

“EUROPE OF MOBILITY” PUT TO THE TEST BY ITS SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES

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ABSTRACT

Today, the right to free movement embodies a popular “Europe of mobility” for European citizens, while the EU, as an institution, is facing a crisis of legitimacy. In this sensitive context, the external borders of Schengen are under strain due to uncertain geopolitics and crises in European neighbourhoods. This study aims to rehistoricise such a “Europe of mobility”, built through speeches and successive achievements within the European construction and establishing a formal right to free movement. It is concerned symmetrically with the real right of mobility for citizens. In the mobilities for study, work or tourism, strong inequalities persist. This study aims to contribute to putting them into words and speeches through a series of comprehensive interviews on the constraints to mobility. Inequalities of access and symbolic costs of mobility constitute as many customs and informal tolls that weigh the imagination of “free movement for all” by the reality and make social and symbolic borders visible. Adherence to the discourse of a “Europe of mobility” does not protect against these inequalities, and can produce social disillusionment for candidates to mobility which are confronted with failure.

Keywords: *European Union, Mobility, Borders, Inequality, Schengen.*

In November 2019, the commemorations of the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall were sober, if we compare them to the 2009 staging where state leaders dropped a replica of the Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate. However, this did not mean that the anniversary enjoyed a less intense and massive memory coverage, which illustrates the political weight of this heritage. In the series of news and reports, the fall of the wall, as an exorcism against political

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partitions, is often presented as the milestone event of a new European destiny, a few years before Maastricht. At the same time, it is also the “Europe of mobility” that is being celebrated by the fall of the wall. A Europe that has enshrined free movement among the freedoms of the European Union (EU), but also as a right embodied in European citizenship. Three decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain, it is this last one that we would like to contribute to reinterview.

We propose to approach in a common dialectic the objective and subjective, symbolic and institutional dimensions around the Europe of mobility by drawing inspiration from the constructivist approach (Berger, Luckmann 1966; Burr 1995; Onuf 2013). From this point of view, the process of European construction that began in the second half of the 20th century is based on a historical construction – made up of speeches, symbols and social representations – in parallel with the concrete achievements (Lequesne 1998). We therefore propose, as a first step, to review these elements and recontextualise the advent of a Europe of mobility for European citizens. In a second step, we will question it sociologically on the scale of the contemporary European social space by questioning the formal right to mobility in the light of inequalities, then finally on the scale of the life trajectory, by mobilising comprehensive interviews in a third step.

TO RECONTEXTUALISE THE REPRESENTATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF A “EUROPE OF MOBILITY” FOR CITIZENS

European construction does not begin immediately on the issues of the free movement of persons, but rather by the creation of common markets in the wake of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), achievements accompanied by speeches mobilising the lexical fields and the symbols of “peace” or “progress”, and by the promotion of pro-liberal and capitalist economic values and rhetoric (Denord and Schwartz 2009). But the lexical field and the symbols of “mobility”, or those of “openness” and “circulation”, have been developed in speeches and representations since the 1957 Treaty of Rome, where, for the first time, it was not only associated with commodities and currencies, but also with workers. In 1958, visas between EEC members for short stays – particularly tourist ones – were gradually eliminated. Free movement thus becomes one of the political and topical themes of European construction that can be identified in the texts, speeches and para-discourses of the promoters of the European project (Bitsch 2004). This dimension is also linked to a specific historical context that needs to be more clearly addressed.

