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Borders, Thresholds, Boundaries: A Social History of Categorizations.

Introduction

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- 1 The border: whether the term evokes the reality of a customs office or is instead used more metaphorically, its polysemous nature allows us to grasp both the boundaries between social, political, or geographical spaces and the uses made of those boundaries. Such polysemy offers the opportunity to take the notions of borders and boundaries as reference points for reflection upon several themes: the identities of constituted groups; potential or condemnable transgressions; the leveraging actions of men and women of the past; and finally, what is built while transforming, in societies ever capable of defying demarcation. In this sense, the studies collected in this volume seek not so much to discuss a theme, to bring together specialists of the question, as to collectively ponder ways to approach social and political history, with such concepts as starting point. This confrontation between fairly disparate fields of research will also allow us to build on the knowledge gained in order to open up onto other horizons.
- 2 It is true that in the study of history, comparison is a difficult undertaking. It does not have good press at this time of global or connected history, and its expected results are not always well-regarded. This is all the truer in that it is easy to fall into the traps of an artificial gathering of very general objects of study, taken out of context. They are then given a cursory presentation, as though these objects were without a history, in order to find superficial points in common or differences that are just as perfunctory. As a result, none of these compared fields ultimately gains in density. The papers we will read here have not been elaborated on foundations of this kind. The collective editorial undertaking and, we hope, the interest of its comparative dimension, are the fruit of encounters and discussions pursued over many years. Throughout these exchanges, the idea of confronting notions of social and sometimes spatial borders and

boundaries appeared as the best means to coherently present the approaches and scientific choices uniting a research group, as well as the work of each of its members.

- 3 The group Research in the Social History of the Political (or *Recherches en histoire sociale du politique/RHiSoP*) was created within the framework of the Centre for Historical Studies (Centre de recherches historiques/CRH) composed of members of the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (École des Hautes Etudes on Sciences Sociales/EHESS) and the French National Centre for Scientific Research (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique/ CNRS) in 2014. It fully lays claim to its relationship with the founding principles of the CRH. Like the CRH, it considers that the differences between “specialties” must not hinder joint efforts. On the contrary, it must enrich reflection upon what makes the discipline of history, in all its diversity, a part of the social sciences, what places it in dialog with the other disciplines that the social sciences are composed of. With this concern for a cross-disciplinary orientation, we also distance ourselves from “periods” by which historians partition chairs, teaching, and, to some extent, intellectual traditions. At times they even go so far as to establish a sort of irreducible barrier between these periods. RHiSoP is therefore a group in which scholars of the contemporary period can foster dialog with specialists in early modern history. This is also the case for areas, for “fields” of research. While all the members of RHiSoP are indeed historians of Europe, all are not researching on French history. It also applies to the themes in which historians again tend to enclose themselves, and thus shutting themselves off from seeing the general warp and woof of the society for which they hold some of the threads.
- 4 This last point is essential, but it must not be misunderstood. Our goal is not to reject the technical sophistication and learning which are the positive aspects of these “specialties,” nor to invalidate the process which consists of historical inquiry into a specific field or problem. RHiSoP works as closely as possible to primary sources, vocabularies, and contexts, seeking also to find what is possible – or not – according to whether one is situated in the seventeenth or the twentieth century. This is how RHiSoP debates take on all their density. On the other hand, the diversity of “specialties” in our group helps us to prevent a facile superficiality. “Religious History” or “Political History,” “Urban History,” “Economic History” or “Administrative History”: such subjects all too often offer their protagonists the opportunity to restrict from the outset the choice of primary sources and questions to what will support their hypothesis. In this view, the actors they study place a given theme at the center of their interests, just like those who are researching the actors. Other facets of their lives are then left to colleagues of other specialties. After a necessary concentration on an object of study, we too often compartmentalize, which ends up removing any problematic dimension from the object in the context of the society in which it participates. Our scientific alliance does not stem from an expedient institutional arrangement. On the contrary, it is based on the conviction that the friction between our fields of research produces a real heuristic advantage for each of us. In this, RHiSoP asserts a concept of collective work free from such hindrances and for which we take full responsibility.
- 5 It is a social dimension –and thus a joint program of social history– that RHiSoP shares in, to observe each of its objects of study. Certainly, “social history” can mean a great many things and thus not always a great deal. Still, what we mean by this has a specific sense, and refers to an ambitious program. Any actor, in their deeds and their words, engages more than just themselves. They engage in work on the social by way of

