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# EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND THE DISCURSIVE (DE-) AND (RE-)CONSTRUCTION OF BORDERS

Ulrike Hanna Meinhof and Heidi Armbruster

In reflecting on the major shifts in European borderlands we are struck by the differences of perspective that can be achieved in the English language by exploiting the fact that English has a present continuum to describe an action as it is happening. Hence we have the creative (if not as yet standard English) option of transforming a noun phrase – borders – into parts of a verb phrase – bordering – and, related to that – de-bordering or re-bordering. This change of grammatical aspect immediately suggests a fluid ongoing process rather than a fixed entity. Whereas state borders foreground geopolitical boundaries with all the institutional paraphernalia associated with them, bordering, de-bordering and re-bordering recall the more psycho-social and symbolic processes of drawing boundaries, of in-grouping and out-grouping, of *us* and *them* divisions.

This article focuses on the ways in which such geo-political and psycho-social processes have interacted in creating different scenarios for relations between European citizens. Our reflections draw largely on two EU-funded research projects we have been involved in as part of larger European consortia which also included Doris Wastl-Walter and her teams. Both projects investigated the multiple meanings of borders against the backdrop of radical historical change on the European continent. The first project entitled *European Border*

*Identities: Changing Identities, Changing Nations, Changing Stories in European Border Communities* ([www.borderidentities.soton.ac.uk/intro.html](http://www.borderidentities.soton.ac.uk/intro.html)), ran from 2000-2003.

It was concerned with the impact of historical change on communities which had lived in different locations alongside the former Iron Curtain. As frontier citizens they had witnessed European history through the changing border regimes on their doorstep. The study included communities between Germany and Poland; Germany and the Czech Republic; Austria and Hungary; Austria and Slovenia; Italy and Slovenia, and the previous border between East and West Germany.

A major aim was to explore the ways in which the history of war and division, the opening of borders and new processes of Europeanization had affected identities and relationships between and within these communities. To capture the generational dimension of the historical experience, a specific focus was placed on working with three-generation families living in corresponding sets of geographically contiguous border sites, many of which were rural.

The study thus put an emphasis on the border as spatially demarcated, as all sites were physically placed near state borders, most of which had histories as strong barriers. This took on a different outlook in the following project. *Searching for Neighbours: Dynamics of Physical and Mental Borders in the New Europe* (Sefone) was conducted between 2007 and 2010 ([www.sefone.soton.ac.uk/](http://www.sefone.soton.ac.uk/)). As the title suggests, the semantic approach to borders was broader. Here, the physical border was only part of a wider interest in processes of (de-)bordering, taking both a post-2004 EU enlargement process and new scenarios of immigration into the equation. Research was conducted in three areas: in territorial borderlands of the *new* EU – which included sites at different Hungarian state borders and in Cyprus; in regions which had been affected by new processes of immigration, including sites in Sicily and provincial areas in Germany and, finally, at

nodes within transnational networks of African migrants in Europe. This approach combined the territoriality of borders with a broader concern with boundaries as relational constructs articulated through practices of othering as well as through those of contact and neighbouring. The comparative focus on such heterogeneous contexts reflected a conception of the border 'as process' (Newman 2006, p. 175). The processes of particular concern to our research were those of continued social, political, mental and spatial bordering in a seemingly borderless and more integrated Europe.

Historically these projects were framed by two major transformative periods which affected the ways in which perceptions of *the others* were articulated in everyday communication: first, the Cold War period marked by new borders as a result of the division between East and West along the so-called Iron Curtain; and, second, the period from German unification onwards to the Eastern/Southeastern expansion of the European Union after 2004, leading towards the end of the *noughties* when the political divisions between eastern and western Europe were finally declared healed ([https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history\\_en#2000\\_-\\_2009](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en#2000_-_2009)).

As our second project came on stream a financial crisis was hitting the global economy and was beginning to leave a strong impact on European economies. In its wake followed a rise in Euroscepticism and a growing right-wing populism which seemed to threaten the very fabric of the European Union. From a geopolitical point of view these decades could be defined as alternations between the constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing of borders, and a glance at the changing maps of European countries bears this out. However, based on our experiences with people living in past and present borderlands, we argue that this is too simplistic a view since the psychosocial and symbolic bordering, de-bordering and re-bordering processes often happen at the same time and in mutually interdependent ways.

