

From Borderlines to Borderlands: Neighborhoods in the Global Village

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In order to clear up the topic of "crossing cultural borders," it is necessary to examine the concept of "border" which, far from being simple or obvious, is complex and even contradictory.

A first paradox is that we cannot discuss ideas without using words. While general ideas aim to be universal, words are specific to languages. Every language has to deal with similar -if not identical- problems with the help of lexical units inherited from the past. For example, the English word *border* derives from Middle English *bordure*, which is borrowed from old French, itself a result of Latin *bordatura*. This fact explains that similar words can be observed in Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, a fairly important part of linguistic Europe. When French expressed the general idea of "edge" by *bord*, it was another word, a military term, which was used to express the separation between countries; *frontière* is derived from the noun *front* in its military use. Thence, in American English, the word *frontier* is used to express the limits between the occupied and the unoccupied part of the country. *Frontier* was used as a perfect synonym of *border*.

On the other hand, the same word, in the same language, is used to express two different ideas, clearly labeled in English by two compound words: *borderline*, which means a line to be crossed or not, and *borderland*, which means a space that people can live in.

To live by the side (or on the edge, or the margin) of another country, of another civilization, is a constraint. Any *borderline* can be closed, and History demonstrates the fact day by day. Crossing it, in a real or metaphorical way, can be impossible or dangerous, and is always difficult. On the contrary, the borders as lands or districts, also called *marches*, and the *Frontier* as a place of extension for an expanding culture, are places to live in, be it comfortably or not.

At a time when relationships between Human beings are worldwide, a new paradox arises between the two meanings of the word *border* and, I presume, of its equivalents in other languages. *Borderlines* remain; indeed, they become more and more numerous. For example, many new countries have appeared from the ruins of the former Soviet Empire or of Yugoslavia. New borders sometimes mean new wars.

Border districts such as the American Frontier have vanished; as the French writer Paul Valéry wrote, " the time of the finished world begins."

Every civilization, with its own features, is mainly defined by History and by Geography. History, the time dimension of cultures, is a continuum. The space dimension is, or can be, discontinuous: for example, some countries developed in islands and archipelagoes; others are limited inside continents, by mountains or rivers; many are bordered by artificial lines, some being entirely different from cultural border lines, for example in Africa, where these lines were defined from outside, by colonizing powers.

In any case, there are contradictions between history and geography, mainly where new countries and States were created at the expense of an ancient ethnic and cultural background, as was the case in America, in Africa, in Australia, much less in Asia and in Europe, where many countries are defined by old civilizations.

The historical factor prevails, but it operates in geographical settings. Not even islands are protected from cultural blending, which may or may not be influenced by ethnic blending. For example, Europe, a continental country, including several very specific cultural areas, such as Germany and France, can shelter several external civilizations (e.g. Turkish and Islamic African, in these two cases), but this is no less true for islands such as Great Britain, with its populations from the Caribbean, India and Islamic Pakistan. Many social phenomena derive from such situations, where external borders are supplemented by internal lines separating (a) historical, traditional cultures living side by side in the same country - sometimes, the language itself reflects the fact in its coinages: in British English, *the Borders* means the area between England and Scotland; (b) cultures from outside, with many blendings - what is called *métissage* in French - which are more often cultural than ethnic. Thus, a Turkish-German and a Southern Slavic-German culture, or at least a set of cultural references, is developing in Germany, and a specific new French-North African social system or set of references has appeared in France, with Algerians and French-born people often unable to speak fluent Arabic (as their parents did). These people are witnesses of an important social phenomenon, a variety of acculturation. Cultural sources are partly inherited and partly destroyed, while a target culture (French urban modern references, in this case) is partly acquired and partly modified. These people, mainly when they are young, use a specific way of talking French, which has developed along with Arabic, Berber, African, West Indian and Gypsy influences, but mainly with slang or cant and argot processes such as syllable reversal. They called themselves *beurs*, a word coined from *arabe* in reverse order, and this is a necessary new word for French dictionaries.

