Transnational migration
Theory and method of an ethnographic analysis of border regimes

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Abstract

The events of Ceuta and Mellia in 2005 and the intensified fencing off of the Spanish enclaves that followed, or the invention of ‘Frontex’ as the EU border control agency, certainly seem to support the metaphor of ‘Fortress Europe’ as an encapsulation of the new Europeanised migration and border control realities. The metaphor may also have contributed to the anti-racist movement by helping to create a critical discourse on European migration policy. However, as we will outline in this article, we are highly critical of the ‘Fortress’ paradigm.


Introduction

It is the untenable myth of ‘zero migration’ that, above all, undermines the ‘Fortress Europe’ metaphor. The erection of metaphorical and actual walls in Europe and elsewhere doesn’t seem capable of repressing migration movements. Despite the upgrading of control, migration still occurs, thereby altering the socio-economic geography of border zones. Against this background our research project, TRANSIT MIGRATION, attempted to come to terms with the Europeanization of migration policy with an approach that examined it as a social, conflictual process of negotiation (Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe 2007). This means we tried to analyse the actors, practices, technologies and discourses involved in the process in concrete social situations. Working as a team, we were able to apply a ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus 1995) not only combining different countries in South Eastern Europe but also different social and local settings, following an approach which the social anthropologists Cris Shore and Susan Wright called ‘studying through’: tracing the ways in which the different actors, discourses or technologies create new webs and relations of power (Shore and Wright 1997). Thus, we were able to work with a high level of cross- or transnational comparison. In this context we also preferred the concept of ‘migration regime’ instead of the classical system-theories. This makes it possible to include a multitude of actors whose practices relate to each other but are not ordered in the form of a central logic or rationality; rather, the concept of ‘regime’ implies a space of negotiating practices.

In line with these general methodological and theoretical remarks, we tried to think and to do research on the practices and discourses of border control in South-Eastern Europe with a double twist: Firstly, we propose to relinquish thinking of the border in terms of a solid line. Instead, we have to think of highly differentiated ‘border zones’; secondly, we suggest abandoning wall-like metaphors of the border in favour of a border seen as a highly perforated system or regime. Enrica Rigo (2005), in her work on the communitarisation of Eastern European border policy, has pointed to how European migration policy leads to the diffusion and stratification of borders. In common with many other critical researchers (Walters 2002; Lahav and Guivandon 2000; Guiraudon 2001) Rigo refers to a ‘de-territorialisation’ of state sovereignty: in certain cases, the knock-on effect of third-state regulations, the ‘police à distance’ as Didier Bigot und Elspeth Guild (2003) call it, can stretch as far as Asia. However, this post-national process of border displacement and externalisation should not be understood as a sovereign act whereby states extend power or competence on foot of an abstract claim for hegemony and control; rather, it represents a multifaceted constitutive plane of struggle.

1E.g. Rio Grande on the US-Mexican border, between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, between India and Pakistan (through Kashmir), between the Kingdom of Bhutan and India, between Israel and Palestine ....
where the regime of mobility control is itself challenged by the fluid, clandestine, multidirectional, and context-dependent forms of mobility. At first glance, this may seem like a heroic glorification of migrant ruses and tactics best suited to the neoliberal ideal type of the homo economicus. However, we consider this epistemological question as central to the understanding of migration as a movement ‘that possesses knowledge, follows its own rules, and collectively organises its own praxis’ (Boutang 2007).

The work of the new migration economics as well as research on transnationalisation (cf. Basch et al. 1994) has shown that the conception of the migrant as an economic and, as a rule, male Robinson Crusoe cannot be sustained (cf. Hess 2005; Kofman and Sales 1998). These studies stress the importance of households, families, and other networks as the context within which migration takes place. So migrants never reach the border on their own.

