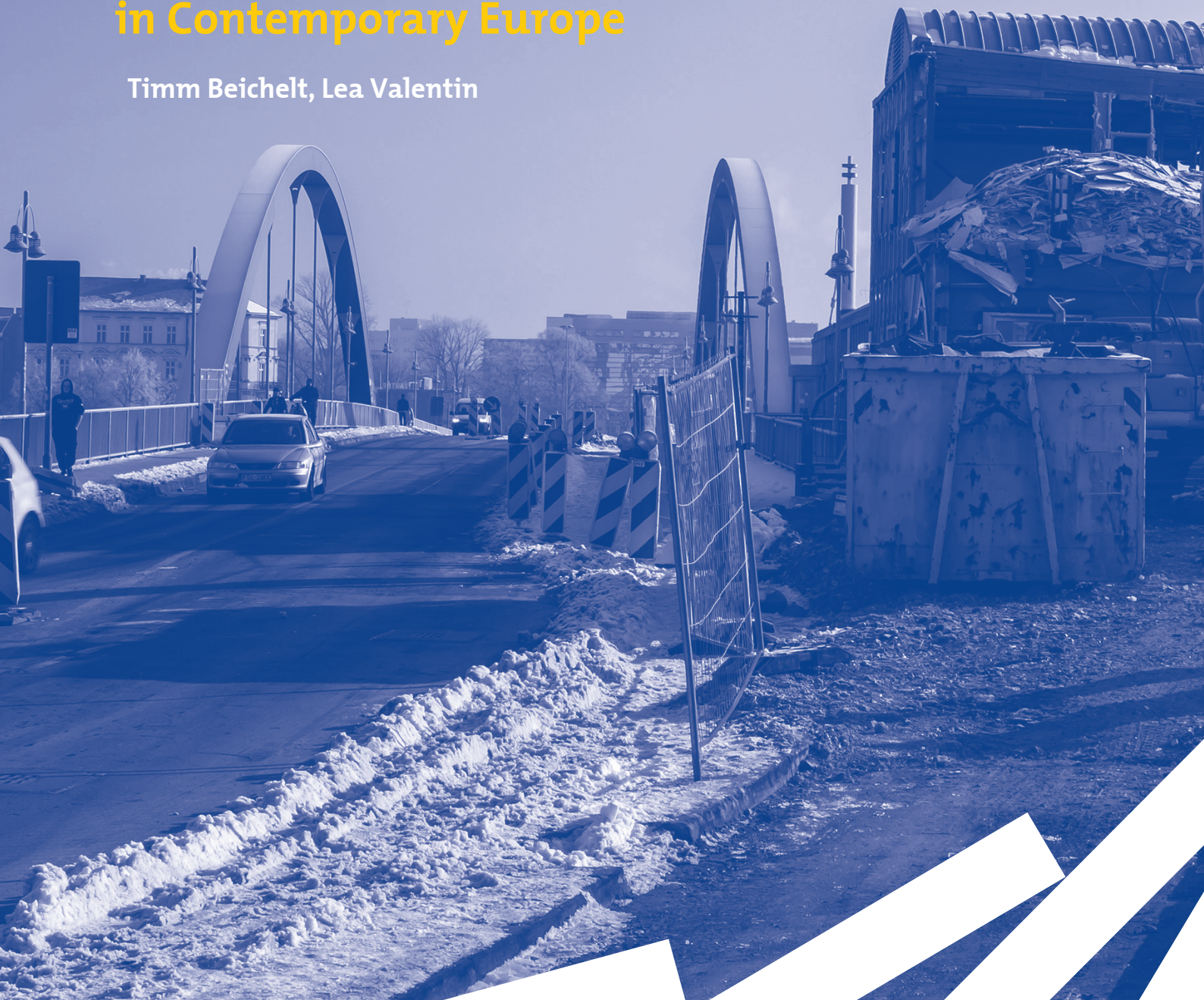


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Liminality and Transnationalism. Two Forces upon Shifting Borders in Contemporary Europe

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Abstract

The working paper presents two analytical concepts to examine territorial borders: liminality and transnationalism. The combination of both concepts offers an approach to borders and migration practices which takes borders not simply as a point of departure but puts border zones and their transgressions to the centre of attention, revealing their ambiguous, in-between character. Taking into account empirical observations of complex, multi-directional migration patterns and conceptualizing them as liminal transmigration, we challenge the rhetoric of impermeable territorial borders and an enduring, one-way migration flow into Western Europe. Instead, we propose a perspective on borders that not only allows for ambiguities but makes analytical as well as empirical disruptions productive.

