

Living between countries
Living between nature and society
Anthropological remarks on national and cultural identities

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relations between nation-states by focusing on populations and more particularly on individuals who share memories and daily experiences whose main referential is a specific international borderland. The discussion reflects on a long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Portuguese-Galician border in which I pursued an anthropology at the level of the individuals. Memory and narration were crucial in my research. Several anthropologies have shown differences between lived and political borders; lived borders are negotiated as experienced varying-size areas by individuals all over time according to practical issues. I approached transnational and international daily experiences which are not new in time but refer to a long history of cross-border relations. National and cultural identities are theoretically discussed as being permanently negotiated, considering personal circumstances, concrete social trajectories and a new socioeconomic spectrum brought up by the recent political and economic histories of Portugal and Spain, and in particular the inclusion of these two countries in the EU in 1986. Despite the fact that physical borders have actually disappeared, new borders, now less territorial, less political, but perhaps paradoxically more *identitary*, have been reinstalled between Portuguese and Galician men and women. In my argument I think crucial to look at human-nature relations, considering that the creation of a Transiberian Park (Xerés-Gerês) is a late acknowledgment of a long-term *ecosystemic* experience that has assimilated Galician and Portuguese peoples. They lived as peasants, exploiting natural resources, raising cattle, constructing walls in-between meadows that actually define the natural (social) landscape of the area. Today in the Galician side family agriculture in which we acknowledge a specific eco-type is being abandoned. Portuguese men and women keep old forms of making agriculture. A peasant aesthetic that unified them in the past is not anymore shared and a new (but more perceived) border seems installed.

Key Words: International borders; ethnography; social memory; narration; human-nature relations; identities.

1. Preamble

I would like to begin by proposing five main ideas that will inform my argument throughout the exposition:

1 - Each borderland, each frontier¹ has not only its own official history but also particular histories and many stories to be told. An ethnography of each borderland will reveal aspects that despite their generalizing scope will be above all revelatory of specific social processes.

2 - Borders and frontiers are complex subjects which convey different levels of reality, namely if one considers that institutions and individuals, pasts and presents, discourses, practices and representations are implicated. Talking about borders and frontiers - in the sense of dividing lines/structures between countries, territories (international) that are constantly crossed and lived – implies us in different approaches that cannot impose on each other under the risk of misrepresenting those other different levels of reality.

3 - Cultural and national identities cannot be assessed through static and definitive notions of culture and of the nation-state. Identities are processually constructed over time and space, according to particular experiences and encounters that each individual participates in. This idea relies on the assumption that nation-states, societies and cultures are not (anymore²) definitive bounded entities but rather open constructions.

4 – Anthropological approaches based upon ethnographic fieldwork enable us to reach micro-scale phenomena and facts that otherwise will be either misrepresented or forgotten. However through a ‘crossing approach’, it is essential to relate micro and macro-politics (parts and wholes as seen in perpetual relation and influencing each other).

5 - The question of (inter)national borders is also one related to a more structuring issue that informs the whole scope of social sciences – what are societies? How to define their particular limits, considering actual spaces and times? More particularly considering contemporary new worlds (my emphasis on the plural is necessary) in which post-moral experiences seems to predominate (Bauman, 2007)? Where to locate individuals by relation to collectives, more or less acknowledgeable, more or less territorially circumscribed?

2. Old issues: new formulations

There are two aspects that I consider very important (though not exhausting the thematic) when studying (anthropologically) international borders on the one hand and national and cultural identities on the other hand; the first one has to do with the idea of international frontiers between countries as theoretical and political constructions that do not necessarily match with the actual lived and experienced territories. Not rejecting the idea that these (historical) administrative and political realities have practical

consequences on the life of the populations (for instance, on their everyday life decisions such as employment and access to primary goods and health services), I prefer to emphasise (second aspect) that history and politics need to be rechecked by an ethnographic process of inquiring. I sustain that a continuous anthropological fieldwork supplemented with studies on memory and local history are very important to reassess what seems to be established as definitive Histories or as completed political processes. As Wilson and Donnan affirm, “borders are contradictory zones of culture and power, where the twin processes of state centralisation and national homogenisation are disrupted” (1998: 26).

