



PRAGREV

Pragmatics.Reviews

Online Publication of the
European University VIADRINA

Volume 5, Number 1

December 2017

Doing Borderlands

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dx.doi.org/10.11584/pragrev.2017.5.1.3

www.pragmatics-reviews.org

Doing Borderlands

Christian Wille, Rachel Reckinger, Sonja Kmec, Markus Hesse (eds.). 2016. *Spaces and Identities in Border Regions. Politics – Media – Subjects*, Bielefeld: transcript.

This recension aims at reviewing the collaborative scholarly publication of the University of Luxembourg on “spaces and identities in border regions”. The disquisition’s main innovative and novel idea is the application of the praxeological approach – an emerging school of thought in cultural and social theory - to the research domain of border(land) studies. This review is trying to give a critical assessment about this research emphasis of the Luxembourg University that is presented in this book. The review, first, gives an overview about the background of the collaborative publication and the general context of it; second, the main assumptions and hypothesis, utilized theory, concepts and methods and finally, a description of the structure of the treatise and ideas for further research.

Background of the Anthology and general context

The anthology “Spaces and Identities in Border Regions. Politics – Media – Subjects” edited by Christian Wille, Rachel Reckinger, Sonja Kmec, and Markus Hesse represents a mission statement concerning the intellectual standpoint of the border(land) research at the University of Luxembourg. Borderland Studies that have occurred in the last 20-30 years have been first developed at the US-Mexican border area and more recently transferred globally to other regions. The theme was to focus not only on the border but at its hinterlands from a multidisciplinary perspective (f.e. historical, geographical and political). Despite the multidisciplinary analytical spectrum applied in this field of research, disciplinary methodological barriers have inhibited to some degree a convergent analytical framework. With this joint project of various disciplines and methodologies, the University of Luxembourg tries to deliver a common approach to investigate spaces and identities in border regions. The main contribution of the collaborative work is to apply a praxeological-constructivist approach indicating that identities are constructed and shaped by social interactions: “The point of departure is the notion that spaces and identities are brought about by social practices” (p. 9).

The praxeological approach that provides a “multilayered research concept that combines methods of spatial and identity studies and integrates various thematic approaches” has been ascribed by authors as “doing geography”, “(de)spatialization”, “identity work”, “identity politics” and in this special context as “doing space” and “doing identity” (p. 9). Spaces and identities are therefore the point of interest and the way how they are negotiated and

constructed through social practices on a daily basis. Moreover, the emerging field of praxeology serves as a theoretical basis for the different case studies conducted in the interdisciplinary collaborative venture. The case studies are structured along the triumvirate “Politics”, “Media” and “Subjects”. Thus, the case studies on space and identity constructions focus on institutional, media-related and everyday-cultural practices.

The collaborative scientific publication has been enabled through the research project “IDENT2 – Regionalizations as Identity Constructions in Border Areas” (2011-2014) funded by the University Luxembourg with the contribution of the research unit Identités, Politiques, Sociétés, Espaces (IPSE) bringing 30 scholars of eight university’s member institutes together. The Research project has been built upon the research results of the previous project “IDENT – Socio-Cultural Identities and Identity Policies in Luxembourg” (2007-2010). Summarized, the publication is an outcome of nearly a decade of interdisciplinary and multi-institutional scientific cooperation in the field of border research in Luxembourg. The thirty scholars have met in forums like in three work groups (p. 12) - Workgroups Politics (6 scholars of 4 institutes), Workgroup Media (12 of 6) and Workgroup Subject constitutions (13 of 5) “uniting researchers from various disciplines represented in IPSE” (p. 37). The publication that reconciled various workgroups, 30 scholars mostly from cultural studies, eight institutes, divergent disciplines, thus, can be considered as an intellectual adventure.