Besides linguistic novelty, such a process creates new cultural borders as well as

destroys old borderlines: what needs to be crossed in order to achieve intercomprehension is no longer the difference between clearly distinct ways of life, ways of thinking and religions. A new French subculture has developed, and new walls have been put up between French-born Algerians or Moroccans and the genuine culture of North Africa, as people experience every day when they cross the Mediterranean in order to visit members of their family.

This is but one of many historical cases when old borderlines break up and new ones are raised, as part of a geographical as well as social shift.

It would be dangerous to view the cross-cultural problems between major world civilizations without taking into consideration the old and new borders separating people *inside* these civilizations. Huge walls, such as the one that was intended to make China a fortress, do not solve the border question, a fact sadly proven by civil wars and revolutions.

Even in relatively quiet situations, it is impossible to overcome the differences between social groups - not only ethnic or geographical differences, but also social, religious and linguistic ones, among others. Such differences entail separation lines or barriers, which have to be crossed via a process similar to translation. Language can be a powerful image of cultural borderlines. Every human being thinks, communicates and expresses his or her thoughts thanks to a linguistic system, a language that is spoken and often written. Writing is an important part of culture, with large differences between ideographic and phonetic systems - as are the alphabetical writings. Such differences are not only technical, but also cultural. They build up two types of relationships between speaking and writing, two different ways of considering words and phrases, of learning language, of developing literary and poetic expression. Translating an Italian poet into English is partly impossible, but the two aspects of language are organized in the same ways; letters are signs for sounds, and the meaning appears when sounds or letters are combined. If the source of the English or French or Arabic translation is a poem written in *kanji*, the meaning itself is inside the writing, which is in some respects a drawing; such a sensible and intellectual device simply does not exist in alphabetical systems. The border between a Japanese *haiku* and its would-be "translation" in alphabetic writing is itself a barrier for any poetic equivalence.

What is clear about poetry can be experienced in many other cultural areas, when the sign systems in different cultures are structurally different; the case of food, cooking and drink is an excellent stage for the production and performance of the world-wide comedy (or tragedy?) of cultural appreciation and miscomprehension. In France, American *fast-food* is understood to be a weapon against good food, and the

English word fast-food used in French has been altered to "*néfaste* food," which means harmful (and ill-fated) food, or translated by *malbouffe*, bad eating. Noticing that this type of McDonald food is widespread all over the world, and no less in France than in other countries, it is the only case where an imported way of eating has such a negative appreciation. The numerous Chinese, Vietnamese or North African restaurants in French cities, the opening of Japanese and Indian restaurants and even American steakhouses in Paris do not bring about such reactions, and not only because they offer better food, as a whole.

If poetry is difficult or even almost impossible to translate - translation being one way of transforming a barrier or a fence into a gateway - anyone can notice that food has to be experienced without any translation. This is not entirely true, insofar as translation can be considered as an adaptation. A genuine Chinese restaurant can be fairly different in the United States, in Germany or in Japan, which means that interferences modify the original models. Differences between Chinese restaurants and cooking styles inside China are of another type, for example regional or social.

Meanwhile, there are some universal features in food preparation and cuisine, just as there are in music or in sport. Cultural differences come within the framework of universal human practices. One of the main questions about social and cultural borders is the representation of logical sets, from the individual entity to Humanity through larger and larger groups and more and more abstract sets.

In the above example, the food habits of any individual more or less reflect the habits of the social group. The borders between habits in a family group are usually limited to different ages or diets. Cultural food habits are more abstract; if they can be described more precisely, it is only from an external, comparative point of view. An expression like Chinese cooking, or French cooking has more meaning for a non-Chinese, non-French speaker, since Szechwan, Cantonese or Pekinese cooking styles have fairly distinctive features for a Chinese person. National or regional features are mixed up, and they interfere with influences from outside. In food behavior as well as in other cultural practices, borderlands do exist. In the so-called *gauchisto* country, South of Brazil, food habits are closer to Argentina than to Northern Brazil. In Alsace, many German-sounding food and drink references are used together with French methods; drinking beer and wine - mainly white wine - is as usual as in Western Germany.

