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ON PARADIGM SHIFTS, HETEROGENEITY  
AND CULTURE WARS**

Agosto de 1995  
Oficina nº 55

OFICINA DO CES

Publicação seriada do

Centro de Estudos Sociais

Praça de D. Dinis

Colégio de S. Jerónimo, Coimbra

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**BOUNDARIES, MARGINS AND MIGRANTS: ON PARADIGM  
SHIFTS, HETEROGENEITY AND CULTURE WARS**

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**Cost A2 Workshop, "Immigration in Southern Europe", 11-12  
November 1994, Coimbra, Portugal**

**Session 3: Guests or Residents? National Policies and the New  
European Order**

## **Abstract**

Drawing on recent developments in cultural studies and in the social studies of science, this paper discusses an approach to the phenomenon of migration that defines migrants, migrations, movement, travel or exile as the rule rather than a break with "normality", without taking national states as the "natural" units for the analysis of migration flows, but as one of the different scales on which the phenomenon of migration emerges, and conceiving migrants as "boundary actors" that negotiate and articulate "hybrid" or heterogeneous cultural configurations, relying on cultural repertoires from different origins, rather than as exemplars of irreducibly alien cultures on the margins of national societies. This approach is homologous with a "cosmopolitan" view of migration, foreigners and cultural configurations and processes, that stands in opposition to current restrictive state policies, boundary policing and "migrant scares".

Even a cursory overview of the transdisciplinary field of cultural studies over the last two decades will reveal what seems to be a central and decisive shift in the way cultures are defined and represented (Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 1992). This shift is expressed, among other features, in the way movement, travel, migration and exile have gained increasing relevance as topics, contexts and metaphors for the study of cultural processes. The definitions of cultures themselves have increasingly focused on dimensions like decentering, unpredictability, heterogeneity, hybridation, transgression, domination and resistance. This is leading to an increasing need to recognize the undecidability of concepts that have conventionally been used to separate, but can be transcoded into concepts that connect, relate and articulate. Such is the case of a term like "boundary"<sup>1</sup>.

A boundary may be understood - and has indeed been understood - as a line that separates or segregates, as Marcia Tucker put it in a striking enumeration, those groups or individuals that are "ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as inconsequential, de-authorized, 'other' or threatening", from those who are "valorized" (Tucker, 1990: 7). Audre Lorde defined the latter as those who are in agreement with a "mythical norm", describable as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure" (Lorde, 1990: 282). This is the standard that makes it possible to reduce all those groups or individuals who are in any way different to "others" at the margins of the "normal", whose existence is recognizable and speakable only as deviations from the norm.

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<sup>1</sup> My use of this concept is heavily influenced by the work of Star and Griesemer (1989) and Santos (1994: 119-137). For a more detailed discussion, cf. Nunes, 1994.

But boundaries can also be defined as the location of cultural articulation and of the emergence of new cultural configurations, of new identities based on hybrid and heterogeneous cultural repertoires, tied to "intertwined histories" (Said, 1993), complex life experiences and a plurality of "generalized others" (Bhabha, 1994; Nunes, 1994). The construction and deconstruction of these cultural boundaries and identities are central topics of recent research on cultures. They rely on new languages for the description and articulation of the processes that generate them. These languages, in turn, resort to the use of terms that evoke movement and transgression, linkages between places, social locations, identity formations. Cultural creation and the articulation of cultural configurations are increasingly referred to resorting to a vocabulary that suggests obvious connections with the wider approaches to globalization, especially those dealing with economic globalization and to the movements of migrants, travellers, refugees and exiles (Clifford, 1992; Wolff, 1993; Ferguson *et al.*, 1990). This, in turn, is linked to the increasing relevance of the *body* as the incorporated matrix and carrier of complex histories and life experiences, allowing these to be transported and to move across territorial, social or cultural borders (Santos, 1994).

