Intensifying and De-intensifying Distinctions

A Meditation on Imagining the Form of a Border

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Abstract

In this article I explore different ways of imagining distinctions in the form of borders and on the attitudes that people assume towards them. A distinction is primarily a cognitive operation, but appears as such in human communication (people talking about differences and identities), and in constructions that shape the material space people live in (borders, buildings, and the like). I explore two extreme positions, the one de-intensifying distinctions by focusing on their logical and contingent forms, the other intensifying distinctions by making them a potential cause of conflict. The first one is exemplified by Spencer Brown's and Niklas Luhmann's reflection on the logical and sociological aspects of distinctions; the second one by Carl Schmitt's theory of 'the political' and its key notion of the distinction between friend and enemy. Both positions are relevant to understand a major debate and struggle in the world of today between liberal cosmopolitans and authoritarian nationalists. I show in what way both positions are aspects of the human condition, and what makes that alternately the one or the other is stressed.

Keywords

distinctions – borders – transgression – identity – conflict

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Borders make no sense to me. Unless we are crossing those borders – that makes sense to me. To be a human being, or a bird or a fish, or whatever that lives in the world [...] if there is a border [...] the excitement of a

border is to be able to cross it. And that is our attraction to drawing lines as human beings: we like to cross them.¹

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Strengthening protection through better border management is key.²

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1 Introduction

We live in a man-made world. What has been made by men is also the outcome of human distinctions and the importance attached to them. In this article I meditate on different ways of imagining distinctions in the form of borders and on the attitudes that people assume towards them. A distinction is primarily a cognitive operation, but appears as such in human communication (people talking about differences and identities), and in constructions that shape the material space people live in (borders, buildings, and the like). My aim is neither sociological (describing existing borders, conflicts about borders, debates on the meaning of borders) nor ethical (exploring the values we attach to borders and to protecting or transgressing borders).³ I will focus instead on two extreme, but also very different, attitudes towards distinctions, as exemplified by two thinkers: the intensification of the distinction between friend and enemy (Carl Schmitt) and the de-intensification of distinctions through logical analysis (George Spencer Brown). In the first attitude, a particular distinction becomes a matter of life and death, marker of an existential conflict; in the second attitude, a distinction becomes a matter of play or, perhaps better, a meditation on various logical possibilities for making a distinction. The first attitude produces a hard, tense, and non-negotiable distinction; the second attitude makes for a fluid, relaxed, and negotiable distinction. By attending to these ideal-types, I want to clarify the range of different imaginaries of bor-

1 Quotation from an interview with British writer Ali Smith in the Dutch journal *NRC Handelsblad* (March 9th, 2018); the interviewer, Nynke van Verschuer, was kind enough to send me the original English version.

2 A draft of the Framework Programme 9 (FP9) funded by the European Union.

3 For an excellent introduction to the sociological and cultural meaning of distinctions, I refer to Martens 2006, pp. 83–108; I thank Wil Martens for his comments on an earlier version of this article.

ders and also to shed some light on the conditions of and motives for these attitudes towards the distinctions that borders articulate. On the one hand, this might help disentangle the complex world of distinctions at work in the whirlpool of solidified identities. On the other, it might help transgress or open up borders. It is important that we grasp the full range of our imagination of distinctions, which oscillates between withdrawing into the benumbed world of meditation and the uppermost excitement that arises when we think we are in danger. Much comes between these extremes, if these are the extremes, and I will touch on what is in-between occasionally. My central focus, however, is on extremes or states of exception from which we can learn most.⁴ The notion of transgression is very important. De-intensification allows for transgressions that ease distinctions until they almost disappear. Intensification, though, makes transgression an existential matter.

2 Three Ways of Looking at Borders

Two metaphors divide the world into two camps. First, there is the image of open borders, transgression, free movement, and multiplicity; second, there is the picture of closed borders, protection, separation, and identity. These metaphors are no longer part of a dynamic alternation of opening and closure – like that staged in choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *Orbo novo* – but become markers of opposing parties fighting over the kind of law that should rule this world. The epigraphs that open this article might clarify this. The first beautifully expresses a common mindset, that one can label as liberal. It hints at a world society through which people can move, roam, and travel freely – not because they must flee violence, hardship, and misery, but for the fun of it. The attraction of liberalism lies in its depiction of precisely this freedom: living in an environment uninterrupted by borders that cannot be crossed or are rigorously defended by those who established them. Borders need not be abolished in this environment, because their existence endows life with a kind of tension: the excitement of border crossings. More serious ways of crossing borders have been the hallmark of modernity, whether in the domains of production, trade, science, technology, or art: the next step on the other side of what has already been achieved is the core ambition one has in these fields. All else seems taboo: to step back or stay put at the present border. As the second epigraph shows, in contrast to the transgressive tendencies of (a naive kind

4 As Carl Schmitt suggests at the end of the first essay in *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Schmitt 1985, p. 22).

of) liberalism and modernization, protecting borders remains crucial in law, jurisdiction, and politics, especially when connected with national, cultural or ethnic identity. We might add domains like education and religion – fields in which borders cannot be crossed without the requisite qualification. A border can become sacred, in the sense that transgression is forbidden or people cannot dispose of the distinction it provides, because its source transcends the human realm. It seems, then, that human life is not necessarily determined by the desire to crossing borders.

