



Multiplicity of Nationalism in Contemporary Europe



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Part II
**Three Perspectives
on Nationalism in Europe**

Chapter 5

Globalization and Nationalism in Europe: Demolishing Walls and Building Boundaries

Daniele Conversi

The modern era was probably born with the enclosure acts emanated by the United Kingdom Parliament (1750-1860 ca.), which bounded open fields and shattered the rights of citizens to access common lands.¹ Since then, the medieval sense of collective responsibility changed forever and the people began dissociating themselves from the land as a shared resource (indeed, the original “commonwealth”). Great swaths of common land were slowly reduced to private property. Enclosures marked the end of the right of land use, particularly of the commons, from which a great number of peasants fully depended. The modern proletariat was being born. Urbanization and the decline of rural culture were thus associated to this series of parliamentary acts of confiscation, more than to industrialization per se, since many impoverished and dispossessed peasants had no other options than migrating to the cities. Here they provided cheap labor for a rapidly expanding and all-devouring capitalist class. The birth of early modernity was thus associated with a process of annexation and boundary-building. The seizure of territory remained its main scope, involving sweeping expropriation of property from its erstwhile usufructuaries. Since then, the modern era has been characterized by a frenetic rush to size and classify, which nourished an obsession with boundary-building.

Nationalism is one of the most powerful processes of boundary-building. All attempts at defining, “inventing,” or reviving a nation imply a process of inclusion-ex-

clusion, that is, the erection of boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. However, this remains an under-stated assumption in much of sociopolitical literature: The majority of scholars mention the relationship between nations and boundaries *en passant*, nearly accidentally, assuming that they are there, without needing further elaboration. Only recently the changing role and dynamics of ethno-national boundaries has been conceptualized and elaborated in such a way as to make the process more understandable. This chapter sets to explore theoretically and comparatively the linkage between violence, nationalism, and boundary-making. It stresses the importance of culture and inter-generational cultural transmission as an inclusive, more permeable, boundary-related strategy that should be compatible with cosmopolitan ideals, as well as with supra-national projects like the European Union.

One of the scopes of this chapter is to investigate how the past Western legacy of destruction and self-destruction intersected with, and was accompanied by, a continuous stress on boundaries, hence on exclusion and the creation of homogeneous identities as defined by these boundaries. The chapter finally concludes with some comments on how to overcome this legacy of conflict and pain in the multinational, multicultural, and multi-confessional project of European unification.

Boundary Theories across Disciplines

First emerged in anthropology as an analytical tool for investigating ethnic group interaction, “boundary theories” have inexorably moved toward a focus on ethnic conflicts and nationalism as processes of boundary-creation and maintenance. This shift from anthropology to sociology and politics has brought a new stress on the oppositional character of boundaries: boundaries function as ethnic identifiers establishing who is situated at either side of the boundary.² Boundaries exist not only to enclose and delimit, but also to clarify and highlight who “the other” is. In this way the “self” or in-group is defined primarily by constant comparison with the “other.”

Before the era of nationalism, oppositional boundedness was associated with *ethnocentrism*, which Claude Lévi-Strauss and other anthropologists identified as a universal feature of ethnic groups across the world. The essence of ethnocentrism is oppositional, with strong hierarchical components, in an evaluative sense. Lévi-Strauss confirmed its linkage with racism, as it often implies a rejection of ethnic, sometimes cultural, differences. For Lévi-Strauss, the most desirable method to overcome racism and ethnocentrism is the knowledge and appreciation, indeed the enjoyment, of different cultures.³ Ethnocentrists typically regard ethnic differences as imperfections, deviations, even anomalies. In general, the us/ them dichotomy is extendable to all sorts of groups, as it remains a key attribute of groupness. Thus, the logic of opposition between groups reinforces boundaries that are not necessarily ethnic.⁴

Boundaries theories have developed within several disciplines.⁵ First of all, they have encountered a naturally fertile ground within *political geography*, since boundaries constitute the raw material of this discipline.⁶ The trend has touched briefly upon *international relations theory* with the “Minnesota School” of *Identities, Borders, Orders*” (the “IBO triad”) and its attempt to re-conceptualize the discipline’s ethno-territorial epistemology within a constructivist methodology. These authors have influenced the debate on national identities as part of a wider “cultural” and “sociological turn” in international relations. More recently, *sociological theory* has also begun to embrace boundary approaches, with the promising adoption of a processual and interactionist angle in the study of ethnic violence.⁷

Some authors have reached quite innovative conclusions, emphasizing how a stress on boundaries and violence can indeed flourish around a lack of actual cultural differences. For these authors, cultural differences can be better interpreted as “denied resemblance.”⁸ Against common sense interpretations, the political implication of such assessment is that inter-group similarity and cultural assimilation are *not* conducive to stability or peaceful coexistence. Groups remain groups, even when concealed by a lack of cultural distinction. The breakup of Yugoslavia provides an experience *in vitro* of the impact of violence and cultural similarity on boundary-building.⁹

Nationalism has often been “launched” as a binding enterprise in situations of cultural assimilation: for instance, the goal of the oppositional ideology shaped by the founder of Basque nationalism, Sabino de Arana, was to maintain, re-create, and reinforce the boundary between Basques and non-Basques.¹⁰ In subsequent forms of radical Basque nationalism, ideological contrasts, cultural differences, and political pluralism have been superseded through the boundary-building effect of violence.¹¹

More generally, a focus on boundaries can be applied to all forms of nationalism. Nationalism remains at heart a process of boundary-building aimed at inclusion/exclusion, even though the rhetoric may be one of “national security,” that is, of boundary-maintenance, rather than boundary-construction. Ties of ethnic kinship across state boundaries around the world mean that ethnic boundaries are often more important and long-lasting than official state boundaries. Ethnic kins in neighboring states can harbor separatist desires spurring domestic secessionist and irredentist movements. Neo-liberal globalization has also interacted with the persistence of ethnic ties, contributing to destabilizing many regions across the world.

