

## **BORDERS OR BRIDGES? THE CURRENT CHALLENGES OF REVISITING THE CONCEPTS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND TRANSNATIONAL CULTURE**

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**ABSTRACT.** *Borders or Bridges? The Current Challenges of Revisiting the Concepts of National Identity and Transnational Culture.* The current paper aims to revisit the concept of national identity in relation to that of border and bordering as well as with the notions of otherness and othering. The current paper thus discusses the idea of borders and isolation as opposed to that of intercultural communication and cultural dialogue. Culture is discussed as an essential environment for identity development and in the same time as a transnational phenomenon. Another dimension of the debate proposed by the paper is related to the challenges of teaching the topics of national identity, diversity and bordering within the current educational environment, characterised by the increased internationalisation of higher education. This also takes into account the author's experience of teaching these topics to international groups of students and is supported by a survey conducted with Political Science students on the issue of the perception of otherness and internationalisation.

**Keywords:** *borders, national identity, intercultural communication, multicultural groups, internationalisation.*

**REZUMAT.** *Frontiere sau poduri? Provocări actuale în rediscutarea conceptelor de identitate națională și cultură transnațională.* Articolul are ca obiectiv revenirea asupra conceptului de identitate națională și abordarea sa în relație cu cele de frontieră respectiv *bordering (crearea de frontiere)* ca

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fenomen, alături de cele de alteritate, respectiv *othering* (*alterizarea*). Articolul analizează ideea de frontieră și izolare în opoziție cu cele de comunicare interculturală și de dialog cultural. Cultura este abordată ca mediu esențial pentru dezvoltarea identitară și, în același timp, ca fenomen transnațional. O altă dimensiune propusă spre dezbateră este cea a provocărilor presupuse de actul didactic privind temele identității naționale, diversității sau creării (gestionării) frontierelor în contextul unui mediu educațional în care accentul pe internaționalizarea învățământului superior este în creștere. Acest aspect al studiului ia în considerare și experiența autoarei în predarea acestor teme unor grupe cu structură internațională; în plus, include rezultatele unui chestionar care problematizează explicit percepția studenților de la programul de Științe politice (UBB) despre alteritate și internaționalizare.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *frontiere, identitate națională, comunicare interculturală, multiculturalism și internaționalizare în educație.*

Despite the increasing flow of information, of commodities and people supposed by globalisation or by the existence of political constructs such as the EU and the Schengen Area, borders are still ubiquitous<sup>2</sup> and protean (see Morehouse 2004, 19). Thus, they remain a topical issue (if we are only to mention Ukraine or the increasingly urgent issue of migration and refugee management). Moreover, they seem to gain significance and pose more problems in the recent years despite the expectations created after the fall of the Berlin Wall by what appeared to be a tendency towards elimination of borders, following the dissolution of the Iron Curtain and the expansion of the EU.

National identity persists in a globalising world, and perhaps the nation remains the pre-eminent entity around which identity is shaped. Dominant theories of the nation are concerned with political economy and history, and the national cultural elements they refer to are either in the realm of high culture, are the 'invented traditions' and ceremonies concocted many years ago, or are versions of folk culture. These are reified notions of culture, which, while certainly still relevant, are only a small part of the cultural matrix which surrounds the nation. (Edensor 2002, vii)

Thus, borders remain paradoxically present and their hybrid, ambiguous nature of borders remains in this context essential: "at the same time *separating and connecting* ... that makes them such an attractive and interdisciplinary site of

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<sup>2</sup> "There seem to be few things in the world today as ubiquitous as boundaries and borders." (Morehouse 2004, 19)

research... Borders and boundaries both *divide and connect, attract and repel, shelter and watch*" (Oates-Indruchová & Blaive 2014, 195).

In the introduction of a collective volume on "border identity in an enlarged Europe" (2008), Romanița Constantinescu mentions a "deficiency in terms of space management" (11) in the paradoxical context of a world "preparing itself to become global, synchronous; but while the speed gains over distance, the space is segregated, the boundaries between centres and peripheries multiply" (11).

The recent centenary of the end of World War I and, with it, the reconfiguration of European borders, has brought to the fore, if necessary, an issue that has been steaming in the recent years. The rise of nationalist parties and their election in some countries has been only part of a landscape also affected by movements such the Catalan strong attempt towards independence, by no means an isolated phenomenon in contemporary Europe. Not only is the ideological and political landscape divided in current Europe but even the communities are faced with inner conflict. Among them, those of academia (and students, in a country such as Spain<sup>3</sup>, for instance, in the Catalan speaking areas, which are, nonetheless increasingly multicultural due to European, Latin-American, Asian and African migration). In such a context, academic debates and language teaching have become more than a methodological challenge because it is becoming problematic to separate theoretical issues and discussing ideologies and concepts from what is for some students a matter of personal, regional or national identity (sometimes posed in terms of identity preservation and survival) and active participation to militant actions. The language is, under these circumstances, converted into a border in itself as a means of protection from what is perceived as literal, physical and cultural invasion.

