BORDER AND CYBERSPACE:
SOME REFLECTIONS OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract: The essence of the border, as separation from the "otherness", has not changed in the course of history. On the contrary, the interpretation given by the men, according to territorial and historical contexts, has undergone radical transformations. Nowadays, it's difficult to find an univocal feature for the border, especially if we take into consideration the new reality of worldwide digital connections. Telematics and virtual reality have altered the relational sphere, and it's necessary to find new criteria to analyze and interpret interactions among people and territories. The question we want to deal with here is: does the idea of border still make sense in the apparently borderless contexts of virtual reality and cyberspace? The aim of this paper is therefore to reflect upon the historical legacy and the functional evolution of the border and to wonder weather this "archetype" of the human action can still play a role in the cyberspace, where places, people and interactions are dematerialized.

Keywords: Border, territory, cyberspace

1. INTRODUCTION

Often the border is defined as an imaginary dividing line[1]: the graphic representation of a linear *locus* that divides the states (when it is political) and the identities (when it is cultural), scans geomorphologies (when it is natural) or identifies the limits of a space. Some concepts are recurrent: partition, limitation, otherness. Actually, the idea of border is approachable to that of separation or limitation, of known and unknown, of partition of a joint entity. It is in the very essence of the border to define, diversify and relate two or more entities, to become a «mysterious place that by connecting separates, or perhaps by separating connects» (Zanini, 1997, p. XIII).

All of this makes sense in the material world, today almost completely divided into political actors - the states -, whose sovereignty is limited and delimited by the borders: these latter still play a key role in determining size, speed and intensity of the relations among the former. The question we want to deal with here is: does the idea of border still make sense in the apparently borderless contexts of virtual reality and cyberspace? The aim of this paper is therefore to reflect upon the historical legacy and the functional evolution of the border and to wonder weather this "archetype" of the human action can still play a role in the cyberspace, where places, people[2] and interactions are dematerialized.

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[1] More correctly, it should be defined as an imaginary vertical plane that goes from the subsoil to the air space

[2] It's the case, for example, of *Second Life*.

2. THE DIMENSIONS OF THE BORDER
2.1. The "archetypal" dimension

We want here to refer to the Jungian category of the archetypes: non logical, primordial and deeply rooted concepts that rule the collective unconscious. In our opinion, border and territoriality can be considered archetypal concepts.

Actually, one is the cause of the other, and *vice versa*: territory, in fact, necessarily involves a boundary, and finds its *raison d'être* only if a border defines its beginning and its end, thus determining other consequentially linked categories: the center and the margin, the inside and the outside. «Man tends to live within an enclosed, limited, space. He needs to be surrounded by a barrier that bounds the space he has occupied, that separates and protects him from something that becomes "other", "different", once a border is drawn» (*ibidem*, p. XV).

From this we can understand the "archetypal dimension" of the border: it is the genesis of the diversity; the knowledge that removes the fear of the unknown; the delimitation of a space for exercising rights, claiming sovereignty, displaying identity; it's a defence from the otherness; a refuge from vulnerability; by means of it, something finite, sure and safe, that counters the absence of limits, is built.

In one only act, several categories of the intellect merge: the law (to define means to create sovereignty and rules), the war, the sacredness of foundation rites – e.g. Romulus and Remus - and the mysticism that these places evoke (Sordi, 1987).

2.2. The cultural dimension

The above mentioned elements refer to the cultural sphere: they are, in fact, products of the human mind and therefore represent expressions of the culture, considered as «collective knowledge, which enables the life any human group, including the most simple and primitive communities» (Spedicato Iengo, 2006, p. 91).

To define a cultural border means to gather culturally homogeneous and spacially contiguous elements: this territorial complex most likely won't match a political border. In other terms, a culturally homogeneous group doesn't necessarily occupy a politically univocal space.

This issue is not trivial: such highly recurrent asymmetries result in the fragmentation of a cultural region by a conventional sign, that sometimes becomes an insuperable political barrier. History is full of such examples, but the case of Africa in the late XIX century is emblematic. The practice of superimposing political borders to cultural regions has been very frequent in the African continent: we can mention, for example, the anomalous boundaries of Gambia – a British-made wedge in the French-speaking Senegal - and the so-called Caprivi Strip, a narrow protrusion of Namibia between Botswana, Angola and Zambia. It is clear that cultural identity cannot follow sudden cartographic changes. Interesting at this regard is the statement of a tribal chief: «For us, the border is intended to separate the British and the French, not the Yoruba» (Reader, 2001, p. 492).

In contemporary world, however, the opposite tendency seems to occur as well: in some cases, peoples are divided not only by political borders, but also by cultural ones, by virtue of which superimposed political boundaries seem to fade away. An emphasis on the cultural features seems then to emerge, and strengthened identities can generate tensions on the borders between cultures. This seems to confirm, to some extent, the theory of "the clash of civilizations" by Samuel Phillips Huntington and his considerations about global geopolitics based on cultural factors (Huntington, 1997).

The border, therefore, can both unite and divide. The cultural dimension, in its complexity, candidates to discriminate - according to Huntington - between stability and conflict.

