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What is a Border?[1]

> You can be a citizen or you can be stateless, but it is difficult to imagine *being* a border.[2]

To the question, 'What is a border?', which is certainly one of the necessary preliminaries to our discussions, it is not possible to give a simple answer. Why should this be? Basically, because we cannot attribute to the border an essence which would be valid in all places and at all times, for all physical scales and time periods, and which would be included in the same way in all individual and collective experience. Without going back as far as the Roman *limes*, it is clear that the border of a European monarchy in the eighteenth century, when the notion of cosmopolitanism was invented, has little in common with those borders the Schengen Convention is so keen to strengthen today. And we all know that you do not cross the border between France and Switzerland, or between Switzerland and Italy, the same way when you have a 'European' passport as when you have a passport from the former Yugoslavia. It is, indeed, to discuss such a question that we are here.

In reality, however, though it complicates matters theoretically, the impossibility of giving a simple answer to our question is also an opportunity. For, if we are to understand the unstable world in which we live, we need complex notions – in other words, dialectical notions. We might even say that we need to complicate things. And if we are to contribute to changing this world in its unacceptable,

intolerable aspects – or (and this perhaps comes down to the same thing) to resist the changes occurring in that world, which are presented to us as inevitable – we need to overturn the false simplicity of some obvious notions.

Allow me to flirt for a minute with some of the language play of my philosopher colleagues. The idea of a simple definition of what constitutes a border is, by definition, absurd: to mark out a border is, precisely, to define a territory, to delimit it, and so to register the identity of that territory, or confer one upon it. Conversely, however, to define or identify in general is nothing other than to trace a border, to assign boundaries or borders (in Greek, *horos*; in Latin, *finis* or *terminus*; in German, *Grenze*; in French, *borne*). The theorist who attempts to define what a border is is in danger of going round in circles, as the very representation of the border is the precondition for any definition.

This point – which may seem speculative, even idle – has, none the less, a very concrete side to it. Every discussion of borders relates, precisely, to the establishment of definite identities, national or otherwise. Now, it is certain that there *are* identities – or, rather, identifications – which are, to varying degrees, active and passive, voluntary and imposed, individual and collective. Their multiplicity, their hypothetical or fictive nature, do not make them any less real. But it is obvious that these identities are not well defined. And, consequently, from a logical – or juridical or national – point of view, they are not defined at all – or, rather, they would not be if, despite the fundamental impossibility inherent in them, they were not subject to a forced definition. In other words, their practical definition requires a 'reduction of complexity', the application of a simplifying force or of what we might, paradoxically, term a supplement of simplicity. And this, naturally, also complicates many things. The state – as nation-state and as a *Rechtsstaat* – is, among other things, a formidable reducer of complexity, though its very existence is a permanent cause of complexity (we might also say of disorder), which it then falls to it to reduce.

All this, as we know, is not merely theoretical. The violent consequences are felt every day; they are constitutive of that *condition of violence*, to which the Declaration issued to launch this

conference refers,[3] in the face of which we are looking for political ideas and initiatives which are not merely that 'Hobbesian' reduction of complexity which a simple central authority sanctioned by law and armed with the monopoly of legitimate violence represents – this being, in any case, an ineffectual solution at the general world level, where it could at most put down a particular troublemaker here or there. . . . In utter disregard of certain borders – or, in some cases, under cover of such borders – indefinable and impossible identities emerge in various places, identities which are, as a consequence, regarded as non-identities. However, their existence is, none the less, a life-and-death question for large numbers of human beings. This is, increasingly, a problem everywhere, and the question coming out of the horror in the 'former Yugoslavia' (the very expression speaks volumes) concerns us all in reality, and it concerns us from within, and with regard to our own history.

For borders have a history; the very notion of border has a history. And it is not the same everywhere and at every level. I shall come back to this point.[4] From our point of view, as European men and women at the very end of the twentieth century, this history seems to be moving towards an ideal of reciprocal appropriation of individuals by the state, and of the state by individuals, through the 'territory'. Or rather, as Hannah Arendt pointed out so admirably – and we are right to invoke her in this context – it is moving towards a *cusp* at which the impossibility of attaining this ideal is manifested at the very moment when it seems closest to realization. We are at that point now.