This context is the geographical, political and ideological partition of the Cold War, dividing the European continent between the two rival blocs very quickly after the end of the Second World War, in the midst of the reorganisation of the international geopolitical order. It invites us to rethink the persistent political and symbolic power of the term “Iron Curtain” through the multiple images of

enclosures, including the paroxysmal image of the Berlin Wall and the multiple photographs of the “Eastern refugees”¹ risking their lives for the crossing in 1961 and for many years. The event that completes the Iron Curtain mechanism marks a resurgence of tension on the continent despite the process of détente of the peaceful coexistence. It underlines the persistence of the Cold War and becomes a powerful symbol of the confrontation of the blocs in Europe. This confrontation also takes place in the political and symbolic field of freedoms: in 1963, the Council of Europe adopted an additional protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms² recognising the rights of free movement of persons and prohibiting the expulsion of nationals or the collective expulsion of foreigners to the signatory states. This addendum is explicitly directed against the socialist bloc, and the latter is quite incapable of responding to it, entangled in thick and hermetic border logic inherited from the Soviet control policies of the 1950s, which were not conducive to movement and mobility, despite timid and limited easing in the inter-socialist space from the 1960s onwards (Dullin 2011). It is no coincidence, nor a mere anecdote, that among the claims for “socialism with a human face”, in the middle of the Czechoslovak Prague spring in 1968, there was also the easing of border crossings. The Cold War became the matrix of a symbolic asymmetry between a West moving towards openness and an East calcified.

However, it should not be forgotten that in reality things are more complicated than the clear-cut representations that were gradually being formed: the borders between states that were part of the European process were far from being fluid, as recalled by the spectacular 1984 truck drivers’ crisis³ initiated on the Franco-Italian border and highlighting the gap between the representation of free circulation and the reality of controls (Jobard 1999). This social conflict precedes the signing of the Schengen Agreement by one year. Although it is not the immediate cause, it illustrates the acceleration of the process already widely mentioned in the European treaties, the European institutions, and initiated within the Community space by the Benelux (Louette 1998).

However, the implementation of Schengen will be postponed in the particular context of the collapse of the socialist bloc in the east of the continent. In Hungary, in Czechoslovakia, as between the two Germanys, the end of the socialist states

¹ According to Jean-Paul Cahn and Ulrich Pfeil (2009), the number of Germans from the German Democratic Republic who passed “to the West” before the construction of the Wall can be estimated at almost 5 million, when the opposite movements (for family or ideological reasons) only concern 400,000 people.

² Commonly known as the “European Convention on Human Rights”, the result of an international treaty ratified in 1950 and entered into force in 1953.

³ In February 1984, a customs strike at the Franco-Italian border blocked the passage of truck drivers through the Mont-Blanc tunnel. The latter in turn responded by initiating a vast strike movement that extended to other French borders and throughout the entire country, claiming border crossing facilities among a range of claims.

was embodied (particularly in the media representations that irrigated collective memories) by the opening (sometimes very temporary) of borders and the demolition of walls by the jubilant crowds of protesters, making, for example, of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 one of the central founding myth in pro and pan-European imaginations. The power of resonance and symbolic rebound in the social imaginations of the “end of the gates” and the visas promised and implemented by Schengen only a few years after these events should not be underestimated.

The achievement of the Schengen area in 1995 was then the major institutional milestone of a “Europe of mobility” in the context of the shift towards the European Union and successive European enlargements. For the first time, a right of free movement on the territory of the EU is associated with European citizenship newly introduced by the Maastricht Treaty and the Member States of the Schengen area agree to drastically modify the control mechanisms of their joint borders⁴. The creation of such a space of free circulation where states twist their monopoly on the right to authorize and regulate travel (Torpey 1998) is a historical event unprecedented in its scope. In this sense, Schengen is one of the examples of the EU’s post-Westphalian and supranational dimension (Ciapin 2018). However, it should be stressed that the EU’s eastward enlargement policy has been accompanied by particular restrictions for citizens of the new Member States, implemented in a differentiated manner by the European states, particularly as regards their possibilities for work facilities (Regout 2019) and that some states have resolutely kept out of the joint dynamics by promoting their own public policy, such as Great Britain, for which the desire of the elites and a large part of the public opinion for migration control can also partly explain the “leave” vote on the Brexit (Denison and Geddes, 2018).