Boundaries versus Content

In anthropology, Frederick Barth first elaborated the concept of *ethnic boundary* in the introduction of an edited collection in 1969.¹² Accordingly, ethnic identities do not derive from intrinsic features but emerge from, and are reasserted in, encounters, transactions, and oppositions between groups. The crucible of ethnic

identities are the “boundaries” which specific aggregates of people establish for different purposes, or simply result from human interaction. Barth focused on the subjective, self-experienced dimension, rather than on objective traits as perceived by the outsiders: *ethnic boundaries* describe the perception of ethnic identity and its limits, whereas *ethnic contents* define its substance, that is, the group’s culture. Because ethnic boundaries are directly linked to subjective self-perception, they are particularly relevant to the study of identity formation. Thus, culture can change while ethnic boundaries remain unaffected. A person’s or group’s identity is grounded on its boundary, rather than its content. Historical records can testify to such discontinuity, i.e., that cultural elements (content) can vary considerably throughout the centuries, even in cases in which the homeland’s name or the ethnonym have persisted.

A more promising direction should try to determine how, and in what ways, cultural elements can influence socio-political behavior, including the construction and maintenance of ethnic identities. Departing from Barth’s original emphasis, I argue that the role of the boundary should be analyzed in relation to its content. “Content” in this acceptance will be taken to mean whatever is enclosed in a boundary: while the boundary represents the subjective perception of ethnicity, separating in-group from out-group, the content is instead the tangible and objective repertoire. It provides a cornucopia of human skills, whose heritage can enrich the cultural experience of ethnic belonging. While boundary relates to psychology, content relates to culture; the latter is visible, the former invisible: you may certainly feel ethnic boundaries, but you cannot often see them.

The next sections investigate the relationship between boundaries, content, and political violence. First, the term “ethnic boundary” needs to be related to the study of ethnogenesis and nationalism. Secondly, the relativist usage of boundaries as infinitely malleable and situationally adaptable ephemera is questioned. Finally, the ethnic boundary is functionally related to the rise of ethnic violence, while violence is related to cultural assimilation, or lack of cultural contents. The case of former Yugoslavia will illustrate the use of violence as a tool of boundary-building. The concluding remarks emphasize that a stress on boundaries, rather than content, is normally an indicator of deep feelings of threat and insecurity leading to, or resulting from, violence.

Ethnic Identity versus “Ethnic” Culture

The anti-objectivist turn in anthropology was an attack on reification, the idea that it was possible to identify externally the existence of ethnic groups independently from the perceptions of the individuals who made them up. In classical anthropology, it was quite normal to catalog and itemize all sorts of groups from the viewpoint of the scholar, producing inventories, lists, indexes, charts, and, in particular, colorful ethno-linguistic maps with neatly demarcated borders. Groups

were classified on the basis of external clues, characteristics, marks, peculiarities and traits. As in other social sciences, *pre*-Barthian anthropology tended to focus on alleged *objective* traits, assuming the importance of discrete cultural features as criteria for establishing group identity. Barth stressed instead that groups could maintain a sense of separateness, while their observable markers or diachritica can change or even become invisible. “Invisibility” may conceal a heightened sense of “us”-ness, moreover with the seeds of aggravated ethnic assertiveness. As a corollary, cultural assimilation does not automatically lead to integration. On the contrary, the two may well be incompatible.

Nationalist propaganda is often keen to point out that identity can be dormant and ready to be stirred and aroused by some national awakener. In fact, ethnicity has resisted state-making and nation-building. More recently, the failure to notice the persistence of ethnic identity has represented one of the major blunders in political science and practice since the end of the Cold War.¹³ Modernization theories, particularly Karl Deutsch’s “social mobilization” paradigm, have dominated American political science since the 1950s.¹⁴ They exemplified yet another academic failure, the incapacity or refusal to see the persistence of ethnic boundaries ensuing sustained modernizing and assimilationist efforts by state elites. Indeed, the study of ethnic boundaries should also be seen as the study of identity *persistence*: It should help us to understand why ethnicities have resisted overwriting premature necrologies.

The issue of persistence is central to theories of nationalism as a whole. The recurring question is: why are ethnic boundaries thoroughly maintained despite all-pervasive changes, including cultural impoverishment and sometimes total assimilation? Anthony D. Smith’s *ethno-symbolism* explains the persistence of ethnic identities by focusing on the importance of myths.¹⁵ Myths have an exceptional capacity to convey a sense of belonging and continuity through successive generations. They articulate the distinction between in-group and out-groups, therefore playing an essential function in boundary maintenance, even in the absence of promptly visible ethnic markers. Myths do not require cultural diachritica as a condition *sine qua non*, but they need to be ritually anchored on, and revived by, the use of symbols.¹⁶ The latter need not to be particularly distinctive. Indeed, modern nationalist symbols are often mere replicas and copy-cats, mutually aping each other. Most “national” flags are banal imitations of the French *tricolore* with few references to pre-modern indigenous traditions. Likewise, most armies and paramilitaries wear the same set of uniforms, with only minimal identificational details. A large number of national anthems appear to be shamelessly mimicked from each other, with only nominal and superficial connection to local folk tradition and popular culture. Other anthems are brazenly imported from abroad—including the U.S.’ “Star-Spangled Banner,” originally a popular cockney drinking song.

According to the ethnosymbolist school, none of these icons could attract any meaningful attention if a mythical framework did not sustain them.¹⁷ Similar mod-

ern inventions have a parasitical relationship with the ethno-symbolic landscape underneath them. As argued by Donald Horowitz, “group boundaries must be underpinned by a suitable apparatus of myth and legend, which cannot be generated spontaneously.”¹⁸ Ethnosymbolism postulates a historical continuity between ethnic and national identity: common myths, historical memories, and common culture are shared by both premodern *ethnies* and modern nations. But how are nations different from ethnies? The difference lies in the nation’s association with a more modern political organization, the state, based on territorial legality. Myths and memories have an important function in assuring the solidarity of the members toward the group. Yet, they should be distinguished from the more complex, pluralistic, and rich cultural heritage that is carried across generations within local communities or national groups.

