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Hierarchies and Boundaries. Structuring the Social in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean

Abstract

The article is an introduction to the 8th issue of *Colloquia Humanistica*. It discusses the concepts of boundaries and hierarchies and their role in structuring the social reality of (semi)peripheral Eastern Europe. The text discusses, on the one hand, the relevance and validity of these concepts and, on the other, the possibility of a critical approach to them. Furthermore, the article reviews the most important ideas and concepts proposed by the authors who contributed to the issue.

Keywords: boundaries, hierarchies, Eastern Europe, modernity, indisciplinarity.

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In the present volume of *Colloquia Humanistica* we look at social reality through the lens of two key concepts – **hierarchies** and **boundaries** – the power of which lies in their exceptional, dual research potential. On the one hand, these concepts reflect two different principles of structuring the social reality – a vertical (**hierarchies**) and a horizontal (**boundaries**) one – which grasp its multifaceted and increasingly intricate complexity, particularly when taken together (e.g. Bourdieu, 2005; Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Kolossov & Scott, 2013; Pareto, 1991; Wilson & Donnan, 2012; Wright, 2000). On the other hand, they allow us to go beyond such theoretical approaches that focus on the alleged growing fluidity, liquidity or even non-existence of the reality (e.g. Baudrillard, 2005; Bauman, 2008; Derrida, 2002), often not paying enough attention to the fact that **hierarchies** and **boundaries** remain significant parts of the everyday experience of most social communities and individuals.

Importantly, in this volume we have tried to draw attention not only to the fact that **hierarchies** and **boundaries** are continuously well-rooted and inevitably present in the social reality, but also that they are subject to constant reconfigurations, shifts and modifications, due to structural changes as well as changes caused by collective and individual actors. Although the social world is structured both vertically – along the relations of domination and subordination, unequal distribution of social status and cultural capital, varying degrees of institutionalization of social organizations etc. – and horizontally – through demarcation lines running between (or across) cultural communities, political entities, social institutions, etc. – we were interested primarily in the dynamics of these structuring processes, which is as crucial as it is unpredictable. Therefore, the articles collected in this volume tackle the dynamics of **hierarchies** and **boundaries** from various points of view: while some address the issue of their materiality, others focus on their symbolic dimension; while some uncover how they are consolidated and sustained, others describe how they can be weakened, exceeded and diminished; while some address their historical forms, others focus on their more contemporary manifestations.

Moreover, we have collected articles that explore the dynamics of **hierarchies** and **boundaries** in Eastern Europe in a broad sense (including the Eastern Mediterranean), because we believe that it is very beneficial for the humanities and social sciences not to focus only on the importance of locality – i.e. on celebrating the uniqueness and irreducibility of each and every sociocultural context – but to keep developing broader reflection on the mechanisms that structure social reality at the regional level.

In specific Eastern European contexts – perceived as a (semi)peripheral sociocultural space (see e.g. Wallerstein, 1974; Zarycki, 2009) – one can identify numerous common processes taking place at the cultural, social and political level. They include, among other things: the historical emergence of the key attributes of modernity at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (modern states, nations and nationalisms, social elites, cultural minorities, etc.); the long-lasting experience of the 20th-century totalitarian and authoritarian systems (Nazism & the Holocaust, Stalinism & the Gulag); the contemporary experience of the chaotic and often shocking transition to liberal democracy after the fall of state socialism. Such points of convergence make it worthwhile to compare and confront analyses concerning, for example, Poland, Slovakia, Russia or Belarus with those concerning Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia or Croatia. We hope the articles collected in this volume provoke readers to make such comparisons and attempt to answer the question: How has the social reality been structured in Eastern Europe?

