



**UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)**

**Europe as a set of borders**

Leerssen, J.T.

*Published in:*  
Yearbook of European Studies

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Leerssen, J. T. (1993). Europe as a set of borders. *Yearbook of European Studies*, 6, 1-14.

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## EUROPE AS A SET OF BORDERS

Joep Leerssen

*European diversity*

It is practically impossible to speak about Europe without evoking its cultural and political ('national') diversity. The inner differences within Europe have become all the more emphasized in the debates around the EC's recent drive for economic and political integration. The perceived national diversity of Europe is the main counterforce opposing its smooth homogenization; it is also the aspect which has been repeatedly cited as Europe's most outstanding and precious characteristic. Europe as the continent of cultural diversity, the 'concert' harmoniously uniting many different instruments, with all the varied richness of its many constituent traditions...

That invocation of diversity-as-uniting-characteristic has become a commonplace. It makes good rhetorical sense: it distinguishes a European ideal from the perceived homogeneity and unitariness of Asia and, especially, America, where the lure of Europe has always been, in part, to 'see 20 countries in 3 weeks'.

The logic of seeing Europe's identity as lying in its diversity is ramshackle, of course. To say that 'X has the remarkable unifying property that it has no unifying properties whatsoever', is tantamount to proposing what is either an absurdity or a platitude: 'nothing is something' or '«nothing» is something'. More important, however, is the connotation

linking diversity to the notion of liberty. Whereas authoritarianism is perceived as tending towards *Gleichschaltung* and towards imposing a single uniform standard on all those under its control, the persistence of diversity indicates tolerance and openness. Diversity, in short, is democratic; and nowhere does tyranny so expose its true nature as in its intolerance towards diversity.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the notion of democracy (or, more generally, of an 'open', tolerant society) has been frequently linked to the ideal of a diverse state, especially a federation. It is the ideal of a United Europe; it was the ideal of those who, under the ideal of 'We the People', Liberty and *e pluribus unum*, declared the independence of the United States in 1776; it was the ideal of Nehru's India. It was also part of the new setup which the early, constitutionalist Revolutionaries tried out in France in 1790 with the *fédérations*; and it was part of various constitutional attempts to create an 'open', democratic Germany (1848, 1948).

Clearly the idea of federalism is a liberal one,<sup>1</sup> and as such it goes back a long way. Among the political Enlightenment ideals cited by the French and American Revolutionaries (constitutionalism, parliamentarianism, republicanism), federalism did figure largely. It was an aspect which Enlightenment politicians praised in such states as Switzerland and the United Provinces, both of which were seen as classic examples of civic virtue opposing monarchical power.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Sir William Temple appreciatively described the de-centralized constitution of the United Provinces as 'a Confederacy of Seven Sovereign Provinces united together for their common and mutual defence, without any dependance one upon

<sup>1</sup> In practice, the federal ideal can be twisted cynically, or fail as dismally, as any ideal. Thus, the old-style USSR invoked a federative structure, even within the constituent Soviet Republics (witness the largest, the 'Russian Federation'); the freedom-loving nature of the breakaway American Confederate States did not apply to the black slave population there. The federal structure of post-colonial India failed to prevent communal violence.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Zera S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans. An Essay in the recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England* (2nd ed.; Northwestern University, 1962); Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1971).

the other'.<sup>3</sup>

It is this ideal which is still invoked nowadays as a viable organization for a United Europe. If Europe is to merge into one state, that state must reflect Europe's diversity in its federal structure.

There is yet another positive quality evoked by the notion of federalism: the fact that implicitly it opposes the national idea in state organization. Nationalism has been succinctly and usefully defined by Ernest Gellner as the desire to achieve congruence between state and nation, between state borders and cultural frontiers. In its most explicit form it has been operative as a political manifestation of romantic idealism (where, accordingly, the state had to incorporate an idea rather than to regulate a material reality). From Mazzini to Mussolini, from Arndt to Hitler (at least the Hitler prior to the Munich treaty) the notion of nationalism was that each nation (so defined by cultural identity) was to have its own sovereign state, and that no state should forcefully yoke different nationalities together.

