Assemblage theory, communicative assemblages and problematising the notion of 'borders' in community communication

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1 Introduction

Borders are studied at the interstices of several disciplines – including anthropology, sociology and geography among others, with scholarship cumulated in the interdisciplinary field of research and practice of border studies. Scholarly interest spans borders in their geographical sense (borderlands), but also the social, political and cultural dimensions of borders. The definition and theorisation of borders have important implications for communications research and practice, particularly for the study of culture, community and identity. In fact, advances in scholarship on borders are twinned with those on culture and community, as illustrated for instance in anthropological thought. Traditional ideas of culture associated with neat boundaries and units of analysis have been replaced by understandings of culture as fluid, changing, all the more so in modern and contemporary times, where races and ethnicities are no longer associated with well-demarcated territories (Alvarez 1995: 449; Kearney 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

This paper focuses on social and cultural borders or boundaries and how we may better elucidate the role of communication in defining, breaking and redefining borders. It draws on assemblage theory as conceptualised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1998) and more recently by Manuel DeLanda (2006, 2016). Assemblages are constituted, dissolved and reconfigured through processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation (DeLanda 2006; 2016), which carry with them the constant making, dissolution and re-configuration of borders. Assemblage theory enables a fresh look at theorising borders. It suggests that processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation - and associated borders, are provisional fixations, which may gain some stability over what may seem like long periods of time, but will nonetheless remain temporary. Furthermore, assemblages may be constituted at multitudes of scales that interrelate and overlap – for example at the level of a community, of groups within the community and at individual level. The implication is that the borders that come with them are relative to the assembling entities and elusive.

The paper furthers scholarship on assemblage theory by applying it to communication processes. It fleshes out the concept of 'communicative assemblages' as assemblages whose primary function is to produce and exchange information, and shows how these play a critical role in defining borders instantiated at various scales, community to individual. These notions are illustrated through empirical research with different Roma minority communities in the UK and Romania, conducted at different times between 2010 and 2021. The first of these research projects was a doctoral study based on participatory and ethnographic research with two Roma communities in South-Eastern rural Romania (Sabiescu 2013). The second study was conducted as part of the European research project project EduMAP (Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship), a Horizon 2020 funded project (2016-2019) that examined the role of adult education in cultivating active citizenship for young people at risk of social exclusion. The project included a strand of research on communicative ecologies carried out among marginalised groups and communities in seven EU countries and Turkey. Among these was an impoverished Roma community in a marginal neighbourhood of Bucharest, Romania (Tacchi, Sabiescu and Gordano 2019), referred to in the present paper. The third study, still on-going in 2021, is a research project[1] funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (2019-22) which explores alternative education and skill building pathways for supporting interest based learning and career orientation for UK young people, particularly young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project adds to long-term research conducted with the Roma community in Coventry (see Sabiescu 2018), looking holistically at the communication practices, interests and professional aspirations of young Roma aged 14 to 25 years old, in

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[1] https://connect2aspire.lboro.ac.uk/

conjunction with out of school opportunities for school building and career orientation (see Sabiescu 2021).

The Roma transnational minority is considered an example of a persistent cultural system (Spicer 1971), a quality associated with its strong intra-community orientation. While there are various different groups of Roma, and they have all adopted to various degrees the language and customs of host populations in different countries, many Roma groups still maintain their cultural identity, sticking together as a community and abiding by ancestral social values and norms (Sabiescu 2013).

Thus, Roma communities are particularly insightful settings for researching borders and the interstices between one's own community and otherness, inside and outside, and processes of preservation and change. The paper approaches these processes through a communicative assemblages lens, looking at information flows and networks and the making, dissolution and reconfiguration of borders in concrete cases when the agents are going through processes of change. Stories of change of individual Roma members will elucidate the importance of communication at the borders, and how these communication hotspots, through increased frequency, gradually come to challenge pre-existing borders and reconfigure them, enabling the agent to join in novel communicative assemblages. When these assemblages stabilise, for example forming into interpersonal networks, we witness the temporary fixation of new borders, relative to the individuals that enact them and at times ignoring or defying pre-existing community borders.

