

VIRTUAL BORDERS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

The article analyses the relation between globalization and borders. The elimination of borders is one of the main characteristics of globalization, also present in cognitive models that arose from reflections on the post-human and posthumous. The drive to restore borders can thus be seen as a form of resistance against the phenomena of globalization. In reality, globalization traces new borders that can be seen on bodies.

Keywords: borders, body, inclusion.

Globalization has taken apart the spatial structure of the world having swept up the borders. In 1848 Karl Marx already caught the main characteristics of this process: the exploitation of the world-wide market and the cosmopolite character of the production and consumerism; the creation of “new wants requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes”; the universal inter – dependence of nations. The widening of this process carries on into the intellectual sphere, implementing a uniform culture in which “national one-sidedness and narrowmindedness become more and more impossible”. Anticipating Bauman’s famous thesis on “the liquid” society¹, Marx announces the dissolution effect that the globalization of the market has – Marx does not use this term – : “ancient and venerable prejudices and opinion, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.” Instability becomes stable. The aggressiveness of Capitalism

¹ Bauman Zigmunt, *Liquid Life*, Cambridge Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005

“batters down all Chinese walls” forcing “the barbarian intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate” destructed by “the heavy artillery” of its cheap commodities².

The relationship between globalization and border is divided into its two registries also in Marx’s thought: the cognitive and geographic – political. It is an important connection in order to illuminate the complex relationship between borders and globalization.

Marx attributed to the planetary expansion of Capitalism the merit of having radicalized and universalized the class conflict, setting the premises for the proletarian revolution that would have definitively put an end to the class struggle and the exploitation of Man by Man.

The abandonment of the eschatological expectations of the Marxist conception has not carved a positive vision of the globalization process; growing economy and culture on a worldwide basis is seen as an achievement and an advanced stage of development: there is no imperialistic expansion, but positive interdependence that allows us to speak about “planetary interdependence”³. The cultural melting pot interpreted as mutual enrichment is appreciated like the blooming of exotic restaurants in the cities. The “End of History” theorized by Francis Fukujama⁴ is the positive outcome of globalization: the growth of the liberal democracy on a worldwide basis shows the exhaustion of viable systematic political alternatives. Liberal democracy is definitely the superior form of government, which, if it does not fulfil history, at least closes its evolutionary process. Similarly, borders are thrown radically into crisis if we consider the cognitive aspect.

First of all, the border between human and not human. The concept of “post-human”, invented in the years after 2000, focuses on the crisis of human centrality, interpreting “human” as rooted on the classic Cartesian pattern of a cognition-oriented subject, characterised by mindfulness, connectedness and self-organizing dynamism. It is a self-conscious, dynamic, dominating subject, in the twofold contrast to the natural world, “object” of the dominion on one side, and to the technical world on the other side, seen as instrument through which the dominion is exercised⁵. The binary contrast culture/nature, subject/object, dominant/dominated, actor/technical artifice is challenged by the so-

² Marx Karl, *The communist Manifesto*

³ Chris Barker, *Television, globalization and cultural Identities*, 1999 Open University Press Buckingham.

⁴ Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History*, Free Press, 1992

⁵ Colebrook, Claire, *Death of PostHuman. Essays on Extinction*, Open Humanities Press, 2014

called “ontological turn” and by all the post–human theorists. What emerges is the disappearance of the borders that delimited the human: Human becomes, in the Post-human and Posthumous perspective, just an interface and interconnected being, a mix of Network, a living system that allows for one world of computers, digital media, animals, things and systems. The post-human anthropology described for example by Claire Colebrook, or Latour’s actor Network theory, or other theorists of post – human, dissolve the subject, finding in this dissolution a revolutionary element of liberation. The intermingling of human with technical artifice, with animals and with things, in other words the abolition of the borders between human and not human, would be an important step in the liberation from the dominion relationship⁶.

