# Chapter 19
# Borders as Resourceful Thresholds

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It is a privilege to have been asked to write a short afterword in this inspiring collection of articles. The question was if I could look back at the historical career and further prospect of the central concept of the book, the threshold approach, and embed this concept in the wider debate on border studies. Well then, let me begin by complimenting the editors to have followed, even meticulously, a central conceptual structure, on the basis of which and around which the individual or set of authors have written their contribution. By choosing a central conceptual framework this edited volume has most certainly gained cohesion and academic parallelism in such a way that the contributions interestingly feed into and complement each other.

For the basis of this conceptual framework on borders as thresholds of indifference an extended version of the work is used that Martin van der Velde, one of the two editors of this book, and myself have written in an article in 2004. It is good to explain the background of this article, as it says something about the past track the concept of thresholds has travelled. At the time, we wanted to focus on explaining the labour migration and mobility patterns in the EU. Many labour market studies deal with mobility. But because the dominant mode of practice of about 97 per cent of the workers is cross-border immobility, not mobility, we realized that in order to explain mobility patterns in the EU, we needed to start from the other side, in order to get a much better academic grip on the concept of immobility. Despite the many efforts of the EU to bring about a homogeneous labour market the dominant pattern was and remains to be, labour market *im*mobility. That is, there may be an increasingly barrier-low internal market for capital, information and services, but for labour, the actual moving house for a job in another member state is, excluding the outlying case of Luxembourg, relatively small. On average somewhere around three per cent or less. What most academics has been puzzling is why relatively so few people move across the border, even in cases where it would make perfect sense, in strictly economic terms. We found that most frameworks trying to explain the mobility of labour were based on (adapted versions of neoclassical) rational decision models in which the structural difference between the foreign and domestic labour market was put central. The general idea of most of these models was that if the profitable difference in pull and push factors between foreign and domestic market would be high enough, people would go. Yet, most models were not able to explain the relative persistence of people to not move even in cases of enlarged or enlarging varying welfare differences in the EU. Apparently, and not surprisingly, the mobility of goods and information across borders is a whole different field than the moving of people themselves with their feelings, emotions, identities and behaviours. So, our main aim was to better understand why most people most of the time did not even consider the possibility of moving across the border. To this end, what we in fact particularly did in that article of 2004 was to enrich the concept of the border in these models (Van Houtum and Van der Velde 2004). We found that in most of these rational decision models, borders are dominantly seen as a mere cut-off line, a threshold of a potentially profitable difference between diverging labour markets. The decision-making process in these models is often imaginatively based on an evaluation of the characteristics and opportunities of the present (*home*) and a possible new location (*away*), after

which a decision is made to become mobile (*go*) or stay put (*stay*). This Cartesian worldview of human action, which has found its present translation in mainstream economics in the (bounded) rational agent, still motivates EU labour market policymaking. We enriched this meagre and all-too naive understanding of borders with existing debates in border studies at the time, in which national borders should not so much be understood (anymore) as economistic differences alone but as socially meaningful constructions of power to a varying degree internalized by the people living within the territorial outlines of the country. Borders were hence not seen as static lines of differences but rather as continuously reproduced social phenomena, as human all too human (Paasi 1996). We postulated that the bordering of our mental orientation and territorial (id)entity is preventing the existence of a large-scale cross-border or transnational labour market in the European Union. Despite many years of European integration, the national border still produces a difference in the imagination of belonging and as such it produces an attitude of *indifference* towards the market on what is perceived as the 'other side', as an abroad, an out-land (Van Houtum and Van der Velde 2004). Apparently still, this mechanism of distanciation helps to gain control in order to gain a social focal point, a selection of social priorities. The space beyond a state then becomes a space of withdrawal, of mental 'emptiness', often resulting in a conservative tendency towards cross-border activities. That what is beyond the constructed differentiating border of comfort (*difference*) is socially made legitimate to be neglected (*indifference*) (Van Houtum and Van der Velde 2004). Interestingly enough, migrants from outside the EU are perhaps more 'European' than those born inside the EU, in the sense of deliberately moving across borders into the EU, which is something Joris Schapendonk, for instance, has recently taken up (see also his Chapter 16 in this volume). For many EU citizens, the market across the border is apparently something that is still seen as