2 Assemblage theory, social and communicative assemblages

Assemblages have been conceptualised in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1998) and systematically theorised by Manuel DeLanda in his books A new philosophy of society: Assemblage theory and social complexity (2006) and Assemblage theory (2016). Assemblages can be identified everywhere in natural and social life, formed through the interaction of heterogenous elements and constituted at multiple scales, spanning biological, chemical, social and mental processes and interactions. While the principles of assemblage theory have some aspects in common with systems theory and ecological thinking, assemblage theory is unique in its insistence that assemblage components are not brought together based on holism or teleology, rather opportunistically and contingently (DeLanda 2006).

Assemblage theory focuses on process and interaction. Assemblages are constantly formed and dissipated, coming together driven by processes of territorialisation and dismantled by processes of deterritorialisation. But even the maintenance of an assemblage is a process in itself, constantly keeping its momentum throughout conflicting tendencies of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. In its literal sense, territorialisation refers to the spatialisation of an assemblage, its expansion in space. Territorialisation may also refer to the internal degree of coherence gained by an assemblage, the internal tendencies of its components to continue sticking together or to disintegrate moving towards other assemblages (DeLanda 2006). Assemblages are thus in constant motion, constant change. Yet this dynamism is often concealed, inducing us to see some assemblages as 'things' with enduring, stable qualities and identities.

Of special interest for this paper are social assemblages. Social assemblages can be constituted at different scales, from routine interpersonal relations between individuals to highly complex specialised assemblages such as organisations, communities and societies. The constitution and maintenance of social assemblages resemble those of natural and biological assemblages, but there are also aspects specific to them. For instance, according to DeLanda social assemblages involve social action and social causality which are more

complex to analyse than causality in, for example, biological assemblages. Social causality involves the agents' reasons or motives, defined by DeLanda as follows: "Roughly, while reasons may be exemplified by traditional values or personal emotions, motives are a special kind of reason involving explicit choices and goals" (2006: 22).

Assemblages as a whole gain emergent properties from the interaction between component parts. Being part of an assemblage also enables component parts to exercise their capacities on virtue of their interaction with other components in the assemblage. The difference between properties and capacities is important, as DeLanda underlines:

We can distinguish, for example, the properties defining a given entity from its capacities to interact with other entities. While its properties are given and may be denumerable as a closed list, its capacities are not given - they may go unexercised if no entity suitable for interaction is around - and form a potentially open list, since there is no way to tell in advance in what way a given entity may affect or be affected by innumerable other entities. (DeLanda 2006)

Thus, becoming part of an assemblage will have a fundamental impact on the interacting components, as these will be enabled to exercise capacities that may not otherwise be used. Enduring membership in an assemblage goes along with a process of identity formation. Take, for example, memberships of assemblages like families, where one identifies with the role of father, son or wife. Or of workplaces where one may identify with a certain job role. These are examples of how long-term engagement in a social assemblage will contribute to building the identity of an agent.

Communicative assemblages can be defined as a specific kind of social assemblages whose primary function is the production, consumption and/or exchange of information. On virtue of their communicative function, we can highlight some key components, identifiable in any kind of communicative assemblage: social, informational and media components (see also Tacchi, Sabiescu and Gordano 2019). Each of these are assemblages in their own right. The social component encompasses social relations and networks and the associated socialisation practices, but also norms and protocols that guide them. Information refers to the semantically meaningful content of the communicative act. It includes both the meaning conveyed by the communication as well as the vehicle used for representing and transmitting it – the language and the communication register and protocols. The media component captures the medium for codifying and transmitting the information, including both human and man-made means of communication (analogue and digital).

3 Theorising borders through an assemblage lens

This section proposes a conceptual exploration of borders through the perspective of assemblage theory, looking at three aspects: the processual definition of borders; borders and identity; and border crossings and change.

Process focus: Borders are constantly being made, maintained or dismantled

Borders have been defined in multiple and sometimes mutually exclusive ways in border studies, or disciplines such as anthropology and sociology: as geographical landmarks, as sets of practices that both define and are defined by physical borders (Alvarez 1995: 448), "boundary-producing practices" (Paasi 2011:18) or even as points of relatedness and connectedness which bound spaces and people through performance and performativity (Hannam et al. 2006). The unique insight brought by assemblage theory is that borders are not things in themselves, but rather temporary fixations articulated through the constant configuration of multiple types of assemblages. These assemblages instantiate borders and

propose them as social conventions that are accepted – whether willingly or reluctantly – by the social agents located at different sides of the border.

