

# Borders, Strangers, Doors and Bridges

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The limit, the frontier, the boundary, time-series of boundaries, or ditches, the void, or *différance*, they are all modifications of the line, the form of topo-logical thinking. Can we escape this thinking in terms of spatial metaphors? Must thinking be visual? I am asking you. I don't know myself. So strong am I bound to the picture of spatial metaphors (Reichert, 1992, p. 95).

## 1. Introduction

The topic of this Special Issue, "Geopolitics of Cross-border Co-operation in the EU", explores current practices, programmes, imaginations and narratives of cross-border co-operation. In this short opening essay, which aims to be a prelude for the papers that follow, we make an attempt to illuminate the symbolic content and meaning of the phrase 'cross-border co-operation in the EU' and to embed current philosophies on cross-border co-operation in a context of critical approaches, both in terms of academic research and in terms of (geopolitical) practices. In doing so, we mainly focus on the constructive and deconstructive power of imagination, as we feel that this is of crucial importance in understanding the power of borders and bordering processes, as well as understanding the attempt to construct a common open space in the European Union. Starting off with an analysis of how imagination feeds both bordering and cross-bordering processes, we then focus on what we see as two significant critical underscorings of current cross-border co-operation practices in the EU. The essay concludes by focusing on the power and potential of the narratives used by the EU.

## 2. Imagining Bordering and Cross-bordering

In recent critical geographical debates, borders are no longer understood as self-evident, inevitable, invariable or ineradicable lines that have to be taken for granted. The discussion of spatial borders conceptualises them now rather as 'unearthed', in the sense of not being earth-bounded any more and, more explicitly than before, the debates have made room for the topic of imagin-

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ation—or, should we say, the issue of imagination has opened up the study of borders. In such debates, borders have become widely regarded in terms of socially (re)produced phenomena and thus they differ crucially in their meanings, forms and contents of representations and interpretation from context to context. Put differently, borders are seen as both representations or signifiers and as ‘a thing or idea itself’, a signified. The constitutive process of imagining the existence and threat of an ‘other’ is crucial in this narrating and imagining of borders. As it defines a border between ‘normality’ and ‘deviance’, othering or exclusion is, as David Sibley calls it, a ‘colonisation’ of social life (Sibley, 1995, p. 83). The political power in a bordered entity perpetuates itself by unremittingly colonising social life through a continuous reproduction of fantasies about the enclosed, bordered community, denying that they *are* fantasies at the same time (Cavallaro, 2001). It is a way of marking and making difference in social space and people beyond the border and rejecting difference within the bordered. It thus seems justified to neglect (or to be indifferent about) what is beyond the border. The other is imaginatively there, but not present. The constructed border is an imaginative, mental border (van Houtum, 1998, 1999), but therefore not less real in its effects and consequences. Hence, the border is a simulacrum that does not hide the truth or makes reality imaginable, but is ‘the truth’ and represents reality. The constructed social authority in a bounded entity, whether or not represented by material fences and gates, must be seen therefore as a deduction from its imaginative strength, the imagination of strangeness and otherness or social consequences of trespassing it. Elsewhere, we have therefore made a plea for the inclusion of the study of the power of invisible borders in our understanding of borders and cross-border co-operation (van Houtum and Strüver, 2002).

Overcoming borders is, we would argue, mainly about overcoming the socially constructed imaginations of belonging to a certain place and of the need for a spatial fixity. For, when imagination has the potential to divide people it also has the potential to unite people. Overcoming borders then asks for the reimagining of borders and the reimagining of outsiders as insiders. That, however, would ask for the imaginative framework that allows people to meet and interact with ‘others’, with ‘strangers’. The key question that then follows from the knowledge that borders are best understood in terms of imagination is: do the existing frameworks of cross-border co-operation contribute to such reimagination? Below, two key problems are identified in current practices: first, the gap between people and policy; and, secondly, the non-crossing of borders via cross-border co-operation.

