Europe’s Borders
The Narrative Construction of the Boundaries of Europe

Klaus Eder
Humboldt Universität, Berlin, Germany

Abstract
This article argues that the social construction of the borders of Europe is the combined effect of a historical trajectory in which the construction of its outer and its inner boundaries interact. These boundaries make sense to the people because they have a narrative plausibility. On such narrative resonance, real hard borders are grounded. The idea of narrative boundary construction is embedded in a minimalist theory of identity that claims that anything can serve as a boundary within a historically specific situation. The only restriction regarding boundary construction is that a new boundary continues the narrative – either in a continuous or a discontinuous way, either as conservative caring for a tradition or as a revolutionary break with a tradition. This radical break with substantialist notions of Europe’s borders and identity implies that such trajectories do not imply any necessity. Whether the European integration process is continuing an old narrative or whether it points towards a specific discontinuity in the further telling of Europe’s story, is historically contingent. Europe has just to continue to tell a story about itself that makes narrative sense.

Key words
■ borders ■ boundaries ■ history ■ identity ■ narratives

Bordering: A Theoretical Proposal

Borders as Hard and Soft Facts
Borders can be very hard facts. Crossing a border and a policeman telling you to stop is a clear case. Borders also often are soft facts. Defining who we are and who the others are creates borders between groups of people that are as volatile as the discourses about them. Such soft borders are boundaries that we draw between people. They are in the images people have of their world. Europe is a case that allows one to study how both aspects of bordering interact. Those trying
to enter Europe and being told that they are not allowed to enter indicate a hard social fact. Defining who the Europeans are and who are not indicates a soft social fact. The difference between both is that the former, the hard borders, are institutionalized borders, written down in legal texts. The soft borders of Europe are encoded in other types of texts indicating a pre-institutional social reality, the reality of images of what Europe is and who are Europeans and who are not.

In the following, the soft dimension of borders, i.e. boundaries, will be addressed. This does not mean that hard borders are irrelevant. On the contrary, it is argued that soft borders are part of the ‘hardness’ of borders in the sense that the symbolic power inherent in soft borders helps to ‘naturalize’ hard borders, to produce the effect of taking borders for granted. Within this general model of symbolic forms helping to reproduce the social fact of borders, the following analysis is situated. The production of images of borders of Europe and the attribution of meaning to ‘objective borders’ are the issues addressed. This meaning production becomes more important, the more the institutional borders of Europe are not finalized and open to political struggles. In such cases, meaning production is more than a naturalization of existing hard borders; it is part of the political struggles over possible hard borders, thus providing a particular mechanism in the construction of hard borders. Defining an imaginary Europe impinges heavily upon the legal construction of the borders of Europe. Thus, Europe can be taken as a case of how border discourses on imaginary boundaries (i.e. soft facts) can play a causal role in the making of institutional (hard) Europe which we call the European Union.

Borders in a pre-institutional sense are boundaries that define a unity that we call a collective identity. Claiming a European identity is a mode of defining a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The different proposals on what a European identity consists of are discursive constructions of such boundaries. These constructions use ‘objective referents’ as signifiers and put them together into a meaningful whole, i.e. into an identity. Such identities have effects as soon as the different elements can be organized into a meaningful sequence, into a narrative sequence providing narrative fidelity and narrative resonance for a people.

Europe has accumulated an immense history of images of its boundaries that are used selectively to define its borders. This history is more than a box that is used to reconstruct the unity of a society. The history of such images has an internal logic, a temporal structure that is characterized by diverse attempts to construct a unity in the course of the time. These moments produce what we call collective identities, snapshots of the history of drawing boundaries. Sometimes such identities are consequential, at other times they are not. In the former case, they change the course of time and produce evolutionary leaps, in other cases, they keep the events in the course of the time within one evolutionary path. Identity construction is therefore embedded in more than just strategic games or normative conflicts. They are embedded in a ‘structured’ time sequence, when identity construction results from former effects of producing identity and difference. Europe provides a particular sequential pattern of the permanent making of Europe over centuries. Structural patterns such as the north–south
and east–west axes of difference construction shape the path dependency of present-day discourses on the borders of Europe, i.e. its claim to have an identity.

