

BOUNDARIES AND IDENTITIES IN THE CERDANYA

Peter Sahlins

University of California, Berkeley

ABSTRACT: The Peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 marked the final cession and acquisition of territories and jurisdictions by Spain and France along the Pyrenees, which had spanned both watersheds, and creating what political scientists and historians across the 20th century have described as one of the most stable boundaries of western Europe. In the language of contemporary geography, following diplomatic usage, the Peace of the Pyrenees marked the “allocation” of the boundary, while the Bayonne constitute its «demarcation» and «delimitation,» a process here coterminous with the construction of the modern nation-state. But these simple terms mask and reduce a profoundly complex history.

KEY-WORDS: State, nation, Pyrenees, boundaries, identities, Europe, France, Spain.

The 350th anniversary of the Peace of the Pyrenees coincides fortuitously with a more proximate marker of recent history: the 20th year of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Two decades ago, a revolutionary wave swept across Europe, forming in the summer of 1989 in Poland and Hungary, cresting with the fall of the Berlin wall in November, and rolling east over the next two years, dissolving the boundaries of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union. Yet despite the grand symbolic gestures in Berlin, walls and boundaries have proliferated to an extraordinary extent in the last two decades, both politically and historiographically. True that 1989 coincided with the latest phase of globalization as an ever increasing flow of people, commodities, and information across state boundaries, a shrinking and flattening of the world that we might expect to make boundaries less and less relevant. And Europeanization – that is, the political construction of Europe and European integration, especially after Maastricht – also seemed to reinforce the idea that the boundaries separating the member states of the European Union were to be effaced, including that between France and Spain. Yet the counterevidence is overwhelming: political boundaries, alongside cultural and ethnic ones, have become more salient, and the world has become more «obsessed» (in the word of Michel Foucher) with boundaries and walls. Foucher claims that states have delimited or negotiated nearly 30,000 miles of political boundaries since 1989.¹

At the same time (literally), ethnic and national conflicts have exploded, beginning in the Balkans during the 1990s. Meanwhile «Fortress Europe» and a vast security and surveillance mechanism form a wall (albeit permeable) around Europe. And beyond Europe, there are more walls being built in the Age of Globalization, especially in the post 9/11 world than ever before. These include the US-Mexican border, where the inequities of global capitalism are revealed; the Israeli walling off of Palestine; and the less visible but no less real walls that dictate and are produced by the uneven spread of globalization itself. The world may be flat, but it is increasingly walled off.²

The lesson of 1989 – that a moment intended to efface boundaries led (unintentionally) to their proliferation – sheds important light on 1659. For while we think of the Peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 – the loss of Rosselló and part of Cerdanya to France – as a singular event, a foundational moment in the history not only of Catalunya but also of France and Spain, what matters more are the unintended consequences, a history that is far from linear, and which escaped and confounded the intentions of the diplomats and plenipotenciaries who negotiated the Peace in 1659 and the settlements of 1660.

On the one hand the Peace of the Pyrenees in 1659 marked the final cession and acquisition of territories and jurisdictions by Spain and France along the Pyrenees, ending the existence of the medieval states – notably Aragon and Navarre – which had spanned both watersheds, and creating what political scientists and historians across the 20th century have described as one of the most stable, «cold» and «fossilized» boundaries of western

1. Michel Foucher, *L'obsession des frontières*, Paris: Perrin, 2007.

2. Cases included in Paul GANSTER and David E. LOREY (Eds.), *Borders and Border Politics in a Globalizing World*, New York, Toronto, Oxford: SR Books, Lanham, Boulder, 2005; and Vera PAVLAKOVICH-KOCHI, Barbara J. MOREHOUSE, Doris WASTL-WALTER (eds.), *Challenged Borderlands: Transcending Political And Cultural Boundaries*, London: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.

Europe.³ Yet on the other hand, much was to happen after 1659 and before the final delimitation and demarcation of the boundary line between two nation-states in the Treaties of Bayonne (1866-1868), a treaty long overshadowed by its predecessor two hundred years earlier. In the language of contemporary geography, following diplomatic usage, the Peace of the Pyrenees marked the «allocation» of the boundary, while the Bayonne constitute its «demarcation» and «delimitation,» a process here coterminous with the construction of the modern nation-state.⁴ But these simple terms mask and reduce a profoundly complex history.

