

# Fieldwork and/with “mobile commons”: A Dialog about the Methodology of ethnographic Borderregimeanalysis

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*In migration, media are both tools for organizing migration itself as well as for the formation of the many communities of migrants. Researching these economies of negotiation, reciprocity and knowledge production in the field raises questions that range from the methodology of research to the researcher himself.*

**Peter Ott/Ute Holl:** Which difficulties arise in academic research into migration and into the use of media as methodology?

**Vassilis Tsianos:** First you have to develop new methods. Our approach is called ›ethnographic border regime research‹, a concept which I have developed during the project “Transit migration” in Frankfurt/Main together with Sabine Hess, Brigitta Kuster and Serhat Karakayaly.<sup>2</sup> Within the framework of this project, between 2002 and 2005, we were one of the first research groups to look into the patterns of *border crossing* in Southeast Europe. In the beginning, collaboration between sociologists and cultural anthropologists did not work at all. Different methodological approaches and epistemological premises led each of us to emphasise our professional identities and initially even had a re-disciplining effect. But at the end of an affect-charged process of mutual de-disciplinisation, we designed the concept of ethnographic border regime analysis, which we, i.e. with Brigitta Kuster and Marianne Pieper, further developed into a “nethnographic” border regime analysis.<sup>3</sup> With this, we aimed

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<sup>1</sup>Tsianos, Vassilis S. (2015): Feldforschung in den «mobile commons». In: Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft. Heft 12: Medien/Architekturen, Jg. 7, Nr. 1, S. 115–125.

<sup>2</sup> Vassilis Tsianos, Serhat Karakayali (2010): Transnational Migration and the Emergence of the European Border Regime: An Ethnographic Analysis, in: European Journal of Social Theory, August 2010, 13, 373-387; Tsianos, Vassilis S. and Sabine Hess (2010): Ethnographische Grenzregimeanalyse als Methodologie. Von der Ethnographie zur Praxeographie des Grenzregimes, in: Sabine Hess, Bernd Kasperek (eds.): Grenzregime. Diskurse, Praktiken, Institutionen in Europa, Hamburg, 243–264; Forschungsgruppe TRANSIT MIGRATION (eds.) (2007): Turbulente Ränder. Neue Perspektiven auf Migration an den Grenzen Europas, Bielefeld.

<sup>3</sup>Trimikliniotis, Nikos, Dimitris Parsanoglou, Vassilis S. Tsianos (2015): Mobile Commons, Digital Materialities and the Right to the City, London; Pieper, Marianne, Brigitta Kuster, Vassilis S. Tsianos (2014): “Nethnographische Grenzregimeforschung”, in: Transnationale Akteur\_innen der Migration: Gender – Netzwerke – Assemblagen: Methodologische und methodische Überlegungen im Zeichen einer neuen Ontologie, in: Julia Grulich, Birgit Riefgraf (eds.): Geschlecht und transnationale Räume. Feministische Perspektiven auf neue Ein- und Ausschlüsse, Münster, 227–249; Dimitris Papadopoulos, Vassilis Tsianos (2013): After citizenship: Autonomy of migration and the mobile commons, in: Citizenship Studies, 17.2. S. 42-73; Vassilis Tsianos, Brigitta Kuster (2013): Erase them! Eurodac and Digital Deportability in: transversal / EIPCP multilingual webjournal, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0313/kuster-tsianos/en>

to analyse border events as moments of crisis, while at the same time maintaining a focus on the protagonists. We wanted to explore the singularities of the border zones. When we speak of border zones, we do not understand it as a geographical concept, but as a concept that highlights relations of powers and activities of diverse actors in the dynamics of the border. Back then, this constituted a radical challenge to the entire methodological arsenal of German language migration research.

PO/UH: What do you mean when you mention singularities?

VT: We refer to Deleuze's concept of singularities: Heterogeneous elements retain their multiplicity in this concept but form a common vector without modifying their diversity. It is about a moment of creation of new micro-assemblages. Singularities therefore refer to crisis-like moments in the dynamics of borders. Field research begins when I act within the lived and observed space of resonance that is the field which in turn vexes me in my subjectivity as a researcher and where I recognize minor or major moments of crisis. I do not simply travel to an arbitrary border in order to observe migrants, that would merely be research voyeurism. Rather, I go where irregularities in the formal or informal procedures of border dynamics can be rendered visible and expressible in migrant communities, be it socially or through media.

