



EastBordNet

COST Action IS0803

Scientific report in realm of Photography Project

**Remaking Eastern Borders in Europe:
a network of exploring social, moral and material relocations of Europe's eastern
peripheries**



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“One State Various Borders (Or East Meets West)”

Various Locations in Israel from Sep. 29th until Oct. 4th

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Report: Israel Photography Project (STSM)

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The Short Term Scientific Mission for photographing various cases of borderlines in Israel was carried out with the preliminary knowledge about the multiple border zones and specific border crossing regulations in this country. The photography trip included a range of fieldwork visits and observations of areas where diverse aspects of borders and borderline practices take place: the specificity of Tel Aviv-Yaffo as a “mixed city” of Arabs and Jews; the Ajami neighborhood in Tel Aviv; the Erez border passage of Gaza Strip and villages near the border with Gaza; the migrant workers in Shapira neighborhood; the lines of division and segregation in the city of Jerusalem; the walls of separation between Judea and Samaria and the State of Israel, etc. The fieldtrips involved meetings with guides, NGO representatives and specialists on the visited areas, interaction with local population, observation of practices related to border maintenance and border crossing, documentation and photographing of key points where such practices occur, and discussions on the conducted fieldwork observations. In the course of our mission, we managed to observe different sections of borderlines and border zones, some of which with more restricted access, others more porous and flexible, some invisible, and others – rigid and hardly possible to transgress. A diverse set of borders – political, social, ethnic, religious, urban, class, etc. were come across and analyzed, and this permitted us to enrich our knowledge about the border zones and layers in Israel, as well as to expand our understanding of borders and their conceptualization.

The participation in the photography project was a possibility for me to extend my research work on documenting practices and material traces in border regions, to share ideas with colleagues involved in similar research activities, and to widen my knowledge about borders and border related practices in Europe’s eastern peripheries. Joining this short term

scientific mission enabled me to compare observations from this region with fieldwork research that I have carried out with communities on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, and laid fruitful grounds for parallels between so distant and different border areas. The mission stirred comparisons also with other borderlines and divided areas where I have had research trips – mostly along Bulgaria’s state frontiers, but also in Nicosia (Cyprus) and Berlin (Germany), where the main function of physical borders to separate human space and to divide nearby communities is also expressed in a vivid way. Among the major lines of parallels and comparative highlights prompted by the various locations visited during the fieldtrip in Israel were the practices of border crossing and border control; the segregation of inhabited space between communities of different ethnic, religious, national, or class belonging; the areas of restricted access to borderline areas, and everyday life practices in frontier zones; stereotypes in perceiving, interpreting and narrating about borders, as well as ways in which different border lines influence the life of individuals and groups in border areas. Aside from learning a lot about the specificity of the borders that we visited and observed during our trip, the experience within the short-term scientific mission appeared extremely useful with the ideas and insights that it provided for fieldwork that I would furthermore develop in border zones in the future.

The beginning of our trip focused on the interaction between Arabs and Jews in Tel Aviv-Yaffo, and the problem of the multitude of shared histories that provide a range of contrasting and mutually exclusive narratives. Following a very original organization of a guided tour, our group had the chance to visit different sites in Jaffo and to listen to presentations illustrating the Jewish and the Arab perspective of the historical and cultural belonging of this area. The presentations showed this part of Tel Aviv as not actually “mixed,” but rather – divided by more or less visible lines of separation, distinction, and self-exclusive approaches to representation. The walk around the Ajami neighborhood – inhabited by Arabs, but a target of state policies of resettlement and gradual re-inscription of its historical and cultural identity – proved to be not only a good ending of our first day during the trip, but also raised stimulating questions about the permanence of existing borders and the reshaping that they may undergo with respect to state-guided initiatives for maintaining their rigid existence.

A different side of border lines – one of guarding as a state frontier and an object of transgression by missile attacks – could be seen during the second day of the fieldtrip when the group visited the border area near Gaza Strip and communities living in more distant or

immediate proximity to the frontier. The desolate landscape in the borderline zone, the restrictions on border crossing, communication, and exchange of basic commodities across the barbed line, the humanitarian problems around the isolated territory, etc. laid deep imprint on our minds, which was furthermore competed by the overall atmosphere of danger and caution in the areas within direct scope of missile attacks. Aside from causing turbulences in the life of communities around them, borders turned instrumental for the readjustment of everyday rhythm on their both sides (e.g. the supply of basic products on the one side, and the state of constant alert on the other), for opening a series of limitations and constraints (the total isolation on the one side, and the bomb shelters on the other), for developing state and community policies of survival, self-guarding, and adaptation to the challenging environment. In a historical perspective, the latter was illustrated by the development of kibutz communities and by their functionalization in borderline areas, as well as their social prestige for having contributed to the founding, development, and protection of the Israeli state.

The third working day during gave us the possibility for a direct encounter with communities of migrant workers in Shapira neighborhood of Tel Aviv, and to gain abundant information about the complex issues of achieving work permit for foreign nationals to settle and work in Israel, as well as to prolong their stay without such permit and to establish their lives on the margins between the legal and the illegal. By visiting various locations in this neighborhood (market, streets, parks, churches, etc.), and by meeting and talking to different representatives of the communities there (migrant workers, refugees, church visitors, children, social workers, etc.), we had the chance to encounter another set of borders and borderlines – one guided not by policies of frontier guarding, but rather by extending state policies of residence and work permit, by positioning migrant workers within a net of regulations for life and work, and by sustaining their placement of marginality and social exclusion. From the perspective of the diverse strategies that migrant workers find to extend their length of stay despite the inspections and control of local authorities, borders reveal themselves as deeply penetrating the organization of life in this neighborhood and as leaving deep traces on the individuals and groups involved in the interaction with this community.