Main assumptions and hypothesis

As it has been mentioned before, the starting point is that spaces and identities are negotiated and produced by social practices. The overlapping identities and spaces within the investigated territory of Luxembourg are socially constructed. This constructivist approach is underlying the praxeological theoretical foundation that is methodologically linking the heterogeneous case studies in the book. Luxembourg is “not space[s] pre-existing per se that could be described via classical categories such as spatial location, accessibility or resources. Rather these places were ‘made’: in one way or another, they have been ‘produced’ and are thus the result of social practices” (p. 371). Also the linkage of space as a social product is nothing new, the innovation in the application of the poststructuralist praxeological approach is the research emphasis shift from the *why* and *with which effect* to the *how*. More precisely, the research interest is located by the physical action by individuals, actors, institutions and media and how they shape identities and spaces through actions. The way how identities are negotiated is the central analytical perspective and less the rationale: “Therefore praxeological approaches are less concerned with the normative attunement of actions, or with the intersubjectivity of cultural codes, but primarily with the physical execution

of practices that conceptionally include artefacts and in which attributions and interpretations of meaning are (re)produced in not necessarily predictable ways” (p. 35).

Territorial, legal, national or political categories are not relevant here – except regarding data collection because all quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews have been conducted in the *Greater Region* – and the research logic conforms rather “a very limited way to ‘nation-state orders’ or to ‘binary orders’ of the here/there” (p. 9). Territory and borders are negotiable and under regular scrutiny in the process of “doing space and doing identity” (p. 9). To justify these assumptions – in the following – the authors draw a theoretical framework that serve as a basis for the further analysis.

Theory, concepts and methods

As highlighted above the research interest lies in the examination of space and identity constructions by social practices: “The investigation of constructions of space and identity in this volume focuses on social practices and on specific sub-aspects linked to them (e.g. bodies, artefacts, spatial networks of relationships, logics of power, attributions of signification with their specific differentiations, and situatedness)” (p. 44). To start to illustrate the main assumptions and to operationalize it for empirical analysis, the authors are giving some conceptual thoughts about border heuristics. The authors “examine different types of boundaries that however should not be seen as merely duplicating national borders” (p. 16). The defined concept of border is linked to three intertwined practices of the border: First, the 1. Establishing the border (“institutions of border as differentiations or regulations”), 2. Crossing the border (“crossing of border as an affirmative or subversive action with transformative potential”), 3. Expansion of the borders as an “in-between of manifold relations and overlaps” (p. 10, p. 16 et seq.). From an analytical perspective, this differentiation of distinct practices through/of borders and/or boundaries serves for a better understanding of how differentiations and borders are negotiated by everyday cultural practices.

After sketching the threefold practices of the border, the concept of space is theoretically reviewed by the authors describing spaces as, first, material substances referring to the traditionalist school of thought, second, as a product of relational systems and, third, space is “emphasized as having significance when considering in particular attributions and ascriptions of meaning in the conflict with the physical-material world” (p. 27). With the presentation of the various approximations to the concept of space, the authors point out that no presented perspective is favored or an own concept of space is elaborated. On the contrary, the plurality of the “relational-descriptive” and “symbolic-interpretative” approaches

are used for a fruitful analysis avoiding “the notion of the impact and influence of (national) container spaces” (p. 28).

A further step to clarify notions and the theoretical framework of analysis is the concept of identity that is described from a poststructuralist standpoint. The distinction of Ricoeur’s concept of identity between “selfhood” and “sameness” had served as a “common touchstone” and “has allowed for a fruitful interdisciplinary cooperation” (p. 37). A further joint understanding of identity for the empirical research has been achieved by the subdivision into two components – “first attributions (identification of), and second, the appropriation (identification with) by recipients (of any kind)” (p. 41). Thus, the constitutive procedure of identity shaping is applied as a theoretical groundwork and can be applied “with a clearer structure in terms of concepts and empirics in their dialectic with spatial constructions in border regions” (p. 44). In addition to this, further theory has been applied in the descriptive case study chapters on space and identity constructions through “institutional practices” (Politics), “media-related practices” (Media) and through “everyday-cultural practices” (Subjects). These theoretical approximations will be briefly reviewed further down in the description of the structure of the publication.

