

Space-sensible sociology of migration: how migration research can profit of socio-spatial theories

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Space-sensible sociology of migration

How migration research can profit of socio-spatial theories

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Introduction

During the last years, much discussion has been going on debating the troubles of methodological nationalism in migration research. In this contribution I argue that one step in order to overcome the methodological problems of the territorial limitations in migration research is to introduce reflections based on the multifaceted body of knowledge provided by thinkers of social spaces into the practice of migration research. As the body of literature on sociospatial theories is vast by now (as discussed elsewhere in more detail, see Scheibelhofer *forthc.*), I will limit my discussion on the different types of socio-spatial concepts to a classification I am suggesting.

On the basis of this classification, the argument is developed that a space-sensible methodological approach allows us to question the meaning of spaces on different analytic levels. These levels include: Firstly, the dimension of the researchers themselves (reflecting their own sociospatial conceptions inflicted on the research questions); secondly, the dimension of the actors we are studying and thirdly on the social institutions. Based on empirical examples, it will be shown for each of these levels or dimensions how a space-sensible approach allows us to gain more appropriate insights into migration phenomena in comparison with spatially ignorant approaches.

The discussion on methodological nationalism in migration research

The discussion around methodological nationalism is entering at the moment into a new phase. For migration research, the contribution of Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) has triggered an important debate in this research area during the last years. Wimmer and Glick Schiller define methodological nationalism as the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world. They argue that methodological nationalism characterizes mainstream social science, and show in their con-

tribution how it has influenced research on migration. Following up and discussing their important contribution in migration research, at the moment, there are two main streams of work on methodological nationalism that can be identified: First, the theoretical work dealing with the question whether we are (or not) confronted with methodological nationalism at the level of “grand theory” in sociological thinking (cf. Chernilo 2006). Although on these grounds it does not seem convincing to blame all grand social scientific theory to be hampered by methodological nationalism, it is yet undoubted that empirical migration research is still not able to deal adequately with the problems that are connected to territorial methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).

Therefore – and this is the second large stream of discussion to be identified at the moment within migration research connected to the troubles of methodological nationalism – a growing number of migration scholars are carrying out empirical and methodological work in which they are trying to forge out new ways of doing meaningful research without going into the trap of methodological nationalism. In doing so, varying approaches have been developed: Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Caglar are arguing for example for the incorporations of scalar theories within transnational migration research (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2009; Glick Schiller, Caglar and Guldbransen 2006). Their main argument is that differences in scalar politics are playing decisive roles for transnational migration that has not yet been incorporated. Nina Glick Schiller is furthermore advocating research approaches in which the selection of the researched groups is not *ex ante* based on ethnic differentiations but research subjects are selected through the presence in a locality (Glick Schiller 2007). A comparable approach is also applied by Janine Dahinden (2009), although in a social network analysis. In this venue, Dahinden combines qualitative and quantitative methods in order to answer the question whether transnationalism is a relevant factor in the everyday lives of migrants and non-migrants living in a small city in the French part of Switzerland.

Speaking about methodological nationalism in a broader sense, also the contributions of cosmopolitanism come to one’s mind. This approach stresses the mechanisms and consequences of our national framing of social scientific thinking: Ulrich Beck (2002) describes a “national gaze” of sociologists by making it clear in his conception of a cosmopolitan sociology that the “national gaze” is hampering us to adopt research methodologies that are able to live up to the exigencies of a globalised social world. Considering migration research, these cosmopolitical considerations also hint to the need to go beyond the nation-state as the main unit of analysis.

The empirical evidence – or why migration research needs a fresh spatial methodological impulse

For migration research the discussed methodological limitations mean that we are unable to perceive the full range of migrant experiences and living circumstances – something that has been made clear in the many studies of transnational migration carried out during the last two decades. Although so many migration scholars and other sociologists have realised and described the problem of methodological nationalism, interestingly enough the resources provided by social scientific thinking about spatiality¹ have not yet been recognised fully by most of the contributions within the debate on methodological nationalism. One of the prominent exceptions here are the works of Ayse Caglar (2006) and Nina Glick Schiller (2007) or the works of Thomas Faist (2004) and Ludger Pries (2008).

The dominant ignorance of spatial concepts within the debate on methodological nationalism fits well into the whole picture: Sociological migration research as such has a history of ignoring the social dimension of the spatial (see Scheibelhofer *forthc.*). This is surprising as the social phenomenon of migration is so obviously and directly connected to questions of moving and migrating. Yet, the question why the spatial has been mostly ignored in migration research might also be explained through the naturalising effects of the spatial: As well as in our everyday lives as in most migration research, the space seems to be objectively given, not changeable by human beings. This view of space has been named a container-like understanding (the expression is going back on Albert Einstein) or an essentialist view on spatiality. Although such a take on space is quite practical in everyday matters, social scientific scholars have shown us already that it is not a theoretically solid position to be taken on (here, one might think of the works of Georg Simmel, Pierre Bourdieu, David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, and John Urry).