Since earliest Antiquity, since the 'origins' of the state, of city-states and empires, there have been 'borders' and 'marches' – that is to say, lines or zones, strips of land, which are places of separation and contact or confrontation, areas of blockage and passage (or passage on payment of a toll). Fixed or shifting zones, continuous or broken lines. But these borders have never had exactly the same function – not even over the last two or three centuries, despite the continuous effort of codification put in by nation-states. The 'tyranny of the national'[5] – to use Gérard Noiriel's expression – is itself constantly changing shape, including the shape of its policing. It is currently changing its functions once again, and doing so before

our very eyes. One of the major implications of the Schengen Convention – which is indeed the only aspect of 'the construction of Europe' that is currently moving forward, not in the area of citizenship, but in that of *anti-citizenship*, by way of co-ordination between police forces and also of more or less simultaneous legislative and constitutional changes regarding the right of asylum and immigration regulations, family reunion, the granting of nationality, and so on – is that from now on, on 'its' border – or rather, at certain favoured *border points* of 'its' territory – each member state is becoming the representative of the others. In this way, a new mode of discrimination between the national and the alien is being established. Also changing are the conditions under which individuals *belong* to states, in the various – indissociably connected – senses of the term. One has only to see with what repugnance states, almost without exception, view dual or multiple nationality to understand how essential it is to the nation-state to behave as the owner of its nationals (and, theoretically at least, to undertake an exhaustive division of individuals between territories, with no one counted twice or left over). This is merely an adjunct to the principle of the – at least relative and symbolic – exclusion of foreigners. But there can be no doubt that, in national normality, the normality of the national citizen-subject, such an appropriation is also *internalized* by individuals, as it becomes a condition, an essential reference of their collective, communal sense, and hence, once again, of their identity (or of the order, the ranking, by which they arrange their multiple identities). As a consequence, borders cease to be purely external realities. They become also – and perhaps predominantly – what Fichte, in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, magnificently termed 'inner borders' [*innere Grenzen*]; that is to say – as indeed he says himself – *invisible borders*, situated everywhere and nowhere.

To attempt to understand how this operates in detail, I shall briefly touch on three major aspects of the equivocal character of borders in history. The first I shall term their *overdetermination*. The second

is their *polysemic character* – that is to say, the fact that borders never exist in the same way for individuals belonging to different social groups. The third aspect is their *heterogeneity* – in other words, the fact that, in reality, several functions of demarcation and territorialization – between distinct social exchanges or flows, between distinct rights, and so forth – are always fulfilled simultaneously by borders.

1. I shall begin, then, with what I call – for the purposes of this discussion – *overdetermination*. We know that *every border* has its own history. Indeed, this is almost a commonplace of history textbooks. In that history, the demand for the right to self-determination and the power or impotence of states are combined, together with cultural demarcations (often termed 'natural'), economic interests, and so on. It is less often noted that no political border is ever the mere boundary between two states, but is always *over*determined and, in that sense, sanctioned, reduplicated and relativized by other geopolitical divisions. This feature is by no means incidental or contingent; it is intrinsic. Without the *world-configuring* function they perform, there would be no borders – or no lasting borders.

Without going back beyond the modern age, let us give two examples of this which still have effects today. The European colonial empires – roughly from the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) to the 1960s – were most certainly the condition of emergence, reinforcement and subsistence, within the framework of successive world-economies, of the nation-states of Western – and even of Eastern – Europe. As a result, these states' borders *with each other* were both, indissociably, national borders and imperial borders, with other frontiers extending and replicating them right into 'the heart of darkness', somewhere in Africa and Asia. As a consequence, they served to separate different categories of 'nationals'. For the 'imperial-national' states did not merely have 'citizens'; they also had 'subjects'.[6] And those subjects, as far as the national administration was concerned, were both *less foreign than aliens*, and yet *more different (or more 'alien') than them*: which means that in some respects,

or in some circumstances (as in times of war), it was sometimes easier for them to cross borders than it was for aliens in the strict sense, and sometimes more difficult.

