Border Crossing as Act of Resistance

The Autonomy of Migration as Theoretical Intervention into Border Studies[*]

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In September 2015, the reality of cross-border-migration seemed to be overwhelming. Thousands of migrants and refugees tore down the fences of the European border regime and demanded the right to cross the borders towards Western European countries in unexpected numbers and with unbelievable strength. They camped on the city squares all over Europe; they jumped on ferries and trains; and whenever the official means of transportation were blocked by the police, they literally marched hundreds of kilometers to cross the next national border. This collective, unorganized uprising found international public awareness when thousands of refugees were blocked at the main station in Budapest and started the "March of Hope" at the main motorway to reach Austria and Germany by foot (cf. *bordermonitoring.eu*). The pictures of marching bodies on motorways in an attempt to cross the nearest national border and to evade police controls and registration procedures soon became iconographic images of borderland resistance. Yet, these pictures have faded away already, and have been overwritten by quite antithetical images of an intensified re-bordering in a very material sense, with newly erected fences and ditches, defended by barbed wire and dogs, e.g., along the Hungarian-Serbian or Macedonian-Greek border. Even if these re-bordering activities, especially the official closure of the so called Balkan

Route and the so called EU-Turkey Deal, managed to reduce the number of people trying to get to Europe via Turkey and Greece, they did not manage to stop the movement altogether. By means of hunger strikes and official protests, the migrants trapped on the Greek islands or in Serbia are still demanding and fighting for their right to flee and to human treatment.

These more or less spontaneous, nevertheless highly collectivized forms of action within the movements of migration have taken place on a regular basis over the last years—yet, admittedly, in fewer numbers and with less media coverage and international public attention as well as with less success. As an example, one might think of the numerous attempts by hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants to climb over the militarized fences of the Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Mellia where—for sure—many got stuck, heavily injured in the barbed wires, but hundreds have been successful entering the European Union year after year (cf. "Hunderte Flüchtlinge"; "Sendung: tagesschau 18.03.2014"). There are also the overt and more or less organized forms of borderland resistance that we could witness in the demonstrations and riots in UNHCR refugee camps, for example, in Jordan, where Syrian refugees have been protesting against this form of enforced internment (cf. "Syrian Refugee"); or in the case of the hunger and thirst strikes in the brutalized Hungarian 'prison camps,' in which all asylum seekers have to stay for one year (cf. Bayer and Speer 12-18).

Apart from these obviously collective forms of resistance, scholarly as well as media reports show an incredible richness of more individual and imperceptible acts of resistance in the social field of border crossing activities, like filing away or etching the fingertips to fool the fingerprint machines and the so called Eurodac system. Eurodac is the big database that is connected to the Dublin Regulation, which determines that refugees have to apply for asylum in the first EU-European country they enter (cf. Tsianos and Kuster). It is the Dublin Regulation that led to the new phenomenon of rising inter-European deportations, as migrants get deported back to the country of first contact if their fingerprints can be found in the Eurodac data base (cf. Schuster 404-05). Although these forms of resistance are practiced individually, they are nevertheless embedded in the social networks of transit migration and draw on the wisdom and collective knowledge of this kind of diasporic communities of border-crossing that could be conceptualized with Asef Bayat's concept of "nonmovement" (11). With this concept, Bayat refers to collectivized mass actions by non-collective actors that are not organized by an organization

and that do not follow one single ideology. Instead, Bayat refers to everyday practices performed by many people at the same time. Although these practices, more often than not, are of a fragmented nature, they, in sum, may nevertheless trigger social transformations, as it was the case with the so-called Velvet Revolutions (cf. Bayat 20).

But these forms of resistance are rarely televised and publicly discussed. At times, though, they draw the public's attention, as was the case in the summer of 2015, when the marching refugees from Budapest succeeded with their demand and the Austrian and German governments opened their borders in a big humanitarian gesture. Hundreds of thousands followed their example demanding again and again the right to cross the next European border, so that, for some time in 2015, we can speak of a more or less open 'Balkan Route.' However, would we have conceived transit migration and the daily practices of border crossing as resistance during the long period prior to these events, when the border regime seemed to have the upper hand and seemed to be able to control and repress the movements of migration?

