

Come with us and enjoy geographical schizophrenia!

BAVO

Discussing the current and future form of the European Union cannot happen in abstract space. According to Etienne Balibar the crucial issue vis-à-vis the EU is to decide what kind of status and rights the inhabitants of this new political entity would individually and collectively enjoy. Let us thus for a moment not consider the poor outsiders knocking at Europe's gates, nor Europe's illegal inhabitants subjected to the abstract (and inconsistent) rule of law. Instead, we should focus on the legitimate, common citizens that populate the EU – those for example that are neither outspokenly pro nor contra the union, neither living in the core-cities of the EU nor in the Eastern hinterland, etc. – and use them as critical yardstick in the discussion on the future of Europe.

Let us start with the inhabitants of what came to be known as the Euregion Meuse-Rhine, a newly founded area located around one of the EU's mythical places: Maastricht. According to official propaganda, the Euregion Meuse-Rhine is nothing less than a laboratory for the future EU, since it crosses borders from three old nation states, bringing together people from four language groups, fusing different political and economical networks, etc. So, the question becomes what kind of subject is produced in this Euregional entity? What does it tell us about a future Europe?

What is immediately striking about the Euregion Meuse-Rhine is the hybrid, contradictory subjectivity of its inhabitants and users. A typical inhabitant of the Euregion starts a conversation by pointing out – often with a smirk – the many small pleasures they have experienced across the Euregion's many borders, the special bargains, the exciting interactions with foreigners at parties, school activities and so on. However, when one endorses this enthusiasm and discusses issues such as integration, deeper co-operation and cross-border thinking and acting, the mood suddenly shifts to a stubborn, even cold inertia. All sorts of unchangeable differences in cultural habits, social preferences and language are put forward as insurmountable obstacles to a further cross-border integration in the Euregion Meuse-Rhine.

This geographical schizophrenia, however, is not just the result of the emotional incapacity of individuals to meet the challenges of the EU's process of trans-nationalization. It is crucial to see that this paradoxical subjective mode is produced by the EU policies itself. An entire propaganda machine is in place today to stimulate EU citizens into consuming the borders between the old nation states and the differences they harbour. People are constantly enthused to enjoy the cultural specificity of their close neighbours – their history, nature, cuisine, dialect. People – and businesses too – are stimulated to profit from different tax schedules, find a job across the border, buy a (second) house, expand their market, etc.

However, a precondition of this cross-border enjoyment is that the borders that are transgressed, should not be eliminated totally. If the transgressed border would not simultaneously be kept alive as a virtual reality or a fascinating artefact, the cross-border economy would collapse, since there would no longer be any interesting differences to consume. Thus, parallel to the imperative to go trans-national, the EU's inhabitants are simultaneously asked to foster their cultural characteristics, to dig up their roots and relearn their dialect. Regions belonging to different nation states are financially supported to

capitalize their specific niche in the Euregional market, profiling their good residential climate, seducing consumers with special tax systems, intensifying their cultural identity, etc.

The fact that this dialectic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (to use Gilles Deleuze's terminology) seems to work for the majority of the users of the Euregion Meuse-Rhine, providing and securing their enjoyment, does not make it unproblematic. When it comes to tackling the burdens that ensue from successful cross-border industries such as drugs tourism or labour migration, we notice that people regress towards reactionary political models based on identity, the interests of the community and absolute control, and go so far as to callously undermine the cross-border opportunity of the Other. This happens, for instance, when people are allowed to work in flexible cross-border labour schemes without receiving equal social or residential rights. At the same time the cross-border activity of some simply prevents the border-enjoyment of others, as for instance is the case when wealthy residents of one country buy houses across the border, and thereby cause property prizes to rise beyond levels that local people can afford, thus effectively repressing the latter. This makes the crossing of borders for some groups not a source of an enjoyment, but on the contrary a humiliating and traumatic experience. Inversely, the borders enable people to leave their acute problems behind, by seeking temporary solutions across the border. In short, cross-border schizophrenia is an enjoyable factor, but it is not politically neutral, nor without considerable negative social by-effects.

The Euregion Meuse-Rhine is not a case in splendid isolation. One merely has to check the website of the EU to convince oneself of the fact that there are hardly any borders of the EU that are not part of a particular Euregion. With the Euregion Meuse-Rhine, we thus get a genuine picture of the future of Europe: a union suffering of a collective borderline syndrome, a union for which the internal borders are both the condition of possibility and impossibility, a union constantly fluctuating between a progressive and reactionary ideology, a union that opportunistically solves the dilemma of the local and the global and, moreover, a union in which all the differences (real or imagined) between the old nation states are exploited for cultural, social and economical profit. We thus have a union of 494 million people all happily living in an eternal in-between state, elastically crossing borders in order to benefit from a tax system here and enjoy a local dish there.

In short, the future of the EU is not only that of an empire in continuous expansion eastwards but also that of an 'inland empire' that exploits its own internal borders. No wonder that the EU, from its very start, is constantly balancing at the verge of a nervous breakdown.

This article is based upon BAVO's research on the Euregion Meuse-Rhine for the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht. See: www.euregionaalforum.net. Get the Euregional Paper – a collection of essays on the Euregion Meuse-Rhine and related issues – for free by sending an email to: info@janvaneyck.nl