

Le passage des frontières: Impulses, Overtures . . . (A Postscript)

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'Borders and margins certainly do not seem peaceful, stagnant areas but, quite the opposite, places where 'difference is at work' (to borrow Heidegger's phrase) in a particularly intense and often dramatic way.'

Malgorzata Kowalska – *La Nouvelle Europe et les confins de la modernité*

This issue asks questions about the future of today's borders in a period of globalization and the end of bipolarization. In this new situation we are witnessing the unprecedented formation of huge regional and subregional groupings on an intercontinental scale. This allows us to glimpse the sketch plan for building a multipolar world, to compete with a world dominated by American power, against which continents and subcontinents are starting to unite to reformulate new rules of exchange. They present themselves as surprise competitors for the human masses they represent, Central and South America, India, Asia, Africa . . . The borders that traditionally separated states according to dividing lines that were stable and clearly identifiable have suddenly started to become porous and act in accordance with a new and complex logic we need to redefine.

Europe, an excuse for thinking about borders

It is that unprecedented process of change in border regions that this issue explores, taking as a prime example the formation of the enlarged Europe at the gates of the former soviet empire to the east, the old Ottoman empire to the south-east and the old Roman empire to the south. That process unexpectedly brings to the fore the lines demarcating the old eastern and western empires whose limits wavered from Rome to Byzantium, not forgetting the empires that preceded them such as Alexander's, which extended to the edge of the Caucasus. The process is also causing violent ruptures, partitions, breaks in space and time that shatter the continuities established in another era, and is also tending to restore ancient ones.

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Indeed it is a reflection on transformations of the worldwide territorial space, and human beings' and systems' ability to adapt to those transformations, which are turning their existence upside down and often urging them to withdraw into the reassuring security of partition, to break away, rather than to emphasize cooperation, invention and the surmounting of previous divisions and limitations.

In this new political configuration that subjects old imperial and state powers to the bureaucratic authority of the European Union, the emerging political entity in this new concert of regional blocs in formation, what is in fact to be seen on its internal and external borders? How are the old lines of demarcation re-emerging, left over from those 20 centuries of history? Are they symbolic, confessional, linguistic, cultural, associated with civilizations, internal or external? What is being formed in the end? Is it an empire, a super-state? Is it a bureaucratic aggregate in the process of writing itself a constitution, to which democracies have unwisely delegated their sovereignty, dispossessing their citizens of their powers of control? They are increasingly finding out that everything is decided elsewhere, that the power of the people, hard won by European political history, is running away from them and being transferred to wider bodies that have the job of coming up with the structures for their new governance, a new world order being formed under their control. Inter-bloc power relations and the decisions that reflect them have direct effects at their borders, Europe's in particular, and transform them.

Bipolarization froze the border between the west and a transitional region known as the Eurasian or eastern margins, and set up a political barrier between the spaces that traditionally formed the European continent. That political barrier gradually turned with time and events into a cultural frontier because coexistence was imposed, the obligation to brothers in the shared socialist utopia. Since it ended we are witnessing the strong return of the east/west binary opposition to describe the space thus reopened for communication. We are also seeing various types of culturalist discourse emerging in the global media, which are tending to refashion the space for power and fill the vacuum left by the end of the bipolar order and grand narratives. Among them varieties of discourse emanating from the two 'big brothers', the USA and the former USSR, reach for notions of civilization and ethnic origin. In doing so they base themselves on a cultural anthropology that does not augur well: they are reintroducing a naturalist ethnic determinism that deals in 'stages' and/or cycles and is destructive because the reductive simplicity of its assumptions reassures those who are destabilized by the radical changes in their existence and are tending to fall into the indeterminate, then rapidly into ostracism, inter-ethnic tension or war to get out of the impasse. In addition, alongside the accompanying debates on the European constitution – Turkey's entry and the referendums that are supposed to get those two things approved by European public opinion – cultural difference is highlighted in the context of rethinking Europe, giving a geographical and cultural basis, indeed a homogeneity, to European identity that transcends the cultural and confessional diversity of the nations that make it up. In doing so its instigators are no longer being faithful to the idea of bringing together a political community hitherto defined by an allegiance to a common set of ground rules. They are opening the door to debates on Christian cultural identity as opposed to Muslim identity. Those who react violently to the issue of Turkey

attest to the credit recently accorded to styles of neo-conservative culturalist discourse, which are very widespread in the media, in opposition to those who put forward more open ideas of culture, which they are attempting to supplant.

But when saying is doing . . .