In a less innocent, and more dramatized, Dionysian version of the border crossing imaginary I have described, which reflects the tension between crossing and safeguarding borders, Georges Bataille devoted much of his work to the role *transgression* plays in human culture. Although his texts are sometimes ambiguous on this point, he refers less to a movement from one specific side to another (such as going from one room to another, one country to another, or from 'normal' to 'abnormal' sexuality), and much to the dissolution of the distinction itself – 'beyond good and evil'. We enter a sphere of the indeterminate, a state of being in which a distinction is still to be made, a continuity that knows no limits and no identities – and therefore cannot be conceptualized or described. Transgression means going beyond the borders of ourselves, being outside of ourselves: ecstasy.⁵ This idea does not refer to a liberal subject playfully crossing borders, but to a kind of subjectivity expressing a sovereignty that is bothered about neither its own survival nor protecting a pre-given identity. This sovereign life lifts itself high above the low necessities of human existence, although of course only for a short period of time, before returning – or not.

This sovereign life can only be thought as a state of exception. In contrast to that state, perpetuating their given way of life compels human beings to take precautions, act reasonably, and anticipate and prevent threats to the order that enables that way of life. Inevitably this means a restricted, limited, and disciplined life. Distinctions should be made, and maintained as quasi-intransgressible borders. Individual and collective imaginaries consist mainly in designing the orders on which their lives depend: as such, they are subject to a rationality of reproduction. In contrast to my first epigraph, this imaginary reflects 'real life'. Birds and fishes not only move in borderless air or water, but will also defend their lives and offspring if threatened and install territories that are not to be crossed by other living beings. And so do human beings. Although it is nice to first draw lines, and then feel the excitement of crossing them, some lines have a different meaning and are the focal points of different

5 See for example Sabot 2007, pp. 87–93.

tensions. The border is not just imaginary, but has an intensified character. Intensification is related to the (threat of) violation of a border, and the violent answer to such a transgression. How to deal with this special design of a distinction? That is the question I want to explore in this text and I will do so by taking a quite *formal* approach to the concept of distinction as term of reference. What is a distinction, as a specific logical form, that it can become both part of a joyful play with borders and the cause of violent conflict?

3 The Social Reality of Distinctions

Ali Smith's image in the first epigraph gives a good idea of the problem I want to discuss. It distinguishes between a living being (a bio-psychic system) and its (natural or social) environment, which is imagined as a world in which borders having value only insofar as they can be crossed. This presupposes that the distinction between this particular system and its environment is not challenged or threatened. That is what freedom is about: being protected so that one can do the things one likes to do. But that already presupposes a border that cannot and may not be crossed – by others!⁶ Obviously, some materialized distinctions are made for crossing. This page, for example, is distinguished from other pages; you can always turn pages back and forth. When time is available, crossing is easy. Stopping reading so as to start doing something else, however, is an altogether different matter. You cross from one activity to another, but will not go on and finish reading this text. If you have decided to read the text, you remain on one side of the distinction between reading or doing something else. This is the point at which a distinction becomes a system, because reading a text involves a series of connected operations that refer to themselves and the text only. If you really want to read the text, you do not want to be disturbed. You protect the system against outside intrusion. A further step is observing the system in which reading this text occurs: the social system of science.⁷ You might stop participating in science at some future point, but so long as you remain within the system you will operate as it requires. Niklas Luhmann called this a system's *autopoiesis*: the fact that a system is a connection of operations that (re)produce themselves. In contrast to Bataille's concept of sovereignty,

6 Nozick 1974, p. ix: "Individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights)."

7 Luhmann 1990. Luhmann's system theory is the general background of my thoughts on distinctions. See especially the collection of essays on distinctions: Luhmann 2002, and Rasch 2000.

for Luhmann the sovereignty of the system consists in the fact that the decision as to where to draw the distinction between system and environment is the system's to take: that is how it operates and decides to operate. These two concepts of sovereignty are opposed: the one refers to transgression, which abandons the system's bounds, the other to the system's continued existence.⁸ Whereas systems theory tries to describe the ongoing 'normal' functioning of a system, in this article, I will focus on the possibility of deconstructing or even destroying a system.

The opposition I am describing can also be seen as that between the imagery of a world with transgressible borders and the reality of a world in which borders are institutionalized and protected, and transgression is controlled or prevented. This is one meaning of the distinction between imagination and intensification, between 'dreaming' and 'real life'. But there is another way of looking at this distinction. The border between system and environment, regardless of the system concerned, might be taken as the object of cognition or communication, that is, of thought (reasoning, imagination, and observation) or public opinion (debate, protest, and publication). It might also be taken as a matter of institutional operation, of what is actually done or made in society and politics. Or, to put this in Luhmann's words, there is a semantics of the distinction between system and environment, and there is the structure of society, its way of operating.⁹ In this sense, intensification can occur either because people take their images or conceptions of a system for real or because the system's operations are really endangered. The contemporary debate about borders is seen by modern thinkers as an opposition between obsolete 'imagined communities' and the realities of world society – that is, between an old-fashioned semantics and the structure of modern society. I would say, however, that both positions express imaginaries that tend to become social realities. They each draw different distinctions, operate differently by using these distinctions, and relativize the distinctions drawn by the other. But there also is a difference in attitude towards distinctions that interests me here. Identity politics seems to use distinctions to express essences (of nations, for example), whereas the politics of globalization seems rooted in a mindset for which distinctions are contingent and functional. According to this latter view, there is

8 The opposition need not be absolute: transgression can be thought of as part of the system's operations. See Stäheli 2000 and Ortmann 2003.