The thematic section opens with two historical articles, the authors of which reflect on both title concepts and show their strong mutual entanglement. In the first article, **Ana-Teodora Kurkina** discusses the specificity of the ideological activity of key Bulgarian nationalist intellectuals in the mid-19th century, reminding us that the process of defining modern state boundaries in Eastern Europe was inseparably intertwined with the process of strengthening new social hierarchies emerging from the ruins of large feudal empires. In her convincing, moderately instrumentalist analysis, Kurkina has analysed how the experience of changing the position in the social hierarchy, widely shared by the key Bulgarian intellectuals of that period, influenced their ways of shaping the imagined boundaries of the future Bulgarian state. The author shows how the modern Bulgarian elite-formation process marked by high social, educational and geographical mobility resulted in the emergence of a small, relatively closed and internally strongly consolidated group of national ideologues – such as Georgi Rakovski, Ivan Kasabov, Hristo Botev or Lyuben Karavelov – whose state-building projects reflected the ideological trends popular among international intellectuals much more than the actual views of the nationally indifferent masses from which they often originated and which they all claimed to represent.

In the second opening article, **Ivan Krasztev** takes us to the Soviet Union to reflect on the boundaries of mutually exclusive ideological systems at the top of the political hierarchy, on the example of the clash between the official Soviet state doctrine, legitimizing itself with its materialist-rationalist roots, and esotericism/occultism, i.e. a protean ideological system built on a spiritualist-irrational foundation. Krasztev discusses the dynamics

of the relationship between esotericism and state power in various periods – from the 1920s, through the 1960s, up to the 1980s – through the lens of the variety of ways in which the authoritarian state approached the very widespread phenomenon of occultism. Precisely speaking, on the one hand the author shows how the boundaries between the two ideological systems were blurred by attempts to include e.g. parapsychology into the natural sciences (controlled esotericism), and on the other he explains how the very same boundaries were strengthened: either by applying severe repressions against members of occult movements, including their physical elimination (esotericism as a threat to society), or by categorizing them as deviants or mentally ill people who should be subject to strict surveillance (corrective control by the state power). Importantly, both articles skilfully avoid the pitfall of historical determinism by exposing the relational – and therefore open – nature of political power, whether oscillating between the national and international (Kurkina) or the rational and irrational (Krasztev).

Ivan Posokhin in his article discusses the so-called *soft belarusization* in contemporary Belarus (2014-2018), considering whether this phenomenon can be interpreted as an attempt to extend the boundaries of Belarusian identity by including elements hitherto marginalized due to the expansion of broadly understood Russianness. The author asks about the extent to which these *soft* shifts in the official public discourse were actually able to resist the Russian violent practice of blurring the boundaries of Belarusian identity. Posokhin has no doubt that *soft belarusization* was a political tool with limited scope and under the full control of the state authorities, with no potential for bottom-up change and no space for a horizontal social movement. He also draws attention to an important theoretical aspect of his research, as he notes that in Belarus the border itself is a polysemantic phenomenon which also functions on a symbolic level. True geographical borders were mixed with symbolic boundaries, such as ethnic boundaries or those defining belonging to a larger context and sovereignty.

The issue of the polysemantic nature of the border in the Belarusian context is continued in the article by **Tomasz Kamusella**. The author explores the limits of the use of languages and their alphabets, pointing out that the Western border of Belarus is also a symbolic border where the domination of the Cyrillic alphabet ends. Kamusella is interested in the largely unexplored phenomenon of the so-called *Polish Cyrillic*, i.e. a method of transcribing Polish religious publications into the Russian version of the Cyrillic alphabet. Interestingly, by examining the language aspect of delimiting the identity boundaries of the Polish national minority within the state borders of another state (Belarus) dominated by yet another one (Russia), Kamusella explores the hierarchy of identities and

languages within a single territorial unit. The author not only examines the characteristics of *Polish Cyrillic*, but also reflects on the political aspect of maintaining such a way of transcribing Polish religious publications. Hence, he points to the paradox of using the Russian Cyrillic rather than the Belarusian. He notes, among other things, that the young generation perceives this as an unwanted imposition of Polonization, which may be a threat to the Belarusian language, which is already at risk of being dominated by Russian.

