

Tracing Connections – Explorations of Spaces and Places

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Often-cited metaphors, such as the ‘Fall of the Soviet Union’, ‘China’s Rise’, the ‘Revival of the Silk Road’ and the ‘dawning Asian Century’, to name but the most influential, bolster the imaginations of ongoing and large-scale political, social and economic shifts across Asia. Expertise from, for instance, East, South or Central Asia Studies is meant to challenge mainstream geo-political generalisations entailed in these tropes by acquiring in-depth knowledge of the ways in which societies, cultures and politics are constructed and connected. Through this aspiration, however, classical area studies in recent years have virtually reached their limits, leading to vivid debates on how to rethink their underlying conceptual foundations (van Schendel 2002; Sidaway 2013). In the wake of the spatial turn, and from a social constructivist position, the conventional perspectives of social sciences in general and area studies in particular are disapproved of for deliberately imposing methodological regionalism and statism/nationalism on empirical enquiries (Agnew 1999; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). By so doing, they essentialise images of social, cultural and political life in container-like spatial units, with arbitrarily drawn boundaries to the outside and homogenisation and centralisation to the inside (Brenner 2004; van Schendel 2002). Conceptualisations of borders (or, more generally, boundaries) as more or less strict lines of division, and an analytical focus on geographical cores and spatial fixes, tend to downplay the complexity and dynamics of social practice in which people, material objects and ideas in constant interaction are the rule rather than the exception.

In response to this criticism, an increasing number of studies, particularly in Asian contexts, have recently scrutinised the diverse array of processes of

exchange, the figurations of relations and flows within and across groups, societies and border(land)s that inform long-term change (Walker 1999; van Spengen 2000; Reeves 2009; Giersch 2010; Harris 2013; Shneiderman 2013, to name but a few). However, tensions between dynamically changing trans-local living and its multi-spatial anchoring in different, often geographically, socially and culturally distant contexts raise questions about the linkage of space and place: how are places constituted in a web of interrelated and overlapping multilocal connections spanning across social spaces of people or groups? What do the production of space as well as increasing (dis-)connectedness and exchange mean for people's imaginations, agency and livelihoods? And how can the interplay between multilocal networks (structures, relations, flows) and particular locales (places) be conceptualized and empirically grasped? These are the issues the present edited volume seeks to address, based on stimulating presentations and discussions during a two-day workshop of the Crossroads Asia Research Network at the Centre for Development Studies (ZELF) of Freie Universität Berlin in June 2013.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A CONNECTION?

As a point of departure we find it meaningful to reflect first on different attempts to conceptualise connections. In the literature on social networks, migration and borderland studies, the central idea of interconnectivity is expressed by resorting to a broad range of different terms, the most prominent among them being 'connection', 'tie', 'link', 'relation', and 'entanglement'. These are often applied without giving a clear definition or conceptualisation of what exactly makes up such connections, how they are created and changed and what actually is connected. A certain state of 'ontological uncertainty', which Paolo Novak (in this volume) identified with respect to categorisations in the context of his studies on Afghan refugees, also seems to prevail in the conceptualisation of 'connectedness'.

Most authors consider mobilities of people, objects and ideas constitutive of the creation and reproduction of connections. Mobilities are expressed in flows of labour migration, flight, pilgrimage, trade and remittance transfers, as well as the flows and dissemination of data and information through telecommunications, mass media and the internet, to name just a few examples. In order to come to terms with this heterogeneous phenomenological variety, the concept of translocality has been increasingly suggested in recent years

by sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and development theorists (Brickell and Datta 2011; Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013; Lohnert and Steinbrink 2005; Zoomers and van Westen 2011).

Freitag and von Oppen introduce their take on translocality with the intention of providing “an intermediary concept which helps to better understand and conceptualise connections beyond the local” (Freitag and von Oppen 2010:3). For them, translocality describes “the sum of phenomena which result from a multitude of circulations and transfers. It designates the outcome of concrete movements of people, goods, ideas and symbols which span spatial distances and cross boundaries, be they geographical, cultural or political” (Freitag and von Oppen 2010:5). In accordance with other theoretical contributions on translocality (Brickell and Datta 2011; Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013; Zoomers and van Westen 2011), Freitag and von Oppen employ the network concept for describing and understanding the multiple and heterogeneous “interactions and connections between places, institutions, and concepts” (Freitag and von Oppen 2010:5). Moreover, they argue for an open, “looser, qualitative and metaphorical approach to network analysis” (Freitag and von Oppen 2010:20), and they take interactions as the central constitutive element of connections as the central focus of inquiry. Places, social actors and institutions are situated dynamically within translocal spaces, and therefore they constantly navigate between the tensions and interplays of movement and stability/order (Freitag and von Oppen 2010:8; Verne 2012:18) in the context of multiple “processes of embedding and processes of disembedding” (Verne 2012:29). The ‘local’/‘locality’ remains critical from a translocal perspective as a place of social and cultural interaction, as a “meeting place” (Massey 1991:28) and “specific node” (Zoomers and van Westen 2011:378) in which countless overlapping networks, relations and communications of different natures meet and weave together.

