

**FOCUS: THINKING BEYOND  
EUROPE'S CULTURAL BORDERS**

# Introduction: Thinking Beyond Europe's Cultural Borders

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Cultural borders play a significant part in modern European history as well as in the present. This Focus has been chosen in order to enhance reflections on the transcendence of cultural borders; how the crossing is conducted, why we want to move beyond cultural borders, and what actually lies beyond them. The individual articles investigate ways to transcend borders, primarily those of the European nation state, in different genres from the nineteenth century onward. This editorial article introduces the theme of thinking beyond borders and presents the contributions to this Focus. It attempts to situate the issue of Europe's cultural borders within European history by delving into three relevant themes: the cultural construction of borders, the growing number of recognized nationalities, and the practices of Europeanization.

## **Introduction: Ambiguities of Cultural Borders**

Cultural borders are of great significance to the divisions and clashes that are presently affecting European societies. The British vote for Brexit came after a campaign that emphasized cultural differences, especially towards Eastern Europeans, but also Muslims. The economic policies towards Greece are embedded in notions of a different economic and work ethos. Generally, cultural differences which concern Northern versus Southern Europe as well as Western versus Eastern Europe are stressed, as well as the differences along the borders between Europe and the Middle East and Africa, which have been brought to the fore in the discourse on refugees. Cleavages in how to understand Islam are now central to the political debate. The discourses on terrorism and security are propagated as issues of cultural borders. Some do not welcome migrants because they do not share a common European culture or national identity. Clothing choice is seen as a political issue, even when it comes to how women choose to dress at the beach.

This Focus applies to cultural borders. For 20 years, social scientists have dealt at length with legal and territorial borders, while researchers in the humanities have

largely turned to issues of identity, and have only more recently come to address cultural borders (Andrén and Söhrman 2017, 6–8). However, cultural borders are essential in building communities. Effective identities have cultural dimensions, including the feeling of belonging. Language and religion, together with a historical narrative of shared origins, have been crucial in the making of European nation states. Cultural borders are unstable objects which are never free from political implications; politics are embedded in them, and cultural borders in turn help to establish territorial and legal borders. Yet, at times, territorial borders clash with cultural borders, as has recently been seen in Catalonia (Wright 1998; Ivanescu 2010; Eder 2006; Delanty 2006).

On the one hand, cultural borders build communities; on the other hand, they are the object of conflicts. When it comes to who belongs to the community, they can be controversial. Cultural borders lead to disputes about the requirements of their members. In contemporary multicultural societies, cultural differences are of significance. Hence, in order to communicate and cooperate across cultural borders, it is of the utmost importance to understand how cultural borders are created, how they function, and what it takes to transcend them. Living with differences means that we have to reach beyond cultural borders.

With the aim of trying to increase reflections on how to transcend cultural borders, the articles in this Focus look at ideas and representations of crossing cultural borders with the following questions in mind: How do we cross cultural borders? What is the purpose of moving beyond cultural borders? And what lies beyond traditional border thinking? Before presenting the contributions of this issue, we turn to some essential themes of cultural borders from European history.

### **The Context of European History**

Looking at cultural borders historically, we can see that they are not a new phenomenon. Narratives of the British connection with continental Europe draw upon a long history of British ambivalence towards with Europe. The Plantagenet kings came from France and for centuries they ruled over lands on both sides of the English Channel and laid claim to the French crown. British armies fought on European ground against Napoleon and Germany, but over the centuries British leaders have also argued for stronger cooperation, and even federation, with other European states. The narratives of differences between Northern and Southern Europe also have a long history, dating back to the Renaissance. When the Reformation took hold in Northern Europe, the Catholics in the South looked upon the North as polluted by Luther's slanderous words and overrun by the atrocious armed forces of the Swedish king, while the Protestant northerners stressed that the South lagged behind and had fallen into decay (Davidson 2005). When the notions of citizenship, individual freedom and the rule of law fought their way into political thought following the French Revolution, Northern Europe began to be seen as more advanced. From a 'stagist theory' of European history, it was mainly France, Germany and Britain that

were considered to be leading the development, with Italy and Spain unable to keep up (Dainotto 2007). Not to mention Greece, with its long history of belonging to the Ottoman Empire.

In the cultural construction of borders, certain features are of importance; cultural borders tend to be represented by concepts, narratives and conceived origins (Andrén and Söhrman 2017). One example: the concept of Sweden is represented by a community whose members know Swedish. Even if there is discussion about the level of knowledge needed to obtain citizenship, the language is conceived as a cultural border. There are certain narratives related to Sweden, not least regarding the Swedish model and its individualism. Sweden has its flag and national hymn. Its origins are found in a state building from the thirteenth century or in a revolt against Danish rule led by a young aristocrat in the sixteenth century. Clearly, nationalism has played a rather significant role in the construction of Europe's cultural borders. With the establishment of the nation state model, a nexus of state, territory and culture combined to create the modern dynamic of bordering.

