The border as research space

Potentials of historical and contemporary border narratives for a better understanding and addressing of migration

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The article proposes a research approach for addressing controversial challenges through migration by focusing on experiences in border regions. This is based on the assumption that narratives of belonging, defence and threat have emerged around borders over centuries, which have produced prevalent national identities over the past 150 years. Among these problematic and heavily mediatised discourses, the regions on both sides of the border are guarding a precious treasure of experiences of border crossing, cultural exchange, social and economic transactions. This hidden knowledge and underestimated potential of border regions can be recovered through research and used for inclusive processes in migrant and ethnicised societies.

Introduction: Between national orders and transnational spaces

In recent years, the power and fragility of borders have emerged, with a particular intensification from 2015 to 2020, as a key issue for the global shaping of the present and future. The increased movement of refugees to Europe around 2015 was politically highly problematized, whereas in 2020 the political scene appeared almost schizophrenic: After the critique of its military offensive in Syria, Turkey threatened the EU with allowing 3.6 million refugees to enter Europe, who were held back there partly with EU funds. While the EU states were considering stricter measures to secure their borders against

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refugees, the SARS-CoV-2 virus effortlessly crossed all borders and put the world in a state of emergency, causing a global lockdown.

Seldom before has it become so obvious that borders are supposed to protect national boundaries as sharp divisions yet fail in the face of global challenges which can only be addressed by international and transnational cooperation. Just like viruses and climate change cannot be stopped at borders, refugee movements and migration cannot be mastered simply via border management if one does not want to abandon all humanity and international solidarity. However, exactly this happened when several states tended to instrumentalize the Corona pandemic to close down their borders and—as in the case of Bosnia—virtually arrested refugees preventing them from moving anywhere. To make things even worse, the migrants were left alone with no humanitarian support whatsoever. In fact, the recent struggles with the virus strengthened the ongoing renaissance of a 'new localism' in nationalist and racist terms, rather than promoting the necessary opening up for transnational, ultimately global collaborative efforts to combat the pandemic threat.

This article aims at broadening the perspective and allow for a critique of the current return to understanding borders in terms of mere geopolitical firewalls. Against this limitation, it deals with the border as an object of research from a rather unusual, widely forgotten perspective, namely not only as a dividing line, but also as a connecting space (cf. Barth 1969; Driessen 1992). Viewed in this way, borders do not only exercise excluding and blocking functions, but also hold potential for cooperation and collaboration across borders.[1]

Particularly in the context of migration, borders are presented in media, public, political and also scientific discourses predominantly as threatened infrastructures of national—and today also EU-European—sovereignty that need specific protection. Just consider the border controls between Austria and Germany and the conflicts between Italy and Austria over the Brenner

1 The research approach discussed here is the basis for a joint research proposal by universities in Austria (Klagenfurt), Germany (Berlin), Greece (Thessalonik) and Sweden (Malmö) as well as NGOs in Austria (Südwind), Romania (Hosman Durabil) and Tunisia (France and Tunisia Terre d'Asile): "Border Narratives on Migration as laboratories for inclusion". In addition to the authors of this paper, the theoretical and methodological part of the proposal was also worked on by Naif Bezwan, Athanasios Marvakis, Veronika Michitsch, Ricarda Motschilnig, Bo Petersson, Ioanna Wagner Tsoni, Werner Wintersteiner and others.

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border as a result of the flight movements in 2015. This escalated in 2019 in the heated debates about a wall between Italy and Slovenia. At the borders with the Eastern European EU countries, the border and migration policies led to setbacks in fundamental questions of democracy and European cooperation. The border issue has thus destabilised the EU's internal cohesion and led to a stronger stance towards the external borders.

But in the shadow of this negative perception of the border also lie unrewarded and unexploited potentials of the border regions: Despite massive conflicts around the borders, people have repeatedly developed positive practices of living together at the border and practised exchange and encounters across borders.

From this perspective, especially border *regions* hold a wealth of experience in dealing with migration, which lies hidden under the surface of mostly negative discourses and is worth to be protected. This should not lead to a romanticization of migration (Mezzadra 2004: 83), as this all too easily ignores the involuntary nature of migration, conditions of exploitation and precarious living conditions. On the contrary, the aim is not only to acknowledge the painful and traumatic historical and, in some cases, current experiences in the struggle for and at borders, but also to study learning processes in these areas over generations. This should allow a better addressing the issue of migration and lead to a better understanding of migration.