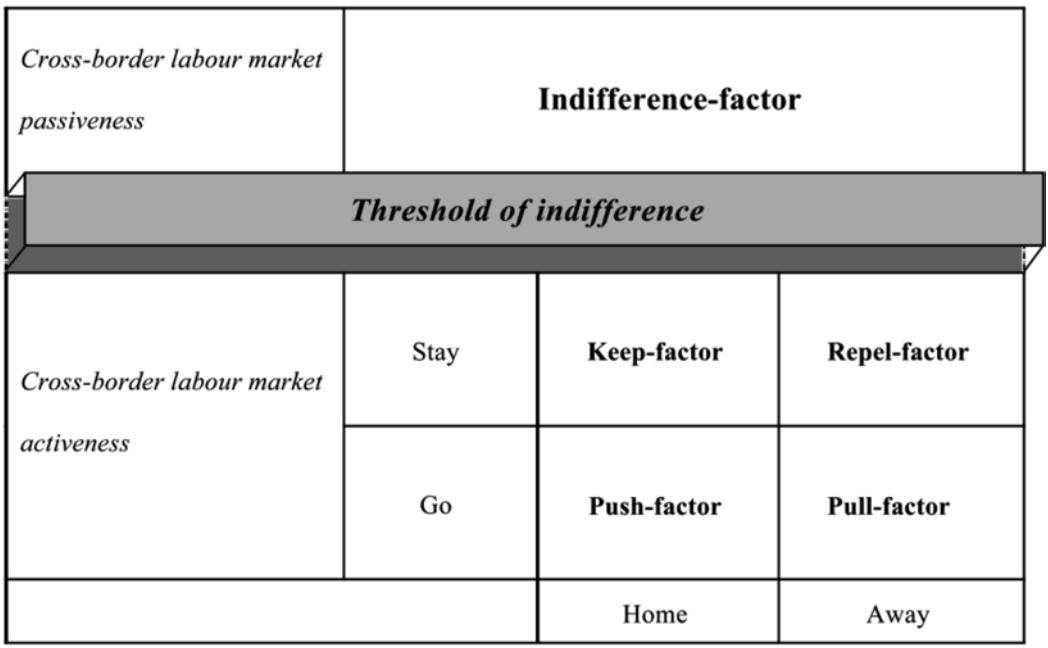


**Figure 19.1 The threshold of indifference**
*Source*: Van Houtum and Van der Velde 2004.

something that can be neglected for the daily social practices in the own country. We suggested that it is the inclusion of the attitude of such a nationally habitualized *indifference* that may help to explain why most workers do not even consider seeking work across the border. The reality is thus that the majority of workers does not surpass the threshold of indifference – only a small group will 'enter' the bottom part of the scheme, the active attitude part in which cross-border mobility is taken into full consideration. This resulted in the model above.

Earlier, Ton van Naerssen and I had reframed the idea of borders as social constructs into the idea that borders should not thus be understood as nouns, as finite, but rather as continuous work in progress, hence as verbs (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002; Van Houtum 2010a, 2010b). To this end, we coined the term *bordering*. And to make clear that with the continuous process of border-making there is a continuous process of ordering a society and antagonizing another, we used the terms 'bordering', 'ordering' and 'othering' (see also Van Houtum 2010b). Newman (2006) picked this up in his article on the distinction between the borders and the bordering approach. Our bordering approach was later used in the edited volume *B/Ordering Space* (Van Houtum et al. 2005). In this volume, the American critical theorist Hooper, at the time working for the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research, introduced the term border-work to describe this social making of borders, something that was later elaborated and extended by Rumfold (2008) in his interesting book on how citizens make and unmake borders in Europe (see also the chapter by Sandberg and Pijpers in this volume).

