

***Heterogeneity, Borders and Thresholds – How Mobile Transnational Professionals Order the World.***

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# **HETEROGENEITY, BORDERS AND THRESHOLDS – HOW MOBILE TRANSNATIONAL PROFESSIONALS ORDER THE WORLD.**

*Magdalena Nowicka*

**Abstract** Do transnational mobile professionals live in a borderless world? How do they make sense of heterogeneity that they experience during their travel? These questions are central to this paper which investigates the ‘invisible’ boundaries in the world that is dominated by global networks of infrastructure and in which nation-state borders lose their relevance to individuals. On the basis of interviews with mobile professionals the paper discusses the condition of borderlessness that they claim to experience as well as their strategies of managing the difference and asks how they distinguish between ‘here’ and ‘there’ and ‘us’ and ‘them’. The paper focuses on their mundane activities to show that their discontinuity marks boundaries between particular spaces.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Mobility and migration – the more or less frequent or permanent movement between two or more geographical locations – are often understood as border-crossing phenomena. In the following paper I focus on how transnational professionals who travel frequently and who are voluntary migrants experience crossing of nation-state and cultural boundaries. Drawing on the empirical study in the group of employees of an international organization I ask how they make sense of heterogeneity of the world and distinguish between ‘here’ and ‘there’ and ‘us’ and ‘them’. My attention is directed on ‘invisible’ boundaries in the time of global spread of networks of infrastructures and people.

Since the establishment of the nation-state system worldwide, borders have been associated with nation-state borders and the movement with a change between container spaces of nation-states. Mobility and migration is also considered a movement between spaces of culture and identity, between the areas of (cultural) familiarity and difference. Mobility and migration establish a specific form of interaction between these spaces. As Simmel (1950) pointed, a mobile person – the Stranger – is someone who belongs to both spaces, the one from which he comes and the one in which he arrives; its physical presence enforces setting boundaries between those who belong and those who do not belong to a particular group occupying these spaces.

The more current reflection is a bit different one – a wanderer as a modern figure is seen as someone who questions boundaries, who changes their meaning and makes them obsolete (Bauman 1993). The recent literature focusing on global mobility and more generally on globalization turns thus towards the unmapping of the borders. This is due to the recognition that the range of space, culture, identity, human communities and political and institutional borders are disjunctive; they are not congruent (Ferguson and Gupta 1997; Malkki 1997; Fortier 1999; Ahmed 2003). The (unspoken) assumption of congruent boundaries and territorial borders has been characteristic to methodological nationalism (Martins 1974, 276; Smith 1983, 26; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Beck 2004a, b). In the national order of things (Malkki 1997) the world looks like on the painting of Modigliani: “neat flat surfaces are clearly separated from each other, it is generally plain where one begins and another ends, and there is little if any ambiguity or overlap” (Gellner 1983, 140). This scheme is questioned by the increased mobility of information, knowledge,

people, images and objects traveling along the networks of infrastructure – “scapes” (Urry 2000). Under the condition of transnational migration and internationalization of social networks people do not simply belong to a single, territorially bound cultural group. They may develop multiple belongings; also their actions are lifted out from particular local contexts (Giddens 1990). Consequently, more attention needs to be given to diverse boundaries which can badly be visualized by drawing on a map and which are not clearly marked by symbols like gates or toll bars.

A rich literature has dealt with various networks that undermine nation-state divisions, and their ability to effectively structure social relations (Elkins 1995; Castells 1996; Albrow 1998; Creveld 1998; Zürn 1998; Grande 2001). These authors drew attention to the material (immobile) infrastructures (Urry 2000; Sassen 2002; 2005) or investigated from a macro-perspective of entire mobile social groups (Castells 1996) or social movements (Smith, Chattfield and Paquucco 1997; Held and McGrew 2000). The voluminous literature on international and transnational migration provides us with examples of how migrants act across borders (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Basch et al. 1994; Martinez 1998). A number of studies have focused on practices of small-scale (labor) mobility within border regions (de Gijzel et al. 1999). Some other focus on everyday cross-border activities of non-migrants (van der Velde 2000), others are interested in how the inhabitants of borderlands perceive and contest the nation-state borders (Mainhoff 2002). Recently, researchers investigated how migrants contest the borders of Europe and how their mobility leads to a creation of the so called border regimes (Shamir 2005; Transit Migration 2007).

What all these studies have in common is their interest in nation-state borders and how they are contested in various forms of mobility. Without neglecting the role of nation-state borders and the importance of the research investigating into their fluctuating meanings, I dedicate this paper to the group of people who are functionally disembedded from nation-states and to whom nation-states borders are perhaps irrelevant. My sample consisted of mobile employees of an international organization (further referred to as the IO), which is a part of the United Nations system. Specific to this group is its functional disembeddedness from nation states and inclusion in the exterritorialized organization with over hundred offices, with its own labor market and well developed independent communication systems. When migrating they do not change between different nation-states, but they remain (usually even until retirement) within exterritorial structures.

I conducted in-depth problem oriented interviews with thirteen individuals and analysed them using the paradigm of the Grounded Theory. It offers a set of useful methods for empirically based theory building, in which the theoretical concepts are inductively derived from the investigation of a phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Glaser 1978, 1998, 2001). It requires from the researcher openness towards the empirical phenomenon, sensibility, and creativity instead of relying on any existing approach or theoretical concepts.