The defence of an ethnographic approach on this subject illuminates some interrogations; I will not be answered to all but I keep them as a theoretical horizon in my script. How do we actually define identities with reference to national or cultural entities? Do we define identities through static categories or do we privilege dynamic and processual elements and traits? In particular, how do we do that in a global (complex) world that simultaneously celebrates (and facilitates) fluxes and movements of people and goods, though reinstalling new frontiers and borders (as seen by discourses and practices on the latest world economic crises or by specific national immigration policies)? And finally by whom do we speak when proposing categories such as the Portuguese and the Galician? Are we actually voicing the plurality and subjectivities that characterise these seemingly homogenous categories?

These questions take me into another plateau of reflection in which I have anchored many other questions that might be considered under this scope and to which my presentation point out (thinking particularly on the concept of cultural (national) identity): (1) is it possible that each of us (individually) constructs identities that rely on singularity traits which redirect to territorial and/or symbolic units more or less identifiable? (2) Or are we talking about defining politically from above, by reconstructing identity traits (which tend more and more to be patrimonialized)? By following a specific trend that assumes a kind of a renationalization of identities?³ (3) Do we insist, only concerning scientific/analytical purposes, in finding differences and codify them, sometimes against (or regardless the *emic* constructions of) the individuals who are subjects of our research? Or, still in other words, instigating on them an auto-classificatory need? (This is, actually, the starting point of Brandes’ argument on international frontiers [1993])?

These questions become even more pertinent if one considers that we live in a world, as many authors have shown us (for instance, Ulf Hannerz), that seems to celebrate itself in cultural movements and traffics (in the double sense of movement and business) between centres and peripheries; centres (and related peripheries) – as always – that should be understood as

those that diffuse hegemonic discourses, practices or what one might call the 'Western hegemony'. Is it possible to neglect and forget that these freedoms of movement, of choosing identity traits (including biophysical ones), of pointing to life destinies, that these transnationality features which define an apparent globalization (without come back) coexist with so many other socioeconomic processes (for instance multinational lay-offs, dislocation of factories) that reveal renewed dominations, discriminations and exclusions? These socioeconomic processes are themselves product of this or these globalizations (acknowledging different paths and paces in this apparent whole-embracing project), and in some cases they are the cause that drive individuals into new and non desired and volunteer movements, departures (migrations); in some cases, these same socioeconomic processes which are celebratory of epiphenomena such as the globalization leave no option for individuals to stay/to be in their original communities, environments, lands and exploit their natural resources (which are not theirs anymore or to which they have no access)⁴.

3. A multi-focused anthropology (research) for a complex subject

An anthropology of international frontiers is one that acknowledges that if different scales and scopes are used by the researcher (social scientist), dissimilar dimensions and facts will be observed and therefore disparate conclusions will be reached. I also would add that we as social beings, without any purpose of researching borders and frontiers from a scientific point of view, normally face in our lives these very same divergent approaches⁵. Everybody may say that this remark is banal considering any social and human phenomena, and that nothing new is being stated. I agree but I also should mention that, many times, the problem of studying borders and frontiers (in a wider sense – considering, for instance, symbolic, linguistic, identity forms of inclusion and exclusion and not only divisionary lines between countries and states) lies on the fact that one may tend to reify them as things that have their own live despite its particular social constructions, without any attempt to look closer, namely to look at 'concrete' individuals, social events, interactions and processes that take place at a micro-scale. They become too-static categories that insist on an over-sociologization of reality from a middle-range theory or even from a grand theory stand point, forgetting that concrete individuals and communities are part of the borders as crucial constituents.

Actually in my own approaches to this subject I always recover the argument of Stanley Brandes (1993) which refers to a crucial discrepancy between what is anthropologically called the *etic* and the *emic* points of view. Do the (human) subjects of our research understand the categories and the concepts that we as scientists are using to translate and represent social realities?" Brandes reflects specifically on international borders (actually the

Portuguese-Galician frontier) but his concern may be extended to all human and social phenomena as approached by anthropology (social sciences). Borders and frontiers are at the same time real and imagined, are lived/experienced and proposed (suggested) entities; they correspond to separating structures, lines, discourses and to connection points and areas of fluid encounters; in sum they are forms of creating and created meaning over social realities which necessarily are contested and negotiated all over time and space. Firstly because macro and micro-politics in and between countries change; and secondly because communities and individuals living in a closer and daily experience of the frontier produce new social phenomena that will have an impact on the Nation-States politics (and more and more on the plan of a supra-national politics)⁶.