categories, hierarchies, and frameworks of the thinkable and the unthinkable that they mobilize. Any social actor is caught up in collective determinations that give meaning to their deeds and words, beyond their simple singularity. The analysis of the individuals' actions, understood in this way, is a portal open to the general rationales of the society studied and of its transformations, on the condition that these rationales should explicitly be the aim of the work. The construction of the social, in the plurality of its manifestations, therefore, remains the shared horizon of the various specialized subjects presented within the context of the RHiSoP group. This group is of course not the first nor the only to be confronted with a certain primary difficulty. That difficulty is coordinating the attention given to primary sources – always individualized and historically situated – with the concern for understanding the general traits of the social structure and the mechanisms of its evolution. This problem oscillates between two principal pitfalls.

- 6 The first resides in the over-interpretation of the individual dimension of social interplay. In the humanities and social sciences, the extent of the attention given to individual actions, as well as the will to take the actors' reasons seriously, have both led to thinking that this individual dimension was the primary driving power of the social. This social interplay would then result, after a fashion, in an ever-moving arrangement of resources that those who compose it seek within that same arrangement. But such an approach would come down to reducing the analysis of maritime traffic to the simple decisions of ship captains. It would render us oblivious to currents, the map of the world, navigation laws, and the rules of commerce. If all these elements are not specifically mentioned in the decision to speed up or change course, they are nonetheless present. In the same way, the operations of social categorization that social actors engage in and that validate, implement, or seek to neutralize the structure, are but rarely articulated, at least not explicitly. This falls to the work of confronting and contextualizing the primary sources. In other words, it comes down to bringing out the relationship between individual and structure. For example, the interaction with authority (present in the contributions to this volume in the form of letters, memoirs, *facta*, etc.) does not create the relationship to authority. Certainly, such an interaction actualizes the relationship and, while confirming it, can also just as well modify or subvert it, or in any case, include it in the contextually situated iterations of the work of social society-making. But the interaction can only exist and have effect if it recognizes the structural framework that posits this relationship. It is often under the form of the obvious, of the unspoken, that the social structure is present in the apparently individual remarks of the actors.
- 7 But then the second pitfall appears. If the social at play in individual words and deeds exceeds what the actors say and do, there is a risk of using artifacts that historians create – that is the social groups, the political systems, the meaning of history– and thus reducing the contextualization of sources to their insertion in preconceived schemata. The science of history has produced enough of these artifacts that it is not necessary to describe this pitfall in any more detail. A reflection on the distinction between *emic* and *etic* can help us here to look directly at this difficulty. The operations of categorizing present in the actors' social interplay never tell of the whole structure. One sole individual expresses choices, but also tensions and impossibilities that cannot be resolved by their mere utterance. Still, these categorizations must not be grasped as incomplete reflections of the social, but rather as means to understand its contradictions and its potential evolutions. The work of the historian is to trace these

mechanisms and not to track the reflections. In this sense, the desire to get rid of the acquired categories of historiographical “specialties” serves to better grasp of the categories used by actors themselves. This is not to give oneself entirely over to these categories, but to reconstruct through them the constant work of a social structure on itself. Let us take a central example, that of the State, taking for instance the early modern Holy Roman Empire – where even the notion of the State is problematic – and Vichy France – the “French State.” In order to reflect on the social history of the political, to reunite fields such as these in the same group of specialists, serves as an antidote to all teleological reification of “the State”. It also serves as an invitation to seek out precisely, in all fields, the modalities and principles of complex interactions between social interplay and the State. More exactly it invites us to seek the ways in which the actors of the State attempt to bring about new arrangements of the social structure around their normative production, and the way in which actors take hold of and differentiate themselves from these arrangements.

