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8 Research Paths For The City Feltrinelli Camp 2018

**A cura di
Paola Piscitelli**

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7. Pushing the borders

Unchartered boundaries

Luca Gaeta

Boundaries are not destined to disappear in the next future. The enthusiasts of a flatten world have rejoiced too soon after the demise of the Iron Curtain and the subsequent triumph of globalism. At different scales, ranging from local to international, boundaries are proliferating (Foucher 2016) also because they matter for the everyday lives of billions of people.

According to recent estimates, international migrants worldwide account for 3.4% of the world's population (United Nations 2017). Inversely, then, the overwhelming majority of people live in the country where they are born, even in the same administrative area.

A clear misunderstanding permeates the discussions on boundaries. This is the deeply rooted idea according to which boundaries are a hindrance to movement. Often depicted as barriers and walls (Brown, 2010), namely material artefacts purposely designed to impede the free movement of people and goods, boundaries are rather intrinsic to movement.

According to Thomas Nail (2016, p. 21), «a theory of the border also requires a reinterpretation of society itself as a process of movement and circulation». However, it is not necessary to imagine the border as

something material that is superimposed on social motion, thus blocking and diverting it. My contention rather is that boundaries are quite misunderstood if taken as self-sufficient entities, either material or social.

Let us imagine for a moment boundaries as the settings of everyday life and, more exactly, as tracks of the ordinary comings and goings of people. Let us imagine boundaries as embedded with routine motion patterns. Adopting the viewpoint of everyday practices, along with a theory of practice, the result is that boundaries are integral to social motion, not external to it. Accordingly, boundaries do not exist apart from regular practices and their related motions.

This does not mean to put aside the issues of power and control. Rather, this means understanding control as based on the comings and goings of people. It means understanding the mutual interplay of social and administrative territorialities. Boundaries become the sharp lines of demarcation we are familiar with inasmuch administrative powers attempt to trace the motion patterns of people.

Either for securing general welfare or to achieve social control, territories are divided into districts. However, the administrative layers of spatial ordering are built upon the customary territoriality of common citizens. As life goes on, mismatches inevitably occur between administrative boundaries and everyday practices. Control is never achieved permanently. The spillover of social motion puts administrative boundaries out of joint from time to time.

In this sense, it is useful to remember Michel de Certeau (1990) and his appeal not to overlook the subversive aspect of everyday practices, their inexhaustible inventive vein of uses unforeseen by the authorities. Unchartered boundaries are generated through unpredictable changes in

motion patterns and daily routines as well as through disruptive technological innovations.

Reconciling administrative districts with the paths of citizens is a task that requires strong practical expertise of boundary making and an intellectual understanding of boundaries as mundane horizons. Experts in this domain must be sensitive to the intertwining of society and space. Above all, what is crucially needed is an ethical capacity to discern in concrete settings the emancipative potential of a boundary line from its segregative potential. The resulting space may be more or less democratic in essence, more or less tolerant of diversity and coexistence (Massey 2005; Williams 2006).

Living with boundaries is not only possible but also inevitable as long as we share the planet and its continents with billions of people. Boundaries change their position, shape, functions and symbolic meaning over time. Everyday practices go on everywhere and always, either in peaceful or painful circumstances, and leave traces of their presence.

Authors

Elena Ostanel, Marie Sklodowska – Curie Fellow, Università Iuav di Venezia

Francesco Curci – Adjunct Professor, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

Massimo Bricocoli – Full Professor, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

Marianna D'Ovidio – Researcher, Department of Political Science di Scienze, Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro

Mark Deakin, Professor of Built Environment and Head of the Centre for Smart Cities at the Edinburgh Napier University

Laura Gatti – Landscape designer and Doctor Agronomist, Laura Gatti Studio

Luca Gaeta – Associate Professor, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

Paola Pucci – Full Professor, DASTU, Politecnico di Milano

Giulia Frova- Il Razzismo è una brutta storia - Gruppo Feltrinelli.

Sara Troglio - Researcher at Feltrinelli Foundation

Emanuele Belotti - PhD in Urban Sociology GSSI - Gran Sasso Science