Against this, the Enlightenment notion of federalism poses itself as an anti-idealistic, pragmatic alternative. In this pragmatic view, the aggregation of statehood should follow, not a platonic idea, but the needs of commerce, traffic, defence and mutual interest; and states should not see their identity or *raison d'être* as being connected with the realm of culture. Culture is implicitly seen as something outside the concern of the state (again, the EC exemplifies this notion). All federations take a multiculturalist stance, even though they do not always practice what they preach.

It is instructive to juxtapose two multicultural European states in this respect: Switzerland and Belgium. The *Eidgenossenschaft* antedates the rise of national thought and is a polity which does not invoke its cultural identity (which one?) so as to underpin its political viability or *raison d'être*. The Belgian state, on the other hand, is a product of European romantic nationalism. The anti-Dutch revolt which forms its incipience, in 1830, was sparked off by an opera aria extolling the 'Amour sacré de la patrie', and from the beginning of its political independence onwards, Belgium's authors and historians (De Coster, Pirenne...) have attempted to formulate its cultural identity.

<sup>3</sup> William Temple, *Observations on the United Provinces of the Netherlands*, ed. G. Clark (Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 52.

The Swiss-Belgian juxtaposition can be extended. The former is a federation, the latter (initially) a unitary kingdom (with for its motto *L'union fait la force*). The former has proved a highly successful and durable polity, the latter is now fissioning as a result of century-long cultural conflict between its two linguistic communities. Similarly, a multicultural state like Spain (with Castilian, Catalan, Basque and Galician components under its crown) is now, like Belgium, emulating the federal ideal *à la Suisse* within its own borders.

#### *Modular Europe?*

Even so, the idea that multicultural states should ideally attempt a federal diversification of their political geography, and should do so along cultural lines (as in the cases of Belgium and Spain) still reflects, at the intra-national level, the ingrained pattern of national thought: that administrative and cultural units should match. Following Gellner's aforementioned definition, then, the model of national thought still obtains as much in late-twentieth-century Flanders or Catalonia as in mid-nineteenth-century Hungaria or Germany.

Even in allowing for Europe's cultural diversity, then, we still translate that notion automatically into the concept of different culture-political units. People are quick to point out the differences *between* Europe's constituent units (nations or cultural regions), but by the same token they disregard the possible heterogeneity within each of those 'units'. Such cross-cultural comparison invariably leads to fuzzy terminology, slippage of meaning and a catch-all propensity to fit the facts into preconceived schemata. A few mechanisms may be pointed out which pose a fatal threat to the conceptual integrity of cross-cultural comparison:

[1] To compare two units of undefined taxonomic status means in fact a contrastive juxtaposition; and that is an implicit *a priori* which will work through in our observations. Thus, to contrastively juxtapose X and Y means [a] that *differences* between X and Y will be foregrounded over the *similarities* between those two elements; and [b] that the differences *between* the two will be foregrounded over the differences *within* either. Once we choose, as a framework for our observations, the juxtaposition between 'France' and 'Germany', we will tend to overlook common factors (Christianity, temperate climate, republican states, largely industrialized...)

as well as the great diversity, the differences between Hamburg and Munich in one country, between Rouen and Marseille in the other.<sup>4</sup>

[2] The result is a distortive *typicality effect* which conflates the distinct and the distinctive.<sup>5</sup> We consider the most characteristic properties of a given nation to lie in those aspects wherein that nation differs most from the others. As a result, certain colourful, unusual, 'typical' properties are given privileged status: bullfights in Spain, windmills in Holland. The noticeability of such things is often couched in terms of such phenomena being particularly expressive or symbolic of the country's 'character'.

[3] The result of the typicality effect is the reduction of reality to stereotype. The nationally-based taxonomy on which we tend to rely carries with it a set of stereotyped attributes. These attributes have become fixed, universally current connotations and may influence our judgement or even the type of information we choose to register or to consider relevant or representative. Those stereotypes are often centuries old and in many cases their continuing currency is anachronistically misleading: e.g. in that they originally applied to different aggregates (witness the images of Dutch, or Turks, or Moors: those ethnic names have been applied to widely different groups of people over the past 500 years), or in that they were occasioned by circumstances which have long ceased to apply.