The lessons of history can indeed inform us about the current worldwide tendencies toward self-sufficient nationalism, implying that issues related to cultural borders will also have a large impact in times to come. According to historian Bo Stråth, we should be aware of how nationalism has been pivotal in tearing apart the political order established after the Napoleonic Wars, and that nationalism fuelled by populism was responsible for putting an end to the peace that followed the Great War (Stråth 2016). This could happen again. Still, nationalism came together with hopes of freedom. The quest for national independence was crucial in reshaping the European system of states from consisting mainly of large empires to being comprised of nation states, of which many are small or medium-sized. It is ironic that the empires fanned the flames of European national movements. During the First World War, Germany installed national bodies in the occupied Baltic provinces to distance them from Russian control. Austria – that is to say the Habsburg Empire – encouraged nationalism in Ukraine and the Russian part of Poland, while the Allies called for national self-determination for the Central European nations under the same empire. In what followed, the nation states institutionalized democracy and citizen rights within their borders. For several states, this was a shaky process during the interbellum. However, major democratic achievements took shape alongside the development of nation states.

### **Between Integration and Disintegration**

Those who paint Europe's modern history with a broad brush will find themselves facing a crucial question: is Europe moving towards unity or diversity? On the one hand, Europe has seen a remarkable increase in the number of states over the past century. The new states in Central Europe emerged first, at the end of the First World War. On average, a new state with territorial borders is established every five years in Europe. Consider for instance, that one third of the current members of the EU did

not enjoy sovereignty at the time of the Treaty of Rome in 1957. When we focus on cultural borders, the increase is even more challenging because of the number of conflict zones related to such cultural borders. Aside from the growing number of nation states, Europe has also seen an upsurge of minority cultures over the past 50 years. In spite of EU integration, and also because of migration, Europe now has more religions and languages spoken by substantial parts of the population than it did 50 years ago. Moreover, the strengthening of policies for minorities has revitalized languages and cultures which have historically been underappreciated.

On the other hand, European integration should not be considered solely a post-war business; there is a long history of integration in Europe. Institutional arrangements with the purpose of cooperation were manifold before the 1950 s. One such arrangement was the Congress System from the Treaty of Vienna in 1815, by which the main powers were meant to have resolved their disputes at regular conferences. Even if it only functioned regularly over a few years, the main powers maintained their schedule of meeting at conferences to resolve disputes. Simultaneously, the monarchical system bound the heads of states together through marriages. In addition, new shared international bodies were created for coordinating standards applying to the telegraph, the postal system and the railways. Through the 1920 s, the League of Nations operated to deal with international problems and disputes. In effect, its activity largely handled issues amongst the European states. The US did not join the League, and the influence of non-European members from the rest of the Americas and Asia was rather marginal in practice.

Furthermore, social values rapidly spread through different parts of Europe long before post-Second World War integration began. The notion of citizenship acquired its modern meaning with the American and French Revolutions; it then quickly spread throughout Europe. It became closely tied to claims for local self-government, and corresponding legislation began to take shape in most European states over the subsequent decades. In the quest for modernization, reformers looked towards Britain, France and later Germany. Political ideologies and values of the social movements were not limited to specific countries, but seen rather as a European phenomenon.

Thus, the notion of cultural integration has been well-established in Europe. This has included travel for a variety of purposes; students attended reputable universities abroad, and journeymen went abroad to learn a craft. It is worth noting that in the nineteenth century people travelled in search of examples and models for solving practical issues back home. The railways in England inspired investors in other countries. Legislators took an interest in school, prison and healthcare systems outside of their borders. Furthermore, intellectual life, as well as the arts, were shaped in part by scenes beyond national borders. Cultural integration encompassed the dissemination of books, partly thanks to the establishment of French, German and English as common languages in certain strata of society, and partly due to the abundance of translations. Hence, novels, works of science, and ideological pamphlets made their way abroad, as did new theories in philosophy and economics. During his lifetime, British philosopher Herbert Spencer's work sold one million copies throughout

Europe. The neoclassical economics theories of the late nineteenth century soon found followers all over Europe. This illustrates the existence of an academic community that was connected continent-wide. Thus, the acts of crossing borders and learning from one other have played an integral part in European life.

So, is Europe moving towards unity or diversity? It is possible to discern both trends over the past two centuries. It is therefore inadequate to say with assurance that integration is overriding the nation state, or that Europe is heading towards disintegration (Str ath 2016). Neither integration, nor national independence reigns supreme. They are neither opposites, nor are they interchangeable. Looking at historical developments from nation states as followed by integration is not particularly useful, nor is focusing on nation states as historical menaces. Instead, these are two closely intertwined processes that are mutually dependent on each other. Rather than looking for answers in an either/or opposition, national independence and European integration should be understood as two sides of a single coin.

