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How to 'catch' floating populations? Fixing space and time while researching migration

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1. Introduction

In 'On the move' (2006), Tim Cresswell shows that 'capturing mobility' in order to understand it, has been a central problem since the early stages of Western modernity. Compared to 'place', he argues, 'mobility' is much harder to assess scientifically: "However abstract and ethereal our discussions of place [...] might become, we can always, in the last instance, return to ground and point to something and say "that is what I'm talking about." Mobility, however, has no such presence. It is absent the moment we reflect on it. It has passed us by. [...] Maybe [...] our ways of knowing are just not mobile enough and we are stuck in a sedentarist metaphysics – a way of knowing that valorizes the apparent certainties of boundedness and rootedness over the slippery invisibility of flux and flow" (Cresswell, 2006: 57)

According to Cresswell, ways of conceiving mobility are informed by a desire to fix, within a clear spatial framework, what is unfixable, in order to make it knowable. Fixing strategies have served as the main method to control, analyse, functionalise and interpret mobility. From his overview of the development of technologies to 'catch' movement, it becomes clear, however, that the contradiction between 'fixing' and 'movement' causes a major tension. A tension between rationalised, abstracted and 'fixed' mobility, and the actual lived experience of embodied motion. In this paper it is argued that recognizing the existence of this tension opens up the possibility for a critical analysis of the context in which migration research is being carried out; a possibility to assess the specific ways in which human mobility is being constructed, how it is 'caught' in order to get access to it and to understand it.

The general problem described in this paper revolves around the drawing of spatial and temporal boundaries when researching transnationally mobile people. In order to get grips on this issue, two aspects of research on transnational mobility will be treated. A first aspect is related to the ontology of transnational migration. It is unclear how to define migration based on the time-space behaviour of people. Are workers living abroad for a maximum of a week also migrants? And why would work abroad be so different from long term commuting to large but inland cities? In other words: which temporal and spatial scales must be taken seriously? Secondly, a methodological problem related to time and space appears when researching mobile people: getting access to often highly mobile people can turn out to be harder than expected. Mobility patterns of respondents have to fit with the time-space behaviour of the often not so mobile researcher. It is these ontological and methodological prob-

lems in research on transnational, rather ‘hyper’mobile people that will be dealt with in this paper.

The now criticised ontology and methodology of ‘methodological nationalist’ research are focused upon in the first part of the paper. I will summarise how this approach constructs migration as taking place within or across the borders of a nation-state, which methods are used to measure it and which aspects of migration stay out of sight as a consequence of this approach. In a second part, I will treat the ontological and methodological answers of more recent approaches to this problem with special attention to the development of ‘multi-sited ethnography’ and ‘mobile methods’. In a third part, I will discuss some of the main problems I encountered while doing research and I will argue that the more recently developed methods have their own important spatio-temporal limits. These limits force migration researchers to create new or at least other ‘fixes’ of human mobility which lead themselves to other specific misinterpretations and biases in migration research. In this paper I therefore want to argue that methodological ‘nationalism’ is but one particular way of ‘fixing’ human mobility and point to how other fixes influence the collection and interpretation of empirical material. This process of ‘loosening’ and again ‘fixing’ of people’s mobility, will be illustrated by my own experience about researching Romanians for whom work abroad has been or currently is an important part of their life.

2. Nation-state catches: methodological nationalism in 20th century migration research

As Torpey (1998, 2000) demonstrates, from the end of the 19th century onwards, nation-states have monopolized the authority to restrict people’s movements. They developed loose and more symbolic boundaries but also extremely militarised borders. The networked assemblages of “maps, charts, surveys, aerial and satellite photographs, GIS databases, boundary posts and markers, fences and walls, texts (national legislation, political declarations and international treaties), flags and signs (‘Vous sortez du secteur americain’), customs regimes, border posts and guards, civil servants, passports, rubber stamps, transport companies’ regulations, and so on and on and on” (Painter, 2009: 63) create national territories which are seen as taken-for-granted spatial units. The ‘methodological nationalism’ critique, expressed among others by Glick-Schiller et al. (1992) and Wimmer & Glick-Schiller (2002a,b) points to the related ontologies of post-war migration research and revolves around the uncritical ‘national’ approach to migration that dominated migration research since the post-war period. Due to the equation of society with a nation-state, human

