People, borders, and trajectories

Martin van der Velde

Preamble

Last fall Ton and I ‘finally’ completed an edited volume on East-West migration in Europe. This volume provides the results of on of the workshops of the seminar ‘Mind the GaP’, organized in the summer of 2004 at the occasion of further profiling the research program ‘Governance and Places’ of the Nijmegen School of Management, in which both of us are participating. This workshop focused on differing approaches towards east-west migration research employed in policy and social sciences, particularly in human geography.

My contribution to this Festschrift consists of the epilogue of this volume. This seems to me very appropriate in several respects. First of all a liber amicorum is meant as a kind of showcase of the contribution of the honoured to science in general and scientific development of the authors in particular. This co-authored epilogue serves both. First of all it develops the concept of ‘thresholds’ in several phases of a (potential) migration process. To my knowledge this is still a quite new approach. Secondly this piece for me also is the culmination of my fruitful (but too short) cooperation with Ton. Due to him we were able to enhance the ‘threshold of indifference’-model, which was already developed within the realm of border studies in the Nijmegen Centre of Border Research (van Houtum and van der Velde 2004), to include more ‘geography’ in the form of the spatial routing of mobility processes. Furthermore the first part of the title of this epilogue, Borders, People and Trajectories, is also very appropriate to serve as the title of my contribution. Scientific cooperation and its success for a large part are based on people, disciplinary borders and development trajectories. To paraphrase Shakespeare’s quote on the city1: “What is science but for the people”, science and scientific progress need good scholars. Cooperation is all about being able and willing to cross disciplinary borders. And thirdly the way and direction this cooperation evolves can be expressed in development trajectories.

By including the epilogue2 in this volume, this specific part of the work of Ton will gain attention of scholars other disciplines as well and thereby hopefully also be serving as a source for further debate on the important issues surrounding trans- and international migration.

1 “What is the city but for the people”, Shakespeare, 1623, Coriolanus.
A model to approach migration in the enlarged European Union

The enlargement process of the European Union has raised a considerable number of academic, political and public debates on a wide variety of related issues ranging from European governance and citizenship to environment and public safety. Perhaps the most controversial debate in this respect concerns the issue of east-west migration after enlargement, equally feared and desired in and by the old (EU 15) member states. On the one hand it is argued that, due to the greying of the population and certain niches in the labour market, migrant labour is needed. On the other hand, most of the old EU countries are putting restrictions on the flow of migrant workers from the new member states. In the UK, which was an important exception and which allowed free entry of workers from ‘the East’ after the enlargement of May 2004, policy makers changed their mind and were considerably less liberal towards the (expected) flow of new EU members of January 2007.

There are different approaches towards east-west migration research employed in policy and social sciences, particularly in human geography. Some researchers limit themselves to the analysis of current processes, which can be done in a quantitative way using available statistics and qualitatively by in-depth interviewing. Other methods, which are primarily quantitatively oriented, elaborate on ‘positivist’ forecasting and impact studies, estimating future flows of migration and their influence on labour markets and/or social welfare systems. Wallace (2007) exposes the weaknesses of the available statistics. Her forecast of ‘non-massive migration flows’ within the enlarged European Union is based on arguments regarding state regimes and migration motives. While these imply a free movement of labour within the enlarged EU, Delsen (2007) argues that the (future) volume of immigration from East Europe to West Europe is usually underestimated. Moreover, he questions the economic advantages of migration for both the sending country and the host country. In this respect, it is interesting that Iglicka in her contribution argues that Poland is in the process of transition from a labour-exporting country to a labour-importing country. In such a fluid situation it would be all the more interesting to see how the balance between positive and negative impacts is evaluated.

