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The threshold of indifference;

Rethinking the power of immobility in explaining cross-border labour mobility



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The threshold of indifference; rethinking the power of immobility in explaining cross-border labour mobility

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Abstract

In the current aftermath of the post-modern era more and more scholars within social studies are working with the concept of mobility, sometimes metaphorically termed liquidity or fluidity, to denote and typify the present assumed debordering and interwovenness of our current society. At the heart of the assumed debordering is the implicit normative principle and idea that mobility has a positive connotation, and immobility a negative one. In this contribution we critically address and explore the usage of this assumption, especially in the context of cross-border labour mobility in the European Union. We argue that although our world is ever more interlinked in terms of the mobility of goods, money and information, it is still seen as 'normal' to first think in terms of we-categorisations, in terms of borders, when it comes to the migratory and commuting movements of people. These actions, practices and this behaviour still start off with reference to the (id)entity to which the subject wishes to belong. We argue that a further understanding of why and how this reference is still taken-for-granted and postulated as 'normal' in our daily lives, helps to explain why migratory movements are seen as exceptions and not as the common pattern. Focusing on and drawing empirically from the negligible existence of the Dutch-German cross-border labour market we argue that it is a further understanding of the concept of *IM*mobility more than mobility, which should be at the core of our research on cross-border labour markets. A critical awareness of the power of immobility may help to contextualise and understand the non-existence of a flourishing and fluid international labour market.

Keywords: Labour Market; Mobility; Immobility; Borders; Threshold of Indifference

1. Introduction

Right from the start of the European Union (EU) and its predecessors, encouraging and stimulating mobility has been one of the essential themes. Whether the efforts of the EU since then have been the essential trigger or the developments were only the mere accommodation and consequence of global trends, fact remains that the mobility of goods, money, and information has increased considerably. The fourth subject of policy attention, the mobility of people across the European Union, especially when it concerns labour mobility, has however not risen to the same extent. Campbell (1994) on this:

‘... it is the relative immobility of labour that is the significant backdrop to growing economic integration. In fact, the real *problématique* of globalization is, arguably, the growing disparity between the mobility of labour and of capital.’
(p.187, emphasis in the original)

It is the observation of relative *immobility* that lies at the core of this contribution. The question that we wish to address is: Why is it that people when it comes to cross-border labour mobility are relatively immobile? This paper wants to contribute to the ongoing debate on labour immobility by specifically focusing on the social attitudes of ‘people’ that are supposed to become mobile according to the generally accepted goals and policies. In doing so, we will specifically ask attention for the role national borders play within the EU as the state-centric confinements or markings of geographical (id)entities. It is important to notice that we understand borders not only as administrative, historic and more or less arbitrary lines on a map. Following earlier work, borders are regarded here as actively constructed and reconstructed and lived demarcations between groups of people (Van Houtum, 2000). As such they have a distinct influence on the perception of ‘the other side’ and the orientation of everyday spatial practices of people.

This article continues as follows. In the next section we will first address what we understand as mobility on a cross-border labour market and secondly why it is that mobility and its encouragement is so ‘fashionable’. Section 3 is dedicated to current explanations and theories for the level of mobility. This section ends with a suggestions for the introduction of another factor determining cross-border mobility, that is, *indifference*. In the fourth section the question is raised whether being mobile is all that logical. Could it be possible that immobility is the rule? The final section tries to formulate some implications both where it concerns the

ongoing academic discussion on mobility and immobility as well as (European) policies aiming at the strengthening the integration process within the EU and Europe at large.