Communicative assemblages are essential for tracing and ensuring the social acceptance of borders. Some assemblages are directed precisely at enforcing the border: for example communicative assemblages configured by state organisations and border patrols to mark the border territories and ensure no trespassing at borderlands. At this level, borders are intimately linked to power entrusted to organisations that can legitimately propose and where needed impose and enforce border restrictions. Moreover, borders are also configured by and at the same time reinforcing the patterns of communication on each side of the border, through active assemblages but also by the rules and constraints that mark their being absent or forbidden. A bird's eye view of communicative assemblages near borders will yield a multiplicity of rich communications on each side of the border, but rarefied communications, often reduced to limited protocols or subversive forms of communication at border crossings. The limited forms of communications at border crossings and their subversive nature are all dictated by and at the same time strengthening the existence of the border.

Rich intra-group communication and limited communication with outsiders are well exemplified by many Roma communities, especially traditional ones (Sabiescu 2013). These communication patterns are dictated by social norms and rules, part of the social component of communicative assemblages. Culturally, these norms are in turns demanded by notions of purity and defilement (Douglas 1966), which regulate what is socially acceptable and not in Roma communities. As a result, the communicative assemblages cultivated inside the traditional Roma community contrast the limited outside communications, often within rigidly dictated registers and protocols, to ensure for example livelihoods and economic exchange.

Matters gain complexity when we consider the question of scale. Assemblages are formed at different scales and by different entities to define and render borders socially accepted. When analysing the role of communication in tracing and reinforcing borders, we must be aware of the cumulated effect of assemblage action at many different levels. Some communicative assemblages may work in the direction of reinforcing borders, while others may be denying or openly defying them. Thus, borders may be reinforced at one scale, but be broken or disregarded at another scale. This applies to borderlands, thinking of how illegal border crossings defy the border-enforcing protocols legitimised by states and enforced by their administrative controls. But it equally applies to social and cultural boundaries. Again looking at traditional Roma communities, intergenerationally transmitted norms and the traditional community leadership reinforce norms that legitimise intra-group relatedness and communication while rejecting many forms of communication to and relationships with outsiders. For example, traditional Roma communities of tinkerers in Romania enforce strict protocols for intra-group and inter-group relations and acceptable behaviour. Members tacitly accept these as the traditional way of being, as things are just being done this way and always have been in their community (Sabiescu 2013). However, individual members may choose to defy these boundary-producing practices, cherishing for instance exchanges with outsiders that break the norms established at community level.

The gradual definition of social and cultural borders around a community in relation to the making of assemblages can be examined in the case of emerging or newly-formed communities, such as the community of Romanian Roma migrants in Coventry, UK. The Roma started to settle in larger numbers in Coventry from 2011. Qualitative and ethnographic studies conducted since 2014 (Hagedorn-Saupe et al. 2015; Sabiescu 2018) looked at patterns of socio-cultural change in relation to social integration in the UK. The configuration of borders for this emerging community responded to goals related to strong community interaction on the one hand and social integration on the other. Newly settled families relied

on the ones already settled to find out about life in the UK. Many families settled in the same neighbourhoods already inhabited by migrant Roma, leading to stronger interpersonal networks stimulated by proximity. Places such as the Evangelical Church and a local Roma charity became go-to places for Roma families to meet and socialise – from an assemblage theory viewpoint acting like hubs for the cultivation of communicative assemblages. All of these contributed to strengthening intra-group interaction and at the same time configuring the borders of the emerging community. In counterpoint, social integration goals dictated more interest in and more frequent interactions with the host communities, their culture, and the local service providers than traditional Roma communities would allow. There was, in particular, a keen interest among Roma families for their children to pursue quality education (Sabiescu 2018). These goals led to Roma engaging in assemblages both within and outside their community borders, which contributed to the configuration of more flexible, permeable, dynamic borders than in the case of traditional Roma communities.