mobility was not only in common sense but in scientific research as well, constructed as 'normal' internal (it occurs within the nation-state) or as 'exceptional' cross-border mobility. In this framework, international migration was conceptualised as immigration in a country and emigration out of a country, immigrants were supposed to integrate in the redistribution infrastructures of the receiving nation and to assimilate with the 'culture' and 'loyalties' of the host society. Immigrants were foreigners interfering with the process of nation-building and were newcomers expected to cut through their bounds with their own nation. As such migration was assumed to be a transition from a situation in which a person lived unproblematically in a certain territory of a nation-state until he or she, due to push and pull factors, suddenly and irreversibly moved out of that territory into another territory in which all nationals also lived nice and quite and had their 'culture' to which the newcomer had to adapt.

Next to an elementary spatial dimension -moving from one national territory to another, an elementary temporal dimension was implied: migrants had no history and were divided into permanent and semi-permanent migrants (King et al., 2006). The former were assumed to integrate as quickly as possible, while the latter, 'guest-workers' and students for instance, were supposed to go back after a certain period. Legislation regulating access to citizenship rights was (and still is) also based on specific 'national' constructions of time. The principle of *ius sanguinis* links citizenship to 'national' ancestries far in the mythical past while *ius domicilii* is based on a certain length of stay in the nation. *Ius soli*, on the other hand, constructs new national cohorts whose parents can have other nationalities (see Cwerner, 2001).

This reduction of the social phenomenon of human mobility to the integration of (im)migrants in previously stable nation-states, made for instance Favell (2005: 19-20) urge migration scholars to escape their role of underwriting nation-building efforts, to be more academically autonomous, more thoroughly comparative and more self-conscious about the way contextual factors determine the intellectual content of their research itself. In other words, a plea for migration scholars to recognize and take account of their own position: how they are positioned within various power structures that privilege certain voices over others (Rose, 1997); how the revealing of the social structure or position from which they write and conduct research leads to more insightful analyses of scientific problems (Moser, 2008).

Post-war migration scholars especially in human geography typically mobilised rigorous quantitative techniques to describe and explain the patterns of human mobility within the boundaries of the nation-state (mainly patterns of urbanisation and commuting) and to a lesser extent the patterns of cross-border mobility. Their main data sources were census data, assembled each decennium and if available, data from social security registration

systems (Massey & Capoferro, 2006). As Wimmer & Glick-Schiller (2002) argue, these data sets are not unproblematic: “all statistics and other systematic information are produced by government departments of nation-states and thus take the national population, economy and polity as their given entity of observation” (pp. 223). Cross-border mobility then appears in different national data systems under divergent but ‘rough’ ‘national’ labels; the most important ones nationality and/or country of birth but some countries also include other data such as different types of work, residency or border crossing permits. In order to be included in these databases, however, migrants need to be permeated by the state registration systems (Painter, 2006). So in fact, these statistics often only give insight in how far migrants are part of the state system.

Since the nineties onwards, this methodological approach to migration research has increasingly been criticised. White and Jackson (1995), for instance, state that “population geography is an (overly) empirical enterprise preoccupied with demographic events per se (at the expense of social structures), proceeding through the spatial analysis of copious but limiting ‘official’ data that are uncritically accepted”. A point regularly made afterwards especially within population geography (for instance in the editorial introduction of the special issue of *International Journal of Population Geography* (Graham & Boyle, 2001).

Thus, not only the sources and uncritical treatment of data were blamed to bring along with them a ‘nationalist bias’. The ‘positivist’ epistemology, which was assumed to accompany quantitative analysis came under fire. Because of a restriction to the ‘official’ data, the life-worlds of ‘immigrants’ were not brought into vision, nor the problems they themselves raised as important. As a consequence, the hegemony of a coherent national framework in which migrant integration needed to be explained, remained unchallenged in ‘methodological nationalist’ research (Favell, 2005).

