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Boundaries: Transience and intercultural dynamics.

Volition of new boundaries, absence of old boundaries?

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ABSTRACT

Can we talk of an absence of old boundaries and, at the same time, of a volition for new boundaries? Or is it still the same space, that is, a shared boundary where our similarity is their difference? In this article, the author proposes the boundary as a metaphor to examine its porosity and resistance in a world of increasing mobilities, circulations and flows. This boundary viewed as metaphor continues to exert a desire to distance oneself from others, a distancing that has not gone away in spite of the fact that today's world is commonly described as a world without boundaries. Nevertheless, mobility and transience impose a need to reinterpret that articulation of the volition of boundaries and their absence, a need to consider interdependence once again, and the way in which we categorise the inside/outside, or the centre and the periphery.

Key words: Interculturality, boundaries, ethnocentrism, ethnicity, cultural plurality, globalisation, transnationalism

The discourse on cultural diversity, as a "search for plurality, not in spite of our differences and divergences, but thanks to them" (Jahanbegloo, 2007), contains certain paradoxes. We have to admit that in social practice and individual experience, the intercultural, rather than openness and pluralism, often tends to lead to greater segregation, differentiation and essentialisation. This dynamic needs to be analysed through

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several disciplines in order for us to go beyond the description and to see what occurs between, on and with the people who are involved in these intercultural relations. In order to achieve greater proximity and to study the reasons why boundaries are decided and walls are built so as to identify ourselves with one group and to categorise others, I propose that we view the boundary as a metaphor, as a starting point. Can we speak of an absence of old borders and, at the same time, a desire for new borders? Or is it still the same space: a shared *border*, where *our* similarity is *their* difference? That *border* is not an accumulation or a synthesis of several components, but a space of tension: identity hopes shared with those inside, conflictive differentiation categories for those outside. "The diversity that concerns us is, rather than being a question of cultures, one of identities" (Appiah, 2005). It is the (sometimes perverse) game of identification and categorisation – we are what they are not – and which, in turn, produces disagreements and *boundaries* between what is included and what is excluded: a protection of an "inside" which constructs and organises differences in order to distance an "outside". Negating the dimension of antagonism does not make the tension disappear, it merely makes us incapable of recognising it, locating it and dealing with it. "One of the main tasks is to come up with ways of reducing the tendency toward exclusion that exists in all constructions of collective identity" (Mouffe, 2007).

It is also this space where, rather than come to terms with the difference, we highlight it, measure it out and use it … because we need to categorise the unknown in order to be sure that the extraneous does not worry us or threaten us; we need categories; we cannot live without them, even though we could flee from their tyranny – that is to say, not take it for granted that there can be no new ways of interpreting or categorising. It is in this context that I am suggesting the border as a metaphor, so that we can question its porosity and its strength in a world of all kinds of mobilities, circulations and flows that contradict the rigidity of territorial boundaries.

VOLITION OF BOUNDARIES

During the course of history, and in very different ways, one can find a continuing desire to create boundaries, to establish a distance between "us" and "them", and very often using violence through the hierarchised ethnocentricity that was adopted by imperialism and a devastating colonialism. In the opinion of the Indian philosopher Ashis Nandy, it represents the "great lie of history concerning the nature of the West and the nature of the Others, about Us and Them and the relation of everything with that nature" (Nandy and Wyn Davies, 1993)". Proof of this ethnocentricity lies in the

hierarchisation of the different races, portrayed in the Psaltermap from the 13th century. It shows how the centre of the universe is the triangle made up of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome, and how, going further away from the centre, there are fewer and fewer civilizational references. At the edge of these empty spaces we find a series of 14 naked figures, others of people without heads but with eyes and mouths on their torsos; all of them in the limbo of human existence. It these little monsters on Psalter's map, these hybrid races, which have become known in history as the "Plinian races" (*Historia Naturalis*, Pliny the Elder).

From that point on it is taken for granted that there have been two pillars of Western civilization, classicism and Christianity, which both had a triumphalist self-image. Each of them invented *otherness* to define themselves and to justify a process of maintaining boundaries generated by points of comparison; those points where variety turns to the "Other", and not "Us". It is a story of correlation: the uncivilised, the wild, either a slave or a child, justifies the existence of a "natural" owner and master, who innately represents a superior way of living. This process does not only define the Other but also the European "Us".

