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Crossing borders

The utopia underlying the idea that increased freedom of movement will homogenize the EU is proved wrong by the observation that more frequent crossing of borders creates more difference rather than less. Be it as labour migration, higher education exchange, or tourism, the mobility brought by European enlargement by no means eliminates the role of national borders as identity resources.

"Less than ever is the contemporary world without borders."
Etienne Balibar¹

In studying ethnic identities, Fredrick Barth famously inverted the way to define this difficult notion: it is not pre-existing identities that create borders, but borders, resulting from contact with the other, that create identities.² As Albert, Jacobson, and Yapid recently claimed,³ borders should be studied within a larger complex including identities and orders, which they call IBO (identities—borders—orders). This complex becomes ever more complex in the global world, when Westphalian sovereignty is challenged, when orders overlap, and when identities are no longer hierarchically organized by an ideology.

I will argue that not only contact with the other, but also the increasingly frequent crossing of borders, creates IBO effects. The naive utopia that underlies the European idea according to which more mobility will gradually homogenize the EU space thus proves to be wrong. In the absence of centralized coercive rule, migration, entering new order arrangements, and new identity games encourage difference of all sorts. In many respects there is a certain surplus of movement — you do not declare revenues, you reinvent your biography, you profit from some cultural aura or even culturally specific job (being British is in itself a job in non-English speaking countries). Thus, increasing the speed of human flows produces more difference rather than less, in the same way that the result of global warming is more extreme weather.

Let me start with the lowest level of mobility: people who seek work abroad without being specially prepared for the contact with the other culture and who, as a consequence, depend on some intermediary, usually from their own ethnic group. Moving from a country like Bulgaria towards the EU implies an incredible amount of contingency. In the usual story, the migrant meets someone in the bus or while waiting alone at night at the railway station who invites them to stay at their home and introduces them to their first employer. Even if there has been some preparation, one often hears that those who planned emigration did not succeed, whereas those that joined them by chance managed to stay. During the first year or two, migrants are illegal and are

exploited much more than those with work permits. The mere ignorance of the language accounts for up to 50 per cent of intermediaries' "commissions".

Usually, the socio-cultural level drops dramatically: the engineer becomes a construction worker, the teacher becomes a cleaning woman who works overtime with no social security and outside legislation. Why take the pains to embark on such a dubious enterprise? Besides the dream of the West, the future of their children, or unemployment, there is a very sound reason for enduring hardships abroad: migration confers status at home. The main thing is to return with the money, to park a big car before one's house, to opening a bar and live off one's Euro-earnings. The migrant could stay away from home for life, but nevertheless would never stop comparing himself or herself to those they left behind. Border crossing — real or imaginary — becomes a major identity resource.

Listening to stories about checkpoints reveals that borders have not disappeared. Since Bulgaria entered the Schengen space in 2001, one can pass as a tourist. But most people do not look like tourists. There is the story about a Gypsy begging gang that presented themselves at the French border as delegates of a symposium on cultural heritage. So border officers become more subtle, they start asking questions, they require persons to have a minimum of money (unforeseen by law), which the migrants borrow from the driver or pass to each other during the check. Local knowledge develops: "Slovenians are bastards, Hungarians let you pass for 20 euro..." A particular intersection of IBO is that those who are returned with a black stamp in the passport find a way to change their name (no longer as easy since transcription from Cyrillic was standardized) and take the bus again.

Students can be seen as another case of mobility that creates new types of borders. Mobility in this case relies on various exchange programmes based on international, regional, or cultural difference. Experience abroad is considered to be a resource: the fact of trans-border mobility thus reinforces rather than weakens borders. A large number of Bulgarian youth profit from their student's status to remain abroad, working part-time and looking for a way to regularize their situation. Usually success implies marriage with an "incumbent".

There are also the various types of relations where "transborderality" confers status: diplomats, sportspersons, NGO partners, scientific or cultural representatives, and the like. The other is treated with respect not because of his or her qualities, but as an agent of a supposedly equally sovereign entity. You will not expect the politico-symbolic class in their majority to give up their representative status. One specific aspect of this is the gradual replacing of "aesthetics by ethnics", so to speak, where the main content of high culture becomes spatial transposition. Benjamin argued that the storyteller is someone who comes from far away,⁴ but nowadays he tends to stay there, that is, to refuse to integrate into the host culture.

Tourism has become the most important perspective for most of the places on the old continent, if not yet in economic terms, at least on the level of the imaginary. Tourist flows create differences even when they are absent. In the case of Bulgaria, this is the triumph of the national heritage invented by the Communists: the Thracians, folklore, *kukeri* (a ritual for driving away evil spirits), and so on. Let us not forget another aspect of difference: buying power. This creates effects of transgression, such as in Gevgelija, the "Macedonian Las Vegas", or Sandansky in southern Bulgaria, a destination for sex tourism. Transgression is erotic: when you are elsewhere you are freed

from your own IBO constraints. The powerful ambiguities this creates can be seen in Eli Roth's much criticized film *Hostel* (2006), in which sexual tourism to an eastern European country, presumably Slovakia, turns into a sado-masochistic nightmare.

Borders are normally permeated by business; economic liberalization is supposed to be the strongest vector of trans-nationalization. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of orders and identities continues to thrive in the European space, even if, for capital and goods, borders seem to have been abolished. Take the introduction of the apparently unifying euro: according to the former French minister of the economy, Dominique Strauss-Khan, it is because France is protected by the euro that it permits itself record deficits. The common currency has been accompanied by different inflationist policies, and, as a consequence, different orders. Observation of one of the oldest borders in Europe, that between France and Belgium along the Ardennes that should have disappeared long ago, reveals two very different orders of forest management — large and commercial to the north, small and subsistence-oriented to the south. The differences along the Bulgarian-Greek border are much more visible with respect to levels of exploitation, rights, stability of investment, and so on. Businesses in candidate countries are in most cases ready to flee to other border regions once the country becomes a member of the EU, in order to profit from tax concessions, confused legislation, and easily bribed authorities. Enlargement is a serious business that thrives on borders; although usually it is regional, for the last five years in Bulgaria it has also been ethnic. Let us not forget that deepening of the EU is also a sort of business, if one takes into account that each new raising of standards creates difference and, as a consequence, economic interest.

All this does not necessarily imply that the EU is falling apart; since Meyer Fortes' and E. E. Evans Pritchards' research on the African Nuer, we know that segmentary cultures can stick together fairly well. Nevertheless, we should ask ourselves what the EU is doing when they liberalize, destroy borders, or promote various forms of mobility.

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¹ Etienne Balibar, "Sur la constitution de l'Europe Crise et virtualités", *Passant* no. 49/2004, <http://www.passant-ordinaire.com/revue/49-635.asp>

² Fredrick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Cultural Difference*, Boston: Little Brown 1969.

³ Mathias Albert, David Jacobson, Yosef Lapid (eds.), "Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory," Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2001.

⁴ "'When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell', goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar." Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller. Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov", in: *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt. NY: Schocken 1968, part II.