¹ The notion of spatiality has been introduced by Henri Lefebvre in order to make it clear that we are speaking here about a social phenomenon of the spatial.

Introducing sociospatial theories into migration research

On a way to a space-sensitive sociology of migration that might be one step in order to overcome methodological nationalism, it is therefore not necessary to invent a sociology of space and/or spatial theories from scratch – because such research and thinking is well established since many years. Thus, what is needed is – what I call – a “sensibility for the spatial” by taking in the already existing differentiations concerning spatiality. Going back to Georg Simmel (1992), we already know since many years that space is socially constructed, that it is a capacity of our mind (“Verstand”) and that the spatial is not a pre-given condition for human beings. Yet, there is also a material component as well in spatiality. How these two aspects of the spatial might be integrated in social theory has been discussed by thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu (1991), Henri Lefebvre (1991) and David Harvey (1994). During the last decades, a sociology of space has been established especially in Germany, involving names such as Martina Löw (2001), Markus Schroer (2006) or Helmuth Berking (2006). Also in migration studies, spatial theory has found some resonance especially in the context of transnationalism (here, Ludger Pries, Thomas Faist, Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Caglar can be named as some of the few migration scholars who are including socio-spatial theories in their analyses, for an overview see Scheibelhofer *forthc.*). Here especially concepts from political sociologists such as Neil Brenner (1997) on scaling and re-scaling processes have led to interesting results. Lately though, these authors have revised their take on sociospatial relations claiming that the “inherently polymorphic, multidimensional character of sociospatial relations are not adequately represented by working with scalar approaches exclusively (cf. Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008).

The present presentation does not provide a platform for giving a tour d`horizon of the history of sociospatial thinking. Just to give an idea in which fresh ways we can look at migration phenomena by adopting a space-sensible approach, I would like to introduce some basic differentiations for spatiality as well as a description of the analytic levels in migration research in which a spatially sensitive research methodology could work in order to overcome methodological nationalism.

Based on the review of spatial literature, I suggest elsewhere (Scheibelhofer *forthc.*) that it is useful for migration research to differentiate three main spatial concepts – as well as in the empirical world as in social scientific research (and therefore, also in migration research):

- First, the essentialist understanding of space already mentioned above;
- second a relational understanding of space and

- third a constructivist take on spatiality.

An essentialist understanding of space is characterised by the materialistic, given character of the space. It is not perceived as dependent on human action or interpretation. A relational approach is based on the assumption that the human mind is a significant factor to be taken into consideration. The spatial is constituted through social relations, be it that they are acted upon or imagined. A constructivist perspective is contesting the notion of spatiality as having both: a material and a social dimensions. Space is perceived as solely constructed by human beings, e.g. through communication (cf. Pott 2002).

A space-sensible methodological approach in migration research – dimensions and examples

Having differentiated three differing concepts of space, we can also see that in everyday life we are forming space through our actions but that our actions are at the same time formed by spatial arrangements that we have learned to perceive as given and “natural”. These arrangements include a neighbourhood, a landscape, regions and of course nation-states. Classic migration research (and many migration studies up to nowadays) though is not reflecting this dual spatial character of the social and thus cannot question the consequences of the (implicit) spatial concepts.

Besides the level of everyday action, we can differentiate the level of social scientific analysis. The social scientific reasoning is carried out under different circumstances compared to everyday reasoning and acting. For example, the pressure to act is a characteristic for everyday life – yet the researcher is not under the pressure while analysing his/her data. Besides the dimensions of everyday life and scientific reasoning, I suggest to differentiate a third dimension on which a space-sensible approach is working: The dimension of social systems. On this level, we can discern mechanisms and regulations that are emphasising one or another spatial concept.

The following table gives examples for the differing dimensions if one introduces the three main types of spatial concepts described above – essentialist, relational and constructivist – with the three levels of analysis – the everyday life of actors, the social scientific work and the social systems:

Table: Dimensions of space-sensible migration research

		Levels of analysis		
		Actors	Scientists	Social systems
Spatial Concepts	Essentialist	Identity is territorially bounded, defined and stable in itself even in migration	Territorial methodological nationalism influencing all stages of research	national laws of immigration and occupation; Regulating mechanisms of welfare state regimes enforcing national borders
	Relational	Social relations are key factors for the understanding of migratory movements (e.g. within existing family networks)	Social relations as starting point for the analysis of migrant realities (transnational migration research)	'Loop holes' within migratory and occupational national regimes, resulting in pendular migration, migrant strategies of households
	Constructivist	Meaning of territoriality and place-bound ascriptions are seen as social accomplishments	Space is strictly defined as communication or as socially produced	Scalar implications of political/economic interventions on regions and their migration history

In the following, I will concentrate my discussion on the level of social scientific analysis. Yet, the table shows that also the dimensions of everyday actions and social systems can be questioned along the lines of which spatial concepts are the basis in varying situations. Such a questioning of spatiality may help us identifying limitations described within the discourse on methodological nationalism.

