

METROLUX CONFERENCE 2012

‘UNPACKING CROSS-BORDER GOVERNANCE’

September 6-7, 2012, Luxembourg City

Significant attention has been devoted to the issue of “cross-border governance” over the past two decades, especially in Europe, where supra-national integration and the development of cross-border regions have been the subject of a multitude of analyses in academic and policy fields. Our understanding of the logics and processes underlying the emergence of new institutional spaces and the associated forms of governance remains, however, incomplete. While the singularly protean and fluid nature of the subject matter may partially explain this, progress in the academic debate and the establishment of new theoretical perspectives have given rise to new research questions.

By foregrounding the idea of “unpacking” the concept of cross-border governance, this conference aims to deepen our examination and knowledge, within the context of two particular perspectives. First, the aim is to examine the conceptual and theoretical foundations underpinning the analysis of cross-border governance. With a determined focus on explanation, this perspective aims to make sense of the multiplicity of case studies and the diversity of initiatives. Seeking to understand cross-border governance in its full complexity involves new conceptual articulations and the use of new paradigms. Second, we want to pay particular attention to critical perspectives which question mainstream institutional ideas based on normative or positive attitudes. The coordination of relations between actors located on either side of national borders is never “neutral” and never solely a technical or managerial matter; rather, it accounts for conflict and power struggles. It is thus important to expose the power issues at stake and the interests that often remain obscured in official discourse if one is to fully understand the logics at work and their political and ethical significance.

On the basis of this twofold theoretical and critical requirement, this multidisciplinary conference intends to debate three specific research issues of interest to geographers, political scientists, historians, sociologists and economists.

1. Debordering/rebordering: how to understand the changing reality of borders in a non-binary way?

In the 1990s, research on borders and cross-border regions was focussed on the effects of globalisation and the opening of borders in a context dominated by the dismantling of the iron curtain, macro-regional integration (EU, NAFTA) and the liberalisation of commercial, financial and informational flows. Cross-border governance was essentially understood in relation to a context of “debordering”. The 9/11 attacks dramatically altered this trend and put the focus on issues relating to the terrorist risk and, by extension, the control of migration. The dynamics of “debordering” gave way to the alternative logic of “rebordering”. However, rather than understanding the nature of cross-border relations on the basis of borders which are open or closed to a greater or lesser extent, we believe it is more useful to think of the border as an ambivalent object which can be at once open to certain types of flows, networks and mobilities and closed to others. The issue is then one of establishing how this ambiguity affects the governance of cross-border regions, to the extent to

which the functional changes of borders bring into play divergent interests which operate at different scales and in various temporalities. Such an examination also involves questioning the changing reality of borders by paying particular attention to practices of “borderisation”, and to their underlying logics and imaginaries.

2. Between cooperation and competition: which articulations within a cross-border governance in search of meaning?

Discourses on cross-border cooperation, advanced by the European idea and the multiplication of cross-border regionalisation projects, have sometimes given the impression that the latter is self-evidently seen as desirable from the time at which borders are opened. Constructivist considerations have shown that the existence of geographical proximity, cultural similarities or functional interactions are not sufficient to explain the development of cross-border cooperation and regions. As a historically-contingent process of institutionalisation, there is nothing inevitable about cross-border cooperation. While it concerns a shared will based on a convergence of interests, it also involves power struggles and a rearrangement of relations. Taking as its starting point a rather “disenchanted” view on cross-border cooperation, the approach proposed aims to expand the focus on the determinants of and issues at stake in cross-border governance. To achieve this, it is useful to recall that cooperation is not the only option: competition or indifference are other forms of interaction between actors. Far from being mutually exclusive categories, cooperation and competition can not only coexist but also interact. The modalities of such interaction appear ambiguous, as cooperation can either be intended to reduce the cross-border disparities which lead to competition between territories or, on the contrary, to preserve them within the framework of centre-periphery border regimes dominated by a competition logic. Beyond the official discourses, the purposes of cross-border integration and the sense of the cooperation which underlie it are far from self-evident.

3. Scales, territories, networks: towards multidimensional approaches to transborder regionalisation?

The spatial recompositions which have affected social, economic and political relations within the cross-border regions have to a large degree been understood using the concept of “rescaling”, whether in terms of territorial restructuring (deterritorialisation, reterritorialisation) or through the articulation of different geographical scales. Despite the fact networks of actors play a determining role within the development of a multitude of cross-border institutional arrangements and discursive assemblages, little work has been done within the relational approach which seeks a reconceptualisation of the region as an open space structured by a variety of flows and relations. In view of this, the question is not whether the territorial/scalar approach should be replaced by a relational approach but rather how they can be combined in a way which goes beyond the inherent limits of uni-dimensional approaches. The emergence of cross-border regions is favourable to such an enterprise: first, the absence of a well-defined territory and the multiplicity of actors involved in the decision-making process favour a governance approach based on a system of flexible and negotiable political arrangements structured around collaborative networks which transcend administrative and political limits; second, the presence of a national border cannot be relegated to the level of a simple remnant of a past territorial order as even when open it remains a significant limit in terms of State territoriality. Ultimately, it is because the processes of debordering/rebordering bring into play different spatialities of the border that a critical re-examination of our conceptual approaches is required.