- 8 It is in this way that conflicts, disputes, and debates are the privileged observatories of social history. The first reason is pragmatic, for conflict produces primary sources. The next reason is strategic, for conflict is often the moment in which the clash between things unspoken gives glimpses into the work of the social categorization of the actors – from the most modest to the most powerful – allowing us to better grasp the relationship between individuals and structures. Finally, because conflict is also the driving force for change, which is a dimension we must understand as essential from the moment we consider the social structure, not as an overarching framework for history but as a constant challenge of re-adaptations (whether or not, moreover, they mark a reaffirmation or a modification of relationships of domination and ascriptions). And sometimes, beyond the conflictual moment, the historian identifies long term inflections – “ratchet moments” – that modify for all the actors concerned the interplay of the possible, the thinkable, the allowable. For the historian, conflict is often the occasion to perceive the rules of the game. For the actors, conflict is sometimes the occasion to change them.
- 9 Conflict can thus offer historians both the means and the occasion to study a complex interaction between actors and structure that cannot be reduced either to an individuals’ play or to the shadow theater of a disincarnated history. In this way, the social history that the RHiSoP group promotes is always a situated history, whether it addresses a short or long period, a limited place, or a larger territory, as in the different contributions in this volume. The interplay of scales specific to an analysis in terms of construction of the social cannot be reduced to the choice of one single scale of observation. On the contrary, it attempts to vary the focal length insofar as each of them produces one of the kaleidoscope of views with which the historian observes the social.
- 10 This situated history is also a spatialized history. The notion of “place” in society is not only a spatial metaphor. From ceremony to habitat, by way of the domination over landed property, or the right to inspect the activities of others, the grasp of space is one strong modality of social construction. The “right of access,” or on the contrary the right of ascribing identities to others, constitutes one of the ways of accessing what is self-evident in the work of social categorization. This is sometimes even beyond words, in the gestures of exclusion or inclusion. And the singular dimension taken on by the State in social interplay goes through the affirmation of its own scale of territoriality

entering (without always dominating) the configuration of places where each actor is situated. The place, the site, and the territory can thus be what the historical study of social interplay is able to glimpse of the relationships that the individual establishes between interest, status, and structure.

- 11 This dimension, which is at once both spatial and social, has been chosen as the leitmotiv of the present volume, based on the triptych “border, boundary, threshold.” Depending on their objects, the authors differentiate between these three terms. All come together, however, in a study of competing social wordings of spatial distinction. If the border, the territorial, legal, or parish boundary, the administrative delimitation, the line of demarcation are present, it is always through the differentiated way in which the actors seize that border, each marking their place or attempting to escape it. Thereby they put physical boundaries into word and deed. In another sense, these borders also acquire their own weight with a strength all the greater in that it is sanctioned by passing time, with the spatial points of reference sedimenting the structures, so to speak. Really, this sedimentation and semanticization are often the same thing. In other words, the actors articulate the boundary through ancientness, through immemorial law, and through genealogy conceived as a naturalization of category. This happens particularly when it is a question of creating that category, for example, to distinguish the nobility “of the sword” within the larger aristocracy, to count the number of Jewish grandparents which will tell whether or not one is of the “Jewish race,” or to justify the hierarchy of the trades of Paris under the Old Regime.
- 12 You will not read here the saga of individuals defying borders imposed from on high, since hierarchization, exclusion, and distinction are also vehiculated by individuals, defending the lines that separate them from others. They form a shared grammar, specific to each society. From this perspective, the notion of threshold must be taken up in all its dimensions. The threshold is certainly a place of contact, of passage and fluidity. It also marks a strong transition, however, a change in value, a “gradient” which is sometimes impossible to cross and is always the solution of continuity. In this sense we speak of a geographic threshold, or a statistical threshold, or as we might speak of a threshold of domination. All these thresholds do not possess the characteristic that in mathematics one calls transitivity. As an example, let us take a conflict stemming from the transgression of a threshold up to then either ill-defined or well-defended. If it leads to a point of no return, it can in spatial terms determine a “ratchet” in chronological terms, one of these shifts of the thinkable that fuel a dynamic. In allowing us to grasp both the spatial and the social, the boundary and the threshold offer the possibility of circumscribing the strength of this multiple and sometimes cacophonous interplay of scales and temporalities, of social construction, by indexing the work of categorization of the actors in the horizon of their interests, their place, and their values. Let us cite but two examples which will be developed in two of the articles contained here. Under the Occupation, the concern with inhabiting better housing could encourage Parisians to conform to a discourse of racial separation, so as to turn the hierarchy between landlord and renter to their advantage. There is also the example of the territorial question of the Navarre heritage of Henry IV, leading certain theorists of royal power to formulate an arrangement between the familial and the dynastic, giving a new profile to the categories of the public and the private
- 13 These are the preoccupations that unite the members of the RHISO group, within the CRH, whose financial commitment has allowed us to publish this volume, first in French

and then in English. This work is also the fruit of discussions held in the seminar that unites them since its creation. This joint publication aims to bear witness to the fact that the very free exchange between “specialists” of different fields remains possible, and desirable, without worrying over an immediate “output,” and without submitting the shared reflection to the constraints of exterior funding. Indeed, each of the members of RHiSoP is involved somewhat differently in the life of research, in its circles and its habits, and even in the conception that they have of it. But they share the ambition of a situated social history, the conviction that a shared horizon exists beyond the “deliverables” that it might produce, and brings to each of them, concerning their own work, the stimulating and fruitful perspective of a collective exchange.