The confusion between appearance and substance has beset scholarly accomplishments for quite a long time. I have argued that at the roots of much of this disarray lie in an underlying confusion between culture and ethnicity.¹⁹ Barth’s distinction between ethnic *boundaries* and ethnic *contents* can be simplified by considering the parallel distinction between *subjective* feelings and *objective* data, between *ethnicity* and *culture*. Ethnic boundaries are related to identity, whereas ethnic contents are related to culture. *Culture* can in turn be considered as the common pool and repository from which groups can draw on to maintain, root and embed their identity. Hence we need to appraise and evaluate the relation between the two. Their diverging configurations relate to different levels, degrees and quantities of “content” (from rich cultural production to simple cultural maintenance, mere survival in the forms of relics and antiquarianism, and finally to virtual assimilation into the dominant culture).

In both social science and political praxis, the terms ethnicity and culture are often confused—sometimes deliberately so. By *ethnicity*, we normally refer to a belief in putative descent (that is, a belief in something which may or may not be real). Ethnicity is thus similar to race, in that they both refer to descent.²⁰ While ethnic descent is conjectural and suppository, racial descent acquires a biological determinant. Both are based on speculation and myth—even though early this century pseudo-science came to the fore to uphold the latter. Thus, ethnicity is a perception of commonality and belonging supported by a myth of common ancestry. As Walker Connor has stressed, what matters here is the *subjective* and psychological quality of this perception, rather than its objective and hardly testable “substance.”²¹

As previously mentioned (and as shall be reiterated in the following sections), *culture* means here an open project. You can become a member of a culture by learning its norms, traditions, and codes, then sharing what you have learned by participating in cultural events. Even though the contractual element may be inconspicuous (a person raised in a particular culture can familiarize earlier and more fully with it), there is an implicit give-and-take inference: “I belong to this culture insofar as I can share its benefits while contributing to its maintenance and

development.” However, culture is necessarily based on continuity, being passed through generations. Because of this, it is often confused with ethnicity. But its exclusivist association with a single ethnic group is a relatively modern one.

The confusion between ethnicity and culture is helped by the fact that the latter’s usage is quite new: in fact, the term “ethnicity” only appeared in English during the late 1950s. Yet a more important reason for this confusion may be that cultural continuity is stressed at the expense of cultural innovation: “ethnicity” is a highly conservative, unadventurous concept. Its inborn conservatism is visible as it sacrifices a group’s outstretching and creative power together with its capacity for development beyond rigid ethnic parameters.

Cultures need to be defended through creative endeavors, active policies, temporal accommodation, environmental adaptation, as well as by enhanced inter-generational communication. A culture is either expanding or contracting, that is, it cannot remain static. For a non-dominant culture, this is of vital importance. Its existence is perpetually questioned and in balance. It needs incessant efforts to be maintained, cherished, and cultivated. Moreover, in order to survive, a culture must also have an assimilative power, a capacity to integrate newcomers and attract possible members or practitioners. All cultures must have an assimilative core to live on and endure. Assimilation means just that a member from another cultural group is allowed to become an in-member by simply adopting and sharing its basic elements. Therefore, assimilation is not an exclusive prerequisite of dominant cultures. Small cultures need to assimilate newcomers, too, in order to endure, persist, and live to tell the tale. In the pre-industrial era, scattered communities were not totally isolated and normally allowed a limited number of “outsiders” to join in and share their fruits on the implicit (or explicit) basic covenant that cardinal traditions, core values, and key symbols had to be treasured and enhanced.

To resume, *culture* and *ethnicity* should be kept firmly distinct particularly when we are dealing with political issues. Yet, in the modern world this has *not* usually been the case. Why so? The main answer can be found in the advent of nationalism as the key legitimizing principle of the modern state.²² Ernest Gellner’s definition of nationalism as a political precept which holds that the rulers should belong to the same ethnic (i.e., national) group as the ruled means in practice that the modern state has to become ethnicized.²³ Indeed, the prototypical modern nation-state is the *exclusive* domain of a single dominant ethnic group. The doctrine of ethnic exclusivism is thus in-built in the national principle, at least if this is left to run its course unchecked.

In other words, the modern state tended to become ethnically, culturally, and linguistically “purified.” On the one hand, the modern state cannot be linguistically neutral; perhaps no functioning institution can ever be so. On the other hand, it *can* at least be ethnically neutral. Yet, Gellner’s definition of nationalism implied precisely the contrary, namely that mass mobilization created by modernity, industrialization, and urbanization demands that the state needs to become ethni-

cized. This again stems from a conceptual overlap between culture, language, and ethnicity (with language seen perhaps as the *trait d'union* between the former and the latter). To claim that all education has to be performed in a single language does not mean that it cannot allow for some flexibility in other cultural spheres. With typical Herderian zest, Gellner instead conflates language and culture as if they were nearly synonymous, and then merges this combined amalgamation into an even broader usage of the concepts of nation and ethnicity.²⁴

This section has stressed how the crucial distinctions between language, culture, and ethnicity must be related to the study of the subjectivity and the persistence of national feelings. The next step will be to relate the “content” of ethnicity to nationalism in general and to different types of ethnic mobilization as paramount processes of boundary-building.

Nationalism as Boundary-Building

The idea of nationalism is founded on the premise that there are persistent and coherent groups of people and that their differences are natural or self-evident. The collective “self” needs to be delimited by specific territorial and ethnic boundaries. Thus, nationalism actually works as a process of boundary maintenance or, often, just boundary creation. The erection of barriers in place of existing porousness and fluidity is attempted by political leaders who wish to promote an ideology of egalitarian, yet exclusive, legitimacy, according to which each self-defined “nation” has the right to its own state and to be governed by in-group members.²⁵ We shall start by noting that such a goal is impossible to achieve until the leaders are able to establish who is a member and what differentiates an in-group from an out-group. In other words, the elites’ preemptive task is to decide which are the criteria of membership. In order for their project to succeed, they have to draw a sharp distinction between *us* and *them*. This is the prerequisite without which, not only can we not have nations, but we also cannot generally have cohesive groups.

