

Even inside one country there are enormous economic borders between people. In London, for example, research has shown that the average life expectancy of people significantly changes from one underground station to the other, due to the different socioeconomic situation and opportunities of the people who inhabit these areas. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) is just another chapter in this story of reinforcing economic boundaries on the pretenses

of bringing countries closer to each other through economic measures. In the history of capitalism a very defining moment was when corporations were given the same status as people. Now with TTIP they want to give the same status to companies as states. And in the end, this means that the vulnerable parts of society will lose out again, while the beneficiaries are exempted from paying the price for the risks they take. Just as it happened with the bailing out of banks not so long ago.

Do Borders Prevent Change?

As the current experiences of Europe have shown, in times of crisis countries build fences and strengthen borders to keep different people and different values out of their territories. Thereby, they reinforce the idea that the primary purpose of borders is to prevent change.

But I am not sure this concept is right. That's only one aspect. I was born in a country where the borders were opaque. On the one side there was the sea, on all other sides were hostile countries that you were unable to enter. Even today, I cannot travel to Lebanon, for example, because I was born in Tel-Aviv. But in border studies there is a lot of talk about their other important aspect – that borders not only separate, but also connect.

Borders can, for example, make people curious. They can drive them in their process of understanding the world by making them want to find out what is on the other side.

Borders are the places where people of different cultures, religions or ethnic origins can meet and exchange their ideas and experiences. Moreover, cross-border co-operation enables new forms of mobility between people, even without having to physically change locations. When I came first to Europe in the 1960's, I witnessed what seemed then fantastical to me: that it was normal that people were living in France, for example, but working in Switzerland, so they crossed the physical state border every day without having the feeling that it separates them from those on the other side.

Borderless Europe Could Have Been so Much Better

For many years the Schengen borders were seen as the prime example of borders that brought people inside Europe closer to each other. However, recently, there have been some major cracks even within this construction. Border controls have been reinstated in several EU countries due to fears of terror and an increased number of asylum seekers. When some colleagues used to tell me that the national borders in the Schengen zone were a thing of the past, that these borders don't exist anymore, I always doubted it, exactly because of what happened last summer, because the internal freedom came with the price of growing external border controls – something that could not be sustained with the growing global refugee crisis. It was lovely that you could travel freely from one country to the other, but the problem is that in the meantime the external EU

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borders have turned into “fortress Europe”. The open border that existed for those lucky few who were on the inside didn’t exist for those who wanted to enter from the outside. Not to mention the mental borders that still remain between those we see as belonging to our European culture and those we don’t.

I am not saying that Schengen is a flawed construction per se. For example, if the UK was part of Schengen, what is happening in Calais would not have happened, because people could then freely move to Britain once they had managed to enter Europe. But the Dublin agreement has made things “ugly” by forcing countries on the peripheries to carry an unequal share of the burden associated with refugees. The states at the frontlines, such as Greece or Spain, had to carry the brunt of the borders between Schengen and the outside world. There could have been a Schengen agreement without fortress

Europe, with much more permeable borders for Europe as a whole. Schengen’s origins – rooted in *realpolitik* – should not be viewed as deterministic. There is no reason why this should preclude the construction of an open and inclusive Europe.

We need to maintain our openness and encourage convivial pluralist societies with permeable borders. Ethnocratic mindsets, fences, or fortresses, should have no place in the EU of the future. It is unacceptable that in everyday “borderings” ordinary people have to play the role of border guards, and many of us are also constantly seen as suspected illegal (or at least illegitimate) border crossers. This has to be made clear to the citizens of Europe, rather than giving in to the new “common sense” normalising the destructive populist agendas which currently gain growing legitimacy. ■



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This text is an edited compilation of Professor Nira Yuval-Davis’ answers to questions by the Green European Journal
