Re-imagining spaces of (in)difference: Contextualising and reflecting on the intertwining of cities across borders

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.

Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

Introduction

In his harmonious and appealing collected accounts on the modern city, James Donald claims that the way we live has a lot to do with the way we live together (p. xi, 1999). A city, he argues, 'has always stood not only for the vanities, the squalor and the injustice of human society, but also for the aspiration to civilized sociation' (p. xi). In this special issue, it is not the sociation of people within one city which is being debated, but the intent to find ways to gather and 'cosmopolise' people from two *neighbouring* cities. What is more, it concerns the sociation of citizens of two neighbouring cities across *state borders.*

As this special issue presents a colourful set of special empirically rich case studies on efforts to aggregate various cities across borders, we were asked to scrub the surface of the various approaches put forward in this issue and when we felt necessary, to scrub against their grain. We express our gratitude to the editors for giving us this honourable task. We feel indebted to the various contributors in this issue, as they have given us an extensive body of information, insights and accounts on the making of bi-national cities, thus making our task of reflection arguably lighter than theirs. Their output was our input.

Our epilogue embeds itself in the critical geographical debate that is focused on the denial of the opposition between reality and the immateriality of the city (see Donald, 1999). A city does not exist outside of the imagination, a city is made real *through* imagination. In principle then, creating one city out of two cities is merely a matter of boundless imagination. It is a matter of forgetting about scales, community or national borders or spatial fixations; it is a question of tapping into the ability and willingness to think the unthinkable. In this paper, we would like to scrutinise the current utopian dreamings and imaginations of crossing the border. Following Tourraine's (2000) rhetorical book title

'Can we live together?', we particularly focus on the 'together' and on the word 'Co' in the images and imaginations of coexistence and cooperation between neighbouring cities. How is the strategic co-ing mapped out when constructing (the imagination of) a bi-national city? And how does this reimagining and reinscripting of the city relate to and unfold itself in current practices of citizens living in the imagined bi-national city? We start off by reflecting the complexity of the endeavours of objectifying cities, move onwards to reflect on current practices of reinscribing places across national borders and end by summarising our reflections on the potential of 'co-ing' cities across borders.

Objectifying and commodifying the city

When creating and imagining a bi-national city, it might be useful to first semantically deconstruct the notion of what makes a city a city in our imagination. What is the city? When is the city? Experiencing a city is more than a matter of physical action or awareness. A city is a play with presence and non-presence. The city is around me, above me, under me, in me. I am the city. As citizens, we are desperately trying to capture and apprehend the feeling that is the city. The city is beyond language. And yet, it is words, texts, symbols, signifiers that distinguish cities from each other. How can we find language to describe where a city goes, when a city touches us, or when a city teaches us? For it is the city that teaches us the art of immediance, of being present among others, among strangers, as us among not-us (Donald, 1999). But we do not know who is us, and who is not us. The us is imagined. We do not know our 'selves'. Similarly we do not know where here and there exactly is. Travelling outside the city or migrating to THERE sometimes makes the city more alive, then travelling in the city HERE. The power of imagination leaves the city unknowable, unmappable, unmakable, and yet present.

It is precisely this delicate and intriguing balance, of which Simmel has reminded us in his prominent lecture on cities in 1903, between the physical proximity and immediance on the one hand and the art of social distance to others on the other hand, that makes the city alive (Simmel, (1903) 1997). The city forces citizens to repress emotional involvement with others and instead to use formal more distant, logical criteria in interactions with others. There is physical

presence, yet mental absence. The others are not outsider-strangers, but fellow-citizens, insider-strangers. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman tried to find suitable words for the same mixed feeling of familiar presence and anonymous absence in the city (Bauman, 1995). A city, he argued, would be long dead, if it did not offer us some kind of excitement and pleasure just because of the unease generated by the strangers in the streets of the place: 'it is thanks to the preservation of the strangehood of the strangers, freezing the distance, preventing proximity; pleasure is drawn precisely from mutual estrangement, that is from the absence of responsibility' (*idem*, p. 132). More recently, Sennet tried to capture this feeling in his own words: 'A city is a place where people can learn to live with strangers, to enter into the experiences and interests of unfamiliar lives. Sameness stultifies the mind; diversity stimulates and expands it. The city can allow people to develop a richer, more complex sense of themselves. . . . They are not subject to a fixed scheme of identity. People can develop multiple images of their identities, knowing that who they are shifts, depending upon whom they are with. That is the power of strangeness: freedom from arbitrary definition and identification.' (Sennet, 2001).