9 See the introduction in the first book of the series Luhmann: *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik. Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft* (Luhmann 1980). It should be clear that my text refers to the semantics of borders and is not part of a sociology describing the structure of society and its operations.

no need to intensify distinctions by taking them as the foundation of identities to be protected by any means.

4 The Management of Distinctions

Conflicts are about borders, mostly because borders are transgressed. Whether it is part of an individual or collective imagining the world (in which case we speak of a 'social imaginary') or a 'real' dividing line, a border can become a *casus belli*. Most of the time, these borders will be 'real' in that they are presented and imagined as 'real'. Borders established in 'reality' can be seen as embodying or incarnating imagined distinctions, for example between 'us' and 'them'. Although in some cases the imagination can make use of physical barriers such as skins, shells, rivers, shores, or mountains, in other cases 'real' borders are the outcome of a process of constitution or institution. Imagined borders (distinctions) become 'real' borders when transgression is regulated, restricted or even completely banned: the entrance to a store, the borders of a country, a taboo or sacred space, and the integral human body all figure instances of such distinctions. The kinds of conflict this entails can be seen as the result of the intensification of distinctions, as did Carl Schmitt in the few lines he wrote on this subject in his essay on 'the political'.¹⁰ I will however take a slightly different angle to the topic than that taken by Schmitt, which I tried out earlier in a reading of apostle Paul's letters.¹¹

Intensification has to do with a sensitivity to distinctions shared by all people. This sensitivity is part of people's identity, as an individual or as a group, in a weak or a strong sense. Or, as Kwame Appiah puts it: "given our clan-nishness, commentary on differences always carries some risk of creating ill will".¹² This sensitivity is the awareness of the possibility of an intrusion by the other: the appearance on this side of a distinction of that which lies on its far side. Practically, this leads to a management of distinctions: the way in which people deal with the distinctions that they think are important to different degrees. I will add to this whole issue a particular approach: a meditation of the *form* of a distinction or, better, the *forms* that a distinction might take.¹³ This approach is formal, even formalistic, but reflective too. A meditation of the

10 I refer in particular to sections 2–4 of his *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Schmitt 1932), in English translation *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt 2007). I return to this later on.

11 Terpstra 2017, pp. 251–268.

12 Appiah 2018, p. 94.

13 I have been very inspired by Baecker 2005 and 2013.

form of a distinction is itself one way of managing distinctions. As an approach to dealing with distinctions, it betrays a peculiar sensibility that is different from the ways in which people usually treat distinctions. Although its roots go back to ancient philosophers interested in the *logos* of the world, the formal or formalistic approach to distinctions is typical of a modern, secular, and functional way of thinking that has itself become part of many peoples' attitude towards borders. In a sense, this approach is detached from human existence because it is not concerned with the content, intensity, worth, or importance of specific distinctions – in short, with what life is all about. It distinguishes itself from those attached to particular distinctions and identities, from those that take sides, situating themselves on one side of a distinction. The 'nihilism' of the formalist approach is connected to the idea that distinctions are contingent matters, when they could be otherwise. This way of thinking has the indifferent overtones of a certain liberalism, which asserts everyone's right to choose one's own distinctions or sides. Or, more positively and accurately, it reflects an awareness that human life cannot be reduced to one identity. Human life is more complex, characterized, as it is, by "diverse diversity", an indeterminacy surrounding what counts as an individual or group identity.¹⁴ Sen and Appiah give ample examples of the complex differences that make up people's 'real lives'. They make clear that identity, and the possibility of (violent) conflicts over identity, is an abstraction, a reduction of this complexity, induced by what I call the intensification of distinctions. Their works are attempts at de-intensification that lead to the other extreme end of possible attitudes towards distinctions. The management of distinctions I have in mind is a practical guide for a world citizen aware of the contingency of borders and identities on the one hand, and of the necessity of strong identities if circumstances ask for them on the other.

5 A Meditation on the Form of Distinctions

Let there be a distinction. A meditation on the form of a distinction brings us, in a less dramatic way than Bataille's (thought) experiments, into an imaginary space where there is no special attachment to a content or value, or so it seems. There is just this symbolization of a distinction, a line (or mark) distinguishing two sides, making a variety of operations possible: crossing the line, going back, setting apart, opposing the two sides, or bringing them together. First there is

14 Beside Appiah's recent book, another good example of this line of thought (which asserts the reasonability of relativising or de-intensifying distinctions or differences) is Sen 2006.

an empty, undivided, and undetermined space, then an operation takes place: a distinction is drawn. The form is just a line, a mark. The operation creates three entities: the mark and the two sides demarcated. Meditating the form reveals possibilities: one can point to one side, the other side, the mark, or both sides at the same time; one can erase the mark, restoring the empty space, or duplicate or iterate the mark, and so on. The form may determine a distinction in several ways, but one is not bound to any of them. The mind is free to operate as it pleases, liberated from the pressure of 'real' distinctions. Human beings are capable of this freedom: it is part of the human condition.

