ESF Exploratory Workshop on

Borders through time and space: towards an ontology

Barcelona (Spain), 29-31st October 2014

Convened by:
Solange Chavel & Marco Madella

SCIENTIFIC REPORT

1. Executive summary

The workshop "Border towards time and space: towards an ontology" took place in one of the conference rooms of University Pompeu Fabra's new building on the Ciutadella's campus in Barcelona, Spain.

Participants first met on the evening of the 29th of October for an initial introduction and get-together supper. Then the meetings as such took the form of four sessions during October 30th and 31st. Additional informal interaction was allowed by coffee and lunch breaks on the premises, as well as during the suppers of the 29th and 30th.

14 participants from 8 countries were presenting papers (a 15th person planned had to be excused for family reasons on the last minute) and Alba Echarte – from the sponsoring institution SIRIS Academic – was attending to all sessions and taking minutes. All sessions were presided by a chair, two of those being external participants from SIRIS Academic (Bernardo Rondelli and Sebastian Stride).

The main scientific objective of the meeting was to contribute to a better understanding of bordering processes in a long-term perspective and at different institutional and geographical scales, through the exploration of a trans-disciplinary modelling approach and the proposal of a common ontology.

The methodology of the workshop consisted in combining: a) specific case studies, from social sciences, chosen with the aim of covering a broad variety of borders types; b) tools to elaborate an ontology of borders, relying both on classical conceptual analysis (philosophy) and semantic modelling (knowledge engineering & representation).

The overall conclusions of the workshop were of two different orders:

1) The first conclusion was the extreme context-sensitivity of the concept of border, beyond the general agreement on a functional definition of borders as political institutions set up to deal with the differentiation and negotiation of interactions between two **similar** and **basically** equal groups. From this point of view, it appeared very useful to stick to this broad definition of the border, to distinguish it from close concepts such as limit, or boundary. But at the same time, it appeared difficult to attain any kind of generalizing about the *use* of borders independently of the contexts: a promising path, which emerged from various presentations, is that of case-to-case comparison, allowing for a sensitivity to singular social settings in which borders are used or emerge.

2) The second conclusion is the **importance of epistemological debates** to be able to do some serious comparative work between different disciplinary fields of the humanities and social sciences. An extremely stimulating part of the discussion during the workshop appeared when confronting views on the use or limits of "models" for understanding social phenomenon, and the useful degree of formalization and testing of hypotheses (see section 4 below for more details on this aspect).

The general atmosphere was friendly, which made it possible to have quite animated argumentative confrontations in a very constructive disposition. Several participants

explicitly told the conveners after the event that they had particularly appreciated the ability to enter into quite deep epistemological discussions about the respective merits of different approaches within the humanity and social sciences – which is something which was explicitly permitted by the "exploratory workshop" formula.

2. Scientific content of the event

The workshop was organized into three equivalent sessions with 3 or 4 paper presentations followed by discussion. Then, a fourth session was entirely devoted to exploring epistemological issues.

The first session focused mainly on issues related to borders in archaeology and prehistory. **Marco Madella** introduced the topic by pointing to the main issue of *available evidence* to ground our knowledge about border during prehistoric times. He underlined the difficulty to pinpoint a reality such as "border" when going back in time, as the available experience progressively fades away and the scientists is left with only material artefacts to work with. Indeed, if "border" supposes to talk about politics and power, then we are immediately confronted to the problem of the lack of sources to track this. Therefore, Marco Madella suggests that archaeology is frequently more comfortable talking about the study of *frontier* between cultural groups, and has to rely on a series of related assumptions. Among such assumptions, one can notably list: (a) the idea that equal cultural material evidence testifies for a more or less homogeneous cultural group; (b) that genetics can contribute to match the material culture with the existence of a people. The frontier thus becomes the place where two cultures meet, get together and blur. The frontier is identified in the archaeological records when we identify evidence of different practices.
Enrico Crema continued the line of argument opened by Marco Madella, with the presentation of a research methodology deployed to study patterns of cultural evolution over time and space. The underlying research question was how to identify limits between groups, with the following problem: "Are cultural phylogenies possible?" In the framework designed by such a question, the "frontier" / "border" is thus equivalent to the difference between natural species. As signalled in the preceding talk, it appears that archaeology has to work on the basis that objects are a good proxy to identify culture, which is clearly a very debatable assumption – and could even be seen in some cases as a way of begging the question. **Andreas Angourakis** closed this first series of presentations focused on archaeology by explaining a methodology relying heavily both on the archaeological record and on computer-based simulation to understand the patterns of interaction between framers and herders coexisting in a same wide territory. In this use of the term, a "border" is defined in a purely functional manner as the limit, projected into the physical space, of a specific way of getting resources for the survival of the group out of the territory. As far as "borders" are concerned, such an approach, aiming at understanding cooperation / competition patterns of different populations, raises the question: what is a socio-political border and what is a emerging feature of the "system" which ou are studying? The **discussion** which followed this first session of papers presentation focused on two main issues: the issue of the reliability of the archaeological record to investigate problems related to the political structure of human groups, since we are *de facto* limited by material evidence; and the issue of the use of computer-based models and simulation, on which the fourth and last session of the workshop returned extensively.

