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**Boundaries: Transience and  
intercultural dynamics.**

A World without Surroundings.  
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# A World without Surroundings

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## ABSTRACT

This article is based on the metaphor of “a world without surroundings” which, on one hand, can help us to understand the nature of the world that is currently being configured with the processes of globalisation, and on the other, to assess the most intelligent strategies for shaping it, in accord with the criteria of balance and justice. Our task should be, therefore, to cosmopolitanise globalisation; that is, to politicise the processes with new political concepts that no longer allow the use of the old strategies of delimitation or differentiation between “Us” and “Them”, and which are demanding integrative actions.

*Key words: Cosmopolitanism, sustainability, exclusion, boundaries, risk society, globalisation*

The fact that the definitions for the world in which we live and the ideas we use to attempt to discover their essence are metaphorical in nature is probably a sign of how difficult the task is. It is as if social analysis has ended up having to resort to poetics in its attempt to understand contemporary society using images such as networks, flows and landscapes to explain something as simple and at the same time enigmatic as the idea that we are in the middle of a process that is making the world a unique place.

I would say that all the explanations put forward to clarify the meaning of globalisation seem to be contained within the metaphor that the world no longer possesses surroundings; it has no margins, no outskirts and no outlying districts. To the best of my knowledge, the first person to formulate this idea was Karl Jaspers, who wrote in 1949: “There is no longer anything outside”. Essentially, this image of *a world without surroundings* expresses the idea that ours is “a world without borders”, but in a more

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graphic manner which enables us to understand better what this means. “Global” is that which leaves nothing outside of itself: it contains everything, it connects and integrates in such a way that there is nothing left unconnected, isolated, independent, lost or protected, saved or condemned in its exterior. The “rest of the world” is a fiction or a figure of speech when there is nothing that does not form, in some way, part of our common world. Basically, this metaphor simply gives a graphic force to that Kantian idea that in a round world, we end up meeting up with each other.

Like nearly everything important, this configuration of the world is not the result of a conscious, agreed decision; instead, it is the consequence of involuntary, complex social processes. The unification of the world has not taken place in the way that the course of history would have us believe –as the victory of an empire, the unification of the proletariat, the homogenisation of trade, the hegemony of free exchange, the victory of an organised religion or the spreading of a federalist world ideology– but rather, in an unexpected, unplanned manner, as the result of a process that has left the world without any surrounding areas. Most of our problems result from this circumstance, or we experience them as such because we are unable to evade them or to domesticate them by drawing limits and externalising them. Problems such as the destruction of the environment, climate change, food risks, the financial storms, immigrations, new terrorism, and so on. In Ulrich Beck’s view (2002), globalisation basically means the experience of a civilisational self-threat that eliminates the mere plural juxtaposition of peoples and cultures, and introduces them into a unified space, a cosmopolitan unit of destiny. In a similar vein, David Held (2000) spoke of “communities with crossed destinies” to indicate that the globalisation of risks creates an involuntary community, so that nobody is left out of that common fate.

When surroundings existed, a range of actions was available for us to make use of these marginal spaces –we could evade something, wash our hands of it, ignore or protect. The exclusiveness of what was once known, one’s particular clientele and reasons of State all had a certain meaning. And almost everything could be resolved by the simple act of externalising the problem, by shifting it to a “surrounding area”, out of our sight, in a place far away or off towards another time. A surrounding area is, in short, a place where we can blithely deposit our unresolved problems, our waste –a rubbish dump.

What do the following have in common: the spreading of individual rights that prevents us from viewing anybody as a mere passive subject who obeys the decisions of others, and the ecological awareness that makes it very hard to deposit our waste just anywhere, or to demand recycling? Both phenomena are expressions of the fact that externalisation has become problematised, and that nobody and nothing want to be considered surrounding areas. When we speak, for example, of space refuse (meaning the waste dumped by spacecraft circling the earth), this shows that space itself is no longer

considered a mere exterior area where it is quite legitimate to dump one's rubbish. When we begin to worry about rubbish, it is because something that we previously couldn't see (or didn't want to see) has entered our field of vision. The awareness of what rubbish signifies –in both the literal and the metaphorical sense– represents an enlarging of our world, of the world that we consider ours.