The amoral indifference versus the other in the imagined community of the city of which the various scholars speak could be seen as a functional street-wise neglect. The performance of indifference is used to ascertain the art of *being* a citizen. It is this performance of being of a citizen that helps to bring along excitement, pleasure and often is subject to a commercially orchestrated aestheticism and *flânerisme* (Van Houtum and Naerssen, 2002). *Flânerie*, the art of performative gazing, requires such a certain protective distance (Donald, 1999). It is this distance that makes the city attractive and enjoyable. What Bauman, after Simmel, argues, therefore, is the continuous mental effort, task perhaps, of citizens to find a subtle and optimal balance between the feeling of home, proximity, the 'real', transparency, habitus and convention on the one hand and excitement, mystery, estrangement and darkness on the other hand. In his famous work 'A Tale of Two Cities', Charles Dickens, eloquently formulated this latter feeling of mysterious darkness as follows: 'A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city at night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!' (Dickens, 1859, Book 1, Chapter 3). What this quotation makes clear, in line with the comments of the previously mentioned scholars, is that it is the mysterious hybrid realm of both home and distant that forms the city. The city cannot be owned, fixated, mapped or known in a generic or objective fashion. The city is not a place, it is a mirage of one's own contingent and contextual imagination.

Rebordering and reimagining the city

Indeed, if we accept the mirage-identity of a city, how then is a city created and made real to our imagination? In his well-cited analysis on how space is produced Lefebvre uttered that the representational space of the imagined city comes into being through the metaphorical language of texts (Lefebvre, 1991). In principle, then, constructing a junction of two neighbouring cities would merely require an extension of our mental images and imagination and the intertwining of distinct textures and languages of the separated cities. Intertwining cities would be a matter of rereading, revisualising and rewriting space. Intertwining. Intertextualisation. Unwinding. Reimagination. Idealisation. Utopianisation. Thinking the unthinkable, imagining the unimaginable. No border. No stop. Stop. What maybe falls short in such unbounded thinking and the imaginary unwinding of the knitted networks of what makes the city an imagined community is precisely why cross-border cooperation is often conceived to be 'difficult' or 'complex', and that is the belief in the presence and the daily reproduction of the borders of a city (see also Lundén and Zalamans, this issue). A city has no imaginable boundaries, yet it is believed to be different and distinct from other cities in a Derridaen sense. A city needs other cities to claim its existence and identity. Hence, tautologically, a city claims to represent what other cities claim to be as well, only slightly different. We are like them, but not identical to them. In other words, a city is a sheer expression of the performativity of uniqueness: a city claims to be a city because it shares basic communalities with what other cities claim to be, yet in its sameness it is different. What a city prominently claims is a narration of distinctive coherence, something which is expressed by the bounding of space through symbols, media, narratives, and a common name for a chosen set of historically materialised social relations. In other words, it is the existence of this belief in difference which leads endeavours to bridge two neighbouring places, to displace places in space, to think what is thinkable to be complex in practice. What is more, as many commentators before us have already argued, in the case of binational cities, it is not only the borders of a city which being are transgressed, but also the borders of a political state (see Heddebaut, this issue; see Lundén and Zalamans, this issue). The binational city, or border-crossing city as Buursink termed it in his contribution (see Buursink, this issue), is in practice a *double* border-crossing city. Interestingly enough, what a binational city actually does is reinterpret the function and meaning of the border. Instead of serving as a dividing line, a line where the other begins, the border is split open and reinterpreted as a feature that communifies and congregates two urban societies. The border as no man's land is incorporated by the new conurbation into common land.

