The Limits of Reflexive Modernization

Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour’s approaches to the question of reflexive modernization converge on the question of boundaries. Boundaries include the limits of fields and classes, creating black and-white distinctions between foundational modernist categories such as nature and society, human and technological, rational and unrational and so on. As the orthodoxy of these distinctions are eroded, so the characteristically ‘modern’ is changed into a ‘reflexive’, re-‘modernizing’ or ‘second’ modernity. For Latour, this is a question of interpretation, but for Beck a matter of substantive change (page numbers in square brackets refer to ms. pagination):

This can serve as a litmus test for the existence of reflexive modernity as opposed to postmodernity: the existence of boundaries whose artificial character is freely recognized, but which are recognized as legitimate [not ironic] boundaries all the same. In other words, reflexive modernity exists to the extent that fictive as-if boundaries are institutionalized into systematic procedures that affect everyday life (Beck 2000:[20]).

It is not a matter of the eradication of boundaries, rather, inviolable boundaries become harder to maintain, because of political challenges to the sanctity of procedures for generating trusted knowledge, to experts, and to the institutions of governance (Beck 2000: [22]). Hypothetically, ‘There is instead a multiplicity of inclusionary and exclusionary practices, and, according to context, a multiplicity of ways that things are bounded off’ (Beck 2000 [25]).

Nature-Society

Especially significant is the division between nature and society, a constitutive part of the institutional order of modern societies. Latour casts this as a question of ‘diminishing the efficacy of the pure nature/pure culture boundary’. Distinctions are not only de-naturalized and have to be worked-up or are the matter of explicit choice and struggle, ‘More exactly the hard labour of boundary making between the two will become highly visible - as visible as the building of a fence around a park to make it “wild”’...’ (Latour 2000 [8]). They become ‘not boundaries so much as a variety of attempts to draw boundaries. In a similar manner, border conflicts are transformed into conflicts over the drawing of borders’ (Beck 2000 [21]). For example, the line demarcating life from death becomes equivocal as bodies can be kept alive beyond the point of brain-death and ‘living wills’ are required to indicate one’s choice of the point of death as desire or lack thereof as a consumer of medical services. The natural order becomes more obviously an interpretation based on fallible observations and logic.

It is increasingly well recognized that we live amidst many mundane amalgams of society and nature including the built environment, cities and other complex systems. These rely on the natural as an implicit component for their social and human elements to function. Unlike postmodern irony when it comes to erasing such divisions, second modernity involves the recreation of political institutions to positively cope with ambiguity - I would argue that this is a
new jurisprudence which aspires to resolve courses of action in the face of controversies, of Beck’s boundary struggles, and of Latour’s hybrid ‘disheveled quasi-objects’, perhaps according to a new, categorical, fuzzy logic of decidability and knowability.

Drawing Boundaries
Boundary drawing is spatial and visual. It describes an encompassing vision of a set of elements or an area or expanse, with a particular stress on the limit of a set of boundary markers. Boundary drawing is a matter of deciding on what or where is included in contrast to what is excluded. Beck and Latour include examples such as gender, race and the nation-state to give examples of how important boundary-drawing is as a canonical gesture of modernity. These are foundational moments to any social order which would be understood as such through the lense of Euro-American social sciences. But what do we mean by boundary? Boundaries have their own historicity as aspects of all-encompassing cultural formations of spatial practice, cognition and imagination (Shields 1999; Lefebvre 1991).

Despite the attempts to differentiate the hypothesis of second modernity from the claims of postmodernity, both are hypotheses open to testing. However, both depend on their status as more than ‘well-tuned’ or reasoned hypotheses for their persuasive and rhetorical force. They are extended metaphors: literary conceits. A programmatic theory of second modernity is above all a way of naming the present. In this respect, it shares the same epistemological space as the phenomenon of ‘postmodernity’ (which Ulrich Beck and his colleagues insist it is not). The spatial change in the qualities of boundaries is presented as an empirical detail of second modernity, whereas postmodern theorists have argued from popular culture to an overall change in spatiality.

