

Stephan Günzel

## **The Dyke as Border-Experience**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to talk to you about the dyke as a spatial phenomenon. In order to do this, I first of all want to talk about space in general, and then about the experience of space in a particular form (of which the dyke is a crucial example). Finally, and against the background of this, I then want to talk about the philosophical aspects of the particular experience of the dyke. – And that is: what the cultural meaning of this experience is or might be.

### I. Space and spatial concepts in general

In physical as well as in the social theory of space there are at least two main concepts that define the very alternative in spatial thinking: and this is: the box and the border.

The theory of space as a box was initiated by Isaac Newton's physics and was notably criticized by Albert Einstein. Newton is famous for his notion of absolute space, Einstein for his concept of relativity. From the confrontation of both the identification of a one particular concept of space as a box arises.

However, it is less the theory of an absolute space that was criticized by Einstein in the first place, but Newton's claim of relative spaces within the absolute space. Thus, Einstein was much more critical about Newton's idea of relative space or, to be more precise, about his idea of relative

spaces (in the plural).

Newton illustrates the difference between absolute space and relative space as follows: A ship, sailing on the sea, has people and goods on it. The movement of each object therefore is a double movement: Things move (or don't move) on the ship, but at the same time the ship moves or (does not move) on the sea.

Thus, not only the movement of each single object, but also the movement of the relative space (in this case the ship) has to be considered, when defining the movement of physical bodies in space. For instance, when somebody moves from the front of the ship to its back, while the ship is driving forward, the body of the person only moves backwards in relative space (on the ship), but not in the absolute space, where – according to Newton – it stays still.

Einstein on the contrary (and against Newton) demonstrated what the problem with this concept of space is: Namely, that no single point in absolute space can be defined, from which one can judge all the possible movements of objects in all relative spaces, in order to say what the true movement of an object is. Instead Einstein emphasizes that relativity itself is absolute and the absolute space is a relative space itself.

Applied on Newton's example: To the person on the ship spatial movement is experienced toward the backside of the ship, but to somebody watching from outside (another ship maybe) this person is not moving in relation to the particular spot on sea. So in order to judge, which viewpoint is the true experience of space, Newton has to invent the concept of relative spaces within absolute space.

And this is what Einstein mainly criticized: In order to compare two viewpoints, space has to be thought of as an infinite number of boxes that do contain objects. In the example: The ship then is one of those boxes, containing the person on deck and moving as a whole within absolute space.

Einstein himself called this box-thinking the “container-model of space” (or in German: “das Schachtel-Modell des Raumes”).

I guess, you may ask yourself now, why this excursion into physics is important for our topic of spatial experience in general and the dyke as a spatial phenomenon in particular.

The answer to this can also be found in Einstein: As he explains that Newton's misinterpretation of relativity grounds in an everyday experience – and before one can overcome the Newtonian physics of space, one has to overcome the Newtonian psychology of space. And this is the experience of people living in houses, working in offices and driving in closed vehicles.

Thus, to cut a long story short: In our everyday life we experience a lot of container-spaces, and that are: closed rooms. And due to this, we talk about space in terms of the container or the box. We for example would say, that today, we are in this conference-hall or in this cinema. And on a more abstract level we do say, that all things exist in space. (But we would not say that things do exist spatially – which to Einstein would be the correct description).

The problem of the box-model or the container space-thinking becomes even more apparent (and problematic as well), when one talks in political terms. What does it mean, when I say: I am in Groningen, or in the Netherlands? If I meant it in a purely geographical way, I could instead name the coordinates of the place I am at (here: 53.1 degrees north, 6.3 degrees east). But instead and when talking in terms of the box, we pretend to be inside something – which furthermore implies that there is another box beside this one, in which I could also “be in”. (For example: I could be in Germany or in Berlin instead.)

Talking like this indeed is a heritage of the constitution of the national state, which had to pretend that it is a unity or a spatial unit, which is separated from other units (hence other nations). Social

geographers call this (psychological kind of political spacing) a “reification of culture” – which is the activity to represent entities as visible spatial entities, that in themselves are invisible. This mainly happened (and still happens) through the use of maps, which designate the borders between territories and ascribed them to ethnicities or likewise to languages. Due to this, a nation then is envisaged as a box, in which people are located and by which they become one people – depending on the box they are in: Dutch, German, English etc.

Today, we may believe that we have overcome this spatial thinking, but in fact: our new box is Europe. And just these days we do discuss, who belongs inside this box and who does not. (And we not only do this in respect to current members of the European Union, but also to potential members and immigrants from other boxes that we locate south or east of our box.)

