I. FRONTIERS AND BORDERLANDS

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FRONTIERS AND BORDERLANDS IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE.
INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Frontiers and borderlands have long fascinated historiography, including medieval studies, but in recent years we have seen a clear increase in interest in the subject. In the last two decades, there have been numerous international conferences and the publication of a number of collective works involving historians from many different countries on the topic, there have also been appearing with increasing frequency separate monographs and articles in which the author makes frontiers and borderlands the main subject of their analyses\(^1\). The expansion of attention paid to these themes in European medieval studies is especially notable, though on the other side of the Atlantic it has been an intensively explored subject for over a hundred years (especially in connection with the colonization of the North American West). The increased interest which has become visible in English, German, French and Spanish historiography and intensification of discussion and research has also led at the same time to a widening of scope of the topic. Various regions, centres and situations have become recognized and emphasized as borderlands, and not only in terms of

political boundaries as was traditional, but also as ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries\(^2\), or linguistic frontiers\(^3\), the boundaries of economic zones\(^4\) or even the borders of smaller administrative units or geographical microregions. Thus historians start to follow the line of thinking of Lucien Febvre, who already in 1922 was urging scholars to look at frontiers, rather than studying boundaries – particularly political ones\(^5\).

As a result, the number of different “frontiers” and “borderlands” of variable character and importance has increased dramatically in the recent literature. The attention that has been paid to them has produced some interesting results. It is however difficult to avoid the suspicion that the increasing attractiveness

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\(^4\) As an example, see for the borderlands in the Mediterranean zone: F. Braudel, La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II, Paris 1949. The question of the role of the Elbe as a frontier has been examined by A. Wyczanski, who has refuted the views traditional in economic and social histories on that topic: Granica na Łabie w XV- -XVII wieku – wątpliwości historyka, in: Między Zachodem a Wschodem. Etniczne, kulturowe i religijne pogranicza Rzeczypospolitej w XVI-XVIII wieku, ed. by K. Mikulski, A. Zielińska-Nowicka, Toruń 2006, pp. 17-21.

of the wide use of this concept might bring with it possibilities of its abuse. An additional threat is the incautious use of the term when it is not always appropriate. This would lead to the dilution of the concepts, which are often undefined, superficially envisaged and – despite their wide use – still insufficiently comprehended.

This is to some degree facilitated by the huge elasticity of the concept within which one can place almost every frontier situation, including those as different as the peripheries of settlement as well as a densely-settled area of mixing and exchange, a barrier and a zone of transition, an open zone of expansion as well as a closed fortified defence line, the ordinary edge of administrative units as well as the limits of a civilization, the edge of an empire and the edge of a land-holding, the extensive expanses of steppes dividing various nomadic groups and the narrow boundary between states, the marches of the Empire and an overseas colony. The term can be seen on different scales (from the continental to the micro-regional), can be expressed in different forms (as a line or zone), have a different character (place, society, situation, a movement, a process, a state of mind), various functions, a sphere across which there is a division and across which there is interaction (with nature, another community or society, state, culture), a zone with a variety of significances and influences. In the case of such a wide range of undisciplined use of the concept of a frontier, its cognitive usefulness might run the risk of becoming devalued, leading to it to become an amorphous concept which loses precision and its meaning.

There have been problems with the various terms used from the beginning of its career in historiography, which was begun by the famous thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner on the role of the frontier in the history of the American West6. This gave rise to a long discussion, not abating for decades, between historians and sociologists, supporters and opponents, revisionists and imitators both in America as well as outside. This thesis still exerts an undiminished influence, and opinions and research on borders and borderlands are still in one way or another orientated on the vision of Turner. The works of pro-Turnerists, anti-Turnerists, neo-Turnerists and post-Turnerists now constitute a huge literature on this topic7. These problems are now being dealt with also by European

historiography, despite a general rejection of theses “contaminated by Turnerism”8, attempting, still without much success, to create their own theory and to define the boundaries of the concept of a borderland9.