In all aspects of human experience, the first boundary to be observed is ontological. It is the basis of philosophical concepts such as sameness and difference, identity and otherness. Every conscious living being includes other individuals

belonging to the same species in its environment. *Homo sapiens*, thanks to language, makes a stronger distinction between fellow-men and other objects, establishing two oppositions: (a) between him or herself as a conscious subject and the rest of his or her world experience, and (b) between fellow-men and women and other objects. From this general background, every human being must create images of human otherness; one image for each individual, beginning with mother and father, brothers and sisters, parents, friends or foes, and people encountered. These are pragmatic images which help anyone to build up images of other people, known or unknown, and are connected with proper names. When proper names give way to common names, and when practical, phenomenological experience is included in logical classes applied to human groups, here begins the action of cultural boundaries.

When direct experience is used simultaneously to build up the consciousness of the self and the perception of the social group, otherness as an abstract idea becomes possible. The Other becomes the Stranger, or the Alien, and strangers must be defined as elements of a class, in order to be mastered.

The very idea of a "class of being" is both logical and cultural, like the Sanskrit word *jāti* meaning either a logical set or the social hereditary classes into which Hindi society was divided: *Brahman, Kshatriya, Vatsya, Sudra...* The English word class and the French word *classe* bear the same ambiguity. Constructing different classes in order to get an orderly view of human environments is -or should be- an objective, neutral process, but this is apurely theoretical view. In fact, societies in History are governed neither by logic nor by objective observation or knowledge. Names of classes can tend towards objectivity in scientific terminologies, but not in everyday vocabularies, and not in any language.

Prior to any rational activity, civilizations use their own reference system, where human beings, before any other intellectual operation, are classified into two groups, namely the members of my group, *Us* - ethnic names, in many groups, are expressed by a word meaning "the Men" - vs. *Others*. Others, or strangers, are either inside or outside the group. If they are perceived inside my own group, the boundaries are clear; American or European tourists in Japan, and Japanese tourists in Europe are foreigners, like any group of travelers or immigrants. If the entire foreign group is perceived or imagined outside each language, or even each local use of the same language, different criteria are built up: in North American French, the world *les Anglais* (the English) means English speaking Canadians, while French speaking Canadians are now termed *Quebecois* or *Acadiens*. Naming communities with national entities is frequent and seems to be a simple matter of political boundaries: *Brazilian* means people living in or coming from Brazil, *Chinese* refers to people in or from China. Even in such a simple

case of naming, things can go astray: *Americans* are not "people living in America," but "in the United States," some in Alaska, some others in Puerto Rico, others in Hawaii. In Africa, ethnic designations are not at all identical to national labeling.

The designation of ethnic and cultural groups without a geographical setting is much more difficult. The important fact here is neither linguistic nor logical, it is semantic, with affective and symbolic contents and unconscious aspects. When human beings are used as goods or merchandise, they can be denied any human character. This was the case with slaves, and not only in ancient times; during the so-called 18th century Enlightenment, African slaves transported to America were called (at least in French) *ebony wood*. It was more recently -and it is still now- the case with prisoners, especially in concentration camps, that proper names disappear and are replaced by reference numbers, which can be applied to things as well. And we must also take into account semi-human imaginary beings, from monsters in mythology to modern androids and cyborgs.

The first step in crossing cultural borders is to reject any boundary inside humankind, be it racial, psychological (the insane man is essentially a man), social or institutional. Every human being needs a definition for humanity, including himself and every one of the 6 billion people on Earth. The conceptual sameness of every human being is the first condition for aiming for equality.

