

## PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/163287>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2021-03-01 and may be subject to change.

## OUTLOOK ON EUROPE

# 'SPATIAL PLAY' AT THE ENDS OF EUROPE: OYAPOCK BRIDGE, AMAZONIA

OLIVIER THOMAS KRAMSCH

*Nijmegen Centre for Border Research (NCBR), Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen, the Netherlands.  
E-mail: O.Kramsch@fm.ru.nl*

Received: March 2014; accepted March 2015

---

### ABSTRACT

Drawing on the work of philosopher-semiotician Louis Marin, this contribution to *Outlook on Europe* reveals the 'spatial play' of contending outlooks hovering fitfully over the construction of a bridge at the 'ends of Europe', in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, on that very spot where French Guiana and Brazil, the European Union and Mercosul, physically touch one another over a muddy tributary, the *Rio Oyapock*. The inter-play of visions colliding around the Oyapock bridge, it is argued, illuminates the paradoxes and contradictions of European territorial governance in the globalised time-space of its postcolonial frontiers. In spite of the high geopolitical rhetoric seeking to unite both continents, the peculiar blindness of Europe's metropolitan gaze *vis-à-vis* indigenous difference sets the stage for perverse effects of exclusion and disempowerment in and around the site of the bridge itself, extending far into its regional hinterlands. Framed against the backdrop of a long, 'utopian' modernity of European imperial expansion and territorial conquest, the ghostly spatial dynamics surrounding the Oyapock River bridge project serve to illuminate wider challenges to the projection of EU influence 'in the world'. A close examination of similar dynamics elsewhere may help bring into focus the lineaments of a more fully confident and mature postcolonial European border studies.

**Key words:** spatial play, utopia, French Guiana, Brazil, Oyapock River, European postcolonial border studies

---

### 'THE ENDS OF EUROPE'

Do these 'ends' denote a temporal, as well as a spatial, limit? Assuming that they do, one is inevitably led to conjecture on the historical and geographical conditions of possibility for understanding Europe as a limit-object in the world. This, I argue, turns us in the direction of properly utopian narrative, one which seeks to reconcile two contradictory yet overlapping modes of 'seeing' the frontier spaces of European modernity. In what follows, I trace the 'spatial play' of this narrative in relation to the construction of a 'European' bridge in

the heart of the Amazon rainforest, on that very spot where France and Brazil, the European Union and Mercosul, physically touch one another across a muddy river, the Rio Oyapock. As I argue, the inter-play of visions colliding around the Oyapock bridge illuminates the paradoxes and contradictions of European territorial governance in the time-spaces of its postcolonial frontier peripheries. Specifically, it is the peculiar blindness of the European metropolitan gaze *vis-à-vis* indigenous difference on its overseas frontiers that sets the stage for perverse effects of exclusion and disempowerment in and around the site

of the bridge itself, which serves as a privileged microcosm for assessing wider challenges to the projection of EU influence 'in the world' (Bialasiewicz 2011; Moisisio *et al.* 2012). It is in this precise sense that the Oyapock bridge – ostensibly a spatial medium and symbolic presupposition for utopian transcendence between Europe and one of its vital external frontiers on the South American continent – demonstrates both the capacity for outward radiance as well as the agonised limits of European governmental power at a time when the EU's external borders are being contested with an intensity like at no other time since the end of the Cold War.

The term 'spatial play' is derived from the geographically-infused work of philosopher-semiotician Louis Marin (1973, 1993). The phrase appeared to him one day as he peered at the city of Chicago from the observation deck of the Sears Roebuck tower. Descending to ground level, Marin marvelled at two sets of postcards: one, he reports, 'recalls the prospect [visitors] have discovered from the top floor of the building ... the plain stretching away as far as the eye can see, the others ... the [other] views of the tower from the ground at a distance' (Marin 1993, p. 397). For Marin, the 'spectator's eye', looking down from a dominant position, occupies an altitude so that 'his [sic] gaze "collects" a space that he "really" totalizes, the plain up to its extreme frontier' (Marin 1993, p. 398). Rather than perceive these perspectives as antagonistic opposites, Marin suggests we apprehend the two 'visions of the world' revealed by the postcards as 'all together at the same time and moment of thinking'; the 'opposition as such' would reveal for him a visually decisive emblem of the 'frontiers of Utopia', understood as (1) the frontiers that limit utopia if such frontiers 'really' exist, and (2) the frontiers that any utopia traces if any utopian is capable of tracing such frontiers. We may pardon Marin's playfully confusing syntax. What matters is that from the top of the Sears tower he read the re-emergence of utopian frontiers in world history as a 'symptom' defining the end of the 20th century, whose spatio-temporal horizon would be only the latest iteration of a 'spatial play' whose roots could be located 'at the very dawn of our modernity', in Thomas More's *Utopia* (2012

