

Rivers as Bridges – Rivers as Boundaries Some Reflections on Intercultural Exchange on the Danube

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Rivers are and have always been ambivalent. They bring much needed water and fertility, but also disastrous floods. They are waterways linking distant countries to each other, but unlike seas and oceans, they can be crossed or bridged quite easily. They are roads of transportation, but unlike highways and railroads, they can also be barriers hard to cross. Rivers have always had two faces: they have been bridges and routes of traffic and interaction, and they have been barriers and boundaries. Naturally, this is also true for the Danube and its tributaries, the largest (and the only relevant) river system in Southeast Europe.

There are many factors that determine which of a river's two faces is visible. Apart from the natural conditions, there are economic, political, military, ethnic, and cultural factors which determine if a river, or parts of it, function as a barrier or as a bridge. I will point out the most relevant conditions and factors and try to demonstrate their relevance using the example of the Danube and its tributaries. It goes without saying that these factors and conditions are interrelated and interdependent.

1. It is obvious that *nature* determines to a large extent if a river is a barrier or a bridge. This depends on the kind or size of the river and on the geology, morphology, and climate of the river basin, i. e., on the gradient and the speed of the water, the water depth and currents, the banks or cliffs, the marshlands or dams, fords or passages. Wild and rapid rivers, as well as meandering shallow rivers, are obstacles, but many of them have been regulated and made navigable, mostly in the last 150 years. Today, all larger European rivers are smooth and navigable, functioning as natural bridges rather than barriers. It appears that mountain ranges and ridges, deserts and wastelands, and swamps and marshes are more typical natural barriers and hence economic and cultural boundaries. The Danube, the second largest river in Europe, is navigable from Ulm (Germany) down to the Black Sea, i. e., on 90% of its 2860 km course. The only natural obstacle, the Iron Gate, was made passable by a canal in the late 19th century and a dam in the late 1960s.

2. There are two kinds of river *transportation*. On the one hand, rivers are used as waterways for the inexpensive long-distance transportation of goods and persons, but natural, as well as political conditions, can make transportation difficult. On the other hand, rivers are used, or made passable, as crossroads through the development of fords, bridges, ferries, boats, and ports, but wide and fast flowing rivers, muddy riverbanks or cliffs can make the crossing impossible. The Danube

is used extensively both as a waterway and as a crossroad: together with all its tributaries, it has been and still is one of the most important waterways in Europe with many river ports (like Vienna) for the vast commercial traffic. The new Rhine-Main-Danube canal has increased the traffic even further. For centuries, Hungarian cattle went upstream to Passau or Regensburg, and wheat went in the same direction from the Ottoman lands to Hungary and Austria, with the Iron Gate as the only real obstacle for river transportation. The lower section of the Danube was even used for transhumance, i. e., for the transportation of flocks of sheep and cattle. The numerous towns and cities, many of them going back to Roman times, founded at fords or bridges across the Danube (like Regensburg or Linz) or at ports (like Vidin, Svištov, Rusčuk, Brăila or Tulcea; cf. Kanitz 1882) are evidence of the river's function as one of Europe's busiest crossroads.

3. The *economic* and *commercial* relevance of rivers depends on both nature and politics. Nature determines if a river can be used only for fishing, rafting, timber transportation, or for commercial or passenger traffic. Political factors, technology, and economic forces determine if this potential is used for the economic and trade relations between the countries on that river. Throughout history, rivers have as a rule more often functioned as economic bridges rather than barriers. For many centuries, the Danube and its tributaries have been major arteries for the flow of merchandise in both directions, linking the countries of the Danube basin to each other and to the rest of Europe and the Near East. The economic significance of the Danube for these countries and for their economic cooperation both in history (Paskaleva 1966, 1974) and today (Förster 1958, Gumpel 1996) is beyond question.

4. When one thinks of rivers as barriers and boundaries, it is usually *political*, *administrative*, or *military* borders that come to mind. The following are a few better known European examples: The Drina separated the West Roman from the East Roman Empire, the Sava was the military border between the Ottoman and the Habsburg Empires, Germany and France fought many wars over the border on the Rhine, and after the Second World War, the rivers Oder and Neisse became the border between Germany and Poland. Both the large multinational empires and the modern nation states tend to define rivers as national boundaries and political frontiers. The reason was either the wish for political and military controlability or for homogeneity within clear-cut frontiers. It must be observed, however, that in far more cases rivers flow *within* countries, serving as bridges and waterways rather than as boundaries. The Danube is a good case in point: today, it is a national border for only some 900 kilometers, that is, for less than one-third of its course. Specifically, it serves as a border between Slovakia and Hungary (with Hungarians living on both banks of the river) and between Romania on the one side and Serbia, Bulgaria, and the Ukraine on the other.