- 14 The following articles offer iterations of this diversity and this unity. The first two contributions deal with large categorizations of social groups, in deconstructing notions that seem as self-evident as those of the clergy and the nobilities of robe and sword. Concerning the latter, Élie Haddad joins together the evolving construction of categories with the way in which the actors seize upon them through conflict and attempt to establish them as patent and foregone conclusions, in ways that are all too often repeated by historiography. In so doing, he shows – behind the discourse based on a division of functions and origins – the interplay of the power struggles, articulated in terms of distinction and exclusion. Marie-Elizabeth Ducreux, in seeking to demarcate the Catholic clergy in the composite monarchy of the Habsburgs of the seventeenth century, puts the definitions of the first Estate and of the dignity attached to the handling of the sacraments into perspective by observing the diversity of political constitutions, the variety of social positions within the clergies, and the new and specular distinctions born of confessional confrontation. She thus reintroduces the interplay of the social in texts which proclaim the clergy’s social irreducibility. The multiplicity of scales re-centers the spatial dimension of the interplay, doubtless one of the keys to understanding the position of the high clergy.
- 15 The two following texts deal with the “hard boundaries” wielded to exclude and to solidify, and yet constantly seized up anew by the actors. Mathieu Marraud suggests a rereading of the sources in the economy of the Old Regime, not according to an “economic rationality” but as instruments of a system of local, conflictual, and hierarchical relations, in which each actor – here Parisian corporations – must work within an interplay of reciprocal and interactive ascriptions. These aim not so much to organize an economic activity as to enounce one’s own right to set the boundaries of the place of the other. The growing claim of the State to intervene in this interplay does not place it “above” the rules or beside the rules, but it is instead constantly being solicited by these rules. In Laurent Joly’s article in the division between the “Jews,” “Aryans,” and “Half-Jews” of Occupied France, the State plays a more direct role in the implementation of a categorization that violently excludes. Within debates about this new norm, in the divergences between the different bodies, administrative or judiciary, tasked with applying them, as well as in the utilization that those involved made of these norms and of these debates, one can nevertheless also see the clash of divergent values (confessional or “racial” for example) and power relations in the society of the time.
- 16 The last three articles are more directly dedicated to spatial boundaries. Still, Fanny Cosandey demonstrates that what plays out in the debates about the Royal Domain

under the Old Regime does not consist of merely dividing up this or that property within one category or another. More largely, this consists in redefining the relation between dynastic family and sovereign power. It ends in a shift to new definitions of the distinction between the private and the public, distinctions that are new and indeed thereafter essential to the coordination between social body and a monarchical State. The ambivalence of the monarchical power, between familial transmission and state permanence, thus produces an effort of categorization that is imposed upon the entire social body. Isabelle Backouche studies how, in Paris, ordinary citizens in their letters to the authorities seize upon extraordinary situations (the disappearance of the “zone” and the dispossession of “Jewish housing”) to find or defend their place, conquer a new one, indeed escape certain ascriptions. This interplay shows that the construction of urban space is always a product of the social and cannot be reduced to norms and realizations of bodies that seek to reserve the design for themselves. Instead, it results from multiple strategies flexibly mobilizing the different registers of norms. Finally, Christophe Duhamelle, in studying the 1668 introduction of the Gregorian (and thus “Catholic”) calendar into an overwhelmingly Protestant principality of the Holy Roman Empire by a Protestant prince, replaces this event, and the dispute that went along with it, into the whole group of categories (economic, political, confessional) and of border scales (empire, region, territory, parish) which the actors interactively implement and which prohibit mobilizing the sole categories of the religious and the political of which it seems, however, to partake.