In this respect one should be aware that despite the progressive attempts to eliminate internal borders in the European Union (a fabricated desire of homogeneity)⁷, different levels of frontiers overlap. We may recur to the concept of 'internal frontiers' which has been used by Nick Nolte (1991) to refer to a set of disadvantages that a periphery faces in favour of a centre. According to Nolte, the question is not so much in the definition of territorial centres and peripheries but more of socio-economic and symbolic ones (1991). Nevertheless the author refers more precisely to peripheral regions in Europe which are in relation to central ones that normally coincide with the political and administrative capitals of the countries. Wilson and Donnan underline this same dimension by saying that "changing definitions of peripheries and their relationships to their centres" affect the life of the international borders (1998: 25). They are not homogenous over time and space.

Are we facing a big problem, by considering borders and frontiers as non-definitive realities and concepts? No, I would answer rapidly. It is an issue that raises many theoretical, practical and epistemological questions but also and consequently potential virtues. My professional gaze as an anthropologist relies, by principle, on two conceptions of social realities (intentional plural) – which have, at least, two consequential epistemological implications in the processes of knowing them – actually in the processes of knowing whatever: (i) the first one is that one cannot understand social reality as a static thing (in a *Durkheimian* sense) ready to be known in a single and univocal way – the emphasis on circumstantialities, processes, contingency in the different acts of knowledge do not depend only of the observer (his/her social, cultural and physical location from where he/she knows) but are also intrinsic to the realities themselves; yet in other words one may say that there are multiple parts in the constructed (theoretical or perceived) wholes, multiple voices, multiple perspectives and multiple layers of significance; (ii) the second derives from the first one; because social realities are internal and externally diverse therefore one should reject the

idea of ethnography/fieldwork as a method of research that searches objective truths. By contrast, by *ethnographicizing* history and political processes such as the construction of international borders and their evolution in time we adopt the position that social reality is partially assessed and differently understood if focused from different angles. The issue about this assumption is to turn evident and clear the actual process of knowing; in a reflexive device, we need to reinforce forms of creating intersubjectivity rather than propose objectivity.

One clarification is needed at this point. I consider Anthropology a particular field of knowledge whose main goal is the celebration of encounters in varying forms aiming at particular truths that may be reissued through a comparative theoretical project into global and general arguments on human affairs (social, cultural, political, etc.) In this sense, by proposing here that the social realities of international borders and frontiers are not only a question of political and international treaties, protocols or legislation (even considering that, for instance in the EU, a major and important part of the legislation that regulates movements of goods and people [and therefore ideas, symbols, expectations, ways and lifestyles] is being negotiated, defined and written down very far away from the actual borderlands) but a question of people, communities and individuals who live on a daily basis in those spaces and territories, I assume a particular theoretical position – to look at the social relations at the level of individuals who live in international frontiers - not the truth on the issue of international borders. Though a theoretical position that is crucial, in my opinion, to understand and deal with the contemporary agenda on issues such as nation-states, national, regional and cultural belongings and identities.

This particular claim and need is not only due to the fact that there is growing theoretical concerns with the place of the individual in the anthropological project (what to do with the subjectivities and complexities that form each of us as persons without reducing them to collective and collectivizing categories?)⁸ In fact, the need comes from the opposite pole; social realities are producing new phenomena, new fluid territorial identities (in the literal sense - more and more individuals choose to live in-between two countries like in Portugal and Spain). Either because the discipline claims new theoretical gazes or because new phenomena inhabit contemporary social worlds the fact is that identities are processually constituted as a product of multiple negotiations and selections (culture is seen as constant negotiation of meanings). Despite the fact that general elements of identity redirect us to collectives and certain belongings there is always a reception and a specific appropriation of them by each individual. The basic idea of an anthropology at the level of the individuals lies on a doubly *resubjectiving* paradigm; firstly in the sense that structures and collective regularities are not enough to access those phenomena (they are

insufficient as producers of social knowledge/representation) and secondly because in that way anthropology opens itself as well as the social knowledge to dimensions that lie beyond the visible and the narratable.

Belongings and group inscriptions that defines us and make us distinguish from others and others from others whatever the scale (the Portuguese, the English, the Western, the Exotic) obey to self and hetero exclusion mechanisms highly complex and problematic. Actually the concepts of 'other(s)/alterity(ies)' are associated with the concepts of culture(s)/identity(ies), and they have been central in the scientific project of anthropology. These concepts have been defined and redefined all over the last 130 years. It is curious though while the world becomes global, by uniformizing in and their margins (seen from specific positions in the world and in relation to proposed centres, and in particular to a certain socio-economic-cultural and academic- perceptual West) it seems to emerge from inside the discipline the claim for new insights on the individuals, their social and psychological experiences, their being-in-the-world.