5. Rivers can be *linguistic* boundaries; they can separate language areas as is the case with the rivers Oder and Neisse, which today separate the German and the Polish speaking areas. Another example is the Danube, which partly separates the Romanian from the Serbian, Bulgarian, and Ukrainian language areas. However, this is the exception rather than the rule; in several cases it was achieved by military force. In most cases, the same language is spoken on both sides of a river, and the river serves as a linguistic bridge rather than a barrier. Along most of the Danube's long course, the same language is spoken on both river banks: in Germany and Austria, in most of Hungary and Serbia, and in the Romanian Dobrogea.

6. The same is true of *ethnic* boundaries. Depending on the rivers' width and on the history of settlement, rivers can form ethnic boundaries. In most cases, this is a consequence of recent processes of nation building and of wars. The Upper Rhine, for example, separates three nations (Germany, France, Switzerland), but the population living on this section of the river belongs to the same ethnic (and linguistic) group, the Alemans. As for the Danube, the same ethnic groups live on both river banks for most of its course. In Slovakia, for example, a sizable Hungarian minority lives on the northern banks of the Danube. The Romanian-Bulgarian case is therefore the exception rather than the rule.

7. Rivers can separate or link *culture areas*, and they can also be bridges for, or barriers to, the distribution of cultural goods and ideas. They can function as cultural borderlines, as the Swiss ethnologist Richard Weiss demonstrated by referring to the Swiss rivers of Brünig, Napf, and Reuss as marking the cultural divide between Eastern and Western Switzerland. But as Weiss pointed out, this is largely due to former or present political, administrative, and denominational borders (Weiss 1962). In 1958, the Croatian ethnologist Milovan Gavazzi attempted to determine the culture areas in Southeast Europe on the basis of a variety of elements of *folk culture* (Gavazzi 1958). Gavazzi established twelve larger culture areas, but as it turned out, with the exception of the Sava River, the larger rivers do not coincide with the boundaries between these culture areas. The Danube flows right through the Pannonian area (IX) and through the East Danubian area (I) serving as a cultural bridge, not as a divide. If today the Danube functions as a cultural boundary in some parts of its course, this is due to the cultural policies of the modern nation states – and to the impact of their mass media.

8. In the majority of cases, rivers have served and probably will continue to serve as *communicational* bridges, but due to the influence of recent nation states they can develop into barriers. Only rarely do rivers function as obstacles to communication and cultural exchange; the rule is that they are highways of exchange and (by virtue of this) agents of cultural change, rather than obstacles to it. It appears that over the centuries this was particularly true for the Danube, and after a few decades of socialist isolationism and closely watched borders, it is true again today. Next to the Rhine, the Danube is the European river with the highest

significance as a place of international and intercultural exchange, not only of material goods but also of people and ideas.

The factors outlined so far are similar because they are *objective* factors and conditions. With the exception of nationalism, they seem to turn rivers into bridges rather than barriers. There are, however, other factors which determine whether a river is perceived as a barrier or as a bridge, namely the *subjective* factors, located in people's hearts and minds. They belong mostly in the spheres of ideas and emotions, and they are part either of the mental maps of individuals or of the collective memories or cultural systems of groups or populations.

9. For individuals and for whole groups and peoples, a river can become a *psychological* or *emotional* frontier, a dividing line between "us" and "them", between the familiar "own" lands and the unfamiliar "alien" territory, a line beyond which ordinary people dare not venture. For almost a century, the Mississippi was such a barrier, until around the year 1800 when it was finally crossed by pioneers and settlers who turned Indian territory into colonized lands. On the other hand, people living on the same river often share a sense of belonging together, of regional *identity* associated with "their" river ("our Danube"). This becomes clear in regional names based on a river name (e.g., the "Innviertel"). It is made explicit by emotional statements like "We were baptised with the same Danube water" and by a sense of depending on the same lifeline. The Danube and its tributaries serve as an emotional link between people who even belong to different ethnic groups and speak different languages. The river can also foster and preserve emotional ties between those who emigrated and those who stayed behind, as is the case with the Swabian settlers of the late 18th century who floated down the Danube in their boats and found a new home in Hungary, Bačka, and Banat. It is interesting to note that after 1945 many of them returned to the areas their forefathers had come from around the upper Danube.