So at this point the crucial question is: Is there an alternative of spatial thinking to the box or does spatial thinking per se imply containment? – Beside total relativity (as Einstein supposes), there is at least one alternative to the box – and this is the border.

## II. An alternative spatial experience

To talk about the border now may sound surprising, since what instantly comes to our mind, when talking about national identity is: the border that separates boxes of national identity. But this is only one way to think about the border (the border as an appendix or as an accidental phenomenon – as an epiphenomenon of the box). On the contrary, the original experience of a border is the phenomenon of difference as such.

In order to not confuse the original experience of the border with that of containment, we could also

use another term for border: and this is the English term ‘mark’, which itself is derived from the old-German term ‘Mark’. The interesting thing about ‘mark’ is that it does not only mean border, but can also designate a territory (for example, in the sense of a Margraviate (“Markgrafschaft”). So, just as the box implies the border, the mark implies a territory.

But the main difference is that in the case of the mark, not the containment is the original spatial experience, but the differentiation as a process. One could say, that while the concept of the box obscures or hides the constitution of space through differentiation, in the experience of the border the experience of difference is the original experience.

To understand this, we can refer to Gestalt-Psychology, which says that every spatial experience roots in the phenomenon of a reversible figure: That is: one part of a picture can be seen as the figure and another one as the ground. Like in the famous example of two black faces opposed to each other against a white background.

But the image can also be seen the other way round and one does conceive of the white in-between as the figure and the former black faces as the background, through which a spectator does now see a vase instead of faces. There is only the alternative to see the faces or the vase, but now there is a way, in which the vase and the faces can be perceived the same time.

The British mathematician George Spencer Brown applied this pictorial phenomenon on space in general: He himself does not talk about figure and ground of an image, but about the difference between marked space and unmarked space. He is quite serious about using this term “mark” or “marking” as he says that space comes into to being only when a “distinction is drawn”.

In the case of the map: A nation first of all is not constituted not by containment, but by the act of separation. The identity of a country as a marked space then is everything what it excludes by

marking the difference. If focusing on a country, this country becomes the marked space, while the outside becomes the unmarked space (as a space which is implied in the marking, but which is not conceived in the marking).

Thus, space (even though we think of it in our everyday-psychology as stable) is anything but a box: it is the result of an act of marking. This is already true for natural processes, since the earth has changed space through the geological revolutions within millions of years, in which this happened uncountable times. And it is true for all human activities such as agriculture, architecture, art, politics etc.

Building this room (we suppose ourselves to be 'in') first of all implied the drawing of distinctions, the marking of differences, from which an inside and an outside resulted. (The marking constituted the space as a marked inside and an unmarked outside.)

You probably now can guess, what this means for the dyke as a spatial phenomenon: The dyke is the marking par excellence: In constructing a dyke, space is marked in such a way that it constitutes a marked space and an unmarked space.

Most times, the marked space for us is the country-side and not the water-side, which is the unmarked space. In terms of the box, we identify the country-side with the inside of a box, and do thereby forget about the instance that the dyke is a man-made thing, which actively separated the land from the sea in the first place (sometimes also including lakes on the country-side, which resulted from water breaking through the dyke again).

Thus, in forgetting about this spatial act, dykes today may be conceived as (naturally) given and as stable containment for the back-country. But the dyke was built and when it was built, it marked the difference between the sea and the land, notably at a place where this difference naturally did not

exist before.

This is like the repetition of the first distinction ever drawn – as God is said to first of all have separated the solid ground from the waters in an initial spatial act. It hereby is less important that this original spatial act is ascribed to an extraterrestrial creator (as I said, you could think of the earth itself as the entity which draws distinctions), but it is more important that already in ancient times people were aware of space as a mode of production – that is: a result of a drawn distinction.

And, as I want to claim now: the dyke is a paradigmatic example for the spatial experience of difference. Instead of the border (or the mark), one could try to find an even more precise term for the phenomenon in question, when thinking of the dyke as a spatial border-experience. – And this term is ‘the frontier’.

The term ‘frontier’ is used for a very special kind of border: namely, a border with a course that is a subject to change. More than a hundred years ago, already in 1893, the anthropologist Frederick Turner gave a lecture, in which he tried to define, what the cultural meaning of the border is in respect to the history of the United States. And Turner said, that in difference to the European idea of the border (which resembles the concept of space as a box – we can add here), the spatial experience of the border in North America is that of a frontier.

It is a border of which its course is actively changed through history and pushed forward from the east-coast through the plains to the ocean in the far west. Each relocation of this frontier then is manifested by the extension of the westbound railways. – And we again could add: turning the former unmarked space on the outside into a marked space on the inside.