Whether the dissolution of the humanistic anthropology and the political model of liberal democracy represent an evolutionary culmination of the entire humanity is a problematic issue. The post-humanist perspective based on the idea that domination depends on a ‘centred notion of subject’ and that its overcoming will have an emancipatory effect is misleading. For the neoliberal understanding of subjectivity, in fact, the dominated subject (allegedly) no longer exists. ‘The neo-liberal agent finds in having no substantive core or stable centre the opportunity for an endless self-reshaping and expansion, through a proprietary interaction with a surrounding environment understood as equally fluid and indeterminate’⁷. Slavoj Zizek writes: “in the same way that sciences of the brain teach us that a central self does not exist, so the new society of the multitude which governs itself will be like the today's cognitivist notion of the self, namely a pandemonium of agents who interact without a central authority that directs the show (...) this outlook comes dangerously close to the post – modern capitalistic understanding of subjectivity”⁸

According to Carl Schmitt’s political theory, which points out the relationship between the metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges and the form of its political organisation, the image of a world without borders reflects the globalized capitalistic society.

⁶ Weinstein Jami Colebrook, Claire, *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, Columbia University Press, 2017 New York

⁷ Pellizzoni, Luigi, *Ontological Politics in a Disposable World. The New Mastery of Nature*, 2015 Ashgate, p. 104

⁸ Zizek, Slavoj, *First as Tragedy Then as Farce*. London, Verso, 01 October 2009

We actually see a return towards theories and politics focused on national sovereignty, which invoke the restoration of borders and frontiers in order to contrast the capitalistic dynamics. Régis Debray, who we cannot suspect of nostalgic drifts and nationalism, writes an “Elogio alle frontiere”. Here the requirement to restore borders becomes a form of resistance to globalized capitalism. In his book he elaborates the topic of the border. His starting point is an anthropology according to which the human is, first and specifically, a “symbolic animal”. As you know, the etymology of “symbol” is “symballein”, which means put together. To unite means to give limits, construct borders. The frontier is good in order to think – claims Debray -because the symbolic re-ordering of chaos always passes through a game of contrasts. The mythologies regarding the origins of political spaces prove it: Romolo, in order to found Rome, traces the *pomerium*, which is the sacred and inviolable perimeter of the Palatine. The border constructs sense and gives sense: the etymology of the word “sacred” comes from sanction, which means to encircle, to delimit, to unify. The idea of the border, therefore, is connected with the idea of holy, a priceless thing in a world where all is down to commodity. Borders have the force of the symbol because they are a “place” and the character of a “place” is composed of a totality of elements, which you can never reduce to a single one, neither geographic, nor cultural, linguistic or other⁹.

The limit constituted by the border is, according to Debray, a permeable limit. The border is like a skin, at the same time it circumscribes and delimits the space that the body occupies. It is porous and lets things penetrate. The wall prevents the passage while the border regulates it.

The border is in constant transformation and cannot be fixed definitively. Evidently, based on these premises, the globalized world cannot create any sense of belonging; therefore, it cannot be habitable: “That it is useful to put in net the world, does not mean that this net is a world we can live in”¹⁰. The image of the border, summarised in the walk of the flaneur, who is, according to Debray’s definition, “stray of the borders” and walks along the borders of the city – the surrealist walk is by the limits of perception and touches the symbolic borders of the city - is the idealized form in which Debray interprets the border. Clearly, Debray has a normative theoretical position, which assumes, nevertheless, the idea that global capitalism dissolves borders and frontiers.

⁹ Rosaldo, R. *Culture and truth: the remarking of social analysis*, Boston Bacon Press, Boston, 1989

¹⁰ Debray, R. *Elogio alle frontiere*, ADD Editore, Torino 2012, pp. 42

Is the globalised world really going to dissolve borders?

Let us go back to Debray's concept of the holy. What Debray seems to forget is the ambivalence of holy.

Mircea Eliade writes: "the ambivalence of the holy is not only psychological (attraction and revulsion), but it is also moral and ontological; the holy is at the same time „holy“ and „contaminated“¹¹. The divinity must be protect by profanation, and the profane must be protected by the dangerous intrusion of the divinity. The rules of the holy are the norms that delimit divinity and impurity constitutes the danger of contact with it, intended in both directions. The border is, therefore, a dangerous place: a place of purification and contamination in which symbolic rituals of passage are performed.

