



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Borders and Peripheries: from Offa's Dyke to Fortress Europe

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Reconnoitring the east: over dykes and through curtains ¹

I grew up in the “border country” of South-East Wales, nostalgically narrated by Raymond Williams in his eponymous novel. All the place names in the eastern valley of Monmouthshire were Welsh, but no one spoke this language in my childhood. Idris Jones, my foreign languages teacher at secondary school, was a native speaker of Welsh from further west. I owe my grasp of German grammar to him, and some Italian as well, but the Welsh language was not even on the curriculum in the 1960s. Our headmaster was a chemist, an Oxford graduate, certain that Welsh was a dying language, so why study it? We were taught quite a lot of Welsh history, but we had no illusions that power and prestige were on the other side of the ancient boundary of Offa's Dyke, some twenty-five miles east. In due course I crossed the new suspension bridge over the River Severn, which linked us to the higher civilization more intimately, and went off to Oxford myself. But I never ceased supporting Wales in the only sporting competition that really mattered – the annual rugby international against England.

Later I moved further east to the fens of Cambridge and developed an anthropological research project in eastern Europe. Europe in those days was divided by an “iron curtain”. The politics of the Cold War, even the mild version of the 1970s, shaped my experiences strongly. Yet a great deal about Budapest, from secessionist architecture to the quality of the coffee, left me feeling a bit guilty that I was not suffering the deprivations which an anthropologist is conventionally supposed to endure during his fieldwork. Gradually I learned from Hungarian historians such as Jenő Szűcs (but also Iván Berend and György Ránki) that Hungary was not really eastern at all. Rather, it lay at the heart of East-Central Europe, a unique historical region. The characteristics of this region and its geographical boundaries in different periods remain contentious among scholars. For the wider public, concepts of Central Europe seem to have lost the vogue they had a generation ago. These changing fashions should lead us to question what we mean by Europe in the first place and the manner in which it has been constructed as

a “continent”, the equivalent not of China or India (which would be more appropriate in terms of territory or population) but of the whole of Asia.

My next fieldwork project took me to Poland, where I lived for almost a year in a village very close to a different kind of west-east boundary, one that is well known to students of Polish ethnography but unknown to the rest of the world. According to Roman Reinfuss, in the section of the Carpathians which belonged historically to the Polish state, the highlanders he classified as Łemkowie could be demarcated from their eastern neighbours, the Bojkowie. Reinfuss based his analysis on field research carried out in the pre-war years. The populations in question were deported in the course of the catastrophes of the 1940s, so it was hard for me to verify the ethnographer’s assertion of a clear border in the valley of the Oślawa. But in the village of Wisłok Wielki, very close to that alleged border, in the late 1970s I spoke with individuals who had returned to their native community after deportation. They said that they had not known the term Łemko in their childhood, and that they had always considered themselves to be Ukrainians. Some preferred to stress a religious identity: Greek Catholic as opposed to Roman Catholic. No one could make any sense of a Łemko-Bojko west-east boundary. I eventually concluded that this boundary was fictional, an exemplary case of creative identity construction, aided and abetted by Polish ethnographers (though group construction was also shaped by other agents and diaspora experiences in North America). This fiction, which required an eastern boundary to establish the territorial community, has had some very real consequences. Over the generations, many persons and families have come to take pride in a collective identity as Łemko. The Polish state currently recognizes them as an ethnic minority (*mniejszość etniczna*) which is distinct from the Ukrainian national minority (*mniejszość narodowa*).

West is best: contested theories and shifting boundaries

At the very same time that I struggled to understand the boundaries represented by Carpathian rivers, I was confronted with quite different east-west binaries in the seminar rooms of Cambridge University. My teacher and friend Alan Macfarlane developed his theories of English individualism using an ideal type of a collectivist eastern European peasantry as a foil. According to his argument, the origins of the industrial revolution and British imperial power lay in distinctive structures in the domestic domain and the common law tradition of the Middle Ages. Some distinguished colleagues found Macfarlane’s work suspiciously Anglo-centric. Jack Goody did not consider England to be particularly remarkable in a European context and went on to argue that the modern world emerged through “alternating leadership” between eastern and western Eurasia. By contrast, Ernest Gellner was sympathetic to theories of a “European miracle” rather than a peculiarly English one. He privileged nation-state formation along the Atlantic seaboard: France had to be included, but Germany and Italy were

latecomers, consigned to a different “time zone” of development.

