

Caesar Salad – or: are frontiers really necessary?

GER GROOT

Philosopher

e-mail:

ger.groot@skynet.be

Article history

Received: 01.08.2020

Received in revised form:13.08.2020

Accepted: 15.08.2020

Available online:30.12.2020

Abstract: In the beginning of his play, - *Julius Caesar* – Shakespeare shows how certain aristocrats, who still honoured – the stern morals of the Republic, had second thoughts about Caesar’s political triumph. Nevertheless, compared to the enthusiasm of the people, their authority did not amount to much anymore. We will have a closer look at this scene, as in this essay I will discuss on Julius Caesar in his various appearances, not only to shed light on the problem of *borders, limits, frontiers or boundaries* (*Grenze* in German) in their various aspects, but also to make this problematic *visible* in scenes that apparently have nothing to do with philosophy.

Keywords: analyze; authority; order; delimitation; rules; philosophy; politics;

Introduction

In the year 44 before Christ, Julius Caesar returned triumphantly to Rome, after having slain his rival Pompey. His power was not restrained by anything anymore. For the first time since Rome’s last king, Tarquinius Superbus, the Roman state would have an almighty ruler, a *dictator*. The people of Rome welcomed him with glee and jubilee.

Some millennium and a half later, in 1599, William Shakespeare dedicated a tragedy to these historical facts. In the beginning of his play, *Julius Caesar*, he shows how certain aristocrats, who still honoured the stern morals of the Republic, had second thoughts about Caesar’s political triumph. Nevertheless, compared to the enthusiasm of the people, their authority did not amount to much anymore. We will have a closer look at

this scene, as in this essay I will take a closer look on Julius Caesar in his various appearances, not only to shed light on the problem of *borders, limits, frontiers* or *boundaries* (*Grenze* in German) in their various aspects, but also to make this problematic literally *visible* in scenes that apparently have nothing to do with philosophy.

At the beginning of his tragedy, Shakespeare sets the tone on a very elusive but fundamental level, in an apparently insignificant scene one might easily take for just a sample of popular wit, of *jokes*. At the moment of his entry in Rome, the senators, Marcellus and Flavius, bicker with ordinary inhabitants of the city. They quarrel about order and the lack of it, about the fact that artisans move about in places where they are not supposed to be, and do not distinguish themselves any more with the signs of their trade:

What! Know you not,
Being mechanical, you ought not walk
Upon a labouring day without the sign
Of your profession?

...

Where is thy leather apron, and thy rule?
What dost thou with thy best apparel on?

Thus, speaks senator Marcellus, but the people openly ridicule him as if authority and hierarchy had ceased to exist, as if every person was equal to everybody else and if distinction, rules, and order had completely vanished. The triumphal entry of Caesar is announced with a self-invented holyday regardless of the normal calendar, as though even *time were out of joint*, as Hamlet says in another of Shakespeare's tragedies. 'Indeed sir,' says one of the artisans, 'we make holiday to see Caesar and to rejoice in his triumph.'

In *A Theatre of Envy*, his impressive book on Shakespeare's plays, the French - American thinker, historian of religion and literary theorist, René Girard, uses this apparently insignificant scene to show how, on what a fundamental level, the themes of *border, limit, frontier* or *boundary* appear here as metaphysical conditions of what 'order' is. Or, in other words, to start providing an answer to the central question of this essay: 'Are frontiers really necessary?'

In this opening of Shakespeare's play, Girard argues that tragedy is not only announced by the protesting words of Marcellus but is already present before them in the collapsing social order in Rome. It is *already* confused

and annihilated by Caesar's rebellion against the republican order – and paradoxically calls out for this – or any kind of - revolution because of this very fact that the order is 'out of joint' and must be restored. One could say: a *new order* can only announce itself when the existing order is challenged and shaken. In many cases – such as this one – this new order can only establish itself as a *tyranny* or a *totalitarian state*.

One might also say, however, that the new order (with its new boundaries and lines of division) can establish itself only by denying the old order and declaring it bankrupt. Both 'movements' are each other's condition; they mutually embrace each other. Boundaries and boundlessness are each other's very condition. The former (boundary) needs the latter (boundlessness) to establish itself up and against it as a necessity. The second one needs the first to show itself as the 'formlessness' it is, and that the Greeks called the *apeiron* or *chora*, and the Romantics the *sublime* or *das Erhabene*.

