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# Unbounded boundary studies and collapsed categories: rethinking spatial objects

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**Abstract:** This paper is a response to Reece Jones' 'Categories, borders and boundaries' (2009) that aims to give an alternate proposal to rethink geographical categories and boundary studies. First, it examines the various meanings of the word 'category' as used in Jones' paper. We then stress the importance of the processes involved in constructing spatialized and unspatialized categories as a central issue for social sciences. Using different examples such as the city and the nation state, we finally argue that the triad of reification–naturalization–fetishization is a good tool to analyse the social construction of geographical categories and boundaries.

**Key words:** boundaries, boundary studies, categories, city, countryside, nature, nation state, spatial objects.

## I Introduction

We are all familiar with the disconcerting effect of the proximity of extremes, or, quite simply, with the sudden vicinity of things that have no relation to each other; the mere act of enumeration that heaps them all together has a power of enchantment all its own.<sup>1</sup> (Foucault, 1971: XVI)

Foucault's well-known quote of Borges' apocryphal animal categories from 'a certain Chinese Encyclopedia' does indeed enchant. The monstrosity of the categories lies in the impossibility of finding shared spaces of encounter, of imagining places where things could meet side-by-side. Where, he writes,

could animals 'as active as fools' meet with those 'drawn with a very fine camel-hair paintbrush', or those that are 'innumerable'? Where could they mingle other than in the page that lists them, or the non-place of language? Yet the latter, writes Foucault, can only open a paradoxically unthinkable space, a worrying heterotopia. Things are laid, set and displayed in places so different that it is impossible to find for them a space of belonging, to define below them a common place.

So much so that the Chinese encyclopaedia quoted by Borges, and the taxonomy it proposes, lead to a kind of thought without space, to words and categories that lack all life and place, but are rooted in a ceremonial space,

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overburdened with complex figures, with tangled paths, strange places, secret passages, and unexpected communications.<sup>2</sup> (Foucault, 1971: XX)

Foucault's preface in *The order of things* is shot through with spatial metaphors, of regions, spaces, places, grounds of encounter, as he sets out his project of exploring the naked experience of order and its ways of being, identifying genealogies that made knowledge and theories possible.

This list sprang to mind when reading a recent piece in *Progress in Human Geography* on 'Categories, borders and boundaries' by Reece Jones (2009). He attempts to set forth a new agenda for geography as a whole, and for boundary studies in particular. He suggests rethinking categories and boundaries, arguing that:

the problem is not the categories themselves, but, rather, the way the boundaries around the categories are cognitively understood as closed and fixed even when we know intellectually that they are open and fluid. Consequently, I argue that the key process is the bounding and delimiting of the categories used to understand the world. (Jones, 2009: 175)

In itself, this reminds us some of the results of several decades of sociological and anthropological work (Durkheim and Mauss, 1901–1902; Levi-Strauss, 1966; Low and Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003). Yet Jones' idea is to build on Newman's call for a comprehensive theory of boundaries and bounding processes (Newman, 2003) by collapsing so many categories that this paper takes on an unexpected – and no doubt unconscious – Borgesian flavour.

In this paper, we try to take Jones' proposal of taking categories seriously by exploring how rethinking categories can help us rethink our practices as geographers. However, at the same time, we cannot but be dismayed at some of the facile transitions that his piece makes, in particular the naivety he displays in collapsing and equating the nature of categories such as 'wilderness', 'boundary', 'culture', 'boundary studies',

'neoliberalism' and 'scale'. We are certainly not calling for a narrow understanding of geography as the science of space and materiality, yet we believe that taking space seriously calls for more intellectual rigour and creativity than this, lest we end up only with Foucault's apocryphal unthinkable spaces. Furthermore, we suggest that the widely divergent standing-points and ontologies of the numerous authors invoked in Jones' contribution must be better acknowledged, not least because these read like a pastiche of *Who's who* in contemporary fashionable geographical circles.

