

Engaging with Spontaneous Anthropologies: Fieldwork Learning Practices Across the Greek-Albanian Border

Antonio Maria Pusceddu

¹ *Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA), Lisboa, Portugal*

Abstract:

This paper reflects upon the relevance of spontaneous anthropologies for the ways anthropological knowledge is produced and circulated, understood, and made relevant in teaching settings and for the broader public audience. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci's observations on spontaneous philosophy and common sense, I consider spontaneous anthropologies the conceptions and views – often fragmentary and contradictory – through which people make sense of the world they live in and act upon. Arguably, spontaneous anthropology provides the rough empirical materials for more analytical understandings and explanations of the social and cultural worlds investigated by anthropologists. Drawing from my own research experience with Greek and Albanian border populations, I discuss the relationship between anthropology and spontaneous anthropologies in fieldwork learning practices. I suggest that closer engagements with spontaneous anthropologies in and across national borders can offer a fruitful basis for strengthening both teaching practices and critical anthropological interventions in the public sphere.

Keywords: Antonio Gramsci, Border, Common Sense, Fieldwork, Spontaneous Philosophy

Introduction

- Here we are. The border. Have you decided? Do we cross?
- We cross.

The above citation is from the movie *Ulysses' gaze* (1995) by Theodoros Angelopoulos. The film is about a filmmaker travelling across the Balkans searching for 'the lost reels' of the Manaki brothers, the cinema and photography pioneers in the Ottoman empire. He sets out from Greece with a taxi driver. He seems to hesitate at the Greek-Albanian border post, but he had already decided. The Manaki brothers are chosen as a metaphor for the historical complexity of the region at the turn of the 20th century. The Manaki brothers are 'good to think with' about the Balkans (Cowan 2008) because many histories and stories are told and claimed about them and who they were. Yanaki and Milton Manaki were born in Avdella, an Aromanian village in present-day northern Greece. Their activity was primarily based in Bitola, in present-day North Macedonia. The Iron curtain eventually separated them. Yanaki settled in Greece, while Milton remained in Yugoslavia. The stories of separation and connection of the Manaki brothers resonate with many other unknown and more ordinary stories of living with and across national borders. For this reason, the beginning of Angelopoulos' reflexive journey through the past and present of the Balkans provides an inspiring motif to introduce my argument. In this article, I approach the anthropological engagement in South-Eastern Europe through fieldwork learning practices in and across the Greek-Albanian borderland. More precisely, I look at how fieldwork learning practices entail closer and pedagogically significant engagements with what I call spontaneous anthropologies.

Building upon Antonio Gramsci's observations on 'spontaneous philosophy', I address spontaneity as a possible framework to conceptualise our ethnographic engagements with the lives and narratives of the people we study. Thinking through the idea of 'spontaneous anthropology', I aim to explore how this conceptualisation can positively shape the ways anthropological knowledge is taught, understood, and made relevant in teaching settings for the broader public audience. I consider spontaneous anthropologies the conceptions and views through which people make sense of the world they live in and act upon. Spontaneous anthropologies are thus grounded in the lived experience and the complex (and even contradictory) stratifications of common sense

(Crehan 2011, 2016), broadly understood as the ‘the everyday understanding of how the world works’ (Herzfeld 2010: 301).

Emphasising spontaneity, I am not naively claiming adherence to some truth or genuine intuition of the ‘native’s point of view’. Instead, I aim to develop closer reflections on the relevance of spontaneity in fieldwork learning practices and on how learning through practice can provide a critical ground for bridging abstract theorisations and the concreteness of situated lives and their meanings. To illustrate this point, I draw from my own experience of fieldwork learning practices in the context of the Greek-Albanian border regions. By doing this reflexive exercise, I am thinking of learning as a multi-sided process involving undergraduate and post-graduate students and scholars and the broader public. In this sense, learning is not just about how anthropology is taught and learned in specific educational contexts but also how it is shared and constructed as public knowledge. Ethnographic fieldwork can be (and often is) a puzzling experience. There are many ways of teaching how to do fieldwork and many good handbooks that help get prepared for it. Yet, no sophistication can equate to *doing* fieldwork – ethnographically engaging with people. Doing fieldwork is always a learning practice, which entails a lot of concerns and difficulties. Here I focus on learning as a continuing process that is undertaken through researching and living for a while along and across the Greek-Albanian border. This experience allows me to reflect upon my involvement with the border as a learning device at different times and contexts. Between 2006 and 2017, I conducted research in the region (2006-07, 2010-2012) and participated as a student (2006-07) and teacher (2017) in the Konitsa Summer School (KSS hereafter) in Greece¹, taking place in the border area and with a specific focus on borders. I believe this long-term engagement with the region can be a good starting point to address some reflections on learning and teaching anthropology in South-Eastern Europe.