Such binaries have a long history. Larry Wolff has demonstrated that west-east distinctions within Europe became more salient in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, subverting the north-south cleavage which had been more important for millennia. German intellectuals in this period were ready to concede that their western neighbours epitomised the civilization of Europe. In the course of the nineteenth century, however, they came to see themselves as equally European while continuing to assert a strong west-east boundary – think of Max Weber’s disparaging attitudes to the Poles, or his orientalising of Russia. Perceptions changed again in the wake of the First World War when the boundary between France and Germany was recast by influential French scholars such as Henri Massis, for whom the eastern neighbour which had wrought such destruction did not belong to the West. Following another World War Germany was itself divided and a new intra-European boundary was consolidated during almost half a century of the so-called Cold War. Oskar Halecki provided the professional historical apparatus to support Czesław Miłosz’s poetic exhortations not to forget the “other Europe”.

The west-east boundary has shifted again since the West won the Cold war. Following the expansion of NATO and the EU, it is far from stable today. The western Slavs have been definitively included. Indeed every significant western Christian population of the former Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia has been incorporated into the European Union. Institution-building has been accompanied by unprecedented measures to promote mobility within the EU, above all through the Schengen zone as it has functioned for the last two decades. But these measures to do away with internal boundaries between states require a strengthening of the external boundary. Hence the task of “Building Fortress Europe”, the title of Karolina Follis’s recent book. Hence, too, the renewed concern in more intangible dimensions with the “border of the West”. Can the new Western Europe or the Schengen boundary be given some sort of historical-ethnographical-civilizational legitimation?

The forts of Przemyśl and Fortress Europe

I do not think so. The current border between Poland and Ukraine derives from a line drawn on a map by a British aristocrat following the First World War. The River San was a convenient boundary marker for Stalin and Hitler when they divided Poland in 1939 but, just like the smaller Ośława to the south, it can hardly be taken as a marker of group difference. Of course, some voices continue to assert that in this border country only the Poles belong to the West, above all by virtue of their dogged devotion to Catholic Christianity for over a thousand years. Since Ukrainians, like Russians, practise a Christianity of the eastern (Byzantine) rite, they evidently belong to the East. A closer inspection reveals that things are not so clear cut. Since the end of the sixteenth century successive Church Unions have brought large numbers of

eastern Christians into communion with Rome. The Greek Catholics, as they were classified by the Empress Maria Theresa, later led the way in the emergence of Ukrainian nationalism. As any visitor to Lviv soon learns, the legacies of the national commitment of the Greek Catholic clergy remain strong today. Four centuries of acknowledging the Pope as the head of the universal Church, with a century and a half of Austrian rule along the way, were sufficient for Samuel Huntington to classify western Ukrainians with the West. His civilizational “fault line” is therefore not congruent with the Schengen boundary. It lies deep within Ukraine (though not as far east as Donbass).

Few social scientists today defend such theories. Anthropologists such as Fredrik Barth and historical sociologists such as Johann Arnason emphasize historical construction, contingency and porous boundaries. Neither ethno-national groups nor civilizations are closed entities. Consider the city of Przemyśl, which for centuries before the Second World War was home to three religious communities of roughly equal size: western Christian, eastern Christian and Jewish. In the middle of the nineteenth century, under the Emperor Franz-Joseph, it became the most heavily fortified town of Galicia. The slaughter which took place here in the early years of the First World War was as bad as anything elsewhere on the Eastern Front, before more powerful artillery consigned the forts of Przemyśl to history. Poles and Ukrainians fought for dominance in the wake of the war. After the victory of the Poles, it was the Jewish community which came under the more severe pressures in the 1930s. Then, during the Second World War and its aftermath, both Jews and Ukrainians were almost entirely eliminated – deported to the death camps in the case of the former, or resettled elsewhere (including the former German territories now assigned to Poland) in the case of the latter.

Eventually some Ukrainians returned to Przemyśl, often in very difficult circumstances, but the city remains overwhelmingly Polish. In the 1990s the Greek Catholic Ukrainians tried to regain the cathedral that was confiscated when their Church was suppressed in 1946. They were supported by the Pope himself. But they could not prevail against the strength of Polish nationalism in the city and had to be satisfied with the allocation of the former Jesuit Church instead. I am told that relations are more harmonious today, because the small numbers of Greek Catholics (and the even smaller Orthodox parish) are no longer considered to pose any threat. Moreover some of their rituals, not to mention their wooden churches and icons, help to attract tourists to the region. As Juraj Buzalka has shown, a limited new multi-culturalism is only possible nowadays because Przemyśl’s old, balanced multiculturalism has been destroyed. In its place there now exists a rather sharp west-east boundary, not just in the imagination but physically implemented through all the materialities, tedium and petty humiliations of the EU border crossing at Medyka, just ten miles away.