It follows that the study of nationalism is the study of how elites strive to defend, strengthen, or even construct this sense of distinctiveness.²⁶ Since distinctiveness is unattainable without some distinguished “other(s),” it follows that oppositional dynamics are what give tenor and substance to groupness, particularly to ethnic and national identities. The point of contact between different others, the domain, imaginary or real, where in-group and out-group meet and face each other is called *boundary*. The main question remains: who needs to use, raise, or safeguard the boundary?

Ethnic boundaries have acquired a newly fixed essence with the advent of the nation-state. In antiquity, power was established more through personal liaisons or extra-territorial institutions, such as the Church. With modernity, political power becomes exercised not only upon a strictly defined and bounded space, but

only and exclusively upon that space. The new relationship between power and territory is unmitigated: the state exercises power over its entire territorial extent and over every single individual who lives or transits therein. The very concept of sovereignty is based on this preclusive relationship. Sovereignty, territoriality and the rise of the modern nation-state are all intrinsically related to the establishment of boundaries and frontiers.

Yet, recent trends have contributed to tempering the modern territorial vision of power. An extra-territorial notion has instead emerged as a hallmark of post-modernity. Perhaps the most crucial facet of this change is the role of culture and information. A key power of the state lay in its control of the flow of information through compulsory education, universities, and the media. By selecting and sieving information, it was then possible to “build-up” nations, a project which entailed homogenizing peoples—or at least coveting such a goal. Information is power. Wherever the state could control the flow of information, it could justify its exclusive, unchallenged monopoly over the means of violence—hence its legitimacy.

The ongoing technological revolution has begun to erode this prerogative. The spread of the printing press has first worked as a bounding contraption preparing for the advent of modern nationalism through the creation of “empty homogeneous time.”²⁷ The key role of the press was associated with the spread of literacy, which in turn received the greatest support with the advent of the modern state and its sustained effort of mass public instruction.²⁸ This kind of monopoly began to be infringed upon with the advent of non-literacy related mass media, namely radio and TV. Their boundless character could still be kept in check through the combined alliance of language (mutual unintelligibility) and power (state regulation and control of the media).

Even before WWII it was possible to listen to foreign radio waves across borders. But this had a minor impact upon the homogenizing trend of the nation-state and rarely infringed upon the territorial concept of power. Given their one-way character, mass-media were easily controlled by the state. Competing foreign broadcasts could easily be branded as “enemy propaganda.” Significantly, the popular spread of *two-way* communication tools, from the telephone and the fax to email and other information technology, has made censorship less practical and difficult to implement, although a nightmare scenario would include a direct control of critical web content under the pretext of “protecting” global security. The post-9/11 “war on terror” has greatly eroded these basic freedoms, perhaps beyond repair. In the past, totalitarian systems made a large use of one-way top-down communication tools like the radio and the television, preferring them over two-ways media. For instance, in former Communist Europe the use of the telephone was limited to a selected few. As we know, the Internet revolution has allowed written, spoken, and visual information to be instantly spread throughout the globe in potentially infinite directions. Its impact has been extra-territorial, not bound to any particular space, and conceivably limitless. Of course, no “virtual”

community can ever replace the density and effectiveness of daily face-to-face interaction and it would be insane to suggest that it may replace it. The trend is to both atomize and globalize society: we are now more alone and more interconnected with alone others. Unfortunately, all crises advancements in communication have historically produced a delayed response or concern in the social sciences. The concept of boundary has been slowly *de-territorialized* or enlarged to encompass non-geographical factors. Ethnic boundaries have become a popular item of study also because their fixedness is not absolute, contrary to political-administrative borders. The boundedness we normally invoke when referring to the nation-state is relative to spatial and territorial borders. But the fixedness of state frontiers is in sharp contrast with the adaptability and ductility of ethnic boundaries. As the latter involve a subjective dimension, they are not easily objectified or “put on the map.” They are not easily perceived from the outside despite the use of markers and symbols to signal them. For this reason, the concept has gained ground among post-modernists who view the very vessel of modernization, the nation-state, “collapsing” before their eyes.

Cultural Assimilation: From Europe to the Westernizing World

Thomas H. Eriksen has observed that “groups may actually become more similar at the same time that boundaries are strengthened.”²⁹ He considers boundary maintenance through endogamy and assimilation to explain the ways in which ethnic boundaries can persist notwithstanding cultural communication and demographic flows across the boundary. But how are boundaries strengthened in situations of cultural fluidity, assimilation, and hybridization? How do boundaries work when cultural differences have vanished or are hardly visible, though they may not appear irrelevant to the beholders?

In order to reply to these questions, we need to add another variable: External factors can propel the erection of particularly high, often insurmountable, ethnic barriers. The most powerful factor is possibly violent aggression, in the forms of war, state repression, or grassroots counter-violence. I have argued that internal factors related to cultural contents rarely play a role. When cultural distinctiveness disappears or vanishes due to policies of cultural assimilation or guided “modernization,” its vacuum is likely to be filled by violence. In such cases, violence can override more peaceful cultural endeavors as avenues of mass mobilization. The twentieth century European experience of wars and genocide has taught us that rigid identities have been molded in continuing or periodic conflict.