## **BORDERING AND DE-BORDERING BETWEEN 1945 AND 2003**

There is no denying that the maps of Europe in the last hundred years have undergone enormous changes that substantially redrew the divisions between ethnicities, nations, groups of nations, federations and blocks of nations. Just compare the maps of European nation states of 1930 with those of the alliances built during World War II, with the post-1945 one of reconstituted boundaries of nations and the formation of political blocks created by the Cold War and the Iron Curtain. Then compare these with maps that mark German Unification, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the break-up of Yugoslavia from 1990, Eastern expansion of the European Union from 2004 to 2013 including a post-Schengen map of 2011.<sup>1</sup>

What emerges is the picture of a deeply divided Europe after World War II being transformed after 1989 by a concerted process of de-bordering in which national boundaries within the EU become permeable in new ways. Clearly not all de-bordering visions overlap in these maps: the Schengen signatory map differs from the Euro-membership map, which in turn differs from the European Union map of members, and, of course, the EU strengthens its outer borders. At the same time there is a large area of formerly hostile and warring nation states that are drawn together under the umbrella of the European Union and its close associate members. In the German context where we conducted most of our research, for instance, different members of a three or four-generation family were bound to have experienced their formative years under very different political circumstances: Where the eldest generation typically experienced the formation of the Nazi dictatorship and World War II, the youngest were small children at the moment of German unification and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and found themselves growing up in a differently bordered nation state and expanding EU. The pre-war, war and post-war sociopolitical upheavals would have rearranged many cross-generational experiences and relationships across the continent. But in which ways

do these large-scale political processes of creating new borders or of taking them away affect the experiences of those who live in these border or cross-border regions? This was the question we were asking three-generation families in our first border identities project.

In order to avoid using politically sensitive terms for towns, regions and states in this minefield of 20th century labelling and relabelling of territories and people we employed a highly successful method of using instantly identifiable photographs from the different times, places and/or events (Meinhof and Galasinski 2005). This allowed a shared gaze between researcher and informant at the periods in question, and structured our conversations so that their narratives addressed all three periods even if the images were taken before they were born. The resulting narratives could then be analysed using a discourse-analytical methodology sensitive not only to what was being said but also how it was being said or what was being avoided, hesitated over, re- or over-lexicalized, for instance (Meinhof et al. 2002).

What emerged was a complex and unpredictable set of reactions from our informants. Those photographs that signified times of political repression and German division did not necessarily lead to narratives of deprivation and unhappiness, nor did those that showed the rebuilding of bridges across the former border necessarily lead to stories of happiness and liberation. Let us demonstrate this by quoting from some of our informants on the former German-German border. At the time of our research the Iron Curtain had already been dismantled for more than a decade, which surely informed the views our research participants shared with us.

The exemplary image below offers a view of the Thuringian (formerly East German) border town of Hirschberg across the river Saale from the vantage point of the Upper Franconian (West-German) village of Tiefengrün. It depicts the Hirschberg leather factory which symbolised German-German history in

acute ways: a pre-war foundation built on the banks of a river which later became the East-West border; it was transferred into socialist state ownership after 1949 when it continued to be a major local and regional employer. At the time of our interviews it had already disappeared, as it had fallen prey to the dismantling of the socialist economy after 1990.

When the photograph was taken, Hirschberg was located in the so-called 500 metre *Sperrzone*, a strip of borderland completely cut off from West Germany by barbed wire and later a wall, but also separated from its own country, the GDR, since only people with special residence permits were allowed to enter this space. Below are three examples of contrasting cross-generational narratives, all triggered by this and other images photographed during the Cold War period of intensive hostile separation between East and West. The quoted individuals had all grown up and lived in and around Hirschberg.



Figure 1: Hirschberg leather factory on the German-German border. View from the West (Source: private collection)

Female, oldest generation: *It was a difficult time. The children were growing up then and all the time you had to tell them «don't go here, don't go there» and it was a difficult time. When they left in the evening you were sitting at home «oh dear it is almost 11 they have to come now» you know in the*

*summer, in winter at around NINE TEN, yes they had to be at home, weren't allowed to be on the streets. It was a bitter time.*

Male, middle generation: *This is how we grew up, this was our home here. When we applied for permits for friends and so on and they came in here and went through the checkpoints and then: «Oh my God how can you live here, this is impossible you are locked up!» We never had that feeling. This is just how it was, this is where our house was, it was ours, we never had any problems with the border guards, those who were on patrol (...) they only did their jobs, their duty. It wasn't their fault. I always had a friendly relationship with them.*