In the sample, there were six women and seven men aged between 31 and 62. Nine people were married, two of them for the second time. There was one widow and one single person in the sample. One interviewee indicated having a steady life partner and another having a girlfriend. Ten people have children; five of them have (also) adult children who do not live with them anymore. They are all highly skilled employees; they have higher education and most of them completed studies with an M.A. or M.Sc. degree. They undertake diverse tasks related to economic analyses, project management or team and office management.

Little is known about the transnational life of mobile professionals. So far, the research has focused on their professional networks and how they transmit knowledge between global cities (Beaverstock 2005). Few authors gave

attention to small scale private connections and friendships among mobile professionals (Kennedy 2004) as well as the networking practices of mobile researchers with the help of new information and communication technologies which connect places and people otherwise divided by spatial boundaries (Berker 2003). More generally, Manuel Castells claimed the rise of a (borderless) space of flows in which global mobile elites take a privileged role (Castells 1996).

I described elsewhere how they choose their next place of residence (Nowicka 2006a, b) and how they locate their homes (Nowicka 2007). One of the findings from the interviews was that in no case were the essentials of a place decisive regarding the destination of the move but rather education or employment opportunities, with a large dose of accidentality in resettlement process. This draws the attention to the question if and how they perceive some places as different and similar and how they draw boundaries between spaces to which they travel. More generally, my paper is also concerned with the question of spatial ordering of difference.

My paper proceeds in three parts. I begin a bit unconventionally with a description of what I want to term ‘the condition of borderlessness’ to then unfold my theoretical argument. Drawing on the empirical material I can show that mobile professionals link a border with various kinds of barriers to interaction and mobility. I suggest that a claim of a borderless world is a result of a particular understanding of a border but one should not be easily satisfied with this interpretation. I critically engage with this recognition while discussing the theoretical points made in geography and globalization studies. Thereby I tie into the opening remarks of this paper to present the second empirical focus of my research, which is investigating how geographically mobile individuals experience and manage heterogeneity of the world.

I carry on distinguishing between how the interviewees perceive places as different, and then I focus on their discourses on people. I introduce the concept of a region to discuss another aspect, which is how my interview partners distinguish three spaces: Africa, Europe and the USA.

In the third and last part of the paper I ask how these differences are assigned to territories and whether this spatial order overlaps with the nation-state world order. This is suggested by the frequent referring to national labels; however, the strategies of managing the differences between people and places lead rather to de-territorializing of differences. With the help of globally spanning “scapes” (Urry 2000), the networks of modern infrastructure, they are able to regulate their exposure to these differences. However, these networks are vulnerable and often fail, enforcing new strategies of handling the difference. In turn, the interviewees perceive these places and spaces as different, in which they undertake different activities, in which their daily practices are different. This leads me to the thesis that there is another type of boundaries that divides spaces. I propose to term them ‘thresholds’. They mark the discontinuity of mundane activities of mobile professionals. Concluding, I revise the thesis of a borderless world of mobile professionals, and consider more general implications of the findings for the social theory of globalization.

## **THE CONDITION OF BORDERLESSNESS**

Mobility and migration is a common experience to my interview partners who all have moved out of their country of origin and settled down in a second, third, or fourth country at all continents, Australia excepted. As a result of specific employment conditions in the IO, many swap assignments every three to five years, and this, in turn, often related to change in place of residence. Sabah<sup>1</sup>, for example, has moved 12 times between the countries. All of the

interviewees have also made experience with short-term mobility from the fixed place of residence. Frequency and duration of business travel vary within the sample, dependent on destination, work arrangements, stage of a project, personal situation, and tasks to be performed. The interviewees combine travel to different destinations. They travel for about a week to one country, then go on to another. Such a trip then takes three to four weeks. Depending on the year, Martin, for example, travels six to ten times per year. Ann used to travel about one hundred seventy days a year, and Diego was away from home for at least two weeks each month.

In general, the primary reason for the first change of place of residence was the wish to undertake studies or work assignment. They were also the first migrants in their families, and did not join any friends or relatives abroad. It can be concluded that the interviewees primarily chose their new residence in the light of the facilities available, for example a university or a company (see also Nowicka 2006a, chapter 4). The individual decision about further resettlements was driven by new professional aims or personal matters (the education opportunities for children, security for the family). Over the course of life, all of these motives occur, and create the mobility career of the individuals. The last but not least motive to change the place of residence is curiosity about new places, people, and culture. This factor remains, however, somewhat in the sphere of wishes and loose plans for the future, for example retirement. In general, mobility as resettlement is about taking opportunities, being in the right place at the right time – this is the clear message in all the interviews. The location of an assignment is secondary, both in terms of an organization and a geographical location. ‘Grabbing the chance’ is a part of this general life-plan, and also makes it mobile. The interviewees assume that discontinuity, such as change of job or residence, is an integral part of a person’s biography.