Why has inter-state and ethnic violence subsided in postwar Europe? One of the possible reasons is relevant here: the falling perception of collective threat. The rise of violence has often been associated with a lack of security concerning

the future and self-preservation of a group—sometimes independently from the actual threat.³⁰ A sense of impending menace, vulnerability, and defenselessness is connected with cultural assimilation, in at least one powerful way: cultural homogenization or de-differentiation is perceived as the ultimate threat to a group's or a culture's very existence. The response to the menace can either be a reassertion of cultural values, or, failing the cultural option, a path of confrontation and heightened conflict. This has occurred, for instance, in periods of decolonization and empire breakup, precisely when boundaries have been reshuffled, superimposed, or weakened. Donald Horowitz maintains that “a common source of cultural movements is concern about potential shifts in group boundaries. The colonial period was filled with such movements. The form they took was largely a response to the direction of boundary change underway, to growing differentiation and assimilation. An ethnic group fragmented into subgroups that threatened to overtake the larger group identity might react by reinforcing elements of common culture and common ancestry, suppressing, for example, differences in dialect or stressing descent from a single ancestor.”³¹

A stress on uniformity, common ancestry, and homogenization is also one of the root causes of the rise of fascism in many countries. In particular, post-unification Italy's and Germany's effort to build “efficient,” unified nation-states upon a patchwork of former independent states, linguistic isoglosses, economic systems, and cultural lifestyles could only be achieved by violent, authoritarian means and by mass mobilization. The more fragmented was the territory to be transformed into a single common nation, the more the stress on unity was necessary.³² Indeed, the entire unitarist rhetoric of fascist movements served precisely the purpose of concealing the internal fragmentation of their constituencies. This reasoning can also be applied to the emergence of radical nationalism in areas strongly assimilated into the dominant culture and hence internally fragmented, such as in the Basque Country.³³

It is, however, the common background of threat perceived by minorities which elicits new boundary reinforcement, through either violence or culture: “The cultural revivals that emerged in response reflected an awareness of the danger of a fading group identity. They tended to emphasize the history of separateness and even hostility between the groups. Memories of insult were recalled. Languages were “purified” of words that derived from the language of the neighboring group. Religious practices were cleansed in the name of returning to some former state of orthodoxy that may or may not have existed. Group identity was thus infused with a new or revived cultural content that served to demarcate the lines between groups more clearly, thereby reducing the ease with which individuals could cross group boundaries. Movements that went furthest in asserting the distinctiveness of groups believed to be in danger of assimilation ultimately become strongly separatist.”³⁴

Violence as a boundary-reinforcing factor normally results in eminently *subjective* behavior. But this does not result in an increase of cultural *differen-*

tiae per se, nor in an upsurge of creative endeavors. On the other hand, Barth has argued that “cultural variation may be an *effect* and not a *cause* of boundaries.”³⁵ The direct and shared experience of state-led violence against individuals *qua* members of a group or followers of a faith has a particularly powerful ethnogenetic impact. The “object” of violence turns her/himself into the “subject” of his/her own history, destiny, and identity. But, born out of aggression, this rise of ethnic awareness is not often matched by a parallel rise in cultural-maintaining activities. Despite claim to the contrary, culture and violence remain ultimately incompatible.

Yugoslavia: War-Making, Ethnogenesis and Boundary-Building

The archetypal case of systematic use of violence to separate, dissect, and dichotomize formerly unified and interacting groups can be found in the events leading to the breakup of Yugoslavia. Elsewhere, I argued that Yugoslavia’s breakup developed from within the center (Belgrade), before reaching the periphery.³⁶ According to the 1981 census, Serbs were a minority in former Yugoslavia (35%).³⁷ Thanks to its firm grip on the media, the regime could easily spread a sense of threat among Serbs strewn in mixed areas, particularly in Croatia and Bosnia.³⁸

The most long-lasting effect of state violence was the change in *ethnonyms* (self-definition). Notably, this included the names of languages spoken in the theaters of war: Until 1989 Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro shared a common Serbo-Croat language.³⁹ Both international linguists and local political leaders defined Serbo-Croat as a single unified language.⁴⁰ Supported by grammars, dictionaries, and broader linguistic consensus, it was sanctioned that the regional variants of Serbo-Croat were far too similar to grant them separate status. However, both Croats and Serbian “dialectologists” and linguists slowly began to challenge the official vision since the 1960s. But their ethnicist ideas did not achieve legitimacy until the outbreak of war.⁴¹ Ensuing years of prolonged war and mass murder, few Croats, Bosnians, and Serbs dared to claim that they still spoke “Serbo-Croat.” Average Bosnians had experienced horrific glimpses of murder, rape, abduction, dislocation, “domicide,” and the destruction of their belonging within their inner circle of family and friends. All this was carried out in the name of Serbian and, to a lesser extent, Croatian (hence, Serbo-Croat?) ethnic purity. For this reason it became disturbing and inappropriate to refer to their language as Serbo-Croat. The consequence was the formation of a novel language, Bosniak, or Bosnian. New grammars, dictionaries, and literary works sprang up in Bosniak, with a relatively new terminology, distinguished, for instance, by the preference for Turkic loan-words instead of alleged “Serbianisms” and “Croatianisms.”⁴² Although a Bosnian-

English dictionary has been available since 1996, it was initially classed in Western library shelves under the “Serbo-Croatian dictionaries” section, since the term Bosnian (or Bosniak) was still relatively unheard-of.⁴³ The war led to a capillary search of linguistic distinctiveness in villages controlled by opposing armies. Tone Brंगा mentions the local philologists’ rediscovery of an “old Bosnian vocabulary which was common currency in villages and among older Muslims, but, before the war, was perceived as archaic by the urban, educated elites.”⁴⁴ The process is so subliminally widespread that one does not have to be a nationalist—and make a stand of Bosnianness—in order to speak Bosniak. It became a rampant trend, even though the average Bosnian has never been a nationalist, and even though most Bosnians would have been happy to continue speaking Serbo-Croat, as until 1989 most were happy to belong to Yugoslavia. This externally induced drive toward separation also led to a deeper divergence between Croatian and Serbian.

Further along the line, great efforts have been devoted to the creation of a standard Montenegrin language, as a result of the wishes of several Montenegrins not to be identified with Serbia, but also for historical reasons, as most inhabitants of Montenegro (*Crna Gora*) proudly maintained the memory of independent statehood.⁴⁵ Those who began by learning Serbo-Croat found later to be rewarded by the acquisition of four languages, killing four birds with one stone: Serbian, Croatian, Bosniak, and Montenegrin, the differences between them remaining minimal. But for a long while it will be difficult to cross boundaries, as the utterance of a wrong expression, the murmur of an old-fashioned expression, may turn potential friends into instant outsiders, immediately to be located beyond the borders of one or the other community. On the Serbian side, attempts to purify the language of the Bosnian Serbs by replacing it with the Belgrade norm predated similar Bosnian and Montenegrin attempts.⁴⁶

Externally imposed violence on peaceful co-existing groups has in many cases led to unprecedented impenetrability of borders. In particular, it resulted in a new stress on endogamy.⁴⁷ In Bosnia’s erstwhile ethnically mixed areas, including Sarajevo, a dramatic drop in inter-ethnic marriages testifies to this endogamic shift. The collapse of mutual trust as a direct consequence of violence and boundary-rising has led to a sudden decline of exogamy.