Drawing a distinction means *literally* drawing a line, and pointing to one side, in the sense, for example, in which you use this form to point to the thing you want to talk about or observe. Or one might cross the line from one side to the other, in the sense, for example, of switching the subject of your conversation or object of your observation – although in this case you would have to draw a new distinction in the unmarked space of the previous distinction. The drawing of the line, pointing to one side (and not the other, which remains unmarked¹⁵), or crossing the line are the forms of the operations with which we think, talk, write, or act, when we make, remake, and deconstruct institutions. We might not be aware that we operate in this way, because we are focused on the contents that emerge from drawing distinctions, marking sides, or crossing lines. Entranced by the matter of our distinctions, we fail to raise other questions. Where do these contents come from? Why are they important for me or us? Or, why do they lose their importance?

Meditating on the form of a distinction brings us into a mystical sphere (or "the peripheral condition of existence"¹⁶) in which creation, the first distinction, is about to occur. When it does happen there are as-yet no distinctions and hence no identities either. From this starting point we might go on to establish towards a new foundation for logic and mathematics (this was Spencer Brown's project) or for philosophy and sociology. This imaginary return to the

15 The 'unmarked space' can have different meanings. First it is the state of the world before a distinction is drawn (a white piece of paper, for example); second it is the space on the other side of the distinction. To talk about one human being, for example, means not talking about all the rest. But 'the rest' can become a new empty space in which to draw a new distinction: another person I want to talk about. Everything takes place within the 'original' empty space in which we can draw distinctions, withdraw, or erase distinctions, or make new distinctions. See the discussion in Stäheli 2000, pp. 82–87. The empty space in relation to a distinction signifies contingency. It also shows the imaginary character of the meditation.

16 Brown 2015, p. 84. Very helpful to me was Schönwälder-Kuntze/Wille/Hölscher 2009, especially the contributions by Katrin Wille: "Form und Geschlechterunterscheidung" and "Praxis der Unterscheidung".

primal scene from which distinctions emerge is a movement of the mind. In this formal sense, it resembles a reflection on the start of human culture and social life; an individual's freedom to start all over again and make its own choices; the surrealist's experiment with chance in creating art; or, more dramatically, the condition of refugees who left their 'natural' world (that of their birth and upbringing) and have to begin a new life in a strange 'artificial' environment. The imaginary 'point zero' of distinctions and identities, however, also has a different meaning. In meditating on the form of a distinction, a total *de-intensification* is achieved: nothing matters except the form. Of course, these kinds of thought experiments presuppose numerous distinctions, a complexity that is always already there. All imaginary of a 'zero point' takes place in a 'real' world that is its condition. Nevertheless, it introduces a strong conceptual scene in our experience of contingency – a scene that is denied and repressed as soon as distinctions are intensified.

Meditating on the form of a distinction reveals the condition of possibility for interpretation, without there being a *necessary* ground for preferring one interpretation over another. The phrase 'drawing a distinction' invites us to distance ourselves from the world that we take for granted, inciting us to see distinctions as contingent. Distinctions allow us to observe the world or construct social systems in a particular way. A distinction might flash through the mind, an imaginary idea that comes and goes. On the other extreme, it might be something people hang onto and defend by any available means. In the protected sphere of a meditation, theoretical exercise, or philosophical reflection, however, distinctions can be played with. They lose their intensity. It creates a sphere of formality and neutrality that may extend itself into society. Defenders of specific identities may be horrified by this 'rationalism', for which differences in sex, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, education, and so on are mere contingent varieties of possible distinctions – like colors or shapes. The liberal principle of equality and non-discrimination, for its part, refers back to an abstract way of thinking that ignores the differentiation of value: varieties of distinctions have the same value. They are all human, because they all result from free choices made by people. Of course, most liberals would think this is too abstract.

6 Distinctions are such Stuff as Societies are Made on

This subheading may sound like Shakespearean poetry, but is untrue. Distinctions, as forms with a specific content (or interpretation), are imaginary constructions that people use to get a grip on the world in which they live.

They use them to communicate, know what they are talking about, observe, evaluate the world, and so on. It is only through communication that social systems emerge. They, for their part, construct more or less stable frames of communication. Distinctions are connected to thoughts and meaning on the one hand, and social structures on the other hand. A consequence of meditating on the form of distinctions, and of the awareness of the contingency of particular interpretations of this form, is that everything constructed by human beings can be deconstructed or destroyed. Societies are vulnerable, which is why distinctions in their social articulation matter to human beings. The premise that society is constructed by distinctions, and can therefore be deconstructed or even destroyed, is fundamental to modern society (and its description). We must be aware that using the form of distinctions as a means of describing society implies that the distinctions in question are always interpretations. As such, their formal aspect plays a role when it comes to the acknowledgement of their contingency.¹⁷ It is their content and values, however, that make society what it is.

The form of distinctions has no preference; our preferences make use of this form. We can distinguish among a variety of religions (A, B, C, and so on) that all have the same value (possibilities one can chose), or we can oppose or hierarchize religions by distinguishing one as the true religion, for example, or castigating some as being merely forms of superstition. Distinguishing A from B does not exclude the possibility that they might get along together. However, it can also be read as saying: A, and therefore not-B, or A is a better religion in comparison with B.