It is possible to identify some links between this shift in approach, its topics and its language, and similar developments in the sciences. This means that instead of looking at order, stability, predictability and homogeneity as the norm and the standard point for research in different areas, the centre stage is being occupied by process, uncertainty, unpredictability, heterogeneity and chaos (Santos, 1987). To be more precise, current work in both the sciences and cultural studies is run through by a tension between these two trends. In cultural studies, this is shown, for instance, by the opposition between, on the one hand, cultural "fundamentalists" - who define

cultures as essences to be preserved, with boundaries to be policed and defended against different types of "barbarians" or "marginals", and with a clear-cut set of arguments separating those who are "in" from those who are "out", those who are "up" from those who are "down" - , and, on the other hand, those who see boundaries as the locations where culture is constructed and identities are defined, and "in" and "out", "up" and "down" as contested terms subject to constructions and reconstructions. Although struggle between essentialists of different kinds - from cultural and religious fundamentalists to political conservatives, nationalists and positivistic scientists and scholars, and to some more radical and essentialist versions of "identity politics" - is currently widespread, the fundamental "culture wars" that are being fought today oppose, in broad terms, an essentialist and separatist way of thinking about cultures and about social collectives and social and political participation, on the one hand, and a "cosmopolitan" way of articulating experiences, representations and practices that are quintessentially (no better word found!) translocal and emerge *on* the boundaries, rather than on either side of them. In fact, as several cultural critics have pointed out, it is simply not possible to establish radical distinctions and separations between cultures or cultural configurations that inhabit and share the same space.

As a sociologist of culture and science, I would like to discuss - albeit in a necessarily brief and oversimplified way - some of the implications of this shift - which may be regarded as part of a more general social and cognitive paradigm shift that some authors, like Boaventura de Sousa Santos have described as the "postmodern transition" (Santos, 1989a, 1994) - for the way we look at migration and migrants and, particularly, for the way we deal with the current - restrictive - policies of the European States and of the European Union. My argument will be general, with few qualifications and specifications, and its aim is to ask (hopefully) relevant questions, rather than provide new

data or extended analysis of currently available information. The very notion of the "immigrant" is a contested one, as can be readily seen by scanning the different terms used in different contexts and historical moments to describe those who move and those who have settled as a result of those movements. Concepts like immigrant, guest worker, diaspora, refugee, exile, or the increasing ethnicization of migrant communities are good examples of the cross-national and cross-societal character of the "migrant" as a contested figure and of "migration" as a social and cultural construction. Portuguese migrants and their descendants are being redefined as members of a deterritorialized nation and of Portuguese communities abroad; luso-americans have become an ethnic group among others within the increasingly ethnicized representation of American Society (Feldman-Bianco, 1994; Monteiro, 1987). But there are also important shifts and struggles about the way migrants from North Africa and from the African continent generally or from the Middle-East are described, stereotyped and dealt with in Europe, evoking old colonial images or religious scares; or take the way migrants from Latin America or of Hispanic or Haitian origin are treated by American authorities, as a threat to the integrity and well-being of the US... Or, again, think of the way Asians - and the Japanese in particular - have become the stereotype of a culturally alien people, whose different way of life, morals and everyday practices have turned them into an enemy of a new sort, skillful in handling all the resources of capitalism and highly successful in business<sup>2</sup>.

How can we develop an approach to the phenomenon of migration that will allow us to define migrants, migrations, movement, travel or exile as the rule rather than a break with "normality", without taking national states as the "natural" units for the analysis of migration flows and without conceiving of migrants as exemplars of irreducibly alien cultures? In short, how can we

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent literary exemplar of "Japanese-bashing", see Michael Crichton's best-seller *Rising Sun* and the motion picture based on it.