Therefore, modelled after the political tribulations on the eve of the Ides of March, we can distinguish a fundamentally *metaphysical* problem. How do boundary and boundlessness relate to each other, if they are not simply a contradiction or negation of each other? Moreover, going a step further: what must we think of the phenomenon of 'limit' or 'delimitation' in metaphysical discourse, when limitation and circumscription itself is the condition of the possibility of such a discourse? Only can be *said* what can (literally) be *circum-scribed*. Metaphysics can only put the question of limits and limitation to the test, if the *language* it expresses itself in has already been established as a kind of order. That is to say: when the rules and limitations in the 'stuff' speech is made of are recognized

Rubicon

For a moment, I leave these questions for what they are, to return to the political history of the Roman Empire, or rather to the event and the gesture, maybe we should even say the *brutish* reality and the *violence*, that put these historical events into motion. For the Roman Empire *itself* began with the transgression of a limit or a frontier – and so with the supposition that there was a frontier (or limit) that could be crossed, that was in principle *transgressable*.

Five years before Caesar gave himself the title that bears his name (*Kaiser* and even *Czar* come from 'Caesar'), he upset the political system of the Roman Republic by crossing the Rubicon River with his 13th Legion. The Rubicon was the northern border of what then was called 'Italy': the Roman

heartland where only magistrates appointed by the Senate were allowed to exercise 'empire' or *Gewalt*, to use the better suited German word. That is: only they were allowed to use the instruments of *armed authority*. However, Caesar transgressed this law by physically transgressing the Rubicon – declaring '*Alea jacta est*', the dice has been thrown, so the legends tell us.

This shows how *conclusive* a border is: it dominates, rules over and even installs political reality. Before crossing the Rubicon, Caesar had been declared a criminal, an outsider, by the *existing order* in Rome. But with a **sublime** movement, he turns this accusation upside down, unseats the *old order* and declares the 'legitimate' order of Pompey and the senators in Rome to be the *real anarchy* or at least lawlessness, against which only his (Caesar's) rebellion can restore law and order.

Such is Caesar's pretention. But reality proves to be quite different. Lawlessness will reign for five more years in the Roman Republic, during which Caesar fights his civil war against Pompey. It is *this* anarchy that is overcome by Caesar's new rule, on his triumphant entering of Rome. In fact, at that moment order is not so much 'restored' as created anew – with an act of violence that is warranted in none of both orders, but that does legitimize (afterwards) the new state of things. Caesar crosses the frontier illegally; but within the order of the *new legitimacy*, this frontier disappears and makes room for a new jurisdiction that claims to be *universal*. The separation of the territory north and south of the Rubicon ceases to exist. Caesar now rules in *every part* of the Empire, both in the conquered parts as in the heartland of Italy. The division of powers, defined by the *frontier* the Rubicon was, has no meaning any more.

In fact, taking a broader view of the elements involved, such an act of violence is the basis of *any* order, and has always been so, any time and any place in history. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (inspired by Walter Benjamin's essay *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*) has indicated and illustrated this metaphysical (and political) law in the foundation of another world empire, some 18 centuries later: the United States. Derrida asks, what is really the meaning of the famous words 'We, the people' with which the American Declaration of Independence begins and the existence of this new state is called into being? Who *are* these 'people' that *perform* this deed?

They are certainly not the subjects of the English crown, against which they rebel. What is more, in this rebellion, they *constitute* themselves as 'people': the speech act of the pronunciation of this 'We' creates a reality as if out of nothing. From that moment on, this order is called 'The Republic of

the United States of America'. It transforms itself almost immediately into a *Constitution* that explicitly lays down the logic of this new body politic – against the will of the sovereign who until then served

Thanks to the performative utterance of a people saying 'We' this political order becomes something *objectively real*. It describes itself (as a legal-political order) in its *Constitution* (both the deed and the result of it) and distances itself, *de-limits* itself (*ab-grenzen*) from the old, monarchical order. From that very moment, this monarchy appears as outlived, even reactionary: it is outdated and has no real meaning anymore. Drawing the new border (or limit) that literally *constitutes itself* in its performative 'We, the people', a new identity constitutes itself, and so does the order of law that institutes the new logic whereby reality is ruled (in both meanings of *to reign* and *to set a rule*).

Language

The next step in our philosophical analysis, would be to say that this is not just a *political* phenomenon. *Language itself* responds to the same rule. Language (and the sign in general) is an instrument with which we turn a chaotic world into a comprehensible one. It creates order in the undifferentiated chaos of our sensory impressions by drawing limits and lines of distinction and separation – *Grenze* in general – in our perception. Because a word is a setting of borderlines, it is a de-limitation or a *de-finition* of what was boundless or in-definite, and in that way, it turns into *something* that can be named and distinguished.