3. Ontological and methodological diversity in a transnational era

The increasing amount of critique on these ‘nationalist’ approaches clustered from the 90’s onwards around the concept of transnationalism. This paper is not the right place to reconstruct the development of the transnationalist literature (see for instance Vertovec (2009) and others for an exhaustive overview). Important for this paper however, is that the growth of diverse ‘transnational’ approaches to migration was accompanied by a new energy for developing new ontologies of human mobility, leading to an increasing diversification of the construction of space and time in migration studies. As Samers (2010) shows, the spatial

assumptions of migration theories did change slowly in the post-war period. While push-pull theories, neo-classical economic approaches, behaviouralist theories, the new economics approach and dual labour market approaches predominantly constructed human mobility through the space of the national territory, structuralist approaches in the late 1970's were the first to introduce new spatial frameworks – often used next to the 'traditional' national framework, to interpret human mobility: migration in the global world system (of nation-states), migration between 'global cities', or migration caused by the interplay of processes taking place at multiple spatial scales (local, regional, intra-national, supranational). The more recent transnationalism literature thread similarly pointed to the existence of a social field of connections extending itself across the borders of nation-states. As Smith (2005) and Mitchell (1997) rightly mentioned, these first accounts of some sort of 'fluid transnationalism' however constructed migration based on a-spatial ontologies of networks. There was no reference anymore to the rootedness of mobility, nor to the spatial scales which structured migration. In addition, 'transnational' approaches were criticised for their implicit 'national' focus again. It was argued that not the connections across nations were most important, but rather the 'translocal' or 'transurban' connections existing apart from the national territory (Smith 2005).

With the diversification of the spatial dimension, the temporal dimension of migration became more nuanced, though, often rather implicit and not through theorisation. Following Thomas & Znaniecki's footsteps (see Thomas & Znaniecki, 1996[1918-1920]) transnational research started to demonstrate that migrants maintain links with their homelands while being abroad, implying as such that the process of migration does not stop after physical movement to another country. Indeed, as Vertovec (2009: 13) states: "From the 1920s until recent times, however, most migration research focused upon the ways in which migrants adapted themselves to their place of immigration rather than upon how they continued to look back to their place of origin." Similarly, researching the social situation of second and third generation immigrants implies a much broader framework of time than before and a convergence of longitudinal research, lifecourse analysis and migration theory (King et al., 2006). Moreover, as Cwerner (2001) – the first to theorise explicitly the temporal dimensions of migration argues, migration does not only happen within time, time does also migrate with people. Migrants take their own social constructions of rhythms and time perspectives with them while on the move, which causes conflicts with for instance deeply embedded nationally produced rhythms and times (Edensor, 2006).

The increasing diversity in the ontological construction of time and space did also result in more critical thinking about the methods that are to be used in transnational (or post-

national?) migration research. The past decennium, an increasing number of pleads to put flesh on the bones of migration analysis by adopting more ethnographic methods appeared. In geography, for instance McHugh (2000) encourages population geographers to engage with ethnographic research. Similar pleads can be found in among others Findlay & Li (1999), Fitzgerald (2006), Smith (2004) and Skop (2006).

And while throughout the social sciences the spaces and times of migration were being reconsidered, within anthropology, the spatial scale of the practice of ethnography was redefined at the same time. As Marcus argues (1995), the conventional ethnographical method based itself mainly on intensively-focused-upon single site ethnographic observation and participation. Multi-sited ethnography, on the other hand, “moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus, 1995: 96) In order to take serious the movement that constitutes the migratory process, Marcus therefore proposes to ‘follow the people’. Especially studies of diaspora can profit from multi-sited fieldwork, since it offers the practical advantage for gaining access to social networks with nodes in different sites, as Fitzgerald (2006) argues.

Similarly, but more embedded in the recently developing ‘mobilities literature’, it is argued that in order to understand mobility, researchers have to develop ‘mobile methods’. Büscher & Urry (2009) discern five interdependent ‘mobilities’ that produce social life across distance and upon which empirical mobilities research has to focus: corporeal travel of people, physical movement of objects, imaginative travel through talk and media, virtual travel which enables presence at a distance and related communicative travel. Corporeal mobile research would involve ‘observing the people during mobility’ from a distance or while participating in movement. In that case mobile methods involve ethnographic methods like directly observing corporeal movement while walking with, driving with, travelling with someone through methods such as ‘shadowing’ or ‘stalking’ others.

Interestingly, Büscher & Urry do include spatial fixes in their description of mobile methods. According to them, researchers can stay put but still develop mobile methods through exploring the imaginative and virtual mobilities of people ‘through analysing texting, websites, multi-user discussion groups, blogs, emails and listserves’. As such, researchers do not directly involve in corporeal movement but analyse the traces, patterns or production of social constructions of mobility, time and space or engage in imaginative and virtual mobility themselves.