2. Cross-border labour mobility

Mobility on the labour markets has at least two different meanings, both of them are important when trying to understand the functioning of this market, *occupational mobility* and *spatial mobility*. The first one aims at changing ones actual job-position. This may involve getting a different/better job within the same organisation, changing to another employer in the same sector, or a different employment sector altogether, but also getting employment after a period of unemployment for instance. Put differently, occupational mobility is the outcome of the question: *which* jobs are people taking? In general terms this kind of mobility can be labelled as *occupational mobility* (SER, 2001). The second interpretation of labour mobility involves the spatial component or *spatial mobility*. Within this interpretation two levels can be discerned. On the one hand this involves the physical distance between the place of work and the place of living. The most obvious exponent is ofcourse our regular short or longer commute to the workplace, but also temporal migration, for instance in the case of getting a short-term position somewhere else, falls into this category. This kind of mobility is at the centre of interest in for instance discussions on the clogging of infrastructure systems and, what some even call, the 'right' to be mobile. On the other hand, the spatial mobility involves the physical-distance dimension of occupational mobility. In other words, *where* are people taking a (new) job? Both commuting and migration are expressions of this kind of mobility. Put in the perspective of the integration process in the EU, the encouragement of the free movement of people, originally aims at this specific aspect of spatial mobility. The citizens of the EU should be able to take up jobs *everywhere* within the EU. Commuting and migration are both expressions of this spatial job-mobility². Obviously, both kinds of mobility can and often will be interrelated. A new job will have at least both dimensions, which and where. Encouraging spatial job-mobility across state borders to create an internal labour market in the EU is an important policy issue, both at the supranational, the national and the

² Within this paper, when we deal with (im)mobility, commuting and migration are put on a par. Whether or not migrating or commuting is necessary largely depends on what distance and how much time someone regards as acceptable to get to and from the place of work.

regional and local level. The latest step in putting the labour market at work to the benefit of the member states of the European Union is the wish to transform the EU-wide labour market into the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy (EC, 2001a). Increasing cross-border mobility is seen as an important instrument in reaching some kind of optimum in the perceived and desired functioning of the labour market in the EU.

‘The creation of more genuine European labour markets – removing barriers, reducing adjustments costs and skills mismatches – will increase the efficiency of labour markets overall. This would in fact reduce pressures to migrate for those *who do not want to move*, while creating genuine opportunities for those *who do wish to be mobile*.’ (EC 2001a, p.5; emphasis by the authors)

As a result, recognising the need for transparency, synchronising the rules and regulations between the member states in the EU has become a priority. Establishing an EU wide acceptance of certificates and gearing social securities systems towards each other are clear expressions of the ambition to make the labour market more transparent. It is questionable however whether transparency is a sufficient measure for people to become mobile spatially across the EU. Despite the marketisation and internalisation of labour mobility in the EU, the vast majority of the people in the European Union is still very immobile, when using cross-border mobility as the criterion. The European citizen is not "particularly nomadic (European Opinion Research Group, 2001). Based on their empirical investigation of mobility on the Swedish labour-market, Fischer et. al. (2000) identified "... immobility as a string and persistent behavioural strategy for the large majority of the population." (p.32). No more than 38% of the respondents in a recent questionnaire of Eurobarometer indicated that they had moved house at least once in the last ten years. When we look at cross-border mobility this is almost negligible. Only 4% of the respondents that had moved house had moved to another country within the European Union. In 1996 the national labour markets of the countries of the European Union accommodated approximately 7.8 million foreign workers of which almost 3 million came from other EU-countries. These 3 million foreign workers account for less than 2% of the total workforce (Kiehl & Werner, 1998b). Although this share has witnessed a steady increase from 1.6 to 3.0 million between 1983 and 1996 (Kiehl & Werner, 1998a), partly because of the entrance of new member states, the general level is still not impressive. These figures only refer to migration. Including cross-border commuting does not add much. In 1999 only about 0.2% of the total workforce in the EU commutes to other

member-countries (EC, 2001b). Even when we confine our focus to border regions, cross-border commuting is not a major factor. When we define the border region as the NUTS-3 regions (the smallest administrative region for which Eurostat provides statistical data) located immediately at a national border only 1,5% of the labour force can be characterised as a cross-border commuter. Of a total workforce of 34 million only 500.000 commute to another country (MKW, 2001). According to the research done by the European Opinion Research Group (2001) there is little prospect for geographical mobility. Only 22% of the respondents expected to move house within the next five years. A majority of 51% expected this move to be confined to their present town or village. When we look into the prospects for cross-border mobility it is even bleaker. Only 8% out of these 22% expected to move to another EU country. So out of the total EU-population only 2% expected to move to another EU-country within the next five years.

