



Introduction: *Frontiere Phalanstere?* Crossing the Borders Between 'Theory' and 'Activism'

Olivier Thomas Kramsch¹

Nijmegen Centre for Border Research (NCBR), Department of Human Geography,
Radboud Universiteit, Postbus 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands
O.Kramsch@fm.ru.nl

What does it mean to be a border activist today? This question animated a lively roundtable panel discussion at a recent meeting of the Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS), held 23-25 September, 2010, in Veroia, Greece.² For the panel organizers the timing and location of such a discussion was not only relevant but urgent for several reasons. First – as has been evinced for some time now within the wider geographical discipline – the organizers believed it was opportune to introduce a debate concerning the diverse “publics” to whom border scholars have a responsibility, both within and outside the academy, an issue which has not been taken up by the association until now. This burgeoning literature has succeeded in firmly problematizing so-called value-free geographical “science”, and has called on academics to question the uses to which their conceptual knowledge is put (Blomley, 1994, 2008; Bauder and Engel-Di Mauro, 2008). This



¹ Creative Commons licence: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works

² European Conference of the Association for Borderland Studies (ABS) “The Multifaceted Economic and Political Geographies of Internal and External EU Borders”, organized by the Department of Spatial Planning and Development, Aristoteleion University of Thessaloniki. The roundtable was organized by Olga Lafazani (Harokopion University, Greece), Olivier Thomas Kramsch (NCBR, Radboud Universiteit, The Netherlands) and Despina Syrri (University of Macedonia), and was chaired by Dina Vaiou (National Technical University of Athens, Greece).

has often been achieved by highlighting the contributions to critical geographical scholarship and praxis of constituencies traditionally marginalized by mainstream academic discourse (Fuller and Kitchin, 2004).

Secondly, the very *location* of our intervention at the cusp of Southeastern Mediterranean Europe, imposed this question of what it means to be a border activist today in unprecedented fashion onto our collective agendas. Against the ongoing backdrop of global migration flows passing through Turkey across the islands of the Aegean Sea en route to the EU; the subhuman living conditions of migrant detention centers on the Aegean islands of Lesbos, Samos and most recently Agathonisi; the repressive external border control apparatus being constructed along the Evros River separating Greece from Bulgaria and Turkey; the agony of hundreds of North African migrants entering their second month of hunger strike in Athens and Thessaloniki, seeking the dignity of legalization, many now hospitalized (see Lafazani, this issue); and the efforts of Greek and North African activists working in No Border Camps and other theaters, it would seem germane to ask: what can activists, placing their very bodies on the life-and-death-line of Europe, learn from theory? And, just as vitally, the reverse: operating within a conjuncture whereby theoretical critique is widely perceived to have lost “the capacity both to transform the existing structures of power and to create alternative social arrangements” (Hardt, 2010, 19), what can border theory learn from the myriad struggles of local activists working to counter the effects of an increasingly repressive security apparatus being erected on Europe’s outer perimeters?

Rather than re-plow intellectual soil already tilled elsewhere, the contributors to this dossier seek to address the theory/activism nexus from the lived experience of working within and alongside the practical as well as conceptual borderlands of Europe.³ The authors’ collective space of enunciation “from the border”, therefore, has several important implications regarding the nature and direction the debate on theory/activism may take in the future, raising issues which became clearer thanks to our robust dialogue with two *ACME* board members. A complaint, for instance, was that our interventions “came too much from the side of theory” than from that of activism. Implicit in this critique was the charge that we were reflecting as “arm chair activists”, working from the comfort of our university offices rather than laboring in the activist trenches, thus rendering the truth claims of our analyses suspect. But this claim, we believe, productively raises in turn its own set of questions. Who is the “proper border activist”? And, most importantly, who has the right to claim that proprietary mantle today? This indeed is *the* political question at the heart of many border-spanning social movements today in both the Global

³ An exception to this is the contribution by Noor Nieftagodien (this issue), who addresses conditions for working through the theory/activist divide from the perspective of contemporary South African social movements.