While the reading of the world as a network aims at conceptualising connectedness, some authors move a step further and argue for the need to reach a “genuine relational understanding of the world” (Verne 2012:25). From a thoroughly relational perspective, connections are not simply established between pre-given entities (e.g. actors, institutions, places, objects, ideas) which are then related to one another in networks of nodes and edges, so the role of relations in creating these very entities has to be considered (Verne 2012:25-26). The mere interactional perspective (relations between pre-given entities), Verne argues, needs to be replaced by a “transactional per-

spective”, which considers entities not as “independent existencies present anterior to any relation” (Cassierer 1953:36, cited in Verne 2012:26) but as being themselves and the result of relations (Conradson and McKay 2007). This implies a shift of analytical focus “from the elements and identities towards relations, from traits to processes” (Berndt and Boeckler 2008:3, cited in Verne 2012:26). Consequently, Verne suggests – based on the metaphor of the Rhizome, developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1976) – removing seemingly solid, static and self-containing nodes in the network image, and then replacing the edges with “multiple and branching roots deriving from multiple sources” (Verne 2012:23). Through the ever-changing ways in which “different connections entangle and intertwine” in this “meshwork” (Ingold 2006:13-14, 2007:80-84, 2009:34), places and in-between places, as well as actors, institutions, ideas and culture, are constantly (re-)created and transformed (Verne 2012:30). By applying the imaginary of the Rhizome, strong emphasis is placed on the transformative and processual dimension of translocal connections, privileging “how it becomes” over “how it is” (Verne 2012:29; see also Ingold 2007:116).

Bringing translocal connections and their processuality to the forefront of analysis requires new modes of empirical enquiry entailing new methodological challenges. Among the many suggestions for more open, flexible, multi-perspective, multi-local and mobile methods of tracing and chasing translocal connections, Marcus’ (1995) nearly two decades-old concept of “multi-sited ethnography” still forms a major point of reference. He provides a whole toolkit of different “tracking strategies” (Marcus 1995:95) which “quite literally [follow] connections, associations, and putative relationships” (Marcus 1995:97), i.e. move along “chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions of locations”, in which the researcher has to establish “some form of literal, physical presence” (Marcus 1995:105). Consequently, Novak (in this volume) points to the importance of scale in tracing connections and suggests tracking strategies along horizontal, vertical and area-based lines. Taking ‘tracing connections’ literally, in this volume we bring together scholars inspired by a relational, processual and translocal view on the world, who ask for the constitutive power of connectedness in producing and reproducing actors, institutions and places.

PROCESS GEOGRAPHIES, BORDERS AND THE PRODUCTION OF PLACES

Explorations of connections and flows, especially from the periphery, margins and ‘from below’, as most of the contributions in this volume illustrate, transform the perspective on the meaning and interconnections of space and place. ‘Tracing connections’ reveals, on the one hand, the accommodation of everyday life in long-term social change and large-scale transformations. On the other, it exposes the flexible imaginations and (often enough, strategically employed) representations of the geographical and social constitution of places by the concerned actors and the researcher him-/herself (see Novak in this volume for a detailed discussion). Appadurai (2000), in his groundbreaking essay on the emergence of grassroots globalisation, hence suggests following flexible “process geographies” rather than static “trait geographies” for making sense of social practice that is becoming increasingly interconnected, fluid and translocal. Appadurai (2000:7) goes on to argue:

We need an architecture for area studies that is based on process geographies and sees significant areas of human organization as precipitates of various kinds of action, interaction, and motion—trade, travel, pilgrimage, warfare, proselytisation, colonisation, exile, and the like.