The tension between transnational social spaces and national spaces in terms of constitutional law and order is particularly intense in regional border areas (Scott 2003) with autochthonous minorities and heterogeneity caused by the proximity of the border. The additional complexity is rarely noticed, because of mechanisms of social invisibility of autochthonous *and* allochthonous minorities and is only marginally dealt with in educational research (Krüger-Potratz 2006: 124). The assumption of homogeneous national spaces thus makes, for example, Frisians or Sorbs disappear in public discourses in Germany just as much as the autochthonous Albanian minority in Italy, while contemporary Albanian immigrants are perceived and stigmatized as a migration problem.

Here, a further special feature becomes apparent: The overlapping of historically conditioned experiences of foreignness with more recent migration phenomena has not yet been addressed much (Peterlini 2017). This poses a very special challenge for border regions, because narratives from the past—some of which are mythically transfigured and difficult to access—

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tend to strengthen tendencies of rejection and demands for the protection of autochthonous minorities against new foreign infiltration (ibid.). At the same time, the processing of these narratives offers a high, however still little used, potential for understanding the foreign expressions of others. In areas, where autochthonous minorities and national majority populations live together, mono-ethnic narratives and the resulting narrowly defined identity concepts contrast with the lived plurality. In the concept of the post-migrant society, these distinctions between 'native' and 'migrant' as well as minority are challenged altogether and dismantled as categorical resources to construct a fictive culturally homogeneous 'nation'. Post-migrant narratives deconstruct this notion and replace it by accounts of radical diversities constituting a rather different vision of a minoritized majority (Czollek et al. 2019; Römhild 2014). This superimposition of historically handed-down narratives often standing in the way of an open attitude in the present is not exclusive to the border region.

Discourses being inflamed by border struggles are also effective elsewhere, where experiences have not been made in the first place. Nevertheless, it is worth investigating to what extent inhabitants of border regions are more sympathetic to foreign influences than those who live far away from borders, as they are more used to such influences. In the border region, however, this special mixture of excluding discourses and including ways of life is given in a condensed form and becomes more visible. Therefore, the knowledge generated here is exemplary and can be used for learning processes elsewhere.

The border regions in this sense represent a kind of laboratory for the study of historical and contemporary narratives about migration and its influence. The duality of the border as a conflict-laden condition and the border region as a transnational social space is here of particular interest (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Green 2012; Pries 1996).

The border space also offers itself as a space *in between* (Bhabha 1994), in which fixed meanings are again exchanged and thus transformed. The political and media discourses about refugee's movements, especially those about the Mediterranean, have painfully demonstrated how the concept of the border is subject to deterritorialisation. This is because virtual borders can also be effective elsewhere in contrast to their physically drawn line. This can clearly be seen in the logic of extra-territorialized controls or refugee camps in accordance with EU border protection policy, as negotiated with

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states outside the EU dating back to the decision of the European Council in November 2002 (Europäischer Rat 2002: 10). In the same way, the border can also manifest itself in and around an asylum centre in the region or express itself in cities and conurbations as the plurality of the migration society. It is partly visibly and partly invisibly, divided by different civil rights and participation possibilities (Mezzadra 2003: 112) and accordingly generates different, often contrasting narratives. The zoning of extended "borderlands" has become central to European politics of the externalization as well as the internalization of EU borders (Cuttitta 2010).

A possible access to this presumed wealth of experience of the border regions are their rich narratives about migration. Narratives play a central role in the creation of social and political orders. Generally, they are understood as a representation based on a sequence of events in the past that communicates something from the memory of the narrator (Linde 2015: 2). They are carriers of imagination of how individuals and collectives recall their past (cf. Macdonald 2013), try to understand their present and design their future. The basic idea of the research approach proposed in this article is to survey, transform and create narratives in a performative and participatory method with the various stakeholders in the migration society in order to work on them for a better understanding and management of migration. This makes it necessary to survey less perceived narratives, paying particular attention to discrimination based on origin, ethnicity, language, gender, socioeconomics, culture, religion and others. It is also particularly important that research does not stop at the border, but crosses it, by involving the other side respectively. Especially in the—historical and contemporary—cultural and social exchange, trade and marriage across the border that people in border regions develop a largely unconscious competence in dealing with the other. This can be exceptionally rewarding in those border areas that have a particular conflict potential due to the overlapping of historical—mostly ethnic-national—experiences of strangeness and more recent migration processes.

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Exploring narratives regionally and transnationally

As a method, inquiry narrative analysis is defined by a particular distinction and tension between story and discourse—and their respective rules. Story is taken to refer to the represented events as opposed to a representation of those events, and, as such, tends to follow certain rules of chronological and spatial order. Discourses are, in Foucault's sense, permeated by power relations that tend to support and produce hegemonic and system-sustaining structures, while stories—as narratives—can break these up in life-world contexts.

