Borders: Re-thinking some aspects of cultural interface

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ABSTRACT

The birth of modernity was marked by a meeting of frontiers, when Europe conquered America, as much as by the transformation of the social norms from its faith basis to a self-referent basis. Recently through a new cultural logic, due to the internationalization of capitalism and with the globalizing and homogizing processes of culture. The several forms taken by the power and social conflicts affect the planetary space, on one hand making an exercise of pluralism, and on the other hand, making the borders that separate the countries of the first world from the rest of the world clearer. The idea of a pluralist universe leads to the formation of imagined communities. The transnational type of imagined community is a common characteristic of migratory movements. Transnationalism characterizes different Brazilian communities. One example is the MST (Movement of the landless), that assumes significant proportions, mobilizing political forces and public opinion. Transnational communities can make use of recent cultural instruments, as for example, technological devices and Internet, and become virtual communities inhabiting cyberspace. The virtual community can be a way of resistance to the homogenizing tendencies that occur in neoliberalism. In Brazil, hipernet is an example of a well succeded social movement that acts in the direction of the formation of virtual communities.

Specially in the actual historic moment, when we experiment some recent everyday transformations which some academicals describe as post modernity, the concept of frontier seems to outstand as the focus of analysis, promoting the thinking on the formation of subjectivity, the existence of imagined communities and the experiences of real or virtual frontiers in social life.

The boundaries formation and some points about Latin America

Based on Quijano (1988) we can understand the very beginning of modernity as a meeting of borders. The author pants out that although Latin America has been, without doubt, a passive victim of modernization, it has been, on the other hand, an active player in the process of modernity formation. Quijano identifies that the story of modernity begins at the end of the XV century, in a violent encounter between Europe and America. From then on

in both worlds there has been a radical reconstitution of the image of the universe, which includes the rebuilding of the relation between man and universe and all the relations between human beings. The author perceives that the presence of Latin America in the production of modernity has been maintained through the periods of crystallization of the modernization, especially during XVIII and the beginning of the XIX century.

By this, on both sides of the Atlantic, at the same time, the same trends of thought were formed, the same questions were asked and the same themes were debated. The *Illustration* for example, was experienced at the same time in Europe and in America with intellectuals of colonial America in participating in its European movement[i].

Lechner (1988) emphasizes that at the same time that Latin America was in the birth of modernity, on the other hand, it was constituted on the impact of the latter. The tries and struggles for independence in the Latin American contries were confrontations with modernity itself. The conquering of America by Europeans marked for the latter a try for temporal and spatial decentralization questioning all types of borders[ii]. But the possibility of European decentralization didn't guarantee any definition of social order in Latin America. In this sense, Lechner understands modernity as a period of "disenchantment" with the religious organization of the world, and the appearance of new matters that emphasized the need to establish a new type of social order.

The problem that was established at that historical moment seems to have followed the subsequent Latin American history. Even today in Brazil we ask how we could constitute ourselves as a society without a transcendent legitimization. It deals with the same difficulty that the history of modern society has found from its origins: after it looses its faith society needs to create by its own means some norms that legitimate itself by means of relentless self-reference.

The auto-referent attempts seem to reveal a slower trajectory in Brazil than in the social context of its European colonizers. Evidently it is not by mere coincidence that in Brazil the habit of social and educational movements show themselves, even today, in a very significant manner, connected to religious practice, specially the Roman Catholic Religion, whose strength during the colonization period was undisputable[iii].

The capitalism internationalization and its implications on the boundaries

The difficulty of Brazil standing on its own references in respect to making of norms and public policies is a matter that shows itself tied to the cultural homogenization that the internationalization of capitalism has promoted in the last years. The phenomenon can be understood in virtue of a new "cultural logic", whose implications inflict directly on everyday life. Jameson (1997) sees this new cultural logic of the world as the shaper of a new type of address that reflects a systemic modification in the existing capitalism. In this sense, the capitalism internationalization, as well as its almost total diffusion over the planet, differ from the supposed globalization of capital. It was not, in fact, that capital that was globalized, which would dilute the notion of frontiers among nations and people, but the capitalist model that was spread as never before in the history of humanity. So, it is not surprising that a good part of the Latin-American population uses blue jeans, drinks *Coke* or eats *McDonald's* sandwiches. But this does not mean that we are living in a pacific global settlement in a pluralism that contemplates the cultural differences and without the existence of borders.