4. The practice of research and the fixing of mobile methods

So far, I have roughly sketched how the firm construction of 'national' space and time has been broken up explicitly during the last decennia by critical reflections on research practice. In what follows, I will go deeper into the current praxis of spatial fixing of corporeal mobile methods by developing 'thick description' of the issues that rose when researching transnationally mobile Romanians. As most of the abovementioned proposed 'mobile' strategies depend on more ethnographic research, I will especially go deeper into the limits of qualitative methods.

Qualitative research, Cook & Crang (2007:2) argue, suffers heavily from the linear read-then-do-then-write model of research in which assembling data 'in the field' falls between literature study and reporting 'at home'. Yet qualitative researchers, as they argue, often find that things don't happen the way they planned them in the field' during that second stage. "Those who they expect to talk to and what they

expect to find doesn't happen as planned and, often, more interesting issues unexpectedly appear" (2007: 2). Although I think Cook & Crang's critique on the read-then-do-then-write model of research is not something specific for qualitative research, nor for field work in distant places (for instance also during desktop research manifest deviations from the planned research path can develop), I think it is especially important when planning multi-sited fieldwork, and even more so when that fieldwork takes the form of a 'lonely ranger'. Due to the often short period in which efficient research has to be conducted, the available budget, personal development, emotional intelligence (see Moser, 2008) and the quality of academic collaboration networks, fieldwork abroad turns out to be a sequence of methodological choices with minor but also major impacts on the final outcome of the study. In what follows I will focus on the limited mobility of corporeal mobile research and the necessary spatial fixing. As such, I want to show how migration ontologies and methods are often created 'on the spot', or in accordance to 'local' constructions of migration and need to be contextualised in a time-space framework. In a first part, I will give a short overview of the search for 'access points' to Romanian mobile workers that occurred during my own fieldwork, which led to a way of mixing methods. Reflecting on the choices that were being made, I will explain secondly how other ethnographical research of Romanian migration has 'placed' migration mainly in rural areas for pragmatic reasons, having an influence on the construction of migration as a rural issue and on the practice of doing research. In a third part, I describe more generally the epistemological problems that rise in a context of international collaboration.

4.1 Catching people. Fixing mobility in practice.

As elaborated above, an important methodological question when doing multi-sited ethnography of migration is 'where?' Or, which aspects of migration have to be bracketed out? Since the relationship between the Romanian post-socialist transition and migration as an economic 'survival' strategy was the main research question at the beginning of this research, I decided to take the area of origin (Romania) as a vantage point of the study. Since the impact of socialist planning on the East-side of Romania (Moldova) was rather big, I expected the influence of post-socialism on the people in this region also to be quite important. Therefore, the idea was to start at multiple sites in Moldova, compare the different migration histories contained in these sites and try to reconstruct the corporeal and imaginative travel of persons and related objects.

From September 2005 until August 2007, I conducted around 75 interviews with diverse actors related to Romanian migration. The sites, durations, specific topics and quality of the conversations varied enormously. Interviews with among others (potential) migrants, policy makers, Romanian real estate agents, and academics were conducted in sites as diverse as Brussels, Bucharest, and multiple urban and rural sites in North-East Romania. In addition, participative research and 'mobile interviews' were conducted on airplanes, buses, micro-buses and trains between Belgium and Romania. These interviews were mainly conducted in French, English or a mix of French, English and Romanian. Based on these exploratory interviews, several previous hypothetical ontologies of migration were challenged (such as work abroad as a 'survival strategy').

A first case study was planned in a Romanian regional city. Since I was said that many Romanian temporary workers came 'back' from abroad during summer, I carried out a small questionnaire survey translated in Romanian in the city of Piatra-Neamt during August 2007. The questionnaire was built up in such a way that the differences between going abroad before and after January 2002 could be probed. However, major practical methodological problems appeared. Where to find migrants in a city? Several days and evenings of developing social contacts in the streets did not deliver much result and snow-ball sampling turned out quite difficult as a consequence of migrants' limited stay in Romania and my own limited language skills. As a solution, most migrants were surveyed at the passport office where they had to wait, often half a day, for a renewal of their documents. At the end of the month, seventy returned migrants were personally questioned in Romanian but this was much less than expected.

