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Immunology, ADHD, and Transcendence: Exploring Borders and Boundaries through Byung-Chul Han's Philosophy

Imunologija, ADHD in transcendenca: raziskovanje meja in zamejitev skozi filozofijo Byung-Chul Hana

Abstract: This paper examines the concept of boundaries, drawing on Central European experiences, particularly Hungary's history behind the Iron Curtain, both after 1989 and in the 21st century. It explores the complex emotions surrounding borders, such as longing, fear, confusion, and the desire for transcendence. Using Byung-Chul Han's philosophy, the article contrasts a society of negativity (rooted in external constraints) with a society of positivity, where individuals self-exploit within boundless systems of overachievement and performance. The COVID-19 pandemic is highlighted as a significant event that reshaped the boundaries between work and home life. Ultimately, the paper argues that the meaningful reordering of boundaries should not primarily concern separation but rather foster the potential for transcendence.

Keywords: borders, boundaries, Byung-Chul Han, Peter Berger, immunology, ADHD, transcendence

Povzetek: Prispevek obravnava pojem meja, pri čemer se opira na srednjeevropske izkušnje, zlasti na madžarsko zgodovino za železno zaveso, tako po letu 1989 kot v 21. stoletju. Raziskuje kompleksna čustva, povezana z mejami, kot so hrepenenje, strah, zmedenost in želja po transcendenci. S pomočjo filozofije Byung-Chula Hana članek primerja družbo negativnosti (ki temelji na zunanjih omejitvah) z družbo pozitivnosti, kjer posamezniki sami sebe izkoriščajo znotraj brezmejnih sistemov pretirane storilnosti in učinkovitosti. Pandemija covida-19 je izpostavljena kot dogodek, ki je meje med delom in zasebnim življenjem izrazito preoblikoval. Prispevek v zaključku zagovarja tezo, da smiselno preurejanje meja ne bi smelo biti usmerjeno predvsem v ločevanje, temveč v spodbujanje možnosti za transcendenco.

Ključne besede: meje, omejitve, Byung-Chul Han, Peter Berger, imunologija, ADHD, transcendenca

1. Introduction

The issue of borders is one of the greatest questions of the 21st century. There is a general tendency to set and reorganize borders. The clearest example of this is the ongoing war in the Ukraine: its symbolic images are maps showing from day to day the movement of the front lines. However, not only the borders between nations are at issue, but also those that fall within the realm of sociology or psychology: these include the various layers of society, the boundaries between its different segments, and personal boundaries. If we look at scientific and technological developments, the question arises regarding borders that were once assumed to be solid, such as the distinctions between humans and animals, humans and machines, and the difference between human thinking and AI (Osredkar 2024). Regardless of how we judge the changes concerning borders – whether they are being strengthened, disappearing, or becoming blurred – one thing is certain: they challenge individuals, communities, and societies alike. It seems that the continuous construction of borders is one of the greatest tasks of humanity in the 21st century. This paper attempts to provide a specific description of the experience of borders based on the narratives and experiences of the recent past and the present. In this, the author's unique perspective is also reflected, that of a Central European who has lived through the last period of socialism, the opening of the Western borders, the migration crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The background for the analysis comes from the writings of the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, who offers a critical toolkit with his unique perspective for recognizing borders or their absence and shedding light on their role in our world. The paper, therefore, originates from a kind of local experience of borders but seeks to describe universal human experiences, where not only Central Europeans but others as well can interpret the role of borders in their everyday world (Bagi 2019).

2. Central European Border Experiences

In the twentieth century, Central European border experiences took on a very particular form, especially in Hungary, whose territory and population shrank by nearly a third because of the two world wars. This intense experience was further heightened by the building of the Iron Curtain, followed later by the change of regime and Hungary's accession to the European Union. These historical changes generated very different ways of relating to borders (Langer 1999; Wille and Nieaber 2019, 7–16). One such experience is *border-confusion*, caused by constant border changes following the end of World War I, and *border-pain*, caused by the separation imposed by borders. A typical example of this is the village of Szelmenc, located on the current Slovak-Ukrainian border. The Hungarian-speaking inhabitants of this village found themselves in a new country five times, overnight, until, in 1946, Soviet soldiers erected a wooden plank across the center of the village, which still divides it today, separating villagers, friends, relatives, and families (Matyi 2014).