### **Beyond Borders: Presenting the Contributions**

The contributions to this Focus examine attempts to think beyond cultural borders. They present different genres and contexts in which the transcendence of cultural borders takes place. Each article analyses one or more examples regarding the transcendence of borders and what can be found beyond them. Moreover, the set of articles as a whole is written in an attempt at bringing this subject into contemporary relevance.

The first contribution takes the reader to the very heart of European integration. In Brussels, the European Parliament offers visitors a permanent exhibition of the progress and wealth stemming from European integration. Additionally, the EU has recently opened a special museum, called the House of European History. Both places present an official EU-narrative which underlines the idea of moving beyond national borders. Ann Ighe scrutinizes these exhibitions and discovers the narrative of an additional border, in which the EU plays a crucial role: namely, in transcending the equality gap and the gender border. Ighe reveals the effects of moving beyond both of these borders; this is done by creating a new cultural border, one which is historical and which separates what happened before the Second World War from what happened afterwards. Only afterwards and solely with the creation and following the processes of the EU was it possible to transcend the borders, according to this narrative.

Currently, the cultural borders of Europe are often defined using the categories of 'Islam' and 'Europe'. Much of public discussion revolves around the question of whether it is even possible to integrate Islam in Europe. While plenty of research follows suit and produces empirical investigations on the matter, it fails to shed light on these categories. In his article, Klas Grinell argues that this research draws too much upon public debate and tends to play down the scientific virtues of establishing unbiased points of departure. Grinell shows how both 'Islam' and 'Europe' are

ideologically charged concepts; the former is often defined as simply a religion or terrorism and the latter as a separate, unique civilization. Thus, Islam becomes by definition something different from Europe. This mindset omits the historical presence of Islam in Europe and constructs a cultural demarcation between Europe and Islam.

Twentieth-century European practices of transcending borders were significantly informed by and interpreted through the experiences of two world wars. The next two contributions address two such practices; tourism and exile.

In 1925, there was great optimism that a lasting peace in Europe could be achieved. The economy had overcome the post-war depression. Most of the remaining border disputes from the Treaty of Versailles had been settled. Mistakes made with the former treaty were believed to have been rectified with the new Treaty of Lucarno. Upon entering the League of Nations, Germany was once again included in international society. 1925 also marked the first conference on international tourism, which took place in The Hague. By emphasizing the crossing of borders as a leisure activity, tourism was declared a road to peace. Sune Bechmann Pedersen traces this line of thought, which continued well into the 1980 s. Tourism was seen as a tool for internationalization, for understanding beyond borders. Tourism could lead to peace and international friendship. Interestingly, this view continued to be persuasive throughout the Cold War, and it was only later that scholars began to put forward more critical views.

In the 1930 s, two of the many European intellectuals who went into exile were the Spanish philosopher María Zambrano and the German author Walter Benjamin. They did not know each other, but forced as they were to translate their works in order to be understood as well as to actually make a living in their new abodes, they both faced the problem of how to translate ideas across cultural borders. In short, they exemplify the demand put on the exile to come to terms with a new context and a change in her or his expectations of the future. Karolina Enquist Källgren writes that in order to understand key concepts in the philosophy of Zambrano and the essays of Benjamin we must understand them as writers in exile. Enquist Källgren argues that their efforts to adapt ideas and concepts to new contexts led them to have an increased awareness of the great difficulties that come with translation. However, it never led them to reject the possibility of communication across borders. Rather, their exile for both of them contributed to an underlying notion of sameness beyond linguistic borders.

The two final contributions of this Focus zoom in on the possibility of removing cultural borders. Long before post-Second World War integration started, there were visions of a unified Europe. Sometimes these were utopian, but mostly they had practical motives, not seldom including quests for domination. What they had in common was the idea of moving beyond some of the cultural borders essential to the construction of European nationalism. They presented a concept of Europe which seemingly by-passed cultural borders. However, while avoiding some borders this also strengthened others. Throughout the eighteenth century, the issue of linguistic borders became ever more acute as nationalism was on the rise. At the same time, clashes within Europe over religious borders included disputes concerning

Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodox Christendom. Islam was continuously viewed as a threat from the outside, even if this abated somewhat as the Ottoman Empire entered its decline over the course of the century. Mats Andrén elaborates on the ways that pre-EU visions of unity sought to do away with linguistic and religious borders.

Doing away with cultural borders can also be seen as a dystopian vision for the future. The contemporary novel *Memory of Water* by the British/Finnish author Emmi Itäranta (2014) has received a considerable amount of attention. In it, a world is imagined if/when anticipated environmental disasters take place. This is a world that is both very different from, but also alarmingly close to ours. It is a world that is frightening, with ever present violence and an uncanny lack of cultural borders. With the help of eco-critical theory, Katarina Leppänen analyses Itäranta's novel in the final contribution to our Focus.

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