develop an approach to migration that takes a "comparative cosmopolitan" (Robbins, 1993) point of view which, as Paul Gilroy (1992, 1994) put it, avoids the pitfalls of "ethnic absolutism" based on reverse stereotyping and on the strengthening of barriers and divisions? The basic assumption of this paper is that the same vocabulary and metaphors that are being used to redefine culture and cultural processes can be useful ways of redefining the flows of people, the people who flow and the places connected through their flows, of defining migrations as phenomena existing at different scales (Santos, 1988) and through the articulation of these scales - e.g., the local, the national and the global -, and migrants as transnational "dwellers/travellers" (Clifford, 1992), inhabiting a space defined by the tensions between "roots and routes" (Gilroy, 1993) or "roots and options" (Santos, 1995). This, in turn, should help us in dealing with the conflicts of representation and definition that underlie state and EU policies towards immigration and allow us to develop an alternative way of looking at current policies toward migration and immigrants in Europe. In fact, these policies rely on a set of arguments ranging from considerations of economic conditions to nationalism, national security and the preservation of national cultures. A sort of "migrant scare" is actively developed, demonizing immigrants and stereotyping them along racial or cultural lines<sup>3</sup>. There is, in short, a correspondence between the current shifts in the way cultural analysts and social scientists deal with culture and cultural processes and the way social actors committed to a "cosmopolitan" view of

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<sup>3</sup> We still lack systematic studies of the political demonology of European societies and of the different cultural resources, forms of representation and media on which it has drawn in different historical contexts, in the line of the remarkable work Michael Rogin has been carrying out for the United States (Rogin, 1987, 1994). A particularly relevant issue is the shift from East/West to North/South as the main axis along which "otherness" and the "scares" associated with them are being redefined. The growing bodies of work on the representation of the "Other" in the West (e.g. Said, 1979, 1993, Spivak, 1987, 1990, 1993; Bhabha, 1994, Ahmad, 1992, Taussig, 1987, 1993, Haraway, 1989, Clifford, 1988, Rosaldo, 1989, Clifford and Marcus, 1986, Karp and Lavine, 1991, Thelen and Hoxie, 1994, Ferguson *et al*, 1990, Bamyeh 1993), on the issues of race, ethnicity and culture (e.g. Wieviorka, 1993, Donald and Rattansi, 1992, and the contributions to Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 1992, and Ferguson *et al*, 1990) and on "moral panics" and the social construction of deviance (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994) provide significant starting points and a wealth of materials for such a project.

migration and migrant populations and communities fight out their "culture wars"<sup>4</sup> over the representation of migrants. It should be said, however, that this paper does not specifically deal with the self-representations of migrants which may be found on both sides of the divide between essentialists and cosmopolitans. Available data suggest that there is no homogeneity among immigrants themselves, and no stability over time in their identities, either. The concept of "boundary identities" may be extremely useful, here, as well as the concept of "hybrid" or heterogeneous cultural configurations, relying on cultural repertoires from different origins (Nunes, 1994, Swidler, 1986), but always requiring a specification of the historically constituted "openings" that shape the web of opportunities and of constraints giving rise to each particular social and cultural configuration (Santos, 1994, Nunes, 1995).

Migrants (in the widest sense of those who move across borders and politically defined boundaries pushed by need, discrimination, violence or suffering, or pulled by the prospects of a better life) may be described as "boundary social actors", actors-on-the-move and in the process of constructing hybrid, heterogeneous and unstable identities, as opposed to social actors "on the margin" of "normal" social life, excluded from full participation in equal terms with those who are "in". This opposition is homologous to the one that opposes current restrictive policies of states, on the one hand, and those who defend a cosmopolitan view of migration, foreigners and cultural configurations and processes. These "culture wars" involve issues of definition and representation of the "Other" and, concurrently, of "Us" and our "essence". State policies are increasingly turning problems of

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<sup>4</sup> The expression "culture wars" - evoking the "Kulturkampf" in 19th Century Germany - has become popular in the USA to refer to recent public debates in the fields of religion, education and art (Hunter, 1991, 1994; Gates, 1992; Graff, 1992; Robbins, 1993, Dubin, 1992). In this paper, I am using "culture wars" to refer more generally to the struggles over the representations of "us" and "them", of identity and alterity, of cultures and their boundaries, as well as over their political implications.