The methodology of the joint research project is based on three key approaches: The research concerns “textanalytical processes for examining non-standard cultural manifestations (e.g. exhibition catalogues, films, advertisements, virtual environments, gravestones, newspaper articles etc.)”, a quantitative survey with 3.300 interviewees and 47 qualitative interviews conducted in the Greater Region including population from Luxembourg, France, Belgium and Germany and the utilization of an auto-reflexive method – “at the way the contributors to this volume collaborated” (p. 45). Having in mind the number of scholars from various disciplines that have been working at that publication, the need to reflect on the results is essential.

Structure of the publication

The collaborative publication is composed by six main chapters. The introductory first chapter introduces to the main goals of the publication and presents the background of the publication and the research, scholars and institutes organized in the workgroups to highlight the interdisciplinary and the high coordinating activities to guide throughout the research and publication process that disembody to the collaborative scientific release. The second chapter pictures the theoretical framework and the methodological considerations that have been already presented. To conclude the second chapter also the necessity of interdisciplinary cooperation in scientific collaboration is highlighted. For this purpose, calls of scientific research programmes are scrutinized regarding their inter-, multi-, pluri-, trans- and

postdisciplinarity requirement (p. 52 et seqq.). This subchapter verifies the contemporary research paradigm of interdisciplinarity.

The chapters three till five represent the thematic case study sets along the analytical levels of “Politics – Media – Subjects”. Starting with Space and identity constructions through institutional practices (“Politics” - chapter 3, p. 73 et seqq.) different case studies are being analyzed built up on the *power-critical perspective on spatial constructions* (p. 31) based on the premises of Foucault’s approach of power logics of construction of space, border and identity (p. 74 et seqq.). These theoretical reflections serve as the groundwork for the case studies in chapter three: “The following case studies refer to this analytical triangle [of sovereignty, discipline and governmentality] in order to identify logics of power in the construction of space, limits and identities through policies and normalizations, and to be able to identify them in their relation to one another” (p. 79). In the following, the case studies focus on the “constructions of spaces of im-/morality” investigating the “problematization of prostitution c.1900” (p. 81 et seqq.), on castles (from the investigated border region) “as instruments of hegemonial space construction and representation” (p. 94 et seqq.), on the construction of energy regions in the investigated border region on the basis of Biogas policy (p. 105 et seqq.) and on the migration discourse in Luxembourg based on an interdiscursive analysis (p. 121 et seqq.). The case studies therefore, represent both a highly heterogeneous disciplinary field of studies and identity manifestations out of historical and contemporary practices: “The four case studies concentrate on historically and topically very different social practices, which nonetheless have in common the construction of a political space” (p. 132).

Chapter four puts the main emphasis on “space and identity constructions through media-related practices” (“Media”, p. 141 et seqq.) applying a *media-oriented perspective on spatial constructions* (p. 32). The theoretical groundwork is built upon media theoretical considerations based on the premises of McLuhan’s media as “extension of the human body” (p. 142), on cultural-spatial reflections applying Lévy’s and Lussault’s differentiation of “interspatiality”, “interface”, “spatial scaling” and “co-spatiality” (p. 143) and on the establishment of hybrid “third spaces” by Bhaba, Pratt’s “contact zone” and interstitial-liminal spaces (p. 144 et seqq.). The seven case studies that follow on the next pages are feeding back the empirical results with the theoretical thoughts on different forms of boundary settings. Objects of praxeological investigation are multilingual advertising in Luxembourg (p. 146 et seqq.), the exhibition and publication spaces of the works selected for the “Robert Schuman Art Award” (p. 158 et seqq.), threshold (public/transparent-non-public) of exhibition venues (p. 172 et seqq.), multilingual staging of literature “in-between” (p. 185 et seqq.), self-presentation of teenagers in Luxembourg on Facebook (p. 193 et seqq.) and “petrol stations

as in-between spaces” (Practices/narratives and transfigurations) (p. 204 et seqq.). This chapter represents the media-related richness of contemporary identity-building and exhibits an extensive selection of media-related case study analysis to describe different forms of boundary-making: “On the whole, we can see that media of representation, understood as zones of contact, can indeed enable ‘passages’ to be opened up between different descriptive levels: different figurations of border are placed in parallel to and at the same time contrasted at each other” (p. 230).