In terms of space, borders and borderlands are, from this point of view, most significant, being both vulnerable and privileged in terms of *identity exchanges* and *permeability*. "Borderlands are spaces (...) where cultural identity, sheltered by the boundary, becomes blurred, mixed, creolized" (Morehouse 2004, 19). But is it really "sheltered by the boundary"? I would argue that while the community can, in some situations, be protected by the border, for cultural identity it is generally not the case to adopt this view, precisely because of the natural cultural permeability and cultural "creolization". Additionally, they are not of one kind but can be approached in their evolution, such as in the following standard classification, showing their dynamics and political action rather than cultural or geographical determinism: antecedent boundaries (before human settlement), subsequent boundaries (along with the development

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<sup>3</sup> The author takes into account her teaching experience (2017-2019) as well as prior research experience (2011) at a Spanish university in a Catalan speaking region.

of communities), superimposed boundaries (imposed, ignoring cultural or linguistic communities) and relic boundaries (no longer existing but still visible or traceable). (see Pounds 1963)

Borders are, therefore, not as stable as one might think when looking at the discourse of national identity and the rituals related to the perpetuation of traditions and celebration of common ancestry and historical events and celebrations. The idea of stability and belonging, together with that of a common heroic past are contradicted in most of the cases by the examination of maps in their constant change, even within a limited time frame such as the last century, following a major redesign of maps in 1918. Thus, in fact history reveals a constant renegotiation of boundaries:

Throughout history borders have regularly turned into overtly contested and negotiated spaces, reflecting national struggles over territories, populations, and resources. In response, historiography has identified borderlands as 'badlands' (Winnifreth 2003), 'warlands' (Gatrell and Baron 2009), or 'borderlines' (Diener and Hagen 2010). These terms underline the way these territories operate as sites of fierce political conflicts over nationhood and nationality. In particular, twentieth-century borderlands have witnessed the forced transfer of populations and people in the context of ethnic cleansing policies (Naimark 2001, 3). (Kind-Kovacs 2014, 199)

These contested spaces of sometimes confrontational identities have always been, therefore, more problematic (having been constantly disputed and negotiated) than they would appear to be when read through the lenses of national identity.

### **National Identity, Transnational Culture**

The concept of identity, especially when associated to others such as *national, local, regional* etc., is paradoxical in its intertwining of stability and change, confrontation and shared ancestry, specific and yet dynamic. "Globalisation promotes the mutation of national identity. Identity is always in process, is always being reconstituted in a process of becoming and by virtue of location in social, material, temporal and spatial contexts" (Edensor 2002, 29). The national – but also regional or local – identity discourse is "about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others" (Weeks 1990, 88). This sense of belonging is, however, mainly cultural rather than circumscribed by national, political borders: "None of us exist outside cultural immersion of this sort. We all learn to see and feel and think from our culture in certain way." (Ryan 2010, 83). But is culture national? Can we overlap cultural areas to national borders?

Cultural nationalists endorse the belief that states are politically sovereign entities with clearly defined borders, a unified political and economic system that affects all similarly, and a set of legal and cultural practices shared by its citizens. (Ryan and Musiol 2010, 171)

Thus, both culture and identity are dynamic and their changes, evolution and interferences with other cultures, communities or individuals affect each other:

“Our identity is a specific marker of how we define ourselves at any particular moment in life. Discovering and claiming our unique identity is a process of growth, change, and renewal throughout our lifetime. As a specific marker, identity may seem tangible and fixed at any given point. Over the life span, however, identity is more fluid. (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2006, 51).

This is an essential issue to consider when projecting individual identity on the larger background of national communities, organically hybrid and dynamic despite the artificial and sometimes whimsical (in terms of historical accidents) *national* construct.