Therein lies one significant aspect of narrative analysis: Narratives are radically open-ended in that they can be retold, remade and reconstructed in several ways. At the same time, they remain sensitive to changing societal needs, perceptions and dynamics. Another aspect, which makes narrative inquiry fruitful for this study, is that it focuses on "temporality, sociality and place". As such, it attends to personal and social contexts under which people's experiences and events are unfolding, pays attention to the particularities of the places where inquiry and event take place, to include the ongoing temporality of experience (cf. Clandinin and Huber 2010: 436).

Thus, narrative inquiry uses "the power of storytelling as a tool for eliciting people's local knowledge and understandings of social phenomena and of narrative analysis as an instrument for analysing them" (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012: 18). This mode of inquiry draws its strengths from giving meaning to human experience, focusing on people's individual experience, paying attention both to language and to discourse and to the contexts of storytelling (cf. ibid.).

In their totality and complexity, narratives, similar to dreams according to Freud, represent a royal road to a better understanding of unconscious motives for human actions and attitudes, if they are made conscious and accessible for reflection. In myths, historical experiences such as warlike defeats (Schivelbusch 2002) and violent conflicts are condensed and changed into stories of victims and heroes. On the one hand they offer consolation in the face of collective humiliation, on the other hand they ward off guilt and shame (Freud 1974 [1921]). According to Schivelbusch such sediment collective memories, which transfigure grave historical experiences, are very persistent and difficult to change.

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What and how something is remembered and what falls into oblivion is fundamental to the formation of collective narratives and thus identity-forming narratives. What individuals remember or repress interacts with the group. According to Volkan (2006: 209) the bond between the individual and the group is woven above all through inner images based on the history of large groups such as myths, songs, eating habits, dances, heroes and martyrs. This is where the psychoanalytic theory of forgetting by suppressing meets Jan Assmann's theory of memory (Assmann J. 2002). Just as collective memory has no neuronal network of its own, individual memory is always socially co-constituted. Assmann distinguishes communicative collective memory from cultural collective memory as the former is still supported by contemporary witnesses and can thus date back up to 80–100 years. In contrast, cultural memory is fed by fixed points in the past, such as ancestral history, exodus, desert migration, land grabbing, war and subjugation. In cultural memory, factual history is transformed into remembered history and then into myths. These hardly accessible memories are of central importance for analysing the traditional heritage of societies. However, for their opening it is significant to transfer them into what Aleida Assmann (2006) called social memory. This means: Making narratives conscious, relating them to concrete experiences and life situations, learning to distinguish between remembered and lived experience, making the fixed fluid again.

For this purpose, it is necessary not to limit the research to the collection and analysis of obvious narratives alone, but to work on theme in an action-oriented way. Care should be taken to give space and voice to narratives that would otherwise not be heard or not be spoken out at all. A particular challenge lies in not only making these narratives conscious and opening up transformation processes, but also in generating new narratives to imagine a better future, in the sense of the (im)possible utopia as Derrida (Assheuer/Derrida 1998) tries to distinguish the concrete utopia from an unreal dream. Thus, narratives are not only understood as storage devices for experiences, but they also hold potential to create a new design for the way we want to live (together). The concrete utopia consists in the assumption that narratives are able to influence political, social and economic orders in the sense of a convivial life and society (Illich 1973).

By bringing together discursively and structurally divided people in focus groups, in the performative and artistic settings, media exchange platforms and real encounters, narratives are exchanged, reflected and changed. This

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can produce those "communities of sentiment" to which Appadurai (1996: 54) ascribes the potential to develop from shared imaginations to common actions. However, this can also be a very painful and not necessarily successful way. Above all, dealing with narratives of rejection and hatred involves risks that are difficult to resolve at the level of discourse. It requires a trust in the pedagogical space of the narrative (Demetrio 1988), in which hierarchies and power relations are lowered in order to be able to face this risk in the sense of a weak pedagogy (Peterlini 2011: 169-178). What is meant by this is a pedagogical attitude that gives up some of its power in order to flatten hierarchies, for example between so-called educationally deprived and educated citizens, and thus make exchange possible (ibid.).

When we speak of memory communities, it is important to address the right to claim recognition from others. Charles Taylor's concept of the politics of recognition shows us that people are dependent on recognition by society in their identity and that lack of recognition can have fatal consequences (Taylor 2009). Changes in deadlocked positions can only be initiated when subjective experiences of suffering are met with acceptance and understanding. In this context, the approach of Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz (2011) is relevant that communities do not "have" memories, but that communities emerge in dealing with memories.

