

Bridges or Walls? Or Bridges are Walls? Hegemony, Situational Selection and Counter Narratives at the Boundaries of Spain and Europe

Elaine McIlwraith

ABSTRACT

This Forum contribution considers the idea of bridges and walls. It compares two cultural programmes in Granada, Andalusia, that use the concepts of 'dialogue' and 'tolerance' along with the idea of a bridge between Spain and Europe, and the Arab-Islamic world. Ethnographic data suggest that the idea of bridges and walls are not always mutually exclusive. The former can incorporate subtleties that reinforce the latter. Consolidation of either depends on how closely hegemonic and subaltern narratives align. Even when bridge narratives have a significant presence within a country, ideas of walls at national borders reinforce the exclusion of an imagined 'Other'. Considering hegemonic processes helps to clarify the emergence of these narratives and their effects on both cross-border and local ethnic connections.

KEYWORDS

al-Andalus, cross-border connection, cultural intimacy, ethnic boundaries, historical narratives, memory, Arab world, Spain

The connections and divisions between Spain and the Arab-Islamic world have a long-established presence. More recently, bridge and wall narratives related to various political debates have become part and parcel of these conceptualisations. Thus, I analyse two 'projects' in Granada that similarly define the concepts of 'tolerance' and 'dialogue', two terms that form a part of the reasoning behind the notion of a bridge that connects Spain and Europe. These two concepts, however, present subtle distinctions that are better analysed by addressing the power dynamics of the social processes in which they are formed. Considering this analysis, I argue that the interaction between various groups who are attempting to establish hegemonic narratives can influence whether or not bridges become walls, bridges are also walls, or the wall narrative is not consolidated.



For the first time since the Spanish democratic state was established (1978), a right-wing coalition won the regional election in the southern area of Andalusia in 2015. The unprecedented win for the established PP (Partido Popular or People's Party) and VOX, the first extreme right-wing party to hold a seat in government post-dictatorship, shook the region and the country. Accompanying the anti-migrant political rhetoric was VOX's more resolute calls to strengthen walls (in whatever shape or form) between Europe and Africa. It is obvious that political discourse such as this can have serious ramifications on tactics of border control, on policy, and most importantly, on mobility at state borders and within the borders of the receiving country. As anthropologist Michael Herzfeld points out, even 'innuendo can sometimes create more materiality than the strongest physical wall' (2019: 67). Wall narratives such as these have been consistently present in Spain since the increase in North African and African migration to Europe beginning in the early 2000s. Yet, the call to solidify the separation between a 'secular' Christian Europe ('the West'), and the Arab-Islamic world ('the East'), are often forged on a foundation that draws on particular historical narratives. They reference previously dominant constructions of the Muslim history of Spain that were defined by the fascist regime during the dictatorship of Franco.

Despite this, the idea of Spain as a bridge to the Arab-Islamic world has also been present. First coupled with Spain's induction into the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1980s, it was based on the shared medieval history of Muslim Spain (711–1492), when the contemporary geopolitical divide was situated within the Arab-Islamic Empire and exchange across the border was common (McIlwraith 2018, Sotillo Lorenzo 1989: 28). Conceptualised as an economic, political and cultural bridge, it placed the Andalusian city of Granada at the European end of the cultural bridge.

Drawing on narratives of the famed *convivencia* of Muslim Spain (or *al-Andalus*), the city became characterised as a space of tolerance and dialogue between 'cultures' or 'civilizations' that share this history, but also that have a history of antagonism towards each other. Thus, the idea parallels European Union discourse and its later-created policy on intercultural exchange and dialogue (Margry 2008: 22–23). Considering bridge and wall constructions as opposite to one another, however, tells us very little about how one or the other can become a commonly held view in a society. Whether the idea of a wall or bridge becomes more pervasive is determined by the ways that this geopolitical border is both historically and contemporarily narrated,

and how connection between the ‘self’ and ‘Other’ is conceptualised. Thus, both how the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ are imagined and inscribed on bodies (Keinz and Lewicki 2019) and where the division between the two is marked (Schwell 2015) contribute to their construction. They are formed (both strengthened and weakened) in the struggle to define hegemony in the political, economic, social and cultural fields of social domination.