In fact, the commissioners in 1659 already spoke of the «delineation of the frontier» and understood that «the line, which has to be almost mathematical, has necessarily to occupy a very narrow width.»⁵ It was an image of a linear division that replicated the ceremonial and symbolic dimensions of the political negotiations on the Island of the Pheasants, divided into two, six months earlier. Cardinal Mazarin and Luis de Haro had negotiated the Peace of the Pyrenees on a carefully-chosen «neutral» site on an island in the middle of the Bidassoa River. Cardinal Mazarin explained the proceedings:

Without further delay we had bridges built to link each side of our island [with the mainland] and plan to build equal lodgings, and a large room at the head of the island equidistant from the two lodgings, in which there will be two doors, one on his side, and one on mine, by which we can enter, each holding rank in the chairs which will be prepared for us on each side of the room, which we will take care to build and to furnish, each one his own half.⁶

The symbolic equality still gave rise to competition between the two nations once the ministers and their entoures began to meet, and later during the marriage of Louis XIV and Maria Teresa, daughter of Philip IV, at the same site. More important, the ceremonial symmetry belied French strength at the bargaining table, as France, victorious on the battlefields, dominated the negotiations.

Six months later, the negotiations at Ceret between Pierre de Marca and Don Miguuel de Salva revealed the fictive quality of the linear division. The contention was aggravated by different translations of the key phrase of the Treaty defining the Pyrenees as those “que generalment sempre han estat la divisio de les Espanyes de les Gallies” (the French text read “qui avianet anciennement divise les Gaules et les Espagnes), not to mention the obstinacy of the two plenipotenciaries fighting for their honor (and for a few villages in the mountains). The resulting settlement, which famously ceded 33 villages of the Cerdanya to France, leaving the town of Llívia enclaved among them, was a cession of jurisdictions, not a demarcation of territories. Once the Peace and its conventions were signed, nothing was to define the precise territorial boundaries of the kingdoms: no accepted set of boundary stones, no single line of soldiers or customs guards. At best, the boundary line duplicated the long contested boundaries of the settlements divided between two kingdoms. Rather, as worked out in the further conferences held over the next few years in the town of Figueras, the two crowns established a series of jurisdictional frontiers corresponding to the different dimensions of royal administration, frontiers which failed to coincided. The ecclesiastical boundary was such that Llívia, along with the thirty-three villages ceded to France, remained dependent on the Spanish Bishopric of Urgell. The maintenance of seignorial jurisdictions on both sides of the boundary cut across the limits of judicial administration. The continuity of property ownership across the boundary and the constant insistence of both monarchies to fix taxes following the place of their proprietors’ origins determined a distinct set of limits of fiscal sovereignty. Nor did the customs boundary coincide with the «limits of France and Spain,» since multiple «internal customs» persisted long into the Old Regime.⁷ Most importantly, the parts of Catalunya ceded to France were still linguistically and ethnically (“nationally”) Catalan, with centuries old ties (and disputes) that long predated the “mutilation” of Catalunya.

The history of the Peace of the Pyrenees, then, also begins in 1659, and lasts at least until 1868, when a bi-national commission finally delimited the territorial frontier of France and Spain. The history of the boundary and of the borderland in the Cerdanya was the subject of my book, *Boundaries: the Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, also published in 1989 (indeed, it was released the week that the Berlin wall fell in November).⁸ In the book, I introduced a more complex model of what it meant to be (or to become) French or Spanish, one

3. For example, Jean BRUNHES and Camille VALLAUX, *La géographie de l'histoire*, Paris: Alcan, 1921, p. 353; or Michel FOUCHER, *L'invention des frontières*, Paris: Fondation pour les Études de Défense Nationale, 1987, p. 128.

4. For the classic definition of these terms, see Paul de LAPRADELLE, *La frontière: Étude de Droit international*, Paris: Les Editions Internationales, 1928.

5. Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona, Ms. B183, fol. 2, “Discurso geográfico”.

6. *Lettres du Cardinal Mazarin...*, Amsterdam, 1690, n. 8 (5 August 1659).

7. Peter SAHLINS, *Boundaries: the Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 53-59 *et seq.*

8. Translated as *Fronteres i identitats: la formació d'Espanya i França a la Cerdanya, s. XVII-XIX* (trans. Jordi Argenté, Vic: Eumo Ed., 1993; and *Frontières et identités nationales: la France et l'Espagne dans les Pyrénées depuis le XVIIe siècle* (trans. G. de Laforcade), Paris: Belin, 1996. The book did not translate (or scale) well: I was writing in relation to the historiography of the “nation-states” of France and Spain, not the “nació” of Catalunya – a term I reserved for the political movement of Catalan nationalism since the nineteenth century, and which was not extensively covered in my book.

that included an understanding of the instrumentalism and multiplicity of identities, and that thereby ran counter to official ideologies of belonging in France, Spain, and Catalunya. I argued that the people of the borderland (the peasants, nobles, and townsmen of the two Cerdanyas) were at once agents in the construction of the political boundary and self-conscious manipulators of French and Spanish national identities, a set of identities that they adopted without ever abandoning their own sense of family, place, language, or history ... as Catalans.