The elephant in the conference rooms

Przemyśl, with few of its forts remaining and few hotels, cannot compete in the tourist market with either Cracow or Lviv, where the Old Towns have been classified as UNESCO World Heritage. Cracow's urban landscape has been transformed since I lived there in 1978-9. I remember when the opening of a McDonalds on the famous Market Square caused a storm soon after the end of socialism. Nowadays pubs and fish and chips restaurants cater specifically to the British, who have swarmed to the city in recent years. Many make excursions to Auschwitz and to nearby locations made famous by *Schindler's List*. Klezmer music to entertain the visitors is mostly played by Poles but a Jewish community has been successfully revived, albeit on a small scale.

Chris Hann presenting his paper in Przemyśl, 2nd October 2015.

(Photo: Stanisław Stępień)

Lviv too has emerged surprisingly unscathed from decades of socialist neglect. Habsburg houses and cobble-stone roads are lovingly restored. The Jewish community was re-established after the war but declined after Gorbachev allowed emigration to Israel and the West. While Jewish life has little visibility nowadays, the Greek Catholic Church is flourishing after its emergence from the catacombs. The secular exuberance of the downtown tourist trade is modified by the visibility of military uniforms and by exhortations outside church buildings to pray for the nation in its on-going conflict with Russia. Many sons have fought for their nation in Donbass and some have made the supreme sacrifice. But many others go to great lengths to avoid conscription and the large numbers of co-ethnics who have moved to Lviv this year to escape the violence of the east are not unambiguously welcome. Not only do they take jobs – these immigrants have driven up the prices of real estate, making an apartment unaffordable for locals. I heard mixed views about possible EU accession: people are aware that an influx of capital from the West would have far more dramatic consequences for the fabric and social relations of their city than the present influx from Donbass.

In all three cities I had the feeling that other migrants constituted the elephant in the conference room. In Cracow only sociologist Thomas Faist (Bielefeld) explicitly addressed the theme of migration. He delivered a wide-ranging lecture in which he demonstrated the difficulties of distinguishing bona fide refugees from labour migrants, focused on the "social question", and suggested that more attention be paid to the interplay between processes of "culturalization" and class conflict. He raised the possibility of "new dangerous classes" emerging in Germany, people who are neither "wanted" for economic reasons nor "welcome" on humanitarian grounds, because their invocation of the new metanarrative of human rights is not trusted by large sections of the society. Nonetheless Angela Merkel had taken a brave stance this summer. Faist suggested that her coinage *Willkommenskultur* might follow the precedent of *Blitzkrieg* and become a robust German loanword in the English language. I

pointed to another borrowing from the German and suggested that, as the evidence of problems in the socio-cultural integration of immigrants continued to mount, not to mention sheer chaos in the bureaucratic processing of the new arrivals, political leaders in Greece and Hungary might feel a certain *Schadenfreude* towards the German Chancellor, who in different contexts has given their countries short shrift in recent months.

The migrant crisis in general, and German responsibility in particular, was a recurrent issue. The racist xenophobia of a taxi driver in Cracow reminded me of the worst excesses I heard earlier this summer in Hungary. Taxi drivers may not be very representative, but even moderate academics in Poland drew attention to what they considered to be an inconsistency on the part of Angela Merkel. After placing Germany on the moral high ground in August, how could she have the effrontery in September to insist on distributing migrants all across the EU according to quotas? Many took the view that “she does not know what she is doing”. Some were pleased that the Polish government had broken ranks with other members of the Visegrad Group (corresponding to East-Central Europe?) in agreeing to accept quota arrangements set by Brussels. Others said that this was hardly relevant, since the present government is about to lose office anyway. At least in these intellectual circles there was high awareness of the waves of emotion in Germany as it prepared to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the country’s reunification on October 3rd. Despite the relative success of the Polish economy in recent years, there is no comparable euphoria here, or anywhere else in EU border country.

Of course, many other voices can also be heard in the public sphere, including liberal tones from Church leaders, in line with the pleas of the Pope. Princeton history professor Jan Gross has published a commentary asserting that Poles should be ashamed of themselves for not showing more sympathy with suffering strangers. Provocatively, he placed these attitudes in the tradition of Polish anti-Semitism. This text was quickly translated for publication in *Die Welt*, a mass German daily, where it fed into old prejudices. Poles have learned to live with such inflammatory comparisons. Comments of this kind by western historians, when translated locally, tend to polarize the society by isolating a minority intellectual elite. When they appear in western media, such contributions reinforce old stereotypes of Eastern Europe as a benighted “other”, still lagging behind the West. In his public lecture in Lviv, titled “The Idea of Eastern Europe after the Cold War”, Larry Wolff drew attention to these problems, and to the continuing astonishing ignorance of the region in the USA, where the images of Hollywood and the fourth Harry Potter novel dwarf the impact of academic analyses.