PO/UT: Singularity then is a disruption of continuity?

VT: Singularities of border zones are disruptions that occur either on the level of media, concerning the policy of migration, or appear inside of communications networks of the migrating communities as peculiarities, as explicit violence or as a problematic situation, for instance the interruption of an existing route of migration. Singularities is the term that we use in ethnographic border regime research to describe what challenges we as researchers have to interact with in the field. Though, from the perspective of the migrants, who sometimes are on the move for ten years, these moments of crisis which occur at the border are not singular. Rather, we have to assume, they constitute the lived continuum of their border experience.

PO/UT: We are interested in the media part of your research. What do you mean with the term *nethnographics* in this regard?

VT: Initially *nethnography* was a method for ethnographically researching the practice of software engineers. We adopted this term for two reasons: Firstly, it is directly related to the

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main method of the ethnography of borders, and secondly, during our research we understood that the field cannot be reduced to the geographical area of the border. Ethnographic border regime research means mobile border research. It happens in many places, it has many focuses, it orients itself along migration biographies, migration routes, and it considers the media practice of migrants during transit. We called it nethnography because both communication and research take place across different social media.

PO/UT: That also changes research hierarchies.

VT: A good researcher always is a border character. We are part of the liminal situations in which we act. The sooner a person with whom we interact realises that we are ready to abandon the hierarchy and professional distance that we habitually embody, the more interesting communicative content, the denser the connections and the more complex the levels of communication and involvement will be. There is a narrative polysemy of migration at every media level, both on social media and in face-to-face communication with transit migrants. An experienced migrant has six or seven different *border* stories at her/his disposal, which she/he can update very convincingly depending on their needs, on their circumstances or on their dialogue partners. Among them are also specific stories exclusively directed at migration researchers. It is not the work of the researcher to “discover” these good stories, but rather to try to accompany people for a long time, both offline and online—hence nethnography. This allows us to understand the variation of the narratives which are told as being dependent on the particular context and stage of migration as well as to understand these narratives with regard to their users’ expectations both in the way they are applied and addressed. Therefore the field extends to my office in Hamburg. Because I had to, could and even wanted to make contact again and again, even months or even years after I left my area of field research. Either simply to stay in touch, but above all to accompany the journey of a particular person on its way to Europe.

PO/UH: You did not experience any *digital divide*...

VT: ...this is a myth or rather a problematic view of the factually existing unequal distribution of digital accessibility worldwide. The figure of the *digital divide* not only states an unequal accessibility but also implies a limited or deficient digital agency on the part of the users. This is a conceptually paternalistic assumption.

PO/UH: In migration there is a sovereign disposition over social media ...

VT: In the world of migration there are multimedia environments of capabilities. I do not know why research maintains the thesis of the *digital divide*. It is empirically untenable and, worse still, it attests to a presumptuous academic form of social critique that can only function through the victimization of others. We, on the other hand, speak of connected migrants, of people who are very well versed in multimedia environments and who were already so even before the migration project began.

PO/UH: This means that they also have sufficient equipment available. How do they obtain it?

VT: From the same sources as we do. In *border crossing* a good mobile phone is a very good investment. It is not a status symbol. It is a small mobile bank. It is a miniaturized technology of *border crossing* that can be sold, loaned, renewed, exchanged and at the same time forms the infrastructure of connectivity in *border crossing*.

But all media of communication play an important role. Skype, Twitter, GPS are very important, but also quite mundane letters. The term *mobile commons* includes all forms, all formats of media, not only digital ones. By *mobile commons* we mean the at the same time shared and distributed ability to act within the continuum of online and offline communication structures and at the same time being able to maintain the sustainability of this structure merely by using it.

PO/UH: What exactly does sustainability mean in this context?

VT: It means to make sure that the people who come after you can find the same migration route and media infrastructure undamaged, so that they can also use it. It therefore includes identifying technical fields of disruption and applying corrections. This is the moral economy of border crossing, which is less about morality than about reciprocity and precisely sustainability. If a migration route is no longer open, it no longer functions as a fallback, but neither does it function into the future. Even if someone is no longer in transit, but in some place as an accepted asylum seeker, it concerns him/her if his/her migration route is severed or interrupted technically. In this way he/she is disconnected from his/her relations, and from the many quasi-contractual forms of informal economy. Potentially he/she becomes susceptible to blackmail.