Process geographies as a ‘heuristic device’ therefore redirect scholarly attention towards the dynamic impact of connections and mobilities on socio-spatial change in multi-local settings from the bodily and local up the global scale. Taking seriously this assertion of “jumping scale” (Smith 1995; Swyngedouw 1997) in empirical research, we agree with Harris’s assessment that if spaces are produced, the challenge for the researcher is “to investigate *how* representations of space are rooted in history and produced, conditioned, structured, and experienced in everyday life” (Harris 2013:61, emphasis by Harris). Benz’s contribution in this volume, on the ongoing construction of social networks by Wakhi migrants from two remote mountain villages in Northern Pakistan’s Gilgit-Baltistan Region, and Behal’s historical work on representations of British Imperial coolie trade across the Bay of Bengal, are good cases in point. Reflecting upon ‘process geographies in the making’ is of particular importance in examining the role of connections across border(land)s and in the context of trans-local mobility or

migration, the two of which serve as the foci of the main sections of this volume, as outlined below.

Urging for institutional, physical and social ‘border crossing’, van Schendel, in his proposal for reconfiguring classical area studies, not only aims to invite ‘cross-areal’ academic collaboration, but also challenges a widespread analytical heartland-centrism (van Schendel 2002:661). Nevertheless, he argues, “much can be learned about centres of power from looking at their peripheries” (van Schendel 2002:662). Mato Bouzas’s article in this volume, on interactions across the disputed Baltistan-Ladakh Line of Control (LOC) between Pakistan and India, is a good working example. Following the re-centring of what are often denoted as ‘the margins’ of regions or states (Cons and Sanyal 2013), political borders are increasingly theorised as processes evolving from boundary-producing practices and discourses that extend their impact to people, things and ideas – often at quite a distance away from the actual border – rather than as political institutions dividing space (Paasi 2005; Newman 2006). Thus, a perspective of ‘tracing connections’ across ‘peripheries’, as applied strikingly by Stenberg (in this volume) depicting Uighur traders’ mobilisation of ethnic ties, challenges the powerful bordering discourse imposed by statist politics (Scott 2009). Harris, in her contribution, similarly alerts us to be wary about privileging political borders over connections and flows “as though borders came first and mobility second” (Ludden 2003:1062), and instead encourages us to see mobility and fixity as intrinsically related and mutually constitutive.

Subsequently, it has to be noted that relational and reflexive approaches assume that places are not ‘just out there’ as essentialised elements or substances, but that they are produced through flexibly changing social interaction (Emirbayer 1997). In human geography, Massey (1991, 2004) has emphasised that places are generally constituted, shaped and linked by multiple intersecting and overlapping connections and mobilities of people, capital and power. Such a notion of place as unbound and interconnected, whilst being reminiscent of Castells’ (1996) concept of ‘spaces of flows’ (rather than ‘spaces of places’), adds to what could be dubbed ‘situatedness in motion’. A flexible regime of entwined social interconnectedness and anchoring in particular locales, often termed ‘translocality’ (or sometimes ‘positionality’), first of all, is meant to grasp the tension and mutual impact of mobility and situatedness in people’s everyday life (Freitag and von Oppen 2010; Sheppard 2002). Sharing similar viewpoints, we argue in this volume that