Nation - states, in such a view, are imagined as more or less homogeneous, culturally and ethnically: culture is produced internally, within a country's borders with little outside influence, and shared by the country's citizens equally. Accordingly, nationalists ignore or reject the transnational dimension of cultures, and, no less importantly the diversity of cultures within one country. (Ryan and Musiol 2010, 171)

However, culture does not work like that, as national borders are a political construct, with a long history of changes, fractures and displacements. Culture, as Clifford Geertz argues “is a context” (1973, 14) and “who we are as individual beings – our ‘identity’ – is bound up with the culture we live in. Although it is something outside us, culture makes its way into us through our eyes and ears. We learn the languages of culture as we grow up – what particular kinds of clothes “mean” for example, or what particular actions are good or bad.” (Ryan 2010, 83) However, this cultural environment is itself fluid and problematic, both in terms of structure and connections. In a keynote address discussing Iberian identities (soon to be published), Mercè Picornell discusses the problems rising when attempting to describe these structures and intertwinings in terms of networks, hierarchies or dichotomies. She refers to the systemic methodology influenced by Itamar Even-Zohar or Dionýz Ďurišin, mentioning terms as literary institution, systemic framework, polysystem, macropolysystem

or literary community [*institución literaria* (Rodríguez 2015), *entramado sistémico* (Ribera 2015), *polisistema* (Pérez Isasi y Fernandes 2013), *macropolisistema* (Resina 2009) o *comunidad interliteraria* (Casas 2000)]. Focusing on “the difficulty to define the local or regional status of Majorcan literature, and the intersection of local and global synergies in its actual configuration” (2019, in press), she proposes the metaphor of the tangled yarn ball, suggesting irregularities and sometimes involuntary entanglements, leading to knots and connections that differ and are sometimes difficult to identify, also making difficult, Picornell emphasises, to distinguish where these threads begin or end. Departing from Walter Mignolo’s discussion on the local and global within the “border thinking” (2000), Picornell suggests a process of reflection on the dichotomies (local/global, Western/Eastern etc.), based, firstly, on the “difficulty to clearly affirm a regional segmentation which, nonetheless, appears insistently in the literary study and, secondly, on the complex definition of the cultural locality conditioned by the global socioeconomic dynamics” (2019, in press).

### **Transgressing Borders in International Education**

The ongoing, “natural” exchange and flow of population (as well as information, goods or cultural products) that has come with globalisation finds an interesting counterpart in the organised internationalization of higher education and focus on student/teaching/staff mobilities. Through the internationalization of higher education and increased mobility, the educational environment becomes a seminal ground for cultural contact and increased openness towards intercultural communication and dialogue, as well as the decrease or even erasure of prejudices concerning otherness.

*Othering* is a term that not only encompasses the many expressions of prejudice on the basis of group identities, but ... it provides a clarifying frame that reveals a set of common processes and conditions that propagate group-based inequality and marginality. Although particular expressions of *othering*, such as racism or ethnocentrism, are often well recognized and richly studied, this broader phenomenon is inadequately recognized as such. (Powell and Menendian 2016, 17).

The perception towards the Other has always been a combination between fascination (in discovering the difference and the delights of the immersion of the discoverer/ conqueror into a “new world”) and suspicion or anxiety (as Jean Delumeau highlighted in his anatomy of Western fears, *La Peur en Occident*). The concept was determined within philosophy (starting with Hegel) in relation to the problems of identity and defined itself through the area or segment of *difference* towards the subject, in opposition with the essence of the Self.

The paradox is that the current Western world is increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic and racially mixed (Weedon 2004, 3) but in the same time preserves its fears and anxieties towards the Other, no matter the degree of proximity (Eastern European expats, for instance).

Migration is a clear example of de-localization approached as a literal expression of displacement. The experiences of displacement, indistinction, or “in-betweenness” associated with the migrant experience - this process is sometimes referred to as *hybridization*. The displacements of globalization and the increased proximity of peoples and cultures can result in their combination into a new “hybrid” form, sometimes celebrated as a creative, spontaneous melange of delocalized cultural ideas, objects, and practices, at other times as a form of “creolized,” or “mestizo” identity. (Niezen 2004, 39).

Prejudice and stereotypes – as described by imagology and constantly confirmed by the social and political reactions to the phenomenon of migration – are also reflected in multicultural and multilingual higher education communities. Here we can encounter the same paradox, despite the tendency towards the internationalization of education through academic agreements, mobilities and university policies favouring the collaboration and intercultural dialogue. On the other hand, the encounter with the Other proves still uncomfortable, even in more open environments such as the academia or classroom and is still visible at the level of the dichotomies and implicit hierarchization that stand out, placing the Western above the Eastern, the Northern above the Southern, the European above the non-European etc., even when the qualifications or professional merits are unquestionable (perhaps less so, though, in younger generations, more accustomed with the exposure to the multicultural or international educational or work environments). As problematic as it may seem to the politically correctness-oriented approaches today, this disparity and hierarchical dichotomisation are the effect of the persistence of a stereotyping practice in the traditional social and cultural discourse and imagery which is most obvious in the theoretical and conceptual debates around Orientalism and, later, in this genealogy, Balkanism. Concerning the latter, Maria Todorova, in her reputed analysis (2009), starts her argument precisely by emphasising this stereotypical comparison.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Europe had added to its repertoire of *Schimpfwörter*, or disparagements, a new one that, although recently coined, turned out to be more persistent over time than others with centuries old tradition. “Balkanization” not only had come to denote the parcelization of large and viable political units but also had become a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian. ... That the Balkans have been described as the “other” of