### 3. Cross-border Co-operation and People’s Practices

A key ‘problem’ that can be identified by looking at current practices of cross-border co-operation in the EU is the ‘gap’ between people and policy. In order to shed light on human interactions along or even across those borders in the EU that are materially largely gone (but still present), we would like to recall two essays of Georg Simmel’s *Soziologie*. Both essays stress that spatial relations are conditions and symbols of human relations and that social boundaries are similar to spatial borders. The first one is his essay ‘Bridge and door’ about connection and separation (Simmel, 1909/1997), in which he understands both bridges and doors as images of boundaries that both separate and connect.

Simmel explains that the “people who first built a path between two places performed one of the greatest human achievements ... , a bridge” (Simmel, 1909/1997, p. 66). Without bridges connecting separated places in our practical thoughts, needs and fantasies, the concept of separation would have no meaning.

In the immediate as well as the symbolic sense, in the physical as well as the intellectual sense, we are at any moment those who separate the connected or connect the separate (Simmel, 1909/1997, p. 66).

A bridge thus symbolises the connection between what is separated.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Simmel presents the metaphor of the door as even more significant in illustrating that connection and separation are the two sides of the same act and, consequently, the door is also an image of the border. Bridges are perceived as phenomena of connections, while doors are understood as the blocking *and* permitting effects of borders. Doors are constructed to be able to exclude the world outside, as well as to open for the world outside. Hence, it is not the door itself that should be topic of study, it is *people* who limit, separate and border. It is in their own hands to open the door or step through the door themselves, reach out and get in touch with the ‘other’.

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 are also the themes of the second essay to which we would briefly like to refer, ‘The Stranger’ (1908/1950). Here, Simmel argues that being and feeling socially close do not require spatial proximity. On the other hand, people who are spatially close to each other, but belong to another group, are often socially remote. This phenomenon mirrors the almost always existing synthesis of nearness and remoteness, or tension between nearness and distance respectively, and is described by Simmel as social interaction that is lived as involved difference. He also employs the metaphor of the stranger to illustrate that being spatially close, but socially remote is being neither insider, nor outsider, but ‘near and far at the same time’ and a strange, yet constitutive non-member of a group.

There are some important themes that arise in these two wonderful essays which can be related to the topic of cross-border co-operation in the EU. On the one hand, in cross-border co-operation we are dealing, in fact, with people who are spatially close, but socially remote because they belong or feel that they belong to another group (‘nation’). Being near and far at the same time is what defines the stranger. And this mental distance between here and there might help us to understand the difficulty of connecting the separated, of building bridges and of opening doors. Borders still are respected in the EU not only in terms of feelings of togetherness (patriotism) but also in the non-functioning of cross-border labour markets or supplier markets between small and medium-sized firms, for example (Strüver, 2001; van Houtum, 1998, 1999; van der Velde, 2000). The orientation of these markets is still heavily bounded by current state and national borders. Put differently, it is people’s habitus (practices and performances) that (re)produces their habitat (Bourdieu, 1999). These practices are performed in order to impose one’s own vision of the world and to (re)claim one’s socio-spatial identity. Since imagining and presenting a vision always works on the principle of di-vision, it includes the processes of delimitation and bordering (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991).

One could question, therefore, whether current practices of cross-border co-operation in the EU actually go beyond the rhetoric and imagination of 'sides'—for, semantically, cross-border co-operation already refers to a situation of *closed* borders, as 'crossing' literally means 'going to the *other side*'. The borders between the EU members are said to be materially removed and thus it should not be a matter of *cross-border* co-operation, but rather of human ways of getting along together, of dealing with 'the other', of interaction where human relations are concerned in general. In essence, therefore, cross-border co-operation would have to move beyond the rhetoric of sides and borders. And maybe it would have to move beyond the current practice of institution-building across borders, for, the current fashionable practice of Euregionalisation, the making of new institutions to stimulate cross-border co-operation, is a somewhat paradoxical attempt to open up the borders. Not only does there seem to be a strange tension between installing and bounding institutions and openness, but also the discourse on co-operation between two sides or across the border might, at least in the short term, lead to more emphasis of differences and sense of bounded places, not less.