Such imageries provide the ‘symbolic material’ for institutionalizing borders. A legally defined space such as the EU is linked to the selective construction from contesting modes of telling and retelling the past. To explain the strength of ‘hard’ legal borders, we have to look at the struggles over the legitimate definition of who are Europeans and those who do not have the right to claim to be a European. Such symbolic struggles over borders will be analysed as struggles over narrative projects that provide a plausible way of telling the past on which to build the present. Taking narrative imageries seriously as causally relevant factors for the hard borders of Europe is the central theoretical idea underlying the following analysis.

Communicating Narratives

Europe may be presented as a cognitive project of constructing a collective identity carried by elites (Giesen, 1998). Much research on boundary and identity construction is based on such a reductive view of Europe. It misses the popular resonance that such cognitive projects need for their further reproduction. The discursive universe of the ‘people’ does not necessarily coincide with the discursive universe people live in. It is a universe of stories and related images, a universe which is full of positive as well as negative as well as indifferent stories and images. Cognitive projects are embedded in a discursive universe beyond cognitive constructions. Therefore, the assumption is justified that there is something behind cognitive identity claims which determines their force (or weakness), their plausibility or their non-plausibility. This can be called the narrative plausibility of cognitive projects.

Narrative plausibility is the result of an elementary social process. It results from stories that people tell each other, thus creating a space of narrative fidelity. Telling stories implies a social relationship and implies a space within which such stories circulate. This symbolic space is bordered by ‘shared stories’. Thus we have to analyse stories and the social relations that are constituted by shared stories in order to make sense of the embeddedness of cognitive projects of constructing boundaries and collective identities.

Starting with the assumption that cognitive projects of constructing Europe as an identitarian space uno actu define the borders of this space, we claim that drawing a boundary is embedded in a series of communicative acts which involve the circulation of stories. Even the most conflictual drawing of a boundary, the imposition of a boundary by sheer power, requires some narrative plausibility for those imposing it. Drawing a boundary is a collective act by at least some people who have to work together. In a democratic society, such an imposition is mitigated by considering the advantages of coordinating claims on boundaries or by even debating their legitimacy. The theory, however, also holds for non-egalitarian societies. The type of social relation varies with the type of the story told; in any case they produce boundaries, define the borders of a communicative space of
shared stories. The story of the good king and the brave peasant is a story that makes more sense in a hierarchically organized society than in an egalitarian society. Thus, boundaries emerge in social interaction in which people constantly check whether they share stories to be told about the world they live in.

In such a theoretical framework, we can focus on stories that provide the context for arguments in the case of conflict. Arguing for a collective identity or for a normative idea is a solution when stories collide. Yet such identities and projections do not create a unity – they need again a narrative basis, shared stories that are retold. Identity claims and normative claims mark turning points in the flow of stories over time. They are invented in moments of crisis and open up new paths of normality which are based on a selective retelling of stories and the selective mobilization of images related to such narratives (Tilly, 2002).

When looking at the construction of boundaries, we have to deal with situations of crisis, of discontinuities in the course of time. When looking at their reproduction, we can see the force of narratives. Changing boundaries are embedded in critical situations to communicate difference and identity that are contingent upon stories as a medium and result of their change. This is the starting point of a communication-theoretical understanding of boundary drawing in non-hierarchical social systems which combine the cognitive and the narrative dimensions of boundary construction in a social field of communicative relations.

The evolutionary problem of complex societies can be solved theoretically by understanding the mechanism of communicating difference. The central problem is communication across cultural boundaries, i.e. intercultural communication. Such communication allows stories to be told that members of other language communities understand in the same way as the stories from their original language community. Such communities are normally based on the preference of a language community in a system of communication. The boundaries of such communities are flexible – they go beyond the closed shop of local language communities, and create regional or national language communities. All of them are part of a global language community comprising every human being on the basis of his/her capacity to speak and to make sense. Yet some people ‘understand’ (in the sense of narrative fidelity) each other better than others. Language itself is an under-determined criterion: everybody can speak, but some speak in an easier way with some specific others. Such a particular community of communication can be identical to a historical language community but need not be so. Language is a contingent distinctive mark of a community of communication in which people share stories that others do not share with them, and this is not necessarily (yet often is so) dependent on the type of language people talk.