My interview partners describe this condition of extensive mobility as “(living) in such a world practically without borders” (I12, 52).<sup>2</sup> They refer at this point primarily to a border as a temporal and economic constraint, which could negatively influence their mobility. They equalize a border with nation-states borders from which the embeddedness in the IO liberates them. The complex IO-system supports his professional mobility in many aspects: the in-house travel agent helps arranging for visa and other travel documents, as well as hotel bookings and plane tickets. The internal health department, to which an automatic notification of the traveler’s itinerary is sent directly by the travel agent, reminds him of any necessary injections, informs about region-specific diseases, and advises on medications. The IO’s policies do not forbid combining business and private travels as long as this does not increase the overall cost, so most of the mobile employees “drop by” (I9, 82) to see their families and friends on the way to or from a project site. A special mobility points system rewards frequent travelers with a sponsored ticket and hotel accommodation for an accompanying spouse, usually every one and a half year. All these measures make frequent travel over large distances easier and cheaper.

Moreover, other types of restrictions, which are territorially bounded, are not applicable to the IO staff members and their families. The IO undertakes certain functions of the nation-states. Its employees are not subject to any state taxation policy or social insurance system and they are paid on a net-of-income-tax basis. In addition, the IO’s property is by law immune from search, requisition, or any other form of seizure by executive or legislative action. The IO’s communication, property and employees have a special status equal to one of the country officials. They enjoy immunities and privileges, for example they are not subject to national immigration restrictions, alien registration

requirements and national service obligation. The employees are included in the IO's own retirement and health care (for more comp. Nowicka 2004).

Further, my interview partners relate this borderless world to the easiness of resettlement:

“(It is such a world without borders...) It is a different rule, not like in the nineteenth century when you were going to America, packing everything on the ship, and the goodbye scenes were heart breaking because you were going there forever. Now you go to fix something, to move things on and then you move on.” (I12, 52)

The described easiness of mobility certainly relates to the IO's institutional structure. The IO's supports resettlement of its employees and their families. For example, various associations within the IO advice on how to deal with the differences between the respective countries, they provide information on national educational systems, living conditions, cultural habits, religious beliefs and practices. They offer guidance to spouses and partners with their job search in the destination town, inform on issues related to housing, childcare and schooling, mediate between the residing and newly coming families. In this way, many country-specific customs, which could be experienced as a barrier to accommodation, are irrelevant to the IO's employees. A resettlement from one to another country is a matter of logistics and not an act of border-crossing. Finally, as Atanas says, there exist no borders the passing of which would mean a definite and irreversible change in life. Importantly, one can move back as easily as he or she moved away.

When my interview partners say that they do not have the impression that borders exist, they also equalize a border with a restriction in interaction between people. Atanas explains:

“(...) at least in my work I don't have the impression that the borders exist. One day I am at this continent, the other day at the other continent. Especially our children do not have any awareness of spatial limitations; they cannot imagine that you cannot travel somewhere. If there is a place on the map so you can get there and get in contact with someone there, spend the time together.” (I12, 51)

There are several aspects here, which all relate to the use of new information, communication and transportation technologies. Firstly, the borderless world is a world in which distance matters less, in which some effects of distance can be reduced (Massey 2005, 90). The borderless world is “a world at reach” (Brose 2004, 7), a world of global presence, a world in which simultaneity of physical presence is achieved with the means of distance communication. Secondly, a borderless world “at reach” is also the one in which visuality plays a key role. A single world, the globe, is imagined as a single (potential) meeting place, a place of co-existence. Thirdly, a borderless world is a possible one, in which movement and communication can be realized at any movement in the future, a world of ‘space of possibilities’.

For the described condition of borderlessness the temporal aspects are as important as the spatial ones. The borderless world is, on the one hand such, one in which territorial borders become to large extent irrelevant; on the other hand, in the borderless reality the negative effects of geographical distance are mitigated by a technical possibility of participating in events that take place simultaneously at the far end of the world.

## THE CONDITION OF HETEROGENEITY

The reality of a borderless world is, I suggest, just one side of the coin. It is true as far as a border is associated with movement in geographical space and the disembeddedness from nation-states with their territorially limited systems that determine the life of people within them. It is also true for the use of information and communication technologies that constitute global simultaneity. However, there are three points which need to be critically engaged with. Firstly, the recent studies of globalization, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism draw attention to the fact that the increased global mobility of people, ideas and images questions the nation-state cultural divides in a way that requires a steady work of managing boundaries (Beck, Bonß and Lau 2004). Although the established divides are blurred, this is not a durable condition. It is immanent to social life to erect new divides; their effects are the empirical question.<sup>3</sup>

In geography – and this is the second aspect worth noting - the recent border studies has turned towards the investigation of institutionalization of differences in space (Van Houtum and Van Nearsen 2002, 125). Borders, and perhaps the contemporary borders more than ever, express difference; they differentiate space and create its uniqueness (Van Houtum and Strüver 2002, 21). The very concept of difference, as applied by Derrida, holds within it an imagination of the temporal and spatial, of a process of differentiating. Thus, the attention of social science should focus on border-creating, on a part of a broader (historical) process of spatial ordering of heterogeneous elements, and the question should be what kind of borders exists, what they divide, whom and what they serve, and how stable they are.