A mobile phone number usually works like a bank account number. It is often enough to call somewhere with a certain mobile phone number. A simple ring is enough, it does not cost any units, but the person can be localised by those who accompanied him/her on the journey or even lent him/her money to take the next step in migration. If this step was successful, the

family can be asked to pay the transit costs. But if this number is deleted, the whole chain is deleted. Then conflicts and problems arise.

PO/UH: So the SIM card is a kind of identity, but it must be changed from time to time. And then you have to signal the decisive places: That's me now.

VT: This usually takes place in Internet cafés. In Athens, for example, there are special Internet cafés, which actually function as digital banks, where everyone deposits small digital identities.

PO/UH: What would be the crucial difference between forms of migration using old technical media and those under digital conditions?

VT: Digitality is a space in which media control technologies coexist with migrants using media in alternative ways. Their mutual co-presence and observation is the decisive aspect. Each form of control technology corresponds to a form of resistance against it and the *mobile commons* of migration are the response to a certain form of digital registration or digital prisons. It is no coincidence that for two or three years now, the most important claim of migrants, who are on their way to Europe, has been the erasure of their stored fingerprints. The actual crossing of a real border line is only one aspect of border crossing. Its most important aspect is to maintain and recover data sovereignty. The main issue here is Eurodac<sup>4</sup> and the processing of fingerprints, through which the identified person is turned into a digital prisoner. This means that it is impossible to reach places of arrival that are prohibited by the regulations of the asylum law.

PO/UH: People have to make sure that they cross the border as both a person with a body unharmed and alive, and also as a person with one or more digital subjectivities which they produce themselves.

VT: Above all, they have to cross along with the digital traces they produce themselves.

PO/UH: So in practice, this means it is important where someone is obliged to leave their fingerprint?

VT: That is the most important issue. The first contact with the Schengen area is the place where fingerprints are taken. This is the Eurodac registration. This determines the whole expectation of arrival in the Schengen area. Eurodac was actually the focus of my research. I was not concerned with border studies in the classical sense, they are already extensively

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<sup>4</sup>European database for storing dactylograms.

researched. What interests me is how an identification technology, like the infrastructure of a digital border, shapes the modes, practices, and activities of *border crossing*. These are also organised through social media. The question is how identification technologies attempt to make border crossing impossible, to control it, and therefore to immobilise people by turning them into the object of explicit identification for a long time.

PO / UH: So it is actually about two borders, one is geographical and the other one is part of the digital or virtual space. People have to know and master the bureaucratic arrangements of the digital space. How do they explore this?

VT: They know that. They are professionals. If they are not professionals themselves, they find them.

PO / UH: So it is less about the dramatic border fortifications as we know them from cinema.

VT: Indeed. Of course they also know the real crossings, they know where and when the river water is at its lowest—of course that is also important. But it is more interesting to know where fingerprints are taken with low quality, where there are operational problems, where data transfer takes three months, although it would be technically possible to do so within eight days.

PO / UH: The mobile phone is not only a bank with account numbers but, in old media terminology, it is also a shack for passport forgers. Identities are traded there.

VT: In our context, it is a border object.

PO/UH: In your book you are very confident about expertise of migrants. The old order also seems to be very stable. It can correlate the moving individual via the GPS functions. In this sense, it would be advisable for border crossers to turn off the GPS in order not to be visible to the state data bureaucracy.

VT: Field research indicates the opposite practice. GPS is used intensively, but also road maps. I always observe a techno-continuum, a combination of telephone, internet café, printer and Facebook, i.e. multiple media environments. If there is no GPS, you can print maps that are necessary for a route in an internet café, taking data from Facebook and Google, and with this paper in your pocket you can cross the border.

PO/UH: It is still a problem to be identified as a person who should not be in this or that place according to state regulations.

VT: Interestingly, such identifications are illegal. Existing data traces must not be used arbitrarily to identify a person. This also applies to illegal immigrants, because illegal migration is an offence, not a crime. According to data privacy laws, metadata of migrants cannot be easily and automatically be used for migration control. All programmers of Eurodac acknowledge this fact and therefore this is not implemented technically. With regard to Eurodac there exist strong restrictions of data protection laws, which can later even reverse a deportation procedure. For example, Eurodac has a fixed data retention period for purposes of identification. There is no permanent *cyber deportability*.