### III. The dyke as border-experience

In thinking about the dyke as a frontier, I will now turn onto the final (third) part of my talk and think about the philosophical meaning and cultural significance of the dyke as “grenservaring”.

I hereby can refer to the – probably - only philosophical piece that has been written about the dyke. And this is a chapter in a book entitled “Crowds and Power”, published by nobel-prize winning writer Elias Canetti in 1960 with the German title *Masse und Macht*. This book, which was written by Canetti in Vienna, first of all is notable as it is one of the few pieces on crowds, which is not instantly negative about mass-psychology. (As it was the case with much of early 20<sup>th</sup> century writings on the topic.)

Instead Canetti tries to think about crowds and groups or even people as cultural subjects, and how these cultural subjects experience themselves as a crowd. In the chapter, which is relevant to the topic of the dyke, Canetti tries to name the collective symbols, which nations use to envisage their very nature. More precise, we could say: Canetti tries to analyze the attributes by which nations affirm their being in spatial boxes.

There are for example the Germans, whose collective naturalistic symbol (due to Canetti) is the forest. This is not only because there were many forests in Germany, but because the trees of a forest grow upright and each single one of it is like a part of an army, ready to get going. And that is the reason (for Canetti), why German novels, in which a boy leaves home and enters the forest, logically anticipate the inclusion to the army, as incorporation in uniformity.

On the contrary the national symbol of the British (for Canetti) is the sea, which is controlled by ships. As long as there are enough ships any ocean can be controlled and become part of the Empire. A captain therefore does not rule the crew of his ship, but through the crew he rules the sea. According to Canetti the difference in the collective symbolic experience of space between Germany and England therefore is mainly that between the land and the sea.

So what about the Netherlands now? – How does Canetti describe the collective symbolic experience of space to the Dutch? It comes of no surprise now, but does see it being given in the spatial experience of the dyke – and in particular: the dyke as the experience of a frontier. I quote Canetti (and as I say, this might be the only passage in philosophy to consider the dyke):

“The British have conquered their island, but they did not take it from the sea. [On the contrary] The Dutch had to take the country (they inhabit) from the sea. Since the country is low, it had to be protected against the sea by dykes. The dyke is the origin and the aim of this nation. Men identify themselves with the dyke; together as a crowd they resist the sea. If a dyke is damaged, the country is in danger. [...] Nowhere else the experience of a human wall, which confronts the sea, is that strong. People rely on the dyke in times of peace, but when a dyke has to be destroyed before the enemy, the power of the dyke is passed onto the men, that have to rebuild it. In their mind the dyke is preserved, until it is rebuilt. In a strange, yet singular way, in times of danger, Dutch people do carry this frontier within them.”

Sure, we have to be careful, when talking in terms of a collective identity, as proposed by Canetti in my prior quotation. Nevertheless, we can consider this experience shared by a crowd as cultural memory or the history of a region instead.

Thus, it is less important to identify (as Canetti did) each nation with a different spatial experience (and thereby totalize it), but consider, that regions can share similar experiences. For example the spatial experience of a mountain farmer in the Alps might be comparable or even identical to the experience of a Nepalese farmer in great heights: Both have to cope with a long and rough winter in contrast to rich vegetation in the short period of the summer.

In the case of the dyke as a spatial experience one just has to think about the heavy floods that do not only cause damage to dykes on the Dutch coast every year, but also to the German coast in the

North – or more specific: the damages and deaths that were caused by the flooding of Hamburg in the Winter of 1961. Since then (and even though, Hamburg is not located on the coast directly), the necessity of a dyke on the coast as a spatial frontier became part of the collective identity in Hamburg and its surroundings.

The dyke, that (according to Canetti) is “preserved inside” each member of the crowd (fighting the water), then also had an effect on German politics in the 1970ies. Namely with the later chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who as the former mayor of Hamburg, personally coordinated the fighting of the flood. Then, during the time of his chancellorship, the left-wing-assassins started to become active in Germany. And just like in the fighting of the flood, Helmut Schmidt claimed to resist and fight back the thread, without stepping back and without an alternative.

Not only to his consciousness it was a dyke, that had to be built. – A dyke, which then also became part of the collective memory of any Germans. So the dyke as a spatial experience can not only affect natural space in the first place, but in its transgression the cultural field as well. Its main characteristic is the experience of a spatial frontier that is not the fixed border of a territory, but that of an active marking – a spatialization, which constitutes a fore and a back, an inside and an outside – and that is: space itself.