Thirdly, we need to engage closer with the temporal dimension of bordering processes. As globalization is referred to an increase in cross-border (internationalization), open-border (liberalization) and trans-border relations (uncoupling of social relations from territorial frameworks) (Scholte 1997), globalization studies focused predominantly on spatial aspects of social processes, on their re-scaling. Not only the idea of spatial re-scaling is problematic (Amin 2002) but it also neglects the temporal aspects. The processes of bordering should rather be seen in terms of negotiation (Massey 2005, 179), and their conceptualization must necessarily involve the dynamics of their rearticulating.

As differentiation can be seen as a principle of ordering in space, focus on differences seems to be the right alternative in inquiry of borders and the conditions of extensive mobility. However, I'd like to modify the question slightly. I undertake in this aspect the critique and the suggestion of Doreen Massey (2005, 53) that the specification of difference often entails the postulate of a single coherent totality and constitutive 'aside' or 'exterior'. She pleads for a positive multiplicity, for recognition of multiple trajectories. Massey's point is about the simultaneous coexistence of heterogeneity.

It is not the aim of this paper to discuss how this idea corresponds to the necessity of border management strategies proposed in the writings of Beck. However, there is a certain potential to use both these claims in my research. I draw on Beck's claim of "inclusion of the Other" (2004a, 134) to critically engage it as a form of such positive, irreducible multiplicity. Cosmopolitan reality is nothing else but accepting the otherness of the other, transcending the division between us and them (Beck 2004a, 143). In my understanding, and by drawing on Massey (2005, 5) it is important to accept that the 'other' is never going to become *like us*, that the 'other' has its own history and its own trajectory and thus its own unique future.

Now, if we take all the above points seriously, we need to investigate how mobile individuals manage heterogeneity. The term ‘management’ draws attention to the processual aspects, to negotiation of borders in a non-rhetoric way. The focus is thus on daily practices of ordering. Management of heterogeneity (here I consciously favor the term ‘heterogeneity’ to the term ‘difference’ which is about differentiating from something or somebody) implies a kind of ordering which is not necessarily exclusive. Surely, in other contexts it is a well justified question of exclusionary practices, for example in the context of the European Union’ immigration policy and borderlands regimes (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2001; Transit Migration 2007). My interview partner can, however, be a more suitable group to ask first who is experienced by them as the ‘other’ and why and how they organize spaces. Because of their embeddedness in the system of international aid, they supposedly overtake the popular discourse on globalization as inevitable processes in which all people in all countries undergo a single trajectory of development. My interview partners are also expected to be especially frequently exposed to diverse groups, individuals and locations of different cultures. They are also exposed to a tension of territorial belonging (an example is the departmental structure of the IO which is based on national territorial descriptions – there is a European department, Asian, Latin American, etc.; the countries are the subject of the international aid provided by the IO, not the individuals, and so on) and mechanisms of de-territorialisation (as described in the previous section).

### **Different places**

In order to explore how the geographically mobile people experience border-crossing and how they set new boundaries, I looked at how they construct the divide between ‘us’ and the ‘other’ as well as ‘here’ and ‘there’. The direct stories on belonging were absent from the interviews; the interviewees have often problems to locate themselves in geographical terms, for example to indicate, where their home is (Nowicka 2007). This observation led me to focus on the “invisible difference” and narratives of distinction. I first looked at how my interviewees apply the word ‘different’ and later analysed the concept of ‘difference’, and examined how these descriptions depend on geographical location. The words ‘difference’ and ‘different’ appeared in the interviews very often yet hardly any other words are as imprecise as them. They are employed in relation to countries and places as a label or a replacement of a name; a religion, which is not dominant or not shared by the interviewer, or as a synonym of Islam; and people. Sometimes ‘different’ stands for individual or group characteristics, is a synonym of a group inhabiting a place. It is even more ambiguous what ‘different culture’ denotes.

I first focus on how the interviewees describe various places in relation to each other. Here, I could identify four main types of difference: deterrent, trivial, acceptable and exotic. The interviewees often point to these differences, which they consider factors influencing their decision on mobility. These are for example armed conflicts or high criminality. Next to war, bad hygienic conditions limit interviewees’ mobility. Also political regimes that are restrictive, for example on religious freedom or women positioning, make certain places different than the rest of the world. These are deterrent difference between places. Another type is trivial differences, for example the climate. In fact, the interviewees care a lot about the differences in weather between places. The food is not without importance too, for example in those places where food or water poisoning is rather common. There are also acceptable differences to which the interviewees adapt. These are for example poor material infrastructure in a country is such a distinguishing factor. Most interviewees talk about infrastructure that is different from what they are now used to, either in their home

country or in their previous or current place of residence: “Not better, not worse but different” (I4, 41). Different in this context means unfamiliar, unknown. Social networks in each place also make a difference to the individuals because the type and content of social network determine how one’s life in a place looks.