## II Collapsing categories

Jones calls for a redefinition of categories and categorization within geography, building on work by authors as diverse as Wittgenstein (1958), Foucault (1971), Derrida (1976), Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Habermas (1992) and Agamben (1998), in addition to other more geographical authors such as Cronon (1995), Mitchell (1995), Thrift and Olds (1996), Larner (2003) and Marston *et al.* (2005). As Jones points out, there is nothing new in being interested in categories. Yet, throughout his paper, Jones refers at times to notions, concepts and even classes of things, all taken to be 'categories'. Before we argue how we should rethink categories within geography, we restate how the term category is and has been used with various meanings, a variety that must be kept in mind in order to understand the varied spatial inscriptions.

Within academic literature, the word 'category' has been used to refer to many different things. Though some key authors and approaches are inexplicably left aside by Jones, including such classics as Aristotle's, Kant's and Durkheim's conceptualization and use of the term, many others are mentioned in his paper without these being presented as having different meanings and uses. Although there are many different ways of discerning these, we suggest one possible typology of three uses of the term category in order to indicate how these can be collapsed,

conflated and confused. This should not be taken as an absolute, but rather as a tool, and we end up discussing how spatial objects shift between the three. That said, it seems to us that 'category' as used in Jones' paper is simultaneously:

- (1) a 'concept', if we agree that this is a general idea which takes place within a system of thought eager to describe, explain or simulate reality. Among Jones' chosen examples, 'economy', 'nature', 'culture' or 'wilderness' are such categories;
- (2) a 'type', if we agree that this is a schematic representation of a collection of things considered to be similar. The type is best illustrated through an imaginary element (stereotype, archetype or ideal-type) or an especially relevant existing thing (prototype). Among Jones' examples, the nation state is such a type, and dozens or hundreds (depending on the more or less restrictive definitions of nation state chosen) of existing things (individual nation states) are associated with the related type;
- (3) a 'class', if we agree that this is an element of a general system of classification which differentiates and orders a wide set of things according to a single criterion. If mountains and hills – another example used by Jones – are only thought of through a reference to altitude, as was mainly done in nineteenth-century geographical books and cartography, for example, then both of them count as classes. 'White' and 'non-white' are also two classes based on the criterion of skin colour.

### **III Spatial objects and categories: more topology and semantics, less biology**

The spatial attributes of concepts, types and classes vary substantially. Some of them may be intrinsically spatial: the type 'nation state territory', for instance, indicates a spatial way of thinking about social heterogeneity, political territoriality and sovereignty. The

question of limits and borders is consubstantial with the type and the individuals of the types themselves. The classes 'mountains' and 'hills' also refer to spatial entities when the criterion of the related classification is a spatial measure. In both cases, limits, margins or boundaries need to be thought of in relation to the related types or classes because of their intrinsic spatial nature, even if the quest for a relevant boundary turns out to be a scientific chimera and a logical dead end. The origin of scholarly geography has been traced back to the eighteenth century in discussing how the making of such spatial objects is largely conditioned by the representations we hold of the world. This form of naive realism has depended on a double belief: on the one hand a reliance on the scientific method to reveal things as they really are, and on the other an assumption that objects as they appear exist in the absolute. While this has been thankfully strongly shaken by advances in geography in the past 30 years, the slippages Jones makes paradoxically bring about a biologizing of categorization, in unacknowledged contrast to his parallel claims of social construction.

For instance, when trying to define mountains in the mid-twentieth century, two French geographers got trapped in the difficulty of identifying a boundary for mountains when these were defined as a class of natural objects: 'the head of the mountain shines in sparkling light, but its foot is lost in the hazy plains, and it is man's role to provide the clarity that nature lacks' (Veyret and Veyret, 1962: 35).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the semantic meaning of types such as nation states, or classes such as mountains and hills, is topological. Understanding why and when academic and/or non-academic knowledge needs intrinsically spatial categories is a question of philosophy or the history of knowledge, as Serres, in *Hermès V* (1980), and Foucault, in *The order of things* (1971), have convincingly argued. Should it need clarifying, histories of knowledge, according to Foucault, can be understood as a succession of and a

competition between various *episteme*, where issues in conceptualizing representation and knowledge are much more important than social and political ones (Foucault, 1971).