Today the internal borders of the EU are crossed by millions of people for work, tourism or study mobility. Around 15 million European citizens work in another EU Member State than their own, in addition to which there are around four million Erasmus students and one and a half million cross-border workers (Wihtol de Wenden 2018). For citizens, free movement embodies a widely acclaimed “Europe of uses” (European Commission 2018), while the EU, as an institution, is facing a crisis of legitimacy and the Schengen external borders are under tension due to an uncertain geopolitical situation and crises in European neighbourhoods (Ciapin 2018). This freedom imaginary is reinforced by a symbolic inversion: the anti-migrant barbed wire walls erected at the external borders and Schengen visas have replaced the iron curtain, building in symmetry a

⁴ The principle of the free movement of persons, as defined in Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union, implies that any individual who is a national of the EU or a third country, once he has entered the territory of one of the Member States, may cross the borders of the other countries without being subject to controls. To travel, he no longer needs a passport. Air flights between cities in the Schengen area are considered as “domestic” flights.

reinforced but often naive or candid impression of completed free movement for citizens within the European area.

BORDER PERMANENCE, BOTH SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC

While “Europe of mobility” has become established in speeches and representations at the beginning of the 21st century, a clear distinction must be made between a formal approach to the “right to mobility” and the real possibilities of implementing this right⁵. De jure, every European citizen is supposed to have the same right. De facto, inequalities arise between these citizens, and put the “formal law” or “virtualities” of mobility to the test of differentiated access and implementation costs.

At a time in which being mobile is becoming a social norm, the overall reduction in the economic costs of travel, particularly through low-cost and multimodal networks, could make us forget that access to mobility remains highly differentiated and subjected to multiple parameters from one individual to another and depending on mobility projects. Beyond infrastructures, mobility involves unequal relationships to time and space, financial capacities and resources, available skills - such as the mastery of foreign languages – and challenges the social legitimacy of circulating people and mobility and settlement projects. These differentiated dispositions constitute a more or less important “motility capital” (Kaufmann and Jemelin 2008). Thus, for the same theoretical right, European citizens nevertheless remain differently endowed in terms of real resources. The metaphor of the border helps us to identify the “customs” and the “social and symbolic visas” that would involve the different capitals as a “right of passage” and would weigh the abstract image of a Europe fully open to mobility for these citizens against the reality of the permanence of social and symbolic borders. In this respect, we would like to highlight here class inequalities by taking the example of mobility in tourism, study and work, and symbolic stereotypes that deeply question social legitimacy⁶.

By questioning the unity of the European social space from the perspective of social classes using important statistical materials and with a Bourdieuan inspiration focused on the multidimensional analysis of social hierarchies, Cédric Hugrée, Etienne Penissat and Alexis Spire (2017) invite us to go beyond the vision of a European space perceived only by state-to-state comparisons or through an

⁵ A dichotomy between formal right and real right, classical and fertile in the various theories of justice, as synthesized by Will Kymlicka (2003, 235) when he reminds us that the hypocrisy of a system that ensures the theoretical equality of rights without ensuring the practical possibility of benefiting from them can be denounced. This is the difference between formal and real rights.

⁶ In doing so, we leave open a large number of other angles of approach, we do not intend to be exhaustive here, these other angles will be as many paths to continue this work and to structure other work.

agglomeration of individuals, and to highlight structural inequalities. The result is a map of the social space opposing a Southern Europe and the Central and Eastern European Countries where the popular classes are the most important, to a Northern and Western Europe, where the middle classes have a considerable weight and where the upper classes, more restricted and concentrated in the metropolitan areas, exercise an undivided domination. Some skills, important for mobility, such as language abilities, particularly English, are highly differentiated from one class to another (*ibid.*, 147). The authors point out that mobility is highly asymmetrical according to classes, but also according to national origins within classes, so there are two intertwined levels at play to read them. An eloquent example appears with regard to tourist mobility: the ability to afford a week's holiday in Europe reveals very strong divisions between the citizens of Western countries, all classes combined, and those of East and South, including their middle classes⁷. Another element that appears strongly is the inequality in East-West mobility between members of the middle and upper classes regarding work⁸. Here too, to balance the image of equal labour mobility, Aurore Flipo (2017), after a comparative study on the mobility of young people from Poland in the United Kingdom and young Romanians in Spain, found that for these young people, sensitive to a "migration culture" and having invested themselves to acquire mobility skills, mobility remains socially stratified and paradoxically tends to strengthen social positions from which they start. The emerging alternative is then to abandon mobility and to return, or to choose long-term precariousness abroad (Flipo 2017).