cultural diversity and of migrant and foreign populations in European countries (and in the US) into issues of national security and the defence of a presume "essence" or "purity" of ethnic and racial composition and culture. Immigrants, in other words, are being redefined as the new "barbarians" and criminalized and demonized by official state discourse and official state policies. These "migrant scares" are amplified through the increasing homogenization of policies, that contribute to the erection of new cultural walls, excluding those who are seen as the carriers of other, irreducibly alien cultures. The stereotypes of the "other" as threatening draw, as is well known, on physical attributes and appearance, on dress, accent or total or partial ignorance of the language of the host country, on eating habits or religious practice. Whereas it is true that cultural essentialism based on an exclusionary and aggressive, ethnically rooted politics of identity often takes the form of opposition to the local dominant culture as a whole, it is no less true that, in many cases, the ostensive display of signs of "otherness" is one way of reclaiming a cultural heritage that allows migrants to affirm a new identity as boundary actors, not a sheer refusal of the "values" or the way of life of the host country nor a reenactment of old forms of ethnic identity seen as destiny, but on a neoethnicity based on the reassertion of identifications that relies on their becoming *visible*. As Fredric Jameson has put it: "Ethnicity is something you are condemned to; neoethnicity is something you decide to reaffirm about yourself" (Jameson, 1992: 117). These "neoethnic" identifications are, at root, ambiguous and indeterminate. They may constitute the building blocks of a cosmopolitan assertion of differences; but they may also take the form of war, persecution, ethnic cleansing or extermination. In other words, what they mean is dependent on how they are *performed*.

Ironically, one of the most essentialist and exclusionary forms of a "politics of identity" emerges in the shape of attempts at imposing local cultural

forms as "universal" patterns, a common practice of Western countries over the last five centuries. The emergence of the European Union has made this process more visible, not less, by shifting the location of the "others" to the margins of a transnational space, while, at the same time, multiplying the "internal others" within that space at both the national and the local scales. From this point of view, the meanings of the use of scarves by muslim girls in French schools should be analysed and discussed in a way *symmetrical* to the discussion of the ostensive use of gender or class "markers" which are only seen as "natural" because of their invisibility as potential signs of discrimination and segregation, or, alternatively, as resources for the positive assertion of a difference. In other words, the meanings of identity "markers" or cultural objects and practices is not inscribed in them once and for all. They are *assigned* in the processes of being used in social situations, of generating identifications *with* something or someone, *against* something or someone. All forms of identity politics are at risk of being assigned meanings that are likely to make them fall back onto new forms of essentialism, fundamentalism, exclusion or stereotyping, whenever assertions of "purity" and the search for "true" origins replace the awareness of the relational character of cultures and cultural configurations, of their emergence as the outcome of "intertwined histories" (Said, 1993) and of political processes, and of the undecidability of cultural items (West, 1990; Gitlin, 1993).

In Southern European countries, this process has contributed to construct a powerful representation of the convergence of EU countries through the sharing of fears, scares and imaginary threats from those "outside" or on the margins of European society and culture, like Africans, Muslims, some East Europeans, Indians or Asians, and generally those coming from a demonized "Third World". This is a particularly strong instance of the "state as imagination of the core" (Santos, 1993) and the associated rhetoric of

convergence: "developed" countries are defined by the significant presence of immigrants and refugees. If these are few in number or virtually non-existent, they can be created through official discourse, legislation and media representations<sup>5</sup>. In a case like that of Portugal, this situation has to do with the characteristics of the renegotiation, in a new context, of its intermediate and intermediary position as a semiperipheral society in the world-system, involving a new phenomenon, that of the in-migration of citizens from the former African colonies and from Brazil to a country which has known for several centuries as one of its most persistent and defining features the phenomenon of outmigration. The specificity of the cultural configurations found in Portugal as instances of a "boundary culture" or "border culture" (Santos, 1994) is an ambiguous feature, that has the potential for the development of a mimetic attitude towards the exclusionary and essentialist attitudes and policies developed by core countries (and based on old colonial stereotypes), but also the potential to counteract these trends on the basis of a more "cosmopolitan" attitude towards foreigners and particularly those coming from the Portuguese-speaking countries.

The previous argument points towards two issues which I cannot deal with at length here, but are relevant enough to deserve mention, if only a brief one.