Keywords: Borders, Boundaries, Transnationalism, Liminality, Migration



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Liminality and Transnationalism. Two Forces upon Shifting Borders in Contemporary Europe

Timm Beichelt and Lea Valentin

1. Introduction

While it is often accepted that cultural boundaries bear a blurry character, politically defined spatial borders are regularly associated with rigidly drawn lines. This holds true despite the exponential growth of the movement of goods and persons (and services, and capital) in contemporary Europe, be it within the framework of the EU or between the EU and non-EU European countries. The prevailing idea is that the European continent has been subject to complex historical developments that have intertwined relations of power, certain ethnic populations, as well as chains of production and trade. In historiography, this has led to seminal approaches that take into perspective Europe as a whole rather than turning to national histories (Davies 1996; Judt 2010). Many, if not all, countries, regions, and cities in Europe are therefore commonly seen as places of cultural hybridity. The absence of a rigid cultural “purity” within Europe, however, stands in contrast to the prevailing image of territorial borders as being fixed lines that allegedly distinguish clearly identifiable nations and their states. While there has been a wave of scholarship that looked at Europe as a „post-national“ endeavour (Sassen 1996; Habermas 1998), more recent developments like the EU Treaty of Lisbon, Brexit, and the rise of nationalist parties all over Europe have shown that the nation state maintains a firm role both in political reality and in contemporary political ideology.

In our paper, we want to show that the gap between the two views is not as big as is sometimes insinuated. Not only

cultural boundaries, but also territorial borders are more permeable than the nation state rhetoric suggests. This leads to our argument that, at least in Europe, territorial nations as entities are less clearly encompassed by political borders than one might think. Migration that occurred in the direction of Europe and within the continent has not only transformed cultural practices. It has also diversified the directions into which political borders are being crossed. Empirically, this can be shown by looking at different types of migration. Taking into account these data, we suggest that two theoretic concepts should be employed in order to better understand the nature of political borders in contemporary Europe: transnationalism and liminality.

In order to underline our argument, we show in a first step that migration to Germany and other EU member states has developed into a pattern of transmigration that stands in contradiction to West European immigration presumed to be definite and unidirectional. In a second step, we try to make theoretic sense of these empiric observations. We do this by combining the concepts of transnationalism and liminality. Transnationalism is used as a concept that captures societal links across state borders – for example, economic or migratory practices that regularly take place in two or several nation states. Liminality is a concept that has been developed in anthropology and in the theory of literature. It stands for constellations that are characterized by in-betweenness, that is by constellations in which persons or things are not clearly

relatable to one or the other area. "Liminality" bears parallels to the concept of boundaries, but is – in our understand-

ing – more specific because it refers to inbuilt ambiguities that are created by boundaries.

2. From Migration to Transmigration

During the last decade, TV images and public discourse in Europe may sometimes have suggested that migration to the EU is a general mass phenomenon. Even journalists and media unsuspecting of conscious biasing freely used the metaphor of a "flood of refugees" which symbolizes a non-manageable current of people on their way to alter customary ways of life in Europe.¹ Pertinent figures, however, can adjust this view. Of the 512 million inhabitants of the EU, 21.6 million persons, representing 4.2 % of the EU-28 population, were non-EU citizens in 2017. In addition, there were 16.9 million persons living in one of the EU Member States on 1 January 2017 with the citizenship of another EU Member State. With regard to the country of birth, 36.9 million people – about 7.2 % – were born outside of the EU-28, but lived in a EU Member State. At the same time, there were 20.4 million persons who had been born in a EU Member State different from the one where they were resident.² With reference to the EU's 512 million inhabitants, it would also be possible to talk of moderately diverse populations in Europe, with big "national" majorities in place in almost every country of the EU.

The cited figures indicate a considerable mismatch between rhetoric in the public sphere and empiric data. The public

sphere is, at least in the majority of EU countries, alarmist with regard to migration and its perceived consequences. The figures, in contrast, seem to point at a manageable situation. One of the reasons for this mismatch, we argue, consists in the overly simplistic understanding of migration as a one-way street from "poor" countries to the more wealthy states of Western and Northern Europe. Partly, this view is correct. However, a good portion of migration *to* and *from* as well as *within* Europe can be understood as circular migration. This category of migration explains why large numbers of migrants do not automatically translate into ever larger proportions of migrant populations. The scope of circular European migration in Europe is so complex that the term of transnational migration, or transmigration, should be preferred to embrace the scope of multi-directional movements, causes and motivation that can empirically be observed.

Unfortunately, we do not know of a study that takes into perspective transmigration systematically. Our take, therefore, consists of several pieces of scattered evidence. For example, Germany witnessed in 2017 about 830.000 incoming migrants from within the EU and some 600.000 migrants from other parts of the world (Bundesamt für Migration und

¹ See, for example: Mladen Grgic: Why the Flood of Refugees Will Not Stop Whatever Happens in Syria, <https://www.huffingtonpost.com>, Updated March 05, 2017 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/mladen-grgic/why-the-flood-of-refugees_b_9358866.html. Viewed March 26, 2020.