In fact, when referring to memory and identity, I think there is always the risk of essentializing the common pasts of the social collectives, as if all the individuals had lived the same life, as if all of them had felt and experienced the same feelings. We are this, we are that, we are Portuguese, we are Europeans, and we are participants of socio-cultural immobilities. These categorizations, self-attributed or imposed by the others, from definitions predominantly stanch, more about what we would like to be (or what the others want us to be) rather than what we effectively are, reveal themselves as highly blinding of the living specificities of each individual. It may be easier, in terms of the dominant social and political responses, to propose union traits more than disunion ones – this is actually the risk of not approaching sociologically traditions, customs and cultures – however, from the point of view of a contemporary scientific anthropology, we need to know these individual diversities (I insist intentionally in these plurals – they are not just formal) that give sense to our lives.

The fact that I define borders and frontiers as multi-layer realities means that they need to be addressed by different angles, which do not necessarily leads into similar, univocal and linear arguments and conclusions. This assumption underpins the contribution of two important areas of research/study: local history and memory studies; both have contributed to a reassessment of past and present political and social processes. Whilst official histories apparently for ideological or practical reasons seems to be locked up in coherent, organized and all-over time transmitted scripts, these methodological, theoretical and epistemological proposals, based upon new data found in local archives and in the words and voices of those who live in the border are very revelatory. For instance, about the Portuguese-Galician borderland where I did my fieldwork, contraband and the Spanish Civil War

(1936-1939) are central in the processes of narration and remembering the frontier and the past relations between the two sides of the territory. New and recent studies on, for instance, the contraband (Freire, Rovisco e Fonseca, 2009) in the Portuguese-Spanish border show us the important economic, social and cultural role of this 'shadow activity' for the individuals who have experienced them. Godinho (2005), for instance, has worked on the cooperation between Galician and Portuguese families during the war conflict in Spain (1936-39) and she has uncovered many particular stories about episodes that are historically narrated and described but to which were lacking what I call the social cement of History. Through these approaches, a singular History becomes plural and events lose their static element and are offered movement.

My own research (Martins, 2005) allowed me to grasp the dissonant perspectives on episodes related to these two historical pasts. For instance contraband was in the Portuguese village where I settle my work a kind of complementary activity to the main family farming activities or to the local established commerce. I carried out a long-term fieldwork experience of sixteen-months in the Portuguese-Galician borderland. During this period of time I essayed an anthropology at the level of the individuals, trying to pursue an epistemological trend also proposed by Nigel Rapport (1997) and Bernard Lahire (2003). In this kind of approach, we tend to close up our gaze, looking at concrete individuals through their own personal experiences, biographical inscriptions, acts and processes of signifying places, events and issues that have defined their lives. The idea is not so much to have representatives of communities (for instance Portuguese representatives who are talking about border relations) but to have more specific and particular entrances into social, political and cultural processes. Basically through the continuous observation of daily practices, discourses and representations and the stimulating exercise of remembering past experiences, moments, and events I tried to assess how the individuals in the two sides of the border constructed their own representations and practices of frontier, state and national identity.

4. An ambiguous territory: a non-frontier

Tourém is a rural village of northern Portugal where small-scale family agriculture and small-scale commerce are the two main economic activities. Despite the slow disappearance of the old ways of living, herds of sheep and cows still cross the streets of the village, creating a special atmosphere of sounds and odours. However, new tractors and trucks, and new farm equipment have been introduced into the village, changing the old and somehow paralysed landscape that is evoked to characterise the past.

The village is a *freguesia* (administrative parish) of Montalegre borough that comprises 132 rural hamlets spread throughout 805km². Montalegre is a small rural town (*vila*) of Vila Real district, Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro province, and occupies the heart of the Barroso uplands, bordering the Spanish autonomy of Galicia (North) and the Portuguese boroughs of Vieira do Minho (West), Cabeceiras de Basto and Boticas (South) and Chaves (East). Around Tourém there are mountains and Galician villages: Randín, on the east side if looking north, Vilar and Vilarinho to the southeast, Paradela to the northeast, Guntumil and Requiás to the west and Calvos de Randín to the north. The *Salas*, a Spanish tributary of the river Limia, runs to the west, bordering the village in its northern limits. The south side is dominated by a mass of mountains. The village is about 60km from Chaves, 150 kilometres from Porto, almost 500km from Lisbon and less than 1km from Galicia. Xinzo de Limia, 30km inside the Galician province of Ourense, and Montalegre, 25km via the Spanish road, are the closest towns. The road crosses Pena-Larouco, a mountainous chain that draws the eastern Portuguese-Spanish border. The Portuguese road to Montalegre crosses the National Park Peneda-Gerês.