Postmodernism is characterized by an asserted change in ‘cognitive mapping’, a shift in spatial practices and the position of spatiality in the popular imaginary of the advanced capitalist countries (surveyed in Shields 1992). While many modes of spatial cognition and practice remain unchanged, it is possible to identify apparent changes in specific aspects of the dominant social spatialization. Postmodern theorists highlight the stress of the collapse of distances that once separated all the categories of 'otherness' from the local sphere of 'our' everyday life. Commentators on globalization normalize the idea as part of current status quo. Giddens (1984) has also commented that the diminishing distanciation of "otherness" and "others" is a weakening of the logic of exclusion on the basis of their non-correspondence and "weak" quality with a cultural sense of reality based on proximity, on "being-at-hand". Like flickering radio signals, absent "others" have only a "weak", equivocal status of Being. With 'globalization', distant but present, once inaccessible "others" are now "near"; they are unavoidable presences in contradiction of their spatial remoteness. Such developments appear symptomatic of the displacement and partial dissolution of one aspect of social spatialization.

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1 As Anne Galloway, who brought the significance of conceits to my attention, has pointed out.
Boundary metaphors

Foundational to modernity is not just the drawing of boundaries but the association of this practice of spatial division with specific cultural significance. A boundary was once a limit which marked ‘the edge’ beyond which civilization ceased to exist, or beyond which sailing ships did not return, and perhaps even ‘fell off’ the world. Although the terror of these absolute limit-boundaries persists in the popular imaginary tapped by disaster movies, these unmapped, formless, monstrous spaces beyond the boundary-markers do not really correspond to any society-nature division that contemporary theorists and scientists discuss. Boundaries as a form of differentiation now indicate a clinical line separating the known from the yet-to-be-known; a line between the positively observed, actual, and the yet-to-be validated but theorized (cf. Shields, forthcoming). Culturally, boundaries once established a geographically- and historically-specific type of inclusion and exclusion correlated with presence and absence (analyzed at length in Shields 1992). The inside was near, intimate and present. The outside was distant, foreign and absent. Simmel’s figure of ‘The Stranger’ is the classic diagnosis of the ill effects of this spatialization for those who don’t fit into the binary categories of ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ (Simmel 1950).

Divisions do not disappear but old distributions are no longer stable. Presence and proximity is no longer an indicator of insider status, nor of citizenship, nor of cultural membership. While the opposition of inclusion and exclusion continues to function, it is cut loose from the correlation with the opposition of presence and absence (Shields 1992; Shields 1991). Presence and absence is no longer so strictly spatialized as inside and outside. Where it is found, it nostalgically signals an earlier, simpler era - folk tales such as Peter and Wolf and appropriations of the time-space form of the epic (e.g. Tolkein) still warn us of ‘the edge of the forest’. In everyday life there are fewer and fewer ‘iron curtains’, ‘no-go zones’ in the city are anathema, leaders in politics and the economy are fond of claiming that this or that ‘knows no bounds.’

In modernist spatialization, boundaries set up the following metaphoric and metonymic structure, allowing extended literary conceits to work back and forth between all of the terms:

 inside :: near :: local :: inclusion :: self :: presence
 outside :: far :: foreign :: exclusion :: other :: absence

The entanglement of the spatial form of inside-outside with the absolute 1:0 binary of presence (existent) and absence (non-existence) makes boundaries into limit conditions which are ideal for founding categorical identities. The boundary between presence and absence is an absolute limit. This entanglement dates back to the Latinization of Parmenides and of Aristotles’ discussions of presence (parousia - e.g.. Aristotle 1970 IV:§222a). In the Latin presentia it becomes ‘impossible to distinguish rigorously between presence as Anwesenheit (presence here) and presence as Gegenwärtigkeit (presence now)’ (Derrida 1970:90-1). The Actual, and truth become forms of presence. Heidegger marks perhaps the high point of this metaphysical tradition.
But now, where there are signs of a change in the advanced capitalist societies of the late twentieth century, is in the disentanglement of inside-outside divisions from the present and the absent. Boundaries are not impermeable barricades but are thresholds of varying width. They are *limen* across which communication takes place and where things and people of different categories - local and distant, native and foreign and so on - interact. In this sense, boundaries are liminal zones (Turner 1974) where known social orders are, or may be, suspended. As such, the 'beyond', once separated off in a spatializing act defining of the 'near' as inside and present, also becomes close, describable, and even lovable. The equivocation and undecidability discussed in the literature of postmodern theory is far from universal or arbitrary. It arises out of the difficulty of re-instituting the correlation of insider/outsider with presence/absence and near/far.