Spontaneous anthropologists

I propose spontaneity as a framework to think about our engagements with the people and places we study. I suggest spontaneous anthropologies to conceptualise the complex, stratified, plural and contentious practices and narratives we learn and deal with during fieldwork. I conceptualise spontaneous anthropologies in analogy with Gramsci’s discussion of spontaneous philosophy. According to Gramsci, to a certain degree ‘all men [sic] are “philosophers”’, though ‘unconsciously’, because ‘even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity whatever, in “language”, there is contained a specific conception of the world’. The latter is what Gramsci defines as spontaneous philosophy, which is ‘proper to everybody’ and can be found – besides ‘language itself’ – in ‘common sense and good sense’, ‘popular religion’ and ‘also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of “folklore”’ (Gramsci 1971: 323; see also Cirese 1976)². While spontaneous philosophy encompasses the somehow chaotic stratification of disparate conceptions of the world, the idea of spontaneity refers more precisely to those creative fragments that ‘subaltern groups’ elaborate, appropriate, or rephrase to make sense of their life and their positions in society, which are nonetheless always intertwined with ‘conformism’. It is important to emphasise that ‘the subaltern’ should not simply be conflated with ‘the oppressed’, being a relational category that encompasses diversified grades and forms of subordination, hierarchy, and inequality. These fragments can be either submissive, thus conforming to the existing order and passively reproducing the subordination, or antagonist. They challenge hegemonic assumptions about the world and its inequalities.

The discussion on intellectuals is closely related and emphasises the relationships between the production of knowledge and society. Gramsci insists that ‘all men are intellectuals’ since they all have an intellect and can articulate their conceptions. Yet, ‘not all men have in society the function of intellectuals’ (Gramsci 1971: 9). The social function of intellectuals is to elaborate and/or convey coherent conceptions of the world that become dominant by persuasively presenting particularistic interests as general interests. I am oversimplifying an otherwise complex argument. I aim to highlight two aspects. First, intellectuals are not independent because they are not detached from the social relations in which they produce/reproduce knowledge. Second, as long as they fulfil their social function as intellectuals (e.g. academic intellectuals or think tank experts), they necessarily position themselves to produce compelling social narratives (Crehan 2016: 18-42).

As intellectuals, anthropologists are inevitably entangled in the production and reproduction of knowledge about the world and the social relations that make the world we live in. Paraphrasing Gramsci, one could also say that ‘all humans are anthropologists’, meaning that ‘ordinary’ people conceptualise and speculate about differences, culture, and society. They often draw from the conventional toolbox of anthropology (e.g. culture, ethnicity etc.), thus creatively appropriating or passively receiving the anthropological knowledge that circulates in the widespread common sense, indeed a stratified reservoir and assemblage of disparate conceptions and meaning.

We can think about spontaneous anthropology as an unpredictable combination of conventional and dominant narratives (e.g. on the nation, 'the West', Europe) and unconventional breaches of those narratives. The contingencies of people's livelihoods and life stories create the conditions for reacting differently, creatively, or even antagonistically to those narratives.

In the following sections, I illustrate my own learning experience about how people deal with borders in the Greek-Albanian borderland and what kind of engagements with spontaneous anthropologies can be highlighted in the fieldwork learning practices I participated in. I emphasize the border as a learning device, pointing out the educational potential of border crossing as a relevant fieldwork learning practice.

On the border

The border as a physical and metaphorical place – indeed a relational space – provides the main ground for advancing my reflections on the importance of engaging with spontaneous anthropologies in fieldwork learning practices. Focusing on borders and boundaries, I suggest that closer engagements with spontaneous anthropologies in and across national borders can offer a fruitful basis for strengthening both teaching practices and critical anthropological interventions in the public sphere.