Researchers who position themselves within a more qualitative tradition tend to make use of a ‘social constructivist’ approach to scrutinise the de- and re-bordering of the European Union with regard to migration and mobility. This is the approach by Geisen et al. (2007) focusing on constructing ‘the other’ and Pijpers (2007), with the latter questioning migration forecasts. She reaches the conclusion that the social construction of borders in the European Union is ongoing and so will most likely be the efforts to border labour immigrants. Narratives on ‘the other’ might be more powerful on having an impact on policies than quantitative models. We will join the ‘social constructivist’ approach, while using the umbrella of the duality of structure and agency as coined by Giddens. In the enlargement process of the European Union, institutional (re)borderings are involved, which have an impact on the mobility strategies of (potential) migrants. To capture the individual spatial migratory behaviour we will propose a model constituted of the three basic components: people as agents who decide to migrate; borders that are constructed as barriers
or de-constructed to facilitate mobility; and trajectories as the routes people use to cross borders.

**How people decide to move**

Often when studying actual and potential migration, migrants are reduced to anonymous atomised entries, ‘moving bodies’, functioning in a ‘force field’ of, for instance, population growth, supply and demand on the labour market and regional economic disparities. Such approaches to mobility depart from assumptions that were already formulated in the 1880s by Ravenstein (1885), who considered regional wage differences as the basic principle underlying labour migration and distance as a determining variable. In later years, new and more complex explanatory models came into use, the most popular ones located into the ‘push and pull’ framework. *Push* concerns the factors that force or motivate people to leave home. They are mostly economic such as poverty, open and hidden unemployment, and small farm sizes but could be social as well, for example, lack of educational or health facilities, political climate and so on. *Pull* factors mirror the pull factors and they refer to higher wage levels, employment opportunities, the availability of good health and educational facilities, and democratic space. Although admitting ‘intermediate factors’ such as state interventions, the framework is basically within the neo-classical economic tradition, based on the decision-making individual that acts as the ideal *homo economicus*. Moreover, people’s decision-making is considered as structurally determined.

To cope with the shortcomings of the neo-classical approaches, Simon (1982) introduced the notion of *bounded rationality*, stating that people in their decision to migrate or not cannot be economically rational since they simply do not have all the information they ideally need to take a fully rational decision; even if they do, part of the information will be distorted. Other dimensions and concepts were included, for example the influential idea of *human capital* (Becker 1962) that links the labour decision to migrate to investments in education or learning experiences that could be profitable in the long run. Again another notion is *transaction costs*, which states that all kinds of transactions and, as a consequence, decisions involve indirect costs, relating partly to another culture, as well to different legal procedures, and so on. The new economies of labour migration pioneered by Stark (1982) and originally conceived for rural-urban migration in developing countries, conceptualise the origins of migration as an effort by *households* to overcome market failures that constrain local production and shifts the focus of migration modelling from individual independence to mutual interdependence among members of households, families or even communities. The idea is that the collective unit collaborates with the individual to take the migration decision, with the aim of migration as a means to spread economic risks of the family, community, and so forth.

However, even when these aspects are included, the explanation still departs from an economically based push-pull framework. To start with, the push-pull framework often overestimates the level of labour mobility. For example, we need to realise that within the EU – both the old and the new – immobility is still the rule. Logically, we then reach the conclusion that we should focus less on
factors that make people move and more on factors that make them stay. This is the reason why Straubhaar and others (1988) developed the so-called *insiders advantage approach* (Straubhaar 1988; Tassinopolous and Werner 1999; Fischer 1999), which tries to attach an economic value to being immobile, by introducing ‘keep’ factors. Examples are the work experience or competences built up by workers in practice. If an employer on the other side of the border is not interested in such skills, a worker has to weigh the profit he/she can make when he/she moves against the loss of his or her competences. When a worker is strongly socially embedded in a region and, moreover, feels happy to live there, these could be reasons to stay in the home area as well. This ‘feeling of wellness’ can be linked to the concept of ‘psychic income’ introduced by Greenhut (1956).

