Draft prepared by Sandra Wallman for Engime Workshop, Rome, 18-19 Nov 04.

Session 3: Visible and Invisible Boundaries

In my introduction to this session, I explore the processes through which physical, social, economic and cultural factors interplay to create boundaries between individuals and communities. The two speakers put meat on these bones with insights from their own experience and professional perspectives – one in urban planning, the other in psychology and race awareness training. Both, as they speak, will highlight policies and measures put in place to foster dialogue and cross cultural interactions.

Focusing on processes affecting the *perception* of difference, or better, the perception of *significant* difference, should add more dimensions to the understanding of what 'good' diversity is made of

Observation raises some tantalising problems:

- **difference which counts in one situation doesn't count in another.**

- **a difference which counts for some doesn't count for others.**

- **the perception of same-ness is not consistent even for one person.**

To make sense of these inconsistencies we need to know:

- **who perceives a [categorical] difference to be [socially] significant**

- **when and in what circumstances they do so.**

- **how and by what logic significant difference is marked.**

- **who/ what makes it relevant to social relations. What is its effect ?**

We want to know <u>how a social boundary is marked; how it is held in place; when and how it shifts</u> . We need to understand the systematic *process* by which "visible & invisible" differences are combined, the process by which inert 'objective' difference takes on social and 'subjective' significance. .

What can usefully be said about social boundaries ?

A social boundary is *symbolic*, even when marked by *real* things.

Being symbolic it is also *situational*, responding to changes in the relationship between its two sides – internal and external systems -
just as a <u>balloon</u> responding to relative changes in pressures of air. But the balloon metaphor obscures the possibility that items and influences may pass across a social boundary without jeopardy to it. For this purpose, visualise a <u>teabag.</u>

Social boundaries define *systems of action* and/or they are *systems of meaning.* At the level of action, the system is a set of relationships bounded on the basis of territoriality, economic activity, politics etc. Symbolic identifications with those relationships give them their meaning. At this level, indices of value like race, language and culture come into play. Being symbolically and subjectively very rich, they are handy markers of inclusion in or exclusion from systems which may objectively be defined by quite other criteria. We may ask, for example, how far the race and culture of asylum seekers is the *real* reason for their exclusion.

Different kinds of difference can be articulated in a single system; criteria of inclusion and exclusion don't have to be consistent throughout. The greater number of differences overlapping to mark the 'edge' of the system, the tighter its boundary. But note: as much as redundant boundary 'messages' may hold the dividing line between inside and outside, they are inherently conservative. Comparison between local urban systems with congruent differences and those with looser, more open boundary formations makes the point: the latter are systematically more adaptable in the face of change.

A social boundary happens as a reaction of one system to another. Whether criteria of self and other ascription coincide at any one time doesn't alter the fact that each side is manipulating difference to achieve particular ends, and to preserve itself in opposition to the other. Differences at the level of action and the

level of meaning are not necessarily congruent, but both sides of the boundary and both kinds of difference invariably count.

A model ?

Boundaries – whether balloons, fences or the covers of teabags – necessarily have two sides. And they are probably, or at least possible not the same on either side. [Fig.1] But *social* boundaries, precisely by virtue of their socialness, have not only two sides, they also have two kinds of meaning. [Fig 2]

The first is structural or organisational. A social boundary marks the edge of a social system, the *interface* between that system and one contiguous upon it. I borrow the notion from traffic management: the point at which the flow of traffic changes speed, direction or vehicle type is the point of interface between two traffic systems. It is also the point at which confusion and/or collision is most likely - *viz* the junctions between a busy feeder road and the main highway. By the same logic a social boundary is the point of interface between two systems of activity, of organisation or of culture. Similarly too, it is a likely point of [social] ambiguity and danger.

Identity brings a second kind of meaning. This one is subjective to the extent that it inheres in the experience of participants. Because it is *social* and not simply mechanical, the boundary marking the edge of one social system and the beginning of another has significance not only for the observer, but also and more importantly for the members of those systems. It marks members off from non-members [or non-members from members: the boundary can be read from either side]. It is the point at which, or the means by which, members and non-members are distinguished, 'we' and 'they' are identified.

Unlike a fence or a traffic light therefore, a social boundary is always *both* an interface line between inside and outside, and an identity divide between 'us' and 'them'. The *interface element* marks a change in what goes on; the *identity element* decides the meaning of that change and expresses the participants' relation to it. The interrelation of the four elements in a matrix is instructive. [Fig. 3]

Social boundaries, visible or invisible, are about the ['objective'] organisation of society no more and no less than they are about the ['subjective'] organisation of experience. Neither has more reality than the other, just as both sides of the boundary are implicated in the outcome of diversity.