The Greek-Albanian border was demarcated in 1913 by an international commission appointed by the Conference of Ambassadors in London right after the Balkan Wars. It was ratified in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference that followed the First World War. The border tore apart the last Ottoman provinces in the Balkans. Running along mountain fringes, rivers and cutting across valleys and even villages, the border set a new organisational and relational principle among the dense network of relations that connected valleys, plains, communities, and kin groups. The latter experienced the meaning of becoming 'border people'. They also had to learn to cope with new regimes of 'national identity' and the latter's shifting criteria (language, 'blood', culture etc.) (Green 2005; Hart 1999; Nitsiakos 2010; Winnifriith 2002). In the history of border disputes, the Greek-Albanian border can undoubtedly be included among those involving a surprising mobilisation of intellectuals and experts, ethnological maps and historical arguments to prove the right of one or the other side (Hart 1999). Such discourses became competing narratives about the region, penetrating the local common sense. Yet, the memory of shared histories could nourish a different picture than that of radically exclusive national narratives. The spontaneous anthropology of the people I have come across in the area did disclose far more complex attitudes.

In 2005, I travelled across the northern Greek border regions to the Prespes lakes area, where three national borders converge (Albania, Greece and North Macedonia). I had initially planned to conduct my doctoral fieldwork there³. Eventually, I opted for a group of villages in Epirus, along the Sarandaporos river valley, carrying out long-term fieldwork between 2006 and 2007. I was not interested in borders but marginal places. I assumed some remote villages in Epirus could make for my case, which focused on the dependency relations of small-scale animal farming on EU agricultural policies (and subsidies). Perhaps naively, I did conflate the idea of marginalisation with the border areas in Epirus (cf. Green 2005). However, I could not anticipate how the thick stratification of historical happenings could affect my project and how these happenings were related to the border in many ways. I became acquainted with the border area through people's life stories. The silences, the stories of suffering, the moments of rage, and even the kind lies appeared to me as fragments of a highly complex whole.

During the Greek Civil war (1946-49), mountain regions became areas of intense conflict. The population was forcibly displaced by either fighting side: the Royal Army in the attempt to deprive the enemy of any support (e.g. logistics and food supplies) and the Democratic Army in trying to displace the local population to safer places (nearby Albania, Yugoslavia and other Socialist countries) (Danforth and Van Boeschoten 2012; Laiou 1987). The post-Civil War years were characterised by militarisation and strict police control. Political refugees started returning to Greece as early as the 1950s, though many others returned only after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974 (Mazower 2000; Van Boeschoten 2000). Since the post Second World War era, the border has overlapped with the Iron Curtain for more than three decades. Relationships between Albania and Greece froze during the Cold war until the gradual thawing between the two countries in the 1980s and the reopening of the border in 1991.

I started learning the local geography by listening to stories about the Civil war (e.g. 'my grandfather was killed in Pirgo') and stories about the Italian military occupation in the early 1940s. I then tried to map by walking and

travelling around. Only then I could reconnect this spatial memory to my own experience in the area – the point where the Italian Army entered Greece in October 1940; the moment where the children leaving their villages entered Albania in 1948; the point where Nikos' grandfather was killed in 1947; etc. Other stories connected to more recent developments in the neighbouring country. By the time I started my fieldwork, every family involved in animal farming (with very few exceptions) hired Albanian shepherds, whom I had used to meet in the mountains. They were not the only Albanians living in this area's villages⁴. Many worked as builders or caregivers. There were not as many as in Konitsa but compared to the size of the village, and they accounted for a significant percentage of the local population.

The young Albanian shepherds were the other ones from whom I learnt about the border. This time it was not about memory but about more practical matters on where to cross, how long it takes etc. They also could tell different geography of the Greek border area compared to the one I could learn from my Greek acquaintances. Most of these guys – not to say all, had no residence permits. They knew which places had to be avoided to avoid finding themselves in trouble with the border police. It was another map, which connected safe places, co-nationals, and other trusted acquaintances.

In 2011 I settled in Leskovik, a small Albanian border town. Leskovik and Konitsa overlook each other across the border from the slopes of – respectively – mount Melezini and mount Trapezitsa. Leskovik and Konitsa have shared strategic positions in the Ottoman communication networks throughout history. Inhabited by Muslim and Christian Orthodox populations, they have been both important centres of the Bektashi Sufi order in Ottoman Epirus (Hasluck 1929: 536; Pusceddu 2013: 604-608). They also shared hardships. Leskovik, once a thriving town, was repeatedly bombed and put to fire between the Balkan Wars and the Second World War. During the Socialist period, the area was strongly militarized. In 1947, Konitsa was the theatre of one of the first battles of the Greek civil war. Until the fall of the Colonels' dictatorship, it remained an area under strong police and military control. It became a stronghold of the Orthodox Church-led nationalist irredentist claims on southern Albania in the same period. The re-opening of the border and an earthquake (1996) that attracted Albanian labourers in the reconstruction works re-connected the two towns, retrieving old networks and creating new ones. Many Albanians regularly travelled across the border for various reasons – either for work, shopping, or other business. Regular commuting (on a daily or weekly basis) was also ordinary among those living in the villages near the border (Nitsiakos 2010).