In the following we want to describe the Aegean border zone as a social, conflictual space composed of diverse actors, forces, discourses, interests and economies. We will start with ethnographic accounts of Turkey as a central transit space and hot spot of migration along the so called eastern route. Subsequently, we will follow the border crossing strategies to Greece.

'Sheep trade’ – Wild sheep chase in the Aegean

In contrast to the well known tourist destinations along the Turkish Mediterranean coast, Ayvalik is an almost sleepy resort that lies only a few kilometres from the Greek island of Lesbos. But when we visited Ayvalik in 2003, right away our host told us that only last week a ship had sailed out with 23 migrants on board but had capsized somewhere nearby. Only three survived. ‘The coastguard doesn’t bother to raise the sunken and stranded ships anymore because there are so many of them. I can bring you to one,’ he told us. The journey didn’t lead to a stranded ship but to another person who knew the ‘sheep trade’ from personal experience. Just a few years previously the man had helped 800 migrants board a tanker. It happened the way it always does. He got a call from Istanbul letting him know his help was needed. They actually succeeded in transporting the 800 people to the sparsely populated coast and from there to the tanker which was to take them directly to Italy. A day later he got the news that the tanker had been captured.

When the transport service began in the late 1980s it was very small and personal; then, in the middle of the 1990s, the Kurds began to show up – and now people arrive from just about everywhere. In the beginning they all travelled by public transport; then they were brought with minibuses, and eventually with three or four big buses – until the police began to notice. So now they are moved in trucks, ‘squashed together like sheep’, as he put it. Another fisherman told us a similar biography of smuggling. What started out as a favour lead to more and more people asking him for ‘help’, until eventually, three years ago, he was arrested. However, he was convinced that ‘people will always try and escape and others will always help them’. With the increase in the level and sophistication of control technologies, the situation has become much more difficult – the main effect being that small smugglers like the fisherman are losing the race and well-organised smuggler networks are taking over. As another smuggler in Greece told us while recounting his experience with border crossings, ‘the payment only comes at the end of the deal’. This represents the security that the customers or their relatives have. The deal is always a verbal one. When the captain has been contacted and the agreement made then the date is set, the ‘heads’ are counted, and finally the price and method of payment is determined. The price varies according to the number of ‘heads’ and the type of journey. The captain can earn up to €15,000 per ‘transport’. ‘Sometimes, during the summer, we are finished in five minutes.’
Excessive movements

In a chance encounter, we met Mike on the coast in Bodrum. He had lost track of a friend after a failed attempt to cross the border and now, with a small photo in his hand, he was searching for him. He told us he would be willing to meet up again in Istanbul. As our encounter showed, the social relations in the immediate vicinity of the border zone are closely tied to current developments in the metropolitan areas of West Turkey.

Mike’s migration biography, being stuck in transit for a few years, is becoming increasingly typical for the rising numbers of international migrants passing through Turkey on their way to the North or West (Icduygu 2003). Years ago, he had gone to Lebanon with his friend. However, after years of civil-war Lebanon was a ‘chaotic and difficult country’, as he described it. With forged passports and €1,500 in their pockets, they set out together for Europe. Travelling via Syria, they first made it to Turkey, from where they made three unsuccessful attempts to continue their journey: first to Poland and to Croatia with a visa and scheduled flight, and then by ship to Greece. Each attempt failed and eventually their money ran out. It was apparently difficult to find a job and save money in Istanbul, particularly for African migrants. He often spent days or even months in prison, but each time he managed to get out again.

Luis, another African migrant we met, had also only recently been released from custody. He had entered Turkey with an official student visa but was soon unable to pay the student fees, which meant his visa was no longer extended. Like many impoverished migrants he set out for the Aegean coast, but the minibus from Istanbul was intercepted and the group was imprisoned in an empty school. There are many such improvised ‘deportation camps’ in schools, empty factories, police stations, and hotels. They are used by local authorities as temporary prisons, in the absence of a state migration and asylum policy, and of appropriate infrastructure.