The central problem in explaining the narrative force of borders is their symbolic embeddedness in a particularist world of communication. The proposed solution is to conceive of the particularity of a communicative space as sharing a collective experience which is remembered as something that only ‘we’ share and that we do not share with others. Such shared stories have been handed
down from one generation to the next as a discursive tradition. Thus, borders are inextricably linked to notions of identity in the sense of a shared space which at times is presented by intellectuals as a particular identitarian space. There are variants of such intellectual constructions which range from strong identitarian assumptions to strong normative assumptions about a commonality. These vary, but the underlying dynamic is the same: notions of commonality are transformed at times in explicit cognitive constructions that happen in historically determined situations. This theoretical assumption underlies what I call a minimalist theory of identity which sees identity construction as a cognitive mode of boundary construction.

A Minimalist Theory of Identity

The explanation of boundary construction that follows from such a minimalist theory of identity is based on the simple formula of ‘X ⇒ Y in the context of Z’. This formula contains the minimal conditions for the construction of boundaries that circumscribe what separates us from them, i.e. a collective identity. It says that any sign can become – given a historically contingent context of communication – a collectively shared symbol that serves as a referent for a collective identity. If we extend the notion of sign by the notion of narrative, we could say that any narrative can become – given a historically contingent context of communication – a collectively shared narrative serving as a referent for a collective identity.

The context of European integration offers a context in which communication crosses in diverse forms national spaces of communication. This is a particular situation in the sense that well-established narrative communities are exposed to others with whom no narrative links exists. In such moments of crisis of established narrative bonds, political and cultural elites, above all intellectuals, propose cognitive constructions which do not necessarily resonate with the narrative world of the people. Yet they initiate a process of reconstructing a narrative bond. Three cognitive modes of constructing transnational boundaries can be distinguished:

1 Transnational boundary construction through legal definitions of membership – here the basic cognitive construction is that of citizenship which provides rights to self-interested individuals (Eder and Giesen, 2001).
2 Transnational boundary construction through providing protection of a space of well-being against others while binding those included in terms of fair social relations – here the basic cognitive construction is that of a social Europe.
3 Transnational boundary construction through reviving cultural roots which bind people in the particularity of a language game – here the basic cognitive construction is that of a shared cultural heritage of Europe.

Such cognitive commonality remains unsettled. These cognitive constructions do not provide criteria of where the shared space of communication ends. It is a
basically inclusionary project. Identity claims emerge as forced attempts to create a unitary cognitive space without settled narratives. The issue is whether a transnational space of story-telling emerges from such cognitive constructions. The less we have a shared narrative in a world of differences, the riskier it is to construct identities. There are examples in which differences were not only integrated in an identitarian (cognitive) project, but also embedded in a bounded space of shared narratives. This is evident in historical cases in Europe, such as the multicultural city states (e.g. Thessalonica) in the pre-national epoch and of empires in Europe which succeeded in telling a particular story about themselves. In modern societies such multicultural entities have emerged again in the course of the formation of post-national polities. Thus, the central problem of creating a European space of communication is the process of the emergence of narratives supporting and in the long run even substituting for abstract and elite-bound claims of a collective identity of the Europeans. This is what can be called the narrative bordering of Europe.

The borders emerging from such cognitive and narrative processes are institutionalized – as happens in any political community – as territorial boundaries (Bartolini, 2004). Europe is not a case of deterritorialization, of shifting boundaries or of dynamic networks with open boundaries, but rather the opposite: a pure case of territorial institutionalization.1 Thus, territorial borders matter. What is to be explained is how borders make sense, how they succeed in providing narrative resonance and narrative fidelity to the people.

The Bordering of Europe

The End of Europe

The characteristic of this European society has been its cultural, political and ethnic heterogeneity united by a common religion. Religious differences that emerged with the semantic construction of Europe started to undermine the narrative construction of Christendom as the boundary to the outside world. Fostered by ethnic differences and political cleavages emerging in the course of the territorial differentiation in Europe, the old European society turned into a system of cleavages which defined its unity no longer in semantic terms but in systemic terms. Europe turned into a system of cleavages which no longer needed a word to name this system. The parts took over the semantic function and Europe retreated to the backyard of collective self-descriptions.