These methodological problems were discussed with researchers of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași geography department and the possibility to incorporate the survey-work in the exercises of second year geography-students was raised by them.

In order to link cultural-economic motivations with real migration practices, a questionnaire survey was set up the next months. Two hundred Romanian geography students were asked to conduct 5 surveys in their hometowns or villages. The focus was on persons with a history of working abroad, currently living in Romania on a temporary or permanent basis (home for week, or already home many years). The surveys were conducted between October 2007 and January 2008 and each student wrote a one page review about the main results of his 5 surveys. My quality control of the surveys was based upon these reports, the completeness of the surveys and their general credibility. 80 surveys were kept out of the analysis, so that in total a sample of 914 respondents was left over.

The basic structure of the questionnaire was built around the personal life career of the respondent. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked how they organised work, consumption and reproduction before, during and after they went abroad for work. For a maximum of five trips abroad, the details about the destination, the length of the stay abroad, the type of housing and work and where other members of the household were at the same time, were asked. To gauge migrants' motivations for going abroad for the first time, 22 parameters were included. Another 21 parameters were included to know more about their motivations to come back from the last trip and 15 parameters to know more about the allocation of the income earned abroad. These parameters had to be given a score between 0 (not important at all) and 10 (very important). The parameters were chosen based on the earlier interviews. As such, I tried to offer the respondents a broad range of possibilities being well aware that the total spectrum of migration motivations was larger and more detailed.

The change of method did have a strong epistemological influence. Suddenly, it were not multiple sites that were being researched ethnographically, but it was one case-study that was being surveyed quantitatively. As a consequence, data were collected on 'middle-class' migrants. It is not hard to imagine that the students did not interview the part of the migrant population which is more difficult to access socially (poorer people, Roma minorities) and physically (mostly abroad). As such, the data covered especially a more Romanian 'middle class' migrant group which turned out to be mainly urban (see figure 1B). In addition, shame about migration failures or shameful work abroad was underreported. While through my interviews and personal questionnaires in Piatra Neamt, I could assess much more in detail how former migrants evaluated their work abroad and how difficult it was to talk openly about failure, sex work or the loneliness of being abroad, developing rapport with migrants was impossible because of the distance between the survey taking place and me as researcher.

In order to re-establish this link and to go further into the details of the meaning of work abroad over the life course, I decided to conduct focus groups in collaboration with

researchers from Iasi in May 2009. The main idea was to let different age-groups reflect on the results of the survey and talk about their own migration experience while videoing and taping the group. The group context would enhance discussion, a native Romanian speaker could moderate the talks, and the results could be re-analysed at home (see Hennink, 2007). My introduction of the technique was received as a 'new' and promising technique but also with some reservation (new or just trendy?). One researcher, without experience in conducting focus groups, was mobilised to lead the focus groups in order to gain experience for future use of the technique for his own research. Two focus groups with four and five students were organised in a university class room. My knowledge of Romanian made it possible to understand the discussions and to adjust, if needed, the direction of the talks. Since it were geography students that populated the focus groups, the moderator, who was a lecturer, automatically started explaining how the technique 'works'. As a consequence, the focus groups resembled class discussions on the topic of migration. Notwithstanding these class-room conditions, the students did not really have problems to reveal many of their personal experiences. After two sessions with groups of students, it became clear, however, that recruiting other persons for these groups was extremely difficult. Stealing time from at least four persons simultaneously was impossible to plan within two weeks; in addition, migration was seen as an individual experience and the prospect of having to talk in public about personal experiences and failures worked repulsive, although the organised focus groups proved that once there, respondents were very open. Again, 'catching migrants' turned out to be problematic.

In a final step, again snow-ball sampling during the last two weeks of the fieldwork was used and individual interviews, together with a native interpreter, were conducted. Six intensive in-depth interviews with former migrants, at their home or workplace, could be undertaken. These interviews were extremely rich in empirical material, especially my concepts and categories were at that moment quite evolved, compared to the first interviews. The depth that was achieved in these interviews could not have been reached in these earlier interviews. So, although their number was quite low, their significance for the study was high. There is much to say about such a whimsical methodological path, but in what follows I will focus more on two spatio-temporal aspects of the study that influenced heavily the methodological choices: the phenomenon of what I would call 'methodological ruralism', and the intrinsic international academic context of multi-sited fieldwork;

4.2 How to handle methodological ‘ruralism’?

In Romania, ethnographic and survey research of migration has mainly been carried out in rural communities (see among others: Diminescu (2003), Elrick & Ciobanu (2009), Horvath (2008), Potot (2000), Sandu et al., (2004, 2006), Şerban & Grigoraş (2000)). Consequently, migration from urban areas is generally less covered. As figure 1A however shows, during the 2002 census, relatively more people from densely populated areas were abroad. In my study, I wanted to compare the urban and rural ‘sites’ of origin.