Hegemonic Processes and the Shaping of Bridge/Wall Narratives at the Margins of Europe

Much of the discussion surrounding the idea of walls and bridges tends to address political and territorial boundaries. However, this forms only one part of the anthropology of borders (Donnan 2015). Nation-state borders are the somewhat more concrete marking of space imagined as surrounding what is believed to be a distinct group of people (Anderson 2006). These groups also mark this distinction by identifying social and symbolic differences, such as those addressed in Barth’s seminal work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). Thus, the social and symbolic boundaries that are constructed can be defined as the abstract internal counterpart to political and territorial borders that ‘set limits to mark social groups off from each other’ (Barth 2000: 17). Wall narratives that solidify these boundaries tend to disregard the fluidity across boundaries that Barth observed, giving the idea that nothing is shared across them. They rely on reified identities based on a narrative of the nation or the region, defining those that belong inside the borders and the ‘Others’ that are external to this idea (Herzfeld 2019: 67).

Despite these narratives, this permeability is clearly demonstrated at national borders, for example those of the European Union (De Genova 2017; Herzfeld 2019: 67). However, I argue that both wall and bridge narratives in Europe are shaped by a reified ‘idea of Europe’ (Pagden 2002), an historical construction that determines the region’s territorial and symbolic limits. This becomes most evident in the conceptualisation of ‘Fortress Europe’, with Frontex and peripheral states acting to limit the porousness of the border. The idea of walls in particular, defines the border regions as spaces of Europeanness, not as ‘spaces of ambiguity or reciprocity’ (Herzfeld 2019: 68). Yet, in this case, the Muslim history of Spain is conceptualised as a bridge. This particular construction seems to imply, at the very least, a reciprocity

across this Spanish–European and North African–Arab world border. Many interviewees I spoke with about their historical narratives acknowledge reciprocity across the Mediterranean (McIlwraith 2018). Moreover, ambiguity can be defined not as an unclear or vaguely delineated identity for these people, but as having characteristics that are perhaps not recognised as ‘European’ in other parts of Europe. Even so, using this same Muslim past, these interviewees also place themselves firmly within an idea of ‘Europe’ (McIlwraith 2018: 201–208). However, as Karri Kiiskinen (2012) points out, the mobilisation of heritage both ‘at home’ and outside of national borders can ‘suggest alternative cross-border relations’ (24). These relations are often distinguished by cross-border commonalities.

Consequently, reinforcing belonging within the boundaries of Europe does not necessarily imply that nothing is shared across them. Yet, when historical connections are incorporated into collective identity, a group or individual can appeal to the shared characteristics that have been acknowledged. They then oscillate between these and other characteristics that strictly define the group in a form of ‘situational selection’ (see Gluckman 1963). Group identity remains the same, yet certain characteristics are expressed depending on how much or little affinity is required of the situation (Nagata 1974: 340). Michael Herzfeld (2019) refers to the knowing which are the most appropriate features to access in varying situations as ‘cultural intimacy’. The exclusion that cultural intimacy as a symbolic boundary foments within the state, when unchecked, can become spaces of intolerance (70), particularly when wall narratives are more prevalent.

Because national and internal ethnic boundaries have similar characteristics, Barth’s work on ethnic boundaries becomes indispensable in the analysis of national borders and to any considerations of bridge and wall narratives. Yet, the strength or weakness of any national narrative among the population is not determined by the ideological views of ruling parties or even by one particular group that defines the dominant narrative (Johnson and Dawson 1982: 207). These narratives are instead determined by the struggle between groups that have the power to shape dominant power structures and related hegemonic narratives, and the subaltern groups that challenge them. It becomes about how these structures and narratives are ‘renewed, recreated, defended and modified ... resisted, limited, altered, challenged’ (Williams 1977: 112).