The second session of the workshop led to a change of settings since we approched case studies all related to the modern and contemporary world, and thus relying on a drastically different kind of availability of resources. **Martin Deleixhe** offered a presentation mainly based on a study of historical archives (letters and documents by Karl Marx) and investigating the fate of national vs. class-based solidarity. The case studies consisted in describing the failure of the second international to constitute the workers' movement as a

strong-enough group to resist the appeal of nation-based solidarity in the context of the emergence of the first world war. The discussion led to underlining that the same kind of conflicting solidarities are at play within today's trade-unions, which have a very ambiguous position with respect to migrant workers. The conceptual issue raised by the presentation is to understand why some group boundaries seem to have more salience as others: in particular, why do nation-based solidarities seem, at a certain moment of political history, to trump overall class-solidarity? How do we define, in our understanding of social reality, those group-limits which have a true efficiency? **Lotje de Vries** presented an anthropological case study based on her fieldwork on the South Sudanese border, which she presents as a case of "porous statehood". Not only is the border porous, but this demonstrates the "porosity" of the state itself which "choses its battles" where exactly to enforce border control. The case study thus directly tackle the issues of (a) the link of the concept of "border" with contemporary concepts of state and nation; (b) the link between enforcement of a border a control of mobility; (c) the link between the geographical location of a border and its socio-political effects on the social body. **Speranta Dumitru** then introduced a more theoretically based research, dealing with the effort to define precisely what a full-fledge theory of justice would required if applied to "mobility" as such – without consideration of national borders. She proposes to compare the case of a disable person trying to move around in an urban space which doesn't accommodate her specific mobility needs to the situation of a migrant person which cannot move freely around because she is impeded to cross specific political borders. Speranta Dumitru's hypothesis consists therefore in looking at "borders" without assuming that there should be a difference between internal and external borders, or without assuming that national borders should be normatively more important. From a conceptual point of view, her presentation emphasises the fact that "border", in contemporary political analysis, is often implicitely understood as being equivalent to "national border". This raises the interesting issue as to why we have this tendency to assume this kind of "default" position in our analysis, and whether this nationalist bias in the analysis of the border is justified for social sciences. The debate which follows hers and Lotje de Vries' presentation interestingly focuses on the question to know whether it is true to describe national border as "mobility-preventing devices". **Noel Parker** concluded the section with a reflection which by some aspects related to Speranta Dumitru's emphasis on mobility and migration, because he proposed a study of "diasporas". The working hypothesis is that, since state sometimes find diasporas useful, there might be a space for a political re-valorization of migrations by looking at migrant flows as potential diasporas.

The third session of the workshop dealt with a series of presentations questioning the *uses*, sometimes militant, of existing borders. It started with **Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary**'s presentation wich explores contemporary art done with / on / about borders, as a way to highlight how existing national and political borders impact on peoples' lives, both at an individual and collective level. The artistic exploration of borders thus provides a way to study contemporary imaginaries of power, as structured by borders lines. The main conceptual issue raised by the presentation is the impact, on theory and practice, of "bounded thinking" namely of the implicit assumptions that social realities can be best understood as enclosed within a bounded territory. The presentation by **Sandra Monton Subias** then served as a bridge between the first session focusing on archaeology and the other sessions focusing on more contemporary uses of the concept of border, since the leading question of her presentation consisted in asking what happens when you mix Westphalian vision of the border with non-Westphalian ones. Her suggestion is that our way of approaching space and borders is infused with a theory- and technology-loaded perspective which is not sensitive

enough to culturally different ways of understanding and living space. **Madeleine Reeves** followed with a presentation echoeing deeply Lotje de Vries' presentation, but in a completely different geographical and political setting: that of the new Republics of Central Asia. Her description, also based on an extensive anthropological fieldwork, described how borders are instrumental to the affirmation of state capacity and then raised again the issue of the intertwining of our contemporary concepts of "border" and "state". **Michael Esch** concluded the session with a presentation of two research cases related to a general project on "phantom-borders" involving several German research centers. The first research project studies the persistence of borders within the Ukrainian territory, thus raising the question of what actually explains the effectiveness of a border, and how it can shape social structure even when the political instruments usually associated with it have officially disappeared. The second research project, based on the study of hooligans groups in Poland, deals with the symbolic (and physical) appropriation of urban space. The presentations also give rise to extensive methodological discussions as Michael Esch's method is historical (studying written sources) and not ethno/anthropological (interviews, fieldwork).

