

Review

The geopolitics of actuality

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The recent declaration of the “end of geography” and the so-called “de-territorialization of political space”, which results from a combination of revolutionised information technology and a globalized market economy, as well as the free movement of capital beyond borders raises the question of whether scientific enthusiasm can, at times, overshadow scientific prudence. In the face of such possibilities, an examination of variations in the geographical meaning and spatial applications of terms such as “frontier,” “boundary,” and “border,” as well as their fundamental differences, both in terms of meaning and application, with the concept of “barriers” might shed light on this problem. Following Jean Gottmann’s concepts of “*iconography*” and “*circulation*,” - there can be little doubt that, for as long as human is concerned about his *identity*-defined geographically- and for as long as man remains preoccupied simultaneously with the notion of *independence* within a politically organized space, this independence can only be understood within the context of a politically circumscribed space. The revolutionary expansion of information technology together with the globalization of the world economy and the free movement of capital has helped to mitigate difficulties in communication, both in terms of time and space. Indeed, this has happened to the extent that there is sometimes confusion between what is actual and what is virtual. Despite this, there is little doubt that as long as human is concerned with preservation of his independence from all others within his own portion of space, *borders* will remain in place to manifest his never ending drive for being different from all others and proud of his own particular features.

Key words: State, space, border, boundary, geography, politics, Gottmann, Iran, Persia

INTRODUCTION

Geography never ends, and human’s fascination with virtual reality only broadens the scope of his philosophical appreciation of actual reality. To the non-geographer, a few differences might appear between such concepts as *frontiers*, *boundaries* and *borders*. Political geographers, however, find meaningful differences in both the meanings and applications of these terms and concepts. The *frontier* is arguably the oldest form of defining the territorial extent of a state and is perhaps best described as a “zone of contact.” A *boundary*, by contrast, can be described as a line representing the geometric peripheries of the modern nation-state, as Murphy (2003) reminds us. Historically, *frontiers* were more prevalent; with the rise of the modern state system, however, the *boundary* has essentially supplanted the frontier. Boundaries in the modern sense of the word did not really exist until the dawn of the nineteenth century (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2002). Previously, states defined the limits of their conquests as the *frontier*, which often represented a zone

of contact between two states (Kristof, 1959). Mirroring a tendency found in sociology and political science, many political geographers who empirically see the state as a vertically organized political structure with *territory* as its horizontal feature, defined by its boundaries, a legacy of the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 (Glassner and de Blij, 1989: 46-59). Recent scholarship however suggests that the earliest form of *state* equipped with meaningful state-apparatus appeared in the Achaemenid Persian federative-like system as early as 550 BC. Further development of this early form of statehood developed over time, eventually giving birth to the concept of boundary line in about 5th century AD (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2009). This article does not aim at drawing parallel between ancient Persian state systems with the concept of state as was created by the Treaty of Westphalia. Rather, the aim is to argue that the state created by the treaty of Westphalia was not an instant invention in politically structuring of human space, but it might have

been empirically modeled on the basis of more ancient traditions of structuring political space such as those created by the Achaemenids in Persian antiquity. Moreover, what might form the original basis of this paper is the attempt to argue that what is 'virtual' in terms of politico-cultural space, should not be argued as an alternative that is to replace the concept of actuality of space, and to show the futility of the argument that clashes between these two ideas can never end. Geographers have been arguing this for a number of years (for example, Paasi and Newman that have been cited in the paper). The novelty of this argument here in this paper may be seen in expansion of the visions that Jean Gottmann developed in 1960s on the essentiality of the two forces that shape human's cultural and political spaces; that is, *iconography* and *circulation*. This paper argues that as each of the two worlds of virtual and actual spaces can function on its own merit, there is no need to think of them as being at odds eternally, whereas they can jointly and relationally better enrich human view of political and cultural space.

