

CONFERENCE REPORT

Relocating Borders: a comparative approach Berlin 11–13 January 2013

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The conference, organised by EastBordNet, was one of the final outputs of the COST Action IS0803 Project and became a significant scientific event of the beginning of 2013. Although the most inspirational stimuli were probably found there by experts from the field of social anthropology, a whole range of topics for consideration were raised there also for the fields of sociology, social geography, architecture, urban planning, development studies and other disciplines. The conference was already the second such large gathering organised by EastBordNet and the COST project, which was begun in 2009 and entered its closing phase in 2013. The conference contextualised the project's central theme, the Eastern Periphery of Europe, presented its results and demonstrated that within its framework productive new theoretical concepts and working ties were formed allowing further research projects of the eastern borders of the European Union, of internal and external migrations in relation to the European Union and of wider developmental scenarios including urbanisation, globalisation and the relations of Europe and the Third World.

In the course of the existence of the project, much has changed in the European and global contexts. Since 2009, when the project was started, the migration situation in Europe has modified and also the view of Europe in the context of world development is different. The dichotomy of Europe and the Third World has taken on new meanings; the borders between the European Union and its neighbours can hardly be simply conceptualised as the borders of the developed and developing world now.

Contemporary European and global affairs were reflected also in the scenario of the conference. The organisers of the conference used global events for the evaluation of the theoretical bases of the topic of borders, for work on its anchoring in overall social-science discourse and for placement of the individual pieces of knowledge into the widest possible context of global events. They also strategically selected Berlin as the place of the conference; not only for the reason that as a city in the centre of Europe it was easily

accessible for the European attendees, who were the massive predominance, but also for the reason that it is the direct personification of the transformational processes taking place in Europe. A city, which was divided by a border wall until 1989 and so significantly marked by the consequences of ethnic and political intolerance, is now, as the centre of one of the wealthiest states of Europe, undergoing a deep transformation. As expected, some of the most distinctive monuments of contemporary architecture and urban planning of Europe are created here, but against expectations despite the wealth and technical advancement of Germany cranes have stuck out in all directions for decades already and despite the constant construction commotion the urban infrastructure, which was neglected for several decades, is changing only slowly and ponderously.

The conference was opened by Sarah Green, leader of the Eastern Periphery of Europe project with a lecture called *Relocating Borders: Locations so far and Visualising Borderlands*. Her introductory lecture not only presented the entire project and opened the individual topics of the conference, but also outlined the prospects of research for the future. Through her talk, Sarah Green made it clear that the project should not end with the conference, that it was her intention to develop the research network further and expand the knowledge base by further research events.

The individual panel discussions followed the introductory lecture. Approximately fifty panel sessions took place over the three days of the conference. Each panel discussion had ca 90 minutes available and 4 – 6 contributors were proposed for each of them. Not all of the panels were fully blocked with contributors, so at some there were fewer contributors, sometimes only two of them, but it can be stated that the panel discussions for the most part maintained a high level. Usually, eight panel discussions took place in parallel, so those interested could select thematically closely related questions and draw a maximum of stimuli. On each day of the conference, there were moreover further joint keynote lectures and also topical joint panel discussions and round tables. Of the joint events, it is necessary to highlight especially the successful keynote lecture by T. H. Eriksen and particularly the keynote by Saskia Sassen, which was placed at the conclusion of discussions on Sunday in the late afternoon. At the end of the conference, when such large gatherings usually fall apart and the participants leave early, Saskia Sassen was able to fill the main conference hall and keep the audience's attention with a riveting lecture until the moment when it was necessary to thank the organisers and vacate the premises.

Besides the keynote lectures, the special panel discussion on the renewal of Berlin and its contemporary development and the lecture, or interview with the architect Daniel Libeskind on his Berlin architectural implementations can be considered as highly inspirational.

Considering its size in the environs of Humboldt University, the conference was very well managed in terms of organisation. The credit for that mainly belongs to the main organiser Sarah Green, but also her assistant Darien Rosentals and the local organiser Rozita Dimova. It can be considered especially significant that within its framework there were opportunities of presentations and strengthening contacts with similar networks and organisations, which participated in joint round tables, and that there was a contextualisation of the topics of the eastern borders into the global developmental paradigms.

The conference emphasised a whole range of topics. It was often clear from the individual contributions that the borders between states are a visualisation of a large number of phenomena, but these phenomena play out on the entirety of large territories, which surround the borders. Observing events on the site of the demarcation helps reveal striking phenomena, but their significances require knowledge of a whole range of contexts associated with the economy and social behaviour of large groups of people in the interior. The study of borders thus leads again to wide multidisciplinary perspectives encompassing events in the entire society.

The conference confirmed the knowledge on the diversity and difficult to grasp nature of the various types of borders using comparable social-science instruments. Many demarcations have nothing in common with state borders. What is ever more important in the globalised world are borders leading across states and demarcating individuals and groups determined by ethnic, language, professional, income, confessional or other means. These notional borders are becoming ever more important in comparison with state borders, while states are losing significance not only in the area of economic relations, but also in power relations, which are concentrating ever more distinctly outside of state structures. A study of borders that do not form boundaries of states allows the discovery of the real actors, who influence the money flows, lifestyle and economic behaviour of people across continents. One the large topics opened by the conference is also question of the relationship between the social behaviour of people and its materialisation or visualisation. The topic of borders shows how little social sciences know as yet about regularities of this relationship.

The conference demonstrated that in comparison with 1976, when the Association for Borderlands Studies was founded as a reaction to the research of the specificities particularly on the borders of Mexico and the USA, the topic of borders has substantially expanded and is now studied all over the world. Borders are now perceived rather as a part of processes and not as a static phenomenon. The topic of borders today helps overcome methodological nationalism and is instrumental in understanding the phenomena that not only form the borders but also overcome them. The conference in Berlin indicated that research of this type is currently highly dynamic and is moving forward methodologically also research perspectives in the area of urban anthropology.