A number of the texts presented here felt, without prior consensus, that they needed to react to these kinds of discourse, and they demonstrate the concern bubbling up about this topic in the social sciences which deal with borders and about what is at stake in these radical changes of our era and world-space. That concern was to a great extent shared by an author – Jacques Derrida – who only recently passed away and whose work over the decade 1980–90 alone provided the subject for a conference in Cerisy-la-Salle in 1992, with the aim of retracing his questioning and that of the people who accompanied him in his quest. In the book that covers its main concerns, *Le Passage des frontières, autour du travail de Jacques Derrida*, we found some aspects ‘of two motifs whose richness and urgency seem to come to the fore. On the one hand, in their tradition as well as their quite unusual reactivation, in Europe and elsewhere, issues of nationality and nationalisms (state, nation, community, race), issues too of philosophical nationality, traditions of thought . . . idioms in general, linguistic hegemony, translation. On the other hand, those of crossing borders, divisions, barriers, not only between countries, nations, communities, but between cultural “fields” or “territories”, between the fields of invention, research and education’ (p. 15). What is a border, a limit, a line of demarcation, a sign of belonging? . . . What does it mean to cross over? . . . What allows or forbids that crossing? What gives or withholds the mark of belonging? In the text presented on that occasion, *Apories – mourir – s’attendre*, ‘at the limits of truth’ (pp. 308–9) three types of border limits are highlighted: those separating territories, states, languages and cultures (and the corresponding politico-anthropological disciplines), divisions between areas of discourse – philosophy, the anthropological sciences, even theology – which are presented as ontological or onto-theological territories, and thirdly the lines of separation, delimitation or opposition between conceptual divisions, ‘concepts or terms that of necessity overdetermine the first two types of terminality’ (p. 318).

To formalize these three types of limit Jacques Derrida suggests the following names, all three of which are ‘woven into the same plait’: a hierarchy of questioning is organized around ‘a problematic fence that assigns an area, a field to this questioning. All this is organized into an existence, a modality of being, whose identification is assumed by the unity of the space that in theory can be fenced around . . . From that problematic fencing we must distinguish another sort of limit, the border in its apparently strictest, most common sense. The border designates that spacing margin that separates, not naturally but artificially and conventionally, nometrically, two national, state, linguistic, cultural spaces. If we say that border is anthropological, this is a concession to the dominant dogma according to which humans alone have such borders, and not animals. To these two forms of limit . . . we should add conceptual demarcation; what would tend in all rigour to oppose two concepts or the concepts of two essences, and purify this distinguishing oppo-

sition of any contamination, any participatory division, any parasitism . . . ' (p. 324).

These three types of limit are most explicit in relation to the *existential* analysis of death as the experience of the 'borderline' compared with other possible interpretations of the phenomenon. Derrida suggests that between the stage of *passing away* . . . and *dying properly speaking*, there is another border that separates, orders and itself leads to a first problematical fence, an absolutely preliminary questioning. 'There are anthropological problems that take into account ethno-cultural differences affecting passing away . . . but there is no culture of death itself or dying properly speaking. Dying is neither totally natural (biological) nor totally cultural. The issue of limits that is articulated here is as much that of frontiers between cultures . . . as that of the limit between a universal (but non-natural) structure and a differential (non-natural but cultural) one' (p. 324).

A duty that must owe nothing, a duty without debt, an infinite promise

To illustrate his argument Jacques Derrida refers as well to issues of legal, ethical or political responsibility that also affect the different types of border. He asks questions about 'the problem of decision-making and responsibility as regards the border and its route, and the problem of undecidability: what is the meaning of that experience? Is it a question of transcending an aporia?' He proposes 'a sort of non-passive tolerance of aporia as a condition of responsibility and decision'. Aporia as an unending experience has to remain such if we want to think, to make or let some decision or responsibility event occur. 'The most indeterminate form of this dual and same duty is that a responsible decision should obey a duty that to be a duty must owe nothing . . . a duty without debt . . .'. Is it possible? 'So this formulation of paradox and impossibility refers to a figure that is similar to a structure of temporality, an instantaneous dissociation from the present, a *différance* in the present being with the self.' The few examples he gives are not political by chance. They do not incidentally deal with the issue of Europe and European borders, with the *politeia* and the state as European concepts. He rapidly touches on the seven aporia involving this decade's themes. Each goes through a transition that is both impossible and necessary, and two apparently heterogeneous borders. The border of the first type passes between contents (territories, languages, states . . .) between Europe and some non-Europe. The other type of frontier limit passes between one concept (that of duty) and another according to the bar of oppositional logic. And each time the decision has to do with the choice between the relationship to another that might be its other. The important issue is not crossing a given frontier . . . It is rather that of the dual concept of the frontier from which this aporia comes to define itself:

The duty to reply to European memory, to recall what is being promised in the name of Europe, to re-identify Europe, a duty without comparison with what is generally meant by the word . . . ; Europe is the unique link in the formation of the concept of duty and the origin, the possibility of infinite promise. This duty also dictates that Europe should be opened out . . . opened out to what is not, has never been and never will be Europe . . .

The other five comprise the duty to welcome and include the stranger, to criticize

(‘in-theory-and-practice’, tirelessly) both totalitarian dogmatism and the religion of capital, which is sneaking in its dogmatism in new disguises that we have to learn to identify . . . to cultivate the virtue of this criticism, of the critical idea, the critical tradition, to accept the European legacy, which is unique, of an idea of democracy, but also recognize that it remains to be thought and to come into its own. The same duty dictates ‘that difference should be respected . . . minority, singularity, but also the universality of formal law, the desire for translation, agreement and unanimity, the law of the majority, opposition to racism, nationalism and xenophobia’ (*L’autre cap*, pp. 75–6, quoted p. 315 of *Passage des frontières*).