On the study side, the Erasmus programme is often presented as a formidable accelerator of mobility for European students. However, Magali Ballatore's (2018) work invites us to balance this representation because it is also a "two-tier" programme, which helps to reproduce *de facto* social inequalities. Since its creation in 1987, the Erasmus programme has benefited only 4% of European students, young people who are often already used to travelling and frequenting often more elite institutions. The researcher points out that some young people wishing to benefit from Erasmus fail to access it, or are forced to reformulate their mobility project downwards, in particular because of economic constraints or because their institution is less integrated or quoted. On the other hand, significant imbalances between countries are emerging with regard to beneficiaries and destinations,

⁷ For example, if 97% of the upper classes in Luxembourg claim to have the means to afford a week's holiday, this is the case for 73% of the Romanian upper classes, while 78% of the Luxembourg working classes can afford it, against 53% of the Romanian middle classes and 23% of the Romanian working classes (Hugrée, Penissat and Spire, 2017, 172)

⁸ The constraints of access to the West are, for example, more difficult for the middle classes in the East because of the more difficult recognition of diplomas and qualifications and the more difficult capacity for settlement or family reunification than for the middle classes from the West to the East (Hugrée, Penissat and Spire, 2017, 195).

resulting in particular from economic and linguistic supremacy (Ballatore 2018). Through these examples linked to work, tourism and studies, we see how social borders act as walls or filters to mobility: if not all Europeans of the popular classes wish to be so, which is already the consequence of a certain socialisation, those who wish to do so face multiple constraints compared to their wealthy fellow citizens whose means are in line with projects and virtualities. These disparities bring together a European social space stratified on West-East and North-South axes.

Social borders are coupled with symbolical borders that cross the European area. By this term, we want to underline how the perception of the other (and symmetrically of oneself) can lock individuals into representations and relationships of hierarchical power and producers of symbolic violence weighing on mobility projects, either by complicating them or by aborting them by making them impossible. These symbolic borders can be identified through the pejorative stereotypes that mark individuals and social groups. They refer, for example, to Tzvetan Todorov's questions in “Le Croisement des cultures” (1986) when he reflects on the relationship of Bulgarians to “European foreigners”, which are always perceived in a meliorative way, and in symmetrical the pejorative perception of the “Bulgarian self” in a pejorative way, highlighting symbolic hierarchies that are also internalized (*ibid.*, 9). They can be identified regarding languages as glottostereotypes (Bochman 2001) and this point underlines the importance of dominant language skills in legitimizing mobility. Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the East-West stereotypes inherited from the ideological partition of the Cold War and fuelled by social asymmetries further exacerbated by post-socialist transitions are expressed, even within formally “reunified” Germany (Vimar and Guitard 1999; Giacché 2015). More broadly, we should think of the topos of the “Polish plumber” of public spaces in “the West” as in France to understand the weight of such representations in social imaginaries pushing on the fertile ground of fears related to social dumping. Focusing on this national stereotype through a survey of Polish people in France, Malgorzata Patok (2014) shows how such stereotypes can also be gradually reduced and overcome. But stereotypes about Eastern Europeans can still be reactivated in public spaces⁹, just as stereotypes about Southern Europe have been partially reactivated since the 2008 economic crisis (Mauger 2015). What these stereotypes underline in our thinking is the question of the social legitimacy to be welcomed or to be welcomed,