Twenty years ago, the dominant historiographical paradigm of the nation-state was a story of the center's efforts to subsume the periphery: how the state increasingly (France) or not (Spain) imposed its political authority and institutions – indeed, its culture – on the peasant society of the margins. Eugen Weber's insistence on the belated arrival of the nation in the village during the Third Republic dominated thinking about peasants and national identity. Only the arrival of the railroad, the public school, and military service could turn *Peasants into Frenchmen*.⁹ While such models of nation-building (in France and Spain) insisted on the hegemonic effacement of local identities and cultures, models of what political scientists call «sub-state nationalism» (as in Catalunya) countered with an insistence on the resistance and subversion of national identities in local culture.¹⁰ My own effort was to break out of this dualism and to begin in the borderland and to think the «nation» in more practical, strategic, and instrumental ways. Indeed, far from being crushed, however belatedly, by the authority and culture of Paris and Madrid, groups in local society used their new identities in the service of their local interests. What the archival record seemed to further reveal, however, was how the persistent instrumentalization of «national identity» led in unexpected ways to a framing of interests that *flowed from* the fact of belonging to one state or another. National identity, in the borderland, was contingent and relational; instrumental, like a mask, it was also capable – as Michel Brunet himself once remarked – of sticking to the skin.

Over the last twenty years, some of the ideas in my book became relevant to contemporary discussions about the transformation of Europe and globalization after 1989 in part because of three conclusions that I was able to draw from this singular historical example. The first was the idea that «the history of the world is best observed from the frontier,» to quote the late, great historian of Catalunya, Pierre Vilar.¹¹ Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the emerging nation-states of France and Spain drew the imagined boundaries that delineated their territories, states, and identities. The process of state and nation-building was dramatically highlighted in the borderland, where the two states attempted to articulate their territories and identities in opposition to each other, just as today, the consequences of globalization are highlighted in the proliferation of new borders and walls since 1989.

This led to a second conclusion relevant to the study of Europe and of borderlands more generally: the importance of local groups as agents and historical actors in the making of identities and territories. In my book, I sought to challenge what was still prevalent at the time, the thesis, drawn from modernization theory, that nations and states were built from the center outward, imposed on the periphery. I turned the tables, arguing that local historical actors – peasant communities, municipalities, noble families, small landowners – were critical in determining not only the shape of the political boundary of France and Spain, but their own national identities as Frenchmen and Spaniards, and this at a surprisingly early date. Not in the seventeenth century, to be sure, when local society resisted the French in the military frontier, a period of deepening Catalan identity and loyalty in the borderland.¹² But during the eighteenth century, and certainly before the fatal date of 1789, the two states were forced to engage in a protracted negotiation with local society in the borderland, and the social groups composing this local society helped to create and affirm their version of a national boundary and their own identities as Frenchmen and Spaniards. Thus the third conclusion, itself a corollary of my initial critique of modernization theory. Rather than suppose that the «nation» effaced local difference, I sought to show how the collective and individual actions of peasants, nobles, and townsmen created national identities without abandoning self-interest or a sense of place, nor the practice of a culture distinct from those of either nation-state. Such was the case because local society adopted an *instrumental* set of identities as Frenchmen and Spaniards as one modality of their *multiple* identifications: *Boundaries* argued how village communities and local classes moved from specific, local conflicts to a wider affirmation of their national identities without ever losing the pragmatic and localized dimensions of their self-interests. These groups «nationalized» their local conflicts, bringing the state and the nation into the village.

9. Eugen WEBER, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1976. The title of the French translation, *La fin des terroirs* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), insisted on the disappearance of local identities. For a recent collective reflection on the impact of Weber's work, see the dossier «Eugen Weber», in *Historia social*, n. 62, 2008, p. 75-169.

10. See most recently Michel BRUNET, «Frontera cerdana e identidades nacionales en el siglo XIX», *Manuscrits. Revista d'Història Moderna*, 2008, n. 26, p. 121-131. In fact, Brunet and I agree about the «political chameleons» of the Cerdanya, and especially the «caso Garreta», although I emphasize their local status as outsiders as well (even if powerful figures in the community).

11. *L'Avenç*, n. 86, November, 1985), p. 42.