A second example is that of the 'camps' or blocs in the Cold War between 1945 and 1990. Whereas the 'division of the world' between colonial empires *strengthens* national sovereignty in some cases (while purely and simply preventing it in others), the division into blocs (to which, we should not forget, the creation and operation of the UN was a corollary) seems to have combined an extension of the nation-form worldwide (and, consequently, of an – at least theoretical – *national identity* as the 'basic' identity for all individuals) with the creation of a *de facto* hierarchy among those nations within each bloc, and, as a result, more or less limited sovereignty for most of them. This meant that the national borders of states were once again overdetermined and, depending on the particular case, strengthened or weakened. It also meant that there were once again, in practice, several types of aliens and alienness, and several different modes of border-crossing. When the border, or the sense of crossing a border, coincided with the super-borders of the blocs, it was generally more difficult to pass through, because the alien in this case was also an enemy alien, if not indeed a potential spy. This was the case *except* where refugees were concerned, because the right of asylum was used as a weapon in the ideological struggle. Might it not be said that the dispositions for asylum seekers which passed into law in the 1950s and 1960s, both in international conventions and national constitutions, owe much of their formulation and their theoretical liberalism to this situation? The German law, which has just been changed, is an – extreme – example which illustrates this very clearly.

If we did not keep this situation in mind, it seems to me that we would not understand the terms in which the question of refugees from Eastern Europe currently presents itself (from that Eastern Europe which is suddenly no longer Eastern Europe any more, but almost a part of the Third World). Nor would we understand the difficulties the 'European Community' has in seeing itself *as a community* underpinned by specific interests of its own, whereas it was essentially the by-product, and part of the mechanism, of the

Cold War – even in so far as the aim of constituting a counterweight to American hegemonic power within the 'Western bloc' was concerned.

The colonial empires of the past and the 'blocs' of the recent past have left deep marks on institutions, law and mentalities. But they no longer exist. It would, however, be naive to think that they have now given way to a mere juxtaposition of similar nations. What is today termed the crisis of the nation-state is partly (even if it is not *only*) the objective uncertainty regarding, on the one hand, the nature and location of the geopolitical demarcations which may overdetermine borders and, on the other, what type or degree of national autonomy these hypothetical super-borders might be compatible with, given their military, economic, ideological or symbolic operation. With the question of the inner (ethnic, social or religious) divisions within each nation-state – and even within very 'ancient' ones – it might well be that this tormenting but generally unacknowledged question, fraught with potential conflict, will be decisive in determining *which national borders* in Europe itself are likely to survive into the new historical period. The borders of Germany have already changed; those of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, too, by two very different processes. It could be that others further West will follow.

2. Second, I come to what I have referred to, in a perhaps rather overblown fashion, as the *polysemic nature* of borders. In practical terms, this simply refers to the fact that they do not have the same meaning for everyone. The facts of this are commonly known, and indeed, form the core of our discussion here. Nothing is less like a material thing than a border, even though it is officially 'the same' (identical to itself, and therefore well defined) whichever way you cross it – whether you do so as a businessman or an academic travelling to a conference, or as a young unemployed person. In this latter case, a border becomes almost two distinct entities, which have nothing in common but a *name*. Today's borders (though in reality this has long been the case) are, to some extent, designed to perform precisely this task: not merely to give individuals from different social classes different experiences of the law, the civil

administration, the police and elementary rights, such as the freedom of circulation and freedom of entreprise, but actively to *differentiate* between individuals in terms of social class.