North and South (see Pistikos' and Syrri's contributions in this issue from the frontlines of Greece and Nieftagodien's non-Eurocentric South African perspective in this issue), and speaks directly to the initial challenges the organizers of the ABS panel encountered in selecting appropriately "theoretical" and properly "activist" contributors. It is indicative, for instance, that *none* of our invited panelists wished to be perceived as "pure" activists, entirely removed from the ability to think and reflect autonomously.⁴ The lesson learned from this exchange, and the contributors' subsequent responses, is that border activist subjectivity cannot be made to "come" along a continuum between "activism" and "theory"; *the two are inextricably bound at the very heart of the most intense activist engagement.*

To think otherwise may, indeed, speak more to the particular situatedness of North-Atlantic intellectuals than those working at the geographical interfaces of the Mediterranean, or further afield on the postcolonial African subcontinent. This observation raises the equally intriguing point to what extent, as Nieftagodien eloquently expresses in this issue, the "particular manifestations and meanings [of activism] ... vary across space and time". This insight was fruitfully placed on the agenda of critical geography some years ago by the Argentinian geographer Perla Zusman, who, narrating her own activist participation in Barcelona-based social movements contesting neo-liberal urban restructuring, commented on a tendency of Anglophone academics to source the origins of their activism in the fieldwork process, rather than in "a commitment to question political, social and economic conditions through a recognition that the production of knowledge, and alternative political practice, is a collective, horizontal process" (Zusman, 2004, 133).⁵ But whereas for Zusman and her experience with organizations such as *madeinbarcelona* and the *Ribera del Besos Forum*, "academic activity became a tool for activist practice" (2004, 133), thereby implicitly valuing the latter over the former, the contributors to this dossier reject any such a hierarchical privileging (for illustrative cases, see Pistikos, this issue, and Brambilla, this issue). Following Brambilla, we can assert that "theory" and "activism" are always in a "symbiotic and in a cyclical relation". Indeed, how precisely this "symbiosis" works itself out

⁴ Does a "pure" activist – someone who acts mostly without need for reflection – exist? To be provocative: is thought superfluous when picking up a bullhorn on that detention center roof while staring down a police phalanx, picking up that first stone or hurling back that teargas canister? The very thought, we would counter, is demeaning to Mediterranean activism(s) and to the social movements coalescing around them today. Moreover, such expectations risk reproducing old hierarchies of academic divisions of labour whereby the intellectual peripheries provide the centers of knowledge production with the voyeuristic *frisson* of "activist" immediacy, while the centers quietly (em)place them within *longue-durées* of careful and measured analytical reflection.

⁵ Zusman adds: "[T]he activist experience itself acts as an element that allows the intellectual to increase his/her legitimacy in academic circles, an instrument of distinction within the academic sphere. In that context, activism becomes an element which, rather than serving to spread privileged information in sectors which do not possess it and contribute to their demands, feeds academic production" (2004, 135) – and academic careers, we might add.

in different spaces of theoretical-activist engagement may constitute one of the most pressing frontiers in border studies today.

The “*Frontiere Phalanstere*” of the ABS panel title gestured towards that 19th century architectural dream emerging from the thought and actions of French socialist-utopian Charles Fourier. As envisioned by Fourier, the *Phalanstere* was to constitute a spatial response to the fragmenting and deadening vices of mercantile-commercial society by mixing the functions of living and working so that they would more accurately express the natural dictates of the human passions (see Figure 1). Notwithstanding its roots in a “naïve” 18th century Enlightenment naturalism, Fourier’s *Phalanstere* sought to overcome the artificial separation of intellectual and manual labor through “attractive work”, a notion which perceived more clearly than Marx and Engels the demands of psychic as well as economic

