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DO "GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS"?: SOME REFLECTIONS ON BORDERING IN ANTHROPOLOGY¹

Abstract: The article refers to the myth of possible disappearance of borders (state, national and ethnical borders). The author compares the theories of two eminent anthropologists Victor Turner and Frederik Barth which contain the concept of liminality while researching sensitive aspects of society where man is facing the borders or limitations.

Key words: borders (creating/crossing/disappearance), Turner, Barth, liminality, megja.

There was once a myth, shortly lived, that borders between nations would weaken and eventually disappear. "Trans-national" replaced "inter-national" in the discourse or jargon of the approaching global culture. Cyber space and jet transport, perhaps container-ship transport as well, reshaped communication and consumption. Everything began to be seen and felt as "flows". The metaphor of flowing suggested the arrival of freedom and, for at least one interpreter, Francis Fukayama, "The End of History" (1992).

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was surely the most persuasive proof of the myth's reality, and the widening opportunities for "transnational" migration seemed additional evidence for global –scaled, cultural transformation. Tourism thus became one of the fields where social research could explore the meeting of exotic, distant cultures and ordinary life in the Western metropolises. The term "cosmopolitans", moreover, represented the primary actors in the emergent "world culture" (for a comprehensive essay on this tendency cf. Hannerz, Ulf 1990: "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture," in M.Featherstone, ed., *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. London, SAGE).

Anthropologists, as Hannerz suggests, insist on joining the "global" with the "local", thus maintaining the close –up experience of traditional field work. The sites of field work, however, shifted dramatically, and field work itself became increasingly "multi-sited" (Marcus 1996). A single mountain village in its splendid isolation from the rest of the world could no longer serve as a putative laboratory for sustained observa-

¹ This essay is based on two lectures that were held at the Institute for Ethnology and Anthropology at Sts. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia (4-5 April 2012). I am grateful to Professor Ljupco Risteski, his colleagues and students in Skopje for their good questions and commentaries. It was one of the students who brought Victor Turner's "liminality" concept into the discussion.

The Republic of Macedonia is an obvious field for doing research on "borders", and the Institute in Skopje has become an excellent environment for this difficult kind of work. Readers of the essay can be referred to an article in the anthology co-edited by Professor Risteski (Schwartz 2013).

Finally I am grateful to the editors of the Danish *Tidsskriftet antropologi* for permission to publish in a slightly different form the present essay.

tion and analysis. Closely associated with the renaissance of cosmopolitanism was the re-birth of civil society with non-governmental organizations anchored in metropolitan centers but active in the "periphery" of formerly communist states. The surely stupendous elements just sketched do make plausible the myth of fluidity and the abolition of borders.

The fragmentation of (former) Yugoslavia was one of the first indications that the fluidity of cultures and nations was hardly an accurate portrait of the new world order. "Balkanization" seemed more fitting, and the term becomes increasingly used in the decade of the 1990's, and the dramatic collapse of the Twin Towers in New York clouded the fall of the Berlin Wall. The myth of cosmopolitan cultural exchange and mixes was exploded. Suspicion of terrorist attacks made international airports anything but the unchecked movement of peoples and cultures. Digital techniques of border control began using data from cyberspace to hinder such movement (Broeders 2007). Migration, once the paradigm expression of border crossing, seemed to threaten the very metropolises which had acclaimed its value for civil society. Anxiety for terrorist actions and for foreign cultures is a persuasive force in the politics of the western societies.

If one were to ask: "How might anthropologists respond to this present situation?" a first response ought to be: "Look at our own history of theories." How are borders - and the movement across borders conceptualized and positioned in various theoretical models? To make a tentative answer, as if it were an oral examination topic for a Master's degree!, I would limit my answer to a comparison of two thinkers: Victor Turner and Fredrik Barth.

Both anthropologists make an inquiry into the sensitive regions of a society where a person meets a border or limit. For Turner, the liminal condition is one of ritual transformation. Turner's analysis is centered on the middle, ambiguous region of "communitas" in a rite de passage. Liminality is a state of limbo, "betwixt and between" a prior and a future "structure" (1967). Turner's border crossing, actually a threshold crossing, is done with a one-way ticket. To return from where one started is almost impossible, a veritable "myth of return". Anthropological studies of migration have sometimes drawn upon the "rite de passage" as an explanatory model. Turner, of course, is interested in the life phases of a person from birth, adulthood, parenthood, and death. These recurrent phases of the life cycle point evidently to the one-way process of border-crossing. Indeed, one of Turner's important distinctions is between ceremony and ritual, the former being an enactment of social memory, the latter a transformation of a person which demarcates the entry into a membership. Whereas a ceremony can be repeated, daily or annually, to maintain and reinforce membership, a ritual passage is a single event in a single direction.