The confusion is additionally increased by the differences in meaning of the terminology used. The conceptual vocabulary of different languages is somewhat variable and lacks coherence: English frontier, boundary, borderland, limit; French la frontière, la limite, fins and confins; Italian la frontiera, il confine, termini; Spanish la frontera, el limite, el confin; German die Mark, die Grenze10 (and the derivatives Grenzgebiet, Grenzraum); the Slavic (e.g. Polish) granica (‘border’) and pograniczce (‘borderland’), miedza (‘baulk’, absorbed into Hungarian as megye), rubie¿ (‘frontier’), kresy (‘ends, distant extent’), formerly also kraina (East-Slavic ukraj, ukraina, ‘land on the outskirts, on the edge’).


These names all have their semantic nuances and cannot always be simply substituted one for the other \(^{11}\), which is illustrated by the differences between the English and American understanding of the words *frontier* and *boundary* \(^{12}\). The Polish terms (apart from the semantically broad concept *pogranicze* which is known from Old Polish), and among them the especially widespread *Kresy* \(^{13}\), have a specific sense – emphasizing the factor of peripheralism and marginalisation, a state of separation and dispersion, meaning the ‘end’, ‘edge’, a ‘place where our world ends’, and thus a *fines*. The term *frontier* and its Romance-language cognates on the other hand come from the Latin *frons* \(^{14}\), which means quite the opposite, ‘forehead’, ‘front’, ‘that which is at the beginning’. The different meanings of the terms used are a result of a fundamental difference between two methods of conceptualisation of the phenomenon, in one the frontier is seen as a forward facing “front”, while in the other it is a backward-facing “edge”. This is not however a sharp division or the only division, some terms refer to a linearity, while others depict zones, some terms suggest interaction, others do not, and various terms might be more suitable for expressing the various functions of frontiers (e.g., political, administrative). The terms used outside western and central Europe have their own, separate character, for example the Arabic *thaghr*, the edge of the Islamic territories in the neighbourhood of a war with an enemy, the Ottoman *uj*, the limit behind which extend the lands of the non-believers, or the Byzantine *akra* or *eschatia*, distant from the centre on the semi-barbaric peripheries \(^{15}\).

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15 Th.F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages*, Boston 2005\(^\ast\), pp. 52 ff.; C. Heywood, *The Frontier in Ottoman History: Old Ideas and New Myths*,...
The variety of terms used in the written sources and modern terminology used in different cultural circles is not only a linguistic curiosity, but is determined by the variety of means by which space and the definition of boundaries are conceptualised and the variety of manners in which they were created, used and crossed. Boundaries are variable, in the same way as the people who created them, in different times and for various purposes, and who filled the space between with political and social organizations, endowed them with special meaning, to define and separate themselves from others, define what is “theirs” and what is “alien”. Boundaries are the results of the activities of societies. It is in this that lies the weakness of the theories of Turner which were commented upon by Owen Lattimore: “he taught he saw what the frontier did to society, he was really seeing what society did to the frontier”16.

In addition to the diffuse use of terms for different categories of frontier, there is another conventional, detached concept of frontier and bordering which has become part of modern scholarship on society and culture. This derives from the observation of the heterogeneity of space produced by social and cultural factors and which undergoes division and qualification by categories such as sacral and secular, private and public, known and imagined, empirical and mythical, familiar and alien, friendly and hostile, good and bad. Such a boundary, defining differently qualified zones could be a fence, town gate, field boundary, the edge of the forest, a ritually drawn circle in the sand or even the lips (the “frontier station” of the corporality of a man, an entry into the internal world). We may also meet ideas of the portal of a cathedral as the frontier zone between sacrum and profanum, or the porch of a house which comprises the place where the public and private zones meet. Time also is given a similar division, so we see dusk as being a time of transition between day and night, or night as a time zone conquered by the denizens of the night life of one of the great cities, colonizing the darkness by the light of street lamps17. In such a use, the notions of frontier and borderlands are used as a stylistic tool, hyperbole suggestively evoking the imagination by indicating in place of these specific spatial and temporal situations a correlation with territorial boundaries.