It is most importantly the achievement of Martin van der Velde, Bas Spierings and Ton van Naerssen to steadily have further expanded, sharpened and tested the principle of the threshold of indifference that was coined in 2004. In their articles of 2008, 2011 and 2013 Martin worked together with Bas to refine and extend the idea of the threshold of indifference into the concept of *unfamiliarity* when it concerned cross-border shopping (Spierings and Van der Velde 2008, 2013; Van der Velde and Spierings 2010). They empirically tested the approach and found out that in order for cross-border shopping to occur, a certain 'comfortable unfamiliarity' is quintessential, as it provokes a certain adventurous curiosity that is commercially beneficial. They stated that in order to promote cross-border attention and interaction – or increase international shopping mobility – and prevent cross-border aversion and avoidance – or increase international shopping immobility – European urban and regional policies should aim to help to produce processes of productive (un) familiarization (Spierings and Van der Velde 2013). Borders as markers of differences between countries are a necessity for people to become mobile and visit 'the other side'. This interesting conclusion resonates with the work that recently has come up in border studies, summed under the terms *borderscapes* or *borderscaping*, a fusion of 'borders' with 'scaping'. The latter comes from the Dutch term *scheppen* and the German word *schaffen*, which means to create or design, in which consciously is sought to use the difference a border as productive seducer makes (Eker and Van Houtum 2013; Van Houtum and Spierings 2012; Brambilla 2014; Sohn 2013; Buoli 2015). This view has important new consequences for policies in borderlands, also in the EU where policies have for decades now largely been aiming at obliterating borders that were only seen as barriers and not resources.

Martin also worked with Ton to apply the threshold approach that was originally applied for migration inside the EU towards migration towards the EU (Van der Velde and Van Naerssen 2011). And that is a relevant extension of the approach, because also outside the EU, where welfare differences with members states in the EU are higher, the dominant pattern is actually sedentarism, non-migration. Where tourism has exponentially expanded over the recent decades, moving across the border to actually stay is still the exception rather than the rule (see also the chapter of Van der Velde and Van Naerssen in this volume). Worldwide the percentage of migrants is, according to

the UN (2011), about 3 per cent. There is a persistent idea and even fear of mass migration or even invasion into the EU but this is not backed by the actual figures. Again therefore, as in the case of cross-border mobility and shopping in the EU, the perception of international human mobility in public media and political arenas is often heavily overestimated and overstressed compared with the reality, that is, the dominance of immobility. For the case of international migration outside the EU, Van der Velde and Van Naerssen redefined the threshold of indifference as the *mental border threshold*, which I understand from the perspective of wishing to stimulate mobility, because it emphasizes the border as barrier, a mental distance (see also Van Houtum 1999), but arguably is conceptually fitting less well when one wishes to explain sedentarism from the perspective of those who wish to stay. Those who willingly wish to stay put and do not even consider moving abroad generally arguably would not speak of a mental border, but of indifference. To this mental border threshold they interestingly added the *locational threshold* (whether or not the migrant can find a suitable location) and *trajectory threshold* (whether or not he or she reaches his or her destination because of the difficulties encountered during the journey) (see also Figure 1.1 in this volume).

So, ten years after our coining of the concept of the threshold of indifference that aimed to explain cross-border labour market immobility (Van Houtum and Van der Velde 2004), a whole series of publications have followed contributing to an increased richness of the 'Nijmegen' approach. The concept has travelled and evolved. By persistently expanding the approach to other fields and by inviting other scholars to help build if further, Martin and others have sharpened and refined the debate on borders, (labour) migration and sedentarism with the approach.

