Guest Editorial

The politics of migration

A B S T R A C T

This editorial introduces the Virtual Special Issue on the Politics of Migration by presenting a review of migration and refugee related articles published in *Political Geography*. We have identified two major shifts in scope during the last 30 years. First, the scalar focus has changed from nation-state policies to supranational migration agreements and transnational migrant experiences. Second, the theoretical focus has moved from geopolitics to biopolitics. Ten selected articles illustrate three central themes: regulation of migration, practices of border enforcement and migrant experiences.

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Introduction

Migration is an acute and highly political topic in contemporary societies all over the world. There are currently heated discussions over work-based migration, refugee quotas in European countries, and border enforcement measures taken and planned by the EU in the Mediterranean. Migration trends and policies were among the most-discussed topics in national elections in Europe in Spring 2015, with anti-immigration parties in a number of countries, such as Finland, Denmark and the UK, gaining increased attention and support. In the US, the issues of undocumented migrants and family detention have been the subject of debate and protest. In addition to debates in Europe and North America there are, according to UNHCR, currently more than 51 million displaced people in the world. Most of these people, 86%, are located in less developed countries and around half of the displaced population are children and young people. These different types of movements of people are political by their very nature. This claim does not only apply to national or transnational political fields of governing movement, but also to the banal, everyday life practices and struggles of several precarious groups such as undocumented migrants and refugees.

The question of migration has always been important for political geographers. The scale of this interest is evident in *Political Geography*, where we identified close to 90 articles relating to immigration, migration, migrants and refugees since the journal began publication in 1982. Some of these were contained in two related special issues: on the geopolitics of migration (2002, 21: 8), and on state-diaspora relations (2014, 41). In addition, a special issue on reconceptualizing the state (2004, 23: 3) drew heavily on studies of migration and migrants. Since 2000, the number of individual articles on migration and refugee-related topics has increased significantly, with 66 published in the last 15 years.

The changing political geographies of migration

By looking at the substance of the articles published in *Political Geography*, we identify two major shifts in scope over the last 30 years. First, the scalar focus has changed from the politico-territorial regulation of nation-state policies on immigration to supranational migration frameworks and transnational practices and experiences. Second, the theoretical framing has moved from geopolitics to biopolitics. Authors discuss the globally structured and governed micro-politics of lived migration and the creation of permanent spaces of politico-administrative limbos such as camps, detention centres and the legal traps experienced by undocumented people. These discussions draw heavily from the broader philosophical tradition of authors such as Agamben, Derrida and Foucault.

We discuss these two major shifts through three cross-cutting themes. The first theme considers the political regulation of migration through a focus on national and supranational organisations and policies. The second highlights borders, paying particular attention to the growing interest in border enforcement and biometric bordering. The third theme highlights the various spatialities of migrant experiences in a range of contexts, from North America to China.

Regulating migration: from national mandate to supranational scope

During the 1980s, the marked increase in the number of migrants and asylum-seekers from Asia and Africa started a development which has led to several restrictive national legislations in Europe and North America. Wood (1989) stressed that nation-states tried to predict migration flows through push and pull factors, but noted that intervening forces, such as the

worsening of the local economy, were often not considered. These control efforts started to build geoeconomic fortresses and ever stricter boundaries between wealthier and developing countries. Already in the late 1980s Wood predicted that changes to national policies and the creation of bilateral agreements would eventually lead to growing numbers of rejected asylum-seekers migrating from one country to another. Wood argued that Melander's (1987) scenario of the "orbiting refugee" who is seeking protection and assistance from several national authorities might be too harsh a prediction. However, in 2015 we are living in a world where the precarious refugee is the main target of the globalised logic of migrant detention and deportation practices.

Due to several geopolitical, geoeconomic and environmental reasons, the categories of migrants and their legal statuses have become more varied than ever before (Gamlen, 2008; Kofman, 2002; Reuveny, 2007). Simultaneously, the scalar focus of migration policies has shifted from national to supranational. In the last decades, several transgovernmental agreements on territorial migration policies, citizenship and migrant rights have emerged (Kofman, 2002). The complex reality of migrant categories produces very different experiences of being a migrant. For example diasporic communities with extra-territorial ties to homeland are not governed by the same set of rules as refugees fleeing from generalised conflicts. Interestingly, as argued by Reuveny (2007), climate change-induced migration is also a major reason for generalised conflicts in areas receiving migrants, and requires international co-operation in mitigation plans and practices. These wide-scale ecological shifts create even more pressures to understand the effects of migration as a globally lived process and shared responsibility (both in originating and receiving areas). Thus, we argue that durable solutions beyond the strategies of restrictive national and international policies need to be explored. This means that experiences of migrants should be more central in understanding the politics of migration and in the contemporary "humanitarian" discourse on border enforcement.