Borders, difference and identity

There is agreement in border studies that the existence of borders implies difference, which can be social, political, geographical and cultural (Hannerz 1997). But how do we define and analyse this difference? Ulf Hannerz (1997) argues that social difference may be analysed in relation to membership of different groups or communities. But cultural difference is more difficult to articulate and there have been several schools of thought approaching its study. In anthropology, the study of cultures shifted from seeing neatly patterned differences among cultures into seeing variation along a continuum (Alvarez 1995) using metaphors of flux, networks and flows (Hannerz 1997).

From an assemblage theory viewpoint, the difference associated with borders and borderlands (whether social, cultural, political etc.) is closely linked to processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation and identity formation. Naturally, territorialisation and deterritorialisation have been conceptualised as well in border studies (especially since the 1990s), as they are closely related to the making and dismantling of borders (Paasi 2011). In cultural studies, deterritorialisation is about the loss of relation between culture and the geographical territory (Paasi 2003). Taken up in border studies, this was applied to examining the fragmentation or dissolution of borders delimiting ethnicities, cultures and identities in modern and contemporary times (Paasi 2011).

As mentioned above, in assemblage theory territorialisation may refer to the spatialisation of an assemblage, but also to the degree of internal homogeneity attained by an assemblage. The stronger the process of territorialisation, the stronger and more enduring an assemblage stands, as it constantly resists opposite forces that tend towards deterritorialisation which may lead to the dissolution of the assemblage. Processes of territorialisation are shadowed by identity building that happens at the level of the entire assemblage, but also at that of internal components. The assemblage (such as a human being, or a community) will derive an identity from the identification with certain characteristics conferred by the interactions between the composing parts. Similarly, being a component part of an assemblage (such as members of a specific community or communities) will involve active information exchange and capacity building which in time will shape the identity of the component (DeLanda 2006; Sabiescu 2021). For example, a member of the Roma community will self-identify as a Roma, on virtue of their constant interactions with other members in the large and complex assemblage that is the Roma community. This process of identification is strengthened by difference. As Huntington remarked 'We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against' (Huntington 1996, p. 21 cited in Hannerz 1997).

Communities that tend to privilege intra-group interaction (such as traditional Roma) will develop strong community identity as well as solid and well defined social boundaries. Difference from other communities, and even adversity have been hypothesised by some scholars to further strengthen community ethos and a unique and enduring socio-cultural identity. Spicer (1971) describes persistent cultural identity systems as those socio-cultural systems that maintain a unique identity and cultural continuity in very different and oftentimes adverse contexts. Examples of such persistent systems are the Roma, the Basques and the Jews. Assemblage theory explains this phenomenon by pointing to how such communities in privileging rich intra-group interactions (social and communicative assemblages) further strengthen their cultural ethos and identity – both for the community as a whole as well as for individual members.

Border crossings and change

Alongside depictions of difference and divide, borders have also been analysed as contact zones, areas of hybridisation, creolisation and change (Hannerz 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Hannerz (1997) argues that it is important to identify and analyse how small-scale and often individual attempts at crossing or subverting borders may lead to the re-definition of borders and change at collective level. From an assemblage theory perspective, socio-cultural change can be traced back from the configuration of assemblages constituted around border crossings, often informal, defiant or subversive. Some of these may have to do with the memberships of an individual in different communities. Many of these will remain just that – individual border crossings. But some may lead to individual change as members re-define the grounds of their community memberships and the borders they have taken for granted; and in time many such interactions may lead to re-defining community borders and broader socio-cultural change.

In an ethnographic study conducted within a Roma community in Bucharest, Romania (Tacchi, Sabiescu and Gordano 2019), a powerful story of change stood out. The community, located in a marginal neighbourhood, was afflicted by poverty, poor access to healthcare, education and jobs, and marginalisation and substance abuse (see also Tacchi, Sabiescu and Gordano 2019). Adina had been herself a substance abuser for many years, who finally decided to get clean after partnering with another woman, also a heroine user. During weekly visits to the hospital to assist her partner to get her methadone doses for coping with withdrawal, Adina started interacting with social workers and activists who were promoting social causes that resonated with her. At the same time, she could see the dreadful effects of substance abuse, poverty, even homelessness among hospital patients. Beforehand, her days were spent inside the Roma community, and she had very little interaction with people and places outside her neighbourhood. Yet, she did have a strong urge to help others, especially people in her own community. Inspired by the people she met in the hospital, she intensified the exchanges with activists and started volunteering for a charity. Soon, she obtained a job as a community mediator for a Roma integration charity that was sponsoring alternative education clubs in local neighbourhood schools. And she got closer to her dream of helping others in the community overcome poverty and substance abuse by co-founding a community centre for supporting victims of substance abuse and access to education.

