BOTTOM-UP EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: HOW TO CROSS THE THRESHOLD OF INDIFFERENCE?

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INTRODUCTION

In the same section of this journal in 2004 and in 2008, two papers addressed the cross border interaction at the internal European border. One dealt with cross-border labour market immobility (van Houtum & van der Velde 2004) and the other with consumer mobility in Europe (Spierings & van der Velde 2008). Both drew on similar theoretical concepts, trying to explain why, notwithstanding the efforts towards further European integration, the border still persists in the minds of many people. Sometimes even a 'border paradox' can be observed, where increasing cross-border integration coincides with decreasing cross-border mobility. But explaining the relative indifference towards potential opportunities at the other side of the border, and explaining how these opportunities are rationally evaluated once they do enter the picture, does not explain how the attitude of people can change from indifference towards a conscious consideration of these differences. In this contribution we would like to elaborate on this aspect and try to explain how this change evolves. For this, the concept of 'frames of relevance' (Schütz 1982) in relation to a fully fledged theory of spatial action (Werlen 1992) can be helpful. Of course this is not limited to cross-border spatial interaction, but can serve as a promising theoretical framework for explain-ing any kind of change in patterns of spatial action. This contribution will first critically analyse the earlier arguments. In a next step we will try to show that they draw on two theoretical streams of thought, which are difficult to bring in line with each other. By introducing the action theoretical approach for this purpose we will then try to show, how from this specific theoretical approach, both indifference or cross-border immobility as well as cross-border mobility can be explained. Finally, from this theoretical perspective we will formulate a research agenda.

CROSS-BORDER LABOUR MOBILITY

Within the European Union the integration of markets always has been, and still is one of the key objectives based on the presumption that the internal borders are to be seen as barriers for cross-border interaction, and that getting rid of these internal barriers would boost cross-border trade and the free movement of goods, money, information and labour, leading to higher efficiency (Danielzyk *et al.* 2004; Ernste 2004). It was 'assumed that cross-border mobility is dominantly held back by (market-) imperfections and the lack of transparency and knowledge, an assumption that is still dominantly based on rational-choice theory. This theory postulates that human kind is inherently seeking the highest profit possible

for his/her labour and will move no matter where as long as it pays off' (van Houtum & van der Velde, 2004, p. 100). Although in the course of European integration cross-border interactions have increased considerably, labour market mobility has been lagging behind (Straubhaar 2000). Therefore van Houtum and van der Velde asked themselves, why it is that people, when it comes to cross-border labour market mobility in the European Union, are relatively immobile and that this immobility can be seen as a dominant mode of practice. So after many decades of deliberate EU policies stimulating cross-border mobility, the vast majority of the workers in the European Union are still largely mobile only within nationally-bounded labour markets. The numbers of cross-border mobility are still low if compared with labour mobility between states of the USA, for instance. The dominant mode of practice of 98 per cent of the workers is still cross-border immobility (van Houtum & van der Velde 2004, p. 103). Except for the reference to still existing barriers at the border, the rational-choice models cannot really explain this phenomenon. At this point a broader social-constructivist theoretical approach is demanded, which does not assume that preferences and the situation of decision-making are preset in the way rational-choice theory supposes, but that knowledge about them is socially constructed and negotiated along the way in the process of human actions. In their attempt to fill this theoretical gap, instead of on the utility maximising mechanisms presupposed by rational choice theory, van Houtum and van der Velde resort to mostly post-structuralist theories (De Certeau 1984; Bourdieu 1990a, 2002; Foucault 1991; Hillier & Rooksby 2002), assuming that to a large part human behaviour is based on internalised and habitualised societal norms and rules in the absence of manifest obligations or enforcement. From this perspective it is argued that '[t]he nation still functions as an intuitive structure and embodied sense of place' and that '[i]t is this structuring power of the national habitus that (still) contextualises human rationality' (van Houtum & van der Velde 2004, p. 104). It is this internalised Habitus that explains the indifference of many towards the market opportunities at the other side of the border