The authors of the next two articles continue to consider the issue of language boundaries in the context of social exclusion. **Izabela Olszewska** has conducted a linguistic analysis of the ways in which Polish Jews described their own everyday trauma during the Holocaust, in order to reflect on the limits of language in expressing the radical experience of cruelty and violence. The author draws attention to the diversity of language strategies attempting to express the complexity of the traumatic experience of the Jewish community condemned to extermination: from different variants of reportage oriented towards building a maximally realistic – and therefore credible – picture of the situation, to a whole range of language of emotions describing the human drama of stigmatization, terror and horror. Olszewska's article seems to suggest that Jewish attempts to describe the human disaster of the Holocaust broadened the boundaries of language by adding such ways of articulating trauma that had previously seemed unthinkable. **Magdalena Szpilman**, in turn, proposes a philosophical reflection on the limits of language in relation to an incomparably less extreme, but undoubtedly significant form of social exclusion. Namely, the author considers the limits of mutual comprehensibility between sign language used by the deaf community and phonic language used by the majority of the human population. She reflects on this problem from an interdisciplinary perspective, confronting selected works of Plato, Denis Diderot, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac and Oliver Sacks with selected contemporary cultural works, such as theatre plays. Szpilman's conclusion is more sceptical than Olszewska's suggestions, because Szpilman claims that crossing many boundaries between these two languages is impossible, which forces the deaf community to function in partial isolation from the majority.

Kristina Vorontsova opens the part of the volume devoted to studying literature, film and visual arts. In her article, Vorontsova reflects on the symbolic role of Poland in the cultural space of post-Soviet Russia. She refers to the concept of Poland as the Great (cultural) Borderland, which took root among the Soviet intelligentsia in the 1960s and 1970s. Within this framework, Poland was to be a space accessible and understandable to representatives of the Soviet cultural elites, interpreted by them as a

win-dow on Europe, a bridge between two cultural spaces (West and East), a kind of meeting venue. Vorontsova looks for traces of the old interpretation of Poland as a cultural borderland and finds them, among others, in Alexander Anashevich's poems. According to her, this author offered a novel reinterpretation of the myth of Poland as the Great Borderland which originated in the *Polomania* of the Soviet Union period. In Anashevich's works, Vorontsova saw Poland primarily as a liminal and carnival space, considered in the aesthetics of camp and the grotesque. At the same time, she claims, Poland maintained its cross-border character and helped to reinterpret the shared 20th-century troubled past of both these social spaces.

While Vorontsova's article deals with the issue of cultural boundaries in a spatial aspect, **Gordana Todoric** offers us a more temporally oriented view. In her article discussing the work of David Albahari – a writer of Sephardic Jewish origin belonging to the second generation of Serbian postmodernists who debuted on the Yugoslav literary scene in the 1970s – the author addresses the problem of the broken continuity of the Jewish cultural tradition after the Holocaust. Todoric shows how Albahari's literary search, both formal and thematic, reflected the ambivalent situation of a member of the Jewish community in post-war Yugoslavia: on the one hand deprived of access to the transgenerational transmission of his community's traditional culture, and on the other endowed with the possibility of making his own identity choices and defining his Jewishness autonomously. The author points out that in order to create his own Jewish identity, Albahari first had to cross the boundaries of traditional identity founded mainly on a religious component in order to re-establish a sort of continuity with the Jewish canon in a shape he managed to reconstruct from the cultural rudiments he had inherited.