Many things can happen in this rather dubious system. For instance, migrants are packed off to Syria irrespective of whether they came from there or not. Alternatively, as happened in Luis’ case, this can also mean that a flu outbreak or a purported marriage leads to release from custody.

This situation has seen Istanbul developing into a complex transit zone, with a big market for forgeries and frauds. The merchandise consists of fraudulent accounts of escape, forged papers, or torture videos. Not only is use made of the categories of EU migration policy, but it is clear that there is also a wide knowledge of the conditions of migration: how to make another believe that you are not coming from a ‘safe country’, or how to satisfy the documentary requirements of the European asylum process.

Now, Luis had again to decide in which category of the official migration and mobility policy he should place himself: Should he stay in Istanbul and eke out a meagre existence, or return to Ghana and from there apply for a new visa, or even better, for asylum – this time in Germany? Or perhaps attempt to reach Germany via illegal routes? But, as he told us, ‘... actually, Greece would really be enough’. Greece is in fact the first Schengen point of entry in this region, where the hubs of the migration routes are being linked under new conditions.

Greece: institutionalisation of transit

Resa, a migrant from Bangladesh, was involved in organising a transport from Lesbos to Italy. In the summer of 2004, he was detained in the main city of Lesbos, Mitilini, on suspicion of ‘trafficking’. He had used a dwelling on Mitilini to quarter the trans-migrants whom he had met in the nearby camp. He had initially flown to the island after being contacted by phone by a Palestinian living in the camp. He had told the trans-migrants there that the ‘transport’ to Italy, including the initial accommodation in Mitilini and Athens, would cost €500.
When we visited, about 450 people – guarded by eight policemen – were stuck in the camp. Most of those detained knew that they would have to stay there for three months and then go to Athens. They asked for telephone cards and telephone numbers of NGOs in Athens. When asked if they needed anything else, it was surprising to hear Minu's certainty: ‘Yes, an English grammar book. ... We want to go to Canada, you know!’

Apo was another inmate of this so-called ‘reception centre’. He told us that he was a ‘guest worker’ who had lived with his relatives in southern Germany since the beginning of the 1980s. In the 1990s he had gone back to the Turkish mountains to fight with the PKK. When the PKK called a cease-fire he had withdrawn to Iraq. He had already spent some months trying to return to Germany, eventually managing to reach the Aegean island of Lesbos from the Turkish coast. He could not return directly to Germany, since according to the stipulations of the German Aliens Act, his legal residency was no longer valid due to his long absence. So although he had already lived in Germany for 25 years, Apo would now be illegal there. Although he would qualify as a political refugee, he did not want to apply for asylum on Lesbos – the procedure was too uncertain and time-consuming. The acceptance quota in 2004 was only 0.6 per cent and waiting periods of up to two years are not uncommon. If Apo applied for asylum in Greece, he would also have to be registered in Laurio, a camp for victims of political persecution (from Turkey in particular) that was erected south of Athens about 10 years ago. If he were to be registered in Greece as a refugee, however, his first arrival data would be registered in the Schengen Information System (SIS). According to the Dublin Convention on Asylum, which regulates first country provisions, this would rule out travelling on to Germany, since in case of arrest he would have to reckon with his being sent back to Greece. However, as Apo wishes to live in Germany, he accepts the risks entailed in crossing borders illegally. He is counting on being able to leave Greece illegally with the help of his family networks.

On Crete, we found a repetition of this scenario in the ‘Hotel Royal’, directly opposite the rather oppressive US military base. The spokesperson for the detainees, who had been a teacher in Egypt, told us that half of the detained migrants are Palestinians who have applied for asylum, while the other half do not wish to make an application. They were, in fact, only in Greece by mistake. They really wanted to go to Italy. Their one request was for help in freeing ‘their brother’ who had been identified during an interrogation as a ‘trafficker’ – ‘just because they needed someone to blame’. However, according to a naval officer in front of the hotel, ‘the four traffickers’ had not actually been apprehended yet.