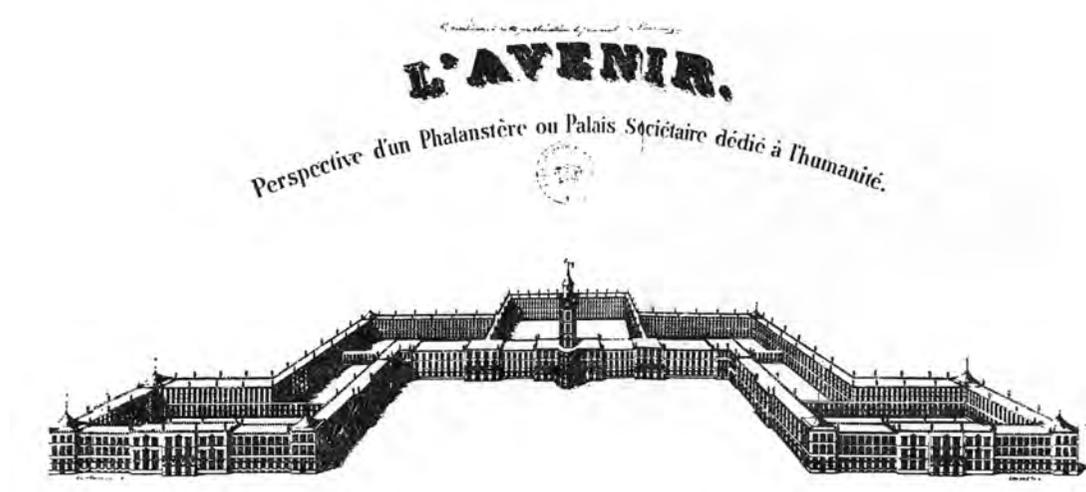


Figure 1. Architectural rendering of a Fourierist *Phalanstere*. Caption reads: “The Future: Perspective on a Phalanstere or a Societal Palace dedicated to Humanity”. (Source: <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Phalanst%C3%A8re.jpg>)

freedom, allowing for the flourishing of man’s (sic) personality as well as serving his (sic) bodily needs (Fourier, 1848).⁶ Much like migrants attempting to cross the

⁶ A reviewer questions the “Eurocentric” and “masculinist” character of Fourier, and makes clear a concern that we not “universalize” our cases in using him as our muse. Point noted. Critical Eurocentrists that we are (“Europe” is, after all, the object of our daily reflection!), we are careful not to speak for the rest of the world. Indeed, our strong belief in the spatial contingency of theoretical/activist practice militates against that very danger.

Evros River into EU space today, the North African hunger strikers in Athens and Thessaloniki, and the thought/action-pieces animating this dossier, the *Phalansterian* ideal seeks to produce a new space – both theoretical and practical – for human self-realization within the existing capitalist order (Beecher and Bienvenu, 1971).⁷ As with Fourier, how successful we are in working through the theory/activist divide will be decided by personal, collective and (most importantly) *spatial* struggles whose outcomes we cannot yet imagine.

References

- Bauder, Harald and Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro. 2008. Introduction: Critical scholarship, practice and education. In, Harald Bauder & Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro (eds.), [*Critical Geographies: A Collection of Readings*](#). Vernon, BC: Praxis (e)Press, pp.1-7.
- Beecher, Jonathan and Richard Bienvenu. 1971. *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier: Selected Texts on Work, Love, and Passionate Attraction*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Blomley, Nicholas K. 2008. The spaces of critical geography. *Progress in Human Geography* 32, 285-93.
- Blomley, Nicholas K. 1994. Activism and the academy. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, 383-85.
- Fourier, Charles. 1848. *Le Nouveau Monde Industriel et Sociétaire, ou, Invention du Procédé d'Industrie Attrayante et Naturelle, Distribuée en Séries Passionnées*. Paris : Librairie Phalanstérienne.
- Fuller, Duncan and Rob Kitchin. 2004. [*Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy*](#). Vernon and Victoria: Praxis (e)Press.
- Hardt, Michael. 2010. The militancy of theory. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110(1), 19-35.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1975. *Actualité de Fourier: Colloque d'Arc et Senans*. Paris: Editions Anthropos.
- Zusman, Perla. 2004. Activism as a collective cultural praxis: challenging the Barcelona urban model. In, Duncan Fuller and Rob Kitchin (eds.), [*Radical Theory/Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy*](#). Vernon and Victoria: Praxis (e)Press, pp. 132-46.

⁷ The publication date of Beecher and Bienvenu's (1971) careful translation of Fourier's *oeuvre* is not haphazard, as the events of May '68 ushered a timely reappraisal of the entire Fourierist canon in the light of the late 1960's multiple reassessments of life, labor and love. Henri Lefebvre himself would not be immune to this act of retrospective restoration (see Lefebvre, 1975).