Turner's "ceremony" resembles Frederik Barth's account of "ethnic groups and boundaries" (1969). (Both Turner and Barth presented their notable ideas at the end of the 1960's, the period that is characterized as one of enormous transformation among western societies).

Frederik Barth's theory is one of "transactions", not "transformations". His focus is on the individual actor as he or she meets "others", who may or may not be members of the same group. Recognition of the "other" in a specific situation creates what ought to be an appropriate conduct. Identity, then, is situational, rather than essential, even though many members insist upon the ultimate reality of their ethnic, national being. Thus, Barth speaks, in a famous sentence (p. 15), of the maintenance of ethnic boundaries, "not only of the stuff that those boundaries contain" (if my memory of the text is correct). A sim-

ple, and eloquent, way of contrasting Turner and Barth is the difference between "rite de passage" and "right of passage" (Anthony Cohen (1996) anticipated the "rite" and "right" homonym in an article: "Personal Nationalism: a Scottish view of some rites, rights, and wrongs," *American Ethnologist* 23 (4) 802-15), but my use of the pun is other than Cohen's).

To maintain my comparison of Turner and Barth, as they are contingent, not polar opposites, I would note that both are speaking of borders as potential danger zones, whether they be ritual or negotiable. Sandra Wallman's article on the "boundaries of race" (1978. "Boundaries of Race: Processes of Ethnicity in England. *Man* 13 (2). 200-18.) is highly relevant insofar as it introduces the notion of "interface" into the study of bordering. Wallman notices that the term "interface" was used by traffic engineers to describe the merging of automobiles and trucks on a modern expressway. This situation of changing lanes, entering or exiting, required maximum attention of the drivers who had to quickly interpret the actions of other drivers to avoid a collision. Wallman thus finds a metaphor of "interface" on the expressway for Barth's "transactions" between members of different ethnic groups, but Wallman points to the gravity of the "meetings". The concept of interface also encourages an inquiry into the intra-ethnic relations, as well as inter-ethnic relations. How do members of the "same group" meet each other and avoid colliding with each other? Is one allowed to "exit" the group and re-enter it at another occasion? Interface, in this context, proposes a total of at least four relations for an inquiry. Each side of the two boundaries has boundaries within as well as across. This means that the "rights of passage" in a situation of interface expand upon Fredrik Barth's seminal discussion of "ethnic groups and boundaries". The potential danger at the site of interface, moreover, seems to incorporate the Turnerian focus on "rite de passage", literally a transition as well as a transaction.

This comparison of Barth and Turner, helped by Wallman's mediation, brings us to the proverbial statement by the New England farmer to Robert Frost, neighbor and poet: "Good fences make good neighbors". The title of Frost's poem is "Mending Walls" and the poet in this work relates how he and his neighbor repair each spring the damage done to the stone wall dividing their properties. Ironically the cause of the damage was the poet's own name: Frost! (I think that the Macedonian word for such a wall is "Megia", not the more common word "granitca", which often refers to state borders. The term is also close to the Scandinavian term for "border", "grænse"). Robert Frost attempts to argue that there is no basic reason for mending the walls. The two owners grow different plants: "He is all pine and I am apple orchard." Note how Frost makes identities out of crops. Why not save each other the arduous work of repair? But, No, the farmer wins the case, and the two men ceremoniously—Turner would say—meet each other along the wall every spring. Hence the argument of the winner: "Good fences make good neighbors".

In his poem, Robert Frost is both the narrator and an actor in a transaction. The poem is a condensed ethnographic field work in a rural village. I catch more presence of Fredrik Barth than of Victor Turner: More rights than rites. One of Fredrik Barth's most brilliant students, the Norwegian anthropologist, Marianne Gullestad (1946-2008), cites Frost's poem in her essay, "Symbolic Fences" (1992: in *The Art of Social Relations*. Scandinavian University Press), so my reflections on bordering can be said to have at least one other spokesman in the profession of anthropology. Gullestad quotes the Norwegian proverb: "Love thy neighbor, but keep the gate."

I hope by now that this very sketchy comparison of two concepts of bordering or crossing borders might lead to further research and reflection. Nearly every issue of co-existence touches upon the dilemma and solution Robert Frost faced with his neighbor. Borders can be fraught with peril; they can also maintain mutuality. There are plenty of fields and plenty of boundaries between them. At least one thing is certain: the myth of unlimited mobility and cosmopolitan fluidity was a short-lived illusion.

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