Boundary-making continues to operate in topological forms, reticulating gestalt fields into a mosaic of areas, but not into an inside presence and an outside nothingness. Similarly core-periphery spatial forms produce margins, but without engaging a strong dialectic of interiority and exteriority. Instead the emphasis is on the status of the centre. Boundaries appear only as asymptotic vanishing points in scalar forms of spatiality. For example in the micro-macro logic of global/local divisions the particular and general are always closely inter-related. A smooth continuum is even clearer in the perspectival flow from near to far. Thus differentiation continues but without the 0:1 implication of presence and absence.

More practically, political boundaries and territorial borders continue to be strongly enforced despite the paradox of imprisoning migrants because no clearly defensible logic for deporting them can be reached. Whether borders of ocean (Indonesia-Australia), chain-link fencing (Mexico-USA; Britain-France at the Channel Tunnel), land-mines (North-South Korea) or fire-breaks, surveillance devices and motion detectors (Canada-USA; Finland-Russia), borders have never been more strongly policed. But they are not so often touted as defences against a menacing absence or 'evil without'. Rather they are part of a mosaic of boundaries designed to stratify territory and slow down mobile enemies. The purpose and ambitions of these boundaries is less absolute.

The changing spatialization of presence and absence, its disengagement from the spatialization of exclusion and inclusion, contributes to the erosion of modernist categories and forms of identity-thinking such as the individual, the city and the nation-state. The impact of this development is to unravel the web of "guiding metaphors" and to render the truisms of common sense unworkable and false. In everyday life, the restructuring of the world confronts the old categories of experience and patterns of action. The probable figures large in the rhetoric of risk societies, the material and virtual, actual and ideal mingle. Truth becomes, respectively, contingent and probabilistic.

This "unbinding" of a specific aspect of the spatialization of Western modernity is a fundamental characteristics of the present, however diversely interpreted. Being as presence, as *parousia*, is no longer limited to the proximate and present-at-hand. The codes of meaning based on "being-
at-hand” are short-circuited by the synthesis of the intimate and foreign. The world is no longer given as a simple presence and as what is present, but as an incongruous synthesis of new social and virtual proximities which may not coincide with spatial proximity, leading modernist high culture back towards the interstitiality and relationality of everyday life (Van Loon 2002). The resulting ambiguity is not just philosophical or a question of language games, but is the everyday experience of dislocation and contingency. While going beyond both in its detail, this argument is congruent with aspects of both post- and second modernity theses. Is second modernity a better guide for further research?

**Decision-making without Boundaries**

The theory of second modernity appears to be a form of pragmatism which acknowledges context as a way of resolving the blurring of categorical reason which occurs in the presence of hybrids of culture/nature, health/illness or life/death. Beck worries that the complete loss of a distinction between nature and society would destroy the ability of institutions to function. Instead he posits a pluralization of definitions and a politicization of debate. However, it is less clear what the difference between this pluralism and postmodern ‘multiplicity’ would be - Beck portrays postmodern positions as free of action, struggle or politics (2000:19-20).

