Borderland Europe and the challenge of migration

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The wrinkled sea. Flickr/jenny downing. Some rights reserved.

Confronted with the violent and obscene images that have been reaching us ever since the influx of refugees entered new dimensions this summer, we may wonder: Why is it that Merkel addresses the issue much better than Hollande does, and Sigmar Gabriel much better than Manuel Valls?

Why is it that – all things considered - Germany behaves with much more dignity and efficiency than France, let alone the UK or Hungary? Surely, because in the long term Germany is in need of the migratory input while France is not (or so she thinks).

Surely also because a majority of Germans have learned a lesson from fascism and from the Cold War, which the French still haven't learned from colonial and neo-colonial history.

But all this only alludes to an issue which has now become impossible to ignore: namely, the relationship between European construction (or de-construction) and the new reality of human migration engendered by underlying catastrophes such as sweeping terrorism (including state terrorism) and unfettered globalization in the circummediterranean region. Hence, we need to restart from the structural data, we need to measure the changes that have since occurred and to ask once again what politics can contribute in this context.

Tens of thousands of 'migrants' - men, women and children - from Africa and the Middle East (Syria in particular) are flooding the systems of control and admission of European member states - first those of riparian states in the Mediterranean region, then those of other states further north. Robbed, deported, tucked into transit camps or left in the *no man's land* of harbour or railway areas, sometimes strafed or

sunk with their makeshift vessels, they die or fail in front of such or such barrier, but they persist and are now here. What will we do about them? What are the governments doing, now that not only militant human rights associations and people in charge of registration or emergency relief operations, but even European officials are speaking of the biggest wave of refugees and the biggest sum of misfortune on the continent since World War II?

Well, they unroll several kilometres of barbed wire. They send the army or the police to push back these scraps of humanity which no one wants to keep while at the same time announcing 'deliberations' and calling for 'pragmatic' solutions.[1]

The problem, they say, is 'European'. But when the President of the Commission asks for the member states to agree on the distribution quotas of refugees on the basis of each country's population and resources, all or almost all eschew this proposal with various arguments. Europe thereby uncovers what it has turned into by approbation or under the pressure of some of its citizens, but against the deep sense of many others: a coalition of selfishness rivalling for the trophy of xenophobia.

It is therefore no overstatement to speak of disgrace. [2] 500 million 'rich' Europeans (very unequally, it is true) are not able and not willing to accommodate 500,000 refugees (or even ten times their number) knocking on their doors. What is more, these unfortunates are fleeing massacres, civil wars, lethal dictatorships or famines, which certainly have very diverse and multiple causes and responsibilities: but no one could dare to claim Europe is guilt-free, in the long term as well as in its more recent policies, be it through cynical alliances, incautious interventions, or a continuous flux of arm sales.

However, collective humiliation is a form of auto-destruction. To repeat that the moral foundation of the European construction - its *distinctive* character (take a look at the East, take a look at the South...) - resides in promoting human rights and constantly denying any sense of obligation is one of the surest ways for a political institution to lose its legitimation. And, as often happens, this disgrace is not even counterbalanced by profits in security or in the economy.[3]

Rather, it is slowly but steadily pushing the European Union towards the collapse of one of the 'pillars' of its communitarian edifice: the mutualization of its borders and the unified control of entries into and departures from the European zone through the *Schengen system*.

None of this was unforeseeable. In fact, the 'tragedy' and the 'challenge' took months, even years, to evolve. During this time witnesses and analysts were decrying the aggravation caused by the voluntary self-deception of the politicians or their complaisance towards a public opinion which they deemed universally hostile to the reception of the 'world's misery'. The very name Lampedusa says it all.[4]

But an effect of *exorbitance* has just taken place which makes us realize that we have now entered a new era and that terms such as 'migrations', 'borders', 'population' along with the political categories built upon them have changed their meanings. Hence, we cannot use them as we have so far. On this as on some other points (such as currency, citizenship, labour) we can say that Europe *will either be realized by revolutionizing* its vision of the world and its societal choices *or it will be destroyed* by denying realities and by holding onto the fetishes of the past. I would like to expound this outcome in a few words.