2.3. The political dimension

The political dimension of the border is probably the best perceived one in common imagery – the political border is the border *tout court* - and plays a role of utmost importance: its countless and multiform situations, displays and contingencies, so often crucial in the history of human relationships, have been the foundations of any territorial organization.

The political border bounds jurisdiction and sovereignty, which makes it an essential feature of any entity claiming authority on a portion of land, at any geographical scale and administrative level. From this point of view, the historical evolution has witnessed a gradual establishment of territorial bodies defined by a boundary line. The modern state, that nowadays we consider the "normal" form of political organization of the territory, is just the most recent one.

The importance of a visible sign of division was the basis of the social order of ancient Greece, both from the political and the religious points of view. Regarding the former, stable boundaries were necessary to the spatial and territorial organization of the *poleis*, the city-states, in order to achieve an effective sovereignty (Daverio Rocchi, 1988). Under the religious aspect, the border was placed under the protection of gods like Zeus Horios, Apollo Horios, Artemis and Hermes, who would have guaranteed its immovability and inviolability. The sacred dimension of the border was also present in the Roman culture with a specific divinity: Terminus, or Jupiter Terminus (Piccaluga, 1974). The idea of the territorial delimitation of the Roman power is also linked to the term *limes*, a fortified space at the frontier of the Empire.

During the Middle Ages and the modern age the border has gradually lost its sacred value, becoming increasingly an element of spatial division, the delimitation of an exclusive rule (Marchetti, 2006).

Among the historical events concerning the evolution of the border, the Treaties of Tordesillas (1494) and Westphalia (1648) deserve a mention. The former refers to the resolution of the dispute between Spain and Portugal over the newly discovered lands following Columbus expedition made by Pope Alexander VI, who established an imaginary line of demarcation along a meridian 370 leagues west of Cape Verde Islands, to mark the border between the Portuguese domination to the east of that line and the Spanish one to the west (Parry, 1994). With the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, however, «we have for the first time a political settlement of the borders at European level» (Lizza, 2001, p. 178). According to mainstream theories, Westphalia inaugurates a new international order based on state sovereignty, a system in which states recognize each others just as states and beyond the sovereigns, a system that has laid the foundations for a modern conception of national and international politics.

In the contemporary world, the role of the border seems to swing between two opposite tendencies. On one side we are witnessing – in the Balkans, in the Caucasus, in the Middle East - a strong local rootedness, which makes the border the stronghold of the identity: this latter is rooted in - and expressed by - the territory, with which inclusive or exclusive ties are established (Raffestin, 1981). On the other side, we can observe a defunctionalization of the border, or rather the weakening of some typical functions of the states.

The cause of this change is commonly found in globalization, defined as «the expansion, intensification and acceleration of relationships, interconnections and interdependencies among different areas of the world. This interrelationship refers generally to every sphere of human life, from culture to economics, from fashion to politics, from terrorism to finance» (Vanolo, 2006, p. 25).

With reference to this work, we can mention the growing influence of supranational bodies like European Union, WTO, etc.: «they are becoming increasingly important actors that erode, to a certain extent, the importance of national governments» (Vanolo, 2006, p. 27), which corresponds to a progressive fading of the border as the limit of state sovereignty. European Union, for example, with its core principles of integration and free movement of persons, goods, capitals and services, emphasizes the role of the border as a place of connection rather than an element of separation, and counters an idea of the border solely based on identity and territoriality.

In conclusion, whereas it seems, on the one hand, that a "crisis of the principle of territoriality" (Badie, 1996) is occurring, on the other hand there's no doubt that the State remains the territorial basis of reference for national societies. In this scenario, the border plays a new role: although not completely independent of the identity and the past, it's now the sign of a cultural transition from a territorially rooted sovereignty to a broader conception of human relations.

3 CYBERSPACE, DISTANCE, TERRITORY
3.1. Virtual reality and cyberspace

The term "virtual reality" has overwhelmingly entered our common language to indicate an immaterial, intangible, "fake" world created by digital technologies. However, though lacking in materiality, virtual reality exists. Quoting Lévy: «It is virtual a "deterritorialized" entity, capable of generating many concrete manifestations at different times and in definite places, without being bound up with a particular space or time» (Lévy, 1999, p. 51)

Another key aspect to note is the connection between virtual reality and the development of new digital technologies. Virtual reality, therefore, is experiencing a great interest because of its matching the digital revolution, which makes it, in the collective imagery, the frontier of post-modernity, the same frontier that has generated the new digital scenario: the cyberspace.

The prefix *cyber-* derives from the Greek *kubernan*, that means "to steer", "to rule". It was first used in the second half of the forties by the scientist Norbert Wiener, who laid the foundations of the cybernetics. However, it was the Canadian writer William Gibson who coined the neologism cyberspace in his novel "Neuromancer" in 1984, describing it as a digital and navigable space in which individuals interacted through the information. From then on, the concept of cyberspace has been drawn on, reused and modified, but it has always been referred to the world of information via computer: as a metaphor to describe the non-physical space created by computers when connected each others. The information, therefore, is the key element of cyberspace.