When viewed from a theoretical perspective of repression, the camps would appear to provide the ultimate proof for the efficacy and the misery of ‘Fortress Europe’; however, the stories told by Mike, Resa, Minu and Apo provide exemplary evidence of the porosity and failure of this self-proclaimed omnipotent ‘fortress’. Moreover, their active embeddedness within criminal networks of cross-border mobility, as well as their perseverance and the multi-directional flexibility with which they manage their biographies, prompt an alternative understanding of both the impermeability of borders, as well as the function of trafficking. In what follows, we want to exemplify this in regard to the function of camps. When viewed through Mike’s, Resa’s, Minu’s and Apo’s eyes, camps are tolerated transit stations, even though these spaces seem to oppose the very core of migration – excessive mobility. Camps are spaces outside of all spaces, heterotopias in Foucault's words (2005), while still existing in reality. What makes the “imperceptible politics of migration” as Papadopoulos et al. (2008) call it, so powerful is that it incorporates, digests, and absorbs these spaces through the excessive movements of mobility.
Transit camps

The Europeanization of migration policy and the installation of the liminal institutions of camps clearly illustrate current tendencies in the transformation of sovereignty. This process of the Europeanization of migration policy, not only attempts to erect a rigid executive segment for policing migration, but it also constructs a space for a new form of regulation of migration. While statist–legalist thinking understands undocumented and illegal migration as a criminal crossing of borders, it is, in terms of its local realities across Europe, a complex field amenable to management and control.

Apo, Reza and all the other trans-migrants caught at the borders are confined to the camps on the islands until their nationality has been accurately determined. Because of pressure from the EU, a treaty of repatriation between Greece and Turkey was established in 2001, replacing the previous, ineffective bilateral repatriation agreements. However, this treaty is practically redundant, due at least in part to the established human rights regime. Threats of penalties and sanctions are meant to force countries of origin and transit states like Greece to accept a ‘common management of migration flows’, and the return of their citizens or trans-migrants who are unwelcome in Europe. However, when it gets translated into the actual practice of the border institution, the application of the treaty diverges radically from the Schengen deterrence scenario.

Those actors involved on the ground include not only the migrants and the militarised border patrols, but also the intervening negotiation space where the different NGOs strive to implement European asylum law. In Greece repatriations are illegal, in the sense that ‘just in time’ sanctions against illegal border crossings (administrative deportation according to §50 of Statute 2910/2001 on leaving and entering Greek territory illegally) are, from a human rights perspective, secondary compared to a general presumption of a right to asylum or humanitarian assistance. The clarification of this procedure normally lasts seventy days. The treaty only works in cases where migrants can be unambiguously categorised as labour migrants from Turkey, and are either already registered in the SIS system for a previous illegal border crossing, or anticipatively ‘out’ themselves as such in order to make a renewed attempt, under better conditions, at the border crossing from Istanbul or Ayvalik. For migrants from Afghanistan, China and Africa, repatriation is even more difficult, since such migrants must be handed over to the bordering country of origin, insofar as it is a ‘third country’.

The illegal border crossing is usually registered by the coastguard or border police, and on arrest the police order an immediate administrative deportation on the grounds of illegal entry. However, the state prosecutor suspends this provisionally by not filling an individual case against the illegal migrant. This is due to the inability of the police to provide asylum procedures in the camps, and so the illegal immigrant cannot be immediately deported because of a presumed right of asylum. As a rule, those not wishing to, or unable to apply for asylum, or those clearly identified as, for example, Iranians or Iraqis are transported to the detention camps in the northern region of Evros as quickly as possible, and in the worst case ‘clandestinely’ sent back across the waters of the Evros river border – mostly under threat of violence. Those among the camp population not immediately deported leave the camp after three months, with a document that requires them to leave the country ‘voluntarily’ within two weeks. Here, the subordinate clause in the ‘document of release’ is of interest, as it states: ‘in a direction of your choice’. Apo and other trans-migrants may, after obtaining permission to leave the camp with their ‘release permit’, travel on to the mainland. The law states that whoever claims asylum, either verbally or in writing, may not be repatriated. The applicant is supposed to be interviewed within three months, but in
practice this phase lasts from one to three years.