In addition to such ‘keep’ factors, we can also include ‘repel’ factors. These factors are linked to the potential destination region, for example, when that region is characterised by traditional resentment towards foreigners, or when the region has an unfavourable regional image, for example because of high crime rates. Such repel factors might prevent people from going there. However, again, an approach, which includes keep and repel factors, still fits into the tradition of rational choice approaches. It presupposes actors who are constantly in a process of deliberation, who are engaged in weighing the pros and cons of different places or regions. In other words, it supposes that these actors are willing and are able to evaluate between the ‘here’ and ‘there’, in our case the area on this side of the border and the area on the other side.

However, migrants are not soulless, overly rationalistic objects, that can easily be put in mathematical models explaining and forecasting the flows between countries and different parts of the world. Such is the approach of Faist when he argues that *social networks* explain why people stay or move to become transnationals (2000). His book focuses on Turkish-German linkages but it can be easily applied within the European Union, as Dikkers (2007) demonstrates in the case of Eastern European Roma, who – both for economic and social (read discrimination) motives – have reason to migrate to Western Europe but they do not. Also, how can we explain the dominance of Poles in de migration flows to and from (mainly) Germany, the Netherlands and the UK? Migrants should certainly be seen as real human beings with a world view, perceptions, stories and so on, that have to be included in the analysis in order to understand what is happening and to be better prepared for what might happen in the (near) future. In this respect, it is interesting to note that of the Polish migrants in the Netherlands less than half mention finding a job as the major motive for leaving Poland. Family reasons (family creating, reuniting or co-migrating) are also important for about 30 per cent of them (Ecorys 2006). Of course, a part of this flow would not come into existence if the job-related migrations had not materialised but nevertheless it puts the potentiality of migrant flows into a different perspective. We will return to the question of motives and decision-making after having clarified the character of the two other components of our conceptualising East-West Europe migration.
Borders

The importance of reflecting on the nature of borders and its impact on policies becomes particular clear in Geisen et al (2007). What are borders? An easy definition states that they are lines demarcating units that differ or are supposed to differ, and in that way, they reveal their ‘Janus-faced character’ (Van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer 2005): existing and/or imagined. This section touches upon the various manifestations of such a duality.

At the structural level, a first distinction is between interpretations of borders as stemming either from 'nature' or 'nurture'; as innate or learned phenomena (Storey 2001). In Western countries, the former interpretation has a fairly long tradition stemming from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia demarcating sovereign states with a territorial line. It reached its summit in the romantic nationalist movements of the early 19th century, which imagined states as nation-states, and gradually seemed to lose credibility in the final decades of the 20th Century. The idea of borders as created and socialised by human actions is a more accepted one in Central and Eastern Europe but the events after 1989 with new territorial units and borders showed the strength and force of the nation-state idea. The same ambivalence certainly exists in de post-colonial states of the non-Western world, where as a rule demarcations were imposed by colonial powers and continued after independence. Imagined communities (Anderson 1991) are needed to make borders acceptable but there are still many examples of cross-border movements based on pre-colonial loyalties and traditions, such as in Sub-Saharan Africa where crossing national borders is ingrained in the lifestyle of traders and nomads (see for example Bilder and Kraler 2005). To make matters even more complicated, in the wake of the 9/11 events there is a trend to posit again a kind of natural world ‘order’ that is accompanied by ‘natural’ demarcations.