Added to this basic idea was the idea of progress: a new meaning for history as the progress of civilisation, in which Europe, from its earliest days to the present, can consider itself as the culmination of all civilisations. The Others were static, they remained at the same historical point where Europe had been, while Europe had progressed, spiritually, intellectually and physically. The process of generating Otherness had taken a new direction, and would become a global project. "The West's present has been rewritten as the future of the Others" (Nandy and Wyn Davies, 1993). And more to the point, the West knew the future of the "rest of the world" better than the "rest of the world" did itself.

Many people view globalisation as the new imperialism, and the global processes as processes of cultural homogenisation, which in turn signifies a threat to local identity. Faced with the ambivalence of a chaotic world, Daryush Shayegan talks about "identity blackmail": on one hand, there are the wars between cultures and tense identity discourses, and on the other, "a kind of rainbow coalition, that is to say, the formation of a rosary of interconnectivity that has been completely reorganised, like a harlequin's costume" (Shayegan, 2001). An uncertainty exists over the local's role in the global sphere; there is talk of openness and shielding, of cultural diversity, on one hand, and of identity reaffirmation on the other. Areas of cultural emptiness or cultural perversion exist, where it is difficult to situate oneself in relation to the *boundary* between the centre and the periphery, between local and global.

Are we the new culturally colonised peoples? Given this uncertainty, at another historic moment (Martinica, 1950), Aimé Césaire (2006) tell us: "I will not bury myself in a narrow particularism. Though neither do I want to lose myself in a stark universalism.

There are two ways of losing yourself: through a walled segregation into the particular, or through dilution into the "universal". My conception of the universal is that of a universal repository of everything particular, a repository of all the particulars, a deepening and coexistence of all the particulars".

Half a century later, we are still talking about the same thing. And the criticism that authors such as Césaire, Glissant and others have received at different times is still valid; that is, their failure to include a political dimension in their demands and their re-channelling of the tension of the social towards less conflictive areas such as art, literature and music.

ABSENCE OF BOUNDARIES

Global processes proclaim a world without borders, or a world of permeable borders, without taking into account the collective distinctions of social groups, the phenomena of contact, friction and cultural displacement. "What globalisation brings into play is not a greater circulation of products, but a deep-seated reorganisation of relations between cultures and countries through – among other processes – a de-territorialisation that hybridises cultures. We can speak about the fragmentation that dislocates and disorientates, the flow that compresses and globalises and the connection that dematerialises" (Martin-Barbero, 1987). Within this context, a re-drafting is carried out of new boundaries and new identifications, which cannot be comprehended in themselves, but in relation to the others. Furthermore, new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are reinvented, mechanisms that are so important for protecting and shielding identities in this moment of fluidity and circulation. Speaking about a global society means referring to a totality that interpenetrates the different existing social and cultural formations. "It possesses its own logic. Its intelligibility does not result from the interaction between the parts of which is comprised; on the contrary, the question is: how does this totality reorganise its elements?" (Ortiz, 1998).

In order to understand the new contents and new characteristics that globalisation has granted to the cultural processes, I propose two ideas, two interpretations relating to the concept of boundary and its possible absence or presence, so as not to leave it solely in a metaphorical dimension, but rather in contact with reality. In 1969, Frederik Barth spoke of boundaries in relation to ethnic groups and situated ethnicity as the social organisation of difference. In his opinion, the juxtaposition of ethnicity with the discourse on the concept of culture represents trying to elucidate one problem by another. Furthermore, "thinking about ethnicity and only thinking about one group and

its culture is like trying to clap with one hand" (Barth, 1969). Milton Santos (1990) speaks of boundaries as rough-textured areas; or rather, as "forms that are maintained even when the conditions that brought about their creation have disappeared, and the contents assigned to them are transforming". We could say that their disappearance is unlikely, though they could take on new roles in new realities. Also, new forms could be created as an emergency for new categorisations.