When I started developing contacts with Romanian researchers in order to investigate work abroad of Romanians, two important reasons were mentioned why research on urban migration was not documented in detail much earlier: (1) the relative importance of migration from rural areas (ontology) and (2) the practical difficulty to organise research in urban settings (methodology).

Although not visible in census data and in figure 1A, the first aspect has to do with the sudden ‘ruralisation’ of Romanian society in the nineties. As a consequence of the increasing economic hardship in cities and the continued maintenance of kinship networks between urban and rural areas, many urbanites returned to the countryside and to agriculture. Many of them went abroad a little while later, however (Diminescu, 2003). In fact, these rural emigrants were thus actually former urban dwellers. This raises the question whether these migrants can be depicted as rural migrants or not. Which ‘fix’ of human mobility has to be chosen? Through which window do we have to look to understand migration?

The second point is even more important. Compared to quantitative data on neighbourhoods of cities, for villages, census and other official data can be found on a detailed spatial scale (see figure 1A and Dimitriu & Ungureanu (2007)). In addition, villages with a high degree of external migration are ideal settings for ethnographical research because of their relatively well-defined boundaries. Within the social context of the village it is relatively easy to know who has been abroad for work, it is possible to know who started the migration chain and how it developed from its first link until the most recent ramblings of its members. It is also relatively easy to estimate the influence of migration abroad on the socio-economic structure of the village and to reconstruct the pathways through Europe that were followed. Due to remittances and conspicuous investments in houses and the church, some of these villages clearly bear witness of international migration. Sandu’s (2004) community study on migration in which information on more than 12.000 villages was gathered, was based on the local knowledge of village officials about the migration behaviour of the inhabitants. A study that could not have been realised in a similar way in an urban context.

As a consequence of this ontological and methodological focus on rural spaces of origin, however, rural migration has become the main framework through which Romanian migration is being interpreted. This methodological 'ruralism' influenced my own research practice. In Romania, whenever I mentioned my urgent need for developing 'thick description' of the practice of work abroad, I was encouraged to settle for a while in a Romanian village. In these settings, I was told, the problems of a total exodus of villages, of alcoholism of the stay behinds were the most impressive and these were the right places to unravel the development of a transnational migration field from beginning to end, it was argued. Interestingly, however, as I elaborated above, it turned out quite difficult to overcome this 'methodological ruralism'. It was only by changing the method from an intensive ethnographic approach to survey-work, that especially urban migrants could be assessed.

4.3 The magics of international collaboration

"The practical difficulties involved in multi-sited research, particularly when they involve multiple languages, can be resolved in part by abandoning the "lone ranger" model of fieldwork and adopting a bi-national or multi-national collaborative model" as is argued by Fitzgerald (2006: 6). It is the combination of 'a fresh viewpoint' and 'local knowledge' which makes international collaboration fruitful, he states. But as Sidaway (1992: 406) puts it: "the approaches of researchers who are nationals of the country concerned may be philosophically or methodolog[icall]y inappropriate". Indeed, what supporters of multi-sited fieldwork in migration research often do not mention is the fact that transnational mobility changes the social and the social scientific position of the researcher him or herself. I think two issues are especially at stake in a context of international collaboration: academic credibility and academic colonialism.

With credibility I mean that in order to sustain the diverse social relations in which a researcher in the field is positioned, it is needed to gain recognition. This is possible for instance by sending a CV, or more informally by asking the 'right' research questions; or in other words, by being in tune with the epistemological and methodological paradigms of the host university. Sometimes already existing collaboration networks are mobilised but often new contacts have to be made. In the latter situation, gaining credibility is of utmost importance. As a starting PhD-student for instance, being educated in an intellectual neo-Marxist atmosphere as in my case, this can turn out to be an important intellectual challenge/opportunity. Although, this is not the place to elaborate too far on this issue, the post-socialist context of the research played an important role in this process.