² Eurostat 2018 (migr_pop3ctb), see eurostat Statistics Explained: Migration and Migrant Population Statistics https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics#Migrant_population:_almost_22_million_non-EU_citizens_living_in_the_EU. Viewed March 26, 2020

Flüchtlinge 2017: 42). In the same year, however, about 590.000 persons have migrated from Germany to other EU countries and some 340.000 persons have migrated to other places of the world (ibid.). Also in 2017, migration to Germany from third countries has been accompanied by considerable emigration from Germany to the same respective countries. The figures obviously vary from country to country, but – with the exception of Syria and Iraq – the number of persons migrating to Germany is only between 25% to 50% higher than the number of persons migrating into the other direction (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2017: 47).

If we stay with the German case and look specifically at non-Germans migrating from Germany, we find figures between 267.000 (2007) and 664.000 (2016) persons leaving the country annually. In most years,³ there is a positive saldo of persons migrating to Germany, with a peak of 1.2 million in 2015. But even in that exceptional year, the total of incoming persons was 1.8 million, and 568.000 persons left Germany.⁴ The paths of return show certain regularities. Whereas the ratio of incoming and outgoing migrants from EU countries like Romania, Bulgaria, or Poland follow a pattern of 2:1, refugee countries like Syria, Afghanistan, or Irak

have from three to ten times more immigrants to Germany than there are emigrants.⁵ Interestingly, from 2015 to 2016 the number of outward migration has increased with regard to many countries, for example to Bulgaria (+21 percent), to Croatia (+28 percent), to Greece (+18 percent), or to Romania (+20 percent). While the number of emigrants to EU countries has averaged +12 percent, the percentage of emigration to other countries was even higher with +18 percent.⁶ This trend has reversed more recently in some cases, but has remained positive with regard to Croatia and Romania between 2017 and 2018.⁷

Another indicator for circular migration is the period of time migrants stay in a country. Again, we have data for the German case for the years 2015 and 2017.⁸ 45 percent of Polish and 56 percent of Romanian migrants stay for less than one year; these figures are even higher for Albanian and Kosovar migrants (about 90 and 83 percent respectively stay less than a year). In 2017, about 50 percent of Romanian migrants and 37 percent of Polish migrants have remained less than a year.⁹ Noticeably these numbers hold up in 2015, the year Germany faced the so called “refugee crises” registering twice as many migrants as in the year

³ There has been, however, net emigration from Germany in the years 2008 and 2009 (see Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2017, p. 39 and 40).

⁴ See Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge: Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2016, <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2016.html>, page 73. Viewed March 26, 2020.

⁵ Ibid, page 77.

⁶ Ibid, page 78.

⁷ See Bundesamt für Migration: Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2018 <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2018.html>, table on p. 81. Viewed March 26, 2020.

⁸ See Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge: Das Bundesamt in Zahlen 2016, <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/BundesamtinZahlen/bundesamt-in-zahlen-2016.html>, page 73. Viewed March 26, 2020. See also Migrationsbericht der Bundesregierung. Migrationsbericht 2016/2017 http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Publikationen/Migrationsberichte/migrationsbericht-2016-2017.pdf?__blob=publicationFile, p. 154. Viewed March 26, 2020.

⁹ Ibid, p. 154.

before (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2017: 73). These figures provide substantial evidence for the circularity of migration flows.

Another example that is widely discussed concerns the British case. Other than Germany and a few other continental EU member states, the United Kingdom opened its labour market for the new accession countries right after EU enlargement in 2004. As a consequence, considerable flows of work migration to Great Britain unfolded. The greatest number of persons came from Poland. While there were only 37.000 residents of Polish nationality in the United Kingdom in February 2003, the same number amounted to 1.021 million in 2017.¹⁰ What is the nature of this migration? We find that there has been an outflow of 232.000 Poles from the United Kingdom between 2002 and 2016. In 2016, for example, 21.800 Poles left the United Kingdom; among them, 7.800 left for work reasons and 11.400 went “home to live”.¹¹ The Polish Statistical Office in various years has registered that about three fourths of the Polish work migrants leave Poland in a long-term intention, whereas the other fourth should be seen as “temporary migrants” (Okólski/Salt 2014: 4).

If we use the term “transmigration” to interpret these figures, we are pointed to different layers. The most important purpose is to distinguish unidirectional from multi-directional migration in analytical terms. Multi-directionality involves visits to the home country, working places in different countries or regions, investments of migrants in their home economies, or the engagement in social net-

works. The types of migration are diverse. From the above-mentioned examples, we can assume that any migration bears a considerable multi-directional component. Transnational migration stretches across different types of migration. Some types of migration, for example student migration, are generally assumed to be of a multi-directional nature (Brezis/Soueri 2011). This is less clear for labour migration, which the Polish migration to the United Kingdom is an example for. The figures we cite underline positions by authors who highlight the transmigratory aspects, for example Michael Piore (1980) or Ludger Pries (1998). We have to remember, however, that other authors have observed work migration as a more permanent matter (see, for example, Borjas 1999).