Methodically, it is worth noting that this paper comprises a discussion of ideas and concepts in relations with actuality of space versus virtual reality, that is, cyber space, rather than an in-depth empirical study of border functions. Hence, no customary results are discussed in this paper because it does not purport to introduce any new empirical data.

BOUNDARY VS. BORDER

Political geographers have variously described the term *boundary* as *a line in space drawn to manifest the ultimate peripheries of modern nation-state and/or a line in space to show the ultimate limitations of territory* (Taylor, 1989; Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2005). A more current multi-disciplinary approach emphasizes the concept of the *border*, which provides more social meaning than does the concept of the boundary. Moreover, the conception of the border also manifests itself in many different ways and has many different social functions and roles. This is to say that the *border* is a socially constructed phenomenon that distinguishes between the internal society – people of a given territory – and those beyond its geographical limits; this often results in the dichotomy between 'us' (our society) and 'them' (their society). People living inside bounded spaces may collectively represent some form of nation and are consequently identified with the territorial entity in which they live. In other words, while a *boundary* is merely a line that separates one state from another, the term *border* normally refers to a strip of land around the line of territorial limitation and is usually used in association with the term 'area' (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2011). It is within this framework that the term *border area* is usually employed to describe regions close to the border as territories distinct from

other parts of the state. Van Houtum (2005: 672) also differentiates between these two concepts, writing that a *boundary* is territorial line, whereas *border* is a site at and through which socio-spatial differences are communicated.

It is noteworthy that what some may see as 'erosion' of the function of boundary in the light of recent developments in information technology; appear to this author as a new and evolutionary aspect of the function of the concept of *border*. In a world that is relationally developed, boundary was never intended to function as barrier to prevent communication, especially in a world that is going through information revolution. In other words, the reality is that boundary has been devised from the beginning as a manifestation of state authority that regulates human communications within a geopolitical system that is unavoidably partitioned among nations. It is also worth noting that the permeability of boundaries has been a consideration for state regulation since their inception in ancient Persia. In his epic, *Shahnameh*, Ferdosi (d. 1020 AD) asserts that the victorious Bahram IV of the Sassanids (420 – 438AD) commissioned the construction of pillars signifying the boundary between Iran and Turan (Central Asian Turks), where the ancient wall, attributed to Alexander the Great, was erected 15 centuries earlier in the same region and for the same purpose. Moreover, the Sassanid king decided that river Oxus (*Jeyhun*) would form river boundary between the two sides. In his account of this development, Ferdosi says:

(The wise king) constructed pillars of stone and chalk (plaster); thereby ensuring that no one from Iran or Turk or other nationals would pass beyond unless permitted by the Shah who has also made *Jeyhun* (river Oxus) a median in the way (Ferdosi, 1985: III, 394).

What is important in this account is the creation of a boundary line in the ancient world intended to separate the Iranian 'us' from Turkish 'them', in order to regulate movement between the two states. The wise king, moreover, made the line of separation permeable to certain people. He allowed those bearing royal permission, perhaps one of the earliest forms of *passports*, to go beyond the boundary pillars.

THE END OF GEOGRAPHY AND GOING BEYOND BORDERS

The concept of *borders*, on the other hand, seems to have gained prominence in a world that is continually shrinking in terms of actual time which represents virtual space, largely as a result of rapidly expanded electronic communication and the coming of the age of digital life and *virtual reality*. This certainly sounds similar to Marx's

forecast of annihilation of space. Once writing in the *Grundrisse* in 1857 to 1861, Karl Marx anticipated how the contradictions of Capital could spur on the 'annihilation of space by time' (*Grundrisse*: 501-550). Today, a combination of information technology and a globalized market economy, as well as the increasingly free movement of capital, means, as Newman (2000) reminds us, that *borders* are no different than barriers to communication. This is largely the result of the concept of the *borderless world*, which arguably confuses the concepts of *border* and *boundary*. Otherwise, permeability of the nature of *border* does not tally with impermeability of barriers. The idea of the borderless world obscure on the reality that borders are not in fact "disappearing," so much as "eroding" the impermeability of the nature of boundary in some contexts and some places, paradoxically helping geographical appreciation of virtual reality. The fascination with the impressive leap forward in information technology in recent decades has led some to go so far as to declare the end of the nation-state in much the same way as Francis Fukuyama declared the *end of history* in the 1990s (Fukuyama, 1992).