Attending to society, we can observe (1) that people make different distinctions; (2) attach different values to what they distinguish, that is, use other distinctions to qualify their distinctions (calling men strong and women weak, to give a trivial example); (3) give different weights and values to their distinctions; and (4) share distinctions and values to different degrees. In short, people are “diversely different” (Sen). Over time, we often see fluctuations in the intensity and content of these distinctions and their values. Distinctions undergo periods of relaxation, intensification, liquidity (or fluidity), and solidity;¹⁸

17 Thomas Hölscher makes clear that Niklas Luhmann deviates from the intentions and analysis by Spencer Brown, only using small parts of the *Logic of forms* (Hölscher 2009, pp. 257–272).

18 Bauman 2007, has given an analysis of these fluctuations by pointing out that the liquidity connected to processes of globalisation leads to uncertainty and fear, used by governments to strengthening (national or other) identities. He does not explore the reasons why people stick to distinctions as basis of identity, seeing this merely as an exception to the normal attitude of openness, characteristic for liberal and democratic societies.

times at which the formality of distinctions prevails and periods during which the content and values of distinctions predominate. The question, then, is this: what determines these fluctuations? Of course, I will not answer this hard question, but confine myself to exploring it to find a possible direction towards an answer. What is the stuff society is made on, and why does this stuff have such different states?

An important distinction has to be made. Stabilization is the most common way in which distinctions become more intense, in the sense of being harder to change or resist. It is a kind of intensification of distinctions, but only in the sense that it is a precondition of what, in the next section, I will describe as extreme form of intensifying a distinction. Distinctions are repeated and become *habits*: established ways of thinking, talking, and acting. They create group identities, as Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, and others have shown. Stabilization is achieved by protecting and strengthening a distinction, even by *purification*: defending the inside against the outside. Stabilization means *division of property and authority*: who is in charge of what? These stabilized distinctions make up social and political *orders*, hierarchies, and statuses. They become the distinctions people stick to in their lives. Or not. And it is then that intensification comes in. Distinctions intensify in a more extreme sense when established distinctions are challenged and become the issue of a conflict. Although it is connected to deconstructing or destroying distinctions, this challenge is of a totally different nature to that of meditating on the form of a distinction. In the latter case, a distinction is put into question by neglecting its content and focusing on the form, discovering all kind of logical possibilities. In the former case, a distinction is intensified on account of the content that people want to protect or fight against: anti-racist protests are as much an intensification of a distinction as racist attempts to establish the 'purity' or 'supremacy' of, say, the white race. In the mind or in communication, people are free to 'play' with distinctions – to think or speak differently, or take their distance from the established order of distinctions. A distinction is destabilized by putting it into question, although it is always possible that positions taken in thought and debate themselves stabilize, that is, become recognized and recognizable ideologies. A stable society is capable of hosting a variety of thoughts and opinions, which often deviate from the 'standard' to some extent, within well-defined social systems. Debates, emotions, and thoughts may be intense, but they remain within the bounds of these continuing systems. Institutional or stabilized distinctions are the frames within which people communicate and interact. Niklas Luhmann describes society, or the variety of social systems (political, economic, legal, scientific, religious, pedagogical, and so on), as the result of stabilizing distinctions by functionalizing and

rationalizing them. Put simply, randomly drawn distinctions are tested according to their efficiency. Evolution decides what is left behind as impracticable and which distinctions prove themselves societal relevant. Although Luhmann is not quite explicit about what drives this evolution, the functional differentiation of society seems to be the natural outcome of human rationality. This society seems immune to any intensification of distinctions. This limit of Luhmann's socio-logical theory forces us to look beyond it for a theory that thematizes this intensification of distinctions.

7 The Intensification of Distinctions: Friend and Enemy

Max Weber first formulated the idea that modern society is functionally differentiated. According to Luhmann too, differentiation is the hallmark of modernity: not only the distinction between society and individual (which precipitates the recognition of human rights), but also distinctions among independently operating social domains (the free market, religious freedom, and academic freedom). Liberalism, according to Michael Walzer, is 'the art of separation'.¹⁹ Schmitt opposes the liberalism inherent in this modernization process, which is blind to 'the political' in that it is about neutralization and depoliticization. Although the political domain has its own function in society, what disappears is the political consequence the existence of a community has. In this light, a particularly intense figure of distinction appears: that between friend and enemy. As Schmitt writes:

The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation.²⁰

Before continuing, it is good to briefly recapitulate some other forms of intensification that do not necessarily have to do with enmity. Institutional intensification, what was termed stabilization in the previous section, occurs where a distinction is connected to power. It represents another form in which a distinction is the ground for inclusion and exclusion, domination and submission, protection and persecution, praise and blame. Institutions use binary codes. Communication also offers forms of intensification when it distinguishes between one's interlocutors and others, or the way in which one speaks with others (friendly or unfriendly, polite or coarse, respectful or condescending,

¹⁹ Walzer 1984, pp. 315–330.