This administrative practice documents a political calculus that is an open secret: the migrant will waive his interview, remain illegal, and move on. Until 1992, the responsibility for both the recognition of the right to asylum and the financing of initial reception lay primarily with UNHCR. The official policy on asylum was characterised by the political credo that Greece was only a transit stop on the way to the European heartland. The implementation of EU legal standards on asylum, mainly due to the intervention of NGOs, serves to put a brake on restrictive border controls and to a certain extent legalises the dynamics of mobility and transmigration.

So, transit camps mark a provisional topography of stations along the various migration routes. The camps along the Aegean function less as a blockade directed against migration and more like an entrance ticket for the next journeys: In fact, the Greek practice and reality of camps seem to institutionalise mobility. Something we can also observe in some of the East European countries who recently joined the European Union. Neither can the improvised camps on the Turkish side be understood simply as the result of the de-territorialisation of the cordon of camps outside European borders. It is not simply that the heartland of Europe determines the general parameters and the South is then liable for local implementation. The EU countries of the Mediterranean play an active and central role in this process. The implementation of EU migration policy across the whole South-Eastern European area, with its informal cross-border economies, is more a mode of transit regulation than of transit control. These changes of function of the camps of Southern Europe that we have described represent, at least in part, the beginnings of a productive transformation of (European) migration control. This observation implies the necessity of rethinking both classic migration theory and the concept of the ‘camp’.

Camps as regulators of migratory flows: Porosity & permeability

The consensus on both sides of the debate of what a camp is – the critical as well as the affirmative with its talk of a fortress that Europe has erected against migration – awakens associations of a field of battle (cf. Dietrich 2004). This association is particularly important for the ideological and political debates. Both the migrants in the camp, as well as the critics in the metropolises, rely on a human rights discourse that seems at present to be the only vehicle capable of articulating migrants’ interests. When we visited the camps in Lesbos, the detainees immediately referred to the scandalous and inhumane living conditions and explicitly requested that we photograph the inadequate sanitary facilities. However, an ethnographic analysis of the border space cannot afford to replicate in its research the typical imperatives of political control which are implicit in the characterisations of camps as battlefields (or simply humanitarian disasters). It is rather a question of producing a conceptual framework to elucidate the relation between camp and regulation as a spatialization of social relations.

Moreover, the camp is the place where the biopolitical dimension of sovereign power becomes productive. Here, it lays hold of interned subjects. By denying them any legal or political status – as is the case in refugee or prison camps – it reduces them to their physical existence. It is a type of catalytic converter that channels the abolition of one order into a new permanent spatial and legal order. The suspension of order transforms itself from a provisional measure into a permanent technology of governing. The state of exception that manifests itself in the different forms of extra-territoriality becomes the new regulator of the contemporary political system.

Various authors such as Ferrari Bravo (2001) or Mezzadra (2003/07) criticise Agamben’s concept of ‘bare life’ (2002)
since it excludes the question of the regulation of labour power and focuses exclusively on a legalist understanding of the function of camps. Such approaches reverse Agamben’s concept: the question now centres on the mode of articulation between deportation camp and the restructuring of the global labour market in contemporary capitalism. In his critique of Agamben, Sandro Mezzadra (2007) recasts the figure of the contemporary camp as a type of ‘decompression chamber’ which functions to disperse the pressure on the labour market, sectorally, locally and exterritorially.

