Europe's Shifting Borders: Rhetoric and Reality

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The rise of the bounded state as a political unit necessitated a concern with the drawing and redrawing of political borders and the formalisation of territorial arrangements. Events such as the Congresses of Vienna and Berlin in the 19th century represented attempts by political leaders of the world's major powers and their representatives to apportion territory to states and to (re)draw the borders between them (Blacksell, 2006). The interest of the 'great powers' in this was hardly neutral. Rather they considered larger strategic interests. In the words of Lord Curzon, British viceroy in India at the start of the 20th century:

> "Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia – to many these words breathe only a sense of utter remoteness, or a memory of strange vicissitudes and of moribund romance. To me I confess they are pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the domination of the world"
> (cited in Kleveman 2003, p3).

Subsequently Curzon, by then British Foreign Secretary, was involved in the post-World War 1 repartitioning of Europe at the conference of Versailles. At that same conference US geographer Isaiah Bowman, as part of the US delegation, was similarly instrumental in the reconfiguring of Europe's internal borders (Smith, 2003). While considerations of physical features (such as rivers and mountain ranges as 'natural' frontiers) and cultural characteristics of populations entered into such decisions, these major conferences can primarily be read as responses to the geo-strategic considerations of the larger powers.

Traditionally political geographers have had an interest in borders. In the past much of this did not extend far beyond classifying borders as natural or artificial. This classification in itself is of course flawed and misleading in that borders are social and political constructs. The decision to make the Rio

Grande a political boundary between the USA and Mexico was the result of human decisions, interactions and conflicts. This academic study of borders, like the geopolitical reasoning of politicians, tended to be detached from the lives of people 'on the ground'. Generally those whose lives were most directly effected by the emergence, disappearance or shifting of borders often had little if any voice within the process of demarcation. Regardless of whether borders are based on physical, ethno-cultural or strategic criteria they are not just lines on a map, they are social and discursive constructs which reflect political strategies and ideologies. They can have important implications for people's lives and, for some, borders, their existence, their location and their accompanying political paraphernalia can have serious ramifications, both materially and psychologically. One such illustration of the personal consequences of the imposition of 'hard' borders (in this case the Cold War divide between East and West Germany) is provided by Oliver August.

> "My father had been fourteen when the war ended and the Allies drew a line across his father's tree nursery. The main house was in the Soviet zone while some of the fields were in the British zone. The border literally divided the property. Aged seventeen, my father hid a suitcase on a horse-drawn cart and drove west across the border on family property, leaving his parents behind. In the following forty years he was allowed to return only twice – for a maximum of three hours each time – for their funerals"
> (1999, p3).

While not all borders have such serious personal consequences they do nevertheless commonly cut through towns, farms, even individual houses. While their socially constructed nature may be obvious, it is equally apparent that they have come to assume a huge significance for people, particularly those who live in border zones. Borders are contested and they give rise to radically different narratives. For some the border is welcome and acts as a barrier separating residents from the 'other' beyond the boundary. For others they are 'scars' on the landscape and act as barriers through which people endeavour to break through. For some they are there to protect against external threat while for others they are impediments locking them out of

certain spaces. Beyond the immediate material circumstances of individuals, they contribute to the formation, solidification or fracturing of place-based identities.

The significance of these barriers may continue long after their material manifestations have disappeared. Though the Berlin Wall has fallen and Germany has been a unified country for many years, 'east' and 'west' Germans continue to distinguish themselves from each other. Cultural prejudices are quite deeply embedded and stereotypical views of the 'other' mean that *Wessis* (west Germans) are commonly caricatured as arrogant while *Ossis* (east Germans) are portrayed as lazy. Once they come into being borders may become deeply entrenched, psychologically as well as physically. The fall of communism has not necessarily eliminated border mentalities (Meinhof, 2002)

It is commonly asserted that we live in a globalising world where bounded spaces are being replaced by spaces of flows as capital, labour, information, ideas run freely around the world. This gravitation towards a 'global village' is seen to be driven by, amongst other things, the collapse of political ideologies, the rise of neo-liberal socio-economic systems and the increasing erosion of cultural differences. These various processes are facilitated by the growth of modern communications technologies, most notably the internet, and cheaper and more accessible modes of long distance transport. This leads to assertions of the end of Geography, the irrelevance of place and the demise of the nation-state as a meaningful political construct. Hence, it is suggested borders are increasingly porous and anachronistic. However, this interpretation seems somewhat off the mark. It might be equally valid to see the present era characterised by the proliferation and maintenance of borders impeding the movement of some groups. The collapse of the Berlin wall and fall of the iron curtain, the expansion of the 'borderless' EU and more 'local' events such as the Northern Irish peace process (and the removal of much of the military infrastructure associated with the Irish border) implies a lessening of the significance of boundaries. This however, is to ignore a series of processes which have precisely the reverse effect.