3. 'Market' explanations for cross-border labour immobility

Explanations for the low mobility figures are predominantly sought in adapting the theories that explained mobility. The dominant assumption is that a 'system' evolves towards a stage of equilibrium and that disequilibria were to be regarded as temporary, and would ultimately be levelled by some kind of mobility. Starting off from the idea that wage differences explain to a great extent the willingness of people to move and consequently the actual migration and commuting for reasons of getting a better job, a principle already formulated in the 1880's by Ravenstein (1885, 1889), the models became more and more complex. They included concepts of human capital (Sjaastad, 1962; Becker 1962), risk, the perception of the chance of achieving improvements (Harris & Tordaro, 1970), imperfect knowledge and bounded rationality. This resulted in very sophisticated models that tried to do justice the complex nature of mobility by dealing with macro- (economic) and micro-factors (individual decision making processes). Some of the best estimating models are models based on the classic Heckscher-Ohlin-Samuelson (H-O-S) model, which is a model that incorporates the substitution effect of labour mobility for capital mobility trade. Trading across borders or investing directly in another country substitutes the need to migrate. One could argue that in the case of the EU the economic integration process is dominantly taking place through the mobility of goods and capital, not people (Straubhaar, 2000). When we regard push and pull factors as two poles of a battery (Tassinopoulous and Werner, 1999), the integration policy in

the EU may have led to a significant loss in the 'potential difference' between the two poles. In other words, the differences in wealth between the member states, especially bordering states, (according to Stark and Taylor (1991) resulting in a feeling of relative deprivation (relative to a reference group for instance in a neighbouring country) and as such an important factor for international migration) has decreased to such a level that they hardly act as push- or pull factor anymore. In this sense one might (naively) conclude that some kind of relative equilibrium has been reached though migration (and commuting). Instead, trade and capital mobility substitute the migration of people. This might be an important explanation of the non-existence of the EU labour market. Still, despite its estimating power also the H-O-S models structurally overestimate the (potential) mobility of labour still. Other forces must be at work as well.

For a better understanding of the persistence of labour immobility we first need to have a closer look at the internal labour market used in these theories. By using the term market, implicitly the existence of some level of supply and/or demand of labour is presumed, like if it was water running through canals and rivers, as well as certain (economic) rules that are supposed to guarantee the smooth and optimal operation of this market. This image of a game on a marked-out playground with more or less unchangeable and 'universal', albeit increasingly complex, rules, within which a contest is unfolding, very much determines the traditions in dealing with this topic. We would like to qualify this image by rethinking the concept of cross-border (im)mobility as an assumed function of national market differences. It is our opinion that a rigid interpretation and operationalisation of the term market in the case of labour mobility prevents other ways of approaching this theme. One of the problems that arise when one assumes a 'water analogy' of the labour market, is that even in the early days, when differences were much more pronounced than today, the (low) level of mobility could not be explained. Since the 1990's this axiom has slowly changed. Gradually the idea caught momentum that being immobile could have a value too. Straubhaar (1991) suggested that we should concentrate not on the reservoirs, containing the 'water', but the tap allowing the water to flow from one reservoir into the other. In his view we should give special attention to what factors allow the tap to be turned on and how big the consequent flow would be. Fischer et. al. and Straubhaar developed this idea into the 'insiders advantage approach' (Fischer et. al., 1997; Straubhaar, 2000; Fischer et. al. 2000). This approach basically transformed immobility from something irrational and unexplainable into something that could be (bounded) rational as well. In general terms, what this approach does is introducing factors that make people

decide to stay put. They distinguished 'worked-oriented' and 'leisure-oriented' advantages. Among the first are for instance opportunity and career advantages from social relations. The second group contains among others the benefits of being integrated and accepted in certain groups that would have been lost when accepting a job somewhere else. All these factors are explicitly tied to the region where the potential migrant/commuter is residing. In this 'insiders advantage approach' immobility is seen as "... a utility maximizing strategy to a majority of people *because the loss of location specific assets and abilities induced by migration would be too severe and because it is immobility which allows individuals to accumulate insider-advantage.*" (Fischer et. al. 2000, p.10). Tassinopolous and Werner (1999) in their discussion on the 'value of immobility' state that we should not forget other more traditional explanations for decisions to stay, like risk-aversion, discrimination against immigrants, losing social benefits and legal barriers and border control.