[1516]). More's text, in attempting to reconcile contradictory political and economic forces racking the Tudor England of its time, would itself inaugurate a tension between European frontier and horizon, totality and infinity, limit and transcendence, closure and liberty, producing deep and lasting reverberations in our lived present.

For Marin, the very contemporaneity of the utopian frontier and its horizons is put back on the agenda since 1989 with the opening up of the East as a 'great void', concomitant with Fukuyama's 'end of history' and 'end of ideology' theses. The collapse of the Communist Utopia, according to Marin, 'allows the return of Utopia itself in the shape of its first apparition at the beginning of the sixteenth century in Europe with the great explorations and travels' (Marin 1993, p. 406). The opening of this 'strange *apeiron*' in the early modern period signals at the same time the emergence of new terms such as '*Lisiere*, the indefinite, horizon', their semantic network constituting today the 'chance of Utopia just as in the past' (Marin 1993, p. 411). Marin situates the proper subject of Utopia in the place of a 'gap' produced by the tension between the two aforementioned visions, a space where 'the beholding process and the fact or feeling to be seen' would change itself into the place of the 'neutral' (Marin 1993, p. 404). The specificity of 'the neutral' (*le neutre*), according to the French semiologist, would lie in 'being neither one nor the other, *neither* this edge *nor* the other' (Marin 1993, p. 410).

To understand the epistemological conditions of possibility for the 'return of Utopia' today, Marin argues we must grasp them not as an iconic or visual representation but as process ('fiction-practice'; Marin 1973, citing Bloch). Utopia-as-representation always takes the form of a map: according to its colour-coded rules of representation, it fixes a location to all journeys, itineraries and voyages: '[A]ll are potentially present because they are all there, but implicitly it negates them all' (Marin 1993, p. 413). In the place of map-as-representation Marin proposes 'the figure of a projected journey, even it is an imaginary one, a dreamed one', one that produces a narrative that 'awakens' space to new loci and practices: the utopian moment and space of the travel

that is also, paradoxically, a limit, a frontier (Marin 1993, p. 415) To give substance to this moving-map, Marin introduces the figure of Raphael, the traveller-narrator of More's *Utopia*, who travels from Portugal to Brazil with Amerigo Vespucci. For Raphael the Brazilian shore represents 'a minimal space at the limit between what is known and what is unknown' (Marin 1993, p. 415). Thomas More describes this New World frontier eschatologically, where 'human abandonment, the desire of traveling, and the encounter with death merge together' (Marin 1993, p. 415). Raphael, glad to be left on the extreme edge of the world, is less interested in continuing his travels than finding a tomb where he can finally rest. His Brazil is the space of the 'neutral', a 'horizon, this edge of the world [which] joins, onto another edge, that of the other world . . . that belongs neither to the one nor the other, a gap between the interior space that is enclosed by the routes of travels (the *terrae cognitae*) and the unknown outer space' (Marin 1993, p. 416).