Border enforcement and biometric governing of movement

The shift in research interest from geopolitics to biopolitics is evident among political geographers focusing on border enforcement. Since the early 2000s, biometric border control and the biopolitics of the body have been widely theorized and studied. Governing the movement of people means that bodies become sources and targets of surveillance and prediction: who is a trusted body on the move and who is not. As Amoore (2006: 343) argues, "immigrant biometrics is based on ongoing surveillance and checks on patterns of behavior". This exercise of biopower, practiced by states with the help of hugely expanded economies of private security firms, extends to multiple realms of social life. Thus the biometric borders reach far beyond the border zones and check-up points. As Amoore (2006: 348) puts it, "border becomes a condition of being that is always in the act of becoming."

In the era of biopolitics, illegal immigration is often viewed as a threat to global and national security. During the last 15 years, offshore detention facilities on remote islands have become sites of existential limbo for tens of thousands of undocumented or illegal immigrants. Mountz (2011) argues that nation-states use these sites to capture liminal populations and simultaneously isolate migrants from getting legal advice and submitting effective asylum claims. Offshore detention is a site of haunting: detainees are confronted with the nexus of sovereign and biopolitical powers, surveillance and several sub-national jurisdictions. Whereas offshore detention represents spatial politics at the physically remote margins of particular sovereign nation-states, the latest

development of offshoring EU bordering practices to neighbouring states, such as Libya, utilises the same tactics of haunting on foreign territories (Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

Recently, the quest for critical analysis of securitization and humanitarian discourses of migration has been highlighted. Vaughan-Williams (2015) argues that conceptual resources in (post)biopolitical theory, such as Derrida's zoopolitics, help to define and explore the governing practices and animalisation of irregular migrants. He goes on to suggest that the zoopolitical border is a spatial-ontological device that can characterise both Europe's humanitarian border security claims and its actual reliance on the creation of animalised spaces of confinement such as camps and detention centres. In these spaces, states aim to immobilise irregular migrant bodies and render unknowable populations knowable (Vaughan-Williams, 2015). These biopolitical and animalised practices of contemporary border enforcement are evident in the Mediterranean Sea everyday.

Tracing the spatialities of migrant experiences

Published work on the spatialities of migrant experiences is particularly useful for demonstrating the changing scalar focus. While the nation-state remains an important actor, its role and significance varies, and other scales of analysis are incorporated, often in an intersectional way. In an early article, Jackson (1992) discusses Caribana, an annual Caribbean festival in Toronto that began in 1967 and continues to the present day. Jackson's focus, influenced by the cultural turn, is identity politics: this includes the localised politics of space evident in the struggles over the placing and composition of the festival; the national politics of state multiculturalism in Canada; and the broader transnational identity politics of an Afro-Caribbean diaspora.

The state plays a more central role in Fan's (2004) article on internal migration in China. The hukou system of population registration, introduced in the 1950s, significantly limited rural to urban migration in China. From the 1990s onwards, hukou controls were relaxed in order to provide a supply of temporary labour to rapidly-expanding cities in China. Many of these migrants are young, female and single, so-called "maiden workers". Fan uses qualitative data from household surveys in rural Sichuan and Anhui provinces to provide insights into the role of the Chinese state: as a recruiter of migrant labour, and as a facilitator of the exploitation of migrant workers through its refusal to address working conditions. As Fan comments, "the silence of the state is not an accident but is rather a prescribed attribute of the migrant labour regime" (2004: 300). However, with its explicitly feminist approach, the paper also insists on the importance of women's voices and experiences as narrated in first-person accounts, and frames those accounts in the broader context of local, national and transnational gender ideologies and capitalist exploitation. In this way, though not the central focus, Fan's paper also demonstrates the shift from geopolitics to biopolitics, with its discussion of the embodied experiences and regulation of migrant workers in China. This shift is also evident in Squire's (2014) article, which discusses humanitarian activists in the Sonoran desert. While her paper can also be read as a commentary on the geopolitical border between Mexico and the US, her main focus is on the way in which the category "human" is bordered. Using a "materialdiscursive" approach, Squire shows how humanitarian activists transform desert trash, such as water bottles and backpacks discarded by migrants crossing the desert, into items of value. In this process, Squire foregrounds "'the human' as a political stake in contemporary struggles over migration and mobility" (2014: 12).

Conclusion

As this brief overview shows, political geographers have shown a broad interest in the processes constituting migration, border enforcement and migrant experiences, and geographic approaches to migration more generally have been strongly influenced by their work (see Samers, 2010: 180–298). Scholars have used a variety of onto-epistemological frameworks to show migration as multiscalar and as multidimensional. In turn, they have used these insights to provide new perspectives on political geography, often in relation to the changing role of the state. Despite this breadth and range, approaches to migration in political geography are also marked by what King has elsewhere identified as a series of conceptual binaries (2012: 135–138). The shifts we have identified now prioritise international migration over internal, precarious migrants over privileged, and theoretical approaches over empirical. Also their geographical focus prioritises migration from the perspective of wealthier countries. There is, we believe, clear scope for political geographers to expand their investigations into migration as a process and an experience, and to continue to use this research to interrogate fundamental concepts in political geography, such as the state, borders, scale and citizenship.

Conflict of interest

The authors whose names are listed immediately below certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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