The telegraphic information reported above can explain what 'the border' – and the Iron curtain – meant for the people inhabiting the region. In the little *kafeneio* of a tiny village, one could come across a group of men playing cards who could easily speak Polish, Romanian, Czech and some Russian (see Danforth and Van Boeschoten 2012: 206). Discussions about the past were often a cause for argument between people who grew up in a Socialist country and those who grew up in Greece. Paying attention to the ways people dealt with the past, I was sometimes torn by the intense feeling of 'defeat' and 'loss' that memories implied. The act of remembering was certainly a present-related need, and as such, it did also matter for the youngest generation. Here I want to address these creative and complicated ways of dealing with the past of separations, loss, and defeat, as well as resistance and creative reinvention, through the framework of spontaneous anthropology.

The border as 'learning device'

In 2006 and 2007, I participated in the first two editions of the KSS. The summer school had a clear focus on borders and emphasised border crossings' ethical and epistemological importance. This was encouraged by critically reflecting on physical separations. The border was the learning device, either a source of theoretical discussions or an actual place and a subject of investigation. Short fieldwork exercises took place in the area, on both sides of the border. For those who chose to go to Albania, the border crossing was also a crucial moment in the fieldwork learning practice. However, for all the participants, talking about borders and looking at and thinking through *this* border were central pursuits of the summer school. These entailed walking at and through the border while interacting with people about border histories, practices and views, and everything related to what I have been framing as spontaneous anthropology. The following description of these ethnographic approximations can provide a clearer idea of how the border worked as a learning device.

On their first excursion, students went to the small border village of Molivdoskepasto. At the time (in 2006), a military border post was still in place. Students walked to the watching post, high on the slopes overlooking the confluence of the rivers Sarandaporos and Aoos (Vjosa, in Albanian). The border crosses the valley, overlapping with the Sarandaporos river and climbing steeply near the observatory post. The students could discern the borderline by

linking the boundary stones. They could also glimpse some villages across the border in Albania. They can easily reach them within a 30-minutes walk. On the same trip, students then drove to a demolished bridge on the Sarandaporos river, where the border post used to be until Albanian partisans destroyed it in the mid-1940s. The ruins of the old bridge Mertziani still hold a peculiar position in the Italian memory of the Greek-Italian war. The bridge became known for an anti-militarist song on the death of Italian soldiers during the chaotic retreat in November 1940, as the Greek Army fought back against the Italian attempt at invading the country. The ruins of the Mertziani Bridge, known to Italians as Perati Bridge – from the name of an Albanian village forcibly abandoned in the 1970s for its proximity to the border, were also a contentious *lieux de mémoire*. In that same year, a memorial tablet put by an association of Italian alpine soldiers on the ruins on the Greek side was later removed. The same place is also a symbol of the Greek national resistance, and now a memorial commemorates the last border guard. The multifaceted stories told through these places rendered the border a ‘palimpsest’ (Dalkavoukis 2019) in which conflict, contentiousness, and ambiguity were fundamental categories to think about how such a small valley had been shaped by multiple spatial and temporal scales of separation and connection. Whereas the ruins and all signs of separation could tell stories of conflict and disconnection, the *longue durée* of this little valley could teach quite different stories of connection, kinships, solidarity, reciprocity and community (Nitsiakos 2010). This little place, in brief, was a dense palimpsest about which no univocal story could be told. It was a severe challenge to homogeneity – in whichever sense. The persistent combination of connection and separation in the stories and experiences told and collected in the field provided the lived experience to elaborate on the epistemological and ethical implications of borders and boundaries. The spontaneous anthropology that students engaged with conveyed empathic and bewildering views about the many and conflicting scales shaping lives and places, all at once. The trips across the border expanded further (and intensified) the interaction between the local socio-geographies of separation and connection and the epistemological complexity underlying fieldwork learning practices.

For commuters, border posts can become familiar places – where relationships are built