Transmigration has regularly been seen as a product of global economic restructuring, huge welfare differences, and decolonisation. The assumption is that global economic processes have destroyed local economies, leading to a mixture of poverty and work migration to places that are better off. From there, a new low-paid transnational labour force settles in poor neighbourhoods of the big economic centres, forms diasporas and moves on in the case of economic crisis (Basch et al. 1994). Labour migration within the EU, where welfare differences are not as high as between the EU and many previously colonized regions, seems to point to a somewhat different direction. The division of labour among highly industrialized and/or service economies is accompanied by increased mobility of the workforce across borders.

¹⁰ Data are from the British Office for National Statistics, Population of the UK by Country of Birth and Nationality: Individual Country Data, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationalityunderlyingdatasheets>. Viewed March 26, 2020.

¹¹ See British Office for National Statistics: International Passenger Survey 4.02, Main Reason for Migration by Citizenship. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/ipsmainreasonformigrationbycitizenship>. Viewed March 26, 2020.

In our eyes, this should lead to a broader understanding of transmigration as embedded into regional migration regimes. On the surface, transmigration seems to mainly concern more prosperous countries and regions, for example Germany or the United Kingdom as receiving countries. A second look, however, reveals perhaps even stronger effects of transmigration in sending areas. It has been shown that countries like Latvia, Lithuania, or Romania lost more than ten percent of their population between the 1990s and the

2010s (Ther 2016: 246-247). These persons appeared and appear in immigration statistics of the wealthy areas of Western Europe.¹² Transnational migration within the European Union therefore bears a specific profile within the developing trans-European labour market. Virtually all regions of Europe and all layers of European societies are in one way or another touched by a type of migration that often bears no final component, but shows elements of a trans-European sociation.

3. Liminality and Transnationalism: Two Concepts Blurring Borders

To which extent is transmigration relevant for the perception of political borders in Europe? On the one hand, we can observe a growing resistance against migration which crystallises in anti-immigration sentiments. In more recent years, the movements, parties and political leaders that build on these sentiments have been commonly called “populist” (Mudde/Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Müller 2016). For a while, the populist phenomenon diverged on the issue of migration. While right-wing populism was seen as centred around nationalism – and the more extreme forms earned the notion ultra-nationalism –, left-wing populism was attributed to the social question and the disparities between the well-off and the not so well-off. However, Ivan Kráštef has argued in a more recent book that the issue of allegedly irregular migration to Europe may well be the most important dividing line in most, if not all, societies of the EU (Kráštef 2017). This view is supported by a growing number of left-wing populist movements and parties that step

into coalitions with anti-immigration parties or that take over such positions openly, for example in France or Italy. Despite the general growth of political populism in Europe, however, the counter position should not be disregarded. The difference between populist and mainstream politics may not be that big anymore with regard to external border policies of the European Union (Eigmüller 2018). Both public opinion and most positions of administrative, political or economic elites do not put into question the large intra-EU migration that has unfolded during the last decade. Of course, this has to do with the constraints and promises of the EU Common Market. While the free movement of persons within the EU is used for many other reasons than originally intended (education, tourism, and labour migration), majorities in many societies still seem to accept that EU citizens should be able to move freely within the EU. Obviously, this fuels transmigration in the sense that the high transaction costs which are associated to

¹² See eurostat: Immigration by Age Group, Sex and Citizenship http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_imm1ctz&lang=en; (data set „migr_imm1ctz“). Viewed March 26, 2020.

more permanent forms of migration are lowered. The moral ground of migration-permissive attitudes is not only linked to the advantages many EU citizens gain from the Common Market, but also to the emergence of “transnational practices” like visiting EU member states or even watching TV programmes from other EU countries (Fernández et al. 2016). Largely,

borders within Europe – and among them cultural boundaries – are in the process of changing their significance. We suggest that these changes can be better understood when taking into account two ideological frames that are often used apart from each other: transnationalism and liminality.

Transnationalism

The term “transnationalism” refers to social activities transcending the borders of nation states (Pries 2010) and is thus a concept which enables to understand “fragmented and multi-vectoral processes in a world of (...) transformations” (Beichelt/Worschech 2017: 13).¹³ A major motivation of transnationalism studies is and was to escape the “methodological nationalism” inherent in much social science (Amelina et al. 2012). While the approach has not completely eliminated nation-oriented terminology, it seems well suited to cover phenomena that transcend national political borders. “Transnationalism” has been employed with different purposes. It has been developed as a real-world diagnosis to overcome the focus on nations (Marjanen 2009). It has been used as a political tool in order to give a voice to persons who do not fit neatly in the framework of nationalism (Brettell 2003), and it has been employed as a mind-map to differentiate between economic, political and societal globalization (Pries 2008).