I feel that text echoes Tetsuya Takahashi’s paper on the transformations of world-wide space and the place of Japan and Europe, entitled “‘Philosophie de l’histoire mondiale”. *Logique du nationalisme philosophique japonais*’ (pp. 105–10). ‘Europe is in the vanguard of present-day capitalism from which Japan is trying to distance itself by becoming more Asian.’ His paper incisively pinpoints the European process of regional integration by taking up a Japanese viewpoint. In doing so it stresses the distinction made by the philosopher Iwao Koyama between universal world history and particular world history, a distinction that the world situation forces upon him. Considering two remarkable events, ‘the pêle-mêle Europeanization of the world’ towards other regions of the world as a modern event, and the active denial of westernization of the whole world by Japan, he starts from a critique of world history’s Eurocentrism, from the consciousness that the western world, ‘seen as the world itself, was in fact merely one modern world’ among others and its order on the edge of decadence. The eastern world thus claims a full existence based on the realization of two fundamental errors: ‘the error of Eurocentrism is understanding the different Asian regions not as particularly independent worlds but as one and the same eastern world’ and not as worlds whose history is formed from interaction between various ethnic groups. The second error is imposing on those non-western worlds the single European model of historical development, which now looks like merely ‘a naïve dogmatism, because it turns a particular history of the European world into universal world history’.

Koyama points out that ‘economics, technology or science are capable of being grafted on to any places, separating off from the people and country where they were born, since they rest on general principles of need or intelligence. Without this possibility of being grafted civilization would forever be attached to its own roots and totally closed off to the other.’ Though he stresses the importance of spatiality, the geographical character and natural substrate of history, in the last analysis the subject of history remains the nation and its spiritual strength. Thus, says Koyama, Japan, in the first rank of anti-western powers, ‘is another direction, the direction of Asia, therefore the non-western world, the direction of the other. European-style capitalist modernization has conferred on it the position of leader in Asia, showing the exteriority of Asia compared with Europe.’ Marked by western hegemony, its denial will of necessity be to transcend modernity, to start postmodernity.

But in this he does not wish to replace Eurocentrism with Japanocentrism even though the temptation may seem great. For Koyama the new order to be attained must put each people and each nation back in its place. To do so each world should rediscover its historical tradition and its geographical specificities . . . an Asia that would be

Asia to itself and alongside it a 'genuinely European' Europe. Thus the author conjures up a theory of blocs: in this contemporary form 'a particular world' is a 'bloc'.

The ultimate aim of Koyama's philosophy seems to be to justify his idea of co-prosperity. This area of co-prosperity cannot be understood on the basis of modern notions of state or empire. The mode of sovereignty appropriate to the modern state is not able to form the basis for the particular world as a large space or sphere of co-prosperity. Establishing a particular world nowadays does not mean bringing independent states together in a system of alliances, or imposing from above forms of incorporation, but rather uniting under the auspices of a new moral principle depending on a community of geography and destiny. As the construction of a contemporary state cannot abandon this establishment of a particular world, it requires as a first necessity denial of the principles of the modern European state: for Japanese neo-nationalists the great east Asia's sphere of co-prosperity is already in existence under the de facto leadership of Japan. In order to distance himself from it, though he refers to an idea of racial community at the heart of the particular world, the author denies the racist determinism that aims to justify Europeans' cultural domination – as well as the cultural value of any race in particular, which he claims results from the confusion between the historical domain of culture and the biological domain of race. Koyama tends to privilege postmodern non-hierarchy and proposes the Japanese as its prime movers.

In certain respects this analysis chimes with the Indian historian Mushirul Hasan's ideas articulated during an interview for the journal *Transeuropéennes* entitled 'Pays divisés et villes séparées' (no. 19–20, 2002). In it the author criticizes in particular the notion frequently put forward of a 'homogeneous and monolithic Muslim community'. He expresses his mistrust of artificial constructions around an identity – in this case Muslim – which more often than not translates officially into institutional arrangements. Homogenization of such identity categories where India and Pakistan were concerned was accompanied by a relativist construction of history, which was fostered by the British authorities for administrative reasons requiring simplification. It seems to have emerged from the encounter between nationalist and communal groups fragmenting society and its complexities in accordance with arbitrary categories. Cultivating a particularist vision gives rise to division; in supposed unity there are excuses for partition.

Marxism with its logic of demarcation also laid down borders; opposition to Marxism in turn created others. Today doing away with borders, putting an end to the great narratives, is allowing others to emerge that are more deeply buried: and so these latter are reintroducing people to thinking about politics as changing the questions on public space with a view to possible common action. And this is happening from the divisions they manifest and which carry within them the urge to redefine questions and issues. This configuration could open out on to another way of experiencing time, and another story that displaces history. It could enable us to discover another direction for our thinking, for thinking the impossible and the unthinkable.

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