What makes the intertwining of cities across borders ambivalent, however, is the complexity of finding a balance between independence and interdependence, the balance between the legitimisation of the existence of a city through a claim on difference, on the one hand, and the intention

to create an existential far-reaching partnership with a city across a national border on the other. What is more, the cross-border cooperation causes an inverse effect. The intention to overcome the passive indifference between two neighbouring cities produces conscious difference, an active border between them. A city is principally unbounded, yet by comparing it to or by its entering into a co-operation with another, the city is reinvented and reified into a bounded place (see Matthiessen, this issue). Association and dissocation go hand in hand. The mental border that represents the produced difference and indifference between two nations, which is often referred to in finding ways of cooperating across the border is to a large extent self-reproduced (see Van Houtum, 1999). Contributing and believing in urbanistic and nationalistic boosterisms reproduces the mental gap between the two cities on either side of the border. It reproduces a here-land, a there-land and an in-between land.

The reinvention and reification of places is a process which according to Sack is typical of territoriality in general (Sack, 1986). His argument is that territoriality must be understood not as an entity but as an action, a spatial strategy. Territoriality communicates the making of a place, in order to classify what is within and what is beyond. The uttering of the existence of a binational city could be understood in these terms as well. The making of a binational city reflects the telling of a powerful story, a script that is or is meant to become a new or renewed spatial imagination. Earlier, de Certeau (1980) also hinted at such an understanding of strategy. According to de Certeau, a spatial strategy aims at creating property (*un propre*) which can be set off against the outside world (*l'extérieur*). It is a script in which elites and counterelites, to paraphrase Brass, continuously attempt to emphasize some constituents of the community's history, to disremember or suppress other and related aspects, and to attach value and meaning to those selected and use these as symbols to mobilise the community, in order to defend its interests, and to compete with other communities (Brass, 1979; see also De Swaan, 1995). Formerly, socially constructed imaginations of 'authenthic' cohesiveness are deconstructed and opened up for new or renewed spatial imaginations. The old imagination is sundered from or sometimes even emptied of its bounded focus, and refilled, reread, reified and represented according to the new/renewed meaning of binationality (Dormans, et al. 2002). The existing time-space framework of social relations in the city is extended to and sometimes even fully replaced by new and attractive symbols and image-building constructions with other cities. In such a process of 'de-signing' urban planning, the city is successively upgraded with a new or renewed overarching signification. Illustrative of the reinvention the city and the importance attached to the process of wording and reinscribing the intention to cooperate in space is the effort of finding a name for the new conurbation (see also Paasi, 1996; Van Houtum and Lagendijk, 2001). The name EUrode, for instance (see Ehlers, this issue) could be seen as an illustration that the re-bordering and re-imagining of the city often follows the logic of urban boosterism, in which the eclecticism of fashion and commerce is seem-

ingly as important as the search for enduring common values (Harvey, 1989; Hall and Hubbard, 1996).

Intertwining cities across state borders

The view that current practices of cross-border governance merely mask the explicit wish to competitively boost the own city/region, but notably in the 'own' national context has come to dominate present academic thinking (see also Scott, 2000; Sparke, 2000; Ehlers, this issue; Bucken-Knapp, this issue; Sparrow, this issue). It can be seen as a critical response to the largely uncritical belief, held particularly in the European Union, that border cities and border regions should be seen as micro-scale laboratories for the larger European Union that dominated the debate on cross-border governance in the beginning of the 90s (Van Houtum, 2000). In that early stage of the European INTERREG period, it was a common virtue, rhetorically supported by the European Commission, to argue that border cities and regions in the EU should associate themselves with border cities and regions on the other side of the border, which after all have to face the same problems. Were borders, especially in the EU, previously regarded primarily as sovereignty lines of the state, with a morally legal right to protect the own (economic) society, in the beginning of the INTERREG period they were mostly seen as barriers, not so much as physical barriers, but as barriers to success, that is, prosperous integration and harmonisation. The idea, was that border-regional economies could benefit from the increase in cross-border networking. With the opening up of the borders, the national peripheral position would be altered in a more dynamic and central fashion in a European context.