The indistinct becomes distinct. That is to say that a number of different impressions come together around one idea, for example 'water'. By the same movement, this delimitation or circumscription creates a *class*, a certain number of unities which might *seem* to be very different but can be reduced to one concept, one identifying unity. The content of the glass I hold in my hand and the content of the liquid plain I see before me (the sea) are the same. They belong together because they are circumscribed by the same concept: they are both 'water'.

As Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out, this creation of a concept is an act of violence, perpetrated by our capacity of knowledge on a reality it *violates* and subjects, forcing it into the straight- jacket of its 'idea'. Some three quarters of a century before Nietzsche, Kant had understood that reality only exists as reality thanks to the conceptual grid we draw over it. Without the grid of our 'categories' there is no world at all: no world that can be *named* and *expressed* by us. Without it, everything is lost in the chaos of the

apeiron or the *choora* – that with some fantasy we might imagine as a kind of metaphysical *Caesar Salad*.

Therefore, there is only *something* if there is a boundary, a *Grenze*. Signification starts to be possible from the moment the indifferent, indistinct ‘primordial stuff’ of reality has been parted into two by the first *trait* which places ‘something’ against and in face of ‘its other’ (left against right, white against black, x against $-x$, 0 against 1) – and then is diversified by other ‘traits’, lines, limits or circumscriptions which together form the ‘grill’ of our conceptual apparatus. Whatever you may call it, this first trait, the first boundary, this first line of separation is the foundation or the *condition of possibility* of *all* meaning, as subtle as it may consequently differentiate itself from then on, in an endless variety of ‘shades of grey’.

This law of the *Grenze* rules on all fields of human meaning and understanding, metaphysical, political, economic and so on. As Rousseau said, the *idea* of property came first into being when a man drew a line or border around a piece of land and said: ‘this is mine (and consequently: what lies outside it is *not mine*)’. Political order rests, as we saw, on the same idea of border, limit or boundary: *within* this field, *this law* (which for his field is the law) is valid, outside it is not. On the other side of the border of the Rubicon, for example, Caesar may dispose of ‘imperium’ (the power of weapons), but not on *this* side. And the moment this border is crossed and transgressed, the whole *order* is put to the test and in danger.

Boundlessness

So let it be with Caesar, as we might quote Mark Antony in the funeral address in Shakespeare’s play I mentioned earlier. In his case too, the creation of a new order was only possible thanks to the transgression of a frontier, that is to say essentially an act of violence which introduced a new order as a *fait accompli*, although it took some time to really settle itself and be accepted: by the people or Rome (‘*we make holiday to see Caesar and to rejoice in his triumph*’) and, more tragically, by the death of Pompey. The crossing of the Rubicon inaugurated a crisis during which nothing was fixed or established and everything stayed more or less in suspense. The complaint of the aristocrats about the Romans in this situation of limbo is an illustration thereof. Without the ‘*signs of [their] profession, [their] leather apron, and [their] rule*’ they were in a certain sense ‘nothing’, they had no ‘meaning’, being literally indistinct, undifferentiated, without properties, ‘*Without rule*’, Shakespeare says, perhaps deliberately ambiguous (rule in the sense of measuring device, but also in the sense of rule as a law).

This crisis ends with a new act of violence: the killing of Pompey in his rivalry with Caesar (the rivalry between two orders), wherein Caesar establishes his rule. Only *then*, the indistinct citizens of Rome are ‘reborn’: no longer as *citizens* of a republic but as *subjects* of an empire. That is, at least, what Caesar wants – but he has not taken into account yet another act of violence. Therefore, if the boundary between order and chaos (as temporary as it is meant to be) has been transgressed, violence rules in principle without limits, because the limit or boundary is order. And so, even after Caesar’s triumph violence hits again. It is announced in the words of one of the senators: *Caesar must die*.

These senators, the representatives of the former social and political order, consider this murder to be a simple restoration thereof, as though Caesar’s death were a kind of expiatory sacrifice, after which everything could go on as if nothing had ever happened. This, however, is not the logic of violence. The expiatory sacrifice, the second death, announces yet another, and even more devastating, period of violence and chaos, of disorder and boundlessness. In Shakespeare’s play it is set off by the famous speech Mark Antony I already evoked, instigating the Roman people to ‘*rage and mutiny*’.