The fourth session started with a brief presentation by **Alessandro Mosca** and **Xavi Rubio** of their methodologies and a short introduction by **Solange Chavel** the sum up some of the recurrent lines of the preceding sessions and opening the collective debate. Alessandro Mosca presented how ontologies and conceptual models of a specific field of knowledge are being built by "knowledge engineers" in order to make it possible to build efficient data bases. The aim is not only to allow computer exploration of the data, but also to provide experts with a reflective view on how they structure a specific field of knowledge. In the specific case of the workshop on borders, the three sessions of papers presentation thus were a first working material to work on to extract elements of an ontology of borders, mapping the main uses, related concepts, semantic associations, etc. Then, Xavi Rubio presented how he uses modelling and simulation to help social scientists test hypothesis through computer-based simulation. The debate which opened after this brief introduction thus mainly focused on epistemological issues relating to the place of quantitatvive analysis in social sciences, the use of "models", and the capacity to put hypothesis to a test in the case of social sciences. The last session had been thought of as a key moment to start comparing the methods and hypothesis of the papers presented in the previous session, and to see whether such a comparative effort could be methodologicall sound: the results of the discussion are thus presented in the next session of the present report, since they constituted the main outcome of the event.

3. Assessment of the results, contribution to the future direction of the field, outcome

The last session took the form of a collective debate, organized around three main lines which had appeared as common concerns during the papers presentation sessions.

- The more obvious line dealt with the capacity of doing comparative work in borders studies, and if so, with the conditions to make such an effort in a robustly sound way. This line of scientific concerns explicitly deals with the question of an "ontology" of border. The problem in this case is quite plainly to understand whether the semantic of "border" is sufficiently stable throughout the cases to serve as a the basis of some efforts of generalisation.
  Indeed, one of the interesting results of the confrontation of various case studies, in particular coming from archaeology and anthropology, was to focus the discussion on a broad definition of border, emphasing the *similarity* of the groups divided by it. Namely, a border appears to be a political device dividing groups which are broadly similar, and then acts as a differentiating device. This very broad definition doesn't say anything about *how* the border plays this differentiating role: the concrete modus operandi of a border seems to belong to the specificity of the social, political and historical context. But the key point is that the border is intrinsically political, which a frontier or a boundary is not necessarily. One of the heated arguments during the workshop related to the question of whether borders are mainly or primarily mobility-forbidding or controlling devices: this was indeed a very good illustration of the level of agreement which the participants could reach. Borders as a political differentiating device was clearly a point of agreement; the necessary link of borders with mobility control was not. This was clearly a surprise for those participants, like the convener, who come from the field of political philosophy where the question of borders recently reemerge through concerns about migration and justice towards migrants. On the contrary, researchers from other disciplinary fields – such as anthropology or sociology – had a very different interpretation of the role of mobility control, which was but one possible use of the borders by political entities in the process of defining or securing their identity.

- A second important line of debate dealt with the statuts of arguments used to study borders. Namely, the presentations offered during the 2 days of the workshop relied on very different argumentative device: some relied on quantitative data about massive data sets (mostly related to material culture evience); other made use of narrative; other again relied on maps as a way to prove or discuss interpretations of the relevant of borders. The interesting debate which arose consisted in knowing how far such different approaches were compatible, and how far on the contrary they were built on mutually exclusive epistemological hypothesis. Interestingly enough, the use of maps was abundant from non-geographers as a legitimate way of illustrating a point to talk about a border, whereas, on the contrary, the geographer was very wary of the capacity of maps to teach or prove a point about borders, without begging the question by the very representative media used. Another important issue to be raised was linked to the possible instrumentalization of scientific knowledge in the case of such a politically sensitive topic as border studies: some were claiming that quantitative data are more prone to political instrumentalization, while other where

pointing out that the use of narrative devices is no defense against such political uses of scientific discourse.