The last type is sites of exotic differences. One reason why the interviewees want to travel is to experience something new and unusual. If they could not travel, they would miss “the smell, the food, the air, the people”, because “the world consists of so many different sides, to be able to see a few of them is enriching” (I9, 132). In the view and experience of my interviewees, interestingly, difference is a rarity:

“(…) my own experience moving across these very different countries has been that on the one hand how similar they are and on the other hand that as similar as they appear to be on 95 percent of the issues how different they can be on the other five percent. So that’s the very interesting thing. Yes, they are different, yes, they are not as different one thinks they are, ‘cause on most things they tend to be quite similar but for that small percentage that are different, differences are big.” (I10, 46)

When the interviewees are asked to say something about their experiences with mobility, they usually start their story either by complaining about the difficulties and problems related to extensive mobility, or they describe the most unusual and surprising things that have happened to them while traveling. When they are asked about their travel destinations, they first list the places that impressed them, in a positive or negative way: for example, countries where they were sick, or those they liked most, and the most unusual ones. Atanas describes his experiences in Central Asia the following way:

“(Mobility) is surely very difficult because of all the tiring things, because one has to sit in one position more than ten hours (on the plane), there are no great attractions on board, and a relieve from this monotony are, when being already there, the excursions to the sites, a kind of safari, when I spend hours in a land rover or in a Jeep driving along the steps and the desert, sleep in a tent among the shepherds and walking there from one place to another, this is a kind of relief, entertainment which I have there (…) There are huge distances and to control my project I have to drive one and a half day, then sometimes I have to horse ride or walk. But I say: this is the nice part, you can forget for a time about civilization, places, hotels, airports, computers and simply for a short time immerse in the life of people who live there and simply disconnect from everything.” (I12, 76-78)

Also Rainer recalls on Africa as “a very exotic place”, where there was no road leading to his house, and where they found snakes inside of the house (I2, 107). Both stories concentrate on a combination of unfamiliar nature (desert, snakes, and insects), housing and infrastructure (no houses but tents, no roads or bad roads, no electricity, no toilets, etc.). Both stories were positive; the differences they came across enriched them. Other interviewees encountered differences that they consider rather challenging, for example “troublesome” Albania, the “Muslim country”, unfamiliar, where people are “extremely different from the European”, mostly due to mafia-like family associations (I6, 46). Similarly, the interviewees experience Russia as a country that “cannot be described rationally” (I11, 90) because of such extreme inequalities and poverty and contrasts between the modern cities and crime in the province (I11, 94-98). The tremendous contrast between rich and poor also surprised Tolga:

“When I went to Abidjan, I felt like…like miniature Manhattan…the buildings, so developed and then I saw all these shadows, in the hotel I asked a receptionist to take me to their bazaars to see what people are saying how they’re behaving and it is completely different, different world.” (I5, 36)

Sometimes, the “wow! effect” is induced by the gap between expectations before travel and experience in the place: Tolga did not expect to see skyscrapers in Abidjan, nor European architecture in Cape Town, nor such extreme poverty in Latin America (I5, 33). She had associated such poverty with Africa (I5, 37). The exotic character of a difference is a function of contrast, when comparisons are made between the expectations and the reality, or the contrast is within a judged object (extreme inequalities in Russia) or between two objects (Europe and Africa).

### **Different people**

A part of discovering the differences is discovering new people and how they think, what they do, and how they do it. My interviewees say that both recognitions – that somewhere else people think and act similarly to them or differently from them – constitute the sense of mobility. When traveling, all the interviewees have contact with the local population, and they get to know it by observing the behavior of people in hotels, shops, on the streets, etc. or by talking to certain individuals: their business partners, local office staff, taxi drivers, hotel personnel, and sometimes also local inhabitants who are their own friends. However, they have normally little time to interact with people from outside of the working environment. Despite this deficiency, they work out their own opinion of the local population rather quickly. Such opinions contain statements about things that the interviewees find unusual or different. For example, Rodrigo thinks that people in Africa mistrust their governments (I13, 46), Ann thinks that people in Poland in the early nineties were sad and tired (I11, 34), Diego believes that Saudis are afraid of losing the homogeneity of their society (I10, 50), and Ludmila considers all people in Ukraine to be tall and handsome (I7, 121). The scope of factors that are considered in such statements is very broad, from appearance to attitudes. They base on observation of particular individuals, and they are projected on to the population of the country: the Ukrainians are handsome, the African mistrust the government, the Polish were sad, etc. Yet the interviewees do not code differences into nationalities by the simple ascription of certain qualities to certain nationalities. No Africans distrust the government because they are Africans but because the authorities have often betrayed their trust (I13, 48). The interviewees always try to justify the behavior of the group, by citing current circumstances, and the political and historical background, or economic situations. By providing a structural explanation of the difference, they de-naturalize these differences and they offer a powerful counter-argument to the notion that “others” are fundamentally different. At the individual level nationality plays no role. Most of the interviewees speak here of “chemistry” between people. Friends have names and personal histories, but no nationalities.

The interviewees had usually positive experiences with the local inhabitants, and they tend to project these experiences on to the whole group. For example, Rainer’s house personnel in Kenya were very friendly and children loving and he says that the Africans are friendly. The interviewees try to avoid negative descriptions of whole groups. Even if they have had negative experiences, they try to justify and excuse them, by stressing that such experiences related only to a particular person, and otherwise people in this place are nice. They distinguish thus two levels: that of individuals, and that of a collective. Similarly, when they arrive at a rather negative estimation of the local inhabitants, they also distinguish the two levels, and to temper their opinions about the group, they express the hope or suspicion that there are surely individuals who think and act differently from the whole group.