[4] In most cases, each national set of current stereotyped attributes is rendered meaningless in that it consists of both opposing poles of a contradiction. The image of Flanders ranges from meditative introspection à la Van Eyck to exuberant sensuality à la Rubens. The image of France ranges from gallant excitability to cerebral aloofness, that of England from choleric gruffness to splenetic *sang-froid*. The image of Holland ranges between the opposite prototypes of Pieter Stastok and Piet Heyn; 'the' Englishman may either be a Bertie Wooster or a John Bull. Germany evokes either Heine or Himmler. The image of Italy includes suave fashionable aristocrats and sweaty swarthy mafiosi. Either polarity can be

<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this problem which is making itself felt in the increasingly nationalistic and antagonistic 'units' which have composed federative states like the USSR and Yugoslavia. What about the presence of Russians in Estonia or in Moldavia? In short, what about the minorities *within* the minorities?

<sup>5</sup> Cf. S. W. Foster, 'The Exotic as a Symbolic System', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 7 (1982): 21-30. I have coined to term 'typicality effect' to denote a highly ambiguous phenomenon: namely, that certain things are given the qualification 'typical' or 'characteristic' because of two contradictory qualities: [a] they are individually remarkable and so unusual as to 'stand out' and [b] they are held to be particularly representative of a 'type'. Thus, to call something 'typical' (in phrases like 'a typical Tyrolean peasant') is both to stress that it differs from the normal and that it conforms to a type.

activated to suit the interpretative needs of the moment. The universal cliché that can be applied to any country whatsoever is that it is 'a country of contrasts and contradictions'. This renders such images unfalsifiable and therefore, as we can learn from Karl Popper, worthless for the acquisition of testable knowledge.

The crux, to sum up, is this: To see Europe as a system of *diverse units* may expose us to accept, uncritically, the conceptual integrity of Europe's constituent units. It is, in other words, to see Europe in a *modular* way, as consisting of discrete, well-defined and well-discriminated building blocks. That modular view of Europe<sup>6</sup> is of course quite valid in some cases: for instance, in a constitutional sense: Europe consists of well-defined states, each with their well-defined sovereign jurisdiction. But by the same token we run the risk of arranging our awareness of cultural diversity according to the same pattern,<sup>7</sup> and to see Europe's cultural diversity in a the old, inherited, comfortable but distortive national schema.

#### *Political and cultural taxonomy*

In the historical sciences, the idea has gained ground that the writing of national history is in fact anachronism on a grand scale. Fernand Braudel has begun by staking pointedly non-national fields of research (e.g. the Mediterranean), and ended by pondering the Identity of France as a problematic (rather than as a conceptual starting-point which it was for someone like Michelet). E.H. Kossmann in his history of the Low Countries<sup>7</sup> has asked the interesting question whether it was not an unwarranted presupposition of diachronic identity to presume that 'The Netherlands' in 1750 and 1950 were commensurable entities. That same question can be asked of any national history. To trace the origins of France means to trace the origins of a state system centered around Paris. Many areas in what nowadays is the Hexagon were, at some part of their history, centered on another place than Paris, a place outside the present-

<sup>6</sup> I borrow the term from the more current usage applied to America. On 'modular America', cf. Rob Kroes's contribution to the present volume.

<sup>7</sup> E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen, 1780/1980. Twee eeuwen Nederland en België* (Amsterdam & Brussel: Elsevier, 1986), vol. 2: 367-386.

day Hexagon. Is one to couch such a situation in the terms that such parts did not 'belong to France' at that time? Is one to study those areas only inasmuch as they enter into the Parisian-centered purview? Some practical implications in any case are facts like these: (a) that the archival information of such areas must be looked for elsewhere, (b) that the links between such areas with their non-French hinterland would fall outside the historian's chosen scope, (c) that the involvement of such areas in developments or conflicts which for the rest bypassed France would fall outside the historian's scope, and that (the conclusion seems almost like a tautology) the use of a Parisian-centered concept of 'France' means to marginalize the historical experience of those parts whose links with Paris were weakest.<sup>8</sup>

That is not a marginal quibble. If Europe, with its well-publicized inner diversity, has a great density of borders, it therefore also has a large proportion of borderlands. Seen in that light, the metropolitan-centred tradition in historiography marginalizes the historical situation and experience of a sizeable portion of Europe. What is more, a constitutional present-day reality is used in our arrangement of facts from a wholly different period. Not only can this thwart our appreciation of historical realities; it also strengthens our post-romantic tendency to conflate statehood and cultural identity, and to see the two as (ideally) congruent.