This book provides an important new step in this debate. In this book Martin and Ton have invited a range of distinguished scholars to reflect on the approach from their own research expertise and field, and in diverse borders sites around the world. Some have stayed close to the approach as offered in Chapter 1 by Van der Velde and Van Naerssen, others have dealt with it more loosely. This has rendered many new insights and deliberations, resulting in possible new directions of the approach as summed in, the still perhaps rather complex, Figure 18.1. It has been made convincingly clear in the various chapters that two possible enrichments of the approach lie in the continuous changing and shifting of the interpretation of the threshold over time and space, as well as in the inclusion of social groups an individual belongs to as this may lead to different perceptions of the border. And it has made clear that the approach obviously also has limits. In the interesting chapter on the Israel-Palestine border of Doaa' Elnakhala who addresses the border tactics in a rather different manner, namely in terms of hostility and violence, the approach is clearly less well applicable. And as Xavier Ferrer-Gallardo and Keina Espiñeira and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen have argued in their chapters, the approach certainly differs in terms of applicability to various cases of migration. For refugees and especially clearly for forced returnees, the idea of being able to choose, even to some extent, is quite different than for cross-border workers in an inner-EU borderland. It shows that the approach that begun with the explanation of the low percentage of cross-border workers has again travelled and is meeting new limits and new challenges, at it should.

It does not stop here, I am sure. Adding to the comments made by the editors in their concluding chapter, I would argue that an important challenge for the future of the approach is to better combine the idea of a border as a threshold and a border as a seduction or resource. When we for example zoom in on the inner borders of the EU, for a long time in the integration process of the EU the national borders were interpreted as a threshold in terms of a barrier, something that needed to get rid of. This led to a kind of internal market score sheet logic, in which the attention is solely focused on the speed of deleting the borders as barriers. It is only in recent times that spatial developers and planners are really and more willingly coming to terms with the reality that for the near future the

internal borders of the EU will not disappear. As has been argued above, the cross-border (labour market) immobility is not an anomaly, but the dominant pattern. In spatial development terms this should not be seen only as pitiful, but as a critical potential to make much better use of. In the book *Borderland* (Eker and Van Houtum 2013) we tried to work with possible scenarios for this, which could possibly further enrich the unfamiliarity approach of Spierings and Van der Velde (see above). We made a design continuum of the border, ranging from the barrier as a seductive and resourceful difference marker on the one hand (the scenario of the border as a resourceful threshold), to the border being totally open, thereby turning the border into a historical relict of a time that once was on the other (the scenario cross-border community). This leads to a range of possible designs for border landscapes. Maybe it is worthwhile to see if such a continuum rather than an either/or could be applied to the case of migration and mobility. Rather than trying to create a communality across borders and breaking down all possible barriers, it might sometimes be much more inspiring and innovative to emphasize the productive difference between borderlands and markets on either side of the border. Seductive differences are much more appealing than forcing markets or people to integrate. The same perhaps holds for the external borders of the EU. Here one sees a complete opposite logic when compared to the inner borders, namely a harsh and discriminative closure for many migrants, leading to an increasing number of unnecessary casualties (Van Houtum 2010a; see also Baggio's chapter in this volume). Where the inner border logic surely is ready for further refinement and more creative redesign, arguably more towards productive and seductive closure, the external border clearly needs more creative openness. In this way, the policy logics towards the internal and external borders which are dominantly and falsely kept separate, and which also in border studies are wrongly kept as separate debates, should and can be connected.

This connects to my final point. The lesson of this book for me is that after ten years of enriching and expanding the 'Nijmegen' approach on 'borders as thresholds', the debate should arguably step out of the academic circle more often and become more policy relevant, something which the editors clearly recognize themselves, as they conclude this in the last chapter. Zooming in on the EU again, too often, as expressed above, in policy regarding borders and borderlands there has been an emphasis on stimulating mobility/migration inside the EU, thereby almost obstinately ignoring the reality on the ground, which is sedentarism. And when it concerns external borders, too long now, has there been an one-sided policy focus on stopping migrants, an inflexibility that is erroneous, even deadly, which needs to be broken.

I am glad that I can conclude that many new challenges lie ahead. That means that the book has done a good job indeed, as a good debate usually leads to new questions. It is for this reason that I compliment the editors and authors with a compelling contribution to the rich and blossoming field of border studies. I look forward to the road ahead.

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