12. Oscar JANÉ CHECA, *La identitat de la frontera pirinenca. Efectes socials i polítics al nord de Catalunya des de la creació de Montlluís (1677-1698)*, Girona: Diputació de Girona, 2008.

Let me briefly elaborate on what we might call the «anti-modernization» thesis by considering what happened in the Cerdanya in the year 1868, when an international commission of French and Spanish experts and politicians finally and belatedly delimited and demarcated the border line. At that moment, many of the local communities on both sides of the border refused to recognize the line conceived by the diplomats and experts of the two states. They did so partially out of solidarity with each other. After all, it was less than two generations since the town council of Puigcerdà had asserted the identity of peasant culture on both sides of the boundary, unchanged by a century and a half of history:

The peasants follow the same methods in cultivating their lands; the families of both sides are intertwined, landowners and proprietors from one Cerdana own estates and properties in the other, and vice versa; the people speak a same language, and they dress alike, so that in seeing two individuals from the Cerdanya, one Spanish and the other French, it would be impossible to distinguish which is which without knowing them already.¹³

By the late nineteenth century, there were few marked differences in landscape, culture, or language introduced by the boundary. On both sides of the valley, the peasantry and rural nobility continued to speak Catalan, to write Catalan, to eat the same food, pray to the same saints (in Catalan), and share a world of cultural practices. The affirmation of differences – of French and Spanish identities – took place then within a shared cultural unity. Moreover, such identities coexisted with, and indeed cannot be explained apart from, the increasing demographic unification of the two sides of the valley. My work in parish registers revealed a large-scale population movement of Spanish Cerdans and Catalans into France, such that as much as a third of the population of French border villages was of Spanish parentage.¹⁴

This led me to the conclusion that the more the boundary was drawn by the two states, the more the two sides of the valley found themselves united and, in some sense, alike. Continuity across the emerging boundary did not simply predate the efforts of the two states to install themselves territorially: it was the very result of efforts by Paris and Madrid to mark the difference of their national territories. The creation of different property and tax regimes in the 18th century, for example, encouraged the purchases of property and the manipulation of residence among local elites in the borderland towns. The development of tariff systems created the massive contraband trade, from specie to oranges, that went through the Cerdanya, and that supported thousands of poorer peasants on both sides of the boundary.

Yet this increased flow of persons and goods across national boundaries did not necessarily result in a sense of relatedness among the peoples of the two sides of the valley. In an important sense, it was the condition of their expression of national differences.¹⁵ Despite the fact that peasants and rural notables on both sides spoke the same language (Catalan), that these groups intermarried, that they shared a common culture, and that they participated in the same economic activities, the two sides expressed their sense of difference – especially during disputes over waters, pastures, and forests in the borderland. As an astute French customs director wrote to his finance minister in 1827,

Contiguous communities often have interests to fight out. When they are not under the same superior authority, their rivalries cannot be contained, their territorial encroachments cannot be stopped, and their usurpations of pasturing rights cannot be impeded. When local demands for protection remain without effort, the communities resort to armed struggle.¹⁶

But it was these “demands for protection” that engendered a new framework of identity. And so the people of the borderland ultimately opposed the international delimitation of the boundary in 1868, precisely because it was not in their national interests. Thus refusing a settlement proposed by the commissioners in 1868 concerning a disputed terrain with the Spanish town of Guils, the mayor of La Tor de Querol argued in defense of national territory against those “of foreign nations and different mores”.¹⁷

I argued that national identity, then, was less about essential differences than about a *perception* of difference, an expression about their distinctiveness – a process of drawing boundaries between collective self and other. This process took place episodically but continuously over two centuries within the claims that arose from disputing

13. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Estado, libro 674d (petition of Puigcerdà, 14 July 1814).

14. Peter SAHLINS, *Boundaries...*, Tables B, p. 5-6.

15. This apparent paradox was identified more than forty years ago by the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik BARTH in F. BARTH (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, Brown, Boston: Little, 1969, p. 10.

16. Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (AMAE), *Limites*, vol. 461, no. 31 (27 January 1827)

17. AMAE, *Commission de Délimitation des Pyrénées*, vol. 10, fol. 298 (20 June 1867)

and contesting local territorial and social boundaries. Indeed, both the identities of Frenchmen and Spaniards, and the boundary of France and Spain, were not imposed from above, by the two states, but emerged instead from below, out of local boundary disputes within and among village communities, and in disputes within village communities over rights and privileges of local membership – themselves emerging as a result of ecological pressures and of the increased social and demographic unity of the valley.

