

A DESIRABLE WORLD

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF
PROFESSOR BART LANDHEER

Edited by

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RAIMONDO STRASSOLDO

BOUNDARIES IN SOCIETY

Georg Simmel was among the early discoverers of the fundamental function of the "criss-crossing of social circles" ("Kreuzung sozialer Kreise")¹ in socio-cultural dynamics. The idea was later developed by other sociologists, stressing the integrative function of the "cross-cutting role sets" in bridging social cleavages and softening conflicts (Merton, Coser). This is certainly a legitimate development of Simmel's intuition; but the idea of *social boundary* had to wait the development of the *modern* systems approach to receive appropriate attention. Only recently sociologists have begun to focus on the interesting phenomena that appear where different systems meet and interpenetrate.

It is commonly held that it is the *core*, the *centre* of things that count, not their peripheries and rims. This is certainly often true, e.g. when we know for sure what we are speaking of. But this is not always the case. The "definition" of our object, i.e. the drawing of the boundaries around it, is in many cases problematic.

When we study relatively simple systems, a rock, a chair, a plant, an animal, there are no troubles. Everybody can see that the object is inside its surface, the animal is inside its skin. But, speaking of societies, can we say that a society is what is inside its boundaries? What boundaries? Things are not easy even within the field of biology. Zoologists are not sure whether sponges are real "individuals" or aggregates of specialized cells, or whether individual ants and bees are real organisms or mere detachable organs of the true organism, the formicary or the swarm. In general, in lower organisms it is difficult to tell the individual from the

colony. More important, perhaps, is the fact that the evolutionary units, the species, have blurred and gradual boundaries; the "genetic barrier", halting the exchange of genes, arises only gradually between "races" and populations living in relative ecological isolation.²

The identification of social units and systems poses similar problems. Some sociologists (Comte) skipped them by conceptualizing "society" as comprising the whole of mankind in some mystic communion. Others left the question unanswered simply borrowing the criteria from anthropologists, who tend to deal with small, simple, isolated human collectivities and can thus compile lists of "functional prerequisites of societies"; the problem is how to apply those criteria to the modern civilization. Some historians like Toynbee subdivided humanity in a variable number of great evolutionary units, akin to animal species, and differentiated more clearly at the cultural ("paideia") level. But operationalization problems remain.

The commonest solution to this problem, however, is the implicit or explicit assumption that society coincides, more or less, with the national society, the Nation, or the Nation State. The problem is not prominent in most standard works of general sociology, where "society" is usually treated only as the container of highly interesting but little related things like family, production, politics, organizations, values, etc.; or in purely theoretical works where concepts, models, etc. are often only *illustrated* by concrete examples, but not really operationalized, i.e. not accompanied by instructions on how to employ them in concrete situations.

The identification (definition) of the units of analysis is taken as a serious, crucial problem in some recent attempts to study society not as a container but as a "complex, open system," as a "higher-order organism."³ This is not the place to refute the charges of old-fashioned organicism levelled against the "modern systems approach" to sociology.⁴ We want only to stress the merits of the "cybernetic" and "communication" approach, as found in social scientists like Deutsch, Easton, Etzoni, Boulding, in exploding earlier formalistic, legalistic conceptions of Society as Nation State. And it is not surprising that awareness to this

² J. Napier, *The Roots of Mankind*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1971.
T. Dobzhansky, *Mankind Evolving. The Evolution of the Human Species*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1967.

³ W. Buckley (ed.), *Modern Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist. A Sourcebook*, Aldine, Chicago, 1969; A. Kuhn, *The Study of Society. A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Tavistock, London, 1966.

⁴ K. W. Back, "Biological Models of Social Change," in *American Sociological Review*, 36, 4 (Aug. 1971).

¹ The translation of Reinhard Bendix, *The Web of Group Affiliation*, is explicitly intended to "minimize the play with words" which the translator sees in Simmel's geometrical imagery. G. Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliation*, tr. Kurt Wolff and R. Bendix, The Free Press, New York and London, 1955.

problem has grown more acute in scholars interested in *international* relations. As long as one studies the "inside of society," the problem of its delimitation is really *marginal*; just as in the "traditional" sociological approach the problems of relationships between man and his biological and physical environment are marginal ("boundary problems").

The issue of social boundaries comes to the focus of attention when we realize that this is a limited world, a single system made up of innumerable interdependent subsystems of social, political, cultural and physical elements. The new supersciences – ecology, cybernetics – are focusing on the linkages and the interfaces between socio-cultural, biopsychical, natural and technological elements; the new catchwords are interaction, transaction, correlation, openness, interdependence. Old "isolation" and "equilibrium" models are discarded; this is a time of flux, confusion, synthesis. Established paradigms, with neat boundary lines between fields of scientific enquiry, crumble under the impact of the cumbersome battlecry, "interdisciplinarity". Biologists talk of social philosophy, engineers write up political manifestos, international lawyers study marine pollution, political scientists investigate architectural problems.