Part of the socialist period was the phenomenon of *border-dreaming*, the images of a world beyond the border that was accessible to only a few: beyond the border was a better, shinier, richer, and freer world. This also included the *view-beyond-the-border*, when one could glimpse over the border into this other world, usually mediated through reports, news, radio broadcasts, or later, TV programs. It was a world where dreams come true. Then came the moment of crossing the border, when one could bring a piece of the free Western world to the other, tightly guarded side of the border, in the form of a refrigerator or Hi-Fi system (Kovács 2002). After the change of regime, the euphoria was followed by a *fear-of-border* of non-registered workers from the eastern part of Europe, a fear that was only fully alleviated by Hungary's accession to the Schengen Area. Finally, with the arrival of the 2015 migration crisis, the concept of permeable borders was tested in practice, and may have awakened a new *desire-for-borders* in many people (Csuka and Török 2015, 60–65).

In summary, the generations that have lived through the socialist period behind the Iron Curtain have three fundamental experiences regarding borders. The first is the experience that the border is an obstacle that we long to cross: everything is better in the West, for not only is there wealth, but old morals are still alive and religiousness – which is persecuted or, at best, merely tolerated behind the Iron Curtain – thrives there. The second experience is its antithesis, namely the experience of the fall of the Iron Curtain, the permeability of borders. This was particularly strong with the eastern expansion of the Schengen Area (Wille and Nieaber 2019). Unsurprisingly, this was accompanied by the differentiation of the previously idealized image of the Western world and a partial disenchantment with it. The experience of free mobility across borders, however, became the defining experience rarely questioned in public discourse. A stronger critical public voice only emerged in 2015 with the migration crisis, when the threatening *experience-of-borderlessness* resurfaced in public discourse (Lutz and Karstens 2021). This was the time when forgotten tropes like border control or border fences resurfaced. The reappearance of borders was further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The above border experience is unique in terms of its structure, as it was born from a Central European historical background. However, if we look at today's border experiences mediated by the media, similar experiences may be found at the borders between Israel and Palestine, or between the United States and Mexico, or on the ships of migrants anchored at one of the Mediterranean ports, where the mere distance of twenty centimetres represents *border-confusion*, *border-pain*, *border-fear*, and allows for *border-dreaming* and the *view-beyond-the-border* at the same time (Saddiki 2018).

3. Global Experiences of Borderlessness

For the currently living generations, alongside a strong experience of borders, especially from World War II onward, the experience of borderlessness has also

become a tangible one at the latest since the 1990s (Kovács 2019). Natural events have always had cross-border, often global effects. An example of this is the Lisbon earthquake of November 1st, 1775, which caused thermal springs to emerge in Baden, an Austrian spa town – at least this is how the event is remembered in public discourse (Araújo 2006). A similar cross-border experience was the eruption of Indonesia's Mount Tambora in 1815, which caused the "Year Without a Summer" not only in Europe but in other parts of the world as well (Brazdil et al. 2016).

However, much more strongly than the examples above, the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster lives on in the European and global public consciousness. This event brought with it the negative experience of connectedness (Gutting et al. 2024). While Martin Luther King Jr. spoke optimistically about the recognition that "all life is interrelated" (Groody 2008, 250–251), finding tangible proof of this interrelatedness in the global movement of goods, the Chernobyl disaster highlighted the dangerous side of this interrelatedness. Radioactive contamination did not stop at the borders of Chernobyl or the Soviet Union; rather, it destroyed the environment and human health regardless of political or societal boundaries. Similarly, global warming, although felt differently depending on geographical location, is still a global phenomenon, experienced regardless of national borders.

Of course, there are also social and economic borders which span across borders. Such examples include economic crises like the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the 1973 OPEC oil price shock, and the Global Financial Crisis between 2007 and 2009, which did not affect only one country or region but fundamentally shook the global economy without respect to national borders. Even strong boundaries like the Atlantic Ocean or the Iron Curtain could not prevent these economic earthquakes (Sufi and Taylor 2021).

Another form of borderless experience is flight, which presents borders from a different perspective. From above, national borders are rarely visible, and even then, typically only when a larger structure, most often a wall, separates countries; or when national borders coincide with natural formations such as a river or a mountain range. However, nature's borders are often drawn differently from those created by humans. The possibility of flight, especially its availability for the broader public, thus brings about a new experience of borderlessness, made possible by physical movement.