The national taxonomy also bedevils our philological reflexes. The science of comparative linguistics arose during the heyday of national thought in Europe and in some instances seems to have classified its working field according to political as well as linguistic data. The vexed question as to what was 'a dialect' and what 'a language' is a case in point. The quip that 'a language is a dialect with a parliament and an army at its disposal' is not too far off the mark. The complex of Romance idioms was divided into 'languages' largely on a political division: thus, minute Swiss dialects were grouped as a 'language' whereas the highly diverse idioms spoken in Italy, from Sardinian to Ladin (concerning which, cf. Jan Markusse's contribution to the present volume) were seen as mere Italian 'dialects'. Generally, the status of 'a language' was most easily

<sup>8</sup> Such questions have recently been raised with reference to various European countries, e.g. by Imline Veit-Brause, 'The Place of Local and Regional History in German and French Historiography: Some General Reflections', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 16 (1979), 447-478.

given to those idioms with a written (as opposed to merely oral) tradition — that is to say, those idioms which had played a role in sophisticated intercourse on the supra-communal level; that is to say, those idioms which had gained currency in a religious, mercantile or administrative system. In most cases that means: those idioms which were surrounded by a socio-economic independent environment of their own. To be sure, certain 'regional' idioms were admitted to the status of 'language' on the strength of obvious linguistic particularity and/or a rich literary heritage (Basque, Provençal, Catalan, Frisian). But the relative status of Portuguese and Galego, or of Scottish Gaelic and Irish Gaelic, or of Danish, FärOerese and 'Norsk' (in whatever variety), or of Plattdeutsch and Netherlandic: in all these cases the difference between the taxonomical status of 'a dialect' and 'a language' is obviously inspired by political criteria rather than any other. Is Galego a language or a dialect? And if a dialect, is it a variety of Castilian or of Portuguese? It could be considered a variety of Portuguese on the basis of its linguistic properties (witness Fernando Venâncio's article elsewhere in this volume). But it can be considered a variety of Castilian by virtue of the sociological and pragmatic argument that its speakers (who are Spanish citizens) use Spain's 'official' language, Castilian, for 'official' business.

Another example. Recently the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg has decided to promote the local idiom, Lëtzebuergesch, to an instrument of state affairs. Parliamentary debates, television programmes, banknotes and postages stamps are now printed in what used to be a dialect of 'the German language' ('the Moselfränkisch dialect of the German language') and what may in future well gain recognition as 'a language (Goossens speaks of a *cultuurtaal*) in its own right: a vehicle for socially important and culturally prestigious affairs. Does this mean that in future the Moselfränkisch dialects spoken in the environments of Trier might become known as 'dialects of Lëtzebuergesch'? The trend may arise, since Lëtzebuergesch owing to its constitutional status is now rapidly acquiring prestige, and a corpus of written texts, which the sister-dialect on the German side of the border lack. Certainly the Continental-West-Germanic dialect as spoken around Arlon in the Belgian province of Luxembourg should now be reclassified as, in the first instance, a variety of Lëtzebuergesch.

gisch, and only in the second instance a variety of 'German'.<sup>9</sup> Again, the Continental-West-Germanic dialects spoken between Liège and Aachen, though they so closely resemble each other as to allow perfect communication between all speakers in that area, are divided as 'Netherlandic' or 'German' dialects according to administrative divisions imposed by the Belgian state as recently as 1960.<sup>10</sup>

Such cases illustrate the problematic implications of viewing the European cultural landscape in a modular way.<sup>11</sup> Indeed the example of linguistic geography may also point a way out of the problem.

Dialectology has abandoned the hierarchy between 'language' and 'dialect', and sees the linguistic landscape of Europe as consisting of dialectal continuums (such as the Romance or the Continental West-Germanic) cut through by isoglosses (sometimes congruent or near-congruent).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jean Campill, "Lëtzebuergesch": A Dialect between Regional Tradition and National Vocation', in *The Literature of Region and Nation*, ed. R.P. Draper (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 242-8. Indeed, the perplexities may go even further. I have established, in an informal experiment conducted with Professor Paul Margue of Luxembourg University, that the idiom as spoken in the South of Limburg (present-day Netherlands, ca. 150 KM to the north of Luxembourg and 200 KM to the south of Amsterdam) is to a large extent mutually intelligible with Lëtzebuergesch. Indeed the degree of mutual intelligibility between Limburgian and Lëtzebuergesch proved higher on this particular occasion than between Limburgian and Standard Netherlandic as spoken in Amsterdam... However Professor Margue has assured me that there is no question of Luxembourg irredentism as yet.