PO / UH: Let us return to the everyday life of the researcher. On the one hand there is Eurodac and on the other hand there is the migrant in his/her autonomy. Both use digital media, you research on both sides and both have particular narratives available. You have to translate these practices, just as an analyst translates a dream into the structure of scientific research.

VT: I have to make inscriptions. I deliberately use the term inscription and not transcription in the sense of well-behaved empirical qualitative research. In *non-local ethnography*, the practice of writing already implies the continuous inscription of the researcher's perspective, in a very literal sense, into the narrative consequences and traces of the dense descriptions about others.

PO/UH: In the case of Eurodac, we can imagine the work of translation. They are computer scientists, administrators who have studied themselves, they are perhaps even flattered that a sociologist takes an interest in them. But what about the migrants? How do you translate these six different stories, which every good migrant has at her/his disposal as you say, into a research narrative that demands clarity after all?

VT: I am not a proponent of anticipatory disambiguation. I am interested in understanding border conflicts, rather than individual biographies. I do not want to reconstruct a coherent story, which we cannot even tell about ourselves. For me only those stories are heuristically important which maintain a certain coherence in terms of the expectation and application of control as well as its transgression.

PO/UH: In this context, can you say something about language?

VT: In migration research you generally need at least two or three languages, first of all French and English, and then you need to have a disposition for all possible forms of sub-proletarian, subaltern non-languages: small, fast, dirty, strenuous, not quite logically reconstructable

expressions, a mixture of English, French, Turkish. When I am confronted with Arabic writings, I use the help of a translator.

PO/UH: Through these forms of communication a language of its own is created.

VT: Yes, it is a communicative proximity, it is a grammar of trust. This is the language of the *mobile commons*.

PO/UH: Are there semantic codes that you are familiar with?

VT: For example, "*fingering*" is an in-vivo-coding. People who are in transit often supply us with in-vivo-codings, i.e. fast, condensed jargon-like accounts of an event that are not individual, that are used more or less by everyone in the field and that, interestingly enough, are also known by control technicians.

PO/UH: "To be fingered" would mean that "fingerprints had been taken"...

VT: ... correct. To be *fingered*.

But of course, the question of language is also a meta-question. With respect to postcolonial critique of occidental epistemic violence, I am not an advocate of epistemological orthodoxies that abstract from the field. These may exist, but it is necessary to observe the inherent logics of the field, to analyse how and whether they are effective, updatable, or perhaps even absent in the field. I am interested to learn how to deal with the fact that the field is perhaps not waiting to be identified as an exemplary case of an omnipresent epistemic violence of the West, and that it can also resist such a "critical" inscription.

The most important thing is to finally understand that from migrants' perspective, the researcher cannot necessarily be more than an additional medium of *border crossing*. At best, she/he is a kind of self-reflexive mobility companion. On the other hand, I am depressed when I lose contact with people.

PO / UH: Because that might mean a lot of things: That they are no longer alive or that they do not want to deal with you any more.

VT: That is correct. It can mean both. For me, this is the most difficult part during the stage of inscription, i.e. that you successively lose the real contours of the faces of the others through the language of the research report and the academic paper. I worry less about cultural dominance at the level of inscription. Of course these already exist before field research and at the time of publication.



PO/UH: Do you think that the researcher as a person also changes fundamentally because of this research?

VT: Every good researcher is always confronted with questioning his own person. This is hard work applied to oneself. We have to do all sorts of things: transfer money, listen to horrible stories, bear screams, caress the trembling bodies of underage transit migrants. These things are difficult to process. In the field, I drink a lot of alcohol, I eat a lot of meat and sweets, I extend moments of leisure as far as possible. All this works primarily on your affect. The standardised interview, in which questions are answered and then you calmly return home and do the analysis, something so ideal-typical might happen to you once in your life time.

You have to be able to understand both sides, the technologies of information and control and the technologies of border crossing. The latter work very strongly through narratives, i.e. they function through myths, fairy tales, rumours. It is not just about technology and digital media.

PO/UH: The perception of digital media is always marked by an ambivalence between techno-utopianism and cultural pessimism. How do migrants negotiate digital media?