The term cyberspace is sometimes used as a synonym for the Internet. However, the two terms refer to different things: while the Internet is a technological infrastructure, made up of material devices, cyberspace is the immaterial space generated by that infrastructure (Giorda, 2000). What happens in the network (an exchange of e-mail messages, for example) takes place in the cyberspace, not in the physical space where interacting computers are installed.

Like physical space, cyberspace contains objects - emails, websites, files, hypertexts - that can be delivered or collected.

3.2. Death of the distance?

From a geographical point of view it's quite obvious that the absence of materiality involves the "death of the distance" (Bonora, 2001, p. 12): the geometric meaning of the distance – a segment joining two points - doesn't make sense in cyberspace. But it cannot be ignored that a new meaning of this term – based on "relationality" and connectivity - is emerging: it's necessary to find a new measure that suits the phenomenon.

In the new virtual world, the accessibility seems to be the most useful criterion for measuring the distance, and the traditional dichotomy "center-periphery" is replaced by the newer "connected - unconnected". «Being distant means today to be unconnected to the flows and the networks that strengthen globalization» (*ibidem*).

Geographical theory deals with these issues, distinguishing between an absolute distance (expressed in metric terms) and a relative one, where relationality and accessibility - that is «the possibility to be reached by individuals or goods and services» (Scarpelli, 2003, p. 180) - discriminate between the near and the faraway. Under this respect, distance is also present in cyberspace, in terms of opportunity and capability to access and process information (Romei, 1996).

This new concept of distance is called "digital divide", that is the gap among individuals, firms, organizations and geographical areas in terms of access to - and use of - information and communication technology (Ranieri, 2008). The digital divide can be internal, that is the gap, within a geographical area, between the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the men and the women and so on; or external, to indicate the gap between areas, especially between the North and the South.

In conclusion, the distance in cyberspace doesn't relate to metric but to relational parameters: if we use digital connections as a measure, we can find new sceneries to measure.

3.3. New spaces, new territorialities

The development of cyberspace can also boost a new concept of territory. Territory can be defined as «a part of the Earth's surface, where human activities are – or can be - carried out» (Landini, 1999, p. 29). It's obviously difficult to relate this definition to cyberspace, since this latter is not present on the Earth's surface. Nevertheless, we can overcome this obstacle if we conceive cyberspace as a place where we keep relationships, and towards which we feel a sense of belonging, just as a material place where we root our bonds.

In this respect, cyberspace appears like a virtual territory - that borders the real one through the four sides of a monitor - «made up of virtual places in connection with each other, according to a certain geography and occupied by more or less structured and organized subjects who use specific codes for that particular environment» (Picci, 1999, p. 13). The new virtual spaces are then represented by chats, newsgroups, social networks, muds and so on. "Virtual agorae" are therefore born: if squares have always been the ganglia of the urban life, "virtual agorae" are the knots of the cyberspace, emblematic spaces for sharing and communication.

4. CONCLUSIONS: DOES BORDER EXIST IN CYBERSPACE?

The essence of the border, as separation from the "otherness", has not changed in the course of history, because of its "archetypal" nature. On the contrary, the interpretation given by the men, according to territorial and historical contexts, has undergone radical transformations: from the holy mysticism of the ancient civilizations to the political sovereignty of the modern state, through the praedial provision of the Middle Ages.

Nowadays, it's difficult to find an univocal feature for the border, especially if we take into consideration the new reality of worldwide digital connections. Telematics and virtual reality have altered the relational sphere, and it's necessary to find new criteria to analyze and interpret interactions among people and territories.

In our opinion, the sense of the border in cyberspace can be found, once again, in his archetypal nature of division and demarcation. In the real world the border delimits the sovereignty of a state or the identity of a nation. In the virtual territories of cyberspace the border between what is inside and what is outside is marked, first of all, by the belonging, or not, to the "era of the access" (Rifkin, 2000). We are clearly referring to the digital divide, a technological border that separates the web-connected world from the unconnected one: «An ecumenical connection is just a theoretical hypothesis, technically feasible through wiring or satellites. Nevertheless, large communication companies that look at the Internet as a market are only interested in the regions with the highest income per capita. Moreover, in the regions where the income of the majority of the population is far below the poverty line, the Internet connection is not seen as the main problem» (Mazzetti, 2008, p. 93).

Secondly, borders in cyberspace are marked by the sharing, or the non-sharing, of virtual territories which find their *raison d'être* in the expression of a culture - in the widest meaning of the world - and in the free choices of accession made by individuals. Agreeing with Lévy, we think that this apparently theoretical consideration can have considerable and unpredictable implications in the real world: we think of the networks of terrorism, pedophilia, satanism, traffics of any kind and so on, that communicate and operate in and through secret niches of the web and make political borders quite irrelevant. If such cyber-territories exist – and they actually do exist – it's important to acknowledge their extension and their limits, that is their borders. Are therefore necessary analytical tools which are capable to lay the geography of the states on that of the networks, to cross the geography of the flows - of people, goods, money - with that of information, to combine the complexity of the material world with the volatility of the cyberspace.

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