Eastern European human geography partially avoided the constraints limiting most of the social sciences during socialism due to its alliance with exact sciences (Maurel, 2002). The repercussions for epistemological development were however quite important. In many socialist countries, human geography studies were mainly restricted to an inventory of the various fields of economic and human activities leading to national atlases or, as for instance in the Romanian case, monographs which had to legitimate the newly constructed Romanian regions. Neo-Marxist, post-structuralist, feminist, post-modern, and other paradigm shifts in human geography were in fast tempo introduced when the limitation on the development of social sciences was loosened during the nineties. International collaborations, which played an important role in this process, as shown by Groza (2003) were therefore welcomed.

With the geopolitical shift, for Romanians, different language skills became important. The mastering of Russian turned out to be less important compared to French and afterwards English. Being multi-lingual as a visiting researcher therefore is a significant factor towards gaining credibility. In academic discussions, French was the main medium of communication although 'Frenglish' and 'Fromanian' often turned out to be more effective (see Watson, 2004).

Sidaway (1992), reflecting on research carried out mainly by British geographers in the 'Third World', argues that increasingly, academics from the North look to Third World countries as a subject for research, journal articles and grants. In the nineties, a similar phenomenon developed between East and West as for instance documented by Timar (2004). In this situation, geographies of academic knowledge production are highly uneven. In the West, theories and publications are produced and accumulated, while in the East, the empirical work is done or worse, serves as an interesting laboratory. During my research, 200 Romanian students were mobilised to conduct surveys. It is clear that this would be much more difficult to achieve for a Romanian researcher doing research in Belgium.

When spatially moving between different academic contexts in order to 'follow the people', taken-for-granted ontological and methodological aspects of research are being challenged.

5. Conclusion

As has been shown in the discussion above, different methods bracket out parts of space and time and highlight particular aspects of migration. Interviews while on the road, oral life stories 30 years after moving, participant observation of migrants' national festivities abroad, surveys, official statistics and so forth all reflect certain fixes (certain case-studies) of migration and give specific entry points to the complex world of migration. The selection of specific methods is thus strongly related to how migration is conceptualised and perceived.

By taking serious the fact that mobility research is constructed by specific conceptions of space and time, I want to engage with Favell's claim (Favell, 2005) that migration researchers have to be more self-conscious about the way contextual factors determine the intellectual content of their research itself. Through explicit recognition of the diversity of space and time, it is possible to contextualise the ontologies of migration. Through recognising on the other hand the space-time limits of doing research and the danger of stretching time and resources too thin (see Fitzgerald, 2006) the actual practice of research methods can also be placed in context.

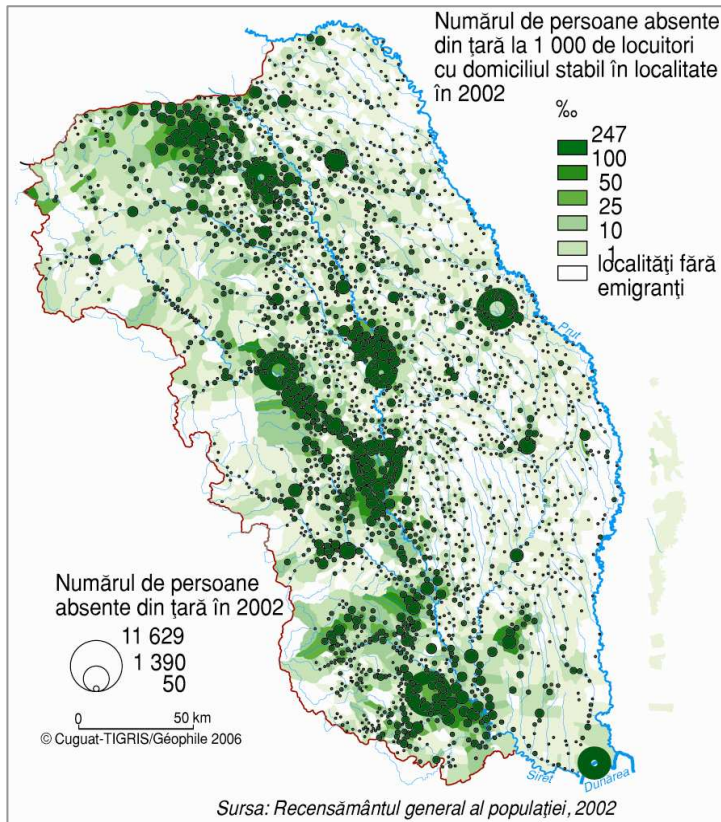
In my case, both aspects came together in the spatial fixing of migration in rural areas. The question then raises to what extent 'methodological ruralism' has permeated migration research in other settings. There are indications that 'methodological ruralism' is perhaps more broadly settled in migration research. When criticizing methodological nationalism, Fitzgerald (2006: 9) for instance proposes 'international urbanisation' as a better conceptualisation of migration: "the urban receiving context characterizing much international migration may be as important in shaping migrants' experiences as the fact that the migration is international" ; thus implying that migrants originate from rural areas. Through the Mexico-US ethnosurvey, Fussell & Massey (2004: 151) found evidence that previous migration theories, built up with ethnographical research in Mexican rural areas, did not hold true in urban areas: "Using data from the Mexican Migration Project, we found evidence of cumulative causation in small cities, rural towns and villages, but not in large urban areas [...] suggesting that the social process of migration from urban areas is distinct from that in the more widely studied rural migrant-sending communities of Mexico." Elaborating on the migration-development nexus, De Haas (2005) argues that migration is inaccurately described as a consequence of under-development since, according to him, development and urbanisation often lay on the basis of migration.