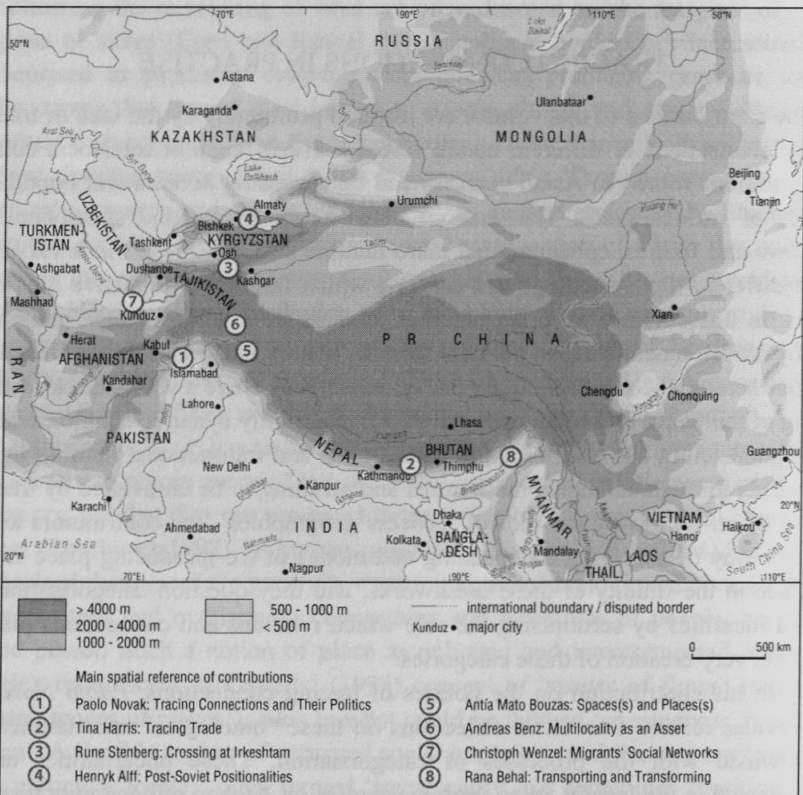
the constant interplay of spatial metaphors such as relations, mobilities and particular locales embodied in people's experiences of everyday life are key to understanding the construction and the meaning of particular places, be it a checkpoint at the Nepal-China border, a village in the Karakoram characterised by high levels of migration or a Peshawar refugee camp. Alff's work, illuminating the contextual socio-spatial positioning of bazaar traders within connections, flows and locales, constituting and reshaping Bishkek's Dordoy Bazaar, and Wenzel's contribution on Afghan rural migrants transforming one of Mazar-e Sharif's suburban neighbourhoods, while being interconnected with kin in their places of origin, tie in well into this debate.

TRACING CONNECTIONS IN PRACTISE

The contributions of this volume are inspired profoundly by the idea of tracing connections of different nature across a broad range of translocal configurations rooted in Asian contexts and transgressing borders and boundaries of various kinds. The tensions between movement and situatedness, flows and fixities, ephemera and more durable structures result in a variety of different topics, settings and contexts which frame the respective inquiries. In this volume, we bring together scholars from anthropology, geography, development studies, political science, history and area studies. Despite their heterogeneous disciplinary backgrounds, they share a very similar reading of the world as a relational, processual and highly dynamic conglomerate of intersecting and intermingling connections and transactions, running like threads through entangled meshworks and awaiting to be unravelled by tracing them. Following the idea of 'process geographies', the contributors ask for a way of clarifying the meaning and modes of (re-)producing place and space in the fluidity of these meshworks, and they question categorisations and identities by scrutinising the role which relations and connections play in the very creation of these categories.

In his contribution on the politics of tracing connections, *Paolo Novak* provides refined theoretical reflections on these "ontological uncertainties" entwined with the processes of categorisation. These uncertainties are grounded in the insight taken from his studies on Afghan refugee migration, whereby the persons, places and processes he was researching seemed to exist simultaneously in multiple and heterogeneous space-times, providing a multiplicity of connections to be traced for each of them. The decision to

trace one or the other connection would imply the crossing of very different types of borders, reach very different spaces and places, networks, contexts and historical periods and would lead to competing, colluding and contrasting definitions of what every single one of these people, places and processes constitutes. Since methods are never innocent, the setting of preferences for tracing one particular set of connections and ignoring others cannot be done based on whatever ‘objective’ measures of relevance are available, but it must always entail normative decisions on which kinds of realities will be helped to become more real – and which less. Tracing connections, in Novak’s view, is essentially a political exercise.



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Figure 1: Main spatial reference of the contributions

A first set of contributions focuses on the specific interplay and tensions between mobility and fixity, flows and ruptures, links and localities in the context of cross-border connections in general, and more particularly in cross-border trade and bordering processes.

Tina Harris, in her article on dynamics and transformations in Himalayan borderland trade, asks for the constitutive role of commodity flows and merchant networks in creating and recreating places along trans-montane trade routes. She shows, with the help of the example of cross-border trade between India and Tibet from a ‘bottom-up’ narrative and historical perspective, how shifts in border policy, national and international politics, free trade agreements, improved transport technology and infrastructure, as well as the emergence of new commodities and markets in the context of regional and global economic changes, recreate, relocate and reconnect trade routes, business networks and places. In doing so, she highlights how new kinds of regional representations, localities and fixities emerge on the scale of everyday life in the borderlands.