In this respect, we would agree with Paasi (2001) who argues that geopolitical discourses on EU and cross-border co-operation are relatively separate from the everyday lives of local people. Current geopolitical reasoning in the EU is still very much related to its 'production sites' (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998). This means that, apart from formal reasoning (such as theorising, describing and explaining), there is practical reasoning (justifying policy approaches) and popular reasoning (the impact on people's everyday lives). These latter two seem to be somewhat (too) distinct from each other.

In addition to this and referring to an overview of current research on the EU's internal borders, three different categories of border studies have been distinguished: the flow approach, the cross-border co-operation approach and the people approach (van Houtum, 2000). The ability to define these three distinct forms indeed suggests that 'cross-border co-operation' on the one hand and 'people' on the other do not overlap and have not much in common—maybe not even a border. Similarly, in this issue, Scott, among other things, makes clear that, although European unification is accompanied by the incorporation of various actors, 'Europe' still seems to be far away from its citizens, despite the Euregios' aims to stimulate and intensify cross-border development and despite the various attempts to remap common and cross-border space in the EU.

It is striking, nevertheless, that in current attempts to reimagine the space of Europe there is so much focus on scale and proximity. As we know from Simmel's essay, proximity does not mean fusion or cohesion. In the same vein, we would argue that it is not the proximity that matters, so much as the imagination of togetherness. Such imagination moves beyond the assumed logic of proximity and the fixity of scale. So why then is there still the general assumption that people in a border region are better equipped or the first persons to create cross-border co-operation? At a national level, one would never think of first focusing on the people at the edges of a municipality or region when interurban or interregional co-operation is attempted. Why should this be different in an international context? In this respect, Kramsch points out that too many people simply do not know that they live in a cross-border region and are expected to act *across* the border. The question is obviously, why should

they? Why is it in the interest of people to *cross* a border? It might be in the interest of the political representatives of a community, for the sake of urban boosterism, subsidy acquisitions and place-marketing in the imagined competition between places in the European Union, to institutionalise cross-border co-operation. But why and how does it serve the interests of the rest of the community? Perhaps what serves the interests of the people most are those things that contribute to their own habitus and ensure their usual practices, such as the pragmatic sharing of basic commonalities, like the fire brigade, hospitals and police services—in short, the public sector. But do we need togetherness or even a common identity as some are striving for, to realise this? Is openness alone not sufficient then? Yet, what maybe makes such pragmatic sharing difficult is that openness is asking much more of our willingness to share than togetherness. It is the *inverse of co-operation*, as it starts from a borderless (comm)unity, instead of from two ‘sides’ that are co-operating. Hence, sharing the public sector would require a true debordering experience, a fluid sharing beyond sovereignty. It would not require a bridge, but a door—a door that is open(ed). At present, however, such open-door policy is far from being common practice.

#### 4. Following the Routes

In this opening essay we have attempted to illuminate and set an agenda for the debate on some of the key problems when trying to co-operate across borders in the EU. We have focused on the difference between bridges and doors in relation to the possibly diverging interests of political place-makers and people in their daily lives. Openness is a crucial term in the EU, yet is a highly complex issue to understand in full, let alone in to achieve. One of the current key aims of the EU is to construct an internal union in which there is more public openness; this is the narrative of cross-border co-operation. Narratives feed and thereby construct imaginations and vice versa. And imagination is what we need to construct openness. Yet, precisely because narratives are so crucial to our imagination, we should be consciously and critically aware of the narratives that are told and the symbols that are used.<sup>2</sup> That will help us to understand which routes the EU is going to take. We, both as academics and as ‘local people living along a border’ also find it very difficult to escape thinking and feeling in spatial metaphors in general and in bordering processes and effects in particular. We express the hope that this Special Issue furthers the debate on such critical understandings and evaluations of these routes.

#### Notes

1. Simmel also distinguishes the metaphor of the window in his essay. The window also represents a situation in which the inner world connects with the external world, yet now in most cases it concerns looking out and not looking in (except for window-shopping).
2. One such symbol that was introduced only recently is the common currency, the ‘euro’. Whereas the coins still vary because they portray the national monuments and persons of each member-state, the notes are the same everywhere—printed with fictitious motifs of *bridges and doors* in order to characterise stylistic elements that are believed to be typical of Europe and its hoped-for openness and solidarity.

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