First, how does one become a citizen and how is citizenship to be defined under the new conditions emerging from the pervasive movement of people across national borders? This new situation requires a rethinking of the concept of citizenship and its links to nationhood beyond the two basic principles inherited from the nation-building processes of the 19th century -

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<sup>5</sup> Turning small absolute increases in the number of those seeking refugee status into widely publicized "frightening" percent increases has been one of the most widely used resources for the construction of a "refugee problem" in Portugal.

the state-centered, territory-based and assimilationist principle of *jus soli* and the ethnic-centered and tendentially segregating principle of *jus sanguinis*, which Rogers Brubaker (1992) studied in detail for the cases of France and Germany, respectively. The contested definitions of "European citizenship" are still largely based on the transfer of principles used to define citizenship as linked to nationality to a transnational but bounded space. This has led to a reproduction, at a transnational scale, of a whole range of discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes and practices aimed at the "non-Europeans" - a label that, it should be stressed, does not apply in the same way to nationals of other core countries of Europe and North America, to those who come from the "Asian dragons" or to those who come from what is usually called, in an indiscriminate way, the Third World or the "developing countries". The "upgrading" of the "national" patterns of inclusion and exclusion to a transnational scale is charged with tensions whose visibility arises, for instance, in institutional forms of racism and ethnicism or in public - and often physically violent - displays of xenophobia, aimed at an "alien" or "other" identified with the "foreigner", the "non-national" or the carrier of what are perceived as visible or audible markers of racial and/or ethnic difference. Xenophobia does not distinguish between the "foreigners" who are "Europeans" entitled (in principle, at least) to a range of rights and subject to a range of duties shared with the "nationals" of any EU country. All foreigners, no matter where they come from, are competitors for scarce jobs and for the limited resources of social security and health, threats to employment, security and a familiar way of life. A transnational concept of citizenship requires a radical revision of the *national* matrix of the concept, and the invention of new ways of defining common, transnational frameworks of rights and their enforcement, without losing sight of the fundamental right to differences rooted in history and in agency. The current debates over the concept of human rights and its relation to cultural diversity over the "common patrimony of humanity"

(Santos, 1989b; Pureza, 1993) and over the theory of democracy and the public sphere are undoubtedly significant contributions to this discussion.

The second issue can be phrased as: how does migration (in the general sense of permanent or long-term movement of people across state borders) work as a mode of *performing* citizenship or, alternatively, as a *response* to the denial - in its various forms, ranging from economic deprivation to political or religious persecution or intolerance, to war and outright physical elimination - of citizenship and human rights? As Albert Hirschman (1992) has convincingly shown, *a propos* the collapse of the former German Democratic Republic, the mechanism of "exit" is not necessarily alternative to that of "voice". In some situations, resorting to "voice" is one way of making "exit" possible, as when people under an authoritarian or dictatorial regime use the possibilities of public expression and demonstration during "unsettled" or transitional periods to reclaim the right to leave the country. Depending on how and under which conditions "voice" and "exit" are articulated, people who move on a permanent or long-term basis across national borders will move as economic migrants, economic or political refugees, voluntary or involuntary exiles.

The "culture wars" related to the increasing heterogeneity of societies linked to the pervasiveness of the movement of people, goods, capital and information will certainly become one of the leading issues in Southern European countries over the next decade. Whether they like it or not, social scientists and scholars in cultural studies are full participants in these culture wars, in the production of the contested representations of the new social and cultural configurations. Whose side will they be on? That of the reinforcement of cultures as essences, of national boundaries and of exclusionary policies and practices, or that of a cosmopolitan view of cultures as emergent

configurations, of boundaries as locations of connection, articulation and negotiation and of the recognition of migrants as boundary actors, rather than "guests" or "foreigners" opposed to "residents" and "nationals"? As Gerald Graff (1992) and Bruce Robbins (1993), among others, suggested, referring to the "culture wars" in the United States, our ability to bring this debate into higher education institutions and help to turn them into a fundamental problem to be publicly discussed in different kinds of settings may well be a significant step not only towards a renewed assertion of the vitality of our intellectual life and of the social and political relevance of our work as scholars and social scientists, but hopefully also a way of contributing to the empowerment, as boundary actors, of those who have been consistently deprived of voice due to their condition of aliens on the margins of citizenship and political participation.

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