(van Houtum 1999). The nationalistic rhetoric does not stimulate cross-border mobility of workers. The same can be said of a regional identity that is lived day to day. Even if there is no strong regionalist rhetoric, the pragmatic and routinised regional orientation in daily life does not contribute to motivate cross-border interaction, even if the barriers at the border are torn down. As such people seem to be much more satisficers and choose the comfort of life at their side of the border (van Houtum 2002). Here the word 'choose' is crucial, as it still assumes a conscious and deliberate decision, which also implies the awareness of contingency and of the alternative, and thus the awareness of the border and the opportunities at the other side of the border. This is also reflected in the central concept van Houtum and van der Velde introduce for understanding the cross-border labour mobility or immobility. They coin the term 'threshold of indifference' (see Figure 1). For a large number of people, the other side of the border might not exist in their mindset and therefore not included in the decision process at all. 'In general terms if there is no active attitude to make and value difference there will be no active decision-making with regard to that specific place [at the other side of the border]' (van Houtum & van der Velde 2004, p. 104). Some people might, however, surpass the threshold of indifference and take cross-border mobility into full consideration.

However, speaking on the one hand of indifference and on the other implying a choice for

Cross-border labour market passiveness	Indifference-factor		
Threshold of indifference			
Cross-border labour market activeness	Stay	**Keep-factor**	**Repel-factor**
	Go	**Push-factor**	**Pull-factor**
		Home	Away

Source: van Houtum and van der Velde (2004, p.105).

Figure 1. *The threshold of indifference.*

'indifference' does not seem to be totally consistent. It also does not take the conceptualisation of this 'attitude of indifference' as suggested by the sources to which van Houtum and van der Velde refer (Bourdieu 1977, 1990b, 1998; de Certeau 1984; Strüver 2002, 2004), fully into account. Indifference, therefore, means that the opportunities at the other side of the border do not enter the mind of the decision-maker at all, as their mindset is programmed to ignore it. Indifference does not mean that one decides consciously and deliberately to ignore it. Taking such a decision would already imply that one is not indifferent.

Van Houtum and van der Velde draw on Bourdieu to explain this phenomenon. Bourdieu views the human being as neither a powerful subject nor an object driven by powerful external processes, but as a combination of both. Through his concept of habitus he states that to a large extend these external structures are internalised in embodied schemes of action, which are then activated in specific situations and moments without being consciously thematised or rationally controlled (Bourdieu 1987). He further emphasises this latter aspect by denoting the habitus as a 'cultural unconsciousness' (Bourdieu 2007, p. 123), in which the disposition takes the place of intention (Bourdieu 1998, p. 167). Notwithstanding his assumptions, as exemplified by the main critiques of Bourdieu's work, he nevertheless still clearly leans towards a structuralist perspective on human action, which is sometimes characterised as a 'constructive structuralism' (Reckwitz 2002; Calhoun & Anthwerpen 2007; Kalinowski 2007).

De Certeau (1984) as well as Strüver (2002, 2004) in contrast conceptualise this kind of indifference as a tactical aspect of the practice of everyday life. In distinguishing between strategic and tactical practices, they see practices not as the sheer reproduction of structures by means of the habitus of the actor, but partly as a result of deliberate (strategic) decisions enforced upon the actor and partly as the result of a tacit and tactical practice, which gives the structural reality an individual twist and dynamics. But also from this perspective, tactical practice is not the same thing as a conscious and free decision, but should be seen as a largely tacit coincidence of circumstances at that specific moment and location, lacking rationality and conscious deliberation (Schatzki 2001). De Certeau denotes it as an 'ensemble of circumstances' (1984, p. 123). He further underscores this tacit aspect by the examples he provides (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) (1984, p. xix), which describe this practice as a non-discursive (Giddens 1986) 'Brownian movement' within the system (de Certeau 1984, p. xx), and as 'silent production' (p. xxi). This therefore, creates the issue of the change of structural realities through tacit tactics, but is not in line with the kind of rational choice decision-making taking place beyond the threshold of indifference. So on the one hand, de Certeau distances himself from the Bourdieu concept of habitus (p.59) but on the other hand does not resort to rational choices as van Houtum and van der Velde still seem to do.

By sticking to rational decision-making, they cannot really explain the phenomenon of 'indifference' or the transformation of an attitude of 'indifference' to an attitude in which differences do play a role. Their main contribution to the debate about European integration of labour markets lies in their emphasis on understanding immobilities, instead of mobilities, but their inspiring concept of a threshold of indifference needs further elaboration to explain this phenomenon. This idea about a specific realm in which differences play a role, in contrast to another realm, where they do not, has also been refined and developed further in the contribution of Spierings and Van der Velde (2008) to this section of this journal about cross-border shopping behaviour.