The effects of an essentialised and unreflected understanding of spatiality in social scientific migration research can be traced through the entire research process. Of course this spatial ignorance resonates also within the social scientific results produced. In the following I will give some examples for spatial ignorance within migration studies and its effects:

Already formulating research questions we are having difficulties not to think within the categories of national groups/ethnic entities or regional ascriptions. Descriptions of research projects, mostly start out with a specific ethnic group and their social practices, integration indi-

ces, family structures etc. in another given place (cf. the critique of Glick Schiller 2007). Thus, we are used to frame our questions already with given notions of groups – here, Rogers Brubaker might come to one's mind with his critique on groupism in migration research (Brubaker 2007) which of course also resonates in our results we obtain by studies that go about in such a way.

Most studies in migration research are thus concentrated on the effects of migration/integration or trajectories within one nation-state. Internationally comparative studies also do exist and indeed they are leaving the framing of the nation state – yet they do so without opening up the national containers as well as they are mostly operating with data sets provided by national administrative bodies with their specific limitations as described by Adrian Favell (2005).

Furthermore, usually studies develop methods of data gathering that are reflecting our everyday, essentialist understanding of space and even in qualitative studies we are used to ask questions, e.g.: How did you experience your emigration from country X to country Z? What are the differences for you when living in place A and not anymore in place B? Or in the context of quantitative projects, we are typically comparing data that has been collected on a national level – often not for a specific research project but by administrative bodies following their administrative duties (Favell 2005; Weiss 2002).

And after all, we are interpreting our data – qualitative or quantitative data alike – on the basis of our (implicit) everyday spatial assumptions. Then, we find studies for example studies focussing on the situation of “secondos” in which the researchers are having difficulties understanding ambiguities in the interviews collected, e.g. that this second generation of immigrants is feeling like living in two worlds. Of course, some of the interviewees are experiencing these mixes and differences within their life worlds as difficulties. Others though are also having experiences of “in-betweenness” or “otherness”, but they are not necessarily experiencing these “melange-effects” (Pieterse 1998) as negative. Yet, many migrant scholars still have difficulties perceiving these nuances – and therefore cannot analyse the social circumstances and consequences of positive states of “in-between-ness”. Thus, we are finding studies such as the one of Oliver Hämmig (2000), who is interpreting every instance of mixed social relations of the secondos he studied (young Turkish young people in Switzerland) as failed integration into a Swiss nation.

So, we see that our implicit spatial conceptions that are most of the time essentialist, are leading us to false assumptions and therefore often we produce results that are not reflect the social world we wanted to study. This is most obvious when we look at the results of

transnational studies – we are risking to miss out migrant life worlds and social relations that are not “contained” by our units of analysis and our units of thinking.

Yet, there are not only studies in migration research that use an essentialist understanding of space but also those that use a relational one. Such studies start out with the hypotheses that the social relations – imagined or acted upon – are the basis for migration and are significant for the understanding of the everyday life of migrants (cf. for example transnational migration research).

Conclusions

A space-sensitive approach to migration research thus can help to

- reflect our spatial conceptions as social researchers during all stages of research and thus identify troubles of methodological nationalism early on;
- adopt research strategies and research methods that are adequate for the research questions pursued in a given project (cf. the works of Nina Glick Schiller who is starting out in one of her studies by snow-balling to search for respondents or introducing graphic designs into interviews in order to study the social relations without enforcing *ex ante* the national as the relevant unit);
- question the circumstances, power-relations and consequences of the (implicit) spatial concepts adopted by the actors studied; also, social systems and institutions are enhancing specific spatial concepts (and on this basis inclusion and exclusion is based on).

To make it even clearer: It is not my argument here that we necessarily need to adopt specific spatial methodologies (Sturm 2000) in order to overcome methodological nationalism in migration research, but that we think about the spatial as another dimension of the social that has to be deconstructed by migration research – very much along the lines with gender or race as categories put into question during the last decades of sociological research.

Markus Schroer points in his sociological thinking to the fact that spatial arrangements are also power arrangements so that they fulfil specific social functions. The same is true for the limitations identified within the discourse of methodological nationalism. Put in this way, spatial arrangements and societal concepts of space have to be included in our interests in order to conduct meaningful sociological analyses also in migration research – very much

along the lines with the argument Doreen Massey has made with her concept of “power geometries” (Massey 1994).

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