The break-up of the Soviet Union and collapse of communism heralded a drive for ethno-national separation as groups sought to lay claim to their own territories and political spaces. In turn this has given rise to claims for yet more ethno-national separation. Parts of Russia, most notably Chechnya, wish to secede but even in comparatively small states such as Georgia, separatist movements have arisen claiming independence for Abkhazia and Adzharia. The collapse of communism, rather than hastening the demise of the state, has in fact resulted in the creation of many more. Far from the removal of borders there has been a hasty rush to erect yet more. Nowhere has this been more noticeable (and costly) than in the former Yugoslavia where ethnic cleansing resulted from attempts to 'purify' space. The violent conflicts which erupted in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo centred on groups trying to eradicate other ethnic groups from 'their' territory. This strategy was built on an essentialist version of defining ethno-national identity and, quite literally, clearing the territory of those possessing a different identity. In order to try to end violent conflict within Bosnia-Herzegovina, negotiators constructed maps on which territory was designated 'Serb' 'Muslim' 'Croatian' etc. with lines dividing towns and cities into different zones. The Dayton Agreement of 1995 divided Bosnia-Herzegovina into two autonomous units; a Muslim-Croat Federation and a Bosnian Serb Republic (Republika Srpska). This internal division, while in some respects an attempt to resolve ethno-national tension, can also be interpreted as essentialising identities and (unintentionally) legitimating and reinforcing the territorial, ethnic and political divisions it was designed to resolve (Campbell, 1999, Storey, 2002).

The European Union (EU) and its continued expansion has further contributed to arguments suggesting the state has had its day and to assertions of the arrival of a 'borderless world'. The scaling down of internal checks at EU borders and the rhetoric of free movement of labour has obscured some issues. Firstly, internal divisions still exist. The imposition by some western European member states of restrictions on the social welfare rights of immigrants from recent accession states in eastern Europe, reflects a sort of internal hierarchy with some migrants more welcome than others. Secondly,

while the EU's internal borders may be of less significance (though far from irrelevant) the outer perimeter is becoming ever more impermeable (at least for some). For some time there has been much debate within the EU aimed at refining a common immigration policy. Immigrants from some countries are clearly more welcome than others. Debates over who Europe should allow in are thrown into stark relief by the sight of the bodies of African migrants washed ashore on the tourist beaches of the Canaries and mainland Spain. That people are willing to take such risks in the first place reminds us of the huge gulf between rich and poor and of Europe's relative affluence. Intriguingly Europe's borders extend into north Africa. Ceuta and Melilla are Spanish exclaves in Morocco and border fences now surround these zones designed to keep Africans out of 'Fortress Europe'. Elsewhere, the EU border has simply shifted eastwards with Poland's eastern border with Ukraine and Belarus now the 'front line' rather than its western border with Germany. The fall of the Berlin Wall has not put an end to these divisions. Far from it; instead ever higher barriers continue to appear (Klein 2002).

Beyond Europe, under the guise of security, Israel constructs a wall to keep Palestinians in place, Morocco builds one in Western Sahara, while walls appear in Tijuana, Nogales, El Paso and other cities along the US-Mexican border designed to contain northward migration. In this latter case as well as US border patrols vigilante-type organisations like the Minuteman Project monitor the border for illegal immigration. In the early 21st century we live in a world which "simultaneously presents the younger generation with doors wide open to the world via cable TV, and with doors shut tight to impede illegal migration" (Ugarteche, 2000, p1).