<sup>10</sup> Boileau, in his *Enquête dialectale sur la toponymie germanique du Nord-Est de la Province de Liège* (Liège, 1954) declares that the demarcation between 'Netherlandic' and 'German' dialects 'ne coïncide avec aucun faisceau isoglossématique important' (p. 54), i.e. has no basis whatsoever in linguistic practice and is purely political in nature. Cf. J. Goossens, *Intérod to the Nederlandse Dialectologie* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1977), p. 22. Also, generally, José Cajot, *Neue Sprachschranken im 'Land ohne Grenzen'?* *Zum Einflus politischer Grenzen auf die germanischen Mundarten in der belgisch-niederländisch-deutsch-luxemburgischen Euregio* (Köln & Wien: Böhlau, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> The examples here have been taken from the fields of history and language. For an extension of this survey into the field of literature, see my 'Literatuur op de landkaart: Taal, territorium en culturele identiteit', *Forum der Letteren*, 34 (1993): 16-28.

congruent fasces of isoglosses). Isoglosses indicate a pattern of discontinuity in speech practice; but they do not circumscribe a pre-given, naturally discrete set of unit-dialects. What constitutes 'a' dialect is a result of a selection of speech features which one chooses to foreground as significant criteria. That selection of speech criteria is variable and depends on circumstances; and what one chooses to call 'a' dialect may encompass a larger or smaller aggregate of speakers, may incorporate a larger or smaller sample of internal differences. In sum: from a great many available discontinuity patterns, a varying few may be selected and foregrounded, as the occasion arises, to outline a sample of speech features which for the nonce are called 'a' dialect.

Such a procedure turns the diversity of Europe 'inside out', as it were: instead of seeing things in a modular way, as consisting of constituent units which in their mutual contiguity define their borderlines, our view (a structural one) now privileges those borderlines as autonomous primary phenomena: a pattern of discontinuity crisscrossing through the European continuum, and generating possible units as epiphenomena. It means that we come to see Europe, not as a set of constituent units, but as a pattern of differences, a set of borders.

#### *Border patterns*

The incommensurability between cultural and political borders is twofold. First, political borders are precise, whereas cultural borders are fuzzy; second, political borders are volatile whereas cultural borders are (relatively) stable.

The precision of political borders is a legal necessity. Jurisdictions, including that of the sovereign state, are precisely defined, and the tendency has over the past centuries been to avoid ambiguous or unclear (i.e. potentially conflict-causing) situations such as unapportioned territory (*terra nullius*) or shared suzerainty (*condominium*). On the whole, then, political borders are sharply drawn, without gaps or overlaps between the areas they demarcate.

The vagueness of political borders is, rather, a diachronic one. As the power or cohesive force of a given state or centre of influence waxes or wanes, states will shrink or expand, or even merge or fission (as in the cases of Germany or Yugoslavia). Thus, political borders, for all their

spatial precision, are temporally volatile. Conversely, cultural borders, which in a spatial sense are fuzzy, are temporally fairly stable. Language borders like the one between the Continental West-Germanic and Romance language families (which runs from Dunkirk through Belgium, the Alsace and Switzerland until it runs into the Slavic languages) have shifted little in the last centuries, despite the political vicissitudes in its vicinity.<sup>12</sup> It took major catastrophes to alter significantly the cultural map of Europe, e.g. the mid-nineteenth-century potato famine in Ireland resulting in the decline of Irish Gaelic, or the genocidal upheavals of World War II and the disappearance of Yiddish in Central Europe. How tenacious cultural patterns are, and how impervious to political pressure, is illustrated by the resurgence of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe after a half-century of communism. However, from a synchronic, spatial point of view cultural borders are extremely fuzzy. They are really wide transitional zones with mixed populations and enclaves and exclaves sprinkled on either side, and as such they differ from the razor-sharp demarcation of political borders. The post-communist conflict in Yugoslavia is a tragical illustration of the impossibility to translate such fuzzy, porous cultural borders into political ones.