Larry Wolff and Chris Hann in the old town of Lviv, 4 October 2015.

(Photo: Tomasz Zarycki)

Anthropologists, through fieldwork in places like Przemyśl, can contribute to breaking down such stereotypes. This city, like Lviv and Cracow on a larger scale, had a vibrant multicultural society in the past. These traditions were destroyed in the twentieth century. After socialism, the national narrative (which had never really gone away) was asserted even more vigorously. Is it realistic to expect such countries, one generation after socialism and one decade after joining the EU, to welcome strangers of whom they are totally lacking experience? The context is crucial. Many young people in Przemyśl and the rest of overwhelmingly rural South-east Poland (like those in Southern Hungary who I discussed in my last post) have very limited career opportunities unless they are ready to become mobile. In a sense, they are not welcome to stay in their own home region. They therefore migrate in large numbers to the country's more dynamic cities and many go abroad, especially to Britain. Until much more is done to improve the life-chances of populations living on the periphery of Fortress Europe, suspicion and rejection of centralized EU schemes such as migrant quotas is entirely predictable. These people are no more inherently xenophobic than other European peoples. But they feel powerless, above all vis-à-vis Germany. In these circumstances the present migrant crisis, whether or not we see it with Thomas Faist as a new variation of "doing class", is playing into the hands of conservative nationalists.

Conclusion

The Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology is located in Halle an der Saale. The river Saale used to mark the border country between Germans and Slavs, but of course it was just as easily crossed as the river San in Przemyśl or Offa's Dyke in my native border country. This does not mean that borders are not interesting, not worthy of study. On the contrary, the construction and maintenance of meaningful collective identities through borders is absolutely central to large swathes of social science. Construction is not the same as invention. The constructivist insight does not entail the neglect of "hard" material variables and persisting institutional differences. The analyst's job in explaining social change is to pinpoint particular constellations of social relations, technology and ecology, which can never be precisely replicated elsewhere. There are good reasons (not necessarily those put forward by Alan Macfarlane) to attribute a pioneering role to Britain, or perhaps to a British-Dutch nexus, in the emergence of the industrialized, globalized world we know today. The Polish-Ukrainian borderlands did not contribute significantly to this breakthrough.

I do not see any plausible grounds for making a causal argument concerning Europe or that even more nebulous category, *the West*. Europe is a macro-region of the Eurasian landmass which only acquired its conventional geographical definition in the eighteenth century. Its eastern boundary south of the Urals is just as fuzzy as the eastern boundary of Łemkowszczyzna. West-east distinctions became more important in the late eighteenth

century, but the crisis of the Eurozone is an indication that north-south boundaries might now be changing the optic again. As for “the West”, this is very obviously an ideological construction and the sooner we dispense with it the better. The example of the Greek Catholics shows that there never was a civilizational chasm in this border country. If eastern and western Christians could live together for centuries, not as parallel communities but readily marrying each other, then strong models of civilizational otherness are untenable.

That these issues are not just a matter for arcane academic debate became very obvious in Germany last year with the emergence of a populist movement called PEGIDA (“Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West”). Hungary’s Viktor Orbán has led the way in proclaiming that refugees from the Islamic world are a threat to national and European Christian identities. This stance (particularly bizarre in the case of Hungary, given the eastern origins of the Magyar people) appears to have succeeded in restoring his popularity levels and diverting attention from corruption scandals and other strains in an increasingly illiberal Hungarian society. In Poland the worry must be that the new government will be tempted to adopt similar strident rhetoric. But it is not a very intelligent reaction on the part of western politicians and academics to classify these societies as somehow less virtuous and enlightened, just because they lack any experience of a new kind of multiculturalism which continues to pose challenges in most western countries. These are uncertain times for western Eurasia. A new vision is needed, one that is rooted in the ancient commonalities and connectivity of the entire Eurasian landmass.

Notes

¹ This text was completed after attending two conferences in September-October 2015. The conference “European Narratives. Europe and the European Union in the 21st century as Political, Social and Cultural Constructions” was organized by the Institute of European Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. The conference “Where is the Border of the West?” was sponsored by New Direction – The Foundation for European Reform and took place “under the honorary auspices of Andrzej Duda, President of the Republic of Poland”. It began on 2nd October in Przemyśl, S-E Poland. On the following day we were driven across the border to nearby Lviv. The fencing at Medyka was intimidating but, whereas ordinary vehicles had to queue for some 4 hours to cross, our bus was whisked through thanks to a diplomatic prior arrangement. I thank all participants at both conferences for their stimulus and especially the main organizers: Dariusz Niedźwiedzki and Jacek Kołodziej (Cracow) and Zdzisław Krasnodębski and Aleksandra Zamarajewa (Przemyśl-Lviv).