Here the state, settled on and constituted by its own borders, has, over the course of history, played a fundamentally ambivalent role, for on the one side it conceals – and, up to a point, formally limits – differentiation, in order to insist upon the notion of national citizen and, through that notion, a certain primacy of the public authority over social antagonisms. On the other hand, however, the more transnational traffic – whether of people or of capital – intensifies, the more a transnational politico-economic space has formed as a result, and the more states – including, particularly, the most 'powerful' among them – tend to operate in the service of an international class differentiation, and, to that end, to use their borders and apparatuses of control as instruments of discrimination and triage. Yet they attempt to do this while preserving to the utmost the symbolic sources of their popular legitimacy. This is why they find themselves in the contradictory position of having both to relativize *and* to reinforce the notion of identity and national belonging, the equation of citizenship with nationality.

There is a double-bind of the same kind inherent in the very notion of the circulation of persons. The problem lies not so much in the difference in treatment between the circulation of commodities or capital and the circulation of people, as the term circulation is not used here in the same sense. It is, rather, the fact that, in spite of computer networks and telecommunications, capital never circulates without a plentiful circulation of human beings – some circulating 'upwards', others 'downwards'. But the establishment of a world *apartheid*, or a dual regime for the circulation of individuals, raises massive political problems of acceptability and resistance. The 'colour bar', which no longer now merely separates 'centre' from 'periphery', or North from South, but runs through *all* societies, is for this very reason an uneasy approximation to such an apartheid. The actual management of this 'colour bar' has a massive but double-edged impact, because it reinforces an uncontrollable racism, and promotes insecurity – and this in turn necessitates an excessive degree of security provision. Not to mention the fact that

between the two extremes – between those who 'circulate capital' and those 'whom capital circulates', through 'transnational relocations' of industrial plant and 'flexibility', there is an enormous, unclassifiable, intermediate mass.

It is perhaps also from this point of view that we should reflect on one of the most odious aspects of the question of refugees and migration, to which Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp and her friends have recently devoted a detailed study: the question of 'international zones' or 'transit zones' in ports and airports.[8] Not only do we have here an illustration of the state of generalized violence which now forms the backdrop both to so-called economic migration and to the flows of refugees, recognized or unrecognized, but we see here in material reality the differential operation and, so to speak, duplication of the notion of border which was already beginning to emerge in the different formalities which applied to the crossing of borders.

We must not confine ourselves solely to a discussion of the legal aspects here; it is essential that we also undertake a phenomenological description. For a rich person from a rich country, a person who tends towards the cosmopolitan (and whose passport increasingly *signifies* not just mere national belonging, protection and a right of citizenship, but a *surplus* of rights – in particular, a world right to circulate unhindered), the border has become an embarkation formality, a point of symbolic acknowledgement of his social status, to be passed at a jog-trot. For a poor person from a poor country, however, the border tends to be something quite different: not only is it an obstacle which is very difficult to surmount, but it is a place he runs up against repeatedly, passing and repassing through it as and when he is expelled or allowed to rejoin his family, so that it becomes, in the end, a place where he *resides*. It is an extraordinarily viscous spatio-temporal zone, almost a home – a home in which to live a life which is a waiting-to-live, a non-life. The psychoanalyst André Green once wrote that it is difficult enough to live *on* a border, but that is as nothing compared with *being* a border oneself. He meant this in the sense of the splitting of multiple identities – migrant identities – but we must also look at the material bases of the phenomenon.

3. This would lead me quite naturally, if I had the time, to discuss my third point: the heterogeneity and ubiquity of borders or, in other words, the fact that the tendency of borders, political, cultural and socioeconomic, to *coincide* – something which was more or less well achieved by nation-states, or, rather, by some of them – is tending today to fall apart. The result of this is that *some borders are no longer situated at the borders at all*, in the geographico-politico-administrative sense of the term. They are in fact elsewhere, wherever selective controls are to be found, such as, for example, *health* or *security* checks (health checks being part of what Michel Foucault termed bio-power). The concentration of all these functions (for example, the control of goods and people – not to mention microbes and viruses – administrative and cultural separation, etc.) at a single point – along a single line which was simultaneously refined and densified, opacified – was a dominant tendency during a particular period, the period of the nation-state (when it really existed in a form close to its ideal type), but not an irreversible historical necessity. For quite some time now, it has been giving way, before our very eyes, to a new ubiquity of borders.