⁹ To take just one example, the lapidary formulas of French President E. Macron in the columns of the newspaper with the far-right editorial line *Valeurs Actuelles* of 31 October 2019 regarding the “clandestine Bulgarian sectors” caused a social and even diplomatic outcry in Bulgaria. A number of articles accuse Macron of stigmatizing Bulgarians as second-class Europeans, and feeding prejudices. The fact that this particular polemic has gone relatively unnoticed in the French public space is perhaps an indication of the symbolic asymmetries between a central France and a peripheral Bulgaria, would a Trump's sentence of this kind on France have caused a probably similar situation...making great noise in France in the most total indifference across the Atlantic.

widely differentiated. The symbolic cost of confronting or mitigating these stereotypes is not the same for everyone and all types of mobility, and is not affordable for everyone, which is particularly true on another methodological scale, when meeting the actors.

FRUSTRATED MOBILITY, ABORTED FREE-MOVERS

Highlighting the existence of deep disparities at macro-social level at European level is one of the scale analyses of the problem. But it seems relevant to us to approach this topic on a different scale, at the level of life trajectories, to calibrate more finely our metaphor of social and symbolic borders based on experience. To this end, we propose to mobilize three comprehensive interviews with young Bulgarian workers already met before and identified for their relevance to this issue, realized between 2018 and 2019 in Sofia¹⁰. The interviews were conducted in an open style, in the shape of a biographical presentation, but with a focus on mobility and the relationship to Europe. The content analysis focused on reconstruction of their trajectories and the relevance of significant details that are milestones for the actors helping to identify meaning and practice reconfigurations. All three have a relatively similar profile, that is to say young people, urban residents of the capital Sofia, graduates, but not from the wealthy classes for whom money is not a problem. All three subscribe to the European project and very strongly to the discourse of an open EU, both in terms of democratic values and free movement, they are part of the 68% of Europeans agreeing that the Schengen Area is one of the EU's main achievements (European commission, 2018). To different degrees, each has projected a mobility based on study or work that would lead to a better so-called statutory and personal mobility. To varying degrees, these projects have faced constraints that have modified or aborted them and produced some frustration. These three identified interviews do not pretend to form an image that would be representative or exhaustive of Bulgarian society or their social group, but they help to contribute to "putting into flesh and blood" our reflection on mobility constraints¹¹.

¹⁰ Since 2011, due to my studies and research work, I have had the opportunity to establish a strong relationship with Bulgaria, which has resulted in multiple visits to the country. Many friendships were born from this relationship, maintained by these trips. However, it is also this dimension which, through its reflexivity, encourages me to reflect critically on the issues of mobility: many discussions on the spot concern mobility, and my own situation raises questions about a certain inequality, since my relative ease to come and return highlights in symmetry the difficulty, and not only economic, of my friends to answer my invitations in France. The discomfort of this non-reciprocity and the associated conversations of trust contributed to my willingness to work on the issue. Just like the fact that I was not socialized from childhood to travel and project myself abroad, I do not perceive these issues as a simple question of desire or will, but as a sociological issue.

¹¹ Each interview is presented as a synthesis.

Desislava (29 years old):

Influenced by the idea that “everything was possible for her generation with Europe”, Desislava invested heavily herself in language learning during her studies, especially French and English, while no one else spoke them in her family. She has stepped up efforts at the university to integrate joint programs (double degrees). They perceived them as “sesames” for the future. Despite years of effort, she was confined to occasional mobility, “cheap and therefore uncomfortable and yet already too expensive”, unsatisfying and precarious in work as in tourism, the ideal destinations being unaffordable. If she persists in her attempts to apply in France and Belgium, she expresses a certain despair and exhaustion, and affirms that her Bulgarian citizenship is a handicap that is difficult to compensate: “I was naive to believe that it would not make a difference... yes on paper all European citizens have the same rights, but in real life when you take out an identity card or degrees in Cyrillic I think it does something, it doesn’t help much, on the contrary”.