Caesar has just been murdered in the Senate. Brutus, one of the conspirators, explains to the people why their idol has had to die. *Caesar was ambitious*, Brutus says. He overreached the powers that were given him within the republican order, but he transgressed this limit. And Brutus convinces people of his own innocence: ‘*Live, Brutus, Live,*’ they shout. ‘*Give him a statue with his ancestors.*’

In this part of the play, the problem of boundary and boundlessness, limit and the unlimited (and therefor the *illegitimate*) acquires a new dimension. Caesar had not only crossed the legitimate border of the republic on the *political* or *juridical* level (that he had done five years earlier already and by then the people had pardoned him for that). Now he is shown, at least in the words of Brutus, to be someone who has transgressed his border/limit on the moral level. *He was ambitious*: that is the essence of what the conspirators reproach him.

For us, this sounds rather odd. For everyone who looks for a job, ambition must be the key word in their letter of application. For us, *ambition* has become a virtue – which it was *not* in ancient culture. Of course, then people were also ambitious. Hunger for power is a constant factor in human history. But they did not dare to appeal to it openly. Quite the contrary: all personal ambition had to be denied as much as possible, had to be hidden

under more noble motives because ambition blew up the intricate equilibrium wherein real virtue was always to be found in the middle between two extremes. Each one of them had to be *limited* by the other, had to find its *boundary* in the other, if a person wanted to claim the title of moral virtue that lay literally *in the scales*: in the balance that measured the moral mettle of a person.

Extra-moral lies

We can only indicate, quite superficially, what the emancipation of *ambition* to an indispensable *virtue* for every promising young talent means today. Apparently, this concept has undergone a similar sort of rehabilitation as *greed*. Once it was the capital vice *par excellence*, but in our actual economic morality it has been promoted to be the *virtue par excellence*. Just think of the way stock-market guru Gordon Gekko, giving his speech in the movie *Wall Street*, brings his audience to ecstasy with the words '*Greed is good*'.

So even on the economic level we see how *boundlessness, il-limitation* has won the battle over *measure, self-control, self-limitation* – just as has happened with *ambition*. Therefore, we could conclude that modern culture as such characterizes itself with its unwillingness to accept *measure* and *limitation* as its criterion. On the contrary, it lets itself be dominated by the *boundlessness* of its desires and by its suspicions against any *boundary* or *limitation*. Once again, this is perfectly expressed in some of the film clips we have heard so many times: the motto of Buzz Lightyear in *Toy Story*: '*To infinity ... and beyond*' – or the almost similar motto with which every episode of *Star Trek* used to start: '*To boldly go where no man has gone before*'.

Let us be clear: this *boundlessness* has brought many good things to humanity. Nevertheless, we may also ask if it is not responsible for – amongst many other things – the deep discomfort that nowadays seems to have the North-Atlantic culture in its grip. No doubt the widespread disease of depression cannot be reduced to this phenomenon alone, but we *must* ask ourselves if it does not have *something* to do with the incapacity or unwillingness to accept *limitation* and *measure* as something *good*. Perhaps we still have to find out, by bitter experience, that the dream of *infinity (...and beyond)* is just beyond ourselves and fails to take into account the reality of our own boundaries.

Having stretched *ambition* from a moral shortcoming of Julius Caesar to a moral problem of modern culture as such, I return now to the problem of

language as a boundary-drawing force. Nietzsche already taught us that words create our world by drawing up *fences* in the unstructured reality of our experience: fences that transform chaos into order and the fluid essence of it into the static reality of an *image* (or *Vorstellung*, as Schopenhauer had called it). We see the world as a whole of static *things*, literally *de-fined* by words.

Even in the case of our own identity, which in reality is in constant development, we have come to see it as a static *x*. No matter how much my appearance, my thinking, my circumstances and my status might have changed during the last 20 years, or *will* have changed within 20 years: I am who I am and what I am – or at least: that’s what I think. The name of this identity is legitimized in the passport I bear, and which separates me and de-limits me as *this* specific individual from the rest of mankind, who are people just-as-I but not *quite* just-as-I. And then, this passport is also a proof of the identity that makes me into the person I am, and without which I would be nothing at all: just a bunch of loose elements and perceptions.

So, the passport is a kind of portable border or frontier. It de-limits who and what I am, and must be shown on the dividing line (the political border) that defines where I am, under what jurisdiction and rule of law I find myself to be. Precisely and specifically on the edge between two political entities, I am must *identify* myself – that is to say: I must determine myself to be the static entity, the ‘*I*’ or ‘*me*’ I am in a certain sense in a timeless way: beyond the passing of time, beyond ‘liquid’ reality of the *apeiron*. One border evokes the other and both are in a certain sense *falsifications* (Nietzsche would say ‘extra-moral lies’) of a reality which in itself does not bother a thing about these de-limitations, borders or frontiers.