The narrative construction of Europe could overcome these differences by distinguishing the ‘Occident’, no longer Christendom from the rest of the world. The secularized idea of the Occident provided a soft version of the unity of differences; but it never succeeded in taking over the function of the identity of differences. The more the religious and political and economic differences separated, the more problematic became the presentation of Europe to the outside world. The idea of the Occident created an identity of Europe which shaped the way
Europe turned to the outside world. The missionary zeal of Europe thus turned away from Christianization and towards the economic and political appropriation of the rest of the world by exporting a European way of life.

The dissolution of unity in the course of the differentiation of Europe into nation-states and the replacement of the narrative construction of Europe by national narratives made the notion of Europe obsolete. The emerging national differences became the starting point for unity, i.e. national unity. This unity was created against religious membership. It based itself on an artificial criterion: those speaking the same language (or rather similar languages). This neutralized (and, in this sense, it was part of the Enlightenment) status, class and religion. It took several centuries to make this idea of national unity work. It finally succeeded by constructing a narrative in which the triumphant nation narrated itself through victories over those who wanted to block the construction of the nation. Sometimes even failures to win such battles contributed to the dominance of the national narrative (Giesen, 1998).

The memory of Europe, however, still lurked in the background, especially when violence and terror overcame Europe. Social structures survived in which such memories were still living. This holds for the network of aristocratic relations across Europe, but also for the citizenship tradition in European cities, whereas the Fourth Estate turned towards internationalism and the global.

The End of the End of Europe

The two world wars of the twentieth century which have been European civil wars have remobilized the memory of Europe, more among those who lost the war than among those who won it. The narrative of the nation, however, was damaged in all nations to the extent that such wars were linked systematically to the very form of nationalism and national organization of politics.

Such attribution is fostered to the extent that memories of the war were released from forgetting the nation. The shadow of national myth blocking such memory is disappearing in Europe, leaving a symbolic emptiness in the nation-state. Not that the nation-state has disappeared, but its symbolic referents no longer survive the assault of collective memory.

This process of the symbolic dismantling of Europe’s nation-states was accompanied by the process of constructing a post-war social order which was supposed to be an order of peace. The new post-war Europe went beyond such primary framings. It produced a political order in Europe with which people could easily identify without special requirements on the particular bonds among each other. They only were required to act as rational beings. This offered the European Communities and finally the EU a legitimacy which, however, lacked a narrative unity. There was nothing to narrate that could compete with national narratives or with rational self-interest. Given this, a countermovement was started, a kind of collective search for a shared European narrative.

This reconstruction offered an interpretation of Europe which put emphasis upon the particular history of a European narrative which experienced a series
of transformations and cycles of narrative legitimacy. A pattern crystallized which is the linkage of identity and difference in the European script. The new Europe appears as a further variation of this theme, a new turning of the tables from which another version of a European narrative might emerge. The present-day search for a European identity thus appears as a normal event in the process of variation of an old European topic.

Identity and Difference in the New Europe

European Integration: Turning a Cognitive Project into a Narrative Project

The rediscovery of Europe, after two world wars, based on the narrative of a peaceful order, was a small Europe, oriented towards the West; it had a clear enemy, from which it could distance itself, i.e. communism, which implied also a definite geographical boundary to the East. Europe was turned into Western Europe which filled the order of peace with a particular social model. This model competed with the communist social model in order to prove its superiority. In this way it also rediscovered its mission. The new commonality was based on freedom and welfare. Europe provided peace, the national states added welfare. This separation of Western Europe from the communist Eastern Europe created a narrative bond which proved to be ultra-stable until 1989. The result of European integration has finally been a partial Europe concentrated geographically along the ‘string’ of cities which since the early Middle Ages had been the centre of the post-Roman world.

This world, however, was as divided as Europe had been divided before. It was divided between the North and the South, and it internalized after 1989 the East–West divide, thus producing a system full of tensions. This system needed more cement for its internal coherence than it so far provided. This is the reason why Europe started to look for a collectively shared narrative that gives a collectively binding meaning to its boundaries. Europe started to rediscover itself as a possible identitarian space linking the North and the South, the East and the West. It started to produce a narrative about itself.