The second step is axiological, which means that, after reality judgments come value judgments or appreciations. Here is the great manufacturing plant of cultural walls, where each social group and each national or ethnic group constructs its own view of mankind. Constructing any judgment is a complex psychosocial operation. In the present case, it is an unpredictable blending of experience (through personal or collective contracts, exchanges and communications), of indirect, circuitous communication (through textual accounts and narratives, through images, through objects, and so on), of understanding and misunderstanding the meaning of the above-mentioned elements, of imagination, prejudice, conscious and unconscious love and hatred, and of projection, in the Freudian sense.

I found a remarkable example for such a set of operations in an 18th century book by Guillaume Raynal about the European economic colonization of the rest of the world. When he describes China and the Chinese, the author, who is very critical about European policy, shows, with many examples, that two opposite images of China were being suggested at the time to the cultured reader. The first one was entirely positive: China being considered as a political and social model to be imitated by Europeans - mainly British and French. The second image was negative and underlined flaws, defects and archaisms in the Chinese system. Such an analysis seemed in both cases to

be founded on objective knowledge. In fact, it was -as I tried to demonstrate- the projection of opposite points of view about western European societies, the projection of the debate between the principles of democracy and those of absolutism. Raynal, helped in several chapters of his work by Denis Diderot, was using judgments about a strange and far-off world, China, in order to support the proposition of changing things in France. The content of such estimations and criticisms involved in the appreciation of foreign human groups is often a reflection of an inner argument.

In this case, two cultural borders are inter-mingled; those separating western Europe and China. The Europeans read China with European glasses. Moreover, they tried to find through their reading a solution to their own problem. The cultural wall is then raised between two different appreciations of the same supposed truth.

The contradictions between two different views of our own social and cultural group can be exported and used to form contradictory views of human groups. This can be the origin of many misunderstandings. Even a scientific view of human groups outside a cultural group can lead to these kind of phenomena: I would be ready to argue that the many studies on Japan and Japanese behavior written in the United States in order to improve communication, mainly in business relationships, show and reveal, at least partly, purely American problems in behaving properly, not only in different cultural settings, but in the United States. Intercultural problems lead to intracultural troubles.

When reading guidebooks that deal with the other country's way of life, one is often struck by the fact that they mirror -using oppositions or differences- the culture of the guidebook itself. An American guidebook to Germany teaches me more about the American state of mind than about Germany and the Germans - beside objective knowledge.

These observations lead to an assumption: borderlines are not only walls built up against the ideal, universal, human values, they are walls inside cultural appreciations, which jeopardize many claims to cohesion in a single cultural setting.

Cultural borders, among other boundaries, are inside every civilization, even inside every individual, inside us. The "far-distant gaze," as Claude Levi-Strauss says, is the main topic of current anthropology because there cannot be a close knowledge of Man, as close knowledge can only be achieved when the object is of a different nature; anything but human. Imitating Professor Yamaguchi's remarkable formulation, I would like to assume that human science, namely anthropology, is the sometimes elegant art of 'knowing yourself' through strangers, whereas other sciences, more or less elegantly, try to understand, as rational subjects, the non-human part of the universe. In order to

improve human knowledge and cross borders, you have to pay a toll, either with experience or with learning. I can see three different ways of acting: first, assuming the status of a stranger in different cultures; second, studying as many civilizations as possible; third, deepening one's knowledge of one's own culture. I tried to follow the last way in studying French language and words as related to every possible external influence. This point, I hope, shall be an excuse for a poor mastery of other languages (as you can hear and read now in English), if not an absolute ignorance (as it is the case for the language of one of my favorite cultures, the Japanese).

Happily, you can learn many things about foreign cultural worlds by reading in your own language or in a few other languages; when translation does exist, from the almost untranslatable -poetry- to the wholly translatable - technology.