The fifth chapter focuses on the space and identity constructions through everyday-cultural practices (“Subjects”, p. 241 et seqq.) applying also the Foucauldian approach of governmentality like adopted in chapter three with the switch of focus from the scrutiny of technologies of power to *how* they are practiced: “While the latter primarily analyses the technologies of domination, normalizations and attributions of meaning, we will here address the question of how such technologies and positings of subjects are lived and/or how they influence the individuals’ self-conceptions” (p. 241). For this purpose, the development of the concept of subject is sketched from different philosophical standpoints. In a next step, subject analysis theoretical principles in cultural studies and governmental approaches of subject constitution are reviewed to finally come up with a suggestion how to operationalize the theoretical concepts. Praxeological heuristics offered by Andreas Reckwitz are applied for the case studies in chapter five as it “seems particularly suited for research in the context of the border, since it is attuned to the investigation of ‘processual realities’, so that it is possible to observe contingent processes and examine space and identity constructions both as preconditions as well as results of practices of ‘Doing Space’ and ‘Doing Identity’” (p. 248). The praxeological approaches are applied in eight case studies dealing with everyday eating practices considering the spatial identification practices (p. 252 et seqq.), “Gender Spaces” scrutinizing “genderized regions in the subjects’ living environment as well as spatialized subjects of gender discourse” (p. 266 et seqq.), identity and regional constructions through “commemoration of the dead in the Treveri Region (2nd/3rd century AD)” expressed in tombstones in Arlon (p. 278 et seqq.), space construction and subject constitution in the field of workers housing estate (p. 292 et seqq.), “discursive construction of suburban spaces at the border between city and countryside” (p. 305 et seqq.), the remembering practices of the Second World War within the Greater Region (p. 315 et seqq.), “Space and identity constructions [...] in cross-border residential migration” (p. 326 et seqq.) and “linguistic identifications in the Luxembourg-German Border Region” (p. 338 et seqq.). The eight case studies reveal a broad variety of identity and space creating practices both from the historical artifacts and contemporary everyday-actions and illustrate the links between the concept of the subject/-ification/-ivations with spaces and identity research in

border studies: “Of particular interest here was, on the one hand, the relationship of subjectifications and subjectivations – or the shifts and creative forms of appropriation they reveal – and the relationship of spaces and identities in cross-border contexts, on the other” (p. 353).

The final content-related chapter is an outlook entitled “Luxembourg is the Singapore of the West” referring to a quote of a Chief Country Officer of a German bank in Luxembourg used by the author to compare the small country to the Asian city state to highlight the relationality of both countries. The author intends to emphasize that “they have derived their significance from a specific positing with respect to other urban locations. Neither local location factors nor their size are relevant here, but rather the specialization of their function in the web of larger spatial relationships and flows” (p. 370). After this geographical classification of Luxembourg, the author relents and stresses the paradigm of the publication that both spaces are “not space pre-existing per se” but rather these spaces are produced by social practices (p. 371). For the consideration of the results the author reiterates two key questions. First, he discusses how the research perspective can be transformed to a higher scale – up to the global level and which consequences this perspective may bear. He replies to this question that the process of increasing complexity concerning network of relationships leads to a crossroad – the researcher shall decide whether to follow a spatial or a social approach: “A constructivist approach to space and focusing on social practices have direct effects on research practice: if the continuously increasing complexity by the material space no longer permits us to clothe regions in a fixed territorial passepartout, then the consequence can only be to examine spatial or social processes of differentiation along different levels of scale, and no longer (primarily) territorial spaces and political borders” (p. 373). Second, he stresses the importance of mobilities of persons, goods, ideas and the knowledge about it concerning the production of space and figures out that “mobilities contribute to the liquidation of spatial conditions and they have considerable repercussions on the spatial objects on all levels of scale. At the same time, they mobilize our notions, images and discourses with respect to these objects” (p. 374).

Review, critique and ideas of further research

The collaborative publication of the University of Luxembourg is a twofold way a remarkable scientific project: First, it comprehends a multitude of various ideas, scholars, disciplines, institutes, methods and methodologies, topics of research, research concepts and has created a joint intellectual output that balances the disciplinary contributions and unites them under a single methodological approach. Second, the publication applies the emerging theoretical premises of praxeology in border(land) studies which can be considered as an

innovative and creative way to refine and further develop the border(land) studies.