The North–South Division of Europe and the Construction of a Southern Frontier

The separation of this new Europe into a Northern and a Southern Europe turns the history of Europe on its head. The historical path of civilizing Europe by the South ricochets on the South. Now the South is to be civilized by the former barbarians of the North of Europe. The myth of the Northern tribes colonizing the South is reproduced in new versions through the multiple transformation of the basic story of colonizing the Other: it is reproduced in stories of the difference between the barbarous North and the cultivated South as well as in stories of the difference between the natural North and an artificial South.
The history of European integration continues this history. The difference is translated into a difference in economic behaviour. The South lags behind the North in the process of modernization. From the perspective of the North, the South (even if Portugal somehow does not fit this image) is characterized by a Mediterranean culture, consisting of a mix of inefficiency, laziness and dirt. Thus, we have a 'Southern problem' in Europe, which in environmental politics has been called the 'Mediterranean syndrome' (Eder and Kousis, 2001).

The North–South difference is a good case for the use of boundaries that create complementarity. At times, the South has tried to define the identity of Europe. This is even the dominant mode of giving meaning to Europe. Renaissance Europe probably was the most explicit attempt by the South to define Europe. This is Europe defined by its culture. The other way around, defining Europe by the North, is a rather recent phenomenon: it is Europe defined by its welfare. Thus, two modes of signifying Europe are at work in the North–South divide. Europe in this sense is a space where competing conceptions of what Europe means are the object of social struggles over the meaning of Europe.

There is a common theme underlying both strategies of giving meaning to this divide. Both define a boundary to a world outside Europe which is either less cultivated or less social. In the missionary project of defending a cultural or social mission, the identity of Europe is rediscovered. Thus, the North–South difference is used to construct a more general difference on which the contested project of a common Europe is based. In that sense, Europe continues the discourse of the missionary Christian Europe.

The North–South divide creates a particular ‘frontier’, an open border where the Southern expansion (or defence) of Europe has remained unsettled. The meaning of the word ‘frontier’ points to the non-conclusive character of a border. In the context of the North–South difference, the Southern frontier has turned in the course of two thousand years of history towards the South-Eastern border region. This border was narrated as the defence against the Muslim world, thus producing a strong narrative separating the Christian and the Muslim world (Suarez-Navaz, 2004).

The South ends in a frontier which begins with the Southern rim of the Mediterranean Sea. Arabic North Africa could have been considered ‘European’ when opposed to ‘Black Africa’. It could claim a long common tradition of being part of the Roman Empire, of an intellectual common ground over centuries of the Christian-Islamic culture up to the colonization of North Africa by the French (and less by the Spaniards). Yet this Southern rim is fixed with the consequence that Southern Italy (Sicily, Apulia) together with Greece, play the role of the ambiguous yet unchangeable border towards a non-European South. Even this obvious border of Europe needed a political act of closing it off culturally: the decline of the demand for EU membership by Morocco.

The role of this particular ‘Other’ of Europe has been finally taken over by Turkey (Neuman, 1999). The Turkish ‘Other’ is (as the Russian ‘Other’, see below) an archetype of boundary construction separating Europe from the rest of the world. The Turkish ‘Other’ has, since the Middle Ages, been a threatening
one, manifest in the image of the Saracens, then of the Ottomans trying to subdue Europe and its culture. Finally, the ‘barbarous’ Ottomans feeding the image of Europe as the civilized Other ended in the image of ‘the sick man of the Bosporus’ which shaped the relationship of Turkey and Europe in the second half of the twentieth century.

This image of Turkey did not remain uncontested. It was accompanied by images of Turkey as the better Europe, as the world where culture, civilized behaviour, art and knowledge had generated something much better than old Europe ever had to offer. Romanticists referred to this culture as sophisticated, literate and artistic. *The Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* even provided an elementary text for children of the bourgeois classes in Europe.

The debate on whether Turkey could become a member of the EU revived – thus destroying this old turcophile tradition – the collective memory of the Southern frontier where Europe was and still has to be defended against its threatening Other. In the course of thematizing this frontier, the difference between Christendom and Islamism has been revived. The battle for Europe becomes a battle at the Southern frontier over narratives. The cultural divide is living its own life, following a logic that is based on narrative fidelity rather than cognitive argument.