The demarcation of existing social, ethnic, and religious borders within the urban space was particularly well outlined in the case of Jerusalem, which was our destination during the fourth day of the trip. The presentation by our guides and the visit to numerous locations along

the separation lines between Jews and Arabs in different parts of Jerusalem, uncovered a striking face of this Holy City – one, which emphasized not the shared traces of exceptional cultural and historical heritage, but rather competition in-between, division, seclusion, and caution about the existing threat from immediate neighbors. The different neighborhoods in the city testified to policies of distinction between areas with Arab and Jewish inhabitants, and to various strategies of exercising state power on citizens that bear non-Jewish identity. The set of measures for organizing everyday life in Arab neighborhoods (fencing and check-points, limitations on water supply, electricity, and garbage collection, difficulties with school system and work permissions, etc.) demonstrated the functionalization of ethnic, religious and social borders on everyday level, and of turning them instrumental in state policies of expulsion, resettlement and re-population. In addition, these multiplied distinctions and borderline practices revealed their ability to get encoded in practices and behavior, which may sometimes seem invisible to external viewers, but remain as a firm core that regulates the political, economic, and social life of this city.

The last day of the trip furthermore deepened the impression of swarming borderlines and divisions, of intensified separation between territories, people, practices and life rhythms. The trip involved visits of different locations along the separation lines between the State of Israel and the occupied territories, conversations with people knowledgeable about the history of border shifts and border negotiations, and photographic documentation of check-points, border passages, and settlements along the borderlines. Aside from producing a range of regularities and border-related procedures, the demarcation of space with these cutting lines of territorial division produced also feelings of pressure, enhanced control, and de-humanization of space. Whether of Jewish or Palestinian belonging, whether locals or foreign citizens, the people in these areas are surrounded by enhanced restrictions, cross-cutting regulations of movement, and tension of securing proof of identities and legitimacy. Albeit inhabited by new settlers, attended by officials and visited by travelers, the border zone appeared largely as a space that was alien to human experience, as if excluding human beings from the nonetheless devastated by reconstruction and divisions arid landscape. All this projected also the meanings of borders not only as distinguishing markers and as signs to delineate experience, but also as tools to alienate territory from human presence, to make it no man's land in situations where its ownership has been deeply ridden by contestation and conflict.

The encounter with these diverse cases of frontiers and borderline experiences reflected directly on the behavior of team members in the course of the field trip experience. With the changes of the situation and the context, we would moderate our reactions and the visibility of our presence, would observe in more cautions and risk-informed way, and would pose questions to satisfy our surprise and curiosity. Despite the facilitation of our fieldtrip coordinators and our guides, we all experienced the symptoms of being at a distance and in the position of outsiders to the complex network of relationships between communities, local groups and individuals in the borderline areas. While being mainly recipients of knowledge and of contacts with communities with which we interacted, we had a rare chance of witnessing phenomena and practices from a standpoint of external observers, and of being guided to step beyond this externalized position. The taking of photographs both integrated us and separated us from the world that was an object of observation: we both came closer to people and sites around, and kept a distance as agents supposed to observe, record and analyze the borderline experiences. Aside from posing a range of epistemological and methodological issues, this double play of being insiders and outsiders, of approaching and distancing from the surrounding groups and individuals, emphasized yet another important border in contexts like this – the cutting line between those who directly experience the borderline and have their lives on it or near it, and those who encounter the border in time-framed visits and with research-guided purposes.

Unlike communities in the border area between Bulgaria and Turkey, which I have had the chance to research in the last two years, the diverse borderlines in and around the State of Israel, demonstrate a state of enhanced “frozenness,” a condition of keeping standstill, with a limited chance to transgress, to circumvent, or to pass through. Heavily loaded by restrictions, prescriptions and limitations, the borders there appear almost immobile and stagnant, hardly allowing a switch of individual’s position, an alternation of roles and conduct, or a possibility for avoiding the preliminary prescribed identification. With all their variety, the borders testify to a rootedness and routinization of individual and group identities around them, to a condition where a minor change can evolve in collision, threat, and preventive reaction. Yet, in a very paradoxical way, this takes place in a situation where borders nevertheless change and get constantly reshaped – whether by rearrangements of settlements along the missile area near Gaza strip, resettlement policies in occupied territories, or population shifts and new border lines in cities and neighborhoods. Whilst following a pattern of constant reproduction and multiplication,

borders act also in the direction of cooling down human mobility, precipitating existing ethnic, religious, and class identities, and capsulating their expression along pre-envisioned and pre-determined lines. The firmly-fixed identity of belonging to the respective community in the area is what determined the everyday managing with the borders and their accompanying regulations – and what constitutes the specificity of most borderline cases that we visited.

As a concluding remark to the report, I would like to state that in my view the photography trip along different borderlines and border zones in the State of Israel was extremely successful and gives a good launching point for future research that my colleagues and I would carry on borders and borderline experiences. The short-term scientific mission provided a rare chance of visiting and documenting a set of sites, which – for various reasons, have been a focus of attention by politicians, but much more rarely by scholars and fieldwork researchers. Bearing in mind the new venues that it opens for observing and analyzing from anthropological perspective the issues of borders in such politically sensitive areas, I would recommend the organizing of similar photography trips in other parts of European peripheries as well.