A deeper insight into underlying social relations in Uyghur cross-border trading networks provides *Rune Stenberg* with a lens through which to focus on the Xinjiang-Kyrgyzstan trade flows channelled through the border crossing at Irkeshtam. Trust, reliability and consistency – in short, the “social glue” of lasting business relations in networks spanning across long distances and different places on both sides of the border – are secured through particular cultural concepts and practices of kinship relations. These are based less on given descent and blood-relations, but are rather established through socially constructed affinal relations. Shaped from dealing with the difficulties and uncertainties of cross-border trading, they form an important translocal economic resource for successfully pursuing this business.

Taking Kyrgyzstan’s largest commercial centre, Bishkek’s Dordoy Bazaar, as a focal point of inquiry, *Henryk Alff* explores in his contribution the various co-implications of places, relations and flows in cross-border trade networks. By employing the intermediary concept of positionality, he sheds light on the dynamics of Dordoy trade entrepreneurs’ changing positions in networks of business and trade relations in the context of large-scale institutional, political and economic changes in the post-Soviet era. The interplay of different spatialities becomes manifest in merchants’ narratives, in which the meaning attributed to particular locales, and the spatial metaphors em-

ployed, both reflect and are shaped by evolving translocal connectedness and the changing flows of people, goods and values.

The transformation of space and place, spatial imaginaries, territorial and symbolic affiliations and alternative spatial realities are also at the core of the contribution by *Antía Mato Bouzas*. In her study on interactions across the Line of Control separating Pakistani-controlled Baltistan and Indian-controlled Ladakh in the disputed territory of Kashmir, she enquires into the socio-spatial implications of what she calls “the bordering process” in this area. Similar to the preceding contributions on cross-border trade, Mato Bouzas stresses the dialectic role of borders as a multiple separating but at the same time (re-)connecting force, both cutting and (re-)creating social, economic, political, cultural and symbolic relations. The highly unpredictable and heterogeneous socio-spatial dynamics of the bordering process in Kashmir poses severe difficulties for the people living in these borderlands.

A second set of contributions in this volume is dedicated to tracing connections in the context of people’s mobility and migration. The authors of these studies explore the role of social relations and social networks for enabling, facilitating and, in certain cases, forcing spatial mobility. The social, economic, political, cultural as well as spatial implications of “relations on the move,” and emergent translocal social spaces, are central issues in this set of papers.

Andreas Benz enquires in his contribution as to how people from the Wakhi community in northern Pakistan were able to benefit greatly from their migration strategies and spatial mobility, which allowed them to overcome local resource constraints and to mitigate risks by tapping new, external resources and sources of income. The migrants did not cut their ties with their families and communities back home but remained integral parts of increasingly multi-locally organised households and of expanding translocal social networks, interconnecting the rural high-mountain communities with an ever-growing number of distant places. Benz shows how multi-locality has turned into an important asset for households and families, which in the context of solidarity and resource redistribution within family networks and flows of remittances could trigger a broad range of translocal socio-economic developments in this Wakhi community.

The emergence of similar translocal configurations of mobile family members was observed by *Christoph Wenzel* in northern Afghanistan, where people and entire households from disadvantaged rural areas move to the

city of Mazar-e Sharif, aiming to overcome the adverse living conditions and lack of livelihood opportunities in the periphery. For many migrants, though, the hoped-for better life opportunities in the city do not materialise. Wenzel shows for selected migrant families the daily struggles for survival and their strategies to get along in a difficult suburban context. In contrast to the Wakhi migration experience presented in Benz's contribution, for many newcomers to Mazar-e Sharif migration has turned out to be a move into a state of marginality and vulnerability. Mutual support, exchange and continuing mobility in translocal social networks, spanning between rural and urban vulnerability contexts, therefore play a crucial role for actors struggling to cope with these difficult contexts.

Translocal networks of personal connections and institutional linkages play a crucial role in more formally organised forms of migration, as *Rana Behal* shows in his historical study on indentured migrant labour in colonial plantations in South- and Southeast Asia in the context of the British Empire. He identifies the hierarchical, multi-scalar networks of workforce provision encompassing European recruiting agencies and indigenous recruiters in villages. Starting from these recruiting networks, Behal traces various connections in different directions and on different scales, spreading across the global system of colonial indentured labour. Based on archival data, he tracks connections to the inherent necessities of expanding modern industrial capitalism in the age of European imperialism and the profit interests of the colonial powers and capitalist investors, which set into motion the massive dislocation of Indian agrarian communities. He further traces in detail the implications and consequences for the affected Indian immigrant labourers and their communities, thus revealing the existential force with which European imperialist interests oppressively deformed individual lives.

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