In the next article, **Anna Batori** takes us back to the concept of hierarchies, this time discussed through the lens of the sociological reading of the contemporary Romanian TV series *Silent Valley* (2016). For Batori, such a reading is a pretext to reflect on the problem of sustainability of the three types of hierarchies that contemporary democratic-capitalist Romania inherited from the previous, authoritarian, state-socialist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu: socio-political, ethnic, and gender hierarchies. Using the toolkit of film analysis, Batori explains how the formal solutions and ideological overtone of the series testify to the sustainability of the first two hierarchies in Romanian society. More precisely, she uncovers threads concerning straight continuity between the former elites of the socialist *nomenklatura* and the new economic oligarchy as well as the slightly more complicated sustainability of the ethnic hierarchy on the example of the attitude of the Romanian majority to the Roma minority, whose marginalization evolved

towards Western-style exoticization. More ambivalent is the question of gender hierarchy, which was broken by the image of a strong, childless woman in a high position, focused on her professional career, but at the same time remained partly sustained when it comes to the radically intolerant stance of the majority towards homosexual relationships.

After papers on literature and film, **Piotr P. Płucienniczak** presents his text on visual arts. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, the author asks how critics and creators of contemporary art (artists) in Poland set the boundaries of their field. He discusses the phenomenon of *Institutional Critique* (IC) between 1990 and 2015, which he defines as a mechanism of self-reflection on the field of art and a method by which artists and other participants of the field explore the aforementioned boundaries of the field of contemporary art. More precisely, within IC Płucienniczak includes statements and actions that concern the conditions of creating and distributing art and social relations within these conditions. Furthermore, Płucienniczak looks not only at boundaries, but also at hierarchies within the field, and his IC research reveals that primarily well-established players participated in establishing the field boundaries – mostly men and representatives of several central, privileged institutions. This is particularly interesting in the context of the emancipatory potential of IC, which was included in his definition.

The thematic section closes with a series of anthropological articles based on field research, which address the issue of (symbolic) boundaries among local communities in the contemporary Balkans. The first two articles tackle the issue of divided cities which were the arena of nationalist conflicts in the 1990s. In the article on Mitrovica (Kosovo), **Marzena Maciulewicz** – distancing herself from the dominating views which emphasize the key importance of the Albanian-Serbian ethno-national divisions – highlights the importance of residential status as a factor that equally strongly shapes neighbourly relations in the city. Based on extensive quantitative and qualitative field research conducted in both parts of the divided city – north (Serbian) and south (Albanian) – Maciulewicz shows an interesting connection between the image of an ideal neighbour/citizen of Mitrovica and the residential status of the inhabitants drawing this image. It turns out that from the point of view of the local community, the main dividing line structuring neighbourhood relations was the division into locals and outsiders – softened by a tendency to emphasize the role of individual involvement in neighbourhood practices – while the divisions along confessional, ethnic and national affiliations were much less important. These findings have led Maciulewicz to the conclusion that a lack of understanding of local community problems in higher-level policies, including the international

peace-building process, results in their inability to rebuild Mitrovica as a space of peaceful coexistence of a multiethnic society.

Agata Rogoś, in her article on confrontational strategies between Slavic and non-Slavic entities in Skopje, seems less optimistic about the integrative potential of local communities. Rogoś introduces the concept of a “polemic city” and examines it on the example of polemic discourses around the urban landscapes of Skopje after 2009 which constituted and reinforced already-existing symbolic boundaries in the city. Within her action-oriented research approach, the author emphasizes the mutual entanglement of two types of symbolic practices: institutional practices of politicization of public space, pursued by Macedonian nationalists from VMRO-DPNE mostly through their attempts at the *antiquization* and *museumification* of Skopje, and contestatory civic reactions arising from intellectual elites, social activists and NGOs. Interestingly, Rogoś observes that local contestatory discourses did not contribute to overcoming the ethno-nationalistic framework of the symbolic division in favour of increasing the potential of transnational integration, but remained similar to them, i.e. based on the conflictual logic of collective action. Thus, Rogoś has become convinced of the sustainability of symbolic boundaries at both levels of discourse (public/private, universal/local). Her conclusion is that modern Skopje remains a multidimensional symbolic battlefield with no visible integratory potential even at the local level.