Perhaps, by using this idea of the elimination of surroundings, we can formulate the most beneficial side of the civilising process and the path to be taken to construct spaces for a common world. Though there is no need for it to be expressly sanctioned, it is becoming increasingly difficult to dump the responsibility on someone else, or on distant regions, future generations or other social sectors. This articulation of what is “ours” and what is the responsibility of others creates a scenario of responsibility that is very well expressed in one of El Roto's cartoons: “In a globalised world, it's impossible to try not to see what's happening by looking the other way, because there isn't one any more”. Let us consider, for example, the way in which we are called upon to show sensitivity to the side effects that are produced in very diverse areas, and especially in those of science and technology; or let us consider the illegitimacy and cynicism with which we judge the discourse of “collateral damage”, when what we mean is military action; the interiorisation of nature in the human world that represents ecological awareness, and thanks to which nature is no longer considered as something exterior; the principle of sustainability, which is like a kind of temporal globalisation, a taking into consideration of the future (which stops being a mere surroundings), the rights of future generations and environmental viability, against the dictatorship of the present exercised at the cost of the future.

Without any surroundings, with a distance that is potentially eliminated, the world is organised into a kind of universal immediacy. Human beings have never been as close to each other as they are today, for good and for ill. One consequence of this is that inequalities are more easily perceived, and they become less bearable when local perceptions are accompanied by external perspectives, when one knows what is going on in another place, and in this way contextualises what is one's own, de-absolutises it and turns it into something that could be in another way. Nobody could imagine that they were poor if there were nothing but poor people in their immediate surroundings. To perceive the difference, one needs to be able to compare, and this comparison is possible when there is nothing hidden, when everything is on show. Information is one of the processes that have contributed most to the fact that the world now has no surroundings. In fact, David Elkins (1995) defined globalisation as the process by which increasingly larger sectors of the world's population gain awareness of differences in culture, lifestyle, wealth and other aspects. Independently of whether the current economic system reduces or increases inequalities, what it unquestionably means is that existing inequalities become less and less bearable.

The most radical transformation being carried out by a world that is gradually wiping out its surrounding areas has to do with the difficulty of drawing limits and using them to organise strategies (organisational, military, political, economic, etc.). In the best of cases, when it is possible to draw limits, we should also bear in mind that any construction of limits is variable, plural and contextual, and that these have to be defined and justified again and again, in accordance with the issue under consideration. The immediate consequence of this is that they continually combine the interior and the exterior into any activity. One of the fields in which this confusion has become the most pronounced is that of politics which, owing to its very nature, has always involved the governing of limits. Now it is commonly claimed as an undisputed truth (though probably without having closely examined all the consequences that it implies) that there is no important problem that can be resolved locally, that strictly speaking, domestic policy no longer exists, nor does foreign policy, as it has all become domestic policy, thereby calling into question the traditional names of these ministries. The limits between domestic policy and external policy have become extremely diffuse, and “external” factors such as global risks, international regulations and transnational actors have turned into “internal variables”. Our way of conceiving and executing policies will not be able to cope with the challenges that await us if we do not problematise the distinction between “inside” and “outside” as being concepts that are inadequate for governing in unlimited spaces.

Another of the difficulties that will derive from a world such as this (and we see it on a daily basis) is the management of security. The delimitation of areas of decision and responsibility becomes confused. Threats to security no longer emanate from one place or one specific source, they are as diffuse as the flows that they draw upon, so that they keep us all in a state of latent insecurity. Instead of wartime fronts that separate the secure space from the threatening surroundings (symbolised in the form of a boundary), what we have is an insecurity that is also interior. To continue with this metaphorical illustration, it could be argued that the global space has taken on the nature of a border area, with everything that this represents with regard to understanding and management of security.

And one of the issues in which we can perceive to what extent globalisation is not only a quantitative enlargement of space, but also a new understanding of the world, is perceptible in the complete change of vocabulary as regards the social question, which for some time no longer considers alienation (excessive interiorisation) to be the absolute social evil, since exclusion (a lack of interiorisation) has now taken its place. In the spatial representation of the political community, “exclusion” equals the opposite of closure, of expelling something out of a closed space, sending it outwards to the exterior, to the periphery or the margins. Does this mean that, in a world without surroundings, exclusion no longer exists? What a world without surroundings means is that the excluded

no longer find themselves outside, but that instead, this exclusion is carried out in the interior, with other strategies, and in a less visible way than when clear limits existed which separated us from the others –the idea that ones inside are here, and the ones outside, are over there. But now, the excluded may even be in the city centre, in the same way that threats no longer come from a far-off place, but from the very heart of civilisation, as seems to be the case with new terrorism. The margins are in the interior, in our “interior surroundings”.

Just as security protection is forced to develop more intelligent strategies in a world that is not threatened from its surroundings, monitoring and surveillance also have to focus more on our mechanisms of exclusion. To be able to deal with an enlarged world (which could serve as a substitutional reference for the idea of progress, thereby substituting the criteria of time with that of space), we should always consider the exclusions that may be originating from our social practices. The progressivism of yesteryear which attempted to sustain the course of time is today a spatialism that is fighting to maintain the form of a world without surroundings; that is to say, without rubbish dumps, without pagans, without third parties, without the absent ones.

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