Far from contributing to the collapse of institutions, this situation has seen the birth of new institutions and new efforts, including theoretical schemas such as ‘second modernity’ which can only be described in legislative and juridical terms. Amongst these institutions, I would include would be the legitimation of International Courts of Justice such as at The Hague. These function precisely thanks to the breaching of the nationalist geographical and political boundaries of legal jurisdiction. Other important legal moments would include the American accession to apply at least aspects of the Geneva convention to Al Queda prisoners. Neither are a situation of the elimination of boundaries but rather a shift in their historico-cultural meaning. However, one negative impact is not the appearance of new political struggles over boundary-projects but the disappearance of discussion as boundaries are reinforced by dint of sheer reactionary force against terrorist ‘wars without frontiers’. These projects police the liminality of the new boundary-zones and surveil everyday life as a means of forcing difference back into clear zones of identity and non-identity, social being and nothingness - forcing a flexible socio-geographical mosaic back into a more positively differentiated grid more strongly marked by judgements of presence and absence (of civility, of whiteness, of wealth, of normality).

The postmodern thesis describes a rupture in the metonymic structure, across the Table (above) such that boundary making between inside and outside no longer establishes an interiority of presence and an exterior absence. The thesis of second modernity appears to posit a crisis in the antinomies themselves, vertically between terms in the above Table. Categories become fluid, not metaphorically but by leaking into their negations. But the situation is not one of simple, ‘across the board’ change. Where the postmodern theorists of the 1980s lack clarity and specificity in their musings about space, the reflexive modernists of the 1990s are unclear about the social construction or significance of boundary-making, overlooking the historicity and cultural specificity of boundaries. Which antinomies, which boundaries are problematized, how
and for whom? This is less a theoretical question for sociologists than an urgent question for those caught at or desperately attempting to cross different social, economic and political boundaries.

**Limits of the Theory of Second Modernity**

I write this from Canada. Beck in particular draws a European boundary around reflexive modernization. But, oddly, it has global significance. The limitation has some virtue but may have its own unintended consequences. While claiming affinity with postcolonial criticism, the disavowal of placing reflexive modernization as one of many entangled modernities, globally speaking, gives it the ‘look and feel’ of a totalizing Occidentalism. Once reflexive modernization has been specified as an avowedly Eurocentric theory it will then be ‘released’, so to speak, to other societies, perhaps as an ideal type, who will then be located in terms of the Eurocentric norm. More worrying, Europe is given peculiar (and rather Germanic *kulturwissenschaftliche*) responsibility (Beck 2000: [1-2]). It is disturbing that modernity seen obliquely from outside (for example, as Brazilian theorists have offered) is rejected in favour of an internal critique. To the victims and marginalized of first modernity, a disavowal of ‘outsidedness’ in a so-called second modernity is chillingly familiar and monological (cf. Bakhtin 1986).

In short, the spirit of second modernity conceals some disturbing continuities which a postcolonial criticism would reveal, not align itself with. A related infelicity lies in what appears to be a mis-reading of the term ‘reflexive’ in the social scientific and ethnographic literature - it does not designate a simple self-referentiality’, nor ‘redundancy’ (Beck 2000: [1]). It designates an emphasis on relations and positionality [1]. ‘Reflexivity’ has previously been associated with an ethical moment in social science thought which appears - to the non-European eye at least - at odds with the spirit of the thesis of second modernity. For these reasons I am less quiescent than Bruno Latour (2000: [11]), for indeed, ‘Remodernization might not describe what has already happened, but it can offer a powerful lever to make new things happen...’ or perhaps to continue making old things happen in a new guise?

**The Nature and Historicity of Boundaries**

A number of writers, including both those associated with the second modernity thesis and postmodern theory, have converged on the idea of a change in the nature of social spatialization. Of the various continuities and shifts, boundary divisions are one possible site of change - this while continuing to engage in subtle forms of division and boundary-drawing - between Europe and the rest or between the present and a prior ‘modernity’. Beck and Latour conceive of boundaries as socially-constructed objects but devote less attention to the precise genre or form of division that may be shifting. The nature-society division is highlighted as an example of the crisis of boundary-making. However, I have argued that divisions may remain intact while changing in significance. Thus, absolute either-or divisions of presence and absence which amount to boundaries between the existing and non-existing, may no longer be spatialized as boundaries between an inside and outside. The historicity of boundaries thus appears as an important issue which must be examined in order to present more precise arguments regarding...
the nature of the present.

**Selected References**