Europe conceived itself as developing borders of its own, but in reality it *has no borders*, rather *it is itself a complex 'border'*: at once one and many, fixed and mobile, internal and external. To say it in plainer English, Europe is a *Borderland*.[5] This implies, I believe, two things of fundamental importance despite their paradox; two things whose consequences may remain out of reach if we continue to think in pure terms of national sovereignty and of police:

Firstly, that Europe is not a space where borders exist alongside one another but rather *on top of one*

another without really being able to merge into one another.

Secondly, that Europe forms a space within which borders *multiply* and *move* incessantly, 'chased' from one spot to the other by an unreachable imperative of closure, which leads to its 'governance', resembling a permanent state of emergency.

Regarding the first point,

 it is worth remembering a fact which we fail to draw a lesson from: even if we merely keep to current realities and decide to leave out traces of the cultural and institutional past, Europe does not have a *unique identification* when it comes to its 'territory'.

We tend to think that the external limits of the European Union define the 'real' borders of Europe, which is a mistake. These limits do not coincide with those of the Council of Europe (which include Russia and determine the area of competence of the European Court of Human Rights), nor with those of NATO, which includes the US, Norway, Turkey, etc. and is in charge of protecting the European territory (especially against Eastern enemies) and engineering some of the military operations on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, nor with the Schengen zone (which includes Switzerland but excludes the UK), nor with the Eurozone which shares the common currency controlled by the ECB (and which still includes Greece today but not the UK, Sweden or Poland). In the light of recent developments, we should - I think - admit that these delimitations will never merge. And that, therefore, Europe cannot be defined on the basis of a territory, except in a reductionist and contradictory way.

But what is the historical meaning of this fact? A long retrospective would be necessary in order to understand why the apparently univocal *national borders* which serve as the 'absolute' model of the border institution actually only constitute part of it. In fact, they could never exist independent of other alignments that allow them to function on a *local* as well as on a *global* level, thereby delineating more or less sovereign territories while regulating the global flux of populations by guiding them (for instance from metropolises to colonies, from North to South or the other way round) and by distinguishing between them.[6]

The following vignette should here suffice: during the age of colonial empires - as the maps posted in our classrooms used to clearly show - a country like France always had double borders, as it always had to define the limits of the 'French nation' on the one hand and the totality of its '*outremer* possessions' on the other hand. Since this disposition was also applied to other empires, an implicit opposition between Europe and the rest of the world, between the natural residence of the 'Europeans' and that of the 'non-Europeans' (commonly qualified as 'indigenous peoples') was drawn.

It would be rather careless to believe that this grand distribution has stopped haunting our understanding of the relationship between the interior and the exterior which commands our perception and our ways of administering the 'newcomers' on European soil. But even though the current system is based (as it has been at each stage of global history) on the principle of a double level, allowing for each 'local' border to function as a *projection of the order of the world* (and of its often prevalent other side, namely *disorder*), it is evidently much more complex than the old one.

And this is mainly due to the fact that the relation between the nation-states (even the powerful ones) on the one hand and the 'nomos' of the earth and the distribution of its population on the other hand has changed. For the former have stopped to be the*initiators* and have become *receivers* or at best *regulators*. Thus, a border is not what a state 'decides' it is in terms of power relations and negotiations with other states but what the global context dictates. No gesticulation (Manuel Valls in Ventimiglia), no coastal guards (Frontex) and no barbed wire (at the Hungarian border) will change this.

The preserved DDR border at Thuringia, Germany. Flickr/D Lumenta. Some rights reserved.

But let us get back to the saddening spectacle Europe is offering us as it is being confronted with its 'challenge of migration', and let us try to better describe the meaning of the multiplications and displacements of borders. This is the *second point*. Let us examine two emblematic case examples.