At this afflicted end of More's modernity, we might well ponder, as did Marin nearly two decades ago at the height of America's military and economic supremacy, what space the imagination can (or should) create in thinking through the contradictions embodied in the contemporary European horizon, or limit. In a plural, post 9/11 world lacking the singular *monstrum* of the 'Sears Roebuck tower', we might ask: how have the co-ordinates of Europe's 'utopian frontiers' changed once its limits seem once and for all to have been exhausted, hedged in by rival geopolitical powers? It may be safe to speculate that if the 'neutral' border-crossing figure of Raphael were alive today, he may be sitting as a frontier guardian on the Brazilian side of the recently completed bridge over the river Oyapock, a natural riverine frontier between French Guiana – a French overseas territory (or *Département-région d'Outre Mer*) often referred to as an 'island' on the South American continent – and Brazil. According to its engineers, the bridge is meant to connect the Brazilian state of Amapá to the French Guianese capital Cayenne, forming one link in a vaster regional transportation system – '*la Trans-guyanaise*' – which should connect Caracas (Venezuela) to Macapá (Brazil) by way of Guyana,

Surinam and French Guiana (Boudoux d'Hautefeuille 2010).

According to its creators, Jacques Chirac and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and eager successors Nicolas Sarkozy and Lula, the Oyapock bridge is also intended to serve a more strategic, geopolitical role, suturing France and Brazil, the European Union and Mercosul, in a partnership whose geo-economic dimensions far outweigh any merely regional, or South American scale. Looking through Marin's 'inverted telescope', we may see that through the Oyapock island-bridge construction, France (and by extension the European Union) attempts to project itself as a geopolitical actor into that frontier space where the colonial metropolitan gaze traditionally imposed itself Sears Roebuck-like on its *territoires d'outre mer*. Here, once again, Europe crosses into that visual limit-horizon made historically manifest as one of France's more notorious penal archipelagos, including that 'neutral' spot where the European Union launches itself into that 'endless frontier' that is outer space via the European space station based in the French Guianese town of Kourou. We may thus grasp this 'utopian geopolitics' as an attempt by France to reconcile the spatio-temporal contradictions inherent in once having been a colonial power and postcolonial motor of European integration, now financially downgraded, sitting astride a continent rudderless and adrift, with rising ex-colonial powers emergent everywhere the eye can see (Benjamin & Godard 1999; French 2014). In this attempted synthesis of opposites, we perceive Europe attempting to maintain, against all odds, some measurable capacity to 'cognitively map' the world around itself, drawing upon the energies of its former colonial peripheries to re-assert its position as a key interlocutor in world affairs.

A richly innovative decade examining what in geography we may now label as the 'postcolonial European border condition' has revealed that the 'process of totalization at work through the beholder's gaze is . . . displaying its practical weakness, its cognitive uncertainty, its ontological trouble from its beginning to its end' (Marin 1993, p. 398; but see also Pickles 1995; Sidaway 2001; Kramsch 2002, 2011; Kuus 2004; Bialasiewicz 2011). 'Ontological troubles', indeed, brought

about by the bridge-builder's blindness to the demands of traditional riverine transport in both Amapá and French Guiana, for which the bridge infrastructure poses a danger for local employment dependent on water-borne carriers (Knechtel 2013); an inability to adequately take into consideration the territorial needs of local Palikur indigenous communities, who, confronted by the bridge, associated border controls and heightened military presence, are cut off from their centuries-old right to transboundary hunting areas as well as manioc-producing palm tree cultivation (Grenand *et al.* 2006; Zárata Botía 2008); and the difficulties of integrating local democratic input into the bridge's future control and maintenance, leaving it to *aménageurs du territoire* flown in from Paris and Brasília (Boudoux d'Hautefeuille 2010; Kramsch 2012).

The comments of a Brazilian restaurant proprietor whose business is located on the French side of the river in St. Georges Oyapock epitomises an entire cross-border community's dumbfoundedness at the sight of a still-empty bridge, whose inaugural date remains a mystery:

It's the first time in the history of civilisation that one builds a bridge that connects nothing. Even in Roman times one built bridges with precise goals. We are far from all that. We are just beginning to understand that we need to unite, but the [European Union] legislation is opposed to this union. The bridge is a symbol of Franco-Brazilian friendship, but this friendship will not be able to become concrete until French Guiana opens itself to the rest of the continent. At this time, she is not integrated in South America (Da Silva, cited in Knechtel 2013; trans from Portuguese/French by author).

