

The ethics of nation-statehood

Boundary-making and ethical-questioning

23rd & 24th September 2020

SR3, 1st floor, Sensengasse 3a, Linguistic Department, University of Vienna

While the nation-state presents itself as a naturalized whole, a bounded entity, its boundaries are constantly negotiated. The boundaries of the nation-state have historically been made and managed through a broad range of techniques, discourses/discursive fields and infrastructures seeking to sort who is “in” from who is “out.” Yet sorting is not a one-time event, nor is membership a binary between the statuses of “in” or “out.” Determining who is “in” and “out” is never simply a matter of conferring legal status (as citizen, legal immigrant, statutory refugee etc.), but rather is a constant negotiation. It entails combined processes of selection and socialisation where rights and resources—both material and symbolic—are differentially distributed, allowing bodies to populate a spectrum of categories within a nation-state. This workshop addresses the ethical quandaries experienced by actors involved in such processes of boundary-making and of differentiated (Holston 2008) or graduated (Ong 2006) citizenship.*

Although the state has long posed itself as the gatekeeper *par excellence* of the bounded nation, the management of selection and socialization has historically involved a wide range of actors, with complex statuses, not always easily identifiable as “state,” parastate and non-state. The embroilments of differing actors in boundary-making often blur where the state ends and begins, complicating who plays what role. Even actors straightforwardly labelled as “state,” employed directly by public institutions and on the state’s payroll, constantly negotiate their role as agents of the state in the boundary-making work they perform—especially street-level bureaucrats: border guards, police officers, public school teachers, public service counter clerks, social welfare caseworkers etc. Players across such broad (and overlapping) spheres of religion, science, education, medicine, business, social work, humanitarian work, media, security etc., operate with their own logics that may at times overlap with, at times diverge from, the policies put in place by “the state.” For actors involved in boundary-making work, negotiating their role also means having to navigate potential ethical tensions arising from conflicting logics and consequences.

This workshop seeks to explore everyday negotiations of roles, of the logics motivating boundary-makers, of the distribution of rights and resources, through an “ethical” lens: we wish to examine the ethics that infuse acts of boundary-making. As such, we invite interdisciplinary considerations of the ethical-questioning involved in boundary-making. What ethical projects are cultivated in everyday boundary-making activities? What ethics are politically mobilized by individuals, groups, institutions, states involved in such activities? Can looking at ethical considerations and negotiations reveal how projects of nation-statehood are constructed/consolidated/challenged?

Relevant topics and potential research areas may include, but are not limited to the following:

NGOs working with migrants/refugees • social work • medical infrastructure • bureaucracy (e.g., municipal authorities) • court/judicial system • education • private and public security • border infrastructures • local civil society initiatives • interpretation and translation in various domains.

* Holston, James. 2008. *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. Information Series. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.

Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press.

Aims of the workshop

The workshop aims to offer the opportunity for a small group of post-fieldwork PhD students and post-doctoral scholars to explore ethical questions inherent in boundary-making, drawing directly upon data gathered from the field. Envisaged as an interdisciplinary and collegial forum, the idea behind this workshop is to pool knowledge and findings that together can reveal more about contemporary struggles over boundary-making.

Format and Organisation

The workshop falls into two parts: It will consist of a conceptual part where we will delineate the notion of ethics/ethical questioning and discuss what it offers as a perspective in the context of our (respective) researched fields; and of an empirical, 'hands-on' part (data session) where we want to encourage participants to apply these discussions to pieces of data from their own research.

By **August 3, 2020**, the organizers will circulate a more detailed program of the workshop and 3-4 workshop themes, accompanied by question prompts that will frame the discussion. Participants will be asked to come prepared to discuss their own research in relation to these themes and questions. In addition, organizers will share all participants' research abstracts. Participants are expected to read all research abstracts in advance in order to be familiar with their colleagues' work and to facilitate discussion.

To participate

We invite prospective participants to send along their *research abstracts* (maximum 1 page) by **May 15, 2020**. These research abstracts should briefly outline your thesis or current research project and include: context, research questions, working hypothesis, methodology, and research goals. In addition, please add a few words on why you are interested in participating and what you hope gain from the workshop.

Please send abstracts to: tessa.bonduelle@mail.utoronto.ca; jonas.hassemer@univie.ac.at; and sabine.lehner@univie.ac.at

All prospective participants will be notified of the final list of attendees by **May 29, 2020**. There are no participation fees.

We know that many of us will have difficulties making plans for participation in such a workshop, given the current uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 situation. We want to encourage those interested in participating, but who are either facing difficulties to meet the deadlines we have set or who are unsure of their ability to make it to Vienna in September, to contact us directly.

We will monitor the situation carefully and decide in due time if we will be able to hold the workshop in September 2020.

Organisers

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