With regard to the transmigration that puts into question the persistence of European borders, transnationalism offers a framework in which networks – in this case, migration-related ones – alter pre-existing interaction patterns and thus

call “into question the traditional definition of the state” (Vertovec 2009: 5). Many authors that follow the implications of this approach are quite confident that the evolving networks lead to new transnational communities.¹⁴ In this framework, the state is bound to be replaced by one or several alternative entities that develop or even enforce new societal rules. Such institutions may or may not follow patterns of behaviour as we know them from the pre-transnational paradigm. Much literature suggests that the migration pressure is so strong that the national framework fades out by itself and is inevitably transgressed by the global flow of goods and persons mainly to cities across the world (Sassen 1991; Castells 2000; Florida 2012). However, other authors see more resilience from state-like institutions like the European Union or specific agencies. Here, governance remains possible even if the nation state loses much of its steering capacity (Zürn 1998). Examples like the EU border protection agency FRONTEX show that supranational bodies may take over functions that resemble those of the state to a large extent.

The main perspective of transnationalist studies, however, does rarely focus on state functions alone. Rather, since the concept highlights the societal di-

¹³ The following section draws on Beichelt/Worschech (2017).

¹⁴ See some contributions in Schiffauer et al. (2005).

mension of the transgression of borders, developments *below* the state level play an important role. Transnationalism can also be regarded as a “type of consciousness” (Vertovec 2009: 5) that links persons with blurred relations of belonging to one or the other state, for example ethnic minorities or diasporas. Such communities are formed by social ties that bear a strong subjective element which perpetuates the idea of the givenness of a community. As Brubaker (2005) argues, diaspora communities often share hybrid collective identities, thus blurring borders and boundaries. Therefore, transnationalism as consciousness is understood by terms like identity, collective memory, or shared imagination.

Insofar as these identities are open and live in limited conflict with their respective environments, many authors have used the term “cosmopolitanism” to characterize a productive way of consciousness creation (Vertovec/Cohen 2002; Beck/Grande 2004). This understanding is also present in other important landmarks of migration studies (Diner 1984). Other authors are more sceptical and insist that prejudices in receiving societies impair the development of diaspora communities which are not touched by open or latent discrimination (Steinberg 2001). Potentially because of ambiguous environments, diasporas often keep idealized memories of their respective homelands, often in conservative terms. If their members retain the right for expatriate voting, they often strongly support political forces in their home countries that promote nationalist instead of cosmopolitan policies. As one of many examples, the support of expatriate Turks in Germany for their president Tayyip Erdoğan may be cited (Ulusoy 2018). The cultural reproduction of diasporas or other nationally detached communities therefore does not always bear a progressive character. In

contrast, transmigration is sometimes a mechanism that preserves national traditions. It is only one path of transmigration to bring “syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity” (Vertovec 2009: 7) to the new homelands of migrant communities. While transnationalism may indeed be marked by creativity of the unexpected, it can also lead to the survival of the traditional.

Against this background, it becomes clear that transnationalism transforms politics and economics on the national level rather than completely transferring the national mode to the transnational sphere. Purely transnational elements in the economic and political spheres do exist, for example nationally (more or less) detached companies like Google, organisations like Greenpeace or Amnesty International, or agencies like the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Such transnational bodies have developed routines that cannot be reduced to national origins; their practices are rooted in the transnational sphere. However, states still retain a certain power potential. For example, the US-American government still possesses potential to fence in certain practices of Google, or national governments of EU countries have the power to contradict recommendations of the IOM if they decide to do so.

Transnationalism is best understood by thinking in terms of demarcation against other competing concepts – specifically the concepts of globalization (Scholte 2000), cosmopolitanism (Vertovec/Cohen 2002), and state driven international politics (Keohane/Nye 1977). Transnational economics and politics are not international economics and politics – this would be the arena of international organizations like the World Trade Organization or the United Nations.¹⁵ They are also not supranational political bodies – these would involve a powerful political centre

¹⁵ The International Organization for Migration has joined the UN system in 2016, but can – due to its origin as a mixture of inter-state and societal agency – be classified as a transnational organization.

(like the Brussels institutions of the EU). To be classified as transnational, organisations or practices need to have a strong societal component that is not detached from national economics and politics, but interwoven with these spheres in complex ways. Because such arenas are typically characterized by a lack of a central political authority, transnationalism is linked to the paradigm of international governance (Rosenau/Czempiel 1992). In contrast to the globalization paradigm, transnationalism does not refer to anonymous forces that drive globalization, but to clearly identifiable actors who are „doing transnationalism“. Of course, international migration is a major playing field of such practices. The according actors switch to new roles and positions in a transnational social space, and

they exist in different spheres of action, for example in culture, economics, and politics. In the process of “being transnationalized”, actors undergo significant transformations but also retain elements of their customary cultures. Transnational interaction patterns include different aspects: networks and social formations, identities (for example diaspora identities), practices of transnational cultural reproduction, and the symbolic construction of certain transnational localities. The emerging transnational spaces of transmigration are built upon interaction patterns that already exist on national, regional or local levels, but they also create new institutions, orders and norms once they are transferred to a cross-border dimension.