²⁰ Schmitt 2007, p. 26.

and so on). Finally, we also find intensification in the degree to which a person or group wants to maintain a certain purity, distinguishing itself from everything that is impure, or what affects the identity of that person or group. This does not have to be hostile and can even be accompanied by a radical peacefulness – when the identity is morally pure (respect for human dignity, for example). Intensification can also combine multiple forms; one calls the other. Those who want to protect a valuable cause will create all compatible forms of intensification to achieve its goals. Intensification can take a conservative or even reactionary form, but also a fundamentalist (radical-orthodox) or revolutionary-progressive form. It can be conservative, protective, or changing. Intensification also entails the possibility of a sacrifice: if a distinction becomes decisive, everything is subordinated to the preservation of what is worthy of protection (a country, God's authority, or one's own wealth). It is to this last form that I will turn now.

In Schmitt's case, the distinction between friend and enemy has two meanings that are not always clearly stated. First of all, it is a distinction made from the perspective of a political community in its environment: which other people or state is our friend, which our enemy? Schmitt pays little attention to the existence of allies. The enemy, however, is especially relevant because it has a distinct effect on the political community. The second meaning is the intensification of the difference between the political community and the people labelled as the enemy. The enemy forces self-reflection: who are we, and what are we willing to sacrifice if we want to go on existing as a community with its own character? For Schmitt, this is what intensifies the distinction, and creates the unique focus on the enemy. In the first lines of section 4 of his *Der Begriff des Politischen*, he summarizes his argument:

Every religious, moral, economic, ethical, or other antithesis transforms into a political one if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy. The political does not reside in the battle itself, which possesses its own technical, psychological, and military laws, but in the mode of behavior which is determined by this possibility, by clearly evaluating the concrete situation and thereby being able to distinguish correctly the real friend and the real enemy. A religious community which wages wars against members of other religious communities or engages in other wars is already more than a religious community; it is a political entity.²¹

21 Schmitt 2007, p. 37.

Throughout Schmitt's text, distinction is synonymously with opposition or antithesis. Whether or not he would countenance, with Spencer Brown, that a distinction contains many possibilities, and that the two sides might be seen as complementary or replaceable, when it comes to 'the political' only the contradiction counts. His eyes are fixed on the polemical side of every distinction.

Numerous forms and degrees of intensity of the polemical character are also here possible. But the essentially polemical nature of the politically charged terms and concepts remain nevertheless recognizable. Terminological questions become thereby highly political. A word or expression can simultaneously be reflex, signal, password, and weapon in a hostile confrontation.²²

Enmity affects all our concepts. The shadow of 'the political' is present in all institutional or established distinctions. Distinctions such as good or bad, useful or harmful, or beautiful or ugly, are oppositions and can therefore be intensified. They show that society is always the outcome and expression of underlying conflicts, which result in (temporary) forms of inclusion (the good, useful, and beautiful) and exclusion (the bad, harmful, and ugly). In themselves, these distinctions have their proper function and domains: morality, economics, and art. It is no coincidence that Schmitt refers to these exemplary domains: they relate to the last two periods that he sees as paradigmatic in the march towards neutralization and depoliticization in European cultural history: morality (the eighteenth century) and aesthetics and economics (part of the nineteenth century); he hardly mentions religion (the theological period preceding the Religious Wars) and science (the naturalist metaphysics of the seventeenth century that precipitates the process of neutralization). These codes, Schmitt argues, are attempts to overcome conflicts produced by former codes. But this will always fail.²³ These institutions deal with uncivilized, harmful, or uncultured persons, but not enemies. As part of a specific people's way of life, however, these distinctions can attain an intensity that makes them political.

The political can derive its energy from the most varied human endeavors, from the religious, economic, moral, and other antitheses. It does not describe its own substance, but only the intensity of an association or dissociation of human beings whose motives can be religious, national (in

²² Schmitt 2007, p. 31.

²³ See Schmitt's essay "Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Depolitisierungen" ("The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations", Schmitt 2007, pp. 80–96).

the ethnic or cultural sense), economic, or of another kind and can effect at different times different coalitions and separations. The real friend-enemy grouping is existentially so strong and decisive that the nonpolitical antithesis, at precisely the moment at which it becomes political, pushes aside and subordinates its hitherto purely religious, purely economic, purely cultural criteria and motives to the conditions and conclusions of the political situation at hand.²⁴

Finally, knowledge and judgment – in assessment of the world in which we live – should take as its final perspective the event of a confrontation with the enemy: *We in Central Europe live “sous l’œil des Russes.”*

We can no longer say anything worthwhile about culture and history without first becoming aware of our own cultural and historical situation. That all historical knowledge is knowledge of the present, that such knowledge obtains its light and intensity from the present and in the most profound sense only serves the present, because all spirit is only spirit of the present [...]²⁵

8 The Political Tension

We have moved from the disengaged and impartial position of a logical or formal account of distinctions (a theoretical or philosophic approach) to the engaged and partisan position of a reflection of our existential condition in a concrete world divided in a plurality of (associated) people. For Schmitt, the intensification of distinctions pertains to one specific aspect of human life: the preparedness to sacrifice lives – including one's own – to secure the continuing survival of a group's way of life. A distinction needs to have an *existential* import to qualify for intensification. A way of life does not have existential significance in itself. People can adjust to new situations, change their opinion, accommodate to other people's interests, and so on. This kind of change does not mean that an individual or group's identity comes to an end. A distinction becomes existentially meaningful only if “die eigene, seinsmäßige Art von

²⁴ Schmitt 2007, p. 38.

