

Boundaries

Concept: Boundaries

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Description Boundaries can be defined as those lines, whether visible or invisible, material or abstract, which divide territories, cultures, traditions, practices, and world views. The term is often used to point toward something that is contained and characterized by homogeneity, coherence, clear-cut separation, or difference from that which is outside. Many authors claim that individuals and collectivities define themselves in terms of what they stand against, what they are not, or from what or whom they are different. In this way, borders become central to understanding concepts and practices such as identity, belonging, and culture. Some argue that it is not so much that which is contained by boundaries that is relevant and in need of attention. Rather, it is the very lines, in the form of boundaries, which delineate that which is permissible from that which is forbidden, and that which is familiar from that which is different. In this respect, boundaries speak more vividly about the limits of the possible in our societies.

Boundaries can be physical or abstract (in the sense of mental, emotional, psychological, or spiritual). Physical boundaries divide territories, spaces, and places, creating a basis for physical and even socio-cultural separation between such territories, and for an imagined coherence within them. Making physical and socio-cultural separation congruent, however, is based on illusions about homogeneity. Boundaries always enclose many contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes. For example, the nation-state relies on and feeds off the ideal of the perfect match between a clearly-cut and uncontested territory, and a homogeneous nation. From the very beginning, such an ideal gave rise to painful internal and external conflicts, as various ethnic groups, caught within the arbitrarily drawn borders of a state, were forced to struggle either for recognition and autonomy, or for separation (which is a more radical form of autonomy). Thus, during and after World War I, thousands of people, considered either ethnic or political minorities in their countries (such as Jews, communists), became undesirable for the states where they were rooted and were consequently expelled. They were forced to take refuge in other countries. As they became "stateless," "refugees," or "displaced persons," their uncertain political status deprived them of human rights both within the territory from which they fled, and within the territory where they subsequently resided. This situation was possible as only the political status of citizenship entitled people to "human rights." This dilemma prompted the political theorist and philosopher Hannah Arendt, in her famous *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, to state that only with a "completely organized humanity" (thereby pointing to its division into sovereign territorial entities divided by borders) "could the loss of home and political status become identical with the expulsion from

humanity" (1951, 177).

In contemporary Europe, with the intensification of economic and political integration, and the expansion and the growth in the number of states belonging to the European Union (EU), boundaries that were previously considered fixed and controlled have become ever more porous and subject to contestation. That is not to say that the free circulation of people is an accomplished fact in today's Europe. With the signing in 1990 of the Schengen Agreement, borders separating the member countries of the EU have become more porous and more flexible, but there is a greater policing and securitization of national territories against "aliens," such as (illegal) migrants and refugees. Therefore, as processes of territorial and economic integration intensify in Western and Central Europe, citizens belonging to these countries acquire an increased sense of autonomy, in the sense of an increased freedom of movement, whereas the autonomy of migrants and refugees to these countries is painfully restricted.

As transnational flows of goods, ideas, images, and people intensify, socio-cultural boundaries become the object of tremendous renegotiations. Cultures and traditions have defined themselves by the boundaries they set on what is permissible and what is forbidden, what is identical and what is different, what is included and what is excluded. Such boundaries are invisible, in the sense that they are internalized and become an intrinsic and natural(ized) part of the individual and collective psyche. For example, the clothes a woman might choose to wear in the presence of men will vary depending on who those men might be. The clothes might point to boundaries about her body that she draws depending on who is present.

It should also be recognized that socio-cultural and material boundaries are mutually constitutive. Thus when one uses a form of dress to determine which parts of her body a woman might display when she is outside the home, over time this act of dressing is assimilated by the woman as a boundary. If a man should by chance see her without the prescribed form of dress, she might feel violated, her socio-cultural border having been crossed. This example points to the psychological aspect of boundaries, and shows that material boundaries may also be internalized, as adherence to certain religious, cultural, and social precepts. Such precepts are meant to differentiate an individual/group from others, and bring together individuals with similar perspectives.