Nadejda (27 years old):

Nadejda was awarded a university scholarship for student mobility in France, in Paris. She was marked by the difficulty of finding an apartment and tells us about a significant moment: with the two Bulgarian friends with whom she does her research, they will “twice be suspected of being prostitutes by the owners. It really hurt me already. I felt dirty. Even after having solved this problem, she quickly faced money problems. The scholarships are insufficient, and she cannot count on any family support: “my family didn’t support me, they saw in this departure something inaccessible... I stood up, but I was ashamed when I saw that it was complicated. I was constantly in the schizophrenia of being so poor in Paris and that my relatives or my parents blame me for a life as a princess. The untenable situation soon led to the breakdown of studies and the return home was experienced as a humiliation. Nadejda’s story highlights the social and symbolic cost of mobility, including the potential symbolic violence when constraints arise.

Anton (31 years old):

Anton works in a foreign IT company in Sofia. He has abandoned his plan to work abroad, his ambitions having gradually been cooled by what he has heard from the experience of family and friendly acquaintances: “Bulgarians are not so well regarded in the West, there are clichés, you pass directly for a Roma who is not welcome” and “even with a good salary compared to here there are many places where the budget is unaffordable and you live poorly”. Throughout the interview, he returned to the feeling of being a “second-class European”, even he rejoiced at his country’s accession to the EU. He already had this feeling when working with foreign interlocutors (especially hierarchical) and refers many questions back to me about my report as a Frenchman on Bulgaria. Evoking my studies in Sofia, he goes on: “In this sense, yes, it’s probably easier. Besides,

you're French, it's not nothing. A Bulgarian in Paris, what do people care? I'm sure many wouldn't even know where the country is on a map...".

Through these three testimonies, what we have described as “visas” or “customs” that make social and symbolic borders visible takes on body and words. Beyond the empirical singularities of each of the trajectories, we perceive how a mobility project has been put to the test by multiple constraints. “Wanting to move” is one thing, but each trajectory is marked by stages and crises, and tests people’s ability to cross them by “paying the entrance fee” by mobilizing their resources. Even with a European passport, but also with language skills and diplomas, even feeling subjectively a member of the EU and a part of a generation for whom to travel is allowed, these three “free-movers” of formal law found themselves face to face with real obstacles, including economic insecurity, but also with a weak social legitimacy of their Bulgarian identity, sent back or interiorised. Taking into account its constraints has aborted their desire for mobility. What emerges beyond the economic costs is that power from the symbolic violence experienced or put into play in these trajectories is too often underestimated. It is likely that it is not often put into words in the case of successful mobility, and in this sense these examples of failure undoubtedly contribute to making visible the submerged face of the iceberg that gives cause for reflection on the persistence of stereotypes in the Western European area and their impact in the East.

CONCLUSION: THE GAP BETWEEN DISCOURSE AND REALITY PRODUCES DISILLUSIONMENT

*“What happens when you remove issues of colour, class, ethnicity, inequality, borders, barriers and cultural weakness from immigration? Answer: you get free-movers”*¹², wrote Adrian Favell (2010, 46) to highlight the borderline case of “ideal-typical” “free-movers” citizens, those he calls “Eurostar”, citizens “at the heart of the European Commission’s efforts to build a Europe through mobility policies” by highlighting their numeric weakness in passing (*ibid.*, 47). With him and other researchers, we wish to make visible how the Europe of mobility “leaves a large majority of citizens by the side of the road” despite a discourse with vocations for all and a right presented as equal.

While the post-Cold War European Union and the current tension at the external Schengen borders suggest symmetrically that the Europe of mobility has progressed in the internal space, we underline the importance of taking into account all the social and symbolic constraints weighing on the highly unequal European social space in order to overcome a trapping formal representation and draw up a real picture. In this respect, we warn against triumphalist discourses that

¹² Translation by the author of this article.

ignore the frustrations arising from these experienced constraints and symbolic violence: the feeling of being “second class” European citizens for those who fail, or the term “two-speed Europe” that also arises from these disillusionments should alert us to the urgency of an ambitious political response in action. The Berlin Wall has certainly fallen, not the money wall, not really the cold war stereotype wall.

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