Melucci (1998) shows how the global processes seem to affect the Latin-American continent culminating with the subsuming of the Latin-American social movements by the collective action of that which was called "world". The idea that we live in a planetary society sustained by a globalized world system seems to brand the dominance of some realities above the others. The issue that is brought up for Latin America is the understanding of which social actors decide the language used in the name of this planetary reality, and how the Latin-American ways of expression and internal organization can be taken into account in this process. In general, the different ways that have been assumed by the power and by the social conflicts affect the planetary space as a whole. But Melucci reminds us that this can happen differently according to the where it occurs in the world. Although we might think, more and more, of a planetary space minimizing the concept of borders, we find on the other hand, the differences between the First, Second and Third world, each time stronger and stronger.

In this sense, the clearest frontier is the one that limits the first world and separates it from the rest of the world. The issue of this dividing line becomes a problem as the collective actions called "global" appear in a web of power relations that produces and keeps specific ways of life and social organizations of the First world as if they were interesting for the whole planet. The meetings and decisions of the *Group of Eight* (G8: USA, Canada,

Germany, England, France, Japan, Russia and Italy) do not include, for example any country from the others side of the line.

In respect to the public sphere and the democratization of Brazil, we find a large group of influences received from the more developed countries. If on one hand we learn from external experiences, on the other hand we "import" not too adequate alternatives to our local public policies. According to Costa (1999) how the pluralist model is aborded does not adequately distinguish the actors of the civil societies from the other groups of interest, losing sight of what is real and specific in the actions the former group. Costa (1999) shows that in Brazil the function of the social movements and voluntary associations, many times represents development, in the sense of perceiving the actors involved not only in their nature but also in their way of action, differentiating themselves from the corporate groups[iv].

Cultural appropriation: Pluralism or homogenization?

Brazil, as other Latin American countries, has experienced the process of world culture homogenization and the different forms of pluralism. Some cultural experiences and policies recognized as "globalized" appear on the Brazilian scene associated with the forms of power that sustain such experiences as valid, or universal. Many of these experiences were not born in Brazil, but entered the country because of the legitimacy they reached in other parts of the globe. According to Foucault (1999, p.71) there is a system of power that bars and invalidates the speech and the knowledge out of the sphere of power. This means that if the knowledge and culture of the third world is not accepted as legitimate it is not because it is wrong or "false" but because "truth" does not exist outside the "power" or without it. *"Truth is from this world; it is produced in it thanks to multiple coercion and it produces regulated power effects in it"* (idem, p.14).

It is in the name of scientific knowledge that the forms of "truth" established by the political economy are sustained and are spread as truths. According to Foucault a society has a "general policy" of truth, and that defines the types of speech it welcomes and makes work as true, in such a way that the group of conceptual representations that the subjects of a society develop are the least they "can" develop. So, there are some abilities that we cannot develop anymore in the globalized experience of life in society. Today in Brazil, the expansion of the international pharmaceutical industry is so strong that even though we are the biggest "crib" in the world for mechanical plants, we "lose" the capacity of managing

these natural resources. Not because these resources are inefficient, but especially because they are not accordingly arranged in the web of power of the internalization of capitalism, so they cannot be legitimized in the collective experience use. Therefore in everyday homogenized life it is the same if an individual is in China, in Brazil or in the USA because probably he will take dopamine when he has a headache.

Chartier (1990), a historian influenced by Foucault's proposals about the limits of the representation understands cultural appropriation as the different ways by which a person can take as his any cultural element incorporating it as another of its daily habits. Evidently, in the actual cultural experiences of the planet, these forms of appropriation have presented some uniformity. If by one hand this fact implies a certain homogenization of every day experiences, by the other hand it offers, for the first time in history, an intimate experience of neighborhood even for the most remote geographic areas.