This differs fundamentally from the online world, which does not require physical movement of the body. The pixels on the screen and the speakers bring distant places and people into presence. Even though their physical reality is absent, the images and sounds of these places can appear to the person anywhere in the world with no perceivable time difference. Maurizio Ferraris' book *Where Are You: An Ontology of the Cell Phone* aptly illustrates this, as with the advent of the mobile phone, the spatial location of the conversation partner has become largely unrecognizable (Ferraris et al. 2014). We can call someone from anywhere without them knowing our spatial location. The same is true for online meetings, as with a good background image, we can simulate any spatial position for ourselves.

4. Byung-Chul Han and Borders

While the above experiences of borders are important, they do not provide a complete picture of the border experiences of our time. Primarily spatial, they focus on borders that can be interpreted in space, even if these are based on symbolic constructions. However, in our era, borders are drawn elsewhere, as beautifully illuminated by the philosophy of the German Korean thinker Byung-Chul Han.

Han is often depicted as a mysterious thinker, whose private life – mainly kept secret – arouses as much interest in readers as his academic writings. In a recently published interview, he is described as "the philosopher who lives life backwards":

> "He's awake when people are sleeping, and goes to bed when others are starting to work. A proudly lazy thinker, he writes just three sentences a day. He spends most of his hours caring for his plants and playing pieces by Bach and Schumann on his Steinway & Sons grand piano. For him, these are the things that truly matter in life." (Eloza 2023)

These sentences are important because, in Han's case, cultural and societal criticism intersects with his lifestyle. He writes extremely concisely and to the point, but also enigmatically. The brevity and precision of his thoughts might even create the impression that they are mere commonplaces, yet attentive and patient reading of his essays reveals the depth and sharpness of his analyses (Madácsy 2023, 41). His writing style blends Eastern writing techniques with characteristics of German philosophy. Not only contemporary philosophy, but also traits of Catholic theology can be seen in his work. It is no coincidence that Pope Francis has quoted him several times, most recently in his encyclical "Dilexit Nos" (Francis 2024, 16).

From both his books and his lifestyle, a type of critique emerges that confronts the logic of modern society, which encourages individuals to self-exploit. Living backwards does not primarily mean experiencing time in reverse or swapping day and night; it rather signifies a new way of drawing the boundaries of life.

5. The Society of Negativity and Infinite Positivity

Byung-Chul Han's most famous work, *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* (2015), translated into English as *The Burnout Society*, describes the characteristic features of today's world through a metaphor. Although he does not directly cite Susan Sontag's essay *Illness as Metaphor* (Sontag 1978), he uses diseases and the defence against them as a model to describe the fundamental functioning of contemporary society. As Han analyses the society of our time, he frequently employs medical terminology, particularly from pathology. At the beginning of *The Burnout Society*, he makes the following statement: "Every age has its signature afflictions." (Han 2015, 6) Han sees the afflictions of the early 21st century as neurological disorders and diseases such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), borderline

personality disorder, and burnout. While the 20th century is called the "bacterial age," which was ended by antibiotics, the diseases of the 21st century are not caused by infections, but by an "excess of positivity." Immunology cannot provide an answer to this because our troubles are not caused by some external bacteria or enemy, but rather by "the violence of /.../ overproduction, overachievement, and overcommunication" (12). Han contrasts the previous, negativity-based society with one defined by positivity, which "is no longer Foucault's disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories" (Han 2015, 17; Foucault 1977), but rather is one of "fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories" (Han 2015, 17). This society represents a world of seemingly limitless possibilities, in which "projects, initiatives, and motivation" become central motifs, and the result is the creation of the society of "depressives and losers" (18). Han summarizes this in a brief definition: "The depressive human being is an *animal laborans* that exploits itself – and it does so voluntarily, without external constraints." (21)

The world Han describes is fragmented, narrow, and in many cases, disappearing, created by the pressure to perform, by the overwhelming stimuli, and the resulting inability to focus. In contrast with the society of negativity based on discipline it undoubtedly seems like an advance, the society of infinite possibilities and performance, with its overwhelming positivity, proves to be an illusion of freedom precisely because of its boundlessness and excess.

