



# Constructing a Relational Space between ‘Theory’ and ‘Activism’, or (Re)thinking Borders

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When I was asked to prepare a statement for the roundtable entitled “*Frontière Phalanstère? Crossing the Borders between ‘Theory’ and ‘Activism’*”<sup>2</sup>, I started asking myself some questions, and precisely: Can borders between “theory” and “activism” be crossed? How to do that? How to construct a relational space between “theory” and “activism”? In other words, I focused on finding the best possible way to convene a dialogue between theory and activism by referring the two spheres of interest to a common topic, that is: borders. The very fact that I relate theory to activism with specific regard to the borders field is relevant indeed in order to reflect upon possible critical answers to the “how-questions” posed above. The goal of this paper is to serve as a vehicle for building and facilitating greater sustained dialogue bridging scholars with activists, launching, on the one hand, opportunities for dialogue on the intersections between theory and activism at a more general level, as feminist, queer, anti-racist and transnational studies have already been contributing a great deal by looking at various social movements and theoretical perspectives built in and through activist practice. On the other hand, in



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<sup>2</sup> The roundtable was organized as part of the European Conference of the Association for Borderland Studies (ABS) “The Multifaceted Economic and Political Geographies of Internal and External EU Borders”, Department of Spatial Planning and development, Aristoteleion University of Thessaloniki (23-25 September, 2010, Veroia, Greece).

this short paper I want to develop a relational space between theory and activism on the basis of their common attention to the field of borders.

The focus on borders allows me to describe my personal experience of border crossing between theory and activism by highlighting the ongoing interactions between the two domains that are far from being strictly separated spheres. From my viewpoint, it is useful indeed to refer to experiences for making the relational space between theory and activism emerge, deconstructing in this way the still dominant binary oppositions. In my opinion such oppositions are (re)produced even in critical and radical discourses within a number of fields where scholars/activists/people are much worried about defining what makes respectively a "true activist" and a "true scholar", as if an absolute ontology of activism and theory could exist. However, this tendency doesn't take into account what emerges from the variety of practices our experience is built on: any definition of "true activism" and "true theory" is questioned in practice (and as practice) and experiences show the *liquidity* of the boundaries between who should be a true activist and who should be a true academic.

This point motivates my choice to highlight in the title the crucial role of (re)thinking borders for constructing such a productive relational space. In order to cross borders between theory and activism, it is first of all important to be aware borders exist, but this does not mean that they are closed borders and intersections are not possible between the different domains they create. Borders can be read not only as a *di-vision* (space of meaning-breaking) but as a space animated by multiple relations, perceptions and perspectives, making it a *pluri-vision* (zone of plural cultural production and meaning-making) (Brambilla, 2009). That is to say, a space where we should insist on constructing fruitful exchanges and no longer deny the value of *difference*, working on it and valorizing the complexity and vitality of borders perceived as a space of difference, connectivity, reflexivity as well as mediation, mobility, and relation.

My experience could help in contextualizing these reflections on the ontology of borders with reference to the relational space between theory and activism. When I decided to study social sciences and anthropology, mainly focusing on borders issues in Africa and reconstructing the genealogy of the Euro-African borderland from the colonial times to the present post-colonial era, my decision was due first of all to my critical "location" as a citizen as well as to my active involvement in associations and movements. In this sense, I would say that my decision to become an academic in the field of social sciences concentrating my attention on the issues here above can be considered as a first example of crossing the border between activism and theory. My personal decision had indeed political meaning as well. Yet, the fact to be a social scientist investigating borders and issues related to them in a critical way has been an important intellectual tool to reinforce my actions being critically and actively involved with borders and "contemporary borderlanders". Furthermore, I would say that the fact to be a scholar has been crucial to create wider opportunities for my 'political actions'.

Following this, although the ontology of borders seems to be at a first glance a strictly theoretical matter, I argue that it should be regarded as the crux of the possibility to create a dialogue between theory and activism as well. This is due to the fact that the peculiar looking glass we use for thinking borders strongly influences, at the same time, the actions they are concerned with. In this way, the theoretical and conceptual reflection on the ontology of borders – meaning intellectual work focused on the “why-and-how-ness” of borders – aims to seek change (Parker *et al.*, 2009) and in such a sense it cannot be considered as opposite to activism: the two are somehow symbiotic and cyclically related. To put it differently, I can argue that a precise theoretical perspective is able to generate a number of activities; it activates us while helping us to critically interrogate ourselves and understand the issues at stake.