Female, Youngest generation: *My father was brought up a Socialist, his father was a policeman, and my mother had been brought up differently. They were more oriented to the West. There was always this tension, because there were entirely different ways of thinking in the family, and as a child you were in between, and at school the other way was drummed into you too, so we were always pulled in two directions.*

What these three story extracts clearly show, and we could replicate every one of these sentiments by others of a similar kind, is that people's narratives of their former everyday lives do not reflect the sociopolitical realities in identical ways. In this case, family members with homes in what used to be the most tightly militarized zones of the former GDR construct their life narratives in ways, that markedly differ along generational lines. While the grandparent evokes the former border zone as a space of confinement and fear, the middle-aged son argues that it enclosed a world of everyday normality where people simply got on with their lives. The youngest family member, on the other hand, saw the (still) unresolved East-West conflict running right through her family.

Strikingly, when showing images of the turning points of 1989/1990 which depicted the dismantling of the border installations or evoked joyful encounters of formerly separated populations (as shown on the image below) we came across sentiments of mutual distrust and frustration. Here



we found strong patterns of contrast between Eastern and Western narratives. They provided both a stark contrast and an inverted mirror image to one another. These stories were told while viewing of *happy unification* images such as the one below. It captures the moment of the border between the two communities being lifted and a temporary foot-bridge (later replaced by a stone bridge for traffic) allowing once more the people to move across and meet.

Female (youngest generation, Hof, West): *F: Well, it is quite common that the people react in quite an irritated fashion, that they can't stand the dialect, I think the dialect is the biggest problem, when they're here in a department store and all around they can only hear the Saxon dialect, the people from Hof, they're not really keen on that (...) and partly you can also tell from their clothes. It's not prejudice, you can just tell.*

*Interviewer: And how, what do they do differently? I mean, youth fashion is pretty relaxed, isn't it? So what do they wear that's so different?*

*F: Well, partly old-fashioned stuff, or combinations that I would never wear together. Red with pink, that kind of thing. Yes, orange with red, I'd never wear that together. Or carrot-coloured jeans, I'd never wear carrot-coloured jeans to school. Yes, truly with some of them, I'd never want to generalize that, but with some.*

Female (youngest generation, Hirschberg, East): *And as I said, in Hof, I felt as if everyone was watching me all the time, as if they noticed somehow that I am from the East, I didn't care for that at all, at that age, I don't know, somehow one feels quite chic and one is wearing the best clothes and mmm then you get all these glances, oh I felt really uncomfortable, and from then on I did not want to move to Hof at all, that was out of question, and in any case Hof was too small for me, was really only a dump, and not what I would have imagined. And in the cities it was different. Meeting other people was not as blatant as here, and even today the situation has not really normalized yet, when we, well we don't say Grüss Gott, so when we go into a shop and we say Guten Tag<sup>2</sup> - imme-*

*diately that shows us up- aha aha and there I think it clicks, not with everyone, but Hof is quite extreme in this respect. I get around a lot these days, Cologne, Hamburg, Essen, Bonn, everywhere, and there this problem hardly exists, especially not in our generation. The younger ones are not so extreme I think, that they have already fixated on a difference and somehow one feels accordingly, and at the university there is no problem whatsoever. But as I said, when I go to Hof...*



Figure 2: Newly opened footbridge between Hirschberg (E) and Tiefengrün (W). December 1989. (Source: private collection)

This is just one of many typical pairs of narratives where we can trace the ways in which discourses of othering are interdependent and dialogic with one another. While the photographs we used represented moments frozen in time, the stories they gave rise to evidently also reflected a much more expansive biographical experience and the changing discourses about unification since 1990. This included the emergence of the Ossi/Wessi demarcation and the attendant characteristics of mutual blame for what either side considered the uneven socioeconomic and psychological costs of unification. Thus, for instance, a typical topos of out-grouping at a time of sociopolitical de-bordering that was activated by the youngest and the middle generation was that of work and work status (Armbruster and Meinhof 2002).

Typically, East Germans felt unfairly accused of having a lax attitude to work, which West Germans blamed on the culture of state Socialism. Mutual blame and distrust were also expressed through other topoi, such as style of clothing, looks and behaviour, fear and outright dislike. Interestingly, such German-German othering discourses echoed those on the German-Polish border, where now unified Germans employed similar topoi of prejudice against their Polish neighbours (Meinhof and Galasinski 2002).