These are times of "statu-nascenti", as Weber put it, times of turmoil when the lines of our mental maps need redrawing. These are propitious times for focusing on the problems of boundaries in society.

The thesis of this paper is that there is only one system relevant to man: "spaceship earth" (Boulding); and that there is a single "worldsociety" (J. Burton). It is certainly not a new thesis, nowadays; innumerable authoritative voices have spelled it. What is perhaps less common is the idea that the study of social boundaries can be a breakthrough to explode those unconscious legalistic and organismic categories that still clutter our thinking. We must recognize that national frontiers dividing one state from another are just one kind of social boundaries, which differentiate groups according to several criteria; that horizontal, territorial boundaries between local communities are in principle no more important than "vertical," "functional," "analytical" boundaries separating social strata, ideological groups, formal organizations; and that the identification of the "points of articulation," the "interfaces," the "linkages" that connect subsystems across their boundaries is an important contribution to the study of social dynamics:

"The first problem is to define the boundaries of a society and this task proves formidable. Fortunately, the obstacles to conceptualization of the boundaries

constitute important empirical problems in their own right for it is the overlapping character of the boundaries of our social systems, that explains much of the tension and the dynamics of social life." (L. Mayhew, *Society: Institutions and Activity*, Scott, Foresman and Co., Glenview, Illinois, 1971: Preface)

This is not the place to give fuller development to the above statements; we have ourselves tried to do so elsewhere⁵ and the writer quoted above has developed convincingly his argument. We want only to recall the principal contexts in which the issue of social boundaries has been treated in sociology.

In the first place there is the "Frontier" in its peculiarly American meaning of empty quarters in which the forces of civilization and reason confront the forces of nature and barbarity. Frontier as the place where civilized society meets the challenge of the environment, and man shows his virtues. The Kennedian New Frontier. The outer frontier in the space. The "frontier" as development of new resources.⁶ These are all valuable denotations of the term; incidentally, the only ones deemed of sociological interest to the compilers of some Encyclopaedias of Social Sciences.

In the second place, there is the "border," or area of contact between two territorial communities belonging roughly to the same category, in particular the Nation-States. This is the type of boundary that has been most widely studied by disciplines like geography and international law. From Ratzel to Jackson & Samuels and Prescott,⁷ there is a well established tradition of speculation and studies on the State borders, their structure, function, types, etc. More recently social geographers and "spatial" sociologists have begun to research border phenomena empirically.⁸ Lawyers and political scientists have reflected on the role of territory and borders in the structure of the State, and analysed the meaning of the border as the limit of legitimate use of violence of which the State is the only proper monopolist. Violence is exerted by physical

⁵ See R. Strassoldo and R. Gubert, "The Boundary, an Overview of its current theoretical status," pp. 29-57, and other entries, in: I.S.I.G., *Boundaries and Regions – explorations in the growth – and peace potential of the peripheries*, Lint, Trieste, 1973. Also R. Gubert, *La situazione confinaria*, Lint, Trieste, 1972.

⁶ The latter is the particular contribution to the meaning of the term by Friedman and Alonso (eds), *Regional Development and Planning. A Reader*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 1969.

⁷ W. A. D. Jackson, M. S. Samuels (eds), *Politics and Geographic Relationships. Toward a New Focus*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1971; J. R. V. Prescott, *The Geography of Frontiers and Boundaries*, Aldine, Chicago, 1965.

⁸ T. Lundén, *Individual Spatial Behaviour in a Boundary Area*, S-Byran Sundt, Stockholm, 1973.

means which are bounded to a certain area (Weber, Parsons).

Finally, there is the "analytical" concept of boundary, to which we have referred at the beginning: boundary as "differentia specifica" separating one social group from the other, even if they are not spatially separated, as in a stratification or in an ethnic system;⁹ boundary as the norms and values that control the functioning of a group;¹⁰ boundaries as the outward face of what, taken in itself, would be called "pattern" (Parsons writes almost interchangeably of "boundary maintenance" and of "pattern maintenance") boundaries as interfaces, "points of articulation" between different systems.

These three approaches to the problem of social boundaries have all some distinctive virtue. The first emphasizes that the peripheries of the system can be more important than its core; the spirit of the frontier can pervade a whole nation; some civilizations are in essence "frontier civilizations," able to maintain themselves only as long as there is a frontier to be conquered, a challenge to be met; and when these lack, the civilization collapses.