Borders are unequally permeable; some can cross relatively easily, for others it is much more difficult. Some can cross with relative freedom while others meet with interrogation, suspicion and hostility. Who you are and what you are remain important. A US or European citizen moves from San Diego to Tijuana with relative ease but for Mexicans going the other way, the story is rather different. Generally we think of our own right to move freely across national frontiers but we may be less well disposed towards others having a similar

right. If you are an EU passport holder the chances are you pass relatively quickly through immigration channels in most countries. If you are not then you are more likely to find yourself queuing and being interrogated as to your reasons for travel, length of stay etc. While tourists and jet setting business people are generally seen as 'good' travellers' those seeking political asylum or fleeing oppressive circumstances (or those simply trying to better themselves) are viewed in a much more suspicious way. Attitudes towards mobility are highly contingent on who is doing the moving. As Hayter suggests "migration for economic betterment, rather than being considered … a sign of enterprise and courage, is now regarded as criminal and shameful" (2000, p64), though we might add that Europeans and North Americans bettering themselves appears quite acceptable but people from Africa and Asia endeavouring to do so is another matter. During the colonial period European settlers tended to act as though they had an automatic right not only to reside in faraway places, but also to control them. Essentially European colonisers were economic migrants. Current TV programmes promote the idea of people retiring to Spain and buying property in north Africa or eastern Europe. This is presented in a generally unproblematic way. However, the idea that people in Romania or Tunisia might make their way here tends to be viewed somewhat differently. Those in richer countries have traditionally viewed their own migratory movements as a natural right while simultaneously restricting the movement of those from poorer areas. We continue to live in a highly unequal world characterized by Bauman as one of tourists and vagabonds where "the tourists travel because *they want to*; the vagabonds because *they have no other bearable choice*" (1998, p94).

The demonisation of those who cross 'our' borders reveals itself in many ways. Much is made of the Polish plumbers occupying a particular occupational niche in London and elsewhere but we hear much less about the expatriate business people from western European countries working in Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava and Bucharest as eastern European economies are 'opened up' for external investment. It seems that Ryanair and Easyjet can take 'us' there but 'them' coming 'here' is a different matter, as though borders should somehow be one-way. Meanwhile ludicrous newspaper headlines bemoan the manner in which 'foreign' languages are spoken in

Britain and Ireland and an entire way of life is alleged to be under threat. Apart from the racist, xenophobic and inaccurate nature of such claims, they also make the mistake of assuming a fixed and essential identity in the first place. Sadly, Ireland despite its emigrant history, seems happy to join in the clamour to make it more difficult for migrants (Crowley *et al*, 2006). History is ignored as we become the border guards rather than those trying to creep through, as we 'protect' ourselves from what we once were.

Borders have always been associated with ideas of security and defence and in contemporary political discourses we see issues of mobility and migration conflated with ideas of terrorism, criminality and security. Some of the discourses about refugees and asylum-seekers either explicitly or implicitly conflate a range of issues and associate migration with criminality and the war on terror. This was exemplified by some newspaper coverage in the aftermath of the July 2005 London bombings. In a crude way, a very diverse range of people from a wide variety of different places are collectively labelled a threat and are viewed with deep suspicion. Such perspectives demonise asylum-seekers and effectively criminalise those seeking refuge. Security paraphernalia, stricter legislation, overt attempts at restriction and policing of migration reflect an ever more hostile environment for those seeking to cross borders. Politicians speak of the need to secure state borders in a way which implies that migrants present some major threat. While on the one hand public sympathy is garnered for those whose lives have been badly affected through political turmoil, such sympathy seems to evaporate when those people turn up 'here'. While many may evince a humanitarian concern for those seen to be poor and living in impoverished circumstances, there appears to be a strong sense that such people should remain in 'their place' rather than coming 'here'.

Even when international borders are successfully crossed, more micro-scale fences appear. The disaffected youth of the *banlieues* of Paris (many of immigrant origin) are both physically separate and socially distant from the heart of the city cut-off by a ring road (the *périphérique*) from the centre and isolated from each other (Morley, 2000). For them, as for those trying to cross

international frontiers the world is far from borderless but rather "has nothing but borders that cannot be crossed" (Ugarteche, 2000, p5). Although Europe may wish to see itself as a borderless entity, both here and elsewhere borders continue to divide. Those who have the means and the power to do so erect fences to exclude the undesirable from their space. As Homi Bhabha memorably put it:

> "The globe shrinks for those who own it, (but) for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers"
> (cited in Gregory, 2004, 257-258).

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