Finally, it may be in order to hint at the (topologically complex) idea that, unlike the spaghetti-like crisscross pattern of cultural borders, political borders are designed to enclosed space rather than to divide it. They form a web- or net-like structure, together encircling portions of territory like so many pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. This topological appearance is a result, perhaps, of a fundamental requisite in the modern European definition of the state: that it occupies a territory.

The territoriality principle is as old as the idea of the nation-state itself, and takes the place of the earlier dynastic model which unifies a polity around the focus of the sovereign ruler and his personal charisma. As long as political organization functions on a feudal-dynastic basis, the idea of the state (and with it, the idea of its territory) is but weak. The dictum impured to Louis XIV, *l'état, c'est moi*, may be a fabrication; but it does sum up his resistance against the idea of the nation-state. Louis expresses the feudal ideal of the monarch who governs by charisma and

<sup>12</sup> For an early, pre-modern example, cf. my 'Macht, afstand en culturele diversiteit: Bijvoorbeeld Overmaas', *Theoretische Geschiedenis*, 18 (1991): 423-433.

dynastic-divine right, who sees his own person as the sole legitimate unifying focus of the entire polity under his rule. In such a scope, the 'organic' or 'natural' unity of the *territory* he rules is of little import — except, perhaps, for strategic purposes. The growth of linear borders, and the gradual decline of the ratio of frontier length to territorial surface area in European political geography, may possibly be most plausibly explained by military historians and from strategic arguments. Thus the rough outline of what at present is France's Northeastern border was sketched in essence by the sites chosen by Vauban for fortification.<sup>14</sup> Witness the observations made by the Sun King's biographer, John B. Wolf:

Richelieu had repeatedly emphasized the fact that there were 'gates' on the frontiers that could swing open for the foreigner to invade or that might be openings for French military excursions beyond the frontiers. Mid-seventeenth-century statesmen did not think in terms of lineal frontiers; they saw the borders of their states occupied by provinces and dependencies, cities and fiefs with ambiguous relationships. They had no idea of 'natural' or 'national' frontiers, but they did think of 'defensible' ones. In the 1630's and again in the 1650's foreign armies threatened to swarm on to Paris as they had done in the sixteenth century; Richelieu, and after him Mazarin, wished to gain control of the 'gates' that these foreigners might use. By the Treaties of Westphalia and of the Pyrenees, Mazarin had secured some control of the 'gates' in Alsace (except Strasbourg), Flanders, and Artois, as well as on the Pyrenees frontier, but Lorraine and Dunkirk still remained of the foreigners, and from the flatlands of the Spanish Netherlands to the hilly frontiers of Luxembourg, there were roads and cities that might assist an assault on the French kingdom. It would be absurd to assume that preoccupation

<sup>13</sup> In some cases the strict linearity of political borders appears to be a late medieval development. Witness the case of the Duchy of Brabant as studied by L. Genicot, 'Ligne et zone: La frontière des principautés médiévales', *Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Belgique*, Classe des lettres, 5e série, # 56 (1970). Also, P. Avonds, *Brabant tijdens de regering van Hertog Jan III (1312-1356): Land en Instellingen* (Brussel: Koninklijke Akademie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1991), pp. 15-29 ('De territoriale grens').

<sup>14</sup> See the contribution by Jacques Darras to the present volume. The displays in the museum of the Ecole Militaire at Paris are especially instructive in this respect. Cf. also Ijja Mieck, 'Deutschlands Westgrenze', in *Deutschlands Grenzen in der Geschichte*, ed. A. Demandt (München: Beck, 1990), pp. 191-234, esp. pp. 209-212 and the sources cited there.

with the 'gates' of his kingdom was the sole axis of Louis' policy, but it is equally false to fail to recognize his concern.