Following up on these attempts to open up the research agenda on immobility, we believe the traditional 'push and pull'-approach, in which the 'go'-factors are emphasised, should indeed be extended to include the active decision not to 'become mobile'. These 'stay'-factors would encompass not only keep-factors, like the ones introduced in the 'insider advantage approach, but also what could be indicated as the repel-factor. By these we understand factors attached to a possible destination region, which prevent people from going there. Such an extended approach, however, still only takes into account people that are actively involved in a process of decision-making. The decisions are all based on some kind of evaluation the costs and the benefits of staying or going. Despite the richness of such a rational action-approach we believe that an approach that is focused on the existence and optimisation of *differences* as an motivation for people to be mobile or immobile fails to sufficiently explain the dominant immobility, the non-action, the mental passiveness of people. It thereby misunderstands the assumed 'non-functioning' of the labour market. We would like to make a plea for the inclusion of INdifferrence in the explanation of labour immobility.

4. The indifference towards mobility

The urge people feel to belong, to create (and defend) their 'own space', to separate, to differentiate and to demarcate, and their attempts to put this into practice has shown to be very strong in the EU (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). Despite, or maybe even because of

the urge that is felt to integrate European-wide, issues and practices of bordering, be it nationally or regionally, have been put more fiercely on the agenda. The (re-)claiming of territorial borders is to a certain extent a conscious act of those who have an interest in maintaining sovereignty and difference (Van Houtum, 2003). The people engaged in political activities in the territory, as well as the owners and managers of the media, have an interest in promoting the territorialisation. Yet, the will to control, the governing power, is not (merely) above us, it is (also) within us (see Foucault, 1982). Borders provide people a kind of comforting rationality and a means to identify oneself with a territorial (id)entity. Believing in an (ide)entity helps to gain some control over the complexities of life. This phenomenon of socially induced self-bordering mirrors the intriguing balance between nearness and distance, of here and there, of us and them, of strangers and non-strangers. The consequence of such bordering attempts is that the labour market across the border may be physically near, but is perceived as distant and interpreted as there, not here, 'the other side'. Borders must hence be seen a strategic effort of distanciation, of gaining control in order to achieve *ease* (Van Houtum, 2003). Through this mechanism of distanciation borders enable people to construct a social focal point, a selection of social priorities. A subject living in a bordered economic entity is consequently to a large extent a compliant act of socialisation. It creates a space of legitimate withdrawal, where actions need not be justified, where the beyond-space is morally emptied, neutralised, tranquillised, made indifferent (Van Houtum, 2003).. In short, bordering is an ordering of *spaces of (in)difference* (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002; Van Houtum, 2003). That what is beyond the constructed differentiating border of comfort (*difference*) is socially made legitimate to be neglected (indifference) (*idem*). The market across the border in the THERE among THEM is irrelevant, something that can be neglected for the daily social practices HERE among US. The social border 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. The avoidance of uncertainty and wish to border oneself and identify with an existing socio-spatial category then become important motivators for such non-action. Being or becoming internationally mobile is not so much the outcome of a (bounded) rational decision-process, but must be considered as much an incremental learning as an *unlearning* process. Overcoming borders principally means overcoming the socially constructed and socially learned imagination to belong to a certain place, overcoming the socially learned comfort of belonging to a spatial (id)entity.