10. It is this emotional or identification value, the cultural or even national significance, which can turn a river into a *symbol*, into a symbolic barrier, or a symbolic bridge. Rivers can become important markers of identity and can become integral parts of the collective or cultural memory of groups, peoples, or entire nations. Particularly in those countries where life depends on a river as a life vein (like the Nile or the Yellow River), a very high cultural value is attached to it, shaping all perceptions and even the entire world view of a whole people. Furthermore, the course of a river is often equaled to the course of life, as is apparent in the subtitles of books on the rivers Elbe² and Isar³. On the other hand, the idea of the river as a symbolic barrier is probably derived from the mythic concept of a river separating this world from the otherworld, humans from supernaturals, or life

² Die Elbe. Ein Lebenslauf. Život reki Labe. Ed. Deutsches Historisches Museum. Berlin 1992.

³ Marie-Louise Plessen (ed.): Die Isar. Ein Lebenslauf. Munich 1983.

from death (for example, the river Styx in Greek mythology, cf. Ward 1984: 1381 f).

The symbolic value is usually expressed and passed on in myths, beliefs, tales, legends (cf. Kircher 1988), songs or proverbs, popular names and stereotypes, and concepts and ideas, but also in literature, art, and in national anthems. High symbolic meaning is attached to the Mississippi (“Old Man River”), the Thames, and the Nile, and countless songs have been composed and sung on the river Elbe, the “gateway to the world”, the Seine, the Rhine (“Watch on the Rhine”), the Volga (“Mother Volga”), and the Danube, the “prince of all European rivers”, as it was named as early as 1688⁴ and as Napoleon liked to call it. The old Bulgarian national anthem hails the river Marica (Ančev 1992).

Of course, different rivers carry different symbolic meanings and evoke different images. Their meanings may even vary in relation to the part of the river and to the peoples living on it. The Danube is again a good case in point: To most Bavarians, the Danube is known affectionately as the “Weisswurst equator”, the symbolic borderline between genuine Bavarianness and the “Northerners”, i.e., the “Franconians” and the “Prussians”. The Austro-Hungarian image of the Danube was largely shaped by the fact that the river was the main artery of the Habsburg Empire and the object of world-famous operas, musical pieces, and songs. To the Balkan peoples, the Danube symbolizes the lifeline linking their lands to “Europe”. If, however, rivers are turned into symbols of national aspirations, they can become the source of hostilities and even wars, as the example of the Rhine and centuries of hostile French-German relations clearly demonstrate.

Rivers can cause wars, but they can just as well be highways of intercultural relations and exchange. Thus, when one calls the Danube a “bridge of multicultural interchange”, one has to keep both the dark and the bright sides in mind. Furthermore, the term “multicultural interchange” needs clarification. “Culture” is a very general and abstract concept: First, one must be precise about what “culture” means in this context, and second, one has to bear in mind that it is always individuals who are in charge of the transfer of cultural goods. Accordingly, one has to ask *what* exactly was (or is) exchanged on or across the Danube, and *who* was (or is) involved in this interchange. It appears that in principle everything has been and can be transported on a river like the Danube, but also that one can discern three major categories, namely people, material goods, and immaterial goods.

a. People, either individuals or groups: People traveling on the Danube or its tributaries were either merchants, sailors, soldiers, journeymen, or students. Balkan merchants, for example, traveled extensively to Vienna where they had their own warehouses and neighborhoods (cf. Paskaleva 1966, 1978), or they were

⁴ Anonymous: Die Donau der Fürst aller europäischen Flüsse: das ist eine genaue Darstellung aller der um und an der Donau gelegenen Königreiche. Nuremberg 1688.

migrant or seasonal workers (*pečalbari*, cf. Palairet 1987) or Bulgarian gardeners working in Hungary or Austria, or shepherds moving their flocks. They were also diplomats, envoys, travelers or tourists. Until the early 20th century, Western travelers to the Balkans or to the Ottoman Empire favored the route down the Danube to Rusčuk and on horseback through the Bulgarian lands, as many travel reports and itineraries show (Roth 1993: 465–507). The river tourism that came up in the 19th century favored the same routes⁵. Finally, rivers have often been routes of migration. The Huns and Avars, as well as Germanic tribes of the medieval migration period, preferred the Danube in very much the same way as later settlers emigrating on boats up or down the Danube, like the Swabians traveling to their promised lands in Southern Hungary and the Banat, or the Bulgarian settlers migrating to the Banat. They all imported or exported material and immaterial cultural goods, brought their own cultures to their destinations, and were influenced by the cultures with which they came in contact.