In this sense, it would be helpful to perceive boundaries as more material than we envisage and less rigid and natural(ized) than we claim them to be. This implies that, on one hand, even though they are arbitrarily drawn or established, "invisible" boundaries have concrete effects on the lives of individuals and groups; and, on the other hand, material and immaterial boundaries, although enjoying a legitimized status, are changeable and constantly subject to contestation. Socio-cultural boundaries are invisible, yet they have very visible ramifications, creating and maintaining social, economic, and political hierarchies, and giving rise to various (and often

contradictory) practices, contestation, and renegotiation, in the forms of socio-economic and political movements. In the same vein, concrete borders and boundaries, while arbitrarily and artificially drawn, bear tremendous and concrete consequences on people's lives, shaping the ways in which they perceive difference, community, identity, and belonging.

In the context of globalization and regionalization processes, changing boundaries not only redefine forms of political and socio-cultural community, but challenge jealously guarded traditions and world views. In many cases, challenges to forms of political organization (through the redefinition of national borders as in the case of the EU, or as in the case of the struggle for the establishment of an autonomous Palestinian nation-state), are accompanied by challenges to social and cultural practices. Sometimes, these two can be contradictory. For example, in the case of Morocco, claims to national autonomy and modernization have challenged traditional ways of socio-cultural and economic organization. In her *Beyond the Veil* (1987), the Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi discusses the way in which the contradictions faced by Muslims, due to modernization and globalization processes, are more or less about boundaries, which relate to legacies of colonization, modernization, and gender issues — specifically, the imposition of foreign world views and European bureaucracies onto Arab territories and lifestyles; the extent to which Western technology is welcomed and/or challenged within Arab societies; and the degree to which women's status is impacted by discourses of modernization, human rights, and emancipation. The author states that women's claims to equality were most disturbing to Muslims, in as much as these claims imply a serious renegotiation and retracing of social, cultural, sexual, economic, and political boundaries. This seems to suggest that material boundaries can be understood as physical expressions of "invisible" boundaries. There is a close connection between the visible and invisible boundaries which implies that one type of boundaries cannot be altered without affecting the other one.

Though nations or bodies are bounded material entities often thought inviolable, it is nonetheless the socio-cultural boundaries that arouse the most heated debates and contestation, because these constitute world views or practices of identity and culture. As women in Moroccan society obtained an increased autonomy, they gained access to high-skill jobs, which led to a renegotiation and contestation of traditional views and practices regarding family, family roles, and the economic bases of family. Paradoxically, at the same time, women who lacked access to education saw their status radicalized into a deeper condition of poverty and seclusion. As such, not only does the alteration of physical boundaries impact profoundly on socio-cultural ones (and vice versa), but the impact reverberates differently within a particular society, bringing into a more acute focus questions of class, race, gender, and ethnic affiliation.

In the case of post-socialist countries, not only did the retracing of physical boundaries reshape (sometimes in extremely violent ways as in the cases

of former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union) the territory on which these particular societies were established, but also it led to a profound and sometimes violent redrawing of previous socio-cultural and economic boundaries. The exposure of these particular societies to the exigencies and conditions of a free-market economy and political liberalism has had tremendous impacts on their socio-cultural boundaries.

As socio-cultural boundaries become less constrained by territorial political ones under globalization, the assertion of claims to personal autonomy takes on new political forms. For example, gays and lesbians become more conscious of themselves as a transnational community anchored in particular views of sexuality. These notions of self also come to be recognized in supranational charters of human rights. These changes create new opportunities for personal autonomy within given nation-state borders, while also changing the politics of such claims.

For example, in Romania, political pressures for the legalization of homosexuality coming from European institutions have caused the government to abolish the legislation that denied rights of individuals based upon sexual orientation. Similar to other societies, however, such gains in autonomy have also been met by strong social pressures coming from organized religion, in this case, the Orthodox Church, an institution that is still extremely powerful in Romanian society. As such, claims to autonomy made by individuals and groups get to be renegotiated in "new politics" by the various political, economic, and social elements that have a stake in such claims. Moreover, the Romanian example suggests that, particularly in an era characterized by an intensification of globalization processes, the limits that are thought to separate societies from one another are fragile indeed. This illustrates that political boundaries, which limited the impact of external social processes on national notions of personal autonomy now need to be reconsidered as they lose material and symbolic power in controlling socio-cultural practices and ideas.

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