Accordingly, it is important to point to the relation between the different dimensions of borders, conceiving them as multi-dimensional sites of negotiation, contestation and struggle, as well as human-made processes that are discursively constructed. In this way, I attempt here to highlight the potential of this approach in conceptual thinking about borders to favor a dialogue between border theory and activism, by assuming the multi-dimensionality of the border concept in the scholarly discussion (*in theory*) as a useful tool to (re)orientate related material border practices (*in action*) as well<sup>3</sup>. In this light, if we aim to discuss border theory and action, as well as measure the possibility and potentiality of encounters between the two domains, we might need to renovate our terms of analysis in the field of research, politics, social movements and cultural practice. This involves, as van Houtum (2010, 120) points out, keeping our distance from a contemporary “methodological state-borderology” that contributes to negating the “ontological multidimensionality” of borders as a first crucial key to opening the dialogue between theory and activism.

Following these insights, what emerges are domains of knowledge and action where border theory and activism can be more productively related. I refer in particular to the sphere of contemporary migration and the politics of mobility. I wish to highlight a major theme that deserves special attention in dialogue between border theory and activism when related to the topic of transnational migration as a field of knowledge and action: *border experiences* and the way they are represented. In this regard, I can state that critical border scholars and activists share the urgency to overcome the most widespread kind of border representation in modern times, namely the Western Euclidean map. Such a map has greatly contributed to diffusing the idea of borders as divisive and closed lines, communicating an invasive representation of migrants by contributing at the same

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<sup>3</sup> Harald Bauder (2011) greatly contributes in pointing out this aspect in his essay “Towards a critical geography of the border: engaging the dialectic of practice and meaning”, forthcoming in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Of particular interest is Bauder’s reflection on the conceptual diversity and multi-dimensionality of the border concept he analyses, proposing Wittengstein’s term “aspect-seeing” as a useful interpretative tool.

time to the institutionalization of an external, fortress-like border regime denying the possibility of grasping the complexity of borders as human-made processes. As a result, both border scholars and activists are engaged in searching for new forms of representing border experiences able to highlight a plurality of *borderscapes* (Kumar Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007), evidence of the complexities of infinite and contingent border variations, while serving as an index that can make room for the invisible, emotional, and life geographies often denied by the modern representational eye, which tends to standardize and essentialize borders. Borderscapes also reflect “local politics” of borders, understood as framing of social arenas and political landscapes and strategies of accommodation, adaptation and contestation – challenging the top-down control of borders. An intersectional angle of vision bringing together border theory and activism highlights the limits of dichotomous formulations and closed borders, pointing out a variety of social interactions – embracing the experiences, policies and representations that enliven borders – which in turn define the meanings acquired by borderscapes.

In light of these considerations, borders are not only viewed as geopolitical and territorial entities, but, by “humanizing” borders, they are also revealed as political, symbolic, cultural-anthropological and epistemological constructions. From this perspective we derive the centrality of border experience and its anthropological dimension, one that, by referring to border experiences is useful to further demonstrate how bridging the worlds of border theory and activism has the potential to enrich both political and intellectual landscape. In this regard, it is important to note that the anthropological dimension has been excluded in most analysis of borders, since borders are often considered as institutions, while their function as multi-dimensional phenomena is left aside. However, as Das and Poole (2004) point out, anthropology should represent an important vantage point for re-thinking international relations, order and sovereignty, which are given meaning by borders. In this way, anthropology could help us take into consideration the persistent exclusion of marginalized social actors who are not part of the group of dominant actors making up the border, even if they are actively involved in its everyday functioning (Donnan and Haller, 2000). Moreover, the anthropological method – *ethnography* – privileges field experience, thereby often grasping realms of the social that are ignored by formal institutional narratives. Following this, ethnography can be regarded as a crucial intersectional domain inhabited by border theorists and activists, where it might be developed as a kind of *praxis*, as a necessary foundation for bridging the gap between knowledge and action. In this sense, I refer to the concept of *praxis* elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu in *Theory of Practice* (1977), where *praxis* differs from daily practice and expresses the unity of theory and practice, not because it is necessary to perform action but because it is fundamental to understanding social reality<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> The reference to *praxis* reminds us of another domain of knowledge and action that could be valorized in constructing a relational space between border theory and activism, that is *action research*, as formalized by