Liminality

If transnationalism transgresses national borders, as Pries (2010) argues, what role do borders and cross-border practices have? Which conceptions are productive with regard to an analysis of transmigration and other transnational practices? Taking transnational communities into focus runs the risk of neglecting the perspectives of and from the border. On the contrary, the political border often becomes a central theme revolving around the concept of the nation state, focusing on the power of state authorities. To overcome these blind spots, we suggest “liminality” as a second theoretical approach. Liminality “captures in-between situations and conditions characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (Horváth et al. 2015: 2). Liminality provides an insight into changing as well as blurring borders and allows for considering border regimes without falling back to a national methodological bias.

The notion of liminality draws back on an ethnographic study of social rituals by Arnold van Gennep (1909) and has widely been understood as “neither here nor there; (...) betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969: 95). Its characteristics are established by a position at a *limes*, a threshold. Liminality embraces the in-between and comprises the ambiguity that a former condition does not exist anymore while a new condition – which may be known or not – has not been established yet. Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist, brought the term to wider knowledge with his study “The Ritual Process” (ibid.). One of Turner’s innovations consisted in the fact that he positioned liminality into the centre of attention instead of associating it with a marginalized periphery. The social structures resembling the “normal” or the status quo are described only in relation to the liminal, as “pre-liminal” and “post-liminal” (ibid.). Turner argues that in a state of liminality, the estab-

lished rules dissolve and new definitions must be created. Furthermore, a liminal phase is always based on a related societal structure while it presents an individual experience, constituted by alternating group-related structures.

If we follow this idea and link it to borders, liminal zones become interesting sites of transition from one order to another (Schiffauer et al. 2018). Liminality is both a result of transnational processes and a tool to understand them. It provides an image of a bordering practice establishing its own liminal or “third” space. Consequently, border zones neither present margins nor overlapping spaces of „pure cultures“ or nations, but entities in their own right. We understand a liminal space not only in cultural terms, as developed by Bhabha (2000), or in spatial terms, as highlighted by Soja (1996). Instead, both cultural and spatial elements play a role. Maria Mälksoo, who discusses the relation of liminality and International Relations, points out the ambivalent character of liminality. On the one hand, in-between situations with fluidized hierarchies stand for an element of destruction with regard to a previous order. On the other, the threshold situations accorded to liminality are also “a vital moment of creativity, a potential platform for renewing the societal makeup” (Mälksoo 2015: 226).

We understand liminality as a concept that displays border regimes as “third spaces” in which hybrid cultures develop, novel spaces emerge and societal changes are negotiated. Furthermore, liminality implies that borders can be enabling. Borders are individual places in society with unique social processes, not only as a place of inclusion or exclusion but as a place which enables to articulate, transform and merge differences. Liminality allows to focus on emerging border regimes as occurring “hybrid” spaces linked to transnational practices (again, see Bhabha 2000). The individual order of the liminal zone usually breaks established hierarchical structures or “traditional settings of authority” (Mälksoo 2015: 226). By neither taking nation states nor their territorial borders as a point of departure,

liminality opens up an analytical space revealing borders and societal change without making the nation-state the central dimension of the analysis.

Instead, liminality questions strict definitions of borders and states without ignoring them as prevailing ideas. Despite this advantage, a reluctance or discomfort of (border) scholars to use liminality as a concept can be observed. Liminality “disrupts, by definition, essentializations and foundational claims” (Mälksoo 2015: 227). Instead of offering the comfort of structure, it highlights the changes within and processes of liminal zones. We argue, in contrast, that these uncertainties are the most valuable asset of liminality. They produce the ability to observe transformations and novel relations without applying traditional hierarchies and fixed categories (Thomassen 2012).

Thinking of liminality as a genuine “third space” allows to investigate unique forms of transnational societal change and transmigration. A liminal position implies processes in which differences can merge and where new distinctive spaces and cultures are produced. Liminal zones overlap with issues of transmigration, such as the creation of social media platforms, the development of diaspora cultures or the occurrence of specific usages of language and other cultural practices. In the analysis of migration, liminality does not depend on terms like “sending” or “host” countries. Instead, it focuses on trans migratory communities and the complex logics of transmigration as genuine issues. The concept of “liminality” does not work without a conceptual regard for acting subjects. It is not a central authority or a political network but the actors who are „doing liminal spaces“, just like they are „doing transnationalism“. They create, occupy and reflect the in-between position and they are the stakeholders of liminal spaces. Usually, these actors are part of networks and influenced by political as well as other discursive practices.