Others have gone even further, confusing the actual meanings of geographical *border* as they relate to human space, with the ideas of *barriers* in economic, political, and cultural aspects of human life. In a recent (February, 2011) slogan advertised on the CNN television network, individuals of varying ethnic and national backgrounds invite viewers to "*go beyond borders*." It is clear that they mean to encourage their viewers to cross human, cultural, economic, political, and geographical barriers, but in a confused way of assertion. CNN explains that their '*go beyond borders*' campaign was launched in 2009 along with the Berlin Wall Tape Art Project, which marked the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. There is a clear characterization of the *border* as a physical barrier, not as a relational line of cultural separation.

As a line of spatial distinction between the communist and capitalist worlds, the Berlin Wall was erected partly to act as barrier to prevent free movement of goods and ideas, but also to regulate the movement of people across the border. In this sense, the Berlin Wall was as much a barrier to movements as the Great Wall of China or Hadrian's Wall. When considering such fine conceptual distinctions, one cannot fail to recognise the fact that even CNN can not invite its international viewers to "*go beyond*" US borders to visit their headquarters in Washington without first obtaining a proper visa from US border authorities.

The inescapable fact here seems to be that, instead of celebrating the coming of the age of virtual reality, some scholars seem to seek a situation in which actuality is replaced by virtual reality. Whereas, virtual reality might indeed be a reality on its own merits, its significance might have been overstated. The real question here is what would prevent virtual reality to function side by side with more geographical structures. To say that certain

phenomena are changing in their character and function is not to signal the end of those phenomena. Nevertheless, it is true that mankind is inclined to follow the notions of independence, always struggles against the so-called "friction of space" in order to break down barriers to movement. Following Prevelakis, more freedom of movement results in greater economic and cultural benefits, even if certain groups benefit unequally (Prevelakis, undated). The drive to partition the surface of the earth into nation-states also paradoxically results in the movements to unify those states. Jean Gottmann theorized these tendencies in 1950s when he foresaw globalization of the ideas that would drive human kind to unification of political space at the maturity of his sense of independence that causes fragmentation of space, coining the terms '*iconography*' and '*circulation*' to describe these two paradoxical tendencies.

While mankind is driven by his particular sense of identity independent of others, his desire for communication and creating connection is also an inborn trait. Jean Gottmann has termed these two paradoxical forces as *iconography* and *circulation*. Creating independent places characterizes strong human sense of independent identity, while creating connections between places with differences of potential has always been a task engaging human mind. He has spiritually learned that he is "he" when he is able to identify himself with a portion of space that is partitioned from those of others within which he has developed his sense of belonging, while he has empirically learnt that the more there is movement, the more economic and cultural benefits are reaped, even though certain individuals and groups may suffer.

The success of this force is associated to the abolition of every form of obstacle to movement: borders should disappear and the *Ecumene* should become a unified economic field. The generalization of *circulation*, if realized someday, will lead to the gradual abolition of the heterogeneity. Mankind would live in a uniform geographical space -at least in respect to economic and social conditions. Such an uniformisation would abolish what Jean Gottmann called "geographical injustice" and, with it, most of the causes of conflict and war. History would thus "come to an end" and Geography (as the study of the diversity of the face of the earth) almost disappears. The idea of unification of human space, thus, fails to materialize. Yet, using the term "globalization" of economy and communication, Gottmann refers in 1960s to a rapidly changing world which opens new ways of unification in human society.