Moreover, cultural codes that can be understood more easily than languages exist all over the world. Music, graphic art and painting, clothing, housing, food and drink are cultural codes. Such codes are not universal, but they can be universally interpreted, even if the cultural background needs some explanation. In all border-crossing experiences, there is a kind of return ticket; when Roland Barthes described, poetically enough, Japanese customs-- for example Japanese food-- his description may or may not be accurate for a Japanese reader, but it is extremely useful for understanding the intentions and practices of French cooking. Literary talent and good will do not automatically lead to cultural accuracy. Borderlines are so easily crossed, but each talented and sincere attempt provides a key to open one of the many locked gates. To go further requires other skills where objective knowledge is less important than intuition. By this, I mean a type of intuition which can express the universal, as the greatest artists can do; William Shakespeare or Miguel de Cervantes are the best western examples I can find, leaving you to choose from universal references in Japan.

Besides this kind of revelation, many writers or travelers and scholars did cross borderlines. Cross-cultural studies and comparative literature are academic topics. Some artists live a cross-cultural life, as can be observed in many activities. Buildings by Pei, either in the United States, in Paris or in Hong-Kong, are examples of common trends in architecture.

Akira Tamba is a Japanese composer writing occidental music with strong structural influences from Japan. Zao Wu Ki is a Chinese western abstract painter. Hundreds of such artists help to build up international, sometimes universal references, across cultural lines. As for scholars, many devote themselves to cultural overlaps, as do my friends from the *Transcultura* association, Alain Le Pichon studying African *Fula* culture, Shigemi Inaga studying the strong Japanese influence upon Western art at the end of the 19th century, and Wang Bin, from China, who described with humor in

Bologna, the pleasure of Italian cappuccino compared to Chinese tea.

In *The Unicorn and the Dragon*, a book dealing with misunderstandings in the search for the Universal—in other terms, with difficulties in crossing borders—authors from China, and on the Western side, Italy and France, expose differences and misunderstandings between two viewpoints. As Umberto Eco puts it, the shock of cultures leads either (1) to conquest, (2) to cultural pillage (as the Ancient Greeks did to the Egyptians by subduing them and trying to steal the secrets of Egyptian mathematics, alchemy, magic or religion) and at last (3) to exchange, which involves mutual respect and appreciation. Marco Polo visiting Asia was, as Eco claims, looking for unicorns, that is to say, for his own cultural imagination.

This is exactly my point in this lecture: our culture is inside the knowledge of other cultures. The wall is at least double: a wall between subject and object, other walls inside the social subject.

It might appear as a terrible curse, since we cannot solve our own cultural contradictions before trying to understand otherness. But it seems to me a lucky situation, since we must live and think, even when living and thinking inside our culture, as though we are on a kind of frontier. This is a point of abstraction where borderline becomes borderland, when separations and tall gates become frontiers, that is to say, the opposite of closed land. Living in borderlands becomes possible only when you admit the geographical and abstract oppositions of your own culture, its fertile lands and its dry parts or deserts, its plains and mountains, its cities and its countryside, its open lands and its secluded areas. Between such opposite aspects of any culture, lie inner borders, which everyone crosses again and again. It might be good training for crossing the global boundaries between cultures, to be helped and improved by individual experiences such as reading translations, traveling abroad, living in other countries, being interested by international news, and so on...

Every social group, when it constructs its ideas of other cultures and peoples, uses its own categories of thought. Trying to apply accurate, different categories (American for American civilization, European for Europe, Japanese for Japan) cannot come first. Moreover, such ideas of other cultures and people are an intrinsic, intimate mixture of relevant and irrelevant information, of imagination, of prejudices - which are unverified judgments, of utmost simplification in relation to the complexity of human social objects.

In many cases, prejudices and simplification are more important than objective knowledge. Human classes are unreal, and the semantic contents applied to them more fictional than realistic or accurate. In historic experience, either imagination or non-

rational feelings can prevail (wars, invasions, ethnic or community conflicts are good examples) while other experiences (such as traveling in peacetime, trade, and scientific intercultural research) can improve what I would like to call the reality factor.

Three kinds of proposals can be made to improve the situation: firstly, in the area of objective, analytical knowledge; secondly (but not the least importantly), in the area of human experience and affective esthetic, artistic or poetic intuition; and thirdly, in the area of intercultural practices.