Bhabha has introduced the importance of “the construction of culture as difference” (cited in Rutherford 1990: 209). This idea can be applied to the “third space” of

borders, making them places of cultural development, transformation and connecting points between diverse cultures. Both the social and spatial dimensions can be explored in the processual nature or temporal development of the “third space”. Transitions, new formations and disintegration can be observed in time. Liminality as a concept is dissociated from the linear idea of time and allows borders

just as society to be studied as complex and circular phenomena. The often multi-directional processes of migration, which sometimes even create and constitute borders that have not existed before, can be adequately studied under the lens of liminality. Migration-related borders are not only places where differentiation is enforced but also places where differentiation can be articulated and transformed.

4. Conclusion: Conceptional and Normative Challenges of Liminal Transmigration

In sections 1 and 2, we tried to show that considerable parts of the migration to and within Europe can be characterized as circular. It is true that the labour markets and social systems of West European states function as magnets for European and non-European migrants. It would be naïve not to acknowledge this element of migration which, among many other things that go along with it, puts pressure on national societies and local communities in Northern and Western Europe. However, we argue that this does not capture the whole story. If we look at timelines of individual migrants or even of whole groups, one-way migration turns not only into two-way migration, but often into complex migration patterns. Because, as we have tried to argue, transmigration is characterized by many elements that differ from national belonging and/or state border-related practices, the phenomenon is not well understood under the perspective of methodological nationalism.¹⁶ Instead, we suggest to take into account a different framework to analyse contemporary

migration: liminal transmigration. If we accept this category, several conceptual and normative consequences need to be discussed. In particular, it seems inappropriate to generally characterize migration (and migrants) in terms of disruption or perturbation. Many practices of migration do not easily go along with traditional practices of nation states. However, this should not automatically imply that migration as a whole can be vilified. Rather, we argue that migration has productive and destabilizing consequences at the same time, and that holds true for many different situations and constellations.

This is, of course, not a new insight (see Ther 2017 for an overview). Without migration from the countryside to cities, industrialization would probably not have been possible (Polanyi 1995 (1944)). This migration took place in a Europe which at the time was not completely marked by nation states, for example if we think of the industrial regions of Germany and Northern Italy. In fact, scholars of nationalism like Karl Deutsch (1953) or Ernest

¹⁶ This does not imply that methodological nationalism should generally be disregarded. Studies with a focus on migration and social systems, for example, still have to relate to “national” practices because social assistance in Northern and Western Europe is until today largely embedded into national, rather than EU-European structures of governance (Leibfried 2015).

Gellner (1983) regarded social and regional mobility, which was necessary for industrialization and modernization, as major driving forces for the emergence of nations and nation states. Also, we can assume that migration has, as a whole, contributed to the wealth of both sending and receiving societies (Diner 1984; Glenn 1986). In other words, migration can be allotted to major historically productive elements of modernity and late modernity. In conceptual terms, this insight makes necessary a certain shift of focus. States and their borders are, of course, still relevant for our understanding of migration. However, the practices and networks of contemporary mass migration cannot be labelled and categorized exclusively in reaction to state practices that deal with migration. Cultural aspects, for example in the framework of diasporas that exist beneath (or above) various countries, lead to different forms of migrant behaviour. Migrants of Polish origin follow patterns unlike those of migrants from, for example, Albania or Vietnam. Of course, examples can be extended beyond national communities. They can be transregional (for example Kurds in the Greater London area), religious (for example Jews in France), regional (for example Swabians in Berlin) or even lifestyle-oriented (Hipsters in New York). Migrants may follow different ways of communicating with each other and different paths of integrating in the local communities they migrate to. It is therefore necessary to insist even more strongly that migrant practices do not display subalternity, but that they speak of the individual choices of persons who often have the room of maneuver between different alternatives.

Even if this might not be true for the initial phases of flight in crisis regions, most refugees are able to select between different alternatives, for example domestic displacement or exile. Of course, such choices often bear tragic components in the sense that none of the options available for refugees are particularly attractive. This should not keep scholars from reconstructing such choices as rational: Refugees and other migrants can be sup-

posed to act rationally in the (sometimes very narrow) restrictions of any given situation. The idea of liminal transmigration can serve as a stimulus to understand migrants as conscious actors rather than as rudderless ships in the unsteerable tides of “migration waves”.

To continue with the conceptual consequences of thinking in terms of liminal transmigration, we need to insist on its multi-dimensional character. Leading scholars in the field have suggested to develop a “three-sided sensibility of spatiality-historicity-sociality” (Soja 1996; see also Schiffauer et al. 2018). In other words, we can approach borders with regard to their spatial, social, and temporal dimensions.