On the contrary, the everyday impression of the power of migration vis-à-vis the border regime is slightly different. In the last couple of years, the image that has dominated the European public and scholarly debate on the European border regime has been one of overloaded, sinking ships in the Mediterranean Sea and corpses lying at the quay. This image as well as the high number of migrants who have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea rather speak another 'truth'—that of a return of a solid "Wall around the West," as Peter Andreas and Timothy Snyder phrased it in their well-noticed book on the re-bordering measures and policies by the Western industrial regions of the world already in 2000. From this perspective, migrants and their border crossing endeavors also appear in a different light: The migrant appears as a mere victim at the mercy of the atrocities of the border policies and practices.

What kind of sense can we make of these two highly contrasting scenarios with regard to the topic of borderland resistance? I would like to caution against building a simple opposition—either resistance or the return of the border, especially as this would be a misconception of the new shape and function of the border in the first place. In this contribution, I would rather like to show how the border regime can be understood as a site of constant encounter, tension, conflict, and contestation due to the strength and wisdom of the movements of migration. In so doing, I would

like to rethink the relationship between the movements of migration and the multiple regimes governing them, and hence to think differently about migration as such. I.e., aim at reconceptualizing migration historically and structurally as acts of "escape," as imperceptible forms of resistance by eluding and evading the condition of existence, as Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson, and Vassilis Tsianos framed it (cf. *Escape Routes*). Yann Moulier Boutang referred to this dimension as "the autonomy of migration" (169). In this view, migration is a force co-constituting the border, challenging and reshaping borders by the daily acts of border crossing.

In my argument, I draw on collective/collaborative research and knowledge practices that started within the Transit Migration Research Group (2007) and are now continued within the Laboratory for Critical Migration and Border Regime Research based at Göttingen University as well as in the German-speaking, Europe-wide interdisciplinary network "kritnet" (cf. Hess and Kasparek; Heimeshoff, Hess, Kron, Schwenken, and Trzeciak).

1. THE RETURN OF THE BORDER PARADIGM

If we read the daily news on the migratory tragedies occurring in the Mediterranean Sea in an unbelievable regularity over the last years; if we study the reemergence of high fences, walls, and deep trenches as they are built along the Greek-Turkish, the Bulgarian-Turkish, and the Hungarian-Serbian land-borders, around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla or along the Israeli and the Sinai-borderline, we are tempted to dismiss our insights in the "power of migration" (cf. Glick Schiller) and to proclaim instead a border paradigm. Apart from these very obvious and material fence constructions, there is another myriad of technological devices established, for example, by SIVE (Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior, since 2002), EUROSUR (European Border Surveillance System, since 2013), MARSUR (Maritime Surveillance, since 2005) or whatever these kinds of digitalized, smart border technologies may be called, establishing more or less invisible networked fences. Millions of Euros are spent for this kind of research and technological development, whereas civil and military actors have been competing as well as increasingly merging. Sergio Carrera and Leonhard den Hertog from the Centre for

European Policy Studies characterized this development concerning the control of movements in the Mediterranean Sea as "the surveillance race" (16), which creates a new spatialized and digitalized border situation, which Etienne Balibar described as the "ubiquity of borders" (84).