Firstly France, between Ventimiglia and Calais. On its 'southern' slopes it bars the way and reacts condescendingly to Italy's requests and complaints even though Italy is, together with Greece, the member state which is currently 'holding the reception'for the migrants on behalf of Europe.

The rules of repudiation are being applied without scruples, and the 'Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité' are cleaning up the beaches. On its 'northern' shore, France combines negotiation with repression in order to lighten the burden the UK has in a certain way subcontracted by keeping out of the Schengen zone. At the same time the UK continues (but for how long?) to attract migrants with a more 'liberal' legislation when it comes to personal and labour rights. Are we dealing with two unrelated situations or rather with one single 'border' represented by the French state?

Let us now turn to the Danube region between Germany and the Balkan states. Migrants here come mainly from the Middle-East but also from some countries or almost-countries originating from the ex-Yugoslavian dismantlement. Everywhere the walls are rising, not in order to make the increasing flux of migrants halt that are coming mainly from Greece and Macedonia, but to send them to other transit points.

And it is Germany, the terminal stop of the exodus, which (as I have said earlier) provides the main humanitarian effort (though accompanied by violent internal controversies and fits of lethal racism) while it simultaneously deploys politico-juridical argumentations that favour a distinction between 'asylum seekers' and 'economic migrants', and most importantly (for some migrants who are fit for work are welcome in Germany) in favour of reviewing the list of 'safe countries' which do not pose an immediate 'lethal' threat to their nationals.

Together, these situations draw a clear but rather unconventional picture. On the one hand, formal membership of the EU has become a second-rank criterion: historically and geographically all the Balkan states belong to Europe, which implies for instance that the Hungarian 'wall' *cuts through Europe* - thus

reproducing a kind of segregation which Europe pretended to have consigned to history (as the spokesperson of the Commission has pointed out in a low voice).

On the other hand, some European countries are tentatively perceived by others *not to be fully European*, or to merely belong to 'buffer zones'. But this ascription is *relative* rather than absolute. It follows a North-South 'gradient', as physicists would say, of political, sociological, ideological, and even anthropological meaning. The 'South', *the other Europe*, isn't fully European as it still stands with one foot in the Third-world or at any rate serves as an entry gate for the latter. For France, this 'South' is Italy, but for the UK it's France. For Germany it's Hungary and beyond, but for Hungary, it's Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey...

This raises the question: Who stops whom? Who serves as border control to the neighbouring state? The answer is: the southernmost (or rather South-Easternmost) state.[7] As a British vacationist quoted by the *Guardian* coarsely stated, it would be necessary to create 'one-way crossings' on access points such as the Eurotunnel for some groups of people.

We can now reach the inescapable conclusion: as a *matter of fact*, the 'external borders' of Europe cut *right through it* and fragment it into several superimposed slices. In consequence, Europe, though officially belonging to the 'North', eventually turns into nothing more than another field to enact the division of the world into a 'North' and a 'South'. But this delineation is not really definable anymore. It becomes clear why some member states are tempted to 'amputate' other states from the European Union so as to better protect themselves from what these represent or give way to.

And it becomes all the clearer taking into account the economic delineations (often even described as 'cultural' ones) which have widened the gap caused by unfettered liberalism between North and South (or between 'creditor states' and 'debtor states') within Europe itself. This makes sense, doesn't it? Well, except for the fact that however, 'pragmatically' speaking, it makes no sense at all. For, where would this supra-border be drawn and what would be its legal definition?

I could stop here and try to extract some political and moral consequences accompanied by gloomy predictions for today and tomorrow. But I think a further step is necessary, despite the risk of seeming too speculative. What we are referring to here from a European point of view is part of a much broader field - namely the overthrow of the course of recent history (Europe is not the 'capital of the world' anymore, it has become a mere 'province' as Dipesh Chakrabarty[8] has put it) and the economic and technological changes which transform the way humanity relates to itself and which bring about huge inequalities.