Some civilizations owe their greatness to the spirit that developed in the frontier or at the meeting point of different socio-cultural systems. Many state capitals developed in such areas, and many frontier marks, like Austria and Prussia, built nations and empires around themselves.¹¹

The third approach lends to such broad theoretical generalizations a tight and operational conceptual framework. It can be applied not only to the relationships between different systems (or subsystems: technological, biopsychic, socio-cultural, physical, etc.) but also to

subsystems of the same type (e.g. states, communities, organizations, institutions, populations, etc.). It is mainly an analytical tool, because the boundaries it speaks of cannot always be traced on the ground; that is precisely its great heuristic value. It forces the researcher to look for the boundary of the system under study; it compels him to *define* his object, to be explicit about what exactly he is speaking of, to be aware of the limits of his discourse. This is certainly a valuable contribution to

⁹ An excellent example of this approach is F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1969.

¹⁰ F. K. Berrien, *General and Social Systems*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1968.

¹¹ These ideas can be found not only in the great Toynbee but also in other historians, like O. Latimore, *Studies in Frontier History*, Mouton, Paris-The Hague, 1962, and in anthropologists like A. Lesser, "Social Fields and the Evolution of Society," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 17, 1961.

science. To begin with, many diatribes about the concept of society could have been avoided if sociologists had focused from the beginning on its boundaries, its limits, its interfaces with other systems.

The second approach is the "traditional" one. It is rich in data, but unsatisfactory in theory. It is strongly influenced by nineteenth-century fixation on the Nation-State, and by the legalistic and organicist tradition from which sociology emerged. It views boundaries and border-areas as "social problems," trouble spots to be healed by appropriate institutional cares, ranging all the gamut from "reaction" to "revolution." Conservatives regret the fact that Nation-States are not all neatly separated, but that at the border there is an annoying and improper confusion of languages, races, economic microsystems, loyalties; and propose policies by which everything is put in its place — by means of population transfers, shrewd drawing of the lines, etc.; all to the major glory of the Sovereign Nation State. Progressives suggest that the hopeless confusion of many "border situations" can be tackled by courageous new "social inventions," like the "buffer states" of old;¹² and special autonomies are granted to some border regions, "transfrontier regions" are envisioned,¹³ etc.

The "new" approach should combine the insights given by the first one (broad historical analysis of the meaning of the "frontier" in the evolution of civilization) and by the third (identification of boundaries at all systemic levels) to investigate anew the world of Nation-States and their borders to which the second approach has so long dedicated itself. The study of international relations, in particular, needs freeing itself from the spell of the statistatrous tradition, and realize that the boundaries we see on geopolitical maps, defining the jurisdiction of that particular social subsystem, the Nation-States are just one of innumerable kinds of social boundaries. In many cases they are still crucial in the behavior of the "international" systems; in other cases they are being voluntarily devalued and "defunctionalized" by the States themselves, who see the advantages of supranational integration; in other cases newborn States try desperately to "build a nation" under their cloak, and give their boundaries a substance they now utterly lack, as in Africa.¹⁴

¹² R. Peattie, *Look to the Frontiers. A Geography for the Peace Table*, Harper & Row, London 1944.

¹³ On such proposals, see the documentation gathered for the Council of Europe by the present writer (R. Strassoldo, *Frontier Regions: an analytical study*, Strasbourg, 1973, Mimeo) and others.

¹⁴ See C. G. Widstrand (ed), *African Boundary Problems*, The Scandinavian

Our picture of the world needs a radical redrawing. It is not the nicely colored geopolitical map that counts; we should be trained to see the territorial distribution of more relevant features – resources, population, famine, pollution; and observe the ugly colors of hate and disease, of waste and war as they spread on our planet. Then we would see that the patterns they form on the maps have little relation with geopolitical maps. So we would be led to ask ourselves: what is the relevance of Nation-States to the solution of world problems? Is the sovereign state a still useful institution, or is it not an historical left-over buttressed only by nationalistic ideologies and myths, by international forces and by the vested interests of the great social institutions, like the Army? Is not the wholesale acceptance of the European model of Nation-State by the “New Nations” of Africa and Asia just another example of unintentional, self-imposed colonialism? Is the Nation-State really the most efficient way to “get things done” (K. Deutsch), to mobilize societal resources? Are there no alternative “idées-forces,” no other models of social organization?

Personally, we believe that the answer is yes. The future of “spaceship earth” requires such an answer. We cannot let national boundaries sanction the separation between producers and consumers, rich and poor, haves and have-nots. The only legitimate boundaries are the interfaces between the institutions and decision-making systems that best serve the basic human needs. The family, the small group, the local community certainly are of this sort. So are the great world organizations, like the WHO, the UNESCO, etc. The legitimacy of boundaries at the intermediate levels – the level of nation-states, regional and continental unions – is doubtful.

The 200 billion dollars spent every year in armaments are an overwhelming evidence of the damage done to man by the national boundaries.