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Re-thinking Migration Planning Visions Through a Border Lens

In times of globalization, questions of planning in relation to migration tend to be fixated on state-centric approaches to cities and regions. In this paper, we formulate a 'border lens' that thinks beyond bounded notions of space and emphasizes the intricate emotional spatialities attached to borders and migration.

In dialogue with Friedmann's notion of planning for migrants, 'integration', Sandercock's 'voices from the borderlands' metaphor and Arendt's notion of 'action', we explore local everyday struggles and transformations involved in the negotiation of hospitality in the Dutch/German borderlands. With the border lens and our empirical vignettes, we aim to problematise the urban bias in planning discussions related to migration and to go beyond the state-centric question of 'where to locate/fixate the migrant'.

Two tales from a borderland

The village of Kranenburg has been confronted with the state-driven and logistics-based arrival of asylum-seekers, whereas the support for them nevertheless has to be provided by local citizens and the respective municipalities. "We have no decision-making power when it comes to allocating refugees to our municipality. This is taken at a higher level, in Arnsberg, based on the Koenigsteiner-Key. All we know is that buses are sent, dropping off migrants on the sidewalk [in front of our city-hall]. We must pick them up from there" (Kranenburg's staff member, 2015).

Just a few kilometers from here, on the other side of the Dutch-German border, a small migrant support organization based in Nijmegen discusses the local consequences of a Dutch national debate regarding where shelter for undocumented migrants should be located. "Bed, bath, bread only in the five major cities" is declared as the conclusion to a long-standing debate in the Dutch national government. These five cities do not include the border city of Nijmegen.

The German village of Kranenburg and the adjoining Dutch city of Nijmegen do not resemble the urban agglomerations that have been the primary locus of popular as well as academic discussions on the challenges of planning in relation to migration (Friedmann/Lehrer 1997; Sassen 2001). The introductory
Migration as a Planning Problem?

A pertinent question is why migration comes to be seen as a planning challenge in the first place? Why are certain groups of migrants seen as more or less of a challenge for social integration and spatial allocation than others? Twenty years ago, in a pioneering attempt to address the paucity of references to migration in the extant planning literature, Friedmann warned of the “dynamic, often dangerously volatile situation” brought along by “masses of immigrants to the city” (1995: 277). For him, the ‘overarching problem’ for planners in Europe’s ‘world cities’ was how to encourage the economic, socio-cultural and political integration of immigrants with their host societies “in order to maintain healthy economic growth and keep inevitable (sic) social conflict to tolerable levels” (1995: 277). To put it in his words:

“Where immigrant groups fail to be integrated (...) they are marginalized, and the marginalization of migrant populations can have grave dysfunctional consequences for the host society, including the loss of production, a rise in criminal activity, a flourishing drug economy, heightened inter-ethnic conflict, and constantly rising expenditures by private individuals as well as the state for security and police control.” (Friedmann, 1995: 280).

Friedmann framed immigration to large urban areas largely in terms of ‘problems’ best addressed at the local level within legal frameworks set at the national scale. His selective problematisations, alongside his hierarchical values of attractiveness attached to differential kinds of Others (illegal, migrant, well- or not well-integrated, speaking or not speaking the host language), sees migration as a state would: objective, dispassionate, inclusionary-paternalist, eminently ‘reasonable’. From such a state-centric perspective flows the classical view that the process of migrant integration (involving both newcomers and hosts) can be planned by answering questions like: Where should new migrants be settled? What is the optimum spatial distribution of migrant populations? In short, Friedmann’s vision of migration planning could best be described in the words Sandercocck used to reinterpret the field of planning more widely, as “the restriction and control of certain bodies in space – those of women, racial minorities, the poor, and indigenous peoples, among others” (1998: 12).

The urban bias underlying such state-centric and territorialisng planning visions, we believe, continues to inform the German and Dutch planning policies today. As our introductory vignettes show, the German village of Kranenburg has been suddenly confronted with newcomers because of centrally planned distribution mechanisms (see Fig. 2). The Dutch example focuses on a national declaration that basic facilities for undocumented migrants should be concentrated
in the five big cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, Eindhoven, Utrecht and Rotterdam. National distribution and concentration appear to be major issues in migration planning.

We argue that taken together, the planning visions emerging from either side of our borderland start from a naïve notion of spatial relations and a misguided notion of migration as a one-sided flow from one homogeneous and stable place to another. This view not only decontextualizes migration from the larger geopolitical and social relations connecting places, but also denies the agency of migrants to forge meaningful relations that go beyond obligatory one-sided integration. More fundamentally, the spatial imaginary underlying such planning visions locks space into a bounded and inward-looking relation with difference. An(y) Other is then seen (in varying degrees) either as a threat to security or as needing integration. Such visions, we argue, presuppose ‘socio-spatial problems’ and predetermine planning challenges within fixed frameworks that do not allow for recognizing embodied everyday relationalities of people inhabiting these spaces on the ground. Rather than a cross-border vision on hospitality, such visions continue to be locked within island-thinking understood to be demarcated by state borders (Fig. 2 literally represents Germany as an island).