Within this framework, I wish to make reference to some recent experiences of mine, which, on the one hand, describe in practice the idea of praxis I just mentioned and, on the other hand, can be regarded as meaningful accounts of crossing the border between theory and activism. I have recently been involved as a scholar in an action-research project in Zingonia, a place, located in the Province of Bergamo, that can be regarded as a Euro-African borderscape in the heart of the Northern Italian Region called Lombardy. Zingonia was founded in the 1960s by the entrepreneur Renzo Zingone to become a model industrial town. The industrial areas were almost all constructed in the early years, but the population increase was not as expected and the project was scaled down at the beginning of the 1970s. The obvious imbalance led to a degradation of the area. This caused a fall in real-estate prices that, together with the high number of firms and their strong demand for labor, attracted many migrants to Zingonia. At first, they came from the southern part of Italy in the 1970s and later, in the 1980s, the number of foreign migrants (mostly from Senegal) greatly increased as well. Nowadays foreign workers – mainly from Africa – have gradually taken the place of Italians and constitute approximately 70 per cent of the total population of Zingonia by transforming it into an “exception-town” in Italy. This has greatly contributed to the spread of an image of Zingonia as a deprived suburban neighborhood conquered by migrants, a dangerous place to be avoided. The present dominant political orientation in Italy as well as national and local media debate have contributed in diffusing such a negative idea of Zingonia that is regarded by public opinion as a ghetto<sup>5</sup>. However, it is worth pointing out that civil society and certain citizens who live in Zingonia and in the surrounding towns have re-acted to this negative representation of the town. A number of demonstrations and events have been organized by a local movement of activists called “Rete Bassa” (Bottom Network) to protest against such stereotyping of Zingonia as a ghetto. The idea to develop an action-research project in Zingonia and my involvement in it are closely connected to the activist practices of Rete Bassa. My knowledge of local African communities – based on my training in African Studies as well as on my previous ethnographical field experiences in Africa – has been a crucial tool to facilitate the active involvement of migrants (this means to help them moving towards *the right to have rights*) in the “actions” supported by Rete Bassa and to improve the relationships between

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Lewin in his paper “Action Research and Minority Problems” (1946). Following Lewin, knowledge is always gained through action and for action; to question the validity of social knowledge means to question not the development of a reflective science about action but the production of genuinely well-informed action, or how to conduct an action science.

<sup>5</sup> The right-wing political movement, the Lega Nord (Northern League), whose support was crucial to Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi’s victory in the last elections, launched in 2008 a campaign “to clean out Zingonia, before it infects the nearby towns” setting up an election stall in the middle of Piazza Affari (Business Square), the centre of Zingonia that is named after the stock exchange in Milan. Meanwhile, on Facebook the group “Let’s invade Zingonia and kill them all” has gathered 700 members spreading anti-immigrant rhetoric that makes life difficult for Italy’s new arrivals.

migrants and Italians in the area, which are crucial to struggle against the negative image of Zingonia. Thus, in order to carry out the action-research, I have been in the field using my intellectual knowledge and tools for working *not on migrants* but *with them*, with the aim of opening up new possible pathways towards novel forms of political participation and belonging. In this regard, I wish to point out how this experience of mine in Zingonia, like many others both in Italy and in Africa, could be very useful to express the way in which I am continuously crossing the border between theory and activism *in practice*, by moving beyond critical reflections on borders and migration and becoming critically and actively involved with these issues in my *human experience*. This doesn't express the viewpoint of a "true activist" or a "true scholar" but my experience contributes to describe the way in which I'm crossing the border between activism and theory in my day-to-day life, being aware of the epistemological and political value of the very act of crossing the border and of critically approaching the relational space between the two domains both from the intellectual and the practical standpoint.

In light of these reflections, the crisis of the traditional approach to borders, regarded as essentialized objects producing spatial as well as temporal fixity (at both epistemological and political levels) – what Mezzadra (2004) has called the "metaborder" – reveals the need to re-think the reified rigidity of borders between theory and activism. Thus, scholars and activists should be able to make their own cross-border movements towards the angle of vision of the 'others' (Newman and Paasi, 1998). In this way, the complexity of what we define as "borders" might really be understood, and it would be interesting to explore new possible orientations within the framework of cross-border dialogues able to grasp the complex link between the polysemic conceptual representation of borders and a number of pressing questions of our time, such as transnational migration. This would help to prioritize the subjective practices, desires, expectations and behaviors of contemporary new borderlanders by recovering a migrant agency that should be consequently regarded at the very heart of both critical contemporary political and epistemological reflection.

I conclude by pointing out how a new analytic lens crossing borders between theory and activism can be conceived as a helpful instrument for recovering the notion of the *human condition* as presented by the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1998[1958]). This notion of the human condition is based primarily on the idea of human *action* (praxis) as the most important activity within what she calls *vita activa*. What is worth pointing out is that the concept of *vita activa*, in opposition to *vita contemplativa*, does not create in itself a hierarchy between *theôria* and *praxis*, but expresses rather a synthesis of the two, one which is crucial in reinstating the life of public and political action to the apex of human goods and goals. From my viewpoint, (re)thinking borders to construct a relational space between theory and activism can greatly contribute to this as well. (Re)thinking borders enables us to give voice to those inhabiting hidden geographies and the geographies of exclusion, showing that they are not marginal, nor can we say that they are inert

peripheral spaces of exception. On the contrary, they are located at the very heart of critical contemporary political, social and epistemological reflection. Giving voice to them means to take the chance to bring back the human condition to its original political value, as shown by Arendt.

It is a relevant chance indeed. Theorists and activists should take it and cross the border!

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