Theodoros A. Spyros closes the anthropological block with his ethnographic and ethnohistorical research on the small Jewish community of Trikala (Greece) understood as a multilocal community which today has its symbolic centre in Trikala, but at the same time is geographically dispersed among other places. Spyros has adopted a processual research perspective and argues that the boundaries of this community were negotiable and depended on both structural and subjective-contextual factors. Using different types of ethnographic methods – including unstructured, semi-structured and creative interviews as well as oral history methods – the author points to the fundamental importance of the relationship between “Jewishness” and “locality” and shows how Trikala’s Jews built the ethnic pluralism of their community on the basis of the process of internal social exchange. Thus, Spyros argues not only that the internal boundaries of this community were mostly symbolic (and sustained by various identity politics’ perspectives on their origin), but also that they were fluid and continually reconstructed by social actors.

The second, smaller thematic block dedicated to relationships between *Culture and Economy* opens with a text by **Maša Kolanović**. The author examines how capitalism captured the collective imagination of the Croats

in the first half of the 1990s, how it was inaugurated, naturalized and finally domesticated, regardless of the ongoing military conflict after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Kolanović understands capitalism not only as an economic system, but also as a system of affects and values that influenced and transformed collective cultural practices and patterns. In other words, Kolanović reflects on how capitalism, which invaded the social space of Croatia with as much blatant force as ethnic conflicts and nationalist antagonisms in the first half of the 1990s, influenced the shape of the whole community, its emotions and structure of feeling. Kolanović shows not only successful practices of implementing capitalism in the Croatian context, but also unsuccessful attempts to resist this utopian unambiguity of capitalism as a system allegedly necessary to replace the completely devalued market socialism of Yugoslavia.

By analysing contemporary Croatian literary texts, **Lana Molvarec** looks at various forms of economic transactions in tourist practices in Dalmatia, i.e. in a sphere and area important for the economy of both Yugoslavia and later Croatia. Molvarec is particularly interested in economic exchanges of a libidinal and spatial character. The former concerns the phenomenon of *galebarenje*, i.e. the practice of seducing foreign female tourists (usually several simultaneously and continuously throughout the tourist season) by young local men, mainly during the Yugoslav period. This exchange was to consist primarily in satisfying the sexual needs of female tourists (especially those from Western and capitalist countries) and some, usually symbolic, increase in status by local men fulfilling their desires. According to Molvarec, the breakup of Yugoslavia turned this type of exchange into an exchange that would consist in a perverse transformation of the local space into one that would meet the needs and desires of Western tourists. This would be manifested, for example, in giving private apartments to tourists for rent or selling them for accommodation in a so-called “good location”. However, Molvarec sees similarities between these practices, which in both cases seemed to consist in the local population making a certain intimate or private sphere available for exchange, in both cases converted into some kind of economic gain. According to the author, both types of exchange could have a destructive impact on the local community by deepening social stratification or the unequal distribution of goods.

Danijela Lugarić Vukas, on the other hand, analyses the relationship between the literature of Gulag testimony and economy. She presents three types of literary testimonies: Karlo Štajner’s memoirs *Seven Thousand Days in Siberia*, Varlam Shalamov’s story “Lend-Lease” and Danilo Kiš’s *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, in which she looks for metaphors and symbols of the camp economy and intertextual exchange of experiences

of camp trauma. Lugiarić Vukas presents the first two authors not only as surviving witnesses, but also as profound observers of the economic aspects of the Gulag, which was a metaphor for the entire socioeconomic system of the Soviet Union. Štajner's and Varlamov's testimony shows that the two topics – the inhumanity, perversion and deviance of the Gulag and its economic aspects – were not and cannot be separated. By using the language of economic metaphors, dry numbers and calculations, they both emphasized the pain and suffering of the prisoners and the dehumanizing mechanism of the camps. In Kiš's work, the author saw inspiration drawn from Štajner's diary, which she has interpreted as a kind of exchange or mediation of the experience of totalitarianism, of which Kiš's father was a victim as well as being a silent witness to that history.