Two processes can be identified here: homogenizing and abstracting. In the first process, a whole group is seen as homogenous: the individual differences between its members are irrelevant, as the relevant differences are categorized only at the level of personal experience. In the second process, experiences and observations are changed into the abstract category of “culture”. Such statements as “it is also cultural thing” how people perform their work, “everywhere it is different” (I5, 87), or “in terms of culture I prefer to work in Europe” (I3, 142) are typical of this process. However, ‘culture’ appears here as an empty, meaningless category, which, similarly to the other strategies, neutralizes the differences, which become less relevant and less real. Such a category contains any practices such as eating routine or shopping habits, as well as the appearance, way of speaking, clothing, etc. (I7, 121). Abstracting has a clear function: what is abstract is no longer precarious. When abstracted, differences can be ignored.

### **Different regions**

In the previous section I have shown that the interviewees I spoke to give national labels to whole groups and that this labeling belongs to how they manage differences. In all the interviews that I conducted my partners used also labels such as ‘Africa’, ‘Europe’ and ‘the USA’. With these descriptions they seem to associate particular qualities to certain territories, and to draw on stereotypical opinions and associations much stronger than in the case of country-labels. The question I want to probe now is how are these regions drawn by the interviewees?

Social theory is well acquainted with two types of formations that are based on the categories of similarity and difference: regions and networks.<sup>4</sup> The first relates, for instance, to the familiar world of nation-states. Any (national) population is defined by enclosing similar elements within fixed boundaries and thus by suppressing – minimizing and marginalizing – individual differences between its members (Mol and Law 1994). Within the national scheme the questions who is different, who belongs and who does not belong to a group, is a matter of national cultural, legal and political assignment. Social and individual characteristics can be territorialized, and associated with a particular geographic entity. Beyond the context of nation-states, however, this principle of differentiation and constitution of regions may not be so obvious.<sup>5</sup> Geographical mobility of people and images may explode the territorial reference of qualitative attributes like skin color, language, etc. and enforce post-national constellations.

Almost all the interviewees have worked at some time in one of the African countries, and some of them lived there for a certain period of time. Their stories and their impressions are very similar: Africa is poverty, Africa is poor infrastructures, Africa needs foreign assistance, Africa has beautiful nature, Africa has very friendly people, and Africa is full of contrasts. All these conditions are clearly a challenge to my interviewees. They have an impression that “Africa is always beginning its way”, there is always “something that needs to be done”, and what needs to be done “is very important” (I13, 58). Africa does not progress. Africa always starts from the very beginning, and development has a very different meaning there, as the first step is only to survive, not to improve (I6, 111). Africa is not really a place you look forward to – unless you are able to find a piece of “Europe” there in terms of architecture and urbanism (I5).

Unlike Africa, Europe has a decent infrastructure: safe roads, comfortable hotels; unlike in Africa, one does not have to be afraid of food poisoning and can eat all fruits, even those that you cannot peel. In Europe, the countries are well organized (I13, 47). Europe is not dangerous and “no real adventure can happen there” (I1, 13). Travel and

work in Europe are easy to manage (I6, 22), and things always go their “normal way” (I1, 15). And Europe is small. There is however nothing definite about its borders.

One thing is clear: Europe is not the USA. Unlike the USA, Europe has a past; the quality of life is high: one works fewer hours and life after work is richer. The cloths are of good quality. European products have style (I6, 146). European society is not a consumption society, whereas the Americans “buy things to throw them away” (I6, 146). Europe is noble, but loses the technological race. Unlike in the USA, people in Europe are open-minded. Many provincial places in the USA are “far more conservative” than Europe (I11, 126). Materialism, arrogance, superficiality, ignorance and intolerance draw the borders of the USA. However, the USA also has its “European stains”, big cities which are more Europe-like (I5, 113).

When regionalizing, my interview partners do not care about individuals differences between someone who lives in Europe and in Africa; they do not bother to explain the condition they ascribe to these regions; they do not worry that their opinions could hurt an American citizen. Regionalism enforces easy associations, for example, between poor and uneducated, Africa and disease. Such associations may be mobilized to depict the population, exclude it or discriminate. They may take the form of stereotypes, for example, that of “a normal German” (Beck-Gernsheim 2004, 171), or Africans as unruly, chaotic, and hopeless (Comaroff 1993).

Regionalizing proceeds contradictory to the previously identified strategies of managing differences in direct encounters with the ‘others’. However, its effects may be similar: it homogenizes spaces and it offers tools to explain any individual differences by referring to apparent collective qualities which are the result of more general condition. Unlike other strategies, regionalizing ascribes people to territories.

## **ORDERING THE WORLD**

Frequent use of territorial and national terms (names of countries and nationalities) suggests that the mobile individuals order the world accordingly to the nation-state demarcation lines. Often, mobile individuals use national and territorial labels to distanciate themselves from the local inhabitants. In this case, national labels indeed stress the territorial bound of groups, the coherence and homogeneity of which is assumed. Such strategies are common towards the minorities, for example immigrant communities (Beck-Gernsheim 2004, 11, 13). In this way, territorial binding of a group, defined in categories of national, ethnic or cultural belonging, stresses its social exclusion or integration. On contrary, various strategies of managing the difference, for example by stressing the structural factors determining their existence, de-territorialize differences. Such differences, and thus divisions between ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘us’ and ‘them’ are also temporary – they can (potentially) disappear when certain conditions are fulfilled. For example, Ivory Cost may soon become just like the USA, as Abidjan is already more like New York than Africa.