**The East–West Division of Europe and the Construction of an Eastern Frontier**

A second division of Europe follows the East–West axis. This division follows the two different modes of agrarian production in Europe: the small agrarian peasant household producing for himself and in part for the landowners against the feudal landownership system prevailing in the East. These two modes of production shaped politics and culture, the politics of landlords and upper agrarian classes, and the elite culture of the landowning classes in the East. This was accompanied by differences in the lower classes, a potentially revolutionary class in the West and a servile lower class in the East. Barrington Moore (1966) has used this difference to account for the form of class struggle emerging in the different parts of Europe. This difference points to another shared narrative of Europe: as a rebellious continent equally in the East as in the West, yet finding different forms of expression of this rebelliousness depending on the socio-economic structures that differentiated Europe.

The East–West distinction was always related to the experience of the Eastern border as a ‘frontier’. The East provides the second frontier of Europe. In the narrations of this frontier, the ‘second other’ of Europe was constructed. This East appears as Russia, providing a referent for something that Europe is different from. From Tsarist Russia to Communist Russia, a particular sense of threat was imagined. The East is the space from once the ‘Mongols’ came, then the ‘Russians’ and finally the ‘Soviet Communists’.

This is contrasted with identitarian strategies trying to bridge the East–West border by including the Other situated at the Eastern frontier. Russia turned into
the ‘better Other’ of Europe. Herder’s Romantic perception of Russia and the 
hypostatization of Russia as the telos of progress (in the socialist sense) have nour-
ished such positive images of the East. These Russophile constructions and the 
more recent constructions of socialist brotherhood indicate possible forms of 
boundary construction. To enlarge the border of Europe to the East and include 
Russia, thus constructing a new outer border of Europe at the Russian–Chinese 
border is a project for romantics, but certainly lacks narrative resonance in Europe.

The Eastern frontier can be seen as an unsettled boundary defining a space 
open to a variety of narratives the West produces about itself. In this sense, the 
East reflects the ambiguity of the West regarding Europe (Neuman, 1999). The 
boundary construction separating the West from the East becomes a dynamic 
process which raises at times high public resonance and at other times is greeted 
with silence. Thus, we have an open space for the construction of a European 
identity in which the idea of the identity of the European space varies with the 
discursive battles over what could be its Eastern border (Meinhof, 2002).

The Identitarian Space of Europe: Where Are the Northern 
and the Western Borders?

What remains excluded from this account so far are the Western and the 
Northern borders. The Western border is defined legally/geographically as well 
as culturally. European expansion has followed the path from the South (Roman 
Empire) to the North-West (England) and is halted there, creating offspring 
across the Atlantic which produce ‘family battles’ about difference, ranging from 
anti-Americanism to a ‘special’ relationship of friendship between America and 
Europe. Thus there is a clear boundary – and no frontier.

The Northern border is different. It is a legal/geographical border filled with 
different and often competing narratives (Lehtonen, 1999; Paasi, 1996). The 
Baltic space is a space which separates Europe from non-Europe. A historical 
narrative centred around the Baltic Sea (referring to the Hanse story) sees itself 
as a transitory space mediating Europe and the rest. Yet, the Northern border of 
this Northern European space does not create a frontier as do the Southern or 
Eastern borders. Beyond the Northern border there is no threatening Other. 
There seems to be just wilderness, a space good for projecting on it adventurous 
forms of life.

Yet, the Northern border is not without narratives which also hold for the 
Western border and the narratives accompanying the relationship of Europe to 
America and vice versa. The North represents the natural past, a kind of prim-
ordial reference of a people struggling with nature. This might explain the 
particular stubbornness of Northern nations against joining a common European 
narrative. Anti-EU feelings are especially strong in North European populations 
which make them a permanent locus of irritation for the rest of Europe. Narra-
tive switches only happened in Finland which turned – due to the special 
Finnish–Russian relationship – towards a new narrative which is basically oriented 
towards Europe as such (Paasi, 1996).
Thus, we have borders of different types that provide boundaries, frontiers in the East and the South, legal (geographical) borders in the North and the West. How can this bordered space of Europe be conceived in terms of an identitarian space? The thesis to be defended in the following is that bordering is a dynamic process, and identity is just a snapshot of this dynamic process, a point in a temporally structured sequence of bordering practices.