Next, the *Review* section begins with two reviews thematically connected with the *Culture and Economy* section. **Agata Gać** reviews Katarzyna Szumlewicz's monograph *Love and Economics in Women's Literary Biographies*, showing social, economic and cultural mechanisms that have been shaping the position and role of women in various contexts for hundreds of years. **Katarzyna Roman-Rawska's** review essay is devoted to a monograph by Paweł Tomczok, *Literary Capitalism: Images of Economic Abstractions in Polish Literature of the Second Half of the 19th Century*. As Roman-Rawska claims, this comprehensive book shows that it is worth crossing artificial boundaries between disciplines in order to fully explore the essence of a literary phenomenon. According to her, Tomczok considers real economic abstractions in Polish literature of the second half of the 19th century. He is interested in the vague constructs of capitalist language, such as money, goods or capital, which have a concrete impact on people, their imagination, behaviour or emotions.

The next three reviews refer to articles from the main thematic section, although to different degrees. **Branko Gorgiev's** review of Vitomir Mitevski's *The Shadow of King Marko: Ancient, Byzantine and Macedonian Epic Poetry* (2017) is related to Macedonian topics in that it concerns reflection on the complex problem of Indo-European, Byzantine and Macedonian cultural tradition through the prism of the well-known transcultural motif of King Marko. Next, **Maciej Falski** looks at the mutual relations between religion and nationhood in his review of Xavier Bougarel's latest book, *Islam and Nationhood in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Surviving Empires* (2018). Falski not only points to the paradoxes of this mutual entanglement, but also identifies the foundation of Bougarel's narrative in the conviction that modern Muslim political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina lastingly stuck to the idea of putting themselves under the protection of such an imperial centre that could secure their (national) interests in the region. Finally,

Tomasz Rawski reviews the latest book by Siniša Malešević, *Grounded Nationalisms* (2019), which provides a macro-historical and sociological perspective on the emergence of nationalism as the dominant form of modern subjectivity. Rawski indicates the main theoretical innovation of this work in comparison to Malešević's previous works, and also explains its main contribution to contemporary theories of nationalism.

The last, *Presentations* section features an article by **Dechka Chavdarova** which corresponds well to the main focus of the whole volume. The author presents the results of a project conducted by her Faculty in the form of three volumes of the *Limes Slavicus* series, which considers the boundaries of the concept of Slavdom. Chavdarova, together with the whole research team, asked whether it was possible in the current geopolitical situation, including real conflicts based on religion, ethnicity or politics between Slavic states, to talk about any Slavic community, and if so – what kind of community? In a way, this is a question about the possibility of a supranational cultural community existing in the era of nation-states. Addressing this issue seems to be particularly important in the context of the functioning of institutions offering research within the framework of broad Slavic studies.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the articles collected in this volume not only uncover various aspects of hierarchies and boundaries structuring the Eastern European social reality, but also prove that their authors very willingly and skilfully cross the boundaries of the overly narrow disciplinary division of academic work by combining various theoretical and methodological approaches in their research. From this perspective, *Colloquia Humanistica 8* testifies to the fact that thinking beyond the power of one particular discipline, thinking beyond disciplines towards *indisciplinarity* (Rancière, 2006), lies in the very nature of the humanities and social sciences.

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Hierarchie i granice. Strukturyzowanie tego, co społeczne w Europie Wschodniej i na Śródziemnomorzu

Artykuł jest wprowadzeniem do 8 numeru czasopisma *Colloquia Humanistica*. Problematyzuje pojęcia hierarchii i granic oraz ich rolę w strukturyzowaniu rzeczywistości społecznej (pół)peryferyjnej Europy Wschodniej. Tekst omawia, z jednej strony, kwestię aktualności i przydatności tychże pojęć, a z drugiej możliwość krytycznego podejścia do nich. Artykuł oferuje także przegląd najważniejszych myśli i koncepcji zaproponowanych przez autorów artykułów opublikowanych w numerze.

Słowa kluczowe: granice, hierarchie, Europa Wschodnia, nowoczesność, indyscyplinarność.

Note

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