Precise proposals are easy to formulate, but not so easy to follow. Many practices exist in order to do so, such as historical research, discourse and image analysis, cross-cultural anthropology and ethnography, or the study of value judgments, prejudices and stereotypes. Linguistic semantics and cultural semiotics offer methods, insofar as they are not defined from a unique viewpoint, often starting from European or North American scientific practice. That is precisely why the *Transcultural* Association intends to promote mutual or reciprocal processes of knowledge, such as African anthropologists giving their views on Europe, or Chinese scientists evaluating scientific research in Western countries. Nobody can pretend to obtain universal values from one cultural point of view, even when Western science, in History, obtained more results than any other. Western culture, science, and standards cannot be said to be universal. Universality is a target, the aim of which is supported by biological and structural facts, by abstractions such as social life, family, language, esthetic and rational aptitudes, even laughter ("laughter is a feature of Man," wrote Francois Rabelais). Language, and laughter, are general aptitudes; languages are collective habits, and laughter is a part of specific cultural codes.

The problem with universals is that they are viewed from a Universal point of view even in universal knowledge, such as philosophy. The history of western philosophy shows us that one of the most influential thinkers in metaphysics, Friedrich Hegel, proposed a universal point of view of the world from a typically German viewpoint, including a hierarchy of societies and cultures devoted to the superiority of European white civilization, with a spiritual principle, *Geist* in German, best represented in German philosophy and probably by Academic philosophers from the University of Jena. Hegel himself was the chairman and supreme thinker there. From general abstractions to human incarnation, the universality of Hegelian philosophy shrinks to a very specific cultural viewpoint, ignoring or misjudging many aspects of world culture - mainly African and Asiatic. The same type of judgment applies to Freudian psychoanalysis, whose general and universal intentions are partly covered with an overwhelming reference to the Viennese middle and upper classes at the

beginning of the 20th century.

In ancient China, Confucius attempted to give universal rules for organizing human relationships in society, with a purely Chinese experience and way of thinking. In 16th century Morocco, the founder -or one of the founders- of modern sociology, Ibn Khaldūn, tried, with unusual broad-mindedness, to discover the spirit of world History in many cultures. However, in his remarkable work, the prevailing thoughts derive from the Arabic and Islamic view of the world, which was open to other types of thoughts.

The more a community is conscious of its identity, the more it is able to understand other cultures. It is easy to observe that universal human types often come to life in a strong specific cultural context, a typical case in modern times being the character created by Charles Chaplin. The human universal content of films made by authors who expressed the spirit of a culture at the same time, such as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Mizoguchi Kenji, bring out human universal types on a typical Scandinavian, Italian or Japanese basis, and with Scandinavian, Italian or Japanese viewpoints. That is why we are still interested in Greek mythology, medieval western European legends, or in the 10th century *Genji monogatari*.

In fact, universal human contents are generated in culturally defined situations (Romanesque and Gothic architecture, Mayan temples, Japanese classical art, Elizabethan theater, Romantic German and British poetry *are*, in that sense, universal), while rational purpose, such as modern science, generates historically and culturally defined models (the big bang hypothesis is closer to Christian creationism than to any other cosmological folk tradition).

This means that if our thoughts, feelings and productions are inserted within boundaries, we can either produce or find in them a double space: one closed by borderlines, and one open on both sides, a borderland. On the map, France borders Germany, Italy and Spain. Britain, which bordered upon the sea, is now linked by train to France, a major technical improvement over the prior situation, where one had to embark, cross the sea and disembark. Happily, cross-cultural relationships reach far beyond geographical constraints, and Europe borders America, Africa, Japan and Australia. Every one of us is partly living in borderlands. Today, thanks to the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, we are acting in two rational and affective countries, one physical and cultural-Japan-- the other mental, psychological and intercultural. I should say transcultural rather than intercultural, since *Transcultura*, as well as our meeting, is a borderland to all our cultures.