²⁵ See the introduction of “Das Zeitalter”, in: Schmitt 2007, p. 80.

Leben" is in danger and needs to be preserved.²⁶ A group's cultural, religious, ethnic, or other *identity* is confronted with serious threats emanating from an *alien* way of life. Preserving this identity is more important than individual people's lives.²⁷ Here Schmitt uses the concept of sovereignty: a people's self-determination to live its own way of life and protect it against all threats. This decision belongs essentially to the people itself: there is no higher law or judge.²⁸ The extreme case of conflict suspends 'normal' social conditions, in which laws regulate all differences of interest and lifestyle, and protect its citizen's individual rights. Sovereignty is about loyalty and commitment to a society as a whole, love for one's country, in contrast to societies in which only individual interest count.²⁹

Summarizing our findings so far, we can say that human attitudes towards distinctions may oscillate between two extremes. Schmitt himself was aware of this:

All concepts of the spiritual sphere, including the concept of spirit, are pluralistic in themselves and can only be understood in terms of concrete political existence.³⁰

On the one hand, a person can retreat into a meditation of the form of a distinction, discovering that it contains all kinds of possible interpretations. This meditation leads to a total de-intensification of distinctions, which not only become mere toys with which to play, but also reveal that human beings are ultimately responsible for managing distinctions. Although they may recognize that they live in a world that is not of their own choosing, but always already ordered by other people's distinctions, they *observe* the contingent nature of distinctions. On the other hand, a person or a group lives in the real world, in which distinctions have existential meaning: they increase and protect, or

26 Schmitt 2007, p. 27: "in order to preserve one's own form of existence"; the word "seinsmäßig" is hard to translate, but I think it best to take this to mean: a way of life rooted in the very existence of people.

27 Many critics have stressed this connection of the distinction between friend/enemy and the distinction own/alien, seeing here already the dark shadow of the nazi genocide, which took place ten years after the publication of *Der Begriff des Politischen*. The text itself shows that Schmitt is dealing with all peoples' tendency to *preserve* its own way of life, which is not the same as destroying 'the other' – although the threat always comes from the other side.

28 See especially section 2 of Schmitt 2007, p. 26.

29 See for a contemporary version of Schmitt's political thought: Kahn 2011.

30 See "Das Zeitalter", in Schmitt 2007, p. 85.

decrease and endanger, the group's chance of survival. In this world, *stress* is the main indicator of real or imagined danger. For a group, alarm bells ring when an enemy appears, through which pressure they are forced to cooperate or associate to preserve their existence: *maximal stress cooperation*.³¹ Like individual lives, group life has its periods of stress and mobilization in the face of the enemy, and its periods of calm in which people evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, so as to fare better in the next confrontation. The intensification and de-intensification of distinctions belongs to these oscillations in cultures or societies.

9 Imagination and Intensification of Distinctions: Fictitious and Real Borders

Are borders there to be transgressed? Or should they be managed in order to protect us against dangers outside, waiting to come in and destroy us? It depends. Neither is the full answer. Our imagination allows us to go back to basics and suspend any final decision about what distinctions should be established, stabilized, protected, or intensified. Reality sometimes gives us the space and time to do so. Our imagination also allows us to compress a diverse world into simple oppositions, "lies that bind" (Appiah). In the end, a distinction between friend and enemy, 'us' and 'them', colors our social and political life, preventing us from interacting with a relevant portion of mankind. We sometimes imagine that the world forces us to adhere to such rigid distinctions. On the one hand, then, we have a flexible imagination capable of extreme states of mind and cognitive operations; on the other hand, we have a reality that might endanger our existence. This conundrum would be simple if only we had full knowledge of our situation, an evidence-based view of our friends and enemies, and a clear and homogenous way of life with shared habits and legitimate institutional distinctions. But the world in which we live is a labyrinth of perspectives. Schmitt had a point when he states that only people themselves can judge and make decisions. People are the makers, managers, and protectors of the distinctions that shape our social, cultural, and political environment. There is no 'transcendent' law or moral standard that summons us to seek peace or protect our (imagined) identity.

The intensification of distinctions comes down to the fact that distinctions become real, and while real become real contradictions: imaginary identities change into physical forces. De-intensification means abstracting from a

31 Mühlmann 2005, a shorter version of the German original Mühlmann 1996.

contradictory social reality by meditating on (the form of) a distinction, for example, or changing reality in such a way that distinctions become indifferent or malleable. In this sense, there is a parallel between the cognitive or imaginative operation of formalizing distinctions, and the social and political process of neutralization inherent to European history. Contradiction is only one possible way in which a distinction can be interpreted. Formalization creates a neutral sphere in which different cultures and opinions can meet without tension.³² The liberal idea of pluralism (Sen's concept of diverse differences) is based on the rejection of what he calls "singular affiliation", i.e. the reduction of all distinctions to one distinction, which comprises all others and forms an uncompromising identity. There is a limit to this, however, because it still has to accept the plurality and diversity of people's identities as social reality. But the movement of thought is in the direction of an "identity disregard".³³