Adina's story is a veritable story of life change whose initial sparkle can be traced in enlarging her social circle, or – from an assemblage theory perspective – starting to engage in new social and communicative assemblages. These assemblages started small, as weekly interactions in the yard of a local hospital. As she intensified these interactions via face to face meetings, volunteering but also following activists and causes on social media, these interactions started to develop into stable interpersonal networks which afforded access to and exchanges of information that Adina did not have access to before. Through membership in these networks, she also started to develop new capacities, which she

systematised through her new job as a community mediator and lastly by co-founding a community centre.

Adina's story is also about breaking borders by cultivating relationships and interactions outside the Roma community. With this trespassing of borders, she created the conditions for her life to change; and by becoming a community mediator and founding a community centre, she planted the seeds for contributing to further change inside the Roma community.

Adina's story of change is an individual one, and so is the re-definition of boundaries associated with it. Yet, we may, while analysing this example from an assemblages viewpoint, start seeing how such change can gain momentum as more members of a community broaden their horizons and their openness to interact and cultivate networks outside the invisibly traced nonetheless identifiable social borders of the community. This is what, in time, may lead to hybridisation and socio-cultural change, as it happened historically with many communities with a unique socio-cultural identity.

4 Conclusion

This paper proposed an analysis of borders through an assemblage theory lens, looking at how borders are defined, contested and re-defined through the constant configuration of social and communicative assemblages at multiple scales, from individual to community and national level and beyond. It identified three critical aspects in the theorisation of borders and the role of communication in their emergence and change. Firstly, it argued that from an assemblages perspective, we need to acknowledge the processual nature of borders, as they are constantly constituted, contested, rejected and re-defined through the configuration of multiple assemblages existent at different scales and often working in opposite directions. As state administrations consolidate assemblages for strengthening borders as lines of divide, informal practices may work subversively to defy and seek to erode these borders. Second, the paper argued that we may look at borders in terms of difference, which is closely linked to processes of identity building. Assemblages are formed through processes of territorialisation, which imply the existence of borders, separating entities such as individuals, groups, organisations, communities and societies from each other. This differential edge further works towards strengthening the identities of these entities. Yet, thirdly, assemblage theory also affords a look at borders as areas of hybridisation and change. Change may start small-scale, for example from individuals with multiple community memberships, or who seek to subvert or reject border making practices and the borders themselves. And while oftentimes change is reduced to a re-definition of boundaries only for individuals, in time these may lead as well to more enduring, collective socio-cultural change (Hannerz 1997).

The paper echoes existing scholarship in border studies and cultural studies, especially relational perspectives (Hannam et al. 2006) and attempts at defining borders in a "deterritorialized world" (Alvarez 1995: 449) in which geographical borders cannot be linked to the social and cultural boundaries of ethnic communities and unique socio-cultural systems (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The paper proposes a definition of borders in processual terms, as provisional, elusive fixations constituted but also contested and rejected at multiple scales. Communicative assemblages, defined as social assemblages with a primary function of information production and exchange, have a fundamental role in the configuration of borders, but also in their negotiation, rejection and dissolution.

The Roma community, introduced in here as an instance of a persistent cultural identity system (Spicer 1971), makes for an illustrative case of enduring social boundaries, maintained through strong intra-community interaction guided by intergenerationally transmitted norms and values. Yet Roma communities in different parts of Europe, even those that resisted change for centuries, are also starting to become subjected to socio-cultural

change. As the example of the Roma woman turned community mediator illustrates, socio-cultural change at individual level may occur through the expansion of one's social networks and interactions outside the social boundaries of the community. The example of the newly formed Roma community in Coventry further shows how social integration goals for an emerging migrant community will lead to the constitution of more permeable and flexible socio-cultural boundaries than in the case of traditional communities. Overall, these examples point to the critical role of communication (seen as communicative assemblages) in the configuration, temporary stabilisation and transformation of borders for individuals and collectivities.

Acknowledgements

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