VT: My friend Abdurrahman, for example, has a 'pragmatic' approach to the ethics of using social media. To him they are important as long as they function and successfully accompany part of his migration route. But he is not interested in my texts. I sent them to him because feedback is methodologically fundamental in ethnographic work, not as a premise but as a practice. People give you feedback, you give them feedback. This is probably also the answer to the question of language: it is about anti-hierarchical practices and cultures of communication in field research. This includes that Abdurrahman is allowed to comment on the reconstruction of his case. But it just amuses him. What we learn about Eurodac, the technological implications for the Schengen control infrastructure, he finds only relevant concerning practical aspects. He wants to know how long it takes to transfer data from Lesbos to Athens. And if I cannot answer that, I have a problem. Then the feedback chain is broken: You call yourself a scientist?

PO/UH: Do these competences not exclude certain people from the practice of crossing borders? Those who are not trained in handling technical or digital media?

VT: There is one main rule in migration: You are never alone. The second rule is: Migration is tough business.

During *border crossing* migrants are not necessarily social groups in the sociological sense. They are social non-groups, i.e. updatable and reconfigurable of social groups. Nobody travels

alone, at least not for the entire duration of the journey, and nobody uses media individually. This is why we use the term *mobile commons*. In criminalised, transborder, transnational migration, everyone is surrounded by many people and many media environments that everyone can use, individually or by delegation. I use your mobile phone and give you something else in return, you lend me your mobile phone until I reach Bremen and I hand it in at the internet café. Or, quite simply, you send a SMS for me.

PO/UH: Older people and children participate in these networks...

VT: Definitely children. However, what we understand by individuality is suspended for a certain time being in the border zone. Children turn into adults for some time. If they are lucky and get here, they become children again. These children also have three or four stories. They learn the particular transit languages very quickly and are media professionals. The thesis of digital exclusion does not apply to the children either. They are constantly surrounded by media infrastructures, individual or non-individual. The vanguard of irregular mobility is also the vanguard of shared and distributed digital competence.

PO/UH: Does that also apply to people who are on the move in the Mediterranean with the help of—in the narrative of our media—ruthless gangs of people smugglers?

VT: It applies also to them. Almost half of those who cross borders take this route. These are exactly the people I am talking about, those who send the short SMS to Italy in time...

PO/UH: ...to indicate where the ship is adrift?

VT: It is exactly about these people, with whom we are medially dealing in a scandalised way. These are the new boat people of the European border.

There is very little serious research on people smugglers. I probably had to deal with smugglers again and again, because this is often a temporary activity in transnational migrant biographies. Abdurrahman has also been a mobility facilitator for a while—he himself was on the road for about ten years and he is a real professional when it comes to being able to be mobile. For three years he was stuck in Istanbul and he used his immense knowledge to keep the route open for others. As with all informal business cultures, it is all about reputation. Such relations of reciprocity should not be conceptualised as being dominated by relations of violence alone. Violence does exist, but reciprocity is more important; success rates must be provable and you must be able to circulate them so that the services of a smuggler will continue to be sought after.

Smuggler organisations are a complex mesh of different groups that are technologically modularised, both in terms of geography and across borders. Some specialise in forging passports, while others can guarantee that someone is able to cross the border at a reasonable risk for a barely affordable sum of money. Certain groups are responsible for transport from one city to another, others are responsible for organising stopovers and basic necessities in collectively used apartments. Others are responsible for the exploitation of labour in transit, such as sexual service as a trade-off.

In conversations with women in transit about their relation to smuggling, it was noteworthy to realise how women portray sexual abuse and what language they use to process this experience. They refer to it as non-free and involuntary forms of exchanging services, which are however based on a quasi-contractual relation. There is a moral economy of the border, which must not be strained by anyone.

Frontex, as the specialist in border control of the “European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders”, attempts to precisely disqualify the moral economy of border crossing, to disable and to limit potentials of chain-linking and contagion. Sometimes they succeed. As a migration route, the Greek-Turkish border along the Evros river had “died” for a while, to use an expression of transit migrants.

Nethnographic border regime analysis reveals very clearly that the margin between field work and inscription work is very thin. In *border crossing*, the field of research actually consists in creating relations of feedback. My field starts in Evros or Lampedusa and ends in Hamburg in my university office and vice versa. Our idea of research field—which already builds on a colonial idea of space—has been redefined by ethnographic border regime research.

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