The Yugoslav case illustrates the mechanisms which made possible to create impenetrable barriers where none existed before. It also helps to clarify the distinction between ethnic content and ethnic boundaries in the oppositional construction of ethnic identities. In Bosnia, Turkey, and elsewhere, ethnogenesis has been related to state violence, rather than culture and continuity. This is not intended to propose that no sense of identity existed before the eruption of violence, but simply that fence-raising may be a quite independent process from objective cultural differentiae. Ethnic identities have the power to survive over long periods of time at a latent, dormant stage only to be “re-awakened” by the dark prince of nationalist violence. Through violence new boundaries

are superimposed on a situation of previous fluidity, characterized by a lack of core values, elite assimilation, secularization, and widespread insecurity over a group's survival.

Assimilation, Homogenization, and Violence

Modernity's deepening cycle of homogenization has often related to the spread of war and ethnic cleansing.⁴⁸ In the process, hitherto permeable boundaries were transformed into insurmountable barriers. Walls of homogeneity have been imposed around entire communities by human agents and chains of events related to their decisions and actions. The resulting homogeneity has in turn created the conditions for new dilemmas when culturally assimilated elites reacted by generating new identities, trying to build a sense of separateness with the scarce human "material" they could find.

Many studies of nationalism have focused on the initial assimilation of proto-nationalist leaders.⁴⁹ It is well known that "ethnic" leaders have been frequently reared in highly assimilated milieus. Donald Horowitz stresses that contrary movements of "dissimilation" are "often begun by group members who are furthest along in the individual assimilation process," a fact that pushes them in the direction of "an explosive and violent assertion of group separateness."⁵⁰ Most of these movements ended up stressing violent confrontation, rather than cultural revival—given the fact that in those particular, often extreme, circumstances and having been robbed of their culture, violence became the only possible glue for their constituencies. We have seen the same mechanism at work and dramatically amplified in former Yugoslavia, where the war pitted against each other elites who originally shared virtually everything, from language to secularism, even atheism.

Liah Greenfeld has noted that nationalism as an ideology often arises as a response to inter-ethnic competition, which set the basis for the resentment of intellectuals suffering dislocation as their cultural markets shrink. Borrowing the concept of *ressentiment* from Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Greenfeld identifies this sense of frustration as a result of pressures toward assimilation and conformity ensuing cross-cultural contact, particularly while facing a powerful outspreading West. For instance, resentment emerged among eighteenth century Russian elites as a result of the increasing contacts with a wealthier, technologically superior West. The fear of losing the indigenous culture and the resulting feeling of inferiority and humiliation were among the major sources for the onset of Russian ethnic nationalism.⁵¹ Other "ideological diffusionists," such as Elie Kedourie, claimed that once the model of the nation-state was created, it was promptly adopted by other "awakening" proto-national elites in a self-degrading imitation effort.⁵² The latter admired and wanted to emulate the foreign model of national development. But copying and imitation resulted in

debasement and humiliation, continually striving to prove that one's own group was not less capable than its rivals in conforming to the ideal model. Nationalist intellectuals were, and are, typically obsessed with their self-image and the image of their country. At any possible encounter, the propensity is to heighten one's Western credentials, while tending to "orientalize" one's most immediate neighbors. This has historically resulted in an inner dilemma between striving for assimilation into the wider West and avoiding the humiliation connected with it.⁵³ While speaking in the name of an ancient community, nationalism's implicit Janus-faced schizophrenia further contributes to modern uprootedness. Indeed, Gellner argued that "the rhetoric of nationalism is inversely related to its social reality: it speaks of *Gemeinschaft*, and is rooted in a semantically and often phonetically standardized *Gesellschaft*."⁵⁴

In order to grasp the relationship between assimilation and the making and remaking of boundaries, we have to analyze its long-term influence, its repercussion and imprint on ethnic identity. A help in this direction may come from immigration studies and related social science literature. Yet, we shall also have to maintain that cultural loss in non-immigrant contexts often results in a rekindled stress on boundaries as a replacement or surrogate of contents.

The concept of *symbolic ethnicity* has been used by Herbert J. Gans to define those instances of group identity largely emptied of cultural content: highly assimilated groups can display a variety of forms of allegiance to their ethnic heritage, from the use of "ethnic" symbols to the participation in ethnic festivals or militancy in "ethnic" causes.⁵⁵ This situational, "lazy" and opportunistic form of group membership implies a personal identification with the ethnic background, but avoids the commitment derived from participating in formal or informal cultural organizations and it does not require practicing the ethnic culture, particularly language. Therefore, it is an example where ethnic boundaries remain, while ethnic contents have largely disappeared. We should again note here that highly assimilated diaspora groups of the "symbolic ethnicity" type, are often behind the financing of extreme co-nationalist groups, where the use of violence, state repression, and terrorism against historical enemies can become legitimated.⁵⁶ Some known cases are Serbian, Greek, and Croatian lobbies, Palestinian radicals and the Zionist far-right, as well as various Basque, Armenian, Tamil, Sikh, and Irish liberation fronts, and many other diaspora-sponsored organizations. Gans' kindred concept of *symbolic religiosity* refers to "the consumption of religious symbols, apart from regular participation in a religious culture and in religious affiliations—other than for purely secular purposes."⁵⁷

The idea that apparently trivial elements like a piece of cloth on a mast or a humdrum anthem may command emotional attachment has been observed since the emergence of nationalism. This phenomenon has been identified by both psychologists and social psychologists. Sigmund Freud used the term "narcissism of small differences," remarking that "it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in

constant feuds and in ridiculing each other.”⁵⁸ Freud’s approach reminds us that nationalism and ethnic conflicts are not based on objective differences, but on a principle of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, “it is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive manifestation of their aggressiveness.”⁵⁹ Freud intuitively identified the difference between perceived and tangible distinctions as one between subjective perceptions of groupness and objective cultural features.⁶⁰

To sum up, a reductive use of the concepts of boundaries as opposed to content risks trivializing the study of inter-ethnic relations. In particular, it risks obfuscating the dynamic relationship between ethnic identities, cultural contents, and boundaries maintenance.