I made a distinction between stable and unstable distinctions in regard to the degree to which an established order is institutionalized, and between the intensification and de-intensification of distinctions. Liberal pluralism is viable in a stable society; instability, however, seems connected to intensification. Stability is based on excluding violence, which presupposes that at least some distinctions are unchallenged. The crucial difference between a de-intensification through meditation, and stabilized or intensified distinctions in social reality, is the status of exclusion. In our thought experiment, exclusion is only one possible logical operation, one interpretation of the form of a distinction, which points to this side of the mark and explicitly rejects the other side. This would entail saying that one cannot be at two sides of the mark at the same time, for example. In social reality (and the world in general), distinctions become contradictions and therefore forms of exclusion as soon as they are embodied and thereby take space that cannot be occupied by other embodiments. Ongoing self-organization in physical, biological, and social processes implies that entities have a life of their own. Self-organized entities, whether individual living beings or social systems, groups, and states, have the power to include or exclude. It is not a choice, it is what they express in being there: the endeavor to preserve its own existence.³⁴ In this view, this struggle for life is the default situation, which entails association and dissociation, inclusion and exclusion. Everyone is always in this constellation of power

32 Wille 2009, pp. 288–300.

33 See especially chapter 2 ("Making sense of identity") of Sen 2006.

34 Spinoza: *Ethics*, Book III, Propositions 4–6; this needs further elaboration, which I cannot give here. See my "Demokratische und geopolitische Perspektive. Politik zwischen gegebenem und konstruiertem Raum (Überlegungen zu Spinoza und Schmitt)", Terpstra 1995, pp. 44–56.

relations and everything depends on its own power in relation to what the surrounding powers are up to. If an entity is stressed by real or imagined danger, intensification is the result.

Let me end this article by returning to the original issue: transgressing or protecting borders. You can look at borders in terms of the distinction between cosmopolitans and nationalists, take the side of cosmopolitanism, and castigate nationalist politics for contradicting the idea that all people are equal citizens of the world. Or you can take the side of an observer, just seeing diversity, and abhorring those who reduce all differences to the one distinction that counts. Or you can take another view, for which abolishing borders destroys the national identity to which you adhere, and those advocating globalization secure themselves in safe and prosperous enclaves from which others are excluded. Already something of the distinction between friend and enemy is visible in this opposition. What I am doing here, however, is observing the distinction itself (which itself draws a distinction between the impartial observer and the partisan activist, for example, as seen from a third-order perspective). I am observing how this distinction makes world politics possible – that it conditions the ongoing conflict over the meaning of national borders. This formal approach is part of the world and the distinctions that make it up: impartial observation exists, although it is not ‘universal’ but specific to a particular position, tradition, practice, or social system. This formal approach leads to and presupposes an important restriction on the use and interpretation of distinctions: drawing a distinction is a contingent operation and does not refer to a transcendent source that is re-entering the immanent realm that differentiates itself from the transcendent. In contrast, adhering to the idea that at least one distinction, or one side of the distinction, is inherently right would suggest that distinctions are not contingent but in some way necessary – that they are not human, but supra-human operations (or observations). One could call this assumption of necessity the ‘theological’, ‘religious’ or ‘sacral’ dimension of the human world of distinctions. In other words, adhering to the idea that the human world has a ground, an *archē*, is mon-archival. Adhering to the idea that distinctions are inescapably contingent, in contrast, is to think in a poly-archival or an-archival way.³⁵ Only then can the pure form of the

35 In Rasch 2000, p. 190, Luhmann says in the interview: “And I find this fascinating, that there is no exclusive, one right beginning for making a distinction. [...] This is part of the postmodern idea that there is no right beginning, no beginning in the sense that *you have* to make one certain distinction and you can fully describe the start of your operations. And that’s the background against which I always ask, ‘What is the unity of a distinction?’ or ‘What do you exclude if you use this distinction and not another one?’” The meta-physical project, in fact, was the attempt to make a hierarchical and deductive system

distinction emerge as distinct from all content, all the particular distinctions that humans can draw. Whenever we are confronted by (collective) identities and the protection of the borders between self and other, whatever the intensity of protective institutions and their operations, we are invited to choose between monarchical, polyarchical, and anarchical approaches. Before making the choice, we reflect on the alternatives and deliberate on the question of whether any distinctions are 'seinsmäßig' and unavoidable (in general, or for the observer) or all distinctions are contingent and could be otherwise. The human condition allows us to travel many roads.

Biography

I studied philosophy at the university in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. My dissertation focuses on the concepts of power in Spinoza's (political) philosophy. My field of research is political philosophy, with a special interest for the tension between politics and religion, the history of the theological-political problem, and the conceptual structure of thinking about power and conflict. Besides Spinoza, the main thinkers that inspire my research are Thomas Hobbes, Carl Schmit, Panajotis Kondylis, and Niklas Luhmann. The latter set me to rephrase the theological-political problem, and the tensions and conflicts which this problem involves, in terms of a theory of distinctions.

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starting with basic distinctions and proceed to further differentiation. Nevertheless, in the idea of the contingency of distinctions there is a founding decision: someone drawing a distinction. That is to say that all distinctions are made by someone, like every observation is an observation by an observer.

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