What I wanted to stress – perhaps it is a truism – is that in the historical complexity of the notion of border – which is currently becoming important for us again, just as it is changing and assuming new forms – there is the question of the *institution*. The institution of the border, of course, and the ways in which borders can be instituted, but also there is the border as a condition of possibility of a whole host of institutions. If the border was defined fictively in a simple, simplistic way and if, as I suggested at the beginning, that simplicity was *forced* – that is to say, subjected to forcing by the state – it was precisely for this reason. But the consequence has been that the borders within which the conditions for a relative democracy have in some cases been won have themselves always been absolutely anti-democratic institutions, beyond the reach of any political purchase or practice. 'Citizens' have settled there for any length of time only for purposes of mutual extermination. . . .

Borders have been the anti-democratic condition for that partial, limited democracy which some nation-states enjoyed for a certain period, managing their own internal conflicts (sometimes *exporting* them too, but that is very much a process which requires a border line). This is why I think you are right in your Declaration to speak of a requirement for 'radical democracy'. As soon as borders become differentiated and multiple once again – once they begin to constitute a *grid* ranging over the new social space, and cease simply to border it from the outside – then the alternative lies between an authoritarian, and indeed violent, intensification of all forms of segregation, and a democratic radicalism which has as its aim to deconstruct the institution of the border.

For my own part, however, I would hesitate to identify such a radical democracy – which is necessarily internationalist or, more accurately, transnational – with the pursuit of a 'borderless world' in the juridico-political sense of the term. Such a 'world' would run the risk of being a mere arena for the unfettered domination of the private centres of power which monopolize capital, communications and, perhaps also, arms. It is a question, rather, of what democratic control is to be exerted on the controllers of borders – that is to say, on states and supra-national institutions themselves. This depends entirely on whether those on the different sides of the border eventually discover common interests and a common language (common ideals). But it depends also on the question of *who* will meet in those unliveable places that are the different borders. Now, in order to meet, one most often needs interpreters, mediators. Disheartening as their experience is today, it seems to me that those who defend the right of asylum precisely rank among those mediators.

Notes

1. Paper delivered to the conference, 'Violence et droit d'asile en Europe: Des frontières des États-Nations à la responsabilité partagée dans un seul monde', organized by Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp and Axel Clévenot, University of Geneva, 23–25 September 1993. Published in Étienne Balibar, *La Crainte des masses. Politique et et philosophie avant et après Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1997).

2. André Green, *La Folie privée. Psychanalyse des cas-limites* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 107.

3. 'Violence is a *condition of existence* in societies of exile and in the societies of the north': Founding Declaration of the conference 'Violence et droit d'asile en Europe', reprinted in Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp, Axel Clévenot and Maria-Pia Tschopp (eds), *Asile – Violence – Exclusion en Europe. Histoire, analyse, prospective* (Geneva: Cahiers de la Section des Sciences de l'Éducation de l'Université de Genève/ Groupe de Genève 'Violence et droit d'Asile en Europe', 1994).

4. This history, together with an anthropology and a semantics of borders, is beginning to be written. See D. Nordmann, 'Des limites d'État aux frontières nationales', in P. Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) p. 35 ff; P. Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989); M. Foucher, *Fronts et frontières* (Paris: Fayard, 1991); and the Autumn 1995 number of *Quaderni*, ed. Yves Winkin, on the theme 'Penser la frontière'.

5. See Gérard Noiriel, *La Tyrannie du national* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1991).

6. See Étienne Balibar, 'Sujets ou citoyens – Pour l'égalité' in, *Les frontières de la démocratie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992).

7. Balibar writes: 'cet Est qui soudain n'est plus l'Est mais plutôt une sorte de demi-Sud' I have adapted this from the French cultural context in which *l'Est* is Eastern Europe and *le Sud* the source of most 'Third-World' immigration. [Trans.]

8. Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp (ed.), *Frontières du droit, frontières des droits. L'introuvable statut de la 'zone internationale'* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993),

(*Translated by Chris Turner*)