Praxeology is a research programme that has entrenched in social and cultural theory in the last 15 years and compounds different disciplinary approaches and offers an open and fruitful analytical perspective (See Schäfer 2016). Especially in the field of borderland studies this approach might be gainful as the post-structuralist and constructivist sumptions allow an open approach to scrutinize identity research in border regions.

The main assumption of the disquisition is that regions are not territorial units in the first place but are socially constructed by daily practices. This hypothesis is not new at all: Ever since the entry of the *spatial turn* in the 1990's the pre-assumption that space is socially constructed has been an overarching mindset (See Soja 1989, van Houtum/Kramsch/Zierhofer 2005) in geography and borderland studies. The main assumption, therefore, is part of a long tradition in geography and enqueues in a long list of books in the bookshelf of social-constructivist contribution in the research field of border areas. Still, the theoretical framework of praxeology provides new research paradigms. The core concern are not the effects or reasons of social practices but rather the manner how practices are performed and therefore how identities and spaces in completely different contexts and periods of time are (re)produced. Despite the comprehensive and innovative work there are of course some critical reflections and proposals for further research that will be sketched below:

On the theoretical concepts of border regions/area, regions and institutions: The starting point of research in this publication is that spaces and identities are created through social practices. In addition to this, these categories are not bound to territorial, legal or national categories: "We understand spaces and regions – in much the same way as borders and identities – as an expression of social practices, not as already fixed analytical categories merely applied to the respective subject of research" (p. 371). Nevertheless, the research is conducted in a border region which in conclusion demands a clarification of the concept of border region. The initial approximation of the concept border region/area leaves it fuzzy and open for interpretation: "Constitutive for the term 'border region' or 'border area' are therefore borders or differences that are not understood as fixed or unquestioned positings, but rather as results of contingent practices" (p. 10). The concept of border region, thus, is always dependent which spatial identity production is generated by social practices. The territorial dimension of border region only serves as a basis for data collection in a spatially demarcated territory of the Greater Region including Luxembourg, and the adjacent border areas of Germany, France and Belgium. In conclusion, spaces and identities are negotiated through social practices that constitute "border regions" or "border areas" that in the same time are spots and spaces within the studied border region. This reveals the contradictory

potential of the terms and concepts used. Along the case studies it becomes obvious that the unclarified terms of border region and border areas cannot be held up by all authors.

Although the concept of space is deeply theorized, the usage of the concepts “space”, “territory”, (border) “region”/ “area” is quite confusing in some case studies as these terms are used by the authors in different ways.

Additionally, the concept of institution is scarcely defined. As the third chapter focuses on institutional practices, the reader expects a theoretical conceptualization of institutions that is kept vague. Additionally, identity constructions by practices of institutions may evoke delusive associations in the empirical analysis of the case studies.

On border region/border area from an empirical standpoint: Space and identity constructions through institutional practices in border regions can be imagined as supranational, national or subnational institutional practices. As the territorially nation-state border plays a subordinate role, European supraregional institutions (such as Euroregions) and their practices in the border region are a perfect object of investigation. As Euroregions are cross-border entities delegated by EU that shall overcome national borders and foster European identity, their practices and implications are highly interesting with regard to the identity-building from an institutional perspective. Surprisingly, no kind of this research is conducted in the case studies of chapter three.

Additionally, the linkage of the praxeological approach and the borderland studies is hardly prevalent. While reading the case studies the question might occur why this research has to be necessarily in territorially demarcated border regions as some of the case studies don't differentiate between empirical results sorted by the samples of the respective nation-state. The title indicates that the spatial and identity construction research is conducted in border regions. This title may be misleading in a twofold way: First, it is not primarily the border regions as a territorial demarcated administrative or political space that constitutes identity but different overlapping identity constructions by miscellaneous social, cultural and linguistic e.g. practices that occur on a daily basis and in different contexts that result in recurring fluid spatialities and venues and identity-formation. Second, the plural term of borders region might suggest that different border regions are compared to each other. More precisely, the work is focusing on only one border region – the nation-state of Luxembourg and its neighboring hinterlands representing the Greater Region. The conjunction of all case studies is that the data (quantitative and qualitative) is collected in the Greater Region depicting selective space and identity constructions within the territorially demarcated border region including the countries Luxembourg, France, Belgium and Germany.