Other types, classes or concepts are intrinsically non-spatial, but may happen to be spatialized. 'Economy' is a non-spatial concept, but the word may be used for designating specific shelves in a library, or specific offices in a university building. 'White *versus* non-white' is a non-spatial classification, but racial segregation has given specific locations to individuals from every class. 'Nature' may be thought of as a non-spatial concept – when referring to given physical and biological processes – or as a spatialized concept – when 'nature' is associated with specific places (urban parks, protected areas, zoos, botanical gardens, etc). In this case, the topological dimension of concepts or types is an optional aspect of their meaning, not one of their intrinsic characteristics. The distinction between intrinsically spatial and spatialized categories is neither arbitrary, nor relative to a category itself. It is determined by the way the category is conceived. An efficient way of determining the role of spatiality in a category is to examine how those who use it define it. Relying on the useful and fruitful proposal made by Umberto Eco (1999), we would argue that if place or space is required in a 'dictionary' description of the category (mentioning its necessary logical attributes) it is intrinsically spatial; if place or space is useful only for an 'encyclopaedic' description (mentioning all we know about it) it can be considered to be spatialized. Understanding why and when social and political practices need or do not need to spatialize these kinds of categories inevitably requires a social science approach. Here, and in this respect only here, is Jones' right to mention social critics of modernity such as Bourdieu, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Foucault, in particular specifically for his work on prisons and sexuality (Foucault, 1977; 1988).

Therefore the spatial dimension of categories is extremely diverse. Our quote from Foucault at the beginning of this paper shows how we often use spatial metaphors when thinking about categories. In that sense it can perhaps be said that there is a boundary between what is part of the economy and what is not, but this has little to do with social sciences and far more to do with cognitive studies and philosophy. If categories are spatialized when their intrinsic meaning does not require it, there is room for the social sciences, because the social uses of categories express the social processes of institutionalization that shape social reality. To know (or to say) that we cognitively perceive the world through categories does not appear to help in this context, nor does referring to some biological determination for categorization, as Jones does when he mentions Lakoff and Johnson's work on neural systems. Whatever biological facts occur and participate in the process, the challenge for social scientists lies in understanding how (and not why) reality is perceived and shaped according to various system of categories which compete with each other. The social sciences' expertise lies in the analysis of the social construction and institutionalization of these categories and, especially for geography, the consequences of this on the organization and the practices of space. Paradoxically, however, Jones attempts to renaturalize the process of categorization, while simultaneously denaturalizing it as a social construction.

Both analytic proposals made earlier in this paper ('concept-type-class' and categories as intrinsically spatial-spatialized-non-spatial) intend to clarify what can be said about categories and their spatiality in geography. But, as we mentioned earlier, this modest proposal should not be understood as a rigid and normative system able to decide where a geographical notion should be put or classified. Words and notions, including their spatial dimension and meaning, are often

thought of differently, competitively and conflictingly within the same society. To deepen this point, we develop the example of the city in the following section.

#### **IV Cities: concept, type or class; spatial, spatialized or non-spatial; bounded or unbounded?**

The example of the city helps us to illustrate the way in which spatial objects shift between different types of categories. Indeed the term city can be and is used with many different meanings. In many scientific and popular approaches, the city is traditionally opposed to the countryside with which it forms a binary, through which every portion of space can be classified. In that perspective the city is a *class* of objects, defined in various manners in various contexts.

Historically, the city was first both a political concept and a type of spatial entity. When associated with specific modes of government, especially in Ancient Greece and the European Middle Ages, cities were bounded spaces, declared such by Charter or by ecclesiastical authorities. In that perspective the cities of the Hanseatic league provide an enlightening example. Centuries later, western national administrations defined cities exclusively through statistical criteria, such as the number of people settled somewhere (albeit the limit might differ a lot, from a few hundreds in Scandinavia to 50,000 in Japan) and spatial criteria (such as distance between buildings). In this context the city became a *class* of intrinsically spatial objects, such as aggregated buildings or municipal limits.