When looking at the geography of these borderlands in 2003 it became apparent that the axes of historical tension and trauma overlapped with those of socioeconomic inequality. In other words, just as the then invisible German-German border marked both a historical conflict and a socioeconomic division, so did the external German border with Poland. Hence the clusters of experiences of the relatively richer as against the relatively poorer found a fertile breeding ground in old and unresolved historical tensions. In a series of articles by the teams working in these borderlands we explored these parallels alongside the eastern as against western dividing lines and found mutually resonating patterns in the narratives of research participants. While being locally specific, the narratives broadly revolved around experiences of geographical and economic marginality and the negotiation of asymmetric wealth between populations on either side of the former border (for details see the articles by the members of the Border Identities team collected in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 2003).

### **BORDERING AND DE-BORDERING POST 2004**

The results of the Border Discourse project were not all painting such an alarming picture of psychosocial bordering at a time of sociopolitical de-bordering, but it left us wondering whether the largest expansion of the EU after 2004 (completed with the accession of Croatia in 2013) would create a more hopeful environment for relations between the citizens

in those regions where borders became porous or, as was the case with the two Germanys, ceased to exist.

As explained above, the SEFONE project (2007–2010) took a broader semantic approach to borders. The processes of particular concern to our research were twofold: firstly, those of continued sociopolitical, mental and spatial bordering in a seemingly borderless and more integrated Europe, and, secondly, we were keen to explore locally developed, bottom-up initiatives of people eager to overcome these circular interdependencies of mental and geopolitical bordering. So we searched for cross-national and intercultural encounters in the new interstate borderlands resulting from EU expansion but also in provincial regions, which had received new migrant inflows. And we added initiatives against those omnipresent yet geopolitically unmarked ethnic and racial borders that were being drawn between majority and minority populations, especially those of African and Afro-European background. By the time the *SEFONE* project was drawing to a close in 2010/2011, we had investigated a whole series of civil society practices that seemed to suggest a more optimistic direction for the new Europe and its culturally diverse people.

(De-)bordering practices studied by the various teams in this project often exposed institutional barriers and constraints as they were challenged by activities in the «civil sphere» (Alexander 2006) where citizens generated communities of affinity or solidarity beyond the institutional or nationalising logic of the state. Doris Wastl-Walter and Monika Maria Váradi illustrated this particularly powerfully in their research on a waste incinerator project at the Hungarian-Austrian border (2011). The plant which was to be built as part of a regional development plan in Austria engendered protests on either side of the border with citizens fearing its environmental impact. Ordinary Austrians and Hungarians formed cross-border coalitions which brought them into opposition with investors and the regional government in Austria, which could muster the most powerful financial, political and scientific resources

in the conflict. They showed how this local activism raised questions of democratic legitimacy in this rural borderland. While planning permission procedures for the incinerator had gone through the prescribed legal process, local citizens felt their voices had been excluded. To them the project embodied the interests of a remote economic and political elite which had no interest in their concerns.

As the authors showed, the activists took to appealing to the EU, hoping it would intervene as an impartial arbiter of transborder justice, in a context where appeals to local, regional and national governments had achieved little. Their hopes were dashed. At the same time, this piece of research revealed striking differences to what the two authors had found several years earlier, as collaborators in the Border Identities project, at a time when Hungary was not yet a member of the EU and the border between the two countries had become a Schengen frontier. Their study on rural communities in the Hungarian-Austrian borderland showed a rather despondent picture of cross-border relations. As they put it: 'Ironically in a situation where the border regime has been relaxed and Cold War enmities ceased, the inhabitants of these two villages have not seized the opportunity to get together. Instead, villagers on both sides have reinforced the separateness and silence between them' (Wastl-Walter et al. 2002, p. 93).

In comparison to what they appositely called a practice of bordering silence the new cross-border activism of the post-2004 period presented a hopeful departure. Both their earlier and more recent studies powerfully revealed two lessons which can be drawn from both projects: Studying processes of everyday mental and political (de-)bordering means, firstly, understanding people's expressions of identity within the context of the claims and conflicts over resources, opportunities and rights they are involved in, and, secondly, embracing the civil sphere as the indispensable space within which national citizens may become cosmopolitans. In the current

crisis-ridden European world, where new rifts have emerged over immigration, financial debt and Brexit, these lessons are even more critical. Racist and nationalist out-grouping needs to be continuously challenged by people on the ground for the European project to succeed.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> These maps can all be found on the internet. See: Map of Europe in 1930.

<sup>2</sup> *Grüss Gott* is a traditional greeting in Bavaria (West). *Guten Tag* is more common in Thuringia (East). Here it also connotes a Western tradition as it is unlikely that *Grüss Gott* (Greet the Lord) was used in the secular GDR.

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