Another interesting interpretation sees the border as fuzzy or amorphous rather than fixed with a binary character. In fact, in the final decades of the 20th century the two just-mentioned seemingly contradictory functional interpretations of the border were fused by the conceptualisation of the border as a selective filter. Where borders used to be filters for all (or most) of the cross-border interactions, they now increasingly control and fence off certain forms of interactions and processes. A clear example is the US-Mexico border, which in the wake of the NAFTA agreement lost a considerable part of its control function for goods, but reinforced its control function for people who intend to cross the border, especially when entering the US. While globalisation and liberalisation have led to a free flow of capital and an increasingly free flow of goods, where people are concerned, the trends are contradictory. For example, an increase in temporary cross-border movements for tourist reasons is encouraged, while border control has been sharpened with regard to workers and asylum seekers. In general, there is a greater contradiction between the existence of (inter)national sovereignties and territories in a world that is increasingly cosmopolitan and transnational. Concerning possible futures for the EU, Zielonka (2001) foresees two development paths: the EU either as a Westphalian superstate, with clear-cut outer and eradicated inner borders, or as a neo-medieval empire in which loyalty and sovereignties can shift easily, not only in time, but also depending on the issue.
At the level of the individual human agent, one can distinguish the idea of the naturalness of borders and the assessment of the border as a ‘natural’ demarcation of personal action spaces on the one hand, and the border functioning as a barrier to activities on the other hand (Van der Velde 1999; Van Houtum 1998). A negative correlation characterises the two interpretations. When a border is regarded as something that demarcates in a natural way and the natural limits of action spaces coincide with the location of territorial borders, there is less need to cross the border, and the border is not considered or experienced as a barrier. Borders may be conceived as guardians against threats from ‘the other side’. This functional interpretation of the border connects to the individual assessment of the border as something that is natural and logical. Conversely, borders can be regarded as creating differences between the adjacent territories, differences which, in turn may create opportunities such as cross-border price differences. This functional view of the border concurs with the individual assessment of the border as a barrier when intended actions to utilising these opportunities are obstructed by the same border. It is clear that with increasing globalisation this view is gaining in importance. The duality of borders logically follows. They are either the instrument to reach certain goals, or the final outcome itself, or, both simultaneously (Williams and Van der Velde 2005). From an EU perspective for example, the outer border serves as an instrument in the migration policy, especially as some kind of filter. It can also be considered some kind of an outcome of the whole discussion on the essence of European (Union) identity. It is the territorial demarcation of this identity.

Finally, we want to distinguish a more static interpretation versus one that stresses dynamic aspects. In the first interpretation the border indicates the more or less stable outcome of demarcation practices. The border itself is the centre of interest, compared to the more dynamic practices and processes of bordering. Thus a distinction can be made between boundary studies, in which the ‘where’ is stressed, and border studies in which the ‘how’ is much more important (Van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer 2005). The distinction that Paasi (1996) makes between borders as morphologies (borders on the ground) versus borders as representation or interpretation (borders in the mind) is similar to these two interpretations. It is in this perspective that we have to evaluate the border issue in and around the EU: within the EU the borders are conceived as imagined, nurtured and open for erosion, while the outer EU borders are considered as ‘natural’ or, in the case of the admission of Turkey to the EU, as a demarcation of ‘West’ from the ‘East’. But as the debates make clear, this view of the Turkish-EU border can change and as such shows processes of (de- and re-) bordering.

**Trajectories**

People move or stay, they cross borders or not. If they move they follow routes, which are often already explored by predecessors and/or are organised and exploited by smugglers who are specialised in human trafficking and need to be hired. Pang (2007) explains how Chinese undocumented migrants pay substantial amounts of money to ‘snakeheads’ who transport them to Central Asian states, from there to Russia and then to Eastern Europe and further, usually
to the UK. The journey is disjunctive and it can take months before it is accomplished. On the way to the West there are certain central points or ‘hubs’ that serve as transfer points: Istanbul is a well-known hub, serving people from the Middle East and Iran; several places in Morocco and in the northern states of Africa are other ones, serving African migrants (Brachet 2005; Moppes 2006).

In the migration literature, it has been acknowledged that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish countries of destination, origin or transfer. In the case of the study of Chinese immigrants in Belgium (Pang 2007), is Belgium a country of destination or transfer? Many undocumented migrants say that they were hindered from making their way to the UK. In the same way, anecdotal evidence reveals that people from Central Asia, the Middle East, the Far East and even Sub-Saharan Africa are immigrants in the new member states of the EU although it remains to be seen whether they consider themselves as permanent or temporary migrants. In the latter case, they will sooner or later move to one of the old EU countries or the United States. At the conceptual level this implies that the inner EU borders although of considerable significance bear an insignificant meaning for these migrants.