The different forms of the frontiers and borderlands which have a physical form is only one part of the problem with the significance of the term as we


use it today. It is used by anthropology (particularly the notion of a frontier) in investigations of ethnic groups and awareness of and the formation of identities.\textsuperscript{18} In these studies we observe that differences in language, belief systems, behaviour and even such minor differences as in different style of costume or hairstyle might create a frontier between human groups.\textsuperscript{19} The scope of connections and divisions which forms the boundary between community and “Otherness” is an invisible line, a symbolic one which runs through human awareness, a mental boundary which can, but does not necessarily have a reflection in physical space, it need not exist in objective terms, but defines the imagined limits of the community. It is created by the process of marking oneself and being marked in processes of adscription and self-adscription, exclusion and self-exclusion, separating members of a group from others, who are beyond its boundaries. The symbolic boundaries between groups, being cultural constructs, interest anthropologists and ethnologists far more than concrete, physical boundaries.\textsuperscript{20} At their centre of interest are social and cultural boundaries, the invisible line created by ethnic differences, differences in religion, language, social condition or sex. Boundaries such as these all played a greater role among people than the frontiers between kingdoms and empires, examples might be: those between pagans and Christians, Catholics and “heretics”, between people with a common language and peoples with foreign ones, those who are necessarily therefore “dumb” (this is the etymology of the name \textit{Niemcy} (‘Germans’) among the Slavs), between inhabitants of towns and village people, between the monastery and the world around it, between men and women, and an infinite number of other means of defining an opposition between “us” and “them”. From that perspective, territorial boundaries of political polities are just one specific type of frontier, they are just one link, though the first link, in the chain of significances, associations and reflections which they evoke.

There is a similar broadening and shifting of interest in the issues of movement through frontiers and their crossing. This does not concern obviously just movement from country to country, or of contraband, or the military incursion across a border, but of the overcoming of symbolic boundaries, not less real

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\item \textsuperscript{18} H. Donnan, Th.M. Wilson, \textit{Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State}, Oxford-New York 1999, present the contribution of the social sciences to the understanding of symbolic frontiers and those existing in a material reality.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Such studies are also being carried out by historians. An analysis of medieval iconography discussing the depiction of the factors of “Otherness” and “foreignness” has been carried out by G. Jahritz, \textit{Social Grouping and the Language of Dress in the Late Middle Ages}, “The Medieval History Journal” III (2000) 2, pp. 235-259; idem, \textit{The Visual Image of the ‘Other’ in Late Medieval Urban Space: Patterns and Constructions}, in: Segregation – Integration – Assimilation. Religious and Ethnic Groups in the Medieval Towns of Central and Eastern Europe, ed. by D. Keene, B. Nagy, K. Szende, Farnham 2009, pp. 235-249.
\end{itemize}
than physical ones\textsuperscript{21}. The metaphorical use of the term has become familiar to us through such terms as the frontiers of human knowledge, the borderland of disciplines or literary genres, not forgetting such surprising linguistic fantasies as for example “frontiers of banks” or “frontiers in brain repair”. The enthusiasm which these various types of frontiers have aroused – material and imagined, physical and conceptual, literal and abstract – has now extended beyond anthropology and the concept has become part of the theory of literature, linguistics and other research fields, with an especially keen interest in studies on social communication and transculturalism.

This variety of types and fluidity of meaning are an \textit{embarras de richesse} for various disciplines which make the concept of boundaries a tool for defining and characterizing those particular social, cultural and political phenomena which are created at the point of contact across them through osmosis, penetration, and overlap. Historiography approaches these challenges somewhat cautiously, and attempts to define the general developmental characteristics which would be typical of frontiers and the communities living in borderlands formed at different times and in different places, without much optimism about the success of such approaches. Indeed, attempts to create an unequivocal, stable and uniform model of frontiers have met with no success. As a phenomenon, they are too variable in their geographical, cultural and political conditions, the factors producing change which decided on their individual character have been too strong. The abandonment of attempts to generalise and the recognition of the individuality of cases even led to doubts and questions whether the concept of a frontier and consequently the notion of a “frontier society” are of any cognitive usefulness as a category of analysis. Furthermore, and what is worse, questions were raised whether they are harmful and misleading concepts, imposing a filter producing a stereotypical dichotomy, creating a sharp contrast in a considerably more complicated reality in which divisions and connections are more fuzzy and tangled, exclusion and integration interwoven and instead of a clear opposition we would see instead more nuanced shades and gradients\textsuperscript{22}.