Bridges and walls are often discussed in terms of political ideologies, where a particular idea or belief is imposed on a population

‘manipulated’ from above. The concept of hegemony as theorised by Gramsci, however, goes beyond ‘ideology’ by acknowledging ‘the whole lived social process as practically organised by specific and dominant meanings and values’ (Williams 1977: 109–110). Bridge and wall narratives are shaped not only by political discourse but by all of these spheres of domination – such as in discourse on relations between ethnic groups, tourism, heritage rehabilitation and maintenance, and development. Because interactions between these spheres is ongoing, hegemony and social formation are never static but can be analysed instead as ‘discursive fields and social fields of force’ (Roseberry 1996: 77). As Kate Crehan points out, Gramsci’s use of hegemony came out of his attempts to understand the historical trajectory of the defeat of the Italian left (2018: 134) – primarily the Risorgimento (nineteenth century to 1922), but also the inability of the bourgeoisie of the mediaeval Communes to form a state (1300–1500) (Hoare and Nowell Smith 1971: 44–55). Thus, hegemony is formed through the interactions between hegemonic beliefs and values of the past that are uncritically absorbed, which has come to be known as ‘common sense’, and the agency of groups that resist or oppose it (333). Finally, and perhaps most importantly for any discussion on bridges and walls, within a given group there may be multiple simultaneous hegemonic processes (Williams 1977: 112–113). Because hegemony cannot be characterised as a singular entity, analysis of these processes should address alternative hegemony and the narratives of the subaltern groups that counter hegemony. In order to observe the complexity of teasing out bridge and wall narratives involved in the marking of symbolic and social boundaries, hegemony, and not simple ideology, becomes necessary for a thorough analysis.

Conflicting Bridge Narratives: The *Fiesta de las Culturas* and *Granada Abierta*

Two examples from Granadan civil society can help us to tease out this complex hegemonic process. These are the *Fiesta de las Culturas* (Festival of the Cultures or the Festival), and the social-justice-orientated platform, *Granada Abierta*. The non-numerated term ‘Cultures’ in the title of the former plays on a common narrative in Spain of the ‘Three Cultures’, those being the Muslims, Jews and Christians of *al-Andalus*. However, it includes all groups living in *al-Andalus*, including Spanish *gitanos*.¹ Both examples employ the concepts of ‘dialogue’,

'tolerance' and 'peaceful coexistence' that are foundational ideas in the conceptualisation of the bridge narrative in Granada. At first glance, the historical narratives and the meanings that the Festival and *Granada Abierta* attach to these concepts are seemingly identical. However, the complexity of how they diverge lies in their connection to particular historical narratives.

When I attended the *Fiesta de las Culturas* (2004–2013), in 2012, this was an evening concert held at the spectacularly decorated municipal theatre. In previous years, the festival involved the concert as one of numerous cultural events organised around the city's official commemoration of the *Toma* (Day of the Capture). The Day of the Capture (Día de la Toma) is an annual event held on 2 January. It includes a procession, religious rituals held in monarchs Isabel and Ferdinand's Royal (Burial) Chapel, and a call and response ritual flag waving held in the plaza of Granada's City Hall (see McIlwraith 2018). Where the *Toma* marks the day that the Catholic monarchs captured the city from the Muslim inhabitants, the concert celebrated the coexistence between the various groups in Muslim Spain. Initially, the festival had institutional support from the local PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) government and then, reluctantly, from the right-leaning PP, until 2012, after which it was quietly phased out (Granada 2013). The narrative around which the festival founder and director created the events aligned it with economic and political discourse. It also drew on a wider narrative of the EU by identifying this *Andalusi* history as a means of promoting 'peaceful coexistence of nations' (Gallego-Coín 2010: 2). Deliberately used by various foundations that collaborated with the festival, the Spanish term '*Andalusi*' avoids the term '*moro*' (or 'Moor' or 'Moorish'), since the latter is viewed by some as pejorative. *Andalusi* makes reference to the inhabitants of *al-Andalus* regardless of religion.

My discussions with Elías,² one festival organiser, made it clear that although the values of the *Toma* commemoration did not align with the event's values of tolerance and dialogue, it did not mean that the *Toma* should be cancelled. Instead, while Elías agreed that the commemoration should be changed to remove more political and religious elements that invoked the fascist past, he argued for the continued observance of the Catholic seizure of the city that resulted in the expulsion of the Jewish, and later Muslim, inhabitants. He reasoned that the:

expulsion had to happen unfortunately. Europe couldn't be Muslim territory. In this Europe of the fifteenth century, it was impossible. So,

the endeavour [translation: *empresa*] was ... [Many came] to finish the Reconquest. ... It was a European endeavour ... this is the history and this is how it was. And I won't ask for forgiveness nor will I applaud. (Elías 2012)