- A third very animated line of discussion finally related to a deeper epistemological issue related with the use of models themselves. Some of the presentations were using formal model to test hypotheses about borders and the discussion focused on what exactly this kind of epistemological approach can or cannot do for research. The problem which appeared is that of "implicit" or even "unconscious" hypothesis which a researcher might bring into her research, then finding or discovering in the field only what she already put there in the first place. And the question arose as to know whether formal models where more or less prone to this kind of failure than more narrative approaches. The debate partially focused on disambiguiating the words in question themselves: are models present in any kind of scientific discourse, or should we limit them to formal approaches? Are models similar to theory, or can models be theory-neutral? Whereas two clear positions could be identified among the participants, this last session was very successful to allow for a better understanding of what each epistemological position is really about. Namely, formal model are actually rarely about "predicting": rather, they offer experimental device to think reflectively about our own theories when approaching a topic. Conversely, narrative or ethnographic approaches are not about filling up a blank page, but clearing explore a field within certain theoretical limits, already set by the researchers de facto. This last part of the discussion was not directly about "borders". But it was very relevant to the field broadly defined as "border studies", because this rich area of scientific research has been producing, during the last thirty years, a very impressive amount of scholarship where the main issue is clearly the heterogeneity – and even apparent incompatibility – of epistemological approaches. Therefore, the capacity as understanding better what is being done when chosing one specific method is key to enable border specialists to better profit from the work being done by other border experts belonging to different disciplinary fields and applying different paradigms.

4. Final programme

Wednesday, 29th of October 2014

Afternoon   *Arrival*

8 pm   *Dinner and introduction of the workshop*

Thursday, 30th of October 2014

09.30-10.00   **Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)**
tba (Scientific Review Group for the Humanities)

10.00-13.00   **Session 1. "Borders and cultural evolution"**

Presided by Carla Lancelotti, Universitat Pompeu Fabra (tbc)

"Push and pull: the role of competition and reciprocity on defining borders between farming and herding livelihoods"
Andreas Angourakis (Universitat de Barcelona, Spain)

"Isolation by Distance, Homophily, and the emergence of cultural boundaries"
Enrico Crema (University College London, UK)

Coffee / Tea Break

"Frontiers in prehistory. Seeds for thoughts from South Asia"
Marco Madella (ICREA - Universitat Pompeu Fabra & IMF - CSIC, Spain)

Discussion

13.00-14.30   *Lunch*

14.30-18.30   **Session 2. "Borders, citizenship and immigration"**

Presided by Sebastian Stride, SIRIS Academic S.L.

"The moving borders of citizenship in the modern era"
Simona Cerutti (EHESS, Paris, France)

"The international labor movement and the migrant workers. Marx, the First International and the Irishmen"
Martin Deleixhe (KU Leuven, Belgium)

Tba [Borders and nation-building in Africa]
Lotje de Vries (Radboud University, The Netherlands)

Coffee / tea break

tba
Speranta Dumitru (University Paris Descartes, France)

"Lines, flows and states: the uses of diasporas"
Noel Parker (Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark)

Discussion

20.00   *Dinner*

Friday 31st October 2014

09.30-13.00   **Session 3. "Borders and Identity"**

Presided by Bernardo Rondelli (tbc)

tba
Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary (University Joseph Fourier, Grenoble, France)

"Borders, space, identity and colonialism"
Sandra Monton Subias (ICREA & University Pompeu Fabra, Spain)

Coffee / tea break

tba
Madeleine Reeves (University of Manchester, UK)

"On the concept of phantom borders"
Michael G. Esch (University of Leipzig, Germany)

Discussion

13.00-14.30   *Lunch*

14.30-18.30   **Session 4. "Conceptual modelling and simulation applied to borders: an experiment"**

Workshop session
Alessandro Mosca (Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy)

Xavier Rubio (Barcelona Super Computing Center, Spain)

Solange Chavel (University of Poitiers, Frnce & SIRIS Academic S.L.)

Discussion on follow-up activities/networking/collaboration

19:00   *End of Workshop and departure*

5. Final list of participants

(name and affiliation is sufficient; the detailed list should be updated on-line directly)

Convenor. Solange CHAVEL, Poitiers University, France

Co-convenor. **Marco MADELLA,** ICREA & Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain

Anne-Laure AMILHAT-SZARY, University Joseph Fourier, France

Andreas ANGOURAKIS, Universitat de Barcelona, Spain

Simona CERUTTI, EHESS, France

Enrico CREMA, University College London, UK

Martin DELEIXHE, KU Leuven, Belgium

Lotje DE VRIES, Radboud University, The Netherlands

Speranta DUMITRU, Université Paris Descartes, France

Michael G. ESCH, University of Leipzig, Germarny

Sandra MONTON SUBIAS, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Spain

Alessandro MOSCA, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (FUB), Italy

Noel PARKER, KU Department of Political Science, Denmark

Madeleine REEVES, The University of Manchester, UK

Xavier RUBIO CAMPILLO, Barcelona Supercomputing Center, Spain

6. Statistical information on participants

(age bracket, countries of origin, M/F repartition, etc.) The statistics to be provided under section 6 can also include repartition by scientific specialty if relevant.

Age bracket 26-60
Countries of origin:
France, 4
UK, 2
Belgium, 1
Italy, 1
Spain, 4
Germany, 1
The Netherlands, 1
Denmark, 1

Female, 7
Male, 7

Disciplinary fields represented
Philosophy, political science, history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, computer science