- 17 Article by article, the reader will be able to perceive the echoes between the ways of handling borders, boundaries, and thresholds in different societies, at the crossroads of different powers, social forces and individual practices. These exist within various configurations, and in various ways they latch onto the elements they have at their disposal to defend their rights, contest those of others’, attempt to enrich themselves or to protect what they have, etc. These echoes are never identical in their resonance, and it is indeed in their differences that they intimate in what way they are interesting: they allow us to perceive the specificities remaining hidden between two societies, continuities between ways of proceeding, but which, within different institutional environments, or forms of power and conceptions of the social order, the cogs “turn” differently. They indicate, for a same period, how societies have been able to work one material in different ways throughout history. Behind the apparent continuity or on the contrary the apparent profound difference, they also hew forth a temporal perspective allowing us to grasp the changes in the very warp and woof of the fabric that makes up societies.

AUTHORS

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Isabelle Backouche is a Professor at the Centre de Recherches Historiques at EHESS. She is a historian who studies urban change through the connections between social and material

transformations of the city. She published *La Trace du fleuve. La Seine et Paris, 1750-1850* (Editions de l'EHESS, [2000] 2016), which analyses transformations in the role of the Seine in Paris. She then worked on urban development issues in the latter half of the twentieth century, starting with the issue of creating a buffer around historical monuments, leading to the book *Aménager la ville. Les centres urbains français entre conservation et rénovation (de 1943 à nos jours)* (Armand Colin, 2013). Recently she has conducted research on Paris, especially on “îlot insalubre” (insalubrious lot) number 16 in the south of the Marais. In her latest book she probes the motivations of this urban development initiative under the Vichy regime, showing that the transformation of the city cannot be understood when divorced from several contexts, including the political and the aesthetic (*Paris transformé. Le Marais 1900-1980 : de l'îlot insalubre au secteur sauvegardé*, Créaphis, [2016] 2019). She also co-edited a volume on social mobilizations over urban development. It highlights the plurality of viewpoints and the capacity of a great number of actors to resist decisions from on high (Isabelle Backouche, Nicolas Lyon-Caen, Nathalie Montel, Valérie Theis, Loïc Vadelorge and Charlotte Vorms (eds.), *La ville est à nous. Aménagement urbain et mobilisations sociales depuis le Moyen-Age*, Editions de la Sorbonne, 2018; I. Backouche, “Mobilisations urbaines et histoire des vainqueurs. Le cas de l'axe nord-sud à Paris (1959-1976),” p. 263-284). Lastly, she participated in a major study of philanthropy, conducting research in Paris (“Micro-tactiques de l'implantation charitable : quatre quartiers parisiens,” in C. Topalov, *Philanthropes en 1900. Londres, New York, Paris, Genève*, Créaphis, pp. 387-434, co-authored with C. Topalov). She is currently part of a collective research program on the massive transfer of apartments rented by Jewish families in Occupied Paris (“Opportunités et antisémitisme. Le logement à Paris, 1943-44,” with S. Gensburger and E. Le Bourhis, *Politika*, put online in June 2017, <https://www.politika.io/fr/notice/opportunités-antisémitisme-logement-a-paris-19431944>), and is pursuing social history work on the “Zone” surrounding Paris in the twentieth century (“La Zone et les zoniers parisiens. Un territoire habité, un espace stigmatisé,” *Genres urbains. Autour d'Annie Fourcaut*, Créaphis, 2019, p. 49-66). Concerned with making research findings available to the general public, she works with the non-profit *Faire-Savoirs* to produce audio walking tours found on the website “Ca c'est passé ici” (passe-ici.fr). With S. Gensburger she has published “Entendre l'histoire pour comprendre son élaboration : des bulles sonores à la webapp ‘passe-ici.fr’” (*(Re)conquérir des publics ? Les écritures de l'histoire sociale, Le Mouvement Social*, n° 269, 2019).

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modern period, enlarging on her first specialization in religious, political, and cultural history of Bohemia. She is also writing a cross-border history of Europe in the world, starting with Central Europe. Her current research concerns issues of the sacrality and legitimacy of the Kingdoms of Bohemia and Hungary in the seventeenth century, analyzed through the interactions between local actors of the religious and the political on one hand and on the other the sovereigns, within a larger European dimension (in particular, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, and Poland). Among her recent publications is *Dévotion et Légitimation. Patronages sacrés dans l'Europe des Habsbourg*, Presses universitaires de Liège, 2016.

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