Outside of my ‘legal’ and psychological identity, I am a constantly changing being, and what I really am is very hard to render: it stays fuzzy. And regarding the political side of this situation: on yonder side of the *geographical* or *political* border where I am obliged to show my passport, the landscape shows itself to be very similar to what it is at this side of it. Both limits/borders are up to a large point arbitrary, just as the language and the way we de-limit reality by it are arbitrary. But still, we cannot do without the *illusion* of it, we need it to structure our thinking, and thus the reality in which we live.

But – it is an illusion anyway. We live, as it were, in two kinds of reality. On one side, we recognize the order and the static construction of it, which makes it possible that there *is* a *world* and even that there exists anything at all (including ‘myself’) that can be perceived and *named* or *expressed*. On

the other hand, the *reality* of it can only exist because it is more than this de-limiting order, and offers the possibility of a *transgression* its 'beyond'. As the French thinker and writer Georges Bataille has noted, such a transgression is even necessary if something like a border of limitation wants to exist: and thus if *order* wants to exist.

Meaning

So, border and the crossing of it, limit and delimitation, boundary and transgression, order and chaos, embrace each other as their mutual condition of existence. I *am* my 'self', I *am* my identity, but at the same time I am so much more – and *what* I am cannot be fixed by or reduced to my name or code, as a sort of ' $x = x$ '. As an *existing* being (in the sense existentialism uses this word) I am – to say it in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre – *not* who I am, and *am* who I am not. Just as the words I speak are not just *these* words, with only this *logical* meaning, but must be animated by my living *speech* to receive real significance – in order to get through to *other people* and receive a force of meaning that gives *life* to them. In other words, in order to really say what a word *indicates* as de-limitation or definition, the border or limit of it (defined by our dictionaries) must be *transgressed* in speech.

Words *are* devices of setting *limits* but become only *reality* in the *de-limitation* that happens in speech: when they are spoken by *this* specific figure that gives them *space*, liberates them out of the frame they are locked in as long as they are mere entries in a dictionary. Semiotics calls that the difference between *langue* and *parole*. So we can draw one conclusion: to really speak, the limitations of language must as well be observed (if not, there would be no meaning) as transgressed, because otherwise there would be no *expression*.

This ambiguous relation seems to be part of the very *essence* of frontier/border/boundary/limit itself. That, from a metaphysical or epistemological point of view, we live in a world of order, this is only feasible because *chaos* is for us a *possibility*. We live in a regulated reality: not only in a moral, but also in an epistemological sense. We live in an order wherein 'things' can be separated, frontiered one against the other thanks to the words we use and the ideas we apply to it. However, precisely because we apply them we must presuppose 'under' it an un-differentiated reality to which we can apply it.

The human force of arrangement and division does not have a grip on that 'wild', chaotic reality. According to Bataille, it is our *philosophical task*

and necessity to be aware of this situation: not only in a theoretical but also in a practical sense, in the way crime, drunkenness, eroticism, violence etc. recognizes the reality of this unkempt field (*apeiron* or *choora*) by setting foot on it, even only for a short while. This can be done only for a moment, because on this field no enduring human life is possible. Yet, at the same time, this ‘impossible’ externity is indispensable for the *possible* human life *within* our well-kept order.

Thus, we always live on the edge of a border, in an uneasy relationship with its paradoxical appearance. Sometimes we cross it, and in this transgression, we become aware of the fact that we switch from one reality to another. Sometimes this happens in quite an ordinary way – but even the most common transgression has its meaning.

Are limits / borders / boundaries / frontiers really necessary? Yes, as we have seen, they are. If not, there would only be indifference, there would be nothing, there would be no *we*, no *I*. We are literally limited beings, in all senses of the word, or we *are not*. However, *if* we are limited beings, then we equally are beings of *transgression* of our borders. Without this transgressing, we would perhaps *be* something, but we would not know *what*, and we would *have no meaning* at all.

AUTHOR BIO:

GER GROOT (1954) lectured philosophy at the universities of Rotterdam, Nijmegen (Netherlands) and Antwerpen (Belgium). He published ten books, some twenty translations (Derrida, Husserl, etc.), hundreds of articles and numerous critical reviews, mainly in Dutch newspapers, cultural and philosophical magazines.