For decades, scientists and especially geographers have seen a spatial *type* mainly defined through morphologic and functional criteria, giving a growing importance to the mobility of commuters compared to the morphology of the built environment. Since the 1960s, the increasing mobility of people and the spread of the so-called urban way of life has led some authors to think about the city as a non-spatial concept: the city is said to be

everywhere (Webber, 1964; Dubois-Taine and Chalas, 1997), or dead since the urban can be seen to be diffused everywhere (Choay, 1994). Meanwhile national administrations remained eager to keep treating the city as a *class* of objects, some of them being more and more willing to include criteria of peri-urban mobility.

Conversely, in mundane language the city is not a *class* and appears to match our definition of a *type*. The objects that we daily assume to be cities are a kind of prototype, or at least a schematic representation. We do not need to count how many inhabitants or commuters are found in a given place to be able to call it a city. Moreover, following Schütz and Luckmann's theory of typification in everyday life (Schütz and Luckmann, 1973), we can say that we immediately recognize that what appears to us to correspond to something we had already experienced as a city is a city. Examining the boundaries of this kind of city is a challenging project, something two of us are currently exploring within a research project funded by the Swiss Science Foundation. This has to take into account the variety of personal experiences, as well as the contexts and purposes with(in) which such categorizations quite literally take place.

Though incomplete and somewhat simplified, this set of meanings of the city is diverse enough to remind us that the semantic and topologic status of a notion is strongly related to forms of knowledge, action and intentionality. Any proposal willing to examine the spatiality of categories and the role of borders and limits should keep in mind that such categories are always part of systems of knowledge with specific structures, and that these forms of knowledge are always socially and spatially situated.

#### **V Rethinking boundary studies: an outline for an alternative approach to categories and boundaries**

Boundary, n. In political geography, an imaginary line between two nations, separating



the imaginary rights of one from the imaginary rights of the other. (Bierce, 1911)

It is commonplace to note that at different times and places the term boundary has meant many things to different people. Ambrose Bierce, in his famous *Devil's dictionary*, suggests a delightfully cynical definition. Without missing the joke, we remain mindful of Jones' interesting call to broaden boundary studies, but we suggest doing it differently. As this is not a full-length paper, but rather an attempt to further constructive dialogue in a new format, our suggestions remain purposefully brief. In this, we agree with Newman (2003) that boundary studies should focus more on the construction of objects and discontinuities instead of on the objects and boundaries themselves. In a sense, to push the joke to its limits, we need to focus not only on the imaginary rights but also specifically on the emergence of imaginary lines bounding these imaginary spatial objects.

We find it productive to think of the process of bordering through the triad of processes of reification–naturalization–fetishization. We suggest that in the first of these processes boundary studies include the analysis of objectivation and reification (how objects are bounded and constructed, before being elevated to being 'real' things). If bordering is a sociospatial process, with topological and semantic dimensions, then the next objective of boundary studies is to denaturalize boundaries by studying the very mechanisms that lead to their spatial definition. Fetishization (how these become quasi-sacred objects, venerated as true) is the last of the three that requires examining, including how borders, walls, technologies and other performances of power participate in making boundaries material.

The nation state is a good example for examining this triad of reification–naturalization–fetishization, indicating how all three processes are interwoven and simultaneous, rather than taking place one after

another. Rankin and Schofield suggested that the idea of natural boundaries emerged in the Middle Ages, following a belief in metaphysical realism, and remained influential in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

to their advocates, natural boundaries were seen as the only real borders, because they were written and drawn in nature – and sometimes assumed to be legitimized by divine providence, and under the premise of natural law acquiring a perpetual and indelible character. (Rankin and Schofield, 2004: 7)

There have been many excellent histories critiquing the idea of natural boundaries in various national contexts and at various times. These include contributions by authors as varied as Friedrich Ratzel (1897), Jacques Ancel (1938), Norman Pounds (1951; 1954), Julian Minghi (1963), Roger Brunet (1967), John Prescott (1978), Claude Raffestin (1980; 1991), Michel Foucher (1991), Jean-Paul Hubert (1993), Jean-Christophe Gay (1995), Daniel Nordman (1998) and Marie-Christine Fourny-Kober (2005; 2007). These numerous critiques all share a desire to map, document and critique the obsession of revealing links between physiography and states or boundaries through scientific and, in particular, geographic expertise – that is, revealing how links between nature and politics are instrumentalized to naturalize a particular spatial object. While few scholars would support the view that states are natural divisions of humanity, this primordialist and essentialist perspective has – as Penrose (2002) has argued – become deeply embedded in commonsense understandings of the world. In this respect, it has been reified. At the same time, this discursive figure has remained a fundamental building block in the institutionalization of the state as a territorial construct, serving as a mythical and foundational reference: it continues to be fetishized (see also Debarbieux, 2004). Fourny-Kober (2005) has argued that the idea of natural boundaries has created an inevitable link between a conception of the