6. Decisions and Opportunities

Peter Berger's 1979 work *The Heretical Imperative*, as well as his 1966 publication *The Social Construction of Reality*, co-authored with Thomas Luckmann, were written in a different era, yet they effectively illuminate the process that led to the emergence of today's society of positivity. Although Han does not explicitly reference Berger, his sociological insights help to understand the fundamental characteristics and problems of the society of positivity. According to Berger, modernity is nothing other than "the universalization of heresy" (Berger 1979, 1). The term "heresy" refers to a concept used in Christian theology, rooted in the Greek verb *αἱρέω* (*hairéō*), meaning to choose or to prefer. In simple terms, we are all heretics, because – as Berger puts it – "compared to anyone in a premodern society, people in modern societies have a range of choices which, for most of history, would have been in the realm of mythological fantasy" (3). However, this is not only a possibility but has taken on a coercive nature: "For premodern man, heresy is a possibility – usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity. Or again, modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative." (28) Han also refers to this imperative as one of the fundamental characteristics of the world of positivity. The compulsive nature of choice is further affirmed by the title of the German translation of Berger's book – *Der Zwang Zur Häresie*. (1980)

In this way, Berger essentially anticipates what Han calls the society of positivity. In a society of negativity, the basic mechanisms of power operate through prohibitions, oppression, the limitation of the range of individual decision-making, or, in radical cases, the complete eradication of these possibilities. In the world of positivity – at least from an external perspective – the individual has many options to choose from: their freedom is not constrained by external limitations, but by their own internal expectations, individual ambitions, and the desire for success. The defining characteristic of a society of negativity is a hierarchical arrangement, where rules and laws govern social relationships and their range of possibilities. In individual relationships, therefore, there are strong boundaries, such as those between parent and child, master and disciple, or master and servant. These differences fundamentally shape identity, which is based on traditional norms. In the society of positivity, however, relationships are more fluid, subordinated to goals that appear to be determined by the individual. Thus, identity does not emerge from external roles and the rules associated with them but – seemingly – through goals and standards set by the individual.

The repeated use of the word "seemingly" is no coincidence. Han speaks of "new constraints," which shift external coercion – whether in the form of roles or behavioural norms – into the individual sphere. Using the master-slave allegory, he argues that "the dialectic of master and slave does not yield a society where everyone is free and capable of leisure," but "it leads to a society of work in which the master himself has become a labouring slave" (Han 2015, 34). Even more vividly, he compares the "new constraints" to a "work camp inside," where roles blur: "This labour camp is defined by the fact that one is simultaneously prisoner and guard, victim and perpetrator. One exploits oneself. It means that exploitation is possible even without domination." (34) Thus, Han simultaneously speaks about the maintenance of boundaries – since every "labour camp" has clear, limiting boundaries –, and the blurring of these boundaries. In this "labour camp inside," the dividing lines between roles are unclear, and the location of the labour camp itself cannot be precisely defined either. (34)

7. The Immanent and Vanishing Boundaries of Time

The peculiarities of the "labour camp inside" boundaries are even more pronounced when examined along the coordinates of temporality. Another key assertion made by Berger, together with Luckmann, is that "the world of everyday life is structured both spatially and temporally" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 40). This is highly relevant here because the very notion of structure implies boundaries, in this case, spatial and temporal boundaries which take the form of "knowledge that guides conduct in everyday life." (33) Spatial and temporal boundaries define relationships, thereby determining and enabling coordinated social action: "The world of everyday life has its own standard time, which is intersubjectively available. This standard time may be understood as the intersection between co-

smic time and its socially established calendar, based on the temporal sequences of nature, and inner time." (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 40) However, in the society of positivity, the boundaries of time are also subject to the goals set by the individual, or more precisely, to the pressures of performance internalized by the individual, which can be adjusted or, in certain cases, erased.

This is especially true for the boundaries between different types of time, where the lack of a perfect simultaneity between them gives rise to the phenomenon of waiting. Berger and Luckmann give the following examples: "I may want to take part in a sport event, but I must wait for my bruised knee to heal. Or again, I must wait until certain papers are processed so that my qualification for the event may be officially established." (41) The characteristic of time is summarized as follows: "The temporal structure of everyday life is exceedingly complex because the different levels of empirically present temporality must be ongoingly correlated." (41)

When viewing this within the world of positivity, the coordination of time and goals becomes the task of the individual. In this sense Han speaks of "dyschronicity": "Life is no longer embedded in any ordering structures or coordinates that would find duration." (Han 2017, 1) Time is subordinated to the logic of production and consumption, in which there is no real place for authentic times, such as celebrations. The latter would require that it not only be about rest, which recharges and gives strength for further production, but also that it not merely be interpreted as a consumable break, but rather as a radical departure from the logic of the society of positivity. This would be served by the original two characteristics of celebration, which Han defines as freedom from purposiveness and the separation of the sacred from the profane. (2019, 99) Celebration cannot take place in a society of positivity because time is completely occupied by work, recreation, and consumption; the structure of time can only be conceived along these lines. Only a relationship with others that is free from purpose (*frei vom Zweck*) would make it possible, not only to be authentically friends to others, but also to be able to celebrate (Han 2014, 11). However, this is hardly possible in the all-encompassing world of profit, production, and consumption.