b. *Material goods*: The bulk of commercial transport on the Danube (and its tributaries) consisted, and consists, of raw materials and livestock, such as iron ore, coal, oil, chemicals, wood, meat, wool, grain, cattle, and sheep. However, *artifacts*, i.e., all kinds of man-made objects, always made up a large part of transportation on the Danube. As a result of the political and economic situation in the last centuries, most artifacts were transported downstream, particularly since the early 19th century. Architecture and styles of house construction spread down the Danube, giving the towns on the Danube their characteristic outlook. Wooden chests from Hungary or Transylvania were shipped to Bulgaria, large quantities of Western bourgeois furniture were shipped to the Balkan countries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whetstones from Unterammergau (in Bavaria) were shipped down the Isar and the Danube as far as Hungary, and to this day all kinds of machinery and modern technology travel the same waterway. After 1888, the new railroad to Istanbul took over its share of this massive influx of material culture. Many of these artifacts were innovations and functioned as agents of modernization and “Westernization” (*evropeizacija*). Until the end of Ottoman rule, all books, journals, and newspapers (mostly printed in Vienna or Budapest) were highly dangerous and sensitive merchandise on the Danube. Book printing in the national languages was extremely difficult or forbidden in the Ottoman Empire, as books brought new and potentially dangerous ideas to the Balkans. Cities on the Danube like Rusčuk and Svištov gained great importance in the 19th century as ports of entry of modern Western goods.

⁵ s. Anonymous: *Pittoreske Donaufahrt von Ulm bis Konstantinopel*. Vienna 1838; Alexander Hecksch, Josef Kahn (eds.): *Illustrierter Führer auf der Donau von Regensburg bis Sulina*. Vienna, Budapest ³1894 (“for tourists and traveling businessmen”); and many similar travel guides.

c. *Immaterial goods*: The artifacts transported on the Danube had a modernizing effect in both material and immaterial ways. New machines exacted new ways of production and new kinds of know-how; new furniture (like Western beds, high tables and chairs, chests of drawers, and wardrobes), new dresses, and new foods compelled millions of people to change their everyday habits and behaviors. New fashions from Vienna, Budapest, Paris, and other capitals created new urban lifestyles, first in the port towns on the lower Danube, and later in the remaining Balkan towns and cities. Beyond that, people, artifacts, and books brought Western *ideas* and ideologies (like those of Nationalism, Romanticism, Enlightenment, Socialism, Liberalism), new religions, and denominations (like Protestantism), as well as new information, attitudes, and world views. To a very large extent all this reached the Balkans on the Danube. In addition, one must not forget that the Danube as an international waterway also demanded and supported a common language, a *lingua franca* of river trade and commerce. The Danubian *lingua franca* was – at different times – Modern Greek, German, and Russian.

Finally, one has to look at the nature of the interchange connected with the river. What kind of exchange and communication was and is taking place? And what direction did it take? Cultural goods can be distributed or communicated either through *direct* (person-to-person) communication, or through *indirect* communication, i.e., through various media and objects. One must assume that merchants and other professionals, as well as workers, students, and travellers participated a lot in direct culture contact and contributed to economic and cultural interchange. Additionally, fairs and markets, as well as river boats, have played a decisive role in this direct interchange. But the vast majority of the Balkan population had only indirect culture contact with the rest of Europe through the artifacts and through the printed reading matter reaching them on the Danube. Furthermore, cultural goods can flow either in both directions or predominantly in only one direction. Unfortunately, there is as yet too little research on the direction of cultural diffusion and interchange on the Danube, but from the extant literature, one may conclude that as a consequence of modernization over the last centuries, most cultural influences went downstream.

I would like to summarize my reflections on the role of rivers, particularly of the Danube, as a locus of intercultural exchange by returning to the point I made at the beginning of this paper that rivers are ambivalent. They can be barriers, but more often they are lifelines and bridges of cultural influences. If they are barriers and borders, this is usually not due to nature, economy, or culture, but to hegemonial, military, or administrative interests, and particularly to the development of nation states and nationalism. One can only hope that the countries on the Danube will be united in the will to overcome these nationalistic instincts and to let the Danube be what it was and what it ought to be: an important economic link and a

bridge of intercultural exchange among the peoples living in the Danubian basin, and between the Balkans and Central Europe.

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