Reflections on EU territoriality and the ‘bordering’ of Europe

Guest Editorial

This journal, Political Geography, has been a major platform for the critical discussion of the European Union and its socio-spatial significance. In recent years, its readers have been able to appreciate shifting conceptualizations of the European Union, both as a political space and as an actor in the world system (see Bialasiewicz et al., 2009). Whether as ‘Fortress’, ‘Empire’, ‘Superstate’ or neo-Medieval mosaic of different territorial units, these conceptualizations reflect a variety of critical approaches. However, they all explicitly raise questions regarding the EU and its territorial nature. As Bialasiewicz, Elden, and Painter (2005) have indicated, EU territoriality is both ‘hard’ in the sense of institutions, borders and policies and ‘aspirational’ in terms of a space of values and an area of solidarity. While the notion of a state-like territoriality, and by extension, a geopolitics of the EU, might appear counterintuitive, it is nevertheless more than an academic issue.

In this Guest Editorial we would like to draw attention to the contradictions and social consequences of emerging EU territorialities. These are reflected quite openly in exclusionary and discriminatory practices with regard to non-EU Europe and citizens of ‘third’ states. In addition, the EU’s Neighborhood Policy (ENP) appears to privilege state actors and policy elites and thus neglect local communities and civil society actors involved in co-operation at the EU’s external borders (Popescu, 2008; Scott et al., 2008). The territorial ambitions of the EU – hardening the external boundaries while consolidating political community within the EU 27 – can be thus seen in terms of bordering processes. Bordering, as we see it, is taking place in the form of the creation of distinctions between groups of people according to varying degrees of ‘EU-European-ness’. This has resulted in concentric territorial rings of EU-inclusion ranging from the EU Schengen, Eurozone, Internal Market, EFTA, Associated Members, EU Candidates, EU neighbourhood, Strategic Partnership to external world. This is a logic informed by security and control concerns, a logic very much associated with state-centered politics of interest.

In contrast to this inclusion/exclusion bordering logic, we would see the EU as a new type of international actor whose potential strengths lie less in the state-like exercise of power and rather more in its ability to affect gradual social transformation. The European Union gradually developed out of a spatial vision of economic, political and social development, a vision that in many ways has corresponded to Perroux’s (1954) notion of Europe as an ‘open society’ rather than a geographical project of ‘self-defence’. Even if the EU’s future institutional architecture has never been an object of consensus, the transcending of inner-European borders and the facilitation of cross-border exchange are largely seen as EU success stories. In fact, it is precisely the ‘de-bordering’ of a major part of Europe that has fed notions of the EU as a ‘force for good in the world’ (Barbé & Johansson-Nougés, 2008). Having achieved historic enlargements in 2004 and 2007, the EU has set its sights further abroad and is developing what it sees as a new kind of international political partnership, one based on an ethics of mutual interdependence and cultural understanding (Commission of the European Communities, 2004).

EU’s geopolitics of co-operation should aspire to clearly formulate a plausible alternatives to ‘realist’, Hobbesian understandings of the world. ‘In order to achieve this, the EU must be able to establish an open attitude towards the world, that is based on avoiding all too big differences in wealth and the establishment of freedom across borders. Furthermore, the EU must accept and work with local and regional difference in order to promote a more fruitful dialogue within the ‘neighborhood’. Unfortunately, the various individual member states seem to be losing sight of the EU’s common past achievements. ‘Enlargement fatigue’, so pervasive in media discourses and public debates, appears to characterize a more general lack of orientation and, perhaps more seriously, enthusiasm with regard to the European project.

Of course, this has been partly self-inflicted on the part of the EU, the result of inept communication and limited dialogue with European citizens. More importantly, however, the EU has faced a populist backlash against more inclusive notions of Europe, European identity and political community. Since the 1990s, nation-states and nationally defined identities have reasserted themselves in European political debates. While EU-Europe has always struggled with national particularisms and the territorial anxieties of its member states, it has until recently rarely succumbed to these pressures. Past rounds of accession to the EU have been subject to critical scrutiny for various geopolitical, economic and institutional reasons. With the opening of EU-Europe towards the ‘East’, however, a visceral sense of fear has been evoked that has played into the hands of nationalist and conservative political groups. Nationalist populism, already on the rise before September 11th, has been strengthened, among others, by threat scenarios of illegal immigration, islamophobic readings of a possible Turkish accession to the EU and a loss of control over borders. Partly as a result of this, the ‘reclamation’ of national identity and sovereignty and the emphasis of cultural–civilizational difference in defining what is and what is not ‘European’ have become mainstream political discourse. 1 We are therefore currently witnessing what might be termed a ‘re-bordering’ of national-states within the EU and, consequently, a heightened demand for more defensive borders for the EU as a whole. Arguably – and this is borne out by our research – borders in Europe have thus begun to re-emerge as markers of sharply – to

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an extent civilationally defined – difference (van Houtum & Pijpers, 2007). While the European Union promotes with its Neighborhood Programme a notion of post-national political community held together by a set of common values and practices, its initiatives of regional partnership have thus also been partly overshadowed by securitization agendas, one-sided conditionality and the increasingly restrictive nature of the EU’s external borders, lending support to the notion of a Gated Community with selectively closed boundaries (Van Houtum and Pijpers, 2007).