Mixing or triangulating qualitative and quantitative methods seems fruitful to contextualise research since different windows on migration can be opened at the same time. The above

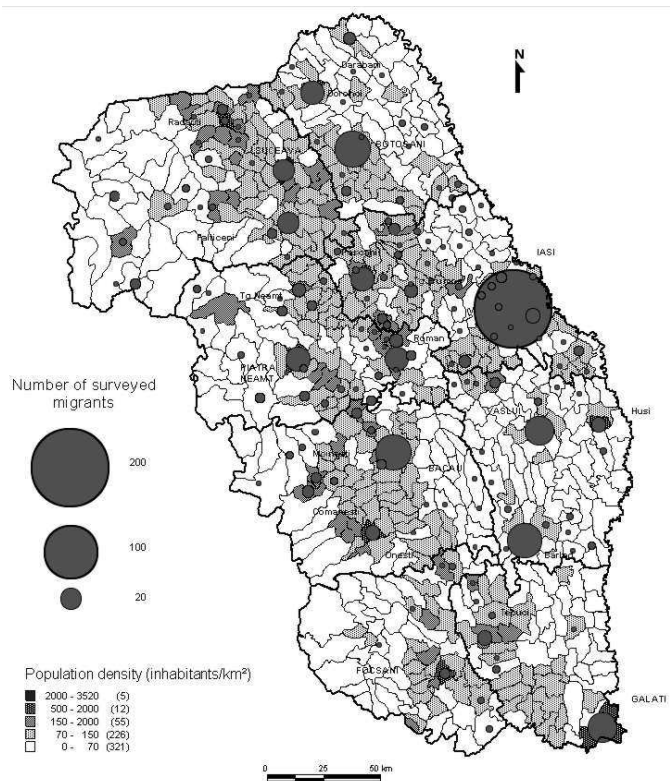
cited Mexico-US ethnosurvey (see Massey & Capoferro, 2004), a multi-method data gathering technique that combines ethnographic and survey methods in a single study and spans several decades, is one of the most conspicuous examples of method triangulation. It offers a solution to the time-space problem of doing research on an individual basis by combining the work of different researchers and research institutions. It also dismantles the war of positions between advocates of qualitative and quantitative methods, an increasingly criticised dichotomy (Sheppard, 2001; Johnston et al., 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Unwon, 2005)

As Fitzgerald (2006) proposes, strong theory formation and international collaboration solve the space-time problem of 'mobile methods'. However, one can question whether strong theory formation and international collaboration always go hand in hand. Indeed, 'corporeal' mobile methods do influence ontologies of migration during the research, since movement between different academic milieus also means movement between different social scientific paradigms. Although the real existence of social processes related to migration is certainly independent from the constructed nature of conflicting migration ontologies (see Sayer, 2000), the question raises how to deal with the struggle between different 'strong theories' in a situation of collaboration.

Figure 1A From: Rey et al (2005)



1B: Spatial spread of surveyed migrants: Based on own survey



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