**Defining Borders: A Narrative Project**

*Narrative Constructions of Borders: Constructing Europe as a Geographic Space*

The definition of the border constructions of Europe depends on how the stories about these borders are organized at a given point in time. An old (nationalist) narrative in Germany sees the German Reich as stretching from the Memel to the Belt, or from Mantua to Vilnius, a sort of little Europe. Such narratives are discredited as national narratives, but still survive as possible European narratives. Such narrative boundaries give to borders a meaning that is shifting in time. The Alps, the Pyrenees, the Urals, the Mediterranean Sea, the Bosporus are objects of meaning attribution and construction. These examples show that even geographical borders are a ‘construction’. Their narrative plausibility varies in time and space. Thus, the first theoretical statement is that borders are the object of a permanent process of telling and retelling stories from which emerge identities sometimes. Therefore, borders are as variable as the stories with which they are constructed.

Narratives are relevant for identity only in the context of ongoing communication: x becomes y in the context of z, as was argued in the beginning. Narrations (x) turn into identity generators (y) in processes of communication (z). To interpret the formula of x => y [z]: mountains become a border in the context of communicated narratives which tell of the Other behind these mountains and – at times – the Self before these mountains.

Stories have to be told which means that we have to know not only the stories, but also who the story tellers are. These story tellers (and their interaction) define the situation, the context z, in which an object takes on a symbolic meaning. The signifier (mountain) has a variable relation to the signified (a border). In this way the problem of what constitutes an identity can be restated: What are the communicative contexts of those stories which turn boundaries into borders?

The ‘conservative’ answer is: this is still done in national contexts of communication since these are the only ones that provide the context which allows us to understand the meaning of stories. The ‘progressive’ answer is: we are living in a global world in which local stories can easily be transferred from one context of communication to the next. Thus, narratives become available independent of national language games and thus a resource for transnational identity construction.
The analytical consequence is to sharpen our theoretical eye for the resonance of narratives beyond national language games. This does not mean moving the theory of boundary construction onto the level of a universalistic theory of language which excludes the feasibility of particularistic language games as stable forms of communication (as the theory of communicative action does). The theoretical eye has to be sharpened for emerging transnational communities of communication such as the 'European community of communication' which create a transnational yet particular space of communication, a space with a boundary that resonates with the stories in the people.

Narrations of a Common History: Constructing Europe on a Bitter Past

The cultural heterogeneity of Europe precludes a 'natural' story based on some supposed cultural commonness. Yet there is an experience that is common to the nations of Europe. This is the past of Europe that relates the nations of Europe through war and conflict. This provides a narrative full of emotions. This story is told from different national perspectives from which emerges another story, the story of a bitter past. The national stories appear as variations of a basic story which imposes itself on these peoples. This common story does not easily enter the communicative space. Remembrance of a bitter past is like a trauma that is defined as an attempt to avoid remembering. It normally is repressed. When such trauma returns, it produces a powerful narrative and thus creates a narrative space which includes those sharing such a past.

Such narrations change the boundaries of the communicative space of those being part of a collective memory. Remembering is a construction that defines not only what is to be remembered but also who is part of the remembering community. Such narrations constitute a space of communication, the boundaries of which are narrative boundaries. Guilt, pride, responsibility are references with a high emotional load that is generated in these narrations and reproduced through re-narrating the past. Those who 'understand' these stories are able to recognize each other as particular fellows sharing a collective identity which separates them from the others (Eder, 2005).

This form of generating a collective identity through narrating the past is a mechanism for creating a European space of communication. Max Weber observed that symbols which have to do with the memory of death, struggle, war and survival are particularly effective in creating a sense of commonality (1956: 515ff.). This mechanism has worked in the creation of national identities and produced stable forms of collective identities that so far have survived cultural globalization in an astonishing way.

Yet the creation of such a space of commemoration in Europe creating the boundaries of a collective identity is in one respect distinct from national commemoration: it does not rely on triumphant narratives, but rather on traumatic narratives. Remembering a traumatic past will lead to a narrative space which requires special conditions for its reproduction. Triumphant histories are
retold without losing the emotional appeal whereas traumatic histories have to be turned into a post-traumatic history which will not provide the simple emotional bonds characteristic of identifications produced by national collective identities (Alexander, 2002; Alexander et al., 2004; Giesen, 2004).