In the spatial dimension, the traditional understanding of borders as dividing lines can be accompanied by the term “boundary” – which allows for tracing liminal zones in demarcated spaces better than dichotomous approaches to borders. Migrants are known for creating and sustaining such “third spaces” that overlap with other spaces. While public opinion often concentrates on seemingly problematic aspects of such liminal spaces (for example, socially disregarded neighbourhoods with high proportions of migrant population), many researchers have hinted at their attractive and innovative character (Rottenburg 1997; Florida 2012). In the social dimension, transmigrant actors and networks can be marked by multiple affiliations and hybridity that allow for creative reconfigurations (Rutherford 1990). This is not to say, however, that cultural hierarchies within migrant communities cease to exist. The transnational network approach does not imply social settings that are free of power asymmetries. Still, social practices within liminal zones are not expected to completely fall in line with either resident societies nor with the migrants’ original cultures and their power settings. The temporal dimension, finally, allows for the observation of liminal processes over time. While the transitional and unpredictable character of liminality hints at constantly changing patterns, some liminal states are also characterized

by certain degrees of institutionalization (Szokolczai 2015; Thomassen 2012). Summing up the conceptual consequences, border studies that focus on liminal transmigration have to be aware of a number of frames that transgress our traditional understanding of borders. In fact, we find it hard to think of borders that do not display elements of ambiguousness. The line of demarcation between North and South Korea may come into mind, but even here special economic zones have been identified – and again we speak of zones rather than lines. We propose, then, that by far the most territorial borders are better understood as boundaries, with new populations penetrating and changing the nature of established orders. Certainly, state borders within Europe are examples for advanced liminal zones, with multinational and diaspora-like groups emerging in the vicinity of all state borders and within all big cities of the EU. We often find evidence for a maceration of apparently “hard” borders in places where we would not expect them. For example, the seemingly rigid border between Russia and the EU has been transgressed by almost four million Russians who applied for Schengen visa in the year 2017 alone – the rate of rejection is very low.¹⁷ Another example of a border which is relatively open despite contrary public assumptions is the US-Mexican border which recorded a rough 40 million of border crossings in 2017, including a vast community of regularly commuting people.¹⁸ Liminal transmigration does not only constitute a conceptual suggestion, but can also be displayed as an empiric fact.

Another consequence of thinking in terms of liminal transmigration is normative. At first glance, it is an inexpensive demand to put the actors, practices, and networks that are “in-between” into the centre of scholarly attention. There is an obvious normative need to pursue this shift of focus – it enables us to discover the life world practices of persons who are disadvantaged by the “lottery of birth” of the liberal international model (Dunn 2011). Of course, taking the liminal transmigratory perspective seriously also means becoming aware of global injustices which, after all, to some extent go back to colonial and post-colonial practices of the West (Appadurai 1990; Castro Varela/Dhawan 2015). In that sense, the transmigrant perspective puts into question most practices around the „Fortress Europe“ (Schindel 2019). From the lens of liminal transmigration, re-erecting a border with strict demarcation characteristics does not only contradict certain provisions of the European Convention for Human Rights, but it misses the reality of social and cultural life of most migrants to and from the EU. Talking of liminal transmigration is also a way to make the practices of migrants plausible to the absorbing societies and territories.

A change of perspective of this kind does, however, not automatically mean that transmigrant practices are normatively superior to traditional ways of living in the target regions and communities of migration. It also means that choices of migrants need to be regarded as contingent, yet rational, action. If the subtext of the liminal transmigratory approach

¹⁷ For example, from the 731.000 applications at Finnish embassies and consulates in Moscow, Murmansk, Petrozavodsk and Saint Petersburg during 2017, only 0.70 percent have been rejected. The highest rate of rejection stems from France with 3.1 percent, see Schengen visa info: Russia Tops Chart with Most Schengen Visa Applications in 2017 <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/russia-tops-chart-with-most-schengen-visa-applications-in-2017/>. Viewed March 26, 2020.

¹⁸ See https://explore.dot.gov/t/BTS/views/BTSBorderCrossingAnnualData/BorderCrossingTableDashboard?:embed=y&:showShareOptions=true&:display_count=no&:showVizHome=no. Viewed November 30, 2018.

consists in giving certain actors a voice and in acknowledging certain counter-traditional practices as legitimate, that also elevates migrant “people” (Vobruba 2009) into the status of responsible and self-responsible persons, even if the room of maneuver is often much more restricted for migrants than can be assumed for long-term residents of Western and Northern Europe.

In that sense, liminal transmigration also presents a political challenge. Conservative or even anti-migration forces tend to dislike the approach and its implications because it renders plausibility and legitimation to the individual (and often difficult) lives of migrants.

However, also pro-migration forces have their reserves. The reversal of established or traditional settings in liminal spaces may or may not bring along productive societal developments. While migration has brought along highly creative constellations in some places, it has brought along conflict and alienated resident populations in others. Acknowledging liminal transmigration is not a normative choice as such, but allows for a more sober normative assessment of productive and non-productive forms of border transformation.

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