



Ivaylo Ditchev

Borders are back in fashion

The fascination of a borderless world has rapidly worn off in an age of accelerating mobility, writes Ivaylo Ditchev. As forms of mobility become increasingly collective, the crisis of the liberal border-machine deepens and political decision-making is thrown into disarray.

One of the first measures taken after the fall of communism was to abrogate the exit visas that the authorities used to control those who wished to travel abroad. Thrilled by the news, I took a random plane out of Sofia and flew to Warsaw (socialist countries did not need entry visas), and walked senselessly through the streets wondering what to do with such sudden freedom. A couple of years later, the influx of eastern European migrants provoked a reversal of Ronald Reagan's famous line: "Mister Yeltsin, put back this wall!" Finally last year, the Russian Duma held a timid discussion on the possible reintroduction of exit visas, presumably for security reasons. Today, many countries in the world are enthusiastically offered generous development aid if they would be so kind as to contain their citizens.

Why did the utopia of a borderless world lose its aura?



Kubekhaza, Hungary, 13 August 2015. Photo: [Giovanni Vale](#). Source: [Shutterstock](#)

Disenchantment came even before the refugee crisis of 2015, when EU countries started to build fences and reintroduce border control. Globalization, and more specifically its mini-version, which is the EU enlargement process, gradually created discontent on all sides: rich states grew progressively more worried about the flood of cheap labour and the resulting social dumping, whereas poor newcomers like Bulgaria or Romania were horrified by the enormity of the brain drain. (At the time, it became a favourite pastime of the

media to calculate when the last citizen of a given nation would die, based on the contemporary demographic trend). Gypsies were an exception though, as the countries mentioned have always wanted to get rid of them; scandals linked to their mobility were also some of the rare occasions on which the extreme Right praised European freedom of travel. Now border fortifications, often combined with walls, are multiplying fast worldwide: following the division of Korea and the partition of India, today we have walls between the United States and Mexico, the Gaza Strip and Israeli, the Gaza Strip and Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Yemen, Morocco and Mauritania, as well as in Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, etc.

Refugees, migrants and especially the absolute other — Muslims —, are but a personification of the general feeling of insecurity (how relieved we are in fact, when the latest mass shooting in the United States turns out to be Islamist terrorism!). The problem lies in the fact that each of us feels as if he or she may be in competition with everyone else on the planet at any given moment. And that there is no longer a community or social state to offer any protection. Allow me to use a primitive metaphor. The freedom to look for sexual partners is fascinating at a given age; but all societies find ways to limit it, by forming a type of family or closed relationship. Just imagine that symbolic borders like "marriage", "love" or "fidelity" were to disappear and billions of possibilities were to emerge for anyone younger and more beautiful to seduce one's partner: the fascination of freedom would soon turn into horror.

On the Right, anguish crystallizes in the figure of the culturally, if not racially, other invading so-called Christian civilization. On the Left, the object of anguish seems to be the multinational corporation permeating our world under the cover of various free trade agreements (whether transatlantic or transpacific) — and usually met with street demonstrations. Curiously enough, the big fish, who are supposed to eat up the small ones if let into the common bowl, are also reticent; most American presidential candidates in 2016 are also critical of the TTIP, as well as the TPP, for they might result in the further loss of jobs. So is there anyone left who dreams of a world without borders? One notable exception seems to be attempts to impose borders on the digital world: these are not yet welcomed. Intellectual property legislation such as ACTA or SOPA were met with worldwide protests. But what of borders in the physical world, and freedom in the intellectual? This might need further investigation.

Neighbourhood in Europe

This article is based on the author's contribution to the current Debates on Europe series, created by **S. Fischer Foundation**, the **German Academy of Language and Literature**, and **Allianz Cultural Foundation**. The topic of the series is "Neighbourhood in Europe: Prospects of a common future".

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However, borders are not necessarily visible: the extent to which they permeate contemporary societies is increasing continuously. How does Europe begin 2016? Britain negotiates the suspension of welfare for migrants in cases of emergency. France votes on a law making it possible for bi-nationals of foreign origin to be deprived of citizenship if suspected of links to terrorism. In Germany, the refugee crisis not only revived the split between eastern and the western states, but invigorated the old clash between Munich and Berlin. Culturalist borders, at least in the public discourse, are thicker than ever: they

are meant to protect peaceful Christians from warlike Muslims, culture from barbarism, or else European women from young African males "in heat". Unfortunately — unlike the ages of colonialism — the alien other is no longer overseas, but among us, and sometimes a third-generation native. This makes culturalist hysteria rather chaotic; in fact, the older immigrants are often the most ardent defenders of their new fatherlands, being afraid of competitors on the labour market.

The ultimate manifestation of this tendency is to declare local minorities immigrants, regardless of whether they or even previous generations have lived all their lives in one and the same country. Thus Turks in Bulgaria are regularly presented in public discourse as quasi-immigrants, even if they settled down in the country six centuries ago. Serbians define as intruders Kosovo Albanians, who arrived after the Ottoman conquest; the Albanians reply that they are the descendants of the ancient Illyrians, for whom the Slavs were in fact newcomers in the fifth century. Though such re-enactments of history are supposed to have faded away, they show a remarkable vitality: it seems obvious that the first to come should have the right to dominate subsequent arrivals. Temporal precedence is as natural as skin colour.