On the one hand there are those who practically 'live' on planes, airports, *shopping centres*, conference halls, and on the other hand those who travel by foot or on trucks on the roads of exile, carrying a child in their arms and a backpack on their shoulders - the only things that they still own. But between these two extremes are also masses of more or less 'precarious' migrants and non-migrants. Somewhere in the middle of the Mediterranean gigantic container ships coming from the now enlarged Suez canal and the decaying dinghies of human smugglers crammed with migrants meet one another (do they actually 'meet'?).

What has radically changed, as we can clearly see, is the regime of the flow of things and people. War, terror, dictatorship, fanaticism reaching our very doors don't simply follow such or such 'logic' but their consequences (which, let's be honest, have no foreseeable end) do fit into a certain frame and sharpen the contradictions. Maybe then, it is necessary to invert *our understanding* of the relation between 'territories' and 'movements' (or displacements) as some sociologists, jurists and philosophers have been suggesting for quite some time now.

For our understanding is still captive of schemes and norms that have shaped centuries of national sovereignty, which see the state as a subordinating power, assigning to each peoples a legally

demarcated territory. In other words, states used to allocate citizenship in an exclusive manner in order to limit and control the freedom of movement, which in a certain way is 'primary'. But increasingly states are losing this unrestricted power without exception or controls: the world is not 'westphalian' any more. The consequences regarding our ways of addressing human rights and political rights issues in the era we are chaotically but irreversibly about to enter, are radical.[9]

I won't carry this speculation to the end even though it hints at the new regime of movements and territories that I have just evoked. Rather, I would like to turn to the more immediate and more urgent question: what is the most effective and the most civil (not to say 'civilized') way to *govern a permanent state of emergency* in which borders that we inherited or added are either beginning to collapse unless they become continuously fortified and militarized?

I have to repeat what is *practically* at stake: human beings who are 'in excess' and their inalienable 'right to have rights' - not to the detriment of those who already have them, but next to them and together with them. No one can claim such a governance is easy, but it certainly should not be based on obsolete discriminations ('migrants' and 'refugees') or dangerous generalizations ('refugees' and 'terrorists') that nourish racist fantasies, prompt murderous acting out and disarrange the surveillance policies that the state needs to efficiently protect its citizens.[10]

Likewise it won't be achieved if the 'poor residents' (still in the great majority) are pitted against the 'poor nomads' (less numerous but more visible and ever increasing) by social disqualification, precariousness, forced relegation into dis-industrialized areas which are nothing but cultural and economic ghettos. If we want hospitality to prevail over xenophobic sentiments - sentiments which eventually trap politicians to such a point that they will have no other 'choice' than finding new expiatory victims such as Roma or immigrants to nourish it - the *social cleft* needs to be confronted at the same time as the *postcolonial resentments*.

There is thus no way around these two alternatives: either social security for all or 'insecurity of identity' and thriving nationalism which bring about the breakdown of the collective security system that has so long been sought and fought for as well as the destitution of the 'European idea' itself.[11]

The irony of it all, however, is that part of the solution is within reach: this *minimum* would be achieved by 1) an official declaration on the 'state of humanitarian urgency' on the entire 'territory' under the auspices of the European Commission, 2) the binding commitment of all EU member states to treat refugees with dignity and equity from each according to their objectively measurable ability.

It is true that the consequences of this minimum would potentially be considerable: re-valorization of the powers of the European Commission, institutionalization of humanitarian norms on a par with budgetary and commercial norms, liberation of resources for a politics of assistance and integration (which in turn would increase the necessity of democratic control at a 'federal' level), concerted educational programmes against racism... In short, a re-invigoration of the European *union* project, in opposition to current tendencies. Is it conceivable? Perhaps, if a common sense still exists among us.

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[4]See Michel Agier : « La tragédie de Lampedusa : s'émouvoir, comprendre, agir » (Le Monde | 04.10.2013) et « Lampedusa : pour une autre politique migratoire en Europe » (Le Monde | 08.10.2013).

[8] Dipesh Chakrabarty : *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference,* Princeton University Press 2000.