

A BRIEF ESSAY ON BORDERS

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Introduction

It was 25 years ago when I first participated on the 5th seminar of Polish and Hungarian geographers in Pécs, in 1983. Since then I have organised others in several interesting topics (e.g. the last decade of state socialism, change of systems in CEE, and their rural aspects). All of them were performed with much data, and computer support. After 25 years, having found out the topic of this seminar, I decided to break this classical geographic tradition.

I tried to create a geographic idea of border (*limes* in Latin) from another approach. It has been motivated by personal stories. One; there had been a series on television called *Game Without Borders* (*Jeux Sans Frontières*). The town of Kecskemét had succeeded well in this game. Few of us thought then that one could travel to Krakow from Kecskemét even without stopping at the 1000 years old border crossing point in 2008. Have the societies of CEE grasped already its significance?

The other story is even more personal. We made a trip to the Eastern Tatra mountains with my English son-in-law. Coming down from Morskie Oko I tried to explain him that the creek on the right hand side used to be the Hungarian–Polish border for 1000 years. I realised he didn't understand. That former border in the Tatra mountains has no relevance to an Englishman.

My two examples highlighted that it's worthwhile to examine borders according to a geographic way of thinking. Several approaches to geography in developed countries prove this. A dispute over this issue in the framework of a similar seminar could draw some attention. Let's start by analysing two main problems.

Border definition

The definition of border carries different and on the other hand sophisticated meanings. Though the English language explains the definition of border in different ways (border, margin, frontier, barrier, etc.). In order to fold out this multiple meaning and give a general definition on border in a geographic sense, at least three clusters of border definition should be designated.

Theoretical borders belonging to the first group exist and have a significant effect on our life. These are in other words philosophical borders, or can be explained as borders of rules of human coexistence. Even “mental borders” is a correct definition, for one exists in the world of our thinking. A part of these have a direct effect on one’s acts and behaviour, and represent a significant share in behaviourist geography. If there’s a problem with these borders in a society like the CEE societies nowadays, communities become uncertain; they cease to consider these mental borders any more. This lack of moral barriers is revealing even in politics, entailing a further social uncertainty about borders of rules determining their everyday life.

It is a general occurrence that miscellaneous sciences give different definitions to borders representing the 2nd cluster. Ones relevant in the science of sciences, mathematics could play a dominant role. They cover a range from borders of geometric figures to the marginal value of functions, although we know that computerised cyber space based on mathematics has no frontiers. Borders of space theory in geography are very common to Euclidean space and space comprehension operating with classical border definitions. Traditional, or one can say, static geography defines or designates borders by itself. Borders like this are the ones of continents, climate zones, forest types and lands. Looking for the borders of dynamic spatial processes covering different areas could be a more difficult approach. Designating the borders of accession of some geographically central cities is a good example of that, since these borders are often different from static administrative ones.

Finally borders really determining our lives themselves in terms of regional research and planning can be grouped together. Site borders designating the basic geographical order of settlements, as well as their shapes and structure are of those kinds. These are the borders of blocks and districts in cities. The administrative borders of settlements are one of the key elements of urban planning and research, inside of which further borders can be located both by the general needs of local community and urban functions.

Other important borders are those of micro regions drawn up by the daily spatial interactions of inhabitants.

Disputes over regional borders in our countries are typical. New regions providing framework for EU regional policy have not been popularised yet for instance in Hungary. Unlike traditional counties, they haven’t become a part of people’s mental maps. Latter ones, which regional units carrying a special meaning have gone on living with borders marked by signs all around by roads.

Finally, language, ethnical, religious borders as well as country borders in the time-worn Carpathian Basin currently fading away all belong to this cluster.

In my opinion each of the three groups are essential in order to enable us express a well-founded opinion on several changes borders have presently been subjected to. I will tell you some examples next.