Against the background of all these rebordering efforts, practices, and devices, we can also observe a return of the 'border' as topic and concept in migration and mobility studies alike. For example, Glick Schiller and Noel B. Salazar took up the topic in their paper "Regimes of Mobility across the Globe," speaking of the return of national borders and ethnic boundaries in the wake of the recent global economic crisis. Thereby, they follow Ronen Shamir's conceptualization of a single "global mobility regime" (200) with the following characteristics:

Oriented to closure and to the blocking of access, premised not only on 'old' national or local grounds but on a principle of perceived universal dangerous personhoods [...]. In practice, this means that local, national, and regional boundaries are now being rebuilt and consolidated [...]. [P]rocesses of globalization are also concerned with the prevention of movement and the blocking of access. (199)

2. THE 'AUTONOMY OF MIGRATION'-APPROACH AS A CRITICAL INTERVENTION INTO BORDER STUDIES

Before I outline the 'autonomy of migration'-approach, I will briefly recall the common understanding of migration and the border. Still today or even more so today—as the European border regime has undergone severe legitimacy problems since the catastrophes of Lampedusa in 2013, when more than 600 people drowned—migration vis-à-vis the border is generally conceptualized in a functionalist and/or instrumentalist top down mode (cf. Mezzadra 794-95). This is the case with the push-and-pull model commonly applied by migration research and the public alike—today we better refer to it as push-and-closure model. The image generated by and associated with this model is the following: On the one side, there is a more or less strong and monolithic apparatus and a will to stop, to hinder, to exclude, and to suppress migration and/or to exploit it. On the other side, there are victims, either people who followed the call of capital and find themselves cheated and trapped in exploitation, as the official left-wing narrative of the so-called guest worker systems wanted

to make us believe for a long time. The dominant narrative was like this: there was a labor shortage, and the German government responded to it by signing 'guest worker contracts.' Then, thousands of poor men from the European South followed the call, more or less unaware of the conditions awaiting them. In this context, the figure of the *homo exploiticus* was constructed as the other side of the *homo economicus* of classical migration theories (cf. Bojadzijev for a critical perspective on this). So either there are the 'exploited victims' or the 'real victims' in the Agambian sense of 'bare life,' driven out of their homelands, faceless masses stuck in transit. I do not want to imply here that the European border regime is not brutal and that it does not produce so much hardship and pain. However, I would like to stress what this representational regime and what this kind of conceptualization hints at, what kind of policy response and what kind of positioning (also in academic and methodological terms) it produces: It not only calls for humanitarian responses, but it establishes a hierarchical, neo-colonial matrix of the helping (and gazing) subject and the suffering (looked at) object.

This representational regime can be described as victimization and as humanitarianism, as Didier Fassin or Miriam Ticktin have called this kind of power, which calls for action to save lives and to alleviate suffering. Under the rationale of humanitarianism, we can also speak of a political economy of 'humanitarian crisis' based on the ability of the European border regime to recode incidents as emergencies (cf. Calhoun) calling for ad hoc, exceptional actions, as Didier Fassin characterizes one central dimension of humanitarianism as politics by exception (cf. 16). And indeed, if we look back, we can see that this kind of emergency policy was highly productive and one of the main driving forces in developing Frontex into a big organization with a big budget (cf. Heimershoff, Hess, Kron, Schwenken, and Trzeciak 8). The marching migrant bodies also call for humanitarian answers; but this time, their agency and political subjectivities, their demands for freedom of border crossing cannot be erased from the picture. Instead, they confront the humanitarian gesture that always rests on the good will of the powerful position to decide when to act and which lives to save—as Fassin outlines with his concept of "politics of life" (226)—with the claim to have the right to cross the border just like everybody else. This is the far-reaching political sign of the current migratory uprisings everywhere in Europe: By coming out of the shadow of irregularity and factual hiding in the transit migration hubs

and marching on the streets, migrants thus do indeed reclaim a political subject position within the dominant representational and political matrix.

What is changing with regard to our understanding of the border, policy, and migration, if we conceptualize 'the migrant' not in structural terms as quintessential victim or in cultural terms as the quintessential contemporary Other, as it is still mostly the case in cultural and social science migration research? What is changing if we conceptualize migration differently, as it is provocatively expressed with the notion of the autonomy of migration?