Words are insufficient to describe what is happening, and to enable the cultural to go beyond the descriptive, by entering into this dimension where questions are formulated and where problems demand solutions. How can we talk about all the things that are not covered by the existing not-very-flexible structures and categories? Some authors are calling for a reinterpretation that will deal with the crisis of the cultural and the social. For example, according to Zygmunt Bauman (2005), the concept of culture is "too old-fashioned for analysis, and should be replaced by notions of transitoriness and mobility". John Urry (2000) even speaks of how "the transformations and particularly the different mobilities are reconstructing the 'social as society' into the 'social as mobility'".

Ulrich Beck (2005) situates the reflection in a present that is cosmopolitan and requires a cosmopolitan view to observe the increase of interdependence. "People cling on to a hypothetical strategic essentialism of ethnicity itself to establish boundaries, which are constantly erased and intermixed, between inside and outside, us and them. Without a cosmopolitan view, one cannot understand at all the new landscapes of identity and memory, either". In a present in which identities transcend territorial borders, the centre and the periphery lose their categorisation value, given that what is near moves farther away, while what is in the distance comes closer: "they" are no longer distant beings from silent peripheries, but instead form part of our society, and with voices of their own. To redefine the community "beyond society, we must speak of a de-territorialised, dispersed community that is not limited by space or time" (Delanty, 2003). Can we speak of new forms of community in the sense of new forms of connectivity through the cultural/social; new forms of community that are created from a mixture of the local and the global?

We need a vocabulary that is sensitive to the effects of interdependence, to make visible the complexity produced by mobility and "new ways of thinking and organising reality that are not seduced by architectures, and which later turn out to be uninhabitable, but which at the same time do not relinquish the idea of synthesising and organising the diverse" (Innerarity, 2006). Interconnection is still the key word, and it is required to understand the new spaces: "Today we find ourselves in a process of hybridisations, de-territorialisations, disorientations and reorganisation to the extent that any attempt at carry out defining, delimiting work runs the risk of excluding what are perhaps the most important and newest aspects of the social experiences that we are living through" (Martin-Barbero, 1987). How can we renew theoretical, conceptual discourses, bearing

in mind the new mobilities and global movements that have brought with them new types of diversity and complexity?

Can we include new kinds of cultural juxtapositions, encounters, exchanges and mixtures in the existing structures? The movements force us to rethink the meaning and value of identity and cultural diversity, so that "trans-cultural developments present new important challenges to the established national mechanisms" (Robins, 2006).

We have praised multiculturalism, we speak of interculturality and once again we situate the transcultural by culturalising other problems and concealing other uncertainties. But at present, orphans exist of an "us" that provided security in other times. New transnational "us-es" are emerging, the excluded ones of this single, shielded, monolithic "us". Crossroads are emerging where strategies are being born, solidarities dying and mentalities changing. Why? Because it is people and not cultures that interact – people, with their memories, their fears and their hopes. "And cultures emigrate through people (...) No censorship exists that can stop them conversing and interacting beyond borders" (Affaya, 2004). However, these people carry with them cultural baggage which sometimes does not fit very well into the existing structures of the societies that receive them. We need to rethink the cultural and its relationship with experiences and practices. Does the practice reflect the culture? Or instead, is the culture the result of practical actions? And do these practices support a particular way of "being" in the world, which in turn perhaps needs to create new orders, just to maintain and strengthen the old ones?

Talking about intercultural dynamics means talking about identifications and differentiations as processes with multiple effects that go way beyond one single idealised identity, or one single stereotyped difference. "Hybrids, that's what we are. Our vehicle is the notion of translation or network. More flexible than the notion of system, more historical than that of structure, more empirical than that of complexity, the network is the Ariadne's thread of mixed histories" (Latour, 2007). For some, boundaries become invisible, for others they continue to exist, move or become stronger. In some way, boundaries persist, while often the reasons why they were created have disappeared; they form part of the constructions of a cultural homogeneity, of collective memories and amnesia; a protected "inside" that reinforces a sense of belonging against an "outside" behind boundaries that have become porous through new challenges of the circulation, communication and interaction of people, and of their cultures.

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