

The reality and relativity of borders

Borders are a fascinating phenomenon. On the one hand they seem totally arbitrary. Often man-made, just lines drawn on a map. And, being man-made, they can also be easily redrawn. Some inhabitants for instance of the Dutch province of Limburg passed from being Austrian to French to Dutch in the course of a few decades without having had to move one inch... On the other hand, borders can be very persistent and make an enormous difference to people finding themselves on opposite sides of one. Just think of the Iron Curtain: it was a dividing line between two completely alien systems, and very different everyday situations. So even though they are hand-made, borders can be formidable boundaries.

Borders have more than a mere geographical component. Often geographical borders coincide with

cultural ones. What fascinates me is whether the political and geographical borders describe already existing cultural differences, or whether it is just that borders create cultural distinctions. The border between Austria and Hungary, for example, reflects the division between peoples with two different languages, as already existed, whereas many other European nation states only started to fill in their cultural selfness after the political borders had been set. In many cases cultural borders are not sharp lines, but grey areas of transition. For instance, Nice in France is originally an Italic city, just as Rijeka in Croatia is, and all cities in between. Trieste however, one of those cities in between and undoubtedly an Italian city, also has been formed by its Habsburg heritage. And from that heritage it has links going all the way to Lviv in Ukraine.

Ultimately, borders confront us with the human condition: people cannot single-handedly alter them, nor will we be able to move the Alps, or dry the oceans. We are however able to dig tunnels, and build ships. We're able to open our mind, and focus on the relativity of borders. We might not be able to change the world completely, but we can influence it. When confronted with

borders, people either see a boundary or a frontier. It either sparks the imagination or numbs the mind. A boundary literally bounds us, but frontiers can be conquered. Borders remind us that they pose us with a fundamental question: how do we deal with them?

Frank van Mil

Scientific director of the Van Mierlo Foundation