As is the case on its contemporary Eastern and Mediterranean frontiers, the promise for Europe of a voyage into the heart of South American darkness runs the danger, once again, of resolving itself into the fixity and timeless representational grid of a map, with Europe located at its cartographic and epistemological center. On one of Europe's newest limit-frontiers, in the heart of Amazonia, we must, as with Raphael nearly 500 years ago, find ways to keep that map alive to local as well as regional

political historicity, to change and to unexpected surprise, as was imagined by Thomas More at precisely that moment when an accidental 'cough' prevented the main narrator from hearing where, exactly, the island of Utopia was to be found (More 2012 [1516], p. 17).

### Acknowledgements

To Luiza B.'s complicitous smile in New York over that one word: 'horizon'. And to Carlos Z., for his *paciencia amazónica*.

### REFERENCES

- BENJAMIN, D. & H. GODARD (1999), *Les Outre-mers Français: Des Espaces en Mutation*. Paris: Ophrys.
- BIALASIEWICZ, L. (2011), *Europe in the World: EU Geopolitics and the Transformation of European Space*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- BOUDOUX D'HAUTEFEUILLE, M. (2010), La Frontière et ses Echelles: Les Enjeux d'un Pont Transfrontalier entre la Guyane Française et le Brésil. *Cybergéo: European Journal of Geography, Espace, Société, Territoire* 514. Available at <<http://cybergeo.revues.org/23405>>. Accessed 2 May 2011.
- FRENCH, H. W. (2014), *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants are Building a New Empire in Africa*. New York: Knopf.
- GRENAND, F., S. BAHUCHET & P. GRENAND (2006), Environment and Peoples in French Guiana: Ambiguities in Applying the Laws of the French Republic. *International Social Science Journal* 58, pp. 49–58.
- KNECHTEL, A. (2013), *Le Far West de l'Europe: Un Pont sur l'Oyapock*. Deutschland Arte: Découvertes (documentary film).
- KRAMSCH, O. (2002), Re-imagining the Scalar Topologies of Cross-border Governance: Eu(ro)regions in the Post-colonial Present. *Space & Polity* 6, pp. 169–196.
- KRAMSCH, O. (2011), Along the Borgesian Frontier: Excavating the Neighbourhood of 'Wider Europe'. *Geopolitics* 16, pp. 193–210.
- KRAMSCH, O. (2012), Re-conociendo la Frontera UE-MERCOSUR: Espacio, Visión e Imaginación 'Dreyfusard' Sobre el Puente del Río Oyapock'. In: C.G. ZÁRATE BOTÍA, ed., *Espacios Urbanos y Sociedades Transfronterizas en la Amazonia*, pp. 127–153. Leticia-Amazonas: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Sede Amazonía.

- KUUS, M. (2004), Europe's Eastern Expansion and the Reinscription of Otherness in East-Central Europe. *Progress in Human Geography* 28, pp. 472–489.
- MARIN, L. (1973), *Utopiques: Jeux d'Espaces*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
- MARIN, L. (1993), Frontiers of Utopia: Past and Present. *Critical Enquiry* 19, pp. 397–420.
- MOISIO, S., V. BACHMANN, L. BIALASIEWICZ, E. DELL'AGNESE, J. DITTMER & V. MAMADOUH (2012), Mapping the Political Geographies of Europeanization: National Discourses, External Perceptions and the Question of Popular Culture. *Progress in Human Geography* 37, pp. 737–761.
- MORE, T. (2012 [1516]), *Utopia* [trans. DOMINIC BAKER-SMITH]. London: Penguin.
- PICKLES, J. (ed.) (1995), *Ground Truth: The Social Implications of Geographic Information Systems*. New York: Guilford Press.
- SIDAWAY, J. (2001), Rebuilding Bridges: A Critical Geopolitics of Iberian Transfrontier Cooperation in a European Context. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19, pp. 743–778.
- ZÁRATE BOTÍA, C.G. (2008), *Silvícolas, Siringueros y Agentes Estatales: El Surgimiento de una Sociedad Transfronteriza en la Amazonia de Brasil, Perú y Colombia, 1880–1932*. Leticia: Universidad Nacional de Colombia: Instituto Amazónico de Investigaciones (IMANI).