In all of the approaches mentioned above the decision to stay or go is put in a perspective of some kind of cost-benefit analysis with a threshold that has to be exceeded in order to become mobile. The majority of the literature dealing with migratory and commuting movements on a micro-level is considering actors that have entered already some kind of actively sought decision phase. These approaches run the risk of overestimating the willingness of people to move (e.g. de Gijssel *et. al.*, 1999; Janssen, 2000). The activation of seeking labour across the state borders could in theory be triggered by a sizeable gap between the levels of income or amount of employment in another country. But the existence of such a gap may be something that is unknown (lack of transparency and information) and/or consciously unknown (mental rigidity). It is this centripetal orientation, this mental distance towards leaving one's country, starting to seek labour across the state borders that we emphasise here and makes understandable why mobility is the exception rather than the rule. Not everybody is always in the process of thinking about and evaluating their present situation compared to some other situation. Not everyone is willing to enter the phase in which a decision on action is made based on the size and content of labour market differences. What we suggest here is to include the attitude of *indifference* that may help to explain why most people not even consider migrating or commuting across the border. This leads, what we would like to refer to, a *threshold of indifference* (see Figure 1). What this scheme tries to elucidate are the spatial 'dynamics' of which one of the possible outcomes is mobility on the labour market. The vast majority of people in the EU is indifferent about the cross-border labour possibilities, symbolised by the top box of this scheme. First of all because a decision to leave a certain job-position is not made frequently; a second reason being that, if someone decides to take up another job (in other words to become *occupationally* mobile), this does not automatically imply some kind of cross-border *spatial* mobility. In the context of this contribution, in which we focus upon cross-border spatial mobility, the 'other place', the 'there' across the border might be 'non-existent' in the mindset and therefore not included in the decision process at all. In general terms if there is no active attitude to make and value difference there will be no active decision-making with regard to that specific place.

Figure 1: The threshold of indifference

<i>Cross-border labour market passiveness</i>	Indifference-factor		
<i>Threshold of indifference</i>			
<i>Cross-border labour market activeness</i>	Stay	Keep-factor	Repel-factor
	Go	Push-factor	Pull-factor
		Home	Away

When the majority of the actors never surpass the threshold of indifference, only a small group will ‘enter’ the bottom part of the scheme, the active attitude part. This latter part symbolises what is usually called ‘rational’ decision-making. Based on an evaluation of the characteristics and opportunities of the present (*home*) and a possible new location (*away*), a decision is made to become mobile (*go*) or stay put (*stay*). What this ‘model’³ emphasises is, certainly if we realise that only 2 out every 100 people is mobile, that being immobile is the rule and mobility is the aberration. Hence, studying the social construction of *immobility* might be as important and fruitful in understanding mobility than mobility itself.

5. Concluding remarks

What we bring forward in this article is that labour immobility is not so much a rational or irrational choice. To a large extent, it escapes such a strict economic choice-reasoning. Not-commuting or not-migrating across a border is not merely a matter of failing to recognise opportunities because of existing differences, but must rather be considered as a matter of INdifferencE towards the ‘other side’, the ‘market’ across the border; certainly not as some

³ It is important to realise that this scheme by no means can be regarded as static or unchangeable. No category is fixed. Attitudes as well as borders and the valuation of the different ‘stay’- and ‘go’-factors are open for socially induced changes.

kind of ‘cheap’ or irrational sentiment. Hence, spatial job-immobility not mobility must be understood as the dominant spatial practice of people. The labour market is not a choice game, which is played according to fixed rules in a closed arena that only can be played right if everyone is familiar with the rules. Such an image of the labour market is not doing justice to what is the dominant mode: a ‘non-playing’, an indifferent attitude. Feelings towards ‘them’ and ‘us’ and consequent practices or non-practices are crucial in understanding the attitude towards labour mobility. In this sense borders play an important role as socially constructed frameworks of familiar locales where the ‘other side’ is for most people of no importance for (im)mobility on the labour market. In this respect the importance of transparency on the labour market, one of the essential focus-points within the European Union, is put in a different perspective. Transparency then may be important but certainly not sufficient to change the attitude on cross-border mobility.

We support the already existing tendency to extend the set of variables important for the outcome of an active decision process to include and elaborate ‘stay’-factors. There are already some scholars that explicitly take into account (non-economic) factors that cause immobility as a result of a decision not to move. These efforts are certainly contributing to a further understanding of labour mobility. But what might be even more important is the recognition that not everyone is willing to enter the phase where a decision is made. For an in-depth understanding of mobility, we plea for a renewed thinking on the concept of immobility that may substantiate to fully comprehend the role of the indifference-factor in labour *immobility*.

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- (1) Innovations in Spatial and Environmental Governance (ISEG)
- (2) Human Geography

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