Trajectories are meant to bridge the distance between places (localities, regions, countries) of origin and places of destination. This distance is not measured in space only; it is also a mental construct since it equally involves motives to stay or go such as the perception of the labour markets that can act as a strong or weak pull factor, and the institutional setting of borders, including border controls.

Thinking international migration differently

In the foregoing we explained three components of a geographical conceptualisation of cross-border mobility. In the first place, international migrants take strategic decisions to move or stay. Their decision is not overly rational, if only because they are not fully informed about all alternatives and depend on social networks. In the second place, at the individual level borders are ‘natural’ or created. The perception follows the actors’ discursive interpretation of structures (Pijpers and Van der Velde 2007). Third, trajectories as spatial routes connecting place of origin and places of desired destination constrain or facilitate the movement of the actor in space. We will now proceed with a model of factors influencing spatial behaviour in international migration.

Instead of focusing on mobility, we start with the concept of threshold of indifference to explain labour immobility, as developed by Van Houtum and Van der Velde (2004). This concept is based on the idea and rationality of belonging and the importance for people to belong to somewhere or to feel at home in a specific locality or region. This concept is related to that of psychic income as used by Greenhut but – again – it expands the latter idea beyond the realm of economic rational choice approaches. The consequence of using the notion of a space of belonging is that a mental distance is created between places on both sides of the border. At someone’s own side of the border a space of belonging is created, with ease and comfort, where mental nearness to the other inhabitants exists: ‘we’ in the ‘here’. The other side is not a space of ease or comfort, it is another ‘world’: ‘they’ in the ‘there’.
The consequence of this process is that a space of indifference is created; a space that impacts on the decision to cross borders. It creates (consciously or unconsciously) a threshold that has to be overcome before the ‘there’ is included in the search for a job (Van Houtum and Van der Velde 2004). One of the fascinating aspects of this concept is that it explains why social networks are that important in rejection or disregarded in a cross-border movement: it is the existence of transnational communities or of ‘here’ in ‘there’ that allows, facilitates and initiates cross-border migration (Madsen and van Naerssen 2003). For example, the availability of Polish newspapers, food and drinks, and a Polish community will provide migrants with the feeling of being at home. In an earlier phase of the decision-making process, it might also lower the threshold of indifference.

In the original model by Van Houtum and Van der Velde, after crossing the indifference threshold, the actor enters the active attitude part. Here a (bounded) rational process of decision-making is supposed, where all kinds of locational factors are taken into account. These factors can be connected to the place or region of origin, but also to the possible destination. Depending on this deliberation, the actor might decide to become mobile or stay put. We would like to introduce a second threshold here, the locational threshold. This threshold is not surpassed when the actor decides not to move although he/she might be engaged in an active search process.

As was already mentioned in the introduction, we regard three constituents as fundamental to international migration, people, borders and trajectories. This is the third aspect that we also would like to introduce in our model. When someone has decided to move, he or she still has to determine the route to take. This is especially relevant in the case of undocumented migration. Where in the process of deciding on the trajectory, the outcome can be that the wish for mobility will not materialise, or as is more likely to be the case, the final destination will never be reached, because the migrant gets stuck somewhere en route. We would like to call these factors that either totally prevent mobility, or influence the destination, a trajectory threshold.

Figure 9.1 tries to elucidate the ‘dynamics’ in trans- or international migration. The model suggests a sequence of decisions of thresholds, while allowing for several interactions and feedback mechanisms to take place. At the structural level, the differences and similarities on both sides of the border are extremely important for crossing the ‘threshold of indifference’. When these factors (such as income difference, unemployment rates) are considerable, one could expect people to be less ‘indifferent’, implying that the ‘there’ is considered an alternative option. Going beyond the economic factors at play, the social component of ‘here’ in ‘there’ is of major importance in decision-making. Space, distance, borders and place as comprehensively incorporated in our notion of ‘trajectory’ are the geographical factors that play a role, and as such explicitly labelled as determining factors in the model.