One must know the geography of the area in order to understand local history and the close relation of the village, and of many others in the Portuguese northern frontier, with Galicia. In the past, a small autonomous territory called *Couto Misto*, formed by three Galician villages (Santiago de Rubiás, Rubiás and Meaus) kept a privileged commercial route with Tourém. Those who traded inside the area of the *Couto Misto* were free from paying custom duties. From that time on, a special relation was preserved and even reinforced during the political and military dictatorships of Salazar/Caetano in Portugal (1928-1974) and Franco in Spain (1939-1975). In particular, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and World War II, poverty and scarcity characterised the life of these villages. The solution found by these populations, was to create a network of small smugglers that nurtured a sort of hidden economy that lasted until very recently (the time of the complete abolition of the police controlled border between the two countries, in 1995).

Today, as in the past, Tourém keeps a special neighbouring relationship with the Galician villages. The histories of these villages are intimately related. In the recent past, famine and poverty united these villages more than they promoted any nationalistic desire of aggression and separation. As Freud reminded us, neighbouring peoples act accordingly with the action of each other (1951). If my neighbour is good to me, I will be good to my neighbour. The history of Galicia (Spain) and Trás-os-Montes (Portugal) in this specific location had moments of mutual aggression in the past, but the final balance seems to be one in which harmony has predominated. This supports a more global argument: trans-national regions are not an invention of present-day policies (of the common policies promoted by the EU, whose specific impact

in this particular region was the creation of the Euro-region *Galicia-Norte de Portugal* in 1991) but arise from a shared history and geography. As, for instance, Peter Sahlins stressed, the symbolic and cultural relationships between peoples are more durable than any political disposition or treaty (1991).

5. Beyond the written histories – frontiers as stories (of experience)

To be completed

Notes

¹ In the sense proposed by Wilson and Donnan: “territorial zones of varying width which stretch across and away from borders, within which people negotiate a variety of behaviours and meanings associated with their membership in nations and states” (1998: 9).

² I am not sure that they have been once bounded and closed entities. I assume this conception by following a long theoretical tradition that remounts conventionally to the work of Durkheim; notwithstanding the fact that even Durkheim had never ‘closed his theoretical door’ to the potential future of modern societies relying increasingly on less agreed and communal values and more individualistic frameworks.

³ In fact, there is a growing trend (obsession), most certainly stimulated by a new approach on the concept of immaterial cultural patrimony by UNESCO and the subsequent impacts on national and international cultural politics (inscribed at least in the EU in important funding programmes), with classification, inventorying and patrimonialization of what is to be considered the ‘elementary immaterial traits’ of regions, nations, more or less identifiable (invented) belongings. Nevertheless I need to acknowledge that (in Portugal) either in terms of legislation or in terms of the intentions, attitudes and actual requests of the responsible authorities for these processes (Ministry of Culture, Institute of Museums and Conservation) there is a growing concern with scientific approaches on the subject.

⁴ Michael Jackson shows this phenomenon quite clearly with the example of Serra Leoa migrants in London (2008).

⁵ For example, anyone of us has already had to show his/her passport when crossing an international frontier (at least in one of those micro-frontiers such as the airports), anyone of us has already looked at a world atlas and was able to identify lines dividing countries but I am also quite sure that at least once anyone of us has looked at a particular territory over an international border and have found no clear cue about the reason of being kept politically divided.

⁶ See, for instance, the historical ethnography of Peter Sahlins (1989) or Michael Kearney research on the Mexico-USA border (1996).

⁷ I think of crucial debate and reflection the high rates of absenteeism in the European elections for the European Parliament (in Portugal around two thirds of the voters have not participated in the last election of June 2009). An argument on the discredit of the Portuguese politicians is normally made, plus the idea that EU issues are too far away from the everyday life matters, however I think that it is the whole idea of Europe that should be assessed. Even as concerns the Lisbon Treaty there was a clear political imposition of a general consensus.

⁸ In fact this is one of the main topics of the so-called haptic forms of knowledge (the tactile epistemologies) in which visual anthropology have become more and more rooted. The whole issue of the theoretical place of the individual in anthropology is also very unresolved.

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