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Phantom Borders

At a first simple descriptive level, phantom borders are, “earlier, mostly political demarcations or territorial divisions that structure space despite their previous institutional abolishment,” (von Hirschhausen et alii, 2017). Despite spatial political restructuring, the traces could be materially observed for example in architecture and rural settlement patterns or in infrastructure designs. In most enigmatic ways, traces left in contemporary societies by defunct territoriality can also be displayed in statistics or maps on voting behaviour or other social practices, even several decades after the dismantling of historic borders.

Invisible borders or cultural boundaries between ethnic groups are not marked on the ground but function as an interface between communities, regulate their exchanges, and construct the limits of what can be crossed and what is transgressive. By contrast, phantom borders neither check nor regulate movement. They are crossed without transgression. They are less akin to borders as a complex political and symbolic apparatus than to discontinuity. Local societies may even have only a confused awareness of them. As ghosts such historical “phantom borders” (we can also speak about “phantom spaces”, “phantom territorialities” or “phantom geographies”) might appear on some electoral maps for a time and later disappear.

“Phantom borders” is a term identified in von Hirschhausen, et alii (2015) when analyzing the enduring geographical-historic patterns found in East central Europe, on the territory of nation state which was composed after the First and the Second World War, from early pieces of the Habsburg, Russian, German, or Ottoman empires. On electoral maps, like that of Poland or Ukraine, at every election in the post-socialist decades the borders of the empires that had partitioned their respective territories several generations ago reappear with astounding clarity. This can be seen in available maps on elections in Poland in (Zarycki, 2006), or Ukraine (von Löwis, 2015 and von Hirschhausen, et alii 2019, for an in-depth interpretation). Such residual phenomena were also found at the same time by maps showing the levels of equipment in rural homes in Poland, post-Yugoslavian states, and Romania, where people develop different modernization strategies depending on whether their village was Russian, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, or Prussian over a century ago.

At the origin of the concept of phantom borders was the poststructuralist debate on whether supporting regional research on spatial concepts was justified. This debate focused on the case of south-eastern Europe and the Balkans (Todorova 1997; Sundhaussen 2003). Refusing the opposition between mental maps and physical spaces, the concept proposes to consider regional differences as simultaneously a given and constructed reality. The term phantom border is thus metaphorical. Just as so-called phantom pains are felt in an amputated part of the human body, phantom borders are tangible traces (sometimes fleeting, sometimes more

permanent) of earlier political entities and their external borders. It can be related to other metaphoric uses that refer to the complex relationship between space and memory by urban ruins (Edensor 2005), material traces of painful pasts (Jonker 2009), or abandoned places (Buchakjian 2017).

Phantom borders could, of course, be classified as a strange and fascinating phenomenon, yet only useful for 'curio cabinets'; however, this would neglect their political potential. Like phantoms in spiritualism, phantom borders can be summoned by political actors seeking to 'awaken' collective memories at times of political need, such as identity-related speeches and or to help in construction "imagined communities," as described by Benedict Anderson. The separation of the Czech Republic from Slovakia in 1992, and more dramatically the Yugoslav war in the 1990s or conflict in Ukraine in the 2010s, remind us of how phantom borders, once instrumentalised by political actors can become powerful enough to undermine the countries they cross.

On a second and more analytical level, the difficulty both theoretically and empirically of discussing phantom borders is not participating in their reification and in identifying the mechanisms of their construction in the field of social science beyond the mere register of their discursive production. In this critical perspective, phantom borders and phantom space have to be understood as; simultaneously imagined (e.g. produced and passed on discursively), experienced (e.g. perceived as experience and updated in practice by the actors and scientific observers), and designed (e.g. by territorialization processes). Emphasis here is on the interaction between spatial imagination, spatial experience, and spatial design.

In this perspective, the concept of phantom spaces offers an alternative approach to geo-cultural borders, which entails three main aspects (von Hirschhausen, et alii, 2019). First, the concept of phantom borders/phantom space focuses on the experience of the actors and not on supposed stable regional borders. In fact, it considers regional differences to be a bottom-up process through of the everyday behaviour of people. Institutional, social, and structural heritages are permanently interpreted and updated by local actors in a selective way and represent a set of (more-or-less) referenced resources. At any point in time, depending on their momentary perception, these local actors can ignore, disqualify, or make use of and reproduce the heritage of the past. Methodologically, phantom borders are experienced by local actors and/or communities, whereas researchers try to aggregate local experience and to generalize it to some extent. This can be done through ethnographic observations, interviews, and comparative case studies.

Second, the concept of phantom borders/phantom space opens up an interpretation of cultural spaces which entertains imagined spaces, new visions of the future, and joint beliefs. The actors update their resources (of course relying on the past) but also with respect to the horizon of future expectations. They create their own world, which takes shape between a certain experience that is "full of past reality" and an expectation of an imagined future (Reinhart Koselleck).

Third, the concept of phantom borders/phantom space considers that the visions of the future are not only endogenous, that is to a certain degree naturally emerging from the historic path, but also governed by mental maps drawn up at higher levels of power. Hegemonic knowledge defines, among other things the 'centre' and 'periphery', the 'modern' and 'archaic' regions and thus prescribes geographies of the future to local societies which more or less willingly internalize them. The local populations thus identify potential developmental spaces and define their future horizons within the borders implicitly defined by the mental maps.

In this critical perspective the concept of phantom borders/phantom space can be defined: It designs the performative capacity of previously existing historical territories to shape both the experience and the imagination of a social group, and consequently, the creation regional patterns in a specific domain. This capacity is not permanent, but it is historically situated. Phantom borders and phantom spaces can appear and disappear in certain historical and geopolitical circumstances, though this capacity is not universal as it can concern certain aspects of social life, while excluding others.

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