Fenced In:

Infrastructural Anxieties at the Danish–German Borderlands

Annika Pohl Harrisson and Michael Eilenberg

Nestled in the rural borderlands between Denmark and Germany, and passed down through five generations since 1875, Elmegård is the ancestral farmstead of Danish citizen Jens.[1] What distinguishes Jens's home is its unique locality: although it lies in Denmark, the road out front marks the German border. To reach his farm buildings and fields, Jens must traverse several hundred metres along a road situated within German jurisdiction.

[1] Names and toponyms have been anonymized.

The positioning of Jens's property is a testament to the endeavours of his ancestors during the 1920 border delineation, striving for official recognition as Danes. Though the farm was on the German side, Jens's ancestors identified as Danes, so the border was adjusted around their property, creating a dent in the map.[2] Despite the assurance from both countries of unimpeded passage to Denmark, Jens and his family have encountered persistent challenges stemming from their cross-border life. Memories of tense encounters with heavily armed border patrols, episodes of detainment due to inadequate documentation, and the uneasiness of growing up in a border zone under constant surveillance are etched vividly into Jens's consciousness. He describes these memories as almost embodied, things that still make him shiver with discomfort.

[2] In 1864, Denmark lost territory to Germany. After Germany's defeat in World War I, referendums in 1920 led to redrawing the border.

Despite initially moving away from his ancestral homestead and thus relinquishing the, at times, burdensome struggle of borderland existence, Jens's return was prompted by the implementation of the Schengen agreement in the mid-1990s, which facilitated unhindered movement within the Schengen Area. The abolition of frontier controls brought relief and marked a new chapter of ease and freedom in everyday life on the farm. However, recent developments have reignited past anxieties. In 2019, the Danish authorities decided to erect a wild boar fence along the entire length of the border, aimed at preventing the spread of African Swine Fever which poses a severe threat to the Danish pig industry (Eilenberg and Harrisson 2023). Following our conversations with affected borderlanders[3], we argue that this fence triggers a kind of existential anxiety as it both stirs up memories of past conflict and disturbs their sense of safety in the domestic sphere (Rosher 2022).

Comprised of steel bars and metal sheets 1.5 meters high and firmly embedded into the ground, this infrastructural barrier should prevent infected 'German' wild boars from entering Denmark. However, the fence also serves as a stark symbol of division and regression, evoking unsettling memories of past border tensions. As we walk around his land, Jens shows where the borderline is and how the fence cuts through his grounds. He recounts the difficulties this caused during his youth, prior to the Schengen Agreement. He indicates the former positions of the border guards, recalling the anxiety and discomfort associated with their presence and regular patrols, characterized by rudeness and hostility. These unpleasant memories are rekindled by the fence, which

Looking through the fence.
Photo: Michael Eilenberg, 2021.

[3] This article is based on research conducted in 2021.

serves as a physical manifestation of the border and a barrier that impedes free passage across his land. Jens recalls instances when his father was detained for not carrying an ID card while working on fields that extended across territory of both nation-states, and the intimidation faced from guards wielding machine guns.

The Danish-German border region.
Map: Annika Pohl Harrisson and Michael Eilenberg, 2023.

Although the current wild boar fence lacks the presence of border guards and their weapons, the negative emotions resurface around it. Jens states that "it is difficult for me to separate [present from past]. The Wild boar fence (*vildsvinehegnet*) is a daily reminder of this feeling I had when I grew up – that you really must be careful where you step."

The farmhouse and barn are on opposite sides of the border.
Photo: Annika Pohl Harrisson, 2021.

Fences embody a complex fusion of fears, aspirations and aesthetics, influencing landscapes and prompting diverse intellectual and emotional responses. While they provide protection, they also create division (Davis and Williams 2008). The erection of fences can carry adverse implications, excluding individuals from resources and opportunities while reinforcing societal and cultural rifts. Consequently, the act of constructing fences remains a contentious issue globally, particularly in the context of migration and border control, where governments utilize physical barriers to regulate the movement of people. Moreover, fencing processes reflect broader political and social tensions surrounding migration and identity. In border zones, fences come to reflect state regulation, control and exceptional forms of governance (Jones 2012; Rosière and Jones 2012; McDuie-Ra 2014). Here scholars draw attention to the disconnect between the political imaginations that conceptualize borders as unambiguous and linear and the realities of border-dwellers such as Jens, who frequently experience social, emotional and geographic spaces to be overlapping (Troscenko 2016; Wilson 2024).