In France, the new attraction of borders is not only professed by the neo-reactionaries Alain Finkelkraut or Michel Onfray, but also by authors like the former international revolutionary Régis Debray. In his *Éloge des frontières* (2010) he argues that the wish for a world without borders is suicidal, as things exist only in as far as they have limits. The European project of infinite expansion thus turns out to be a nihilistic enterprise: we not only have the right, but also the obligation to draw borders. Let us put it another way: the fascination of a world where borders are gradually abolished¹ has been reversed, resulting in the desire for borders themselves.

The ambiguity of the matter could be traced back to Aristotle's *Politics*, when he describes the perfect polis as being situated such that it would be difficult for invaders to access, but easy for its citizens to leave in case of danger. The ideal border: hard to penetrate from the outside but permeable for those within. In fact, under communist rule, the citizens were deeply frustrated by the inversion of this pattern, so that borders kept populations from "running away". The "frictionless world" of the Internet (Bill Gates) miraculously seems to resolve this ambiguity, even if only in the simulation of virtual space. The invisible borders of our digital realms allow us to attack faraway lands with a simple click and to filter out unwanted intruders without even confronting them.

Borders bear an intimate relation to our notions of justice.² Within a democratic polity, justice is guaranteed to the citizens by laws and state procedures; but we seem to acknowledge today the right of the person to transgress borders, motivated by a higher notion of justice that actually goes against these laws and procedures. Since it is up to the individual to complete the passage from the particular (I am Syrian) to the universal (I am a human being), such passage is tolerated. For in today's developed world, borders are supposed to act as filters that only let people through as individuals.

This principle became visible in the face of the migrant crisis in Europe in 2015. What shocked liberal minds was not so much the numbers, and not even the Muslim religion or the black skin-colour, but the fact that the refugees came in groups — "swarms", "hordes" as they were aggressively described. In fact, for thousands of years the main form of human mobility was collective

and empires like Russia invited the Germans to settle down or exchanged Muslims for Christians with the Ottomans. In democracies, groups crossing borders produce panic, as they are conceived not as docile individuals who will submit to integration, but invaders wishing to impose their own terms. If the far Right calls for them to be stopped with the construction of walls, or even shot, liberal strategies aim at breaking up the arriving masses into individuals, separately treating their demands, resettling them in different locations, etc. It is as if political subjectivity — transgressing borders, aspiring to the status of universal human beings — is only permitted for individuals.

In the case of mass migration caused by disasters like wars or, in the near future, climate change, the question that arises is not about subjects having rights, but about objects being managed, if not pushed around. Once the war in Syria is over, Angela Merkel declared in January 2016, refugees are supposed to return home. Let us add: except for those who have learned German, settled down somewhere, got a job; in short, who have passed through the filter of individualization — and who may by then represent the greater portion, as was the case with the "guest workers" in the 1960s, who also were supposed to go home once they had finished helping German industry out. The world is entering into an age of accelerated mobility; ever-higher numbers are challenging the pattern of individuals crossing borders. Democracy is entering a geographical stage. In nineteenth-century Europe, people started believing that they could change the social class they were born into, and this produced social upheaval, as social mobility was embarked upon not only individually, but also by whole classes. Today it is geographic inequality that can no longer be taken for granted; ever more people think they need not be attached to the soil where their ancestors are buried, and feel entitled to hit the road. The more collective these forms of mobility become, the deeper the crisis of the liberal border-machine. Mass migratory movements are today what social revolutions were during the nineteenth century.

Under such conditions, much more complex ideas of citizenship need to be invented. Some new J.-J. Rousseau would have to proclaim: "Man is born mobile, but everywhere he is hobbled". The rights of locals should somehow be defined against those of newcomers. When do you become a local, how many times in a lifetime are you able to integrate in a foreign land, which cultural traits should you be allowed to keep? Should money be the main factor in the acceptance of newcomers, or shall we assess human efforts, as was common practice in the past, invested in spells of military service, the establishment of kinship relations or patronage? Sooner or later, the mobile "polities" of the migrants, with their customs and their chiefs, will be taken into account, even if today the idea may sound like the much detested notion of "muticulturalism". What rights and duties do countries of origin have towards their former nationals; what claims could those nationals lay upon their former homeland? Consider the EU's proposed deals with countries like Morocco, to take back their illegal immigrants in exchange for development aid; or, else, the hopes of Bulgaria to get rid of the corrupt political class by making more emigrants vote online. What about double or triple spatiality, with people working on one side of the border and consuming on the other... ?

It seems clear that contemporary societies will not be able to decide on these complex issues through simple majority voting; I am not at all sure that they could be sorted out through conscious political decision-making, as politics merely produce disgust and despair nowadays. Change tends to come to societies spontaneously, or shall I say, change tends to be catastrophic, and amidst the intensification of feelings of insecurity, one tends to reach back and

clutch at old-fashioned borders, barbed wire, barriers, customs officers...
believe it or not!

¹ I myself was shocked by the implications of this fascination, which lowered standards of citizenship and produced mass docility — just as I am shocked by the comeback of borders today; cf. "Mobile citizenship?", 27 June 2008, Eurozine, eurozine.com/articles/2008-06-27-ditchev-en.html

² Cf. Étienne Balibar, Sandro Mezzadra and Ranabir Samaddar (eds.), *The Borders of Justice*, Temple University Press, 2012.

Published 2016-02-12
Original in English
First published in Eurozine
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