Boundary-Making and European Unification

What are the implications of boundary theories for the current process of European integration? Can they be useful to implement specific policy action? Can they help us to anticipate troubles ahead and avoid them? The most important single lesson to be extrapolated is: when traditional boundaries are eroded and collapse, new ones always emerge to replace the old ones. In periods of dramatic socio-cultural change, new boundaries are likely to become more impermeable and higher than previous ones. Throughout the twentieth century, this has been the European experience. In an era of aggressive globalization and free-market expansionism, there is little evidence that this trend is going to abate. Cosmopolitanism and universalism are likely reactions to the erection of new boundaries, which in turn are a reaction to the collapse of previous ones. Cosmopolitanism can potentially be an antidote to the dangers of extreme nationalism, state patriotism, and other forms of boundary-building.⁶¹ However, in order to be so, it must be strictly dissociated from alien phenomena like imperialism, globalization, nationalism, patriotism and elitist individualism.

Boundary theories have at least an immediate implication regarding the perverse effects of globalization: Globalization has brought about an unprecedented destruction of traditional boundaries accompanied by the simultaneous rise of particularistic ideologies. These include such a diverse array of positions and choices as communitarianism, xenophobia, nationalism, patriotism, fundamentalism, feminism, and even opportunistic varieties of multiculturalism. In other words, the spread of group-specific, particularistic ideologies has accompanied the onslaught of globalization. Fragmentation and division have not been accompanied by “deep pluralism,” or by a consistent, full-range respect for cultural diversity. Globalization has mostly meant homogenization and thus has led to the global erosion of both national and local cultures—as well as the natural environment. Globalization itself has become an ideology which, like past totalitarian forms of nation-building, has stressed the need to unify.⁶² Like fascism and communism,

its ideologues have rhetorically defended the need to “indigenize” their creed and respect local cultures. Some have even argued that globalization has actually contributed to the safeguard and respect of local cultures: The spurious term “*glocalization*” has been skillfully crafted to defend the idea that globalization is actually compatible with local cultures and ways of life. However, the opposite is true: for large minorities and perhaps for many ordinary people globalization has meant uniformity, specifically in the formal aspect of Americanization.⁶³

European integration may be related to broader visions of a post-ethnic Europe.⁶⁴ However, this has been made impossible by two crucial factors: on the one hand, the persistence of ethnically based forms of nationalism;⁶⁵ on the other hand, the superimposition of uniform cultural patterns emanating principally from the U.S. This has made mutual inter-communication between European countries and individuals harder, if not impossible. More specifically, Americanization is working against inter-cultural dialogue since its consumerist ephemera have partly replaced a century-old shared European communication space. For instance, the production and free circulation of, say, French, British, Russian, Italian, and Spanish movies and music has been hampered, curtailed, and clamped down by imposed import quotas for American products which have monopolized the totality of European markets. Everywhere, the indigenous film and music industry has been struggling to survive, even where it had to confront few rivals, as in Russia and Serbia.⁶⁶ This reduced share of European cultural space has per force serious implications for the future development of a European civil society.⁶⁷ Along with territorial and spatially identifiable borders, less visible, more subtle boundaries mark both inter-personal and inter-ethnic relations. These have been the subjects of much cross-disciplinary research. Despite their frequent invisibility, ethnic boundaries are clearly perceived by in-group members, as well as by those groups with which in-group members usually interact. They can be all-pervasive and crosscutting, orientating behavior and action, while manifesting themselves in the life of every individual.

Neither tied to administrative-political notions, nor to clearly discernible geographical spaces, ethnic boundaries have assumed new meanings through, and beyond, *de-territorialization*. An older generation of conservative scholars saw boundaries, notably state boundaries, as static and forever given. Since at least their anthropological conceptualization by Frederick Barth, ethnic boundaries have begun to denote ethnic identities and collective self-perceptions. Therefore, their empirical identification by outsiders has become more problematic. In general, the idea of porousness and permeability of ethnic boundaries has proliferated in all social sciences.

As the new field of study of nationalism emerged in the early 1980s, approaches began to proliferate to explain the “unexpected” revival of national sentiments. Because the failure of conservative political and social sciences highlighted incapacity to detect the persistence of ethnicity, studies explaining the reasons of ethnic *persistence* have attracted more interest and showed a more

robust explanatory power. In fact, erstwhile “modernization theory” had proven unable to detect the embers of ethnonational vitality under the ashes of modernization. Led by the state and encouraged by the military, cultural assimilation and homogenization advanced dramatically in the twentieth century.⁶⁸ Local cultures (“ethnic contents”) associated with specific non-dominant ethnic groups were declining as a consequence of the state’s attempts at “homologation.” But, contrary to the aspirations of authoritarian politicians and state-makers, the increasing invisibility of culture and the disappearance of cultural contents, were not reflected in a parallel decline of their symbolic significance and political potential. On the contrary, the persistence, indeed the regeneration, of ethnic boundaries, became fiercer, more intensified, and aggravated by perception of a vital threat against the group’s cultural continuity.⁶⁹