nation and its spatial inscription, doubly powerful for being rooted both in reason and in feeling.<sup>4</sup> When states are seen to fail, suggested solutions almost inevitably include partition, segregation and boundary redefinitions, as if the boundaries themselves were to blame (Alesina *et al.*, 2006).

This process of bordering depends throughout on categorization and the ordering of spatial objects. However, the processes of objectivation and categorization differ: the former aims to produce singularity, while the latter produces generic representation and collections of objects. Since nation states are spatial objects, considered similar within the related category, the construction of boundaries between them relies on producing singularity (uniqueness, identity, etc). State boundaries ground symbolic divisions of identification (*us* versus *them*) and of appropriation (*chez moi* versus elsewhere), changing behaviours on either side of boundary lines. Conversely, when 'city' and 'country-side' are treated as types, the construction of boundaries is guided by a system of knowledge which produces generic meanings for each type. For example, the bordering of agglomerations, through the number of commuters, intends to relate a singular object to a general category – *this city is an agglomeration*. The social and political dimensions of the two processes – objectivation and categorization – are very different.

We have argued that categories can be intrinsically spatial, spatialized or non-spatial depending on the way people construct and use them. Research on intrinsically spatial categories and on spatialized categories have different scopes: the former would focus on the spatial models of objectivation and the morphogenesis of objects; the latter on the motives and processes of spatialization and despatialization (ie, when the notion of city is thought of as ubiquitous) of categories. The analysis of the motives and processes of the spatialization and despatialization of categories could be a research domain in itself, informed by very different empirical

and theoretical works including treaties and case studies written by anthropologists, as well as political or law studies. Fruitful questions might include exploring how and when societies and institutions decide to associate or dissociate a category with space. Boundary studies, however broad and theoretical, must therefore remain alert to spatiality and materiality, and not just to processes of construction. This does not mean that we want to introduce an alternative kind of determination just after having rejected a neural one. Instead, because the way people feel, experience and conceive of the materiality of the world is part of the process of bordering, natural as well as artificial materiality is a resource (an affordance in Gibson's words, 1979), and something that has to be taken seriously. Thus appeals to relations, actors, materiality and material encounters that lead geographers to explore the physicality and copresence of the non-human, both animate and non-animate, within conventional human worlds must be linked up to rethinking bordering. (Re)engagements with materiality and spatiality as something that is always already unpredictable, vital, and always shot through with multiple, transversal, non-linear relations (Clark, 2000) provide an impetus and a theoretical grounding for rethinking materiality and categorization. This, we believe, will take us further than simply collapsing categories and making boundary studies into a field of scholarship that takes an interest in anything called a boundary.

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## Notes

1. Original (Foucault, 1971: 8): «On sait ce qu'il y a de déconcertant dans la proximité des extrêmes ou tout bonnement le voisinage soudain des choses sans rapport; l'énumération qui les entrechoque possède à elle seule un pouvoir d'enchantement.»
2. Original (Foucault, 1971: 10): «Si bien que l'encyclopédie chinoise citée par Borges et la taxinomie qu'elle propose conduisent à une pensée sans espace, à des mots et à des catégories sans feu ni lieu, mais qui reposent au fond sur un espace solennel, tout surchargé de figures complexes, de chemins enchevêtrés, de sites étranges, de secrets passages et de communications imprévues.»
3. Own translation from «la tête de la montagne brille dans une lumière éclatante, mais son pied se perd dans la brume des plaines et c'est à l'homme d'apporter la précision qui manque à la nature».
4. Own translation from «un double registre de la raison et du sentiment».

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