By this the production and maintenance of life in community seems to have been shuddered in its different forms of cultural appropriation, in such a way that the borders that limit the identity of a community or nation seem to have been deeply extended and modified. Thinking about the concept of community, Heller (1984) states that the person is born in concrete social conditions and reproduces society non-stop since particular men reproduce themselves particularly. In this sense every day life is a group of activities of particular men that make possible social reproduction. Life in community is thus an everlasting exercise where subjects produce and reproduce themselves and their survival conditions. Evidently, concrete things vary society from society but no matter how different things and their use could be, Heller assures that one thing is certain in the process of socialization: It is necessary to know how to use things, institutions, in other words, the world where we are born. This is a process of cultural appropriation that has no end, even more so, the more complex the society considered is. Although we expect that every singular subject should appropriate himself with a minimum of elements that offers practical capacity for the most important things (crossing the street, holding silverware, etc) the author points out as a relevant phenomenon of life in community the fact that not all learn to use some fundamental cultural elements of his society.

This way we take as hypothesis that if on one side the forms of political power have influences on the cultural elements that are appropriated by the different groups of a society, on the other hand, the political powers on the contents and forms of cultural appropriation, have influence, but do not determine the capacity of the persons to deliberate. It is in the possibility of deliberating and autonomy that one of the most significant forms of popular

power and citizenship resides, even so, remaining the problem of existence of a pluralist universe. Heller (1987) indicates the symmetric reciprocity relationships as the base of a pluralist universe, in which each culture is limited by another culture, in such a way that we do not know that what is better for "us" may not be better for everyone.

Imaginary communities and nationalist identifications

But a supposition of a pluralist universe brings up some new issues in the world scenario, showing some old forms of understanding the concept of nation and the implications of borders. For Anderson (1991) the processes that influence the formation of a nation are originally related to the way how the members of this nation learn and perceive this events, so the constitution of a community is much more related with the subjective and imaginary experience of its participants than based on objective factors. So, by definition a nation would be before all, an imagined community. According to Anderson (1991) the formation of an imagined community or of a nation emerges from language. It is through common language that the members of a community can share from a common identity and without this sharing the nationalism is not possible[v].

Based on the concept of imagined communities Rosenau (1997) tries to trace and evaluate some processes by which in the interaction of events of everyday life, identities can be reconfigured and frontiers can be redesigned. For Rosenau a community can be imagined as long as, even though not benefiting from political autonomy, economic viability and social coherence, even so there is mental and emotional predisposition with sufficient basis so as to promote hope that the imaginary will become reality. In this sense the imagined communities may or may not substitute states and may or may not acquire a concrete and discernable form.

According to Rosenau (1997, p.120) the everyday experience that influences the formation of identities and frontiers turns out to be a species of "waterfall" reflecting in and through each community, country or region of the world. So, according to the author sometimes this phenomenon results in "global transnationalism" that adopts popular forces as much as governments; other times it results in localized individualism and other times (with decreasing frequency) this phenomenon persists confined to the government interactions in interstate systems.

Therefore, according to Rosenau the globalizing and localizing processes could be sufficiently powerful to promote imagined communities of three types: supranational,

transnational and sub-national. The first type of imagined community could be understood as territorial community, including the different ethnics, languages or cultural bonds that historically vinculate a determined imagined territory with the idea of nation or homeland. The transnational type of imagined community refers to the sharing of common interests that offers a sense of collectivity and mutual protection and is not related to the idea of territory, nor does it need a state to establish a bond among its members. The subnational type of imagined community refers to the context of domestic things ("household") including the organization around the familiar life and the bond that in the imaginary offers some condition of identification and mutual cooperation among its members.

The transnational type of imagined community seems to be the one that sustains the experience of groups of immigrants that can forge a community life without territory and without an own state, but guaranteeing protection and common interests (religion, organization, etc.). Transnationality is then characteristic of all migratory movements even in the same country. The transnational vision of the members of this type of imagined community can create a differentiated social segment that Ribeiro (1994) considers typically ambiguous and "without territory". Ambiguity moves its members towards the identification of themselves as world citizens at the same time as they perceive themselves as unprotected, what results as, most of the times, reproduction of the world system in the context of small villages, where these groups live and organize themselves[vi].

In Brazil there exists several types of transnational communities. During the colonization of Brazil, around 1500, countless sub-groups from Europe came to live in the "new land". Groups of prisoners, deportees or adventurers headed for Brazil in caravans and lived together in small villages where they reproduced as much as possible the lifestyle they had in Europe. Even today some cities in Brazil have two languages: Portuguese (the official language in Brazil) and another language due to the influence of immigrants (mainly Italians and Germans)[vii].