If one is to believe the official estimates of Europol, 500,000 undocumented migrants enter Europe annually via the South-European/Mediterranean route. This represents one fifth of the total estimate of undocumented immigration to Europe. Under such conditions, the camps of South-East Europe are omnifunctional institutions of migration policy, since they ‘produce’ the flexible separation of residence and labour rights, and the outsourcing of the reproduction costs of undocumented labour. In no sense are they places of totalitarian immobilisation. Their relative porosity and the temporary nature of residence give them the function of stopover points. The camps are fields of various forces which permeate the migration politics of the EU countries along various axes. Within them, migrants are subject to what appears initially to be a rigid system of mobility control, but which they seek to bypass where they can with microscopic ‘sleights’. The camps represent less the paradigmatic incarceration milieu in the age of authoritarian neo-liberalism than the spatialized attempt to temporarily control movement, i.e. to administer traffic routes, to render regulated mobility productive. Their porosity is thus an expression of an institutionalised border porosity that evolves through relations of power, where the actions of the migrants and their carriers play just as much a role as the clearly discernible population policy intentions of the EU. Therefore, in the final section, we want to ask if it is possible to think camps ‘from below’?

Deceleration: The temporal control of mobility

With the aid of Paul Virilio (1980), the catastrophic functionalism of Agamben’s position can be challenged insofar as one opposes the political disciplinary connotations of camp confinement and exclusion by using the figure of decelerated circulation of mobility. That is, viewing the camps from below reveals a constant flow of mobility, and camps as the spaces which most drastically attempt to regulate the speed of this circulation and to decelerate its velocity. Rather than stopping the circulation of mobility, camps reinsert a socially commensurable time in the migrants’ movements. They bring illegal and clandestine migration back into society by rendering it visible and compatible with a broad regime of temporal control. Decelerated circulation means that migration is not regulated through space, but through time.

The Schengen camps are less panoptical disciplinary prison institutions than, following Virilio, speed boxes. Camps as they appear in ‘Fortress Europe’, Zelimir Zilnik’s film, are markers on the map of travel; communication and information centres; rest-houses, and, not infrequently, small banks of undocumented mobility. Against the background of Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1976), it would also seem important to examine the figure of decelerated circulation in the light of how it alters the relation of time, body and productivity. The centrality of temporal as against spatial regulation for understanding migration today also becomes clear when we consider how the time regime of the camp is distinguished by the disassociation of the body from its direct economic utilisation. Previously, mobility was rendered productive by territorializing movements and inserting them into a spatial regulation of bodies. Consider for example the workhouse, or the first foreign-worker hostels of the Gastarbeiter era,
which territorialized mobility in order to create a productive workforce. However, within the current configuration of camps, this seems to have changed.

Camps do not attempt to make migration economically useful by making migrants productive in a spatial order; rather they make migrants productive by inserting them into a global temporal regime of labour. This regime is not based on disciplining bodies and regulating whole populations. The temporal regime of global labour follows the movements of people and invests where it finds a productive workforce in a state of flux. This allows global capital to thrive on labour and life conditions which are in a state of transition, and most importantly, are primarily unregulated and informal. With this global temporal regime of labour, the moving and changing workforce is rapidly embedded into capital’s productive structure. However, global capital also quickly abandons those recently and opportunistically embedded workforces as soon as new possibilities for exploitation emerge elsewhere. What is significant for us here is that this is a temporal regime, rather than a spatial regime: the spaces where global capital invests do not exist as such previously; they constantly emerge and vanish as people move, migrate and change their lives.

How to understand migrants’ waiting, hiding, unexpected diversions, stopovers and settlements; the refusals and returns; the possibility of a fatal end to the journey? Is the deceleration of migration by way of the camps and border controls really productive for the European labour market? The camp regulates the temporalities and speeds of migration and in so doing reintegrates the global vagabonds of the third millennium into a new temporal economy; an economy they have long since deserted on their journey. The main function of camps is to impose a regime of temporal control on the wild and uncontrollable unfolding of the imperceptible and excessive movements of the trans-migrants.

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