The differences (and similarities) that the interviewees distinguish can be classified at two levels: social and structural. At the level of social difference, the mobile individuals employ various strategies to deal with it: reduce it to two categories (individual and collective), then generalize, homogenize, and finally abstract it into ‘culture’. Another strategy consists of justifying and explaining the differences between people by reference to the structural conditions to which they are exposed, for example, poverty. Although direct contact with other people is one of the main motivations for mobility, in the end, the differences between people do not play any important role in the mobile individuals’ decisions to travel to or settle in a place.

The opposite can be said of structural differences. Not only do they take on importance as an explanation for social differences, but they also play a key role in the choices of the mobile individuals. Structural differences shape life in the place: not only of the local population members but also of the mobile individuals who visit it. If there are no cinemas and theatres, one may take up gardening as a hobby. For the interviewees, what they do makes a difference more than where they are in the geographical sense. For example, they distinguish between places in which they live slower from places where their life is more hectic (I10, I3, I6, I13), in which they rather need to settle things up themselves or in which they rely on given infrastructures (I2, I11) and in which they struggle daily with badly functioning infrastructures or in which their activities go smoothly (I2, I11, I13).

Differences in lifestyles and activities are relevant in the places which the IO employees visit and in which they reside. There are places dominated by work activities, there are places dominated by family relations, there are places dominated by tourist activities, etc. If the existing infrastructure in place – housing, schools, shops, cinemas, etc – is similar to the one the interviewees know, in their home country and their place of residence, it allows for continuity in their everyday practices, for exercising routine behavior. Routine practices independent of geographical location are possible due to the standardized, globally spanning networks, the “scapes” (Urry 2000). These are the systems of transportation of people by air, sea, rail and other roads, diverse cables that carry telephone messages and computer information, etc. Such networks overcome the friction of (regional) space. Elsewhere I described how my informants regulate their exposure to heterogeneity (Nowicka 2006b). Mobile individuals have nowadays a choice to which extent they want to experience the local conditions and people or use the familiar, internationally spanning scapes. They can for example live within expatriate communities; they watch English speaking television, shop in supermarkets where they do not need to communicate a foreign language; they rather go to music concerts instead of theatre, or use fitness studios, hotels, airports or Internet, which render their actions independent of local conditions.

However, these and other networks often fail, i.e. they do not temper the negative effects of change of location, they do not enable smooth transition from one location to another. The interviewees give many examples of situations in which networks do not function. For example, one may stay overnight in a four-star chain hotel and eat in its luxurious restaurant, but that does not prevent the food from being poisoned. Most interviewees complain that staying in expensive and good hotels, in every place, does not protect them from water or food poisoning. One must then call a doctor, but, depending on location, doctors may be helpless, or proper medications cannot be found (I5, 37). Similarly, transportation networks quite often fail: the usual practice of taking a taxi from the airport to a hotel, which works well in the USA, can turn out to be dangerous in Africa or Albania, as the roads there are in very bad condition; and even if the roads are secure, taxi drivers cannot be trusted (I6, 40). In many cases, practices are adapted to failing networks: one always carries medications or avoids eating certain foods (I9, 98). When there is no school for expatriate children, the parents take over the teaching themselves (I2). In many situations, however, practices cannot be mutated: they must either be abandoned (one does not travel to countries where every drive from the airport to the hotel is a risk to life), or continued (one takes a taxi and hopes that no accident happens).

### **Thresholds**

The interviewees often refer to the infrastructure which quality or presence/absence distinguishes one place from another. Yet we also could see that in fact the infrastructures are relevant insofar they decide about the

discontinuity of mundane practices of the interviewees. It is not the regions and their border that can be identified, but thresholds. A threshold means a point of entering or beginning something, or a limit of reaction; it seems more appropriate than the term border, which has a clear territorial connotation, or boundary, which points to the symbolic character of the division. Threshold is more appropriate to describe the points of passage from one spatial entity to another. Thresholds can be identified in those places where the discontinuity of practices appears. The interview provided many examples of such discontinuities. Somewhere between Europe and Asia, there is a threshold, before which the mobile individuals do not have to carry any medications, can eat any fruit, and need not bother about being food poisoned. However, beyond it their daily practices have to change drastically: they must avoid certain food and hope that the medications they have brought from Europe are helping, so that they do not have to rely on local doctors.

These thresholds are of much greater relevance to the mobile professionals than the border of nation-states that they cross frequently without experiencing any effects of their lives. Their existence makes the mobile people question the reality of nation-state borders but also ask whether the world is divided into any other spaces, most notably that of cultural difference. After all, any 'space', like 'Africa' may undergo a change soon, which will make the structural conditions more similar to those that currently prevail in the space which is a reference of the comparison, for example someone's home country, let it be 'the USA'.