As his narrative continued, he firmly established that history had determined a particular geopolitical division that placed Islam outside of Europe. Moreover, he made it clear that while he agreed with the hegemonic historical narrative that promotes the bridge idea, he also ascribed to the past hegemonic narrative of the Reconquest more often attributed to the political right. His narratives closely aligned with what could be considered the 'alternative hegemony' of the PSOE government. Such constructions of the medieval past celebrate the Muslim history as well as incorporate hegemonic historical narratives inherited from the dictatorship. They privilege national-Catholic history, but they do little to counter the latter. Thus, they are able to oscillate between the narratives supporting the idea of a bridge and that of a wall.

Granada Abierta, on the other hand, is a platform involving around twenty groups dealing with issues including the rights of women, migrants, the Palestinian people and Muslims, as well as cultural associations on Andalusian culture. For thirty-five years the platform has organised an alternate event promoting dialogue and tolerance that takes place at the same time as the *Toma* commemoration. The platform has called for the cancellation of the *Toma* or at the very least, has strongly recommended changes to the event to emphasise the values of tolerance and dialogue (see McIlwraith 2018: 112–209). Furthermore, with only fleeting institutional support, the platform publicly marks historical events that are not officially commemorated, such as the Inquisition's burning of Muslim and Jewish books in the city (1499) in an annual event called 'The Memory is Burning'. Finally, by invoking these concepts, they draw attention to the differential justice in the 2015 decision to grant Sephardic Jews Spanish citizenship but not Muslim Arabs with *Andalusi* ancestry whose families were also expelled (Gobierno de España 2015).

The definitions of dialogue and tolerance that participants in the platform maintain are generally tied to historical narratives of *al-Andalus*. These definitions reject the repopulation narrative associated with that of the Reconquest that suggests the entire Muslim and Jewish populations were expelled and that there was no miscegenation between populations, a common historical narrative among the right-wing and of some PSOE politicians (Remedios 2013). However, to negate that

some of the autochthonous Jewish and Muslim inhabitants remained and mixed with the northern conquerors, as both the past hegemonic and alternative hegemonic narratives do, denies the close connection that these groups feel with those across the Mediterranean. Thus, their historical narratives, their ethnic affinity to the Spanish (and European) Arab-Islamic ‘Other’, their commemorations of officially silenced historical memories, and their calls for equal citizenship all point to a counter hegemony within this subaltern group. In some ways, their arguments echo those of Gilles De Rapper’s interviewees in presenting the border space as ‘a “multiethnic” reality in which all groups, including the Muslim ... should have the same rights’ (2009: 53). Furthermore, they oppose both the idea of a wall and that of a bridge that allows for the creation of internal ethnic spaces of difference. They reformulate definitions of ‘coexistence’, moving beyond Talal Asad’s charge that ‘it is precisely because Muslims are external to the essence of Europe that “coexistence” can be envisaged between “us” and “them”’ (2002: 213).

Conclusion

Considering bridge and wall narratives together, not as completely opposing configurations, but as complex, contradictory ideas, presents a dilemma for the conceptualisation of the terms as opposites. The idea of a bridge can in fact invoke that of a wall. Common concepts such as ‘tolerance’ and ‘dialogue’ that form the foundation of a European bridge through Spain’s Islamic past to the Arab world seem comparable on a superficial level. However, projects that use these concepts to invoke a bridge can still subtly reinforce internal walls regulated by cultural intimacy through their constructions of this past. This bridge construct creates an alternative hegemonic narrative to the idea of a wall. Thus, when analysed in terms of the power dynamics that shape these subtleties, how a bridge narrative conceptualises the border and its limits, becomes clear. Whether the bridge is strengthened or not – whether it becomes ‘common sense’, a shared belief among a significant portion of the group or population or not – depends on the extent to which the dominant group defining the bridge is able to consolidate the border as either ‘a space of Europeaness’ or as ‘a space of ambiguity or reciprocity’ among subaltern groups. The same is true for the idea of a wall.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Randa Farah and Dr Malcolm Blincow for their comments and guidance on the initial chapter from which the ideas for this contribution stem, and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship for funding this research.