This mid-seventeenth-century notion of national frontiers gives way, according to Wolf, to a more modern notion towards the end of the century. One of the salient facts to emerge during Louis' Dutch War was the importance of a defensible lineal frontier. The old frontiers made up of 'provinces with their dependencies', and thereby complicated by irrational enclaves and feudal overlappings, had been satisfactory enough before the rise of the new armies and the new conceptions of political military power. A 'province with its capital city' could be a satisfactory 'gate' in Richelieu's parlance, but what was now needed was a frontier that could be defined and more easily defended by 'lines' to prevent marauding enemy detachments from collecting 'contributions' by invading the kingdom. Vauban had seen this in 1673 when he urged 'by treaty or by a good war' that the irrational '*pêle mêlée*' of French and Spanish fortresses scattered here and there on the frontier should be made into a *pré carré*, a rational 'dueling field', that could be defended without excessive costs. The Treaty of Nymwegen did away with much of the irrationality on the frontier with the Spanish Netherlands [...]<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Wolf suggests, the notion of territorial compactness and frontier rationalization coincides with a 'modern', post-feudal and post-dynastic idea of the state.<sup>16</sup> Such a process would provide the prerequisite for the development of nationalism as sketched by Gellner, and gives us a *terminus a quo* for that type of national thought which conflates political and cultural identity.

What is more, this historical sortie allows us to posit the idea that borders can be seen in systemic terms, as the outermost line of the furthest periphery which a given power centre can maintain within its sphere of influence without losing that periphery to neighbouring power centres and *their* sphere or influence (e.g. the case of the German-Belgian or German-French borderlands) or to possible autonomy claims of local, provincial power centres (witness the breakup of the USSR). Such a systemic core-

<sup>15</sup> Louis B. Wolf, *Louis XIV* (New York: Norton, 1968), pp. 189, 403-4.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. also Wolf's *The Emergence of the Great Powers, 1685-1715* (New York, 1951), and the essay 'The Emergence of the European States System', in his *Chapters in Western Civilization*, vol. I (New York, 1961).



periphery model allows us to study borders and border conflicts with due attention to their inbuilt volatility: as, in a manner of speaking, the high- and low-tide marks of the centripetal force of state centres.

### Conclusion

The 'diverse units' which constitute that diverse thing called Europe are certainly diverse — units they are not. If we scrutinize the purported building blocks of Europe we see that in political terms they are of recent invention and highly volatile, and that in cultural terms they are so misleadingly defined and classified as to be unusable for the purpose of practical organization or sober analysis.

What does exist, certainly, are borders, frontiers. When moving across the political and cultural landscape of the real thing called Europe, we do register changes; changes which are real, and not just our invention or imputation. The European landscape features a great many discontinuities, places of transition — frontiers. In the case of states, their borders form a tidy net without loose fringes, enmeshing a set of neatly contiguous and self-enclosed territories; but those borders are also the most recent invention and the least stable variety.

Conversely, cultural frontiers (such as religious or linguistic ones) meander across the map with far less precision or neatness. They are hardly 'borders' at all but rather transitional zones, with mixtures and minorities — grey areas rather than black lines. And unlike political borders, they do not surround or enclose anything; they form a crisscross of individual lines rather than a well-meshed net.

Europe is not a set of units but a set of borders; not a aggregate of identities but a web of differences. If Europe has a great density of border sovereign state capitals, by the same token it has a great density of border areas. Thus the European experience has perhaps something to do with the fact that one is never far from a frontier of sorts. Most of Europe consists of borderline cases.

## THE SHAPING OF EUROPE

W.H. Roobol

Scholars in search of a European identity soon come across lofty ideas such as Judeo-Christian civilization, freedom or social democracy, but there are also more down-to-earth notions such as 'un enchevêtrement de barrières' and 'barricades and borders' (witness the title of a recent handbook).<sup>1</sup> The fictional and ever changing external boundaries of Europe — fictional because they only exist in the minds of men and on the maps where these fictions took the form of zones or lines — are partly determined by geographical considerations and partly by cultural or political ones.<sup>2</sup> Although 'Europe' may be mainly an imagined entity, the

<sup>1</sup> Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne 1680-1715* (Paris: Fayard, 1961), p.411: 'Qu'est-ce que l'Europe? Une forme contradictoire, à la fois stricte et incertaine. Un enchevêtrement de barrières, et devant chacune d'elles, des gens dont le métier est de demander les passeports, et de faire payer des impôts; toutes entraves possibles apportées aux communications fraternelles.' To be sure, in the same book Hazard answers his question in different ways.

Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders. Europe 1800-1914* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W.H. Parker, 'Europe: How Far?', *Geographical Journal*, 126 (1960): 278-297.