A more comprehensive understanding of ethnic conflicts can be achieved by considering the role played by *internal* variables, that is, ethnic contents and culture, or more specifically “core values,” which are directly related to how the in-group is defined (I stress the *role* of internal variables, rather than internal variables *per se*). This focus should be accompanied by an attention to the role of *external* agents, like state policies and political violence, on the formation of ethnic boundaries. In particular, a scrutiny of the mutual relationship between internal variables and external agents may help to formulate a typology of ethnic conflicts as depending on the role of what lies on both sides of the boundary. Content and culture can be identified as *internal* variables, not directly related to the dynamics of ethnic conflict. Boundaries and identities can instead be identified as *external* variables, that is, elements which are based on their transactional, relational character with “the other.” External variables are those more directly correlated to the rise of violence and external agents are directly involved in this process. A major problem in the study of ethnic boundaries is the alleged “malleability” of the concept. But this relativist vision of infinite ductility betrays its limits by evoking that very sense of insecurity that inevitably results in the strengthening of old boundaries—and even the rise of new ones. Michael Billig has defined this quotidian, reiterating, nearly ritual character of nationhood as the practice of “*banal nationalism*.”⁷⁰ Boundaries are not necessarily *loci* of conflict: Miroslav Hroch’s seminal study showed that nationalist movements in Europe were *not* most popular in ethnic boundary zones but instead flourished in centers of expanding communication networks.⁷¹

A related problem is the difficult empirical grounding and “measurability” of boundaries. The only way to “measure” their weight and endurance would be to focus on the intensity of identities and “us/them” feelings. This can be done in several ways: synchronically, with the use of surveys, large-scale questionnaires, voting patterns, and other statistical data, as well as with qualitative data or more belatedly with the recourse to media reporting on the magnitude of ethnic conflicts once they have started. Diachronically and on a more *longue durée* basis, by studying the evolution of shifting identities in political practice. The most suitable

way of empirically grounding boundaries on practice is to relate them to content. By emphasizing their relationship with cultural content one can more easily estimate the boundaries' salience and shifting importance, without falling into the trap of reification. The subjective character of boundaries is precisely emphasized by referring to their inner relationships with what they enclose and contain. It is this relationship which provides evidence of something which would otherwise remain obscure to the external observer or analyst.

Ethnic violence often occurs when there are few cultural "markers" accessible to differentiate between groups. When groups in conflict share too many elements of the same culture, difficulties in their self-definition may emerge. The leaders of a non-dominant, subordinated group have then to create new contexts and "fabricate" new options in order to emphasize group identity and re-define ethnic boundaries. One of these options, the use of violence as a means of boundary-building, has been chosen by leaders in some of the cases analyzed here. The main rationale of many threatened groups is the defense of a boundary, particularly an ethnic boundary, from what is subjectively perceived as external aggression: The boundary is reinforced by focusing negatively on what lies "outside" and opposing it positively to what is "inside."⁷² For instance, David Campbell theorized the oppositional nature of U.S. foreign policy, arguing that, while the Cold War discourse was based on a narrative of the American self constructed in opposition to the "other," such narrative did not change despite the end of the cold war. U.S. foreign policy makers began immediately to concoct and single out new targets of enmity, primarily political Islam or specific pariah states, thus justifying new military build-ups in front of U.S. public opinion. Indeed, the perception of the "other" as an unfathomable danger is central to the construction of American identity. In general, the perception of threat can be either fabricated or authentic, but a "patriotic" control over the mass media and state bureaucracy makes it possible for murderers to be painted as "victims."

As Horowitz points out, "the violent character of these responses to the feared loss of group distinctiveness is a powerful point in the case against assimilationist policies of nation-building."⁷³ For smaller stateless groups the experience of threat can of course be overwhelming, but lacking a grasp on the mass media, their response is delayed. At the same time, the loss of cultural identity as a consequence of assimilationist policies makes radicalization more likely. In general, multiculturalism, federalism, and the promotion of all forms of cultural pluralism have great healing powers for building civic peace, by assuaging the sense of mutual threat which is at the core of violent strife.⁷⁴ If cultural autonomy can enshrine the protection of minority rights, the legal limits of self-determination rights can be reassessed within the parameters of both EU integration and globalization.⁷⁵

In our examples, groups in contact share the ethnic boundary while cultural contents span the boundary. The boundary created by violence replaces the missing boundary that was, or could have been, created by culture. Emptied, cleared, voided boundaries are more insecure than boundaries that protect a rich cultural

content. Empty boundaries can easily be filled by violence to replace the cultural hiatus. Hence, paradoxically, communities where ethnic borders entirely circumscribe the diffusion of cultural contents are deemed to be safer places for an ethnic group to exist. This, of course, does not insinuate a rejection of multiculturalism; quite the contrary, it makes it all the more vital and imperative. When boundaries are culturally defined (rather than merely identificationally so), culture can work as an inter-generational bridge, restraining violent deviations, keeping radical fringes at bay, reassuring members of the group's continuity, lessening inter-generational gaps, filling the life of cultural communities with everyday meaning, and, finally, contributing to their mutual contacts, coexistence, and persistence. In short, it is not the permanence of ethnic boundaries as such which matters, but rather the need to fill them with significant cultural content.

As global homogenization amalgamate, blend, and intermingle cultures, behaviors, tastes, appearances in a planetary melting pot, as contents tend to evaporate and disappear, boundaries risk becoming unprecedentedly reinforced.⁷⁶ The sweeping spread of reactive nationalism, statism, ethnic cleansing, and separatism testifies to the prevalence of this drift. This trend can only be rectified by restoring attention to the importance of culture and content, of creativity and continuity. In general, a stress on boundaries, rather than content, always indicates some deep insecurity. The need to raise boundaries, while forgetting the content they are supposed to defend, should be enough to alarm us about the rise of some deeply seated sense of vulnerability and fear. Violence may well be a logical finale of this parallel stress on boundaries and abdication of culture. This may be particularly true when all efforts to reinforce cultural specificity are discarded—often in the name of culture's alleged inefficacy in terms of granting a group's identity and survival.

In conclusion, boundaries and boundary theories are relevant to current European trends and patterns of integration.⁷⁷ Their relationships to more traditional forms of nationalism should be kept in mind, together with the widespread, universal sense of threat unleashed by globalization.

Notes

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