8. COVID-19 and the Rethinking of Boundaries

The most radical rearrangement of the usual boundaries of space and time was brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kovács 2023). Through the restriction of personal contact and the exploration of digitalization, phenomena that were previously only peripheral parts of life – such as home-office, home-schooling, distance learning, online therapy, and online conferences – became part of everyday reality. This also brought a new kind of experience of boundaries. Some of these phenomena operated according to the logic of negativity, such as lockdowns or the monitoring of working hours by companies in home-office settings (Delfino and van der Kolk 2021). These created new boundaries around homes, and in

fact, the boundaries moved within homes. The beginning of work was no longer marked by arriving at the workplace, and its end was not signalled by leaving; instead, it was determined by the turning on and off the computer in the living room. However, these boundaries were far from clear-cut and still are today, as the symbolic spatial separation between home and workplace offered no help in this regard. *Boundary-confusion* here is not caused by constant border changes following the end of a world war, but by the disappearance of the symbolic spatial division between the private and the public, work and home, or labour and leisure. This creates the need for new capacities, such as "work-family boundary management." (Vitória et al., 2022) *Boundary-pain* is not caused by external, spatial separation, but by the divided attention at home, which can no longer be channelled solely into communication with family members, into reading a good book, cooking, or even focusing on a TV series. The division does not occur in space but in the narrowing of attention and, thereby, in the narrowing of the world. *Boundary-dreaming* and *gazing-beyond-the-boundary* are, therefore, only possible in exceptional cases, as they assume the conception of a different kind of world in which home exists not only as a kind of separation from work but also as a space that reflects the essence of the private sphere. In this world, home is not only open to the world of labour and consumption but also, for example, to different kinds of human relations, such as friendship.

The *desire-for-boundaries* arises from the blurring of work and private spheres: boundaries should offer protection to both worlds – the private and the public – and enable focus in each direction. *Crossing-boundaries* here no longer means crossing a physical line, nor does it mean crossing the boundary between the public and private; it refers to transcending an internally dictated logic of achievement, which also involves overcoming the compulsions of a world where boundaries have blurred. The *fear-of-boundaries* is not caused by border guards but by the overcoming of former operating modes and logics, as well as the losses associated with abandoning the logic of efficiency, which leave the individual without the accustomed way of functioning.

9. Conclusions

The article seemingly traces a trajectory that leads from external, physical, and political boundaries to those of everyday life, touching on privacy and the world of labour. Based on the background presented, it may seem that changes in the experience of boundaries follow external historical, political, and societal changes over time. However, this linear understanding of changes is not entirely accurate. The issue of national borders remains just as relevant today as the dilemma regarding rest and celebration, both of which have existed for a long time now. Early modern moral theologians' debate about working on Sundays – what qualifies as a forbidden (*opus servile*) and what is a permissible (*opus liberale*) under certain conditions – is very similar to the contemporary question of when we are

capable of acting aimlessly, or more precisely, of simply existing (von Döllinger and Reusch 1889). The question of boundaries is rather a general human experience, which naturally takes on a specific colour depending on the given situation. Han's philosophy precisely shows that the anthropological key to boundaries is not in separation – although this may sometimes be necessary – but in the capacity, or perhaps more accurately, the possibility, of transcendence. Separation may be an important tool for this, but it is never a sufficient condition. Just as crossing the boundary of the socialist block did not mean that the individual left the world of dictatorship behind, the separation of work and leisure does not equate to the ability to celebrate. The force behind boundary experiences does not lie in pointing to the existence or necessity of a boundary. Rather, their role is to illuminate the fragility or, in some cases, the loss of the unconditional nature inherent to human existence (Globokar 2022), showing that the constant pursuit of goals and the limitless subjugation of human life to performance and achievement leads not only to a narrowing of the human world but ultimately to its disappearance (Kovács 2022). *Boundary-confusion*, *boundary-pain*, *boundary-fear*, and the experience of *crossing-boundaries* all point to areas where human existence is wounded. Only when we understand this can we begin to reorder boundaries in a human way over and over again.[1]

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[1] This article has been linguistically revised with the assistance of an AI language model, ChatGPT, for clarity and correctness.

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