CONSUMER MOBILITY IN EUROPE

Again it was observed that, notwithstanding the continuous EU policy to make national borders disappear, cross-border shopping is still very limited. Even in border regions, where people are expected to have a greater propensity to cross into another country, only about a half per cent (see Table 1) of all shopping trips is transnational (Spierings & Van der Velde 2008, p. 498). Also in this case the main explanation is that the national framework of action is still predominant and frames the rational decision-making. So far the explanation is an extension of the explanation used in the case of cross-border labour markets. The active cross-border

Table 1. *Cross-border shopping interaction between the Netherlands and Germany.*

Motive	From Germany to the Netherlands	From the Netherlands to Germany	Percentage of total
Shopping for daily products	938,000	437,000	0.4
Run/purposeful shopping trips	488,000	161,000	1.0
Fun/leisure shopping trips	1,071,000	420,000	1.5
Total	2,497,000	1,018,000	0.6

Source: Spierings and van der Velde (2008, p. 500).

decision-making is analytically divided up into 'emotional' and 'rational' differences. Together they constitute what is called a bandwidth of 'unfamiliarity' or 'strangeness', which people are willing to accept or which stimulate mobility, exploring the opportunities at the other side of the border. '[W]hen shoppers consider international differences too large, they fall outside the bandwidth and operate as keep or repel factors – which imply that cross-border consumer mobility is discouraged and prevented. The more differences are interpreted by shoppers as push and pull factors and the less they are interpreted as keep and repel factors, the more cross-border shopping is taking place' (Spierings & van der Velde 2008, p. 502). Beyond this bandwidth of familiarity, differences lead to immobility. As such they indeed contribute to the further elaboration and understanding of cross-border immobility.

Their conceptualisation of cross-border shopping trips also differs substantially from the traditional conceptualisation of the border as a barrier or market imperfection hindering the consideration of shopping opportunities at the other side of the border. Dissimilarities at the border can both be attractive to or can be valued negatively by potential cross-border shoppers (Williams *et al.* 2001; Rast & Kroll 2006; Tosun *et al.* 2007). Beyond the conscious repudiation of border-crossing shopping trips, cross-border immobility, might also be explained by sheer attitude of indifference, even though Spierings and van der Velde (2008) do not elaborate on this. In the same way as border differences can be framed as attractive or repulsive, the border can also be framed as irrelevant. But how can something that in the first instance is seen as totally irrelevant and to which one acts indifferently, enter the mind of the shopper or worker, and become part of our deliberate consideration and decision-making? If indeed we want to adopt a social constructivist perspective to better understand cross-border immobilities and mobilities, we cannot content ourselves with the idea that on the one hand frames of irrelevance are discursively determined and on the other hand, within the framework of relevance, a rational decision-making process takes place. We need a consistent theoretical understanding of both the emergence and transformation of framings and of the individual decision-making or spatial action.

A JOINT ACTION-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One possible theoretical framework conceptualising these processes is offered by Werlen (1992) with his action theoretical approach to everyday regionalisations. In his view the social constructions of space are to be found in individual actions, in which internal and external structures of meaning can play a role, without one-sidedly emphasising one of them at the cost of the other. Here we already observe a shift in focus from Foucault's discourse structures and Bourdieu's structured reconstructions in the form of the habitus (Lippuner 2007) to impartial spatial actions. This is enhanced by Giddens' theory of structuration (1986). He points to the cognitive, material and normative structures which enable and restrict everyday actions. At the same time he distinguishes between discursive and practical consciousness. The 'subconscious' attitude of indifference could be seen as part of this practical consciousness, which tacitly regulates many of our day to day actions. The indifference towards the border in first instance does

not involve explicit and conscious decision-making but nevertheless could enter the process of reflexive monitoring once it is problematised. In a similar way Schütz (1982; see also Berger & Luckmann 1967) coins the term 'frame of relevance' and in our case he would probably denote the attitude of indifference as a frame of irrelevance (Gonos 1977; Nuehring & Fein 1978; Schütz, 1966, 1982; Mote 2001). In his elaboration of that concept Schütz also shows how these frames of irrelevance emerge and are changed. These are processes of change that are essential for transgressing the threshold of indifference (Ensink 2003) and, therefore, can fill the gap van Houtum and van der Velde left open.