◆ Elaine McIlwraith, Department of Anthropology at Western University (Canada). E-mail: kmcilwra@uwo.ca ◆

Sources: Interviewees

Eliás, involved in *Fiesta de las Culturas*, Granada (Spain), February 2012.
Remedios, involved in *Granada Abierta*, Granada (Spain), June 2013.

Notes

1. The term *gitano* refers to the Spanish Roma peoples of Spain. While the direct English translation ‘gypsy’ is derogatory, *gitanos* in Spain continue to use this term to identify themselves.
2. Names and genders may have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the people involved in this work.

References

- Anderson, B. [1983] (2006), *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso).
- Asad, T. (2002), ‘Muslims and European Identity: Can Europe Represent Islam?’, in A. Pagden (ed.), *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 209–227.
- Barth, F. (1969), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press).
- Barth, F. (2000), ‘Boundaries and Connections’, in A. P. Cohen (ed.), *Signifying Identities: Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values* (New York: Routledge), 17–36.
- Crehan, K. (2018), ‘Antonio Gramsci: Towards an Ethnographic Marxism’, *ANUAC (Rivista della Società Italiana di Antropologia Culturale)* 7, no. 2: 133–150.
- De Genova, N. (ed.) (2017), *The Borders of “Europe”: Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering* (London: Duke University Press).

- De Rapper, G. (2009), 'Pelagic Encounters in the Greek-Albanian Borderland: Border Dynamics and Reversion to Ancient Past in Southern Albania', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 18, no. 1: 50–68.
- Donnan, H. (2015), 'Borders, Anthropology of', in J. D. Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford: Elsevier), 760–764.
- Gallego Coín, J. (2010), *Memoria. Fiesta de las Culturas 2004-2010* (Granada).
- Gluckman, M. (1963), *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa* (London: Cohen & West).
- Gobierno de España. Ministerio de Justicia (2015), 'Law of Concession of Nationality to Sephardic Jews Originating in Spain'. www.mjusticia.gob.es/cs/Satellite/Portal/es/areas-tematicas/nacionalidad/concesion-nacionalidad (accessed 5 October 2020).
- Granada, L. M. (2013), 'La Fiesta de las Culturas queda en “stand by” por falta de apoyos', *Granada Hoy*, 27 December.
- Herzfeld, M. (2019), 'Boundaries, Embarrassments and Social Injustice: Fredrik Barth and the Nation-State', in T. Hylland Eriksen and M. Jakoubek (eds), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries Today: A Legacy of Fifty Years* (New York: Routledge), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3453>
- Hoare, Q. and G. Nowell Smith (eds.) (1971), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers).
- Johnson, R. and G. Dawson. (1982), 'Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method', in R. Johnson, G. McLennan, B. Schwarz and D. Sutton (eds), *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson), 205–252.
- Keinz, A. and P. Lewicki. (2019), 'Who Embodies europe? Explorations into the Construction of european Bodies', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 28, no. 1: 1–18.
- Kiiskinen, K. (2012). 'Border/land Sustainability: Communities at the External Border of the European Union', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 21, no. 1: 22–40.
- Margry, P. J. (2008), 'Memorialising Europe: Revitalising and Reframing a “Christian” Continent', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 17: 6–33.
- McIlwraith, K. E. (2018), 'On *Convivencia*, Bridges and Boundaries: Belonging and Exclusion in the Narratives of Spain's Arab-Islamic Past' (PhD Diss., The University of Western Ontario). <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/5450/>.
- Nagata, J. A. (1974), 'What is a Malay? Situational Selection of Ethnic Identity in a Plural Society', *American Ethnologist* 1, no. 2: 331–350.
- Pagden, A. (ed.) (2002), *The Idea of Europe: From Antiquity to the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Roseberry, W. (1996), 'Hegemony, Power and the Languages of Contention', in E. Wilmsen and P. McAllister (eds), *The Politics of Difference: Ethnic Premises in a World of Power* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 71–84.
- Schwell, A. (2015), 'Negotiating the Imagined Geography of Europeaness in Polish State Bureaucracies', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 24, no. 2: 128–149.
- Sotillo Lorenzo, J. A. (1989), 'América Latina en las negociaciones del ingreso de España a en la Comunidad Europea', *Política y Sociedad* 4, no.1989: 25–32.
- Williams, R. (1977), *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).