The original model has been developed in the context of an already highly integrated region like the EU 15, where contrary to the expectations, dismantling the border did not result in a major increase in labour market mobility. In such a situation explaining immobility instead of mobility is relevant, as, for example, is shown by Dikkers (2007) for the Roma. The model can also be used in
situations and at other levels where integration has not developed to the same extent, for example, the US-Mexico border or the outer border of the (enlarged) EU. However, and as a final note, as Hooper (2007) shows in the case of sex trafficking, all cross-border movements, migrant motives, borders and trajectories should be put in the context of power relations between states and regions which constitute the hidden dimension in the model.

Conclusion: assessing the (un)desirability of borders for channelling mobility

National borders do play quite different roles in different parts of the world. Sometimes they are not much more than symbolic markers between groups of people that feel somehow connected. In other places they function as an active protection against presumed threats of all kinds. Focusing on the EU, this is in essence the same. The Eurocrats would like to interpret the inner borders (especially the ones between the EU-15) as relics from the past, which we have to get rid of. At the same time they use the outer borders to literally establish
fences against the forces that in their view threaten the wealth and prosperity of the Union.

Where the mobility-inducing differences are small, people will be indifferent to borders: they will not cross the threshold of indifference. This seems the case in the EU 15. Differences are small and much to the disappointment of the EU, mobility is low. Borders are not needed in their role as a control mechanism for human mobility. In this vein, potential mobility between the countries of the EU 25 might be higher, as demonstrated in the case of the Poles. But even here it seems more a matter of a temporary shock to establish a new equilibrium. Within the context of the EU, performing a balancing act between national protection and EU integration has proven the difficulty of using the national borders as a control mechanism. Those that want to be mobile go to any length to reach their goal. To cite a recent example: in the Netherlands in the spring of 2006 there was a lively debate about whether or not the transitional measures with regard to labour mobility should be continued. Within the government the State Secretary of Social Affairs and Employment pleaded for the complete abolition of barriers. His main argument however was not so much that this will be beneficial to the Dutch economy, but that he was unable to enforce the existing measures. He was throwing in the towel so to speak.3

When looking at the outer borders obviously the differences are bigger and therefore also the motivation ‘to get in’. Also in this case however, it is our conviction that we do not need to overestimate the mobility of people. In fact, mankind is not very mobile. Notwithstanding the fact that our hypothetical ‘migration country’ would be the 5th largest country in the world, it would only account for three per cent of the world population. Of course, one could conclude that this shows that borders are functioning quite well. Comparable data for the EU (supposed to be a showcase for an integrated region without borders) shows that only 1.7 per cent of the EU nationals are living in another EU-15 country. Could this be an indication for the redundancy of borders when it comes to controlling human mobility?

Along borders several outcomes are possible, resulting in mobility as well as immobility. When a large group of people exhibit an indifferent attitude towards job opportunities on the other side of the border, immobility will be the rule. That situation is found along the Dutch-German border, perhaps as well other inner EU borders. The other extreme holds for borders such as those between the EU and Africa, where life itself is at stake for the workers from Africa, and people are ‘desperately’ seeking alternatives for their current situation. The greater the (spatial and mental) distance, the border control, and time to overcome between places of origin and destination, the greater the importance of trajectories acting as constraints or facilitators. Workers from the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 apparently occupy the middle ground. From one of the European opinion polls it appears that they show no big desire to move (Bruinsma and Hakfoort 2005); for them keep and repel factors are already more important than the authorities in the old member states realise.

The provocative question we would like to leave the reader with is, what would happen if we grant everybody unlimited freedom of movement (as stated in the Declaration of Human Rights)? When accepting the thesis that mankind is

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3 In May 2007 the transitional measures were officially abolished.
not particularly nomadic, are the current border control measures not like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut? We counsel a more reactive instead of proactive stance, but at the same time close monitoring to try to understand what makes people mobile. We would not be surprised if in the end the answer to the question of the desirability of undesirability of borders would be that we can discard borders as channelling instruments for human mobility and that we have to concentrate on the regions of origin and destination instead.

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