At the end of the 90s it became clear that the national borders would prove to be more persistent than was believed or hoped. The assumption of a free fluid open space within the European Union proved to be naive. People may associate themselves globally with images, brands and destinations but still live their daily lives in communities. The human imagination is unlimited, but willingly restricted, as it is focused on voluntary associations of comfort, pleasure and adventure that fits its specific identity. Moreover, when it became clear that cities and regions did not show real signs of enthusiasm to integrate beyond direct economic functionality and calculativity, criticism gradually won the battle over uncritical imagination and belief.[1] Cross-border governance has truly become *à la mode*, but in current efforts to transnationalise cities there is arguably too much pressure, too much eagerness, to come up with uni-dimensional projects or narrations to open up the border, to use the border, and to make and claim a new place. The city is not an object that can be projected in space, it is not a scalar container that can be opened up and refilled or moved or made to compete or fuse with another city to increase its scale and power. The city is not a projectteam or enterprise that you can team up with another city. Nor can its citizens be equated with employees that can be managed and directed towards cross-border integration. To govern and manage the process of symbolically emptying, refilling and reifying a city by a new joint

symbolism is born of the simplistic instrumental idea that one can/must boost the city in the global or national 'urban competition'. Such rhetoric is easily found to be hollow or utopian (see Ehlers, this issue).

Hence, there is arguably too much single-focused attention given to scale, place and territory, too much eagerness to hold on, and too much emphasis placed on protecting and claiming distinctiveness in space. This *a priori* imagination of spatial unity and the borders of a city masks or even prevents a more spontaneous association and socialisation of citizens. What is (re)established then is a new spatial 'container', in which social practices of the citizens are held within or related to the new spatial model (see Sack, 1986). It is questionable to what extent this rescaling of a local (id)entity complies with and/or contributes to the current interests, intentions and actions of citizens. The debate on how governing rationalities and citizen rationalities (should) intersect and interact with each other in the process of cross-border governance surely has yet not come to a close and deserves to be further elaborated and explored (see also Bucken-Knapp, this issue; Matthiesen and Bürkner, this issue). It is often unclear and seldom explicitly stated what added value is generated for citizens and how it helps to improve or upgrade their (tangible) intentions and wishes. Maybe we need to move away from a focus on scale, cross-border citizenship, and cross-border governance (Brenner, 1999a; 1999b; Cox, 1996; Kramsch, 2002). Acting beyond national or city borders could also be seen as an opportunity to cease worrying about the spatial scale citizens move in and (inter)act within. Accomodating the associations and networks in the public space in which they (wish to) be mobile and interact is perhaps more important than foreordaining the spatial scale of practices. Maybe we have focused our attention too much on the efforts to find synergies, and methods of integrating. In doing so, we may well have given too much attention to the inequality and confrontation of identities, thereby running the risk of essentialising and overempowering the influence of territorial identities. Cross-border differences between we and them and the lack of understanding and sameness need not be scientifically proven. Absence is present in a single city as well. We do not need to have a common or single identity to be citizens in the same city. In a city, strangers, the others, are often a joy, not a confrontation. We need not be afraid of the emptiness between two places, of the absence of a bridge. To once more paraphrase Sennet's words, citizens are not subject to a fixed scheme of identity. They can develop multiple images of their identities. Who they are may shift, depending upon whom they are with and wish to be with. That is the true freedom of citizens: freedom from arbitrary definition and identification (Sennet, 2001).

So what we may need is another, less divisionary public language regarding the rhetoric of competition and assumed interests of the nation and the city. Such other public language would then have to be accompanied by a more active attitude towards the opening of our own (community) borders rather than the government and management the transnationalisation of spatial fixes. We do not need a utopia.

A utopia is about realising the unthinkable, and materialising the unmappable. A utopia boxes our imagination. Integration beyond words requires us to open up our borders and to be willing to unbound our own minds.

Notes

1. The rhetoric used in the introduction of the currency (EURO) to see it as a symbol of the new value of and cohesion in the Union surely is no help in dispelling the criticism on cross-border governance. And that symbols of invented, fictitious bridges, arches, doors, and viaducts are used on this new common currency is another suggestive hint in this respect. It is as if the European Union is being textualised and materialised through commodification.

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