This opens new possibilities for overcoming the divides; it introduces new kind of dynamics. On the one hand, the reference to structural conditions underlying the divisions and mundane practice resulting from them refuses people and their space their own histories; they are included in the global trajectory, they are like anybody else despite being (currently, for a time being) different. On the other hand, their differentiation includes a great dynamics – they are potentially, and possibly, soon undergoing a change. It does not require any new network to be established, any new connection to a particular space to overcome the existing boundary; thresholds can be overcome when an existing network will function better than now.

Thresholds require the existence of networks. They allow for accessibility and connectivity without which any comparisons and also (dis)continuity of practices could not take place. Thresholds may therefore not be barriers comparable to less permeable nation-state borders, yet they do constitute a certain technological constraint to free mobility.

I have stated in the first part of this paper that the (national) borderless world relates, among others, to the condition of interaction: the nation-state borders are not a constraint to interaction between people because of well functioning technologies of long-distance communication. Thresholds are not such barriers to interaction as well; however, by stressing the difference in structural conditions between certain spaces, my interviewee partners distance themselves from their inhabitants. Different practices, life-styles and life conditions bring people away from each other. Friendships, and more general interaction, do not emerge because of physical closeness and they do not end because of physical distance; it is not accessibility or connectivity that decides on interaction between people but common interests and experiences. The interviewees reflect upon this in relation to their old school and university friends – they say, their mobile life-style is a reason why their friendships grew apart. Their old friends do not understand their current life-style and the experiences they make in foreign countries (I2, 81). The same can be said about potential interaction with other people, just with the difference that those are rejected the possibility of common life-style before the interaction took place.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The geographically mobile individuals whom I interviewed have a feeling they live in a borderless world. They meet few restrictions to resettlement and interaction with people who live in distant places; crossing of nation-state borders does not mean much to them as long as they are embedded in the transnational networks of the IO. The IO enables their mobility; its sense they see in discovering new people and how they are different or similar to them. However, differences are challenging to them and the mobile individuals develop multiple strategies of managing these differences: they abstract them, generalize and homogenize them; they classify differences at collective and individual level, and distinguish between social and structural differences. Some of these strategies de-territorialize social differences; yet the interviewees also distinguish regions using territorial ascription of social and structural differences. One type of difference – the structural one – turns out to be especially relevant to my informants because it decides upon their mundane activities. I proposed the term ‘threshold’ to describe spaces in which individuals’ practices alter. Referring to structural conditions of difference opens up a room for a change: someone who now lives in particular conditions which decide upon her or his difference may change (and become less different or alike) if these conditions change. No one is therefore essentially different, argue my informants.

In conclusion, I would like to draw a few more general remarks. The above identified condition of borderlessness is often considered a condition of cosmopolitanisation: the emergence of transnational forms of life and the proliferation of multiple cultures. Cosmopolis does not know borders. It also means that with the decreasing relevance of nation-state borders people are more aware of being a part of one-world, and they have increased chances to get in contact with other people. However, the interviews prove that the individuals develop many strategies which mitigate their interaction with foreign populations; at the same time, these strategies place all people in a common global framework. This involves the dialectic between recognizing the ‘other’ as different and refusing to accept the ‘otherness’. My interviewees notice that they experience heterogeneity daily but at the same time it, heterogeneity is a great rarity in the places, which become increasingly alike. One world is thus as much a world of interconnectedness as of a single development. In this one world, people and spaces are differentiated by their position at a particular stage of becoming alike. Potentially they will achieve the structural similarity; if so, even less space will be left for difference, which will then be limited to cultural divergence, which is as exciting as annoying and can be ‘managed’ or ignored. This in turn questions the real recognition of multiplicity in the world. We might thus need to consider what ‘cosmopolitanisation’ means and where its limits are: in my view, the way people encounter places and their inhabitants decides upon cosmopolitanism as a practice rather than an ideal.

## NOTES

1 All the names of people and places used here are fictitious. They have been change to assure anonymity of the interviewed individuals.

2 The text in brackets refers to the interview number and the quoted line within this interview.

3 This concept relates to any kind of boundary; Beck, Bonß and Lau (2004) have yet primarily conceptual divisions in mind, for example the one between nature and culture. In the other writings of Beck, especially those on cosmopolitan, the same concept of de-bordering and re-bordering imposes yet a spatial dimension, as mixing of people and cultures and the question of Otherness (Beck 2004a, 133; 2004b, 124).

4 I mean here certain logic present in social theory and not empirical interest in studying border or other (administrative, geographical) regions. An extreme version of regional social thought would be that of Habermas (1992), who seeks to separate life world from systems, and to sort out all the concomitant subdivisions, or Goffman (1971). Since the seminal work of Barnes (1954) and Bott (1971), sociological studies have frequently utilized network analysis in various fields of research and theorizing on social structure, also in a metaphoric way. Its practitioners include Breiger, Granovetter, Knoke, Marsden, Wellman, White. Compare also Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, and Castells 1996.

5 In networks, relations set up boundaries. Those elements are close that are connected by similar relations (Mol and Law 1994: 649). The relationships between these two formations have been discussed in terms of how networks contribute to the constitution of regions (eg. Latour 1987; Law 1992; 1997) or contrarily by overcoming their friction how they de-construct regional spaces (eg. Beck 1993; 1997; Albrow 1998; Urry 2000).

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