In today's movements towards regional or even continental integration, and formation of bloc identities which is concurrent with globalization of market economy and triumphant procession of cyberspace, the political map of the world has, as Anssi Passi reminds us (Passi, 2005), undergone significant changes; many boundaries have become more permeable for people, goods, capital, etc., and information technology, in many ways, does not

recognize boundaries. This rapid development in the functions of borders has encouraged some scholars specialising in economy and information sciences to make a case for a unified geopolitical world, using phrases like “borderless world” and “de-territorialisation”. In response, Newman (2006) argues that, despite these trends, human activities continue to take place within well-defined territories. Furthermore, he points out that the notion of a “borderless world” is a specifically Western European concept, originating in a place where the softening of borders is being actively promoted. This trend has not gained traction everywhere. For example, in the post-9/11 era, borders are hardening in many places. Hence, we see a growing move toward *re-territorialisation*.

Indeed, it seems that the relaxing of border controls and the lifting of economic barriers inside the European Union, followed by monetary union and creation of the Euro zone in 2002, has been one of the main sources of enthusiasm for such ideas as *borderless world* and *de-territorialization*. A geographer however, can hardly overlook the fact that, despite easing economic barriers in the Schengen area of the European Union, legal and cultural borders remain firmly in place and borders have in fact been hardening between the Schengen area and the rest of the EU, as well as between the European Union its neighbours.

BORDERS MANIFEST THE IMPERATIVE OF INDEPENDENCE

The coming of virtual reality has introduced a fresh and very interesting dimension to the discourse among geographers and other social scientists. But the “virtual” is not poised to replace the actual; for as long as man remains concerned about independence and identity, such ethno-territorial identity, boundaries and nationality will retain their potency.

Gottmann describes the process that results in the fragmentation of space and creation of nation-states as *iconography*, arguing that it functions as a sort of ‘glue’ that binds individuals together in order to form political societies, each possessing its own space (Gottmann, 1964). Gottmann, who in the words of peers such as Jackson (1958), helped to return political geography to the mainstream of social science after its near-demise, once stated:

To be distinct from its surroundings, a region needs much more than a mountain or a valley, a given language or certain skills: it needs essentially a strong belief based on some religious creed, some social viewpoint, or some pattern of political memories, and often a combination of all three..... The most stubborn facts are those of the spirit, not those of physical world.... And while history shows how stubborn are the facts of the spirit, geography

demonstrates that the main partitions observed in the space accessible to man are not those in the topography or in the vegetation, but those that are in the minds of the people (Gottmann, 1964).

The basic element of Jean Gottmann's theoretical framework is the concept of man's fragmented geographical space that is partitioned and limited. It is limited, since it cannot go beyond his technical capacity. As man's technical capacities develop, however, geographical space, in a sense, grows with them. The concept of geographical space is tied to that of political space: both are extremely complex and synthetic. All aspects of human life, moreover, are integrated in them, physically and culturally, economically and socially, militarily and diplomatically.

Geographical space is subdivided into territories, occupied, organized and dominated by different groups, each of which forms its own political society. The partitioning of geographical space is a fundamental reality of our world. This concept is both geographical and political. The form of partitioning defines the limits of the various polities. Changing it brings about results of enormous political consequences: majorities become minorities and vice-versa, the regional balance of power is altered, etc. For this reason, much blood has been shed in the name of territory.

CONCLUSION

Territorially fragmented political space constitutes human's fundamental geographical reality, an empirically achieved reality that cannot be replaced by any idea of virtual reality. When Gottmann says “*to be different from all others and proud of one's special features is an inborn trait of man,*” he means to tell us that, as long as human is concerned with his own identity, independent of all others, borders will not disappear. Societies would seem to require a line in space, which we call *borders*, to separate them from their neighbours. Thus, *border* is a state of mind for human that cannot be undermined by any idea of virtual reality in the form of notions such as *borderless world*, *global village* and/or *de-territorialisation* of man's political life to exceed the bounds of actual reality. In other word, human kind's indulgence in virtual reality ought to broaden the horizons of actual reality rather than signalling the end of geography.

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