To summarize, then, my argument ran counter to received wisdom that nations were built from the center outward, and that the center – the capitol, but also dominant social groups – forces the periphery to give up local identities and territories. Even the most imaginative of the scholarship of the 1980s on nations (including Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* [1983]) shared a vision that I call the "the myth of the dominant center": the idea that identity is built up as a series of concentric circles, in which loyalty to village is superseded by loyalty to the valley, the region, the province, and finally the nation. Associated with the myth of the dominant center is the myth of inevitable conformity: the assumption that localities come to resemble the nation more and more, that the village simply becomes the nation writ small.

The case of the Cerdanya suggests that such myths tend to mask the local workings of nation building; that neither takes into account the simultaneous persistence of local identities, nor the contextual and oppositional structure of identity. Thus the social and political expression of affiliation is also an expression of difference and distinction. In this sense, we should perhaps think less about circles than about segments, clusters of potential oppositions based on perceptions of difference, differences that are always relative, potentially fused into a more generalized opposition. Anthropologists call this a segmentary system, referring to lineage-based, stateless societies. But the basic principles of segmentation, complementary opposition, and structural relatively may be usefully applied to the development of national identities within complex societies in Europe.¹⁸ Especially, but not exclusively in a borderland, the social construction of national identity is relational and contingent, focused on the contextual affirmation of a sense of difference.

Such was the argument twenty years ago. As I suggested, the world has since changed vastly and in unpredictable ways, under the impact of globalization and wall-building, and the historiography of boundaries and borderlands has itself become a cottage industry. If I were still thinking about *Boundaries* today, and I would likely temper my conclusions in three ways.

First, I think that I overemphasized the responsibility of local society in the making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees. The shift in perspectives – from centers to peripheries – has proven useful in understanding how local historical processes become dialectically engaged in world historical processes, but it is important not to reverse completely the notion of historical agency. Much emphasis is placed today on this notion of local agency, but often at the expense of an understanding of how dominant institutions and social groups continue to structure the possibilities of local actions.

Second, I think that I overemphasized the instrumental character of national identities in France and Spain, and underplayed the extent to which local inhabitants explicitly thought of themselves as Catalans. In particular, I should have insisted more, as we know better today, how the experience of the seventeenth century military occupations of the Cerdanya helped to crystallize an oppositional identity of Catalans and French. In this, I would have contrasted the relative peaceful eighteenth century between the two Bourbon monarchies, as well as a more favorable economic conjuncture, that was the setting for the articulation of "national" identities and the opposition between French and Spanish. At the same time, I think it is important to reconsider the period of the French Revolution not as the "moral frontier" (Lucien Febvre) that marks the birth of the "nation" as a political category but as a more complex moment, in the Cerdanya, where choices of membership and belonging to Catalunya, Spain, or France were also determined by pre-existing fractures of family, kin groups, or neighborhoods. The imbrication of the local and the "national" is a deeply complex phenomenon.

In *Boundaries*, while emphasizing the instrumentalization of identities, I perhaps did not fully comprehend how the third term of "Catalan" identity might be at play, if differently, on both sides of the boundary, even if largely invisible in the archives. In particular, since I did not work in great detail on the period from the late nineteenth century to the present, I did not sufficiently contrast the articulation the experience of the two Cerdanyas in the context of Catalan nationalism; nor was I enough of an anthropologist to do more than cursory fieldwork on both sides of the boundaries. And even though the "literary turn" raged all around the U.S. academy at the time, twenty years ago, I did not take seriously enough the rhetorical tropes and strategies of enunciating a national identity.

Finally, I believe that I underestimated the singularity of borderlands and their special configurations of state and locale. It is true that the last twenty years have born witness to the Newtonian law of identity that claims all processes of universalization must involve equal and opposite processes of differentiation. But when this happens

18. Peter SAHLINS, *Boundaries...*, p. 110-113.

at state borders, the chemistry is unique. Specifically, the segmentary model, emphasizing the relational and contingent nature of identities grounded on telescoping distinctions of “us” and “them,” is much more evident in a borderland than elsewhere, where it is present in everyday life and activities. At the same time, as recent work on England and France has shown, at the level of the “imagined community,” a wide range of media construct discursively and visually national identities and counter-identities.¹⁹ But while the literary and propagandistic model of oppositional identities is important, it is different from the living oppositions of face-to-face communities. The question is not only about scale. It is also about how people of the borderland bring the nation (whichever it may be) into the village.

19. Linda COLLEY, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992; and more recently, David BELL, *The Cult of the Nation: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003. See also the engaging recent monograph of Renaud Morieux who treats the English Channel as a boundary: *Une mer pour deux royaumes. La Manche, frontière franco-anglaise (XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles)*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008.