Europe does not need special proof. What has been emphasized about the Balkans is that its inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized world. As with any generalization, this one is based on reductionism. (Todorova 2009, 3)

But, as anticipated above, this is just one of the hypostases of the dichotomous approach which has marked the discourse on identity and otherness for a long period of time.

Todorova's archaeological approach to the study of the Balkans and Balkanism shares much with Edward Said's analyses of *Orientalism* ... By construing the "Orient" as the essentialized "other," through a dichotomous and essentialist system of representations embodied in stereotypes, Western writers have strengthened the West's own self-image as the superior civilization. (Razsa, & Lindstrom 2004, 632)

Concerning higher education and the above-mentioned exposure to international or multicultural environments, students from areas such as Political Science strongly benefit from internationalisation as they not only study these issues at the theoretical level but can be directly confronted with otherness (national, cultural, linguistic and/or racial). They are thus encouraged to reconsider or even erase their potential national or cultural stereotypes, establish a dialogue, identify common concerns and have access to alternative discourses or perspectives, set the basis for their future activities, agendas and involvement in the support of policies concerning issues related to multiculturalism.

Internationalization ... is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels. International carries the sense of relationships between and among nations, cultures and countries. However, internationalization is also about relating to the diversity of cultures that exist within countries, communities, institutions, and classrooms, so intercultural seems the best term for addressing aspects of cultural diversity. (Knight 2008, 21).

The teaching of topics such as *national identity, border issues, collective memory, enemy making* etc. (to BA Political Science students) or intercultural communication (to MA students with various backgrounds in social sciences) was extensively stimulated and enhanced in the case of international groups. The diversity of their cultural and national backgrounds (Western or Eastern European, African, Asian) has stirred interesting intercultural contacts and debates, as well as the questioning of previous cultural prejudice on both sides. It made explicit the experience of "othering" (i.e. a Moroccan student and



his experience in Europe as religious and cultural “Other” or a German student’s perspective on Romania as a “Balkan” Other, as he saw it more similar culturally to Greece and other countries in the region than with the Western European countries.) Interestingly, the international students chose for their class presentations (from a more general range of topics related to political science) particularly the topics involving discussions on identity and otherness such as “borders and bordering” or “national identity”.

This context has stimulated further inquiries regarding the interaction and intercultural communication patterns in the form of a survey on these topics. The respondents are students at the current BBU Political Science BA programme (survey conducted in April 2019 on a first-year group of students enrolled at the English for Specific Purposes course; moreover, the survey was conducted in English). The 16 questions regarded the students’ approach to diversity, otherness, prejudice, othering or bordering in relation to international education and more precisely the different degrees in which they consider other students as different or strangers depending on their origin (in addition, they had to mention, on a scale, the spaces/countries they considered more or less distant or close in terms of cultural similarities). Also, they were asked about their current experience in multicultural or international groups (if the case) and their perception on the benefits or challenges of such cases. Finally, they had to make comments on their interactions with international students and reflect on their own perception in case of being granted a mobility to a foreign university. The results proved extremely interesting and relevant, as 80% of the respondents answer that they have had the direct experience of international groups and that they currently have colleagues from other countries and 66% answered they would maintain contact with a foreign colleague after completing their studies. Also, 80% of them consider multicultural groups a positive thing and the same students confirm that they believe this to make classes more interesting. Considering the issue of prejudice, 64% of the respondents believe that young people have prejudice regarding students from other countries, but 100% of them answer that they do not have such prejudice personally.