Quite often, this notion is quite incorrectly translated and equated with autonomous migrants. But this is certainly not its intention, because 'autonomy of migration' is a structural argument based on a materialist-Marxist reading of history. It also does not intend to wipe out the sorrows and misfortunes many projects of migration are confronted with. Rather, with this notion of the 'autonomy of migration,' Yann Moulier Boutang and other proponents of this theoretical endeavor tried to reposition migration within the history of labor, capitalism, and modern forms of governance by highlighting and focusing on the unchecked capability of living labor to resist and to escape from the conditions of (re-)production (cf. also Mezzadra and Neilson). Moulier Boutang writes:

Primarily, governing means facing the challenge to dissuade society from its desire to escape and refuse by means of representative democracy. Policy has to channel the energy of flight into ever new institutions that manage to transform resistance [...]. (172; translation: SH)

In his theorization, Yann Moulier Boutang draws heavily on the theoretical traditions of operaism. *Operaismo* emerged as a political movement and as the political theory in Italy in the 1960s in opposition to mainstream Marxism. Two essential insights of operaism are of central importance to the shift of perspective proposed by the 'autonomy of migration'-approach: First, operaism reads capitalist history as being driven by labor struggles. From this perspective, industrialization and the emergence of the factory appear as reactions to workers' resistance; and second, it re-conceptualizes 'resistance' in a more empirical way by stressing silent and small forms of subversion and evasion as expressed, for instance, in slow-work or jokes and rituals on an everyday level of factory life.

In analogy, Moulier Boutang did not conceptualize capitalism as the first mover of history and society driven by some abstract parameters like sinking rates of profit. Quite on the contrary, he read capitalist developments as reactions towards mobilities, as constant attempts to regain predominance over the desire and capability of living labor to resist and escape the conditions enforced on it (cf. Moulier Boutang 172-73; cf. also Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos). Thus, the 'autonomy of migration'-approach does not stop at the insight that migration is an active force, that it is to be understood as a form of everyday silent resistance. Rather it goes on asking how migration intervenes into the very center of our knowledge production (cf. Hess 31-32). Bernd Kasparek and Maria Schwertl recently summarized the theoretical intervention that is evoked by the notion of the autonomy of migration. They stated: "The Autonomy of Migration is less a conclusion to arrive at but a perspective that opens up new ways of interrogation and doing research. Or, to quote Moulier Boutang, autonomy of migration is not a slogan, but a method."

3. The Autonomy of Migration as Prism

If we conceive of the 'autonomy of migration'-approach as a method or a prism that allows for new perspectives, then we have to ask about what it enables us to see. Firstly, the 'autonomy of migration'-approach enables us to understand migration and mobility as social movements and thus inherently as political, social, transformative practices. Through migration, social actors escape their normalized representations; they reconfigure themselves and their conditions of existence. Following Vassilis Tsianos and Dimitris Papadopoulos, migration is thus to be conceived of as a world-making practice, an active transformation of social space:

Migration is not the evacuation of a place and the occupation of a different one; it is the making and remaking of one's own life on the scenery of the world. World-making. You cannot measure migration in changes of position or location, but in the increase in inclusiveness and the amplitude of its intensities. Even if migration starts sometimes as a form of dislocation (forced by poverty, patriarchal exploitation, war, famine), its target is not relocation but the active transformation of social space. (169-70)

Secondly, by looking at the border and the migration regime from the perspective of the 'autonomy of migration'-approach, our conceptualization of the border and hence our understanding of the state and sovereignty changes as well. The once monolithic border apparatus decomposes and falls apart into multiple factors: into actors, practices, discourses, technologies, bodies, affects, and trajectories, whereas migration is to be understood as one of its driving forces (cf. Heimeshoof, Hess, Kron, Schwenken, and Trzeciak 13-14). This conceptualization of the border destroys clear-cut or binary models of structure versus agency, as it reconceptualizes the border as space of contestation and negotiation.