To be fair, the EU’s quest for ‘hard’ territoriality (and state-like authority) is in many ways a response to a lack of political and popular support. The European Union is presently faced with important questions regarding its status as a political community. This has been highlighted in the media by the continued failure...
to ratify a constitution or to reach accord on immigration, foreign policy and other issues. However, if the EU’s apparent crisis of identity is indeed one of territoriality then assuming a neo-Westphalian guise is fraught with dangers and therefore misplaced. Without the political will to transcend local and national particularisms, the EU is in danger of forfeiting its idealism (its ‘aspirational’ territoriality) and thus its ability to positively influence developments within and beyond its borders. It is precisely the EU’s indeterminate and evanescent character (not a state but much more that a free trade zone) that is at the heart of its identity; it is also a resource that allows it to project its ideational power without resort to heavy-handed coercion or the hubris of a ‘global peacekeeper’ or superpower. Furthermore, relational and flexible notions of Europe more clearly reflect historical experience than exact definitions. There has never been and can be no consensus as to where Europe begins or ‘ends’ or to what is, and what is not, European ‘identity’ (see Boedeltje and Van Houtum, 2008). Instead, there exists a space of ambiguity that reflects Europe’s historical evolution, as well as its colonial and post-colonial experiences. In Balibar’s (2004) terms, it represents a ‘borderland’ that can potentially mediate between cultures. Unfortunately, what we are seeing at present are policies of internal consolidation and external ‘bordering’ that can be characterized as ‘neo-Westphalian’. Thus, instead of much-needed debate on the renewal of the EU (and Europe as whole), issues related to security, territorial borders and definitive geographical definitions of the EU have tended to dominate political debates. Needless to say, these tendencies are clearly at odds with attempts to establish more intense cross-border relations with the EU’s new neighbors. For example, we are witnessing an almost obsessive use of universalizing EU-centric visions – cartographic and otherwise – on Europe as a geographically bounded entity. The territorial ambiguities expressed in Fig. 1, a map of Baltic Sea Cooperation, are one example of this. The bulk of structural fund resources available for cross-border co-operation are targeted at the consolidation of the EU-27 (highlighted in dark color) and exclude non-EU neighbors (represented as light colored areas) for the most part. While the European Neighborhood Policy Instrument does provide limited co-funding for non-EU members, much less support is available than was previously the case. Thus, the ‘neighbors’ are both present and absent, not only in cartographic terms but also in terms of concrete project-oriented cooperation. Indeed, cross-border cooperation at the EU’s external boundaries, all rhetorical statements to the contrary, has become mundane, technocratic, underfunded and bereft of the historical symbolism of earlier cooperation at what, since 2004 and 2007, have become internal borderlands of the EU.

Accepting that a certain degree of institutional coherence and territorial anchoring are inevitable consequences of the EU’s maturation, we must also question whether a return to ‘bordered’ thinking is the only option available in the EU’s quest for meaning. We believe, on the contrary, that there is no central concept or practice that can capture the complexity and uniqueness of the EU as a regional idea. There is no ‘central screenplay’ that has been or is being followed in the making of the EU. Rather, it is the precise absence of a totalizing political geographical model that has been so significant for the EU’s evolution during the last decade. Again citing Balibar (2004), we argue that such a EU-centric vision is necessary flawed since no European ‘identity’ can be opposed to others in the world. Indeed, there exist no absolute border lines between the historical and cultural territory of Europe and the surrounding spaces.

Despite indications of postmodern ‘de-territorialization’ within Europe, the Hobbesian ghost of fear and determinism is still present in current day European union’s geopolitics. Even though borders – at least in our critical academic perspectives – no longer seem self-evident, inevitable or immutable they are still being taken for granted. The EU’s new territorial anxiety is part of a worrying trend and reminds us how important it will be for the EU to transcend national particularisms and bordered thinking if it is to exercise its normative power judiciously.

Endnote

1 The case of Europe and Turkey is quite illustrative. As Dutch politician and former EU Commissioner Frans Rolfstein explicitly stated in the Flemish daily De Morgen of 07 December 2006: “Europe is the product of Christendom, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and democracy. Turkey just doesn’t fit in.”

References


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