Meaning to further inquire into this perspective, several questions focused on the *Other* (in general but also as belonging to different spaces) and the labelling of this difference/ otherness as negative or positive. Thus, 66% of the respondents believe they would feel “different” or a “stranger” if granted an Erasmus or another type of mobility and the same number of students agree that foreign students may feel life this when coming to Romania. However, the majority answer that they associate “difference” with a positive thing (66%), 13% believe it is negative and the rest find it ambivalent, answering “both” or, “sometimes positive, sometimes negative” or “just different”. Just an isolated answer specified “depends on the race” and “depends on the country”, somehow reinforcing the issue of prejudice discussed above. Interestingly, considering this

reflection on mental borders, at the question “Would you expect discrimination in a multicultural educational environment?”, 40% answered *Yes* and 40% *No*, while 20% considered it *possible* (again, depending on the country, they added) but also that they believe it can also be a form of positive discrimination. In order to tackle more closely the perception on the degree of proximity or similarity (anticipated above in the example of the Moroccan and German students coming to study in Romania, in Cluj), some questions focused on particular spaces (Western and Eastern Europe, American, Asian or African students). To the actual questions, they were asked to add a list of spaces from similar to dissimilar, from close to distant. Regarding the questions, the results showed that 33% considered East European students as different (one was undecided but considered them “somehow alike”), while 46% considered Western European students as different, while others detailed (“a bit different because of the culture”). Regarding Asian, American or African students the ratio was the same, 66% considering them different although two respondents specify that *in a positive way*. When asked to detail what we can call a subjective or mental geography, the results were diverse and somehow contradictory: some ranked, as expected, Moldova or Eastern Europe as the closest but others mention here Australia, Asia or Africa, one of them emphasising he considers Ireland as “close”. The results at this requirement are very diverse, therefore, some considering the USA as close while others consider it as culturally different. Among unexpected mentions are Turkey (seen as “distant”) or Saudi Arabia (“very distant”), Taiwan or Russia (also considered as different).

Finally, some comments made by the students below the survey and concerning their interactions with international students are worth mentioning as they make more relevant the discussion on this approach to the internationalisation of education. When required to illustrate with examples this interaction that they have had with international students, a category of respondents mentioned “(1) conversations, going out, sharing classes; (2) classes at university, different courses or different organisations for volunteering, meeting at different parties; (3) courses in common, interacting at the cafeteria, going out for a beer, playing some games (video games), some activities, academic debates”. One of them even detailed a specific case of “(4) a very positive interaction with two Erasmus students from Kazakhstan. They were kind and fun to be around and we got along nicely. One of the girls was on my team for our school projects and we worked really well together and made a good team. The Erasmus students this semester are also nice and smart and we get along. I did not have any negative experiences with international students so far and I hope I won't have in the future either.” Another category did not mention previous interactions but the interest in future ones: “(5) I would like to talk about sports with people from Asia and USA; (6) I would like to have interactions with international students. I have classmates from the Netherlands,

France, USA, Korea etc. I would like to work with them on a project; (7) I would like to change different interactions such as culture, food, traditions, conception etc. I didn't have a negative interaction with anyone; (8) I would have a good relationship with other students to know them better, to understand their culture and language; I haven't had interactions with international students but would like to. I would ask them a lot of questions about their country and tell them about my country (Moldova)". One of the respondents mentioned an "interaction based on education, debates on learning, discipline, socialising, the sharing of value and patterns of behaviour, the knowledge of traditions" but did not mention if these were in her intention or related to some experience. Only three respondents left no comment on this, the majority revealing interest in a deeper reflection concerning the issues in question. Taking into account their young age (an average of 20) and their specialization in Political Science, I would interpret the results of the survey as promising in relation to the surpassing of "mental borders" and prejudice and a tendency towards a positive process of othering, at least in this particular academic environment.

### **Borders or Bridges? Conclusions**

In Tim Edensor's still extremely relevant formula, "national identity persists in a globalising world, and perhaps the nation remains the pre-eminent entity around which identity is shaped" (2002, vii). Peter Sahlins approached the idea of the frontier as a bridge between the national and the local (1989). Whether discussed in the context of multiculturalism and diversity or in that of nationalism and bordering (considering the most recent UK or US positions), the issue of national identity remains, therefore, a staple topic in today's society as well as in academic debates in political science or cultural studies. However, as previously argued, culture is not nationally confined and the extremely complicated history of borders and bordering, together with that of displacements and migrations reveal that their aspect at a certain moment is both frail and artificial. Culture, on the other hand, can only rarely and/or artificially be confined to national borders, as it is usually regional or transnational, circumscribing its own maps. The internationalization of higher education is, I believe, a significant form of support in terms of intercultural communication, dialogue and erasure of cultural as well as national prejudice on all the sides involved. This form of dialogue, supported by the academic curriculum, can provide a long-term support in the process of raising awareness on the transnational and hybrid character of culture, particularly in a globalising world. The intercultural exchange and dialogue can help to a better understanding of border issues to be perceived more as political constructs, culturally permeable and to be increasingly transformed into bridges rather than isolating walls.

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