The ethnographic border regime analysis developed by the Transit Migration Research Group in the beginning of 2000 tries to translate these theoretical insights into a research methodology (cf. Transit Migration Forschungsgruppe; Tsianos and Hess). Thereby, they draw on political science as well as on the Foucauldian concept of regime, which makes it possible to include a multiplicity of actors, institutions, and other non-human and human factors without reducing all these diverse forces to a single logic or hidden agenda. Instead, the ethnographical border regime analysis starts with the empirical as well as theoretical insights that the border constitutes a site of constant encounters, tensions, and contestations, whereas migration is a co-constituent of the border. According to Giuseppe Sciortino, a regime is a "mix of rather implicit conceptual frames, generations of turf wars among bureaucracies and waves after waves of 'quick fix' to emergencies [...] the life of a regime is a result of continuous repair work through practices" (32).

Hence, the regime-approach reads the constant re-figuration of the border centrally as a reaction to the forces and movements of migration that challenge, cross, and reshape borders. Through reconceptualizing the border on the basis of the 'autonomy of migration'-approach, this perspective makes a big difference to most of the existing contemporary constructivist approaches in border studies that conceptualize the border also as result of a multiplicity of actors and practices as it is expressed in the notion of 'doing border' or 'border work' (cf., e.g., Rumford; Salter). However, most of these highly interesting constructivist approaches either completely erase migration as a constitutive force or they conceptualize the migrant again mostly as passive victim. To put border struggles at the center of the analyses instead, as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson also did in their recent book *Border as Method* (cf. 13-14), follows the 'autonomy

of migration'-approach. In this view, the forces of migration produce the social and economic phenomenon of the borderland: Borderlands are the product of the collectivized excessive will to subvert and pass the border, of the networks of people on the move, and shared knowledge practices of border-crossing (cf. Fröhlich). Thereby, one central capacity and means to resist is not to be noticed, to pass and immerse oneself in the big migration hubs and the (internationalized areas of the) economies of the new transit cities; another capacity is to be flexible to take on different social roles as student, tourist, laborer, or asylum seeker along the route and to be able to tactically adapt one's own biography to the demands of the border regime. And last but not least, to seize any opportunity as soon as it comes up (cf. Hess and Kasparek).

It is this generative excess that various state agencies and policy schemes subsequently try to control, manage, and make use of by invoking the border as a stable, controllable, and manageable tool of selective or differential inclusion. In the 'long summer of migration' 2015, the border regime lost even this representational capacity, as the mass movements of migrants made clear that the will to flee is stronger than the technical and bureaucratic apparatus of the border regime. The current construction of the four meter-high fence along the Hungarian-Serbian border and the reestablishment of national border controls all over the European Union are in fact defensive-aggressive attempts to regain control.

However, the border regime transforms the legal status of the people crossing the border: It takes away the basic human right to have rights—as it is at least officially encoded in national citizenship—by putting the border crossers into the different existing categories of migration. In this sense, the border is a huge transformation regime producing new hierarchies of people by categorizing and processing the unchecked mobilities as 'migration.'

But the struggles of migrants in Germany, Hungary, Serbia, Turkey, or elsewhere for the right to flee, for the right to stay where they want to stay, and for the right to move freely within Europe—these are the new demands and fights of migration especially directed against the so-called Dublin regime—show that also people excluded from full citizenship enact citizenship rights and post-national visions of it on a daily basis (cf. Nyers and Kim; Köster-Eisenfunken, Reichhold, and Schwiertz; Hess and Lehbuhn).

To sum up, what I tried to do was to re-conceptualize borderlands as well as migration itself as ways of resistance, as products of a generative excess that cannot be fully subjectified by the forces of domination. However, if we really accept this understanding of migration following the perspective of the 'autonomy of migration'-approach, then this has radical repercussions on our general knowledge production: Migration ends to be the culturalized object of our scholarly gaze and it starts to become a method, a perspective, a prism for a situated post-national knowledge practice that itself is only thinkable as a way of resistance, as criticism of the hegemonic, objectifying mode still deeply entrenched in the post-colonial order of knowledge (cf. Hess 34-35). That is what we try to develop within the network for critical migration and border regime research "kritnet" (cf. *Movements*; *bordermonitoring.eu*).

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