Recently an important transnational community has influenced public opinion and strongly interfered with Brazilian political life. That is the "Landless Movement" (MST), that originally is composed of agriculture workers that left their lands in a situation of misery. The members of the MST, the "landless", are victims of an accelerated process of Brazil's urbanization and of the abrupt rural exodus that has been happening in large scales over the last decades. Associated to left wing political parties the big group of ex-agriculture workers went on to fight for a piece of land to cultivate.

The actions of the MST ended up forming a very united group and of strong political power in Brazil causing the agricultural reforms to become obligated matter for the press. The members of the MST are distributed over the country but have common interests that make them distinctive anywhere they may be. There are at least two sides to the transnational condition of this group. What joins its members in common interest in the fact that they are not owners of land and they wont be able to work the land after the process of mechanization of the great properties, on the other hand they reivindicate a piece of land to plant so as to make possible a domestic economy that would allow a family lifestyle. Therefore the objective of the group if reached, tends to dismantle the identity of this imagined community. In other words the closer they are to their objectives the more fragmented they are as to their identity[viii].

At times the public administration makes some "reserves" of MST families but they are rare and scarce situations considering the dimension of the problem. Many of the members of the MST live in camps organizing themselves in provisory villages. Sometimes they camp in front of public buildings claiming their needs to the political powers and mobilizing the public opinion. Other times they could be found in rural settlements, as if they were in a hideout or a military operation, when they occasionally conflict and engage in physical confrontation with land owners to take possession of pieces of land which they think are not productive. These engagements are like a civil war that keeps the public opinion divided and alert.

Many year have passed since the beginning of the mass exodus from the country side in Brazil, what seems to make even more difficult the issue, since there are some leaders of the MST that were agriculture workers many years ago and that already have about two new generations in their family, theses generations could be blamed for claiming and taking part in the movement (MST) more than being agriculture workers. Some researchers try investigate how a person is or not a legitimate "landless"[ix].

Virtual communities: a way of resistance to the homogenization of culture

The conditions of transnational communities seem to indicate some world tendencies. Yudice (1997) points to the existence of transnational communities and the processes of globalizing culture as constitutive elements of a "new civil society". In this sense world history is not only in the presence of a global restructuration from the economical or

ideological point of view, but a series of new conflicts: the resurrection of a supposedly dormant nationalism, the rising of religions and of fundamentalism ethnic groups and the tendencies to redesign the geopolitical frontiers as an answer to globalization. The process of globalization has made uncountable changes to daily life and in spite of the difficulties that have come to pass, Yudice tries to identify how globalization can offer new forms of struggle and resistance to the homogenization processes of post-modern neoliberalism. "Although most leftist views of globalization are pessimistic, the turn to civil society in the context of neoliberal policies, and the uses of the new technologies on which globalization relies, have opened up new forms of progressive struggle in which the cultural is a crucial arena of struggle." (Yudice, 1997, p.357).[x]

In this sense Hopenhay (1988) already shows his worry of incorporating the postmodern debate without submerging in a functional postmodernity to the project of neoliberalism's political cultural hegemony. In spite of not finding a safe method for this, Hopenhay anticipates the difficulties of the left wing movements in incorporating the technological advances and other postmodern devices in their strategies of struggle.

Timothy Luke suggest that at least one type of pos-national and transnational order is gradually involving the ways of production of the modern nation-state, dislocating the focus of the "new world order" that was based on the idea of the nation-state from modernity, to the scenery of "neo-world orders", originated in the global movement of posmodernity. If on one side the concept of "new world order" of the nation-state were based on imagined communities (Anderson,1991), now Luke tries to show "neo-world orders" result in virtual communities involving abstractions in which time does away with history space destroys reality and the flux of images and information destroys society. In the sense proposed by Luke, virtual communities are more real than imagined communities.

According to Ribeiro (1997) the process of globalization favors the transnational experience and points out the new ways of communication especially the Internet as capable of making possible the existence of virtual imagined transnational communities. The author indicates meanwhile that there are fundamental differences between imagined and virtual communities: an imagined community is a symbolic abstraction politically built whereas the virtual community is a different reality in between reality itself and abstraction. The virtual community is strongly helped by the computer networks, which results in a differentiated culture and territory, normally designated as "cyberculture". In the cybercultural space, which does not have a fixed space the members of the virtual community can be at several places at

the same time, they can create spaces and redefine identities. The absence of the physical matter as a real element of relationship among its members make possible the rescue of other concrete elements in the relational process, while allowing the total recreation of a non existent body. The experience of virtual community creates a new type of identity manipulation and way of expression, characterizing reconfigurations of the body and the redesign of borders.