Selected Examples of Narrative

One example is a narrative project that involved radicalized patriotic youths in South Tyrol on the border between Italy and Austria conducted in intervals of twelve years. The young people were not only interviewed but also accompanied into their life worlds. The topic was how they understand homeland (Heimat)—as the innermost core of political identity in South Tyrol—and how they experience it in their everyday lives. The results of the study showed clear differences between the radical political statements, which were strongly influenced by discourses, and the much softer life-world narratives, which correlated strongly with concrete experiences. In the second survey, the young people had become young adults. All of them showed a remarkable process of reflection, which can be explained, above all, by life experience and educational biography. All the youths interviewed agreed that the first survey twelve years earlier had initiated a permanent process of reflection in

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them. The opportunity to talk about their understanding of their homeland had encouraged them to further reflection (Peterlini 2010; 2011).

The memory of a historical event is never uniform, but is composed of different perspectives, some of which are even contradictory. However, this is also vital on the local scale of (post-)migrant and border regions in which diverse narratives of diverse and shared histories coincide. What meant a victory for some was a defeat for others. Territory that had been won by some had been registered as a loss for others. Avishai Margalit (2002) distinguishes between common and divisive/shared memories. Separating memories require understanding, they must be discussed, told and heard in order to find mutual acceptance. In order to share memories that divide, the dialogue between the individual memory communities about the traditional historical narratives is necessary. This does not automatically lead to agreement but at least to a perception and recognition of the diversity of memories. The aim is not to take over the narratives of others but to respect their experience and recognize their perspective as a legitimate view of things. Thus, the recognition of the narratives of others is a key element in the resolution of hostilities.

Negotiating memories and building communities around such memory work can be seen as acts of citizenship (Rothberg/Yildiz 2011). This can be observed in the experience with another current research project at Klagenfurt University, which aims to bring pupils and teachers from Carinthia and Slovenia into exchange about historical narratives. Together they work on official and less visible historical narratives of their region and reflect on where their own environment is situated in this process. An empirical study on the communities of remembrance in Carinthia from 2016 shows that the old narratives in relation to the history of the region are not breaking or disappearing but that new, different ones are progressively appearing alongside them, in the sense of a multidirectional memory as observed by Rothberg (2009). Voices, that differ to varying degrees, shape the discourse and over the last 20 years the conversation has been increasingly co-determined by young people (Danglmaier et al. 2017).

Methodologically, border studies require an interdisciplinary approach oriented towards the social space to which educational science, cultural anthropology, political science, media theory in the context of critical migration research contribute. Even artistic interventions are not only used, as it is often the case, to communicate or prettify the results of research, but art is used as a performative part of the research project. Performative elements,

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like forum theatre (Boal 1993) and exhibitions, should make it possible to bring the public's attention to narratives that have been suppressed and to produce new future-oriented accounts.

Perspectives and expectations

The different approaches converge in the common interest in the lifeworld (Husserl 1976 [1936]: 4) in the selected border regions. Their historical and current migration experiences are made fruitful for future action strategies through the analysis, reflection and transformation of narratives. The following questions need to be addressed: Which narratives guide the perception of migration in these life worlds and in how far do they provide motives for action? How do these narratives interact with political, social and cultural practices? In which way do narratives determine these practices or are, what much speaks for it, even always practices.

A scientific potential lies in the intentional renunciation of dissolving the ambivalence of modern societies on one side or the other. The complexity and tensions of the migration society are perceived and accepted as the special potential of border areas and their narratives. The approach is oriented towards migration research as research on migrants and non-migrants. It also refers to the research in between as a genuinely educational space (Westphal 2007), in which reality is not simply accepted but can be shaped performatively. It directs its epistemological interest to learning and educational experiences in overcoming the "dualism between the margins and the hegemonic centre" (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2007: 43), from which migration research as a critique of society can lead out (Transit Migration 2007, Römhild 2014). This should especially be understood in the sense of a de-migrantisation of migration research and a migrantisation of society research. The broadening of perspectives to include the overlapping of the migration issue with the coexistence of autochthonous minorities and nation-state majorities represents a potential third way for research on migration.

The overall and ambitious goal of the research approach in terms of a long-term impact is to contribute to changing debates in modern European societies and to open up new opportunities for the successful integration of migrants. In order to stimulate this process, an analytical view of narratives

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of migrants and non-migrants is necessary and, in parallel, an attempt to escape this dualism at least partly.

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