A large cattle grid hinders access to Jens' field on foot.
Photo: Annika Pohl Harrisson, 2021.

Symbolically, fences represent ideas like ownership and protection, yet they have also been utilized as tools of colonialism, displacing Indigenous populations or disrupting traditional livelihoods under the guise of conservation efforts (Guha 1991; Scott 2009). Fencing, as a form of securitization through separation, embodies both liberation and alienation simultaneously, offering comfort while also provoking offense. Security technology, such as fences, can sometimes engender unintended emotional responses contrary to its intended purpose. For instance, while fences are typically erected to provide security (to keep unwanted life either in or out), they can paradoxically convey feelings or meanings that are antithetical to security (Coaffee, O'Hare and Hawkesworth 2009; Murzakulova 2021). Fences alter the material environment and, as in the cases of residents who are directly confronted with such barriers on their properties, elicit affective responses. At Elmegård the fence is a materialization of a negative state effect. Jens feels abandoned and disenchanted by the Danish authorities who have not recognized his protests against the erection of the fence and its physical and

emotional impacts on his everyday life: "I feel really, really bad about the need to mark that border again. It stirs up many old emotions and concerns. It just affects people when there is a physical border again. It's like living in an open prison (*åbent fængsel*)."

The wild boar fence separating agricultural fields.
Photo: Annika Pohl Harrisson, 2021.

Anxiety is a condition characterized by agitation, inner turmoil and worry about future events. It manifests physically, combining mental and emotional distress with a pervasive sense of unease about potential outcomes (Tyrer 1999). In our case, the fence infrastructure prompts both uneasiness and distress about what has been and what might happen again. This aligns with the insight by Harvey and Knox (2015) that infrastructure can render the social and political visible in our contemporary world. Via a wild boar fence, the relationality between populations, infrastructure and the resulting concerns thereby becomes tangible. How are these anxieties dealt with by affected border populations and the relevant authorities, and how does this influence their coexistence? Jens has on occasion reacted angrily and verbally assaulted fence construction workers. In turn, the authorities dismiss his complaints with bureaucratic double-speak and a lack of empathy, failing to grasp the complexity of life on the border, with its past conflicts and the emotional ballast rooted in this landscape.

The home has particular importance for an individual's sense of ontological security (Dupuis and Thorns 1998). Ontological security refers, according to Giddens (1991), to a feeling of stability and continuity in an individual's or a society's identity and understanding of the world. When this is disrupted, individuals and societies can experience unease. Harries (2008) associates ontological security with the consistent material elements of a home, highlighting the interconnectedness of visual representation and emotional reassurance. In this context, the construction of a physical barrier like a

fence can disrupt the visual embodiment of home as well as undermining one's sense of control, thus impacting the fundamental ontological security that should be provided by the domestic sphere. For Jens and other borderlanders, the wild boar fence evokes feelings of anxiety and discomfort, stirring up memories of past border tensions and injustices that transmigrate into present social relations and harm emotional wellbeing.

Beyond the immediate borderland, fencing strategies and the accompanying discourse on biosecurity also reflect broader popular societal anxieties of the perceived risk of outside threats and hence offer an interesting example of how the movement of various forms of unwanted life across borders are politicized and securitized (Hinchliffe et al. 2013). While the Danish fence might present a more benign case of infrastructural fencing, the Schengen Area more widely is experiencing a growing move towards neo-Westphalian rebordering through fencing. For example, starting in 2015, Slovenia built a fence along its border with Croatia, and the Hungarian government erected fences both at the Croatian and the Serbian border (Székely and Kotosz 2018; Korte 2020). Triggered by, among others, the current migration crisis in Europe and biosecurity concerns, this trend negatively impacts freedom of movement. But on a broader scale, such moves give rise to anxiety both emotional and physical and produce a general sense of ontological insecurity (Mitzen 2018).

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