Some simple examples about the role and changes of geographical borders

(1) Parcel borders are situated the closest to us. In respect to parcel borders, there are many rankling phenomena nowadays. In the old days, local communities have decided over the division of parcels. Mainly in the countryside, in villages, after sharing equities – but some places already in the beginning – the community was modest, and never hedged in a bigger area than needed for everyday life. Whether the parcel borders were arranged in a regular order, or there was a hodgepodge among them, which means that in reality they formed sets, they were accepted by the whole local community. From the middle 19th century – in line with wealth-growth – the separation of sites had strengthened. Nowadays, if we take gated communities (which were imported from the West to CEE countries) or the extremely expensive villas of the *nouveau riche* as an example, the attitude for separation has become stronger. Material segregation strengthens spatial segregation. The new borders block everyday communication within local communities. In case of gated communities, the inhabitants create their own rules within their newly created and strictly guarded borders.

(2) Changes in the administrative borders of settlements and microregions in Hungary highlight another interesting and different kind of problem. In the 1980's, a bunch of rural settlements were joined to cities due to positive discrimination concerning urban areas and the political and redistributive preferences of state socialism. Their number of inhabitants could easily reach the magical 100,000. Their share of deconcentrated budget consequently increased. After transition, more than 100 settlements declared their independence and separation from the cities. Administrative borders were redrawn year by year. The decision made on this local level of democracy brought separation on the level of communities. Positive tendencies were expected from separation, which mostly failed to occur.

Weird cases, when settlements claimed to be reallocated from a county to another one also happened. Not much later, they realised that changing county borders to municipality ones didn't bring general well-being.

(3) Even the changing borders of microregions have been a general practice in Hungary. Their number has increased by 40 in the last 20 years. Some interesting factors played a key role in this kind of border shifting. First, the number of small settlements gaining town status had risen. Afterwards these small towns intended to provide services to their own area in order to ensure influence on the microregion and concentrate financial sources of development. Therefore, one by one, they initiated the organisation of new microregions. Those acts entailed the appearance of new borderlines on the map of Hungary. Few words are said, however, about the basic tasks of supply quality within the borders, and that conditions of effective operation are deteriorated by fragmentation. Here, when our seminar is held, the

disintegration of Sarkad microregion was brought up. The possible close end of the microregion was demonstrated by showing a black coffin. Politics then withdrew. In absence of well funded objective data on the size and functions of microregions, their changes become unlimited.

(4) County and regional borders, although more solid in administrative terms, hardly exist mentally. Neither people nor socio-economic processes stop at these borders in almost any sense. Nevertheless, supply networks, subsidy systems, and European Union's convergence funds all target these main regional units. The border of this specific space called region and the inhabitants' spatial identity differ from one another. Therefore, regional programmes bring few results while leaving regional disparities intact.

(5) A more interesting geographical issue is the fading and permeability of country borders. It is evident that with some delays, nation state development in CEE has finished. Furthermore, these borders of living space of nations had generally failed to conform to either ethno-linguistic or natural borders, just like the border of Wallonia and Flanders splitting the Belgian Kingdom in the centre can be well detected nowadays. Such inner borders in our countries became more characteristic after official disappearance. One can consider for instance the language map of Romania or the cartogram showing electoral geographic results of Ukraine. These borders, evidentially of artificial nature, had become solid in the minds of the last 3 or 4 generations. Their mental stability and strength is a question to be answered.

One could mention here the famous rainbow example. If one set off from the Baltic sea to the Adriatic 4 –500 years ago, neighbourhoods could be easily found understanding each others language, enabling the traveller to reach his destination without trouble. Transforming nation state borders to language borders is a serious side effect of current border problems. The reinstallation of a rainbow effect is a prerequisite of the permeability and real disappearance of borders from the mental maps of local inhabitants. If only parcel neighbours of a multinational settlement could comprehend each others language as they used to 200 years ago. If only political leaders, economic and civil partners of nation states and regional areas all knew that the only solution is Europe without borders!

Summary

Borders are variable. Their behaviour and effect is therefore diverse. Theoretical or mental borders, often based on principles, almost never interfere with borders drawn by scientific results, nor with political, administrative, linguistic or religious borders. Borders with different types and origins also have a diverse significance.

Well designated, functionally comprehensive and mentally existing borders may promote regional development, cohesion and local identity.

Badly drawn borders can form barriers. They could block development, restrain natural circulations, and become hardly or not comprehensible.

In my opinion, local, microregional and regional borders should gain in importance, while country, national, linguistic and religious borders should become more and more permeable.