The relationship between holy and contaminated regards the body. Social sciences, since the important works of Foucault and Norbert Elias, have brought to light how society inscribes the social order in the bodies dominating them with punishment and discipline¹². Even the biological nature of the body is no longer an unquestioned basis: the body is nothing but a social construct. It is not the body to exercise its explanatory power on the political order and on the operation of the society, rather the society conditions, forms, articulates bodies, to the point where the body just shows and reflects the social order¹³. Mary Douglass has shown how the human body is in reality the projection of the prevailing idea of the social order, not vice versa: the experience that everyone has of its body passes through the symbolic mediation of society¹⁴

The body plays a central role in the symbolic order of society and necessarily in the definition of borders. First of all, in the experience of the border. In fact, the border is the ritual place where the bodies are "written": by the border you will be peered, controlled, palpated, stripped. The border is a place where the normal rules to protect the body are no longer valid. The frontier is a liminal space within the state power which is absolute. Such border stations have a "neutral" or "no man's citizens"

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism arcaic Techniques of Ecstasis*, Routledge and K. Paul, 1964.

¹² Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, University College Dublin Press, 2006; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, New York, 1999.

¹³ Chris Shilling, *The Body and the Social Theory*, London, Newbury Park, New Delhi, 1993; M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth B. Turner, *The Body: Social Process and Culture Theory*, London, 1991

¹⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo*, London and New York, 2002

space, where ordinary civil rights are suspended¹⁵. At the border, the categories of exclusion and inclusion are written on the body: the idea of contamination is one of the most significant issues, which is used for discriminating the bodies. It figures out the dangers and the fears raised by the passage of borders. We fear the pathogenic action transmitted by the microorganisms, which endanger the bodies and the political body. In a certain critical sense, border maps are thus also body maps.

Now, after taking into consideration these brief remarks, we return to the issue of globalization. If we take into account the body, we see that globalization designates new borders. I refer to the borders traced between “globalized” people and the people who are “victims” of globalization.

A clear example of this are the immigrants’ bodies that create new borders outside and inside our “body politics”, in other words, our State: bodies crammed on the ships, drowned dead bodies filmed underwater, bodies touched by people equipped with surgical masks, bodies amassed on the docks of the ports and closed in reception centres. But we can also find mechanism of inclusion – exclusion affecting the citizens inside our society. Let us consider the phenomenon of populism 02¹⁶, where the role of the “forgotten”, namely the people who are outcast by the globalization process, both in an economic and cultural sense, has great significance.

The problem of the borders emerges once again in this regard: we find once again the concept of “maps”. Which are the new maps that trace globalization? After the latest US elections the New York Times published an article about the “two 4 Americas”¹⁷: the America of Trump and that of Clinton. The first occupies 85% of the territory and counts 146 million people, while Clinton's America is dense and compact, 15% of the territory, with a population of 174 million people. The two worlds are culturally strangers; the borders are drawn up between city and campaign: Trump’s America is that of scattered houses and of depopulated villages and of provincial towns; Clinton’s America is metropolitan, the America of great cities. The fracture is such to recall the process of Nation Building¹⁸. The United States are a divided Nation, divided between those who are “within” and those

¹⁵Hastings D. Wilson T. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity Nation and State*, Berg, Oxford, 1999 p. 131.

¹⁶ Revelli, M., *Populismo 2.0*, Einaudi, Torino, 2017

¹⁷ Wallace, T. *The two Americas of 2016* in “*The New York Time*”, 16 November, 2016.

¹⁸ Revelli, p. 45.

who are “outside”. An eloquent metaphor used to illustrate the contrast between outside and inside is that of the passengers of Acela, the Express train, which connects Washington and Boston. There are those who are “within”, equipped with tablets and of headphones, and there is the world “outside”, the de-industrialized America.

These new borders are translated into body maps, as occurs in rituals of the territorial borders. The success of Trump, who uses his body in order to communicate values and attitudes, playing the role of a successful businessman, giving the model of muscular masculinity, is an important sign that the body has become more and more important¹⁹. He embodies a genuine model of “muscular masculinity” that has success because of the frustration of “the white” American male, who has lost his dominant position, in the melting pot of the races, in the human rights battle which includes women, homosexuals and blacks. There is an “ethological reflex”, there are acknowledgment mechanisms that are activated through elementary signs, gestures and expressions. Since the border as place is defined by symbolic density, we have to address the symbolic in order to find the new borders.

Man, the "symbolic animal", is crossed by borders: those of globalized society are perhaps even more impassable. They are not the result of the creative walk of the *flâneur*, as Debray hopes, but the result of the strict economic logic imposed by globalization itself.

¹⁹ Katz, J., *Man Enough? Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton and the Politics of Presidential Masculinity*, Interlink Books, 2016



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