On interdisciplinarity and case studies: One of the main achievements of this publication is the reliable set of interdisciplinary research based on common theory-building and

disciplinary case-studies that are bundled by the praxeological approach. To integrate about 30 scholars of eight research institutes is not natural and requires a high degree of scientific coordination and fine tuning. The necessity of interdisciplinary research has also been highlighted in the superfluous subchapter on the current research paradigm on interdisciplinary research in international project research funding (p. 52 et seqq.). Especially the case studies expose the richness and fruitfulness of interdisciplinary research.

Nevertheless, the case studies composition discloses some inconsistencies in the case selection procedure. While in chapter three (institutional practices) only four case studies are conducted, in the other empirical chapters the double amount of cases is presented.

Moreover, especially in the part on the institutional practices the cases seem to be arbitrary chosen as there are hardly links between the different case studies that vary from historical practices (hegemonial representations by historical stately homes, problematization of prostitution in 1900) and contemporary institutional practices (construction of energy regions with the example of Biogas policy and migration discourse in Luxembourg). As European cross-border region-building is promoted by the European Union, a case study on institutional practices of the Greater Region would be appropriate and expedient.

On territories and nation-state borders: Territories matter and so do nation-states and their historic border lines. In recent years, re-nationalization processes led to a disintegration in various sectors. Nation-state borders have been strengthened, fences (re)built and cross-border interdependencies disentangled. These processes are mirrored in the social geography and critical borderland studies research. In recent years, intergouvernementalist-realist perspectives have recurred in the discourses on bordering in distinction to social-constructivist approaches. The inevitable counterargument to the examined scholarly contribution is, hence, that territorial, spatial and historical pre-conditions matter for identity-building in cross-border regions. How historical lines of separation still matter has been examined by the interdisciplinary phantom borders (“Phantomgrenzen”) project that assumes that contemporary boundaries of spaces and identities are territorially linked where once historic border lines divided territories of dominion (See von Hirschhausen et al. 2015). Historical, political and territorial contexts cannot be omitted. The authors admit that the emphasis is put on current practices in Luxembourg with few studies on historical practices: “Most of the following case studies address these questions in the here and now, Luxembourg and the border region in the 2010’s but this book also includes historical studies that raise identity issues” (p. 39). In general, the fact has to be stressed that the Greater Region represent a highly permeable and intertwined border region as it represents a border region in the heart of the founding members of the European community, with early cross-border interaction and reconciliation after the Second World War and a homogeneous socio-

economic structure. The de-bordering of the nation-state borders in the Greater Region through the European Integration process, thus, offers a great playground for contemporary identity formation research. In conclusion, the heuristics developed by the border researchers at the University of Luxembourg offer a fruitful and innovative interdisciplinary research approach when examining border regions where social and geopolitical demarcations diverge. Another approach to grasp on border and boundary research is the heuristic elaborated at the Viadrina Center B/ORDERS IN MOTION. The main difference in this heuristic is the approach to use the border as the main resource for analysis: “Starting with the integration of border and boundary theory, our main argument is to consider borders as a demarcation tool, which divides both different spatial, temporal, cultural or social units on the one hand and orders on the other. As such, any border deserves to be studied in its own right, but can simultaneously serve a distinct perspective on these demarcated units and orders. The resulting methodological principle of thinking from the border implies a fundamental change of perspectives: borders move to the centre of attention, rather than being perceived as a peripheral phenomenon.¹ This also means taking the complexity of borders more seriously” (Bossong et al. 2017, p. 65 et seq.).

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¹ This standpoint also underpins the interdisciplinary research centre B/ORDERS IN MOTION at the European-University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder).

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Peter Ulrich: Review on *Spaces and Identites*. 2016. In PRAGMATICS.REVIEWS 2017.5.1