Border Transgression

Mobility and Mobilization in Crisis

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Borders, Migrations, and Fortune*

Borders are taking the function of demarcating territories that social and political groups occupy. In the specific case of national borders, their purpose is to demarcate the physical environment of each of the political entities recognized by the international community (Schmitt 1950). This already seemed to be clear at the beginning of political modernity, as territorial integrity and the inviolability of national borders became fundamental principles of international law established after the Peace of Westphalia. Their validity has also been confirmed by the system that has been institutionalized around the United Nations since 1945.

Borders also delimit geographically the different jurisdictional systems, and in one or another way all inhabitants of the planet are subject to these demarcations. Borders, then, are valid for everyone, but their effects are not the same for everyone. Something as random as the fortune or the misfortune to have been born on one specific side of a border, in principle a trivial circumstance in moral terms, has direct repercussions on the range of opportunities for welfare and justice that people can enjoy throughout life. Such effects become especially evident in the very unequal abilities that people actually have to move freely about the planet and settle in the country of their preference. Throughout this article, we will analyze the normative dimensions of this issue with the aim of finding ways to overcome this arbitrariness of fortune and reduce its effects on human mobility.

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Borders in a globalized world

Borders continue to be a tangible reality, but lately their meaning has become volatile and complex as they have gradually turned more fluid and selective, a result associated to a large degree with the dynamic of so-called *globalization*, the term that probably best expresses the spirit of these times. Among the different processes of social change subsumed under that notion, the elimination of borders stands out. The idea that borders have been or are really going to be eliminated is, however, closer to the realm of the imaginary than to the real, as is demonstrated by the fact that, in the midst of generalized proclamations about global interconnectivity, there has been no interruption of the establishment of technically advanced filters and border control and monitoring mechanisms. With a profusion much greater than in any other era, over the last two decades, a vast number of walls, trenches and fences have been erected all over the globe – reaching, according to some estimates, a total length of 18,000 kilometers (Rodier 2012) – which reliably mark the outline of national borders on the land the purpose not so much of blocking the entry of invading armies as impeding the transit of private persons and/or any other type of national flow. There are more than a few borders that during this time have acquired the same unsettling, characteristic look of high-security prisons.

This wave of wall-building is taking place right at a historic moment when the effective sovereignty of States is being diluted: the ability to autonomously manage what happens in the territory of their jurisdiction has been limited as much as the degree of interdependence has increased. In this context, walls are erected “to offer a symbol of firmness to the internal public.” (Moré 2007: 15, see also Andersson 2014) The iconic value and performative functions predominate to such an extent that the possible meaning of such walls would lie more in their ostentatious visibility than in their doubtful effectiveness. They do not solve the conflicts between globalization and national interests, but project a glorified image of the scant sovereign power that States still possess (Brown 2010).

The real space where social interactions play out is no longer confined by the limits of different political jurisdictions. For some time now, their effective perimeter has completely spilled beyond local and national jurisdiction, covering the finite spherical surface of the planet we inhabit. As Ortega y Gasset indicated already in 1929, “there is no longer any part of humanity which lives separately; there are no islands of humanity.” (Ortega y Gasset 2008: 272) Given that all human beings share the same physical environment as the setting for their multiple and varied social practices, it makes sense to think about whether borders are ungodly figures that should be overcome (in the Hegelian sense of the term). The answer is not at all simple. The world has certainly never been as unified as it is at present (in the sense that its different parts have never been

sary to lead a decent life, but would instead recognize freedom of movement as a universal right. It would without a doubt be the most sensible way to tame chance and guarantee not being in the worst possible position: to be born in a country with no resources, and moreover, to lack the rights that allow a person to leave the country and enter another one. It should not be forgotten, then, that, unlike mere walls, the function of borders is not to impede exchanges, but to enable them by regulating transit (Debray 2016: 41–43), a regulation that must also comply with criteria of justice and equity. Therefore, if in spite of everything, in that initial agreement a world organized by means of borders would be approved, the different parties should at least stipulate that rich countries that refuse to share their wealth would lose the power to close the entry to their territories without further justification (Velasco 2016: 316–327).

The opening of borders is probably one of the more significant issues that a reformist agenda will have to address on a global level. Of course, opening or closing borders is not merely a question of opening or closing gates, but rather of changing the machinery of a complex system. Therefore, it would be necessary to carefully consider the internal structure of global interconnections to understand the full implications of a world-wide opening of borders, the possible steps leading up to it, and the material and regulatory conditions it should be subjected to. It presents a fascinating political and intellectual challenge.

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