The concept of framing, therefore, is promising for this specific problem (Entman 1993; Fisher 1997). Similar ideas were already developed by Bateson (1973) who described frames as tentative localised expressions of cultural maps that organise perceptions around shared premises in the active interpretative process of perception. These frames are not an optional extra but a necessity for perception. Analogously Piaget (1973) discussed the way schemata evolve in the mind. Through assimilation, the sense-data are modified in order to fit the schemata and through accommodation, the schemata are modified to incorporate the new data. The two processes exist in a dialectical relationship. A similar process is identified by Festinger (1957) in the idea of cognitive dissonance: If beliefs are held sufficiently strongly, people may go through remarkable psychological contortions in order to assimilate new information to the existing beliefs, rather than accommodating the beliefs to the information. The belief system becomes a frame of reference within which all new ideas and information are located and evaluated (Zimbardo & Leipe 1991). This approach to framing has been developed in detail descriptively by Goffman (1974; see also Jameson 1976). It has also become a mainstay of discussions in post-structural cultural criticism, although as we have seen above, not in its full consequence (D'Angelo 2002). The process of 're-framing' has also been explored by Bateson's followers in the Palo Alto group (Watzlawick *et al.* 1973).

Tversky and Kahneman (1981, 1987) have adopted the concept of framing in rational choice theory. But frames are then seen as strategic choices, and not as emergent generative structures of perception. In the same way, the concept of framing is used in theories about social movements (Benford 1997). In a sense, the process of re-framing can be seen as a germ for a 'new social movement', but the framing literature about social movements and political interventions, like in rational choice theory, analyses framing as deliberative and strategic categorisations (see e.g. Laws & Rein 2003). This is of course not useful for explaining the attitude of indifference towards the border.

In the perspective of framing, in first instance, the attitude of indifference or frame of irrelevance based on the routinised and internalised daily life without border crossings, makes the actor blind for the border and for opportunities at the other side of the border. While others might cross the border, even if their numbers are initially quite low, the instances at which non-border-crossers are confronted with foreign labourers, with products from the other side of the border and with many other effects of these border crossings, the frame of irrelevance is irritated, and problematised. These un-asked-for confrontations then function as psychological cues signalling a change in the situation. The frame and the related behavioural scripts no longer suffice and do not fit the changed situation anymore and a code-switching towards an available alternative frame and script is triggered. Alternatively a slow process of trial and error and of habitualisation of the new framework and related scripts may be initiated. In this way formerly irrelevant aspects of the current situation are assimilated in existing frames or the frames are accommodated to the new situation.

Through such a comprehensive theoretical framework, we can consistently explain both the phenomenon of indifference and the phenomenon of deliberate rational decision-making beyond the threshold of indifference as well as the transformation from cross-border immobility to mobility. At the same time it makes full use of the social-constructivist approach, and does not limit the process of social-construction to the discursive determination or indoctrination of the human mind-set, within which human beings are supposed to

behave (economically) rational. Instead, it conceives the process of human decision-making as (an on-going) process of social construction itself, and thus, goes beyond the behavioural rational-choice theories and makes productive use of (phenomenological) theories of spatial action (Werlen 1992).

BOTTOM-UP EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

In this way we do not just better understand cross-border mobilities and immobilities, but also the way how in daily life, the dominant strategies for European integration are adopted but also resisted, through the tactical interpretative processes of individual actors. It is the process of re-framing, which sets the speed in which European integration literally takes place (Ortloff 2006). As the empirical results show, in some realms the progress in European integration evolves quickly and in other realms, such as labour markets and shopping behaviour they evolve at a slower pace. But a process of re-framing and re-regionalisation of our action space is slowly but surely taking place at the internal European border, although further empirical research has to confirm this. In this way Europe will grow not by enacting top-down measures or strategic discourses, but bottom-up in daily life (Schmale 2001; Meinhof 2004).[1]

The well known phenomenon of dissatisfaction with European integration policies as such, can be associated with a mismatch between top-down integration policies and real integration or lack of integration in daily life (Arzheimer 2002; Günther 2004; Schmale 2005). European integration could therefore easily tap into the 'progress trap'. A sustainable Europe, which does not degenerate to an 'audience democracy' will have to build on the firm base of a real European daily practice. The investigation of the re-framing processes as Europeanisation from below therefore is crucial and needed.

Note

1. see also <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_25-8-2003_pg3_4>; <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract;jsessionid=5D696F562C87CD30B387E82ED140805F.tomcat1?fromPage=online&aid=33663>;

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/iset/projects>

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