Brazil has one of the first experiences in the world in the formation of virtual communities that were maintained as a way of resistance to the homogenizing tendency of culture. This deals with the hipernet project (Melgarejo & Marchinni, 1997), a social movement vinculated to the Laboratory of Educational Software (EDUGRAF/UFSC), that since 1994 implemented a software plataform for the use of Internet (groupware) in public stands in the city of Florianopolis, in the south of Brazil. Trying to overcome the technological oppression and the imposition of a false speech of competition, the hipernet got together non-governmental organizations, labors unions, public school teachers and youths in a risk situation that articulated their experiences and redesigned perspectives that kept them as transnational community. Actually the hipernet project is articulated as a movement of continuous resistance, offering backup and technological tools to different subgroups that organize themselves as potential virtual communities. The hipernet project is not profitable, sustained by a group of partners and keeping besides the tendencies of consumption via net.

Conclusions

The optimist tendency of understanding the flow of homogenizing cultural experiences by pluralism can hide the fact that, in the plurality of languages and cultures, some are understood as legitimate or real, as others don't appear on the world scenery relevantly. In the same way we could not prioritize all the cultural habits at the same time, meanwhile evidently the spread of the habits of the first world countries is not just a coincidence.

The possibility that the third world culture can come to subsume in this globalization process seems to be an inherent risk, at least in some cultural aspects. In Brazil, the cuisine, the clothing and the daily habits have changed radically in the last decades, in an intense mechanism of North American cultural appropriation.

But it is the possibility of interlocution with different groups around the world and the globalization that are facilitating transnationalism. The transnational communities seems to be speakers of an era, many times characterizing themselves as groups of social resistance to political regimes and social habits.

The transnational communities can maximize their political struggle potential and mutual cooperation capabilities and this can happen as they use the technological instruments to their favor that come from globalizing capitalism. The use of Internet and the formation of virtual communities seem to indicate new ways to organize transnational groups.

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NOTES:

[i] Quijano (1988, p.18) quotes the example of a Peruvian, Pablo de Olavide, forced to leave Peru, was Voltaire's friend and integrated to the nucleus of French encyclopedists, taking an active part in the political experiences of the Spanish reformists of this period.

[ii] Lechner (1988, p.130): "The encounter with the Indian – the other – establishes a new scale of differentiation that immediately questions his own identity. The world map is modified and , therefore, the small mental space in which the old social order was conceived is altered."

[iii] Brandao (1995, p.12) classifies the types of education in Latin America in three: (a) education as christianizing, (b) education as a human right, (c) education as a human resource.

[iv] In this context Sergio Costa (p.103) exemplifies the role play by the social movements and volunteer actions to the introduction of new themes and questions in the political agenda and to the widening of the Brazilian public space, specifically in the sense of showing the public character of questions like abortion and the racial discrimination that were treated before in the private media.

[v] The origins of nationalism are presented by Anderson (1991) also about the impact on the individual formation and the psychological notion of group.

[vi] Ribeiro (1994) exemplifies the economical impact of transnational migration: "such as the Brazilian on where the flow of migrants from the state of Minas Gerais to northeast of the US and the return migration of Japanese-Brazilian changed the local economies of sending areas."

[vii] An example of the influences of German culture can be found in Blumenau, interior of Santa Catarina, a state in south Brazil. In a similar way, the Italian culture influences the city life of Caxias do Sul, in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, another southern state.

[viii] Contrary to the transnational communities composed by immigrants, since theses, the more they satisfied their needs by reproducing their country of origin, the more cohesive they became as to their identity.

[ix] About two years ago, for example, a beautiful young lady posed nude for a high circulating national magazine, identifying herself as a "landless". The debate this caused affected the MST. On one side the young girl had identified herself as part of the movement, but on the other, there were allegations that she had left the group. Any way debate indicated that she had never been an agriculture.

[x] An example of this type of struggle, that can use globalization to the opposite, is the Zapatista movement of Mexico. Yudice describes how the Zapatistas used Internet and other medias in innovating ways to create webs of sympathy not only to obtain the rights of the indigenous groups and the democratization of Mexico, but also organizing a world web against the neoliberal movement.