

Scientific Critique and Polemic

Julie Mostov. Soft Borders: Rethinking Sovereignty and Democracy

Palgrave Macmillan, May 2008

A political theorist who has lived, studied and worked in former Yugoslavia since the 1970s, conceptualizes political space and relationships of social cooperation. *Soft Borders* encourages sustainable resolutions to ethno-national conflicts, economic and social development.

The book starts with the author's preface and acknowledgments. Mostov supports her soft versus hard borders theory and defends transnational citizenship exercised within and across multiple, fluid polities. In her introduction, Chapter 1, she outlines her argument further and specifies what she means by sovereignty particularly in reference to borderlines and movements. She then proceeds to provide the readers with the summary, main idea and goal of each chapter that follows.

Chapter 2, "Locations and Boundaries of Sovereignty", situated in a currently transitional moment, Mostov explores sovereignty internally and externally, historically but also symbolically. She locates decision making authority in terms of subsidiarity and explores ways in which the arrangement facilitates and encourages relationships of equality and interdependence. According to her, sovereignty moves in an invented sphere, yet is deeply rooted in intellectual, legal and political traditions. Democracy, after all, is defined by the logical requirements of what the writer calls "relational sovereignty".

In Chapter 3, "Sovereignty and Ethnocracy", "ethnocracy" – a politics of national identity – is examined as the attempt of rulers to defend national interests as defined by common culture, history, religion, myths and presumed descent. Mostov judges this as a dangerous combination in ethno-national conflicts that poses huge obstacles to peaceful resolution of complex questions of international nature. To support her arguments she highlights the case of the fragmenting Yugoslavia (Kosovo, in particular) questioning the intractable nature of such conflict as well as presenting the ambiguity produced mostly in Europe due to political and economic instability in the Balkan region.

Chapter 4 speaks of "The Politics of National Identity". Social cooperation requires thick bonds of common history, language and culture. A feminist theory and the case of former Yugoslavia are examples that illustrate the politics of national identity as they promote notions of belonging inconsistent with democratic choice. Collective rights have continued to convey fixed relationships of inequality, an example being the identification of women as privileged bearers of identity and boundary markers of their communities. Mostov suggests a rearticulation of spaces where a move toward decoupling citizenship from nationality is necessary.

The relationships that foster democratic social cooperation and make possible

an understanding of citizenship decoupled from nationality are sought in Chapter 5, “Democratic Polities: Thin Bonds and Soft Borders”. Mostov’s soft border approach envisions democratic practices of social cooperation exercised through multiple and overlapping polities and by individuals and groups with multiple and fluid identities. She seeks to depoliticize ethnonational identities by arguing that the enjoyment of public goods and basic rights should be independent of membership in any particular identity community.

Mostov’s idea of soft borders is analyzed further under the lenses of a) transnational citizenship, b) membership in multiple soft border polities, c) thin bonds strengthened through democratic practices of social cooperation and d) access to various levels of transnational or international organizations by a variety of actors in Chapter 6, “Transnational Citizens in Multiple Polities”. Readers consider possible ways in which to facilitate legal border crossings and cross-border polities as a democratic practice that respects ethnonational ties and identities.

Lastly, Chapter 7, “Reconstructing the Polity”, continues the discussion initiated in Chapter 6, proposing that cooperation relies on trust built through reiterated positive experiences of social choice. All in all, if we are to think of a future in which there are better possible solutions to regional conflicts, we need to think in terms of softening borders. Transnational information networks play a critical role in this softening of borders and global cities with large numbers of migrants and a juxtaposition of class and ethnic differences stand out as a particular kind of soft bordered political space.

The book concludes with rich notes, bibliography and index. It is a work that explores the democratic potential of cross-border polities and transnational public spaces, but also the destructiveness of hard borders and hard border thinking in a globalizing world. The model it proposes, that of opening the opportunities and avenues for collective action, sounds timely in an era of strong migration and constant mobility.

The ways of communication Mostov envisions suggest new geographies in a global world where still hard ethnocentric borders prevail. They also relate to contemporary trends of building new fortresses against labor migration. The “soft” solutions are not easy (– taken their global economic effects in particular) though capable of providing long-term strategies for peace and prosperity in the southeast European region. What is nostalgically longed for – a community and all the embodied past that comes with it – will eventually seek to be heard. Perhaps multicultural education and anthropological advice as prerequisite paths could assist a hardcover book to reach its soft goals smoother.

This *Soft Borders* review coincides with the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a historical event that suggests bringing down very hard borders. Is the essence, after all, found in connecting bridges but also the sacrifices it takes to bridge every distance locked in a constant battle between the old and the new? If so, then the healthiest aspect of a nation is to be found in societies that are destroyed over and over again, that remain fields of sacrifice and struggle, as well as in the flexibility of traditions and their cultural bridges.

Maria Hnaraki