Despite this variety and ambivalence, efforts have been made not to concentrate on local studies and to attempt to see the phenomenon of frontiers in the more general context. Attempts have also been made to introduce some


form of classification, which – bearing in mind the differentiation of characteristics, forms and functions – separate physical boundaries, social ones, conceptual and symbolic, political and settlement, linear and zonal, direct and transitional, divisive and exclusive, compelling separation and facilitating contact, permeable and isolative, open and closed. Comparative studies have been advanced upon, with full awareness of the risks involved, confronting examples from sometimes totally divergent places on the continent as for example Iberia and east central Europe, in order to identify similarities and differences and thus more clearly see the phenomenon itself and its own characteristics. One other possibility of overcoming the problems connected with the particularism of the phenomenon was shown by the influential and thought-provoking work of Robert Bartlett. The development of different places in the borderland scattered on the peripheries of the Latin world was treated in a homogeneous manner, as part of a model sequence of conquest, colonisation and acculturation, which contributed to the process of the expansion and formation of Europe.

In many other works, attempts have been made to indicate that, despite the individuality of particular situations, there are a certain number of common characteristics which to a greater or lesser extent are shared by frontier societies. These include aspects such as militarisation, instability and a state of permanent threat, the existence of greater freedoms, but also subject to greater violence, a state of open conflict between cultures and identities, the activity of mechanisms of negotiation and mediation, the liveliness of processes of cultural exchange and the emergence of syncretic cultural forms, social dynamism and the creation of conditions for mobility and advancement, the exalted position of the local aristocracy, multiple loyalties, the creation of the myths of the frontiersmen and the bastion of civilization. This catalogue of characteristics is neither applicable to all cases, nor is it complete; careful investigation will reveal in

23 The collection Grenzräume und Grenzüberschreitungen..., comprises comparative studies looking at the same problems in pairs of situations one in the east, the other in the west.
each case different characteristics which accompany those which are common to all and typical.

The impossibility of creating schematic models to cover all cases, their resistance to attempts to theorise about them, their variety and the individuality, these all have been and are typical characteristics of frontiers and borderlands and research done upon them. This continually arouses doubts and objections and justified concerns, but also constitutes the element that makes the subject so attractive and inviting to the investigator. It is precisely in this variety that lie the chances for reaching a deeper understanding through the examination of the similarities and contrasts. The elasticity of the concept is a real threat, but also an advantage, inspiring the use of comparative methods and also an encouragement to the confrontation of the results of the investigations of different disciplines. Caution towards possible oversimplification and uncritical use of the terminology imposes the necessity to pay attention to precision and the strictness of the definition, and the careful justification of the adequacy of the conceptual apparatus to the studies undertaken. In the fact that the terms “frontier” and “frontier society” are explanatory concepts, but are not self-explanatory one may perceive both drawbacks but also benefits. This dose of optimism however cannot absolve us from a full realisation of the dangers and risks of the use of these abused, ambiguous and diffuse concepts.

The studies collected in this volume reflect both the variety of form which borders and borderlands had, as well as the variety of investigative possibilities and of approach. At the same time of course they do not represent them all – this still a phenomenon which is little known and inadequately described. They show and illustrate however individual directions of research on this phenomenon which the more resistant it is to our attempts to dissect its complex nature, the more we are stimulated to try. Discussion of this topic is far from being totally exhausted, and despite the increased attention being paid to it, to judge from the lively resonance that it still evokes, does not give the appearance of becoming atrophied in the near future. We hope that the texts in this volume brought here to the reader’s attention will lead to the further development of this current of research and be a voice in the continuing discussion of frontiers, borders, margins, edges and the people living among them.

translated by Paul Barford

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