**From Boundaries to Identity and Back to Real Borders: The Double Process of ‘Bordering’**

Europe provides options beyond the national option of defining the borders of a communicative space based on a common language, shared values and a linguistically defined culture. Such linguistically homogenized spaces of communication crossed their zenith in the middle of the twentieth century, i.e. after the ethnic cleansing of Europe in the course and aftermath of the Second World War (Mann, 1999). This marks the beginning of the end of national narratives as the operators of collective identities. National identities have produced traumatic memories which since then have intervened in the reproduction of these identities, undermining their affective qualities. What is left for national identities is to give to their citizens a sense of privilege that they do not have to share with those outside. Such identities will function as long as these privileges can be upheld against the forces of globalization.

One way out would be to have recourse to shared values which are particular for a group. This is, however, a self-defeating idea. In modern times values have to pass the test of their universalizability. Any values we defend we cannot defend in the name of a particular people, but only in the name of a universal people. Universalistic values can only generate identity and boundaries when ‘we’ take them as values that ‘we’ have to bring to other people, i.e. through defining a mission of converting others to these values. Boundaries would in that case break down as the others are converted. The alternative to a missionary mission could be patriotism. ‘We’ then love our values in a way that is different from the way other people love their values. Yet nobody can be excluded from being such a patriot. Patriotism is as universalistic an idea as the idea of values itself. Finally, we are left with the claim of a particular origin for defining the boundaries of a European ‘we’. Primordial construction ends in racist conceptions that have been delegitimized in the European history of fascism when Europe was conceived as a space held together by the symbols of fascism.

Since this past cannot be invented in a positive sense as happened when the nation was invented ‘by getting its history wrong’, Europe is forced to construct this space ‘by getting its history right’. This provides a new way of narrating the boundaries of Europe. The people in Europe share not only particular histories of their particular past but they also share a common past as soon as they start to define a common space of communication of these histories. Who participates in such communication then becomes part of Europe in a cultural sense. To turn the boundaries of such a communicative space, i.e. its ‘soft borders’, into hard borders of Europe is a political project. But the cultural basis of such borders is contingent upon the readiness to share one’s own history with the history of the
others around her/him. In this sense, boundaries are never fixed, are snapshots of a dynamic reality of sharing a communicative space, and identities forming within such borders are snapshots in the flux of communicating stories. Borders are attempts to institutionalize such boundaries through law which requires strong political institutions. Thus, the borders of Europe not only depend on strong political institutions, but also and even more so, on shared stories about its boundaries.

The test of being part of Europe is in the last instance in sharing a common narrative of the past which guides the relationship with one’s neighbour. In this sense, the real test of Europe finally is the Balkans where sharing a communicative space of often bitter histories is still not visible. Thus, the test of Europe might turn out not to be so much on the construction of its outer boundaries and the making of its outer borders, as current debates propose, but much more on some inner boundaries, and the most virulent inner boundary which is also hard fact, a border separating Europe within Europe, is the Balkans.

Notes

1 This remark is directed against those who try to figure out an evolutionary novelty in Europe. Europe has a centre, it has a periphery, it has borderlands, and contested legal boundaries, something that not only nation-states have, but also empires and city-states as Hassner (2002) or Paasi (1996) show. What such studies show is a pattern that reproduces itself in shifting historical constellations. See the contributions to Anderson and Bort (1999) or Zielonka (2002).

2 This topic will not be explored in depth here, also because this relationship does not seem to be decisive in the border construction of Europe. Representing the two sides of one coin implies that the issue of defining a border is without consequences. Turning the coin does not move the border either towards Europe or towards America.

3 The critical border in Northern Europe is the North-Eastern border with Russia which, however, joins the narrative of the Eastern Other of Europe.

References


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Klaus Eder is Professor of Comparative Sociology at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. His fields of interests include political sociology and cultural sociology. Recent publication include: *Collective Memory and European Identity: The Effects of Integration and Enlargement* (with W. Spohn) (Ashgate, 2005). Address: Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, Philosophische Fakultät III, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany. [email: keder@rz.hu-berlin.de]