In the same period Friedmann was articulating his urban and state-centered view of planning, Sandercock was crafting a provocative metaphor to describe the discipline’s main responsibility in postmodern times. Commenting on her disenchantment with ‘the exclusions of a purely class-based perspective’ as well as the ‘paralyzing effects of a structuralism’ (Sandercock, 1995) that had dominated the field over the previous two decades, she wrote: “The demographic and economic restructuring of our cities and regions over the past 20 years (...) calls for a further radical shift in perspective. We are being challenged in the city and in the academy by frontiers of difference. We must listen to these voices, for they are not only telling us what is wrong with our cities, but also what is wrong with our way of looking at the world, and providing clues as to what might be better ways of dealing with both. In other words, we are faced with a challenge to both our theory and our practice by what I call the voices from the borderlands” (Sandercock 1995: 79).

Drawing inspiration primarily from the writings of North American women of color, Sandercock argues that these ‘voices from the borderlands are significant for planning theory, and (...) raise questions for planning practice that are arguably the most difficult we face in this and coming decades” (ibid.: 79). It is precisely in the work of those “inhabiting the margins/borderlands – psychologically, epistemologically, ontologically, and methodologically that we may find a new way, a

new space (...) a space of radical possibility – a way forward” (ibid.). Two decades on from when these words were written, we can only concur with Sandercock’s planning vision of a planning one that moves beyond state-centric blind spots to acknowledge epistemological ‘uncertainty’, acknowledge multiple identities as active subjects, encouraging us to “reach out to take risks, to explore the borderlands and transcend differences between classes, races, ethnicities, genders”, and perhaps most importantly, to “give up the search for a safe place, a homogeneous community, and to embrace difference and diversity” (ibid.: 85).

The Border Lens

In this article we build on Sandercock’s ‘borderlands metaphor’ by grounding it in the individual and collective, real and imagined, material as well as emotional, diasporic European borderlands we inhabit. We attempt this by crafting a border lens capable of seeing everyday struggles, conflicts and transformations involved in the negotiation of hospitality.
straddling the German/Dutch border. It is from our vantage point as migrant border scholars, neither fully belonging to one side of the border nor to the other, partially incorporated but nevertheless still vulnerable to the arbitrariness of state regulatory power in both The Netherlands and Germany, that we experience the border from an emotionally inhabited location. This location cannot be reduced to mere metaphor, as we embody the border, thereby making us wary of therapeutically-minded planning strategies that express the everyday borderland through the voices of oppressed Others (cp. Sandercock 2004). Significantly, our space is alive to ambiguity, paradox and the fraught contextualities of emotional responses that resist any safe recuperation via rational, liberal-institutionalist visions of territorialised meta-governance.

The space produced by our lens is not without its risks, pains and joys. But its gift grants us a powerful voice to question nation state-oriented narratives framing the borderland, from the perspective of its multiply unacknowledged, hidden under- and outsiders. It is through such a border lens that we can grasp the border and its surrounding regional hinterland as a true frontier of difference beyond the two nationalities that lay monopoly claim on. It is a space of transformation made up with the help of all those who have no rights, but at the same time whose rights are already and always prefigured and legitimated through their affective and bodily habitation of the borderland.

When seen from the perspectives of embodied relations of people, borders take on a more transformative meaning, rather than being fixed and pre-given. The inhabitance and emotionalities of what Hannah Arendt (1958) once called inter-human relations have a power of their own in producing actions that alter the paths of being a citizen, often ignored in more static understandings of citizenship as based on fixed identities (e.g. place of birth, legal status). For Arendt, the true realm of human affairs is situated in relational actions: „Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitation and cut across all boundaries“ (Arendt 1958: 170).

Thus, rather than subscribing to physical or legal boundaries that attempt to „bound“ the otherwise boundlessness of inter-human action, for Arendt: „[T]he polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be“ (Arendt 1958 : 177).
If matters of ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ are central to building and completing planning visions for new projects and regions in an increasingly interdependent Europe (cp. Ache 2011), equally urgent is the question of how capable these visions are in adapting to the transboundary nature of identity-formations and communities on the ground. Planning visions never exist outside the community. But, what is community anyway?

Unbounding Planning Visions

‘When my boyfriend revealed to me that he is undocumented I was shocked. It was only then that I realised how difficult our system can be to outsiders’ (a Nijmegen inhabitant, reflecting on her former relationship, May 2015).

“Now I am facing the challenge of receiving the affection of a young Syrian refugee I am trying to support here in Kleve” (a shop-owner in Kleve, reflecting on hospitality towards newcomers, July 2015).

Locating our gaze in the ‘in-between’ spaces of inter-human relations takes on an unbounded, unpredictable dimension that dislocates the bounded, seemingly fixed gaze of cross-border state hospitality towards un/welcome guests, while entangling the same within cross-border trajectories of welcome guests (EU nationals). In the inter-human emotion of love, for instance, the border between a legal citizen and an undocumented migrant (categories imposed by state institutions) emerges as an ongoing negotiation and intimate co-habitation. Even the seemingly hard legal boundaries that come under Dutch-German and EU regulations on mobility (allowing European nationals to cross borders while limiting others to do the same), when seen from everyday inter-human relations, are contested. For example, after the rejection of his asylum application and a period of nine months spent in detention, an undocumented migrant in Nijmegen chose to live with his Dutch girlfriend on the German side of the border. With his mobility, he has inspired other undocumented migrants to think about this option as well. However, migration regulations attempted to bound his mobility again, as he was caught by the German police during a control on the streets in his new living place. At that moment, he could not hand over any documents to the police. As a result, this man was brought to the police station where his fingerprints were checked. They noticed he applied for asylum in the Netherlands, and for this reason he was sent back to the Dutch side of the border. There a rather Kafkaesque conversation followed between him and a border guard, as our informant told us:

“He [the border guard] told me ‘don’t show up here again’, but I told him: ‘I was not in the Netherlands, I was in Germany. The German police brought me here, and now you say, ‘don’t show up in the Netherlands.’ I am confused.”

The confusion is that he actually acted already according to Dutch regulations by moving to Germany, but with this move he offended European regulations. At the end of this procedure, the Dutch authorities could do nothing more than give him an expulsion order, a one-page document saying he is obliged to leave Dutch territory. This procedure reveals the notion of Dikec (2009) that spaces of law can easily turn into spaces of lawlessness. At the moment of his release, the Dutch authority agent jokingly suggested to our informant: “Take your bicycle and go to Paris”. This last comment is striking not only because it reproduces the notion on that only big cities are big enough to handle migrants, but also reinforces the image that once the migrant has crossed the border it is not our problem anymore.

We, as researchers, also encountered the ‘absurdity’ of the border-as-limit ourselves during a recent gathering of the round table, a monthly event at Kranenburg city hall to discuss issues related to supporting refugees, involving the mayor, leaders of local support organisations and migrants. At a recent meeting, which the authors attended, different aspects of Kranenburg’s ‘welcome culture’ were addressed, including bicycle repair initiatives started by retired persons, the idea of refugee integration through sport, as well as the challenge of how to deal with often appalling hygiene conditions in overcrowded dormitories where migrants are forced to live. When mentioning to local support staff that these issues are very similar to those being discussed in the Netherlands, perhaps requiring a joint or cross-border response of some kind, the reaction was immediate: “But the border!” Thus, the border hinders the emergence of a migrant solidarity network. In other words, solidarity initiatives may uncritically reproduce the state-gaze of bounded spaces and places. Similarly in Nijmegen, Stichting Gast: a Dutch migrant support organization, stipulates in its charter that in order to get support its own members (undocumented migrants) must be attached to the city of Nijmegen. This point of territorial attachment creates an inherent tension with the often complex migratory trajectories of its potential clients.

However, these bounded notions of solidarity have also been transgressed through everyday actions. For instance, our border was crossed by a spontaneous social-media campaign of students at the Radboud University Nijmegen. Students amassed within a very short time several carloads of clothing, blankets and bedding for 150 refugees housed in a high school gymnasium across the border in the German city of Kleve. This Grenzüberschreitende Spendenaktion received wide press coverage in the local German media, surprising many German locals who had never expected such solidarity from the Dutch side of the border. Similarly, within Stichting Gast, the idea emerged of collecting donations for refugees across the border. While this act initially came as a surprise, several Gast clients began to offer donations to the refugees in Kleve, and are in addition becoming active in migrant support organisations there as well. In this way, the proximity of the border, and the nearness of human needs across the border, spurs transboundary, inter-human action that refuses to be fixed in space. Inhabiting
border regions triggers actions that transgress the limits of legal identities bounding human actions by precisely crossing the border.

Conclusions: Re-envisioning Migration Planning through a Border Lens

As travelling migrant border scholars involved in migrant support initiatives that straddle out borderland, we speak from a deep sense of embodied unpredictability when forging actions that overcome our thresholds. These actions are not only potentially charged with fear about the future of the Self in relation to an (unknown) Other, but also invite a continuous sensibility and openness to not knowing where the relational path leads. Rather than taking sides within binary visions of us/them, local/migrant, legal/illegal, such a border lens is critical of category-driven planning processes that further fuel rather than overcome real challenges of people on the ground. This lens urges planning to be seen as emerging from the coming together of knowledge and action initiated by marginalised actors who possess political capacity. It follows trajectories of human relations on the ground that cannot be bounded by state-centric thinking, but instead is hospitable to the unpredictabilities that emerge from inter-human relations. It is precisely at this moment, when the dream of transboundary regional integration in Europe appears to be faltering, that we argue for the urgent necessity of such a border lens. In this light, we should re-envision European borderlands as a third-space that produces cross-border relations we cannot yet imagine (Soja, 1996). It is also precisely at this time that we are informed that 3000 refugees will arrive in our borderland - being 'placed' in Nijmegen. We cannot wait to see the cross-border inter-human relations yet-to-come.

Acknowledgement: This essay is dedicated to the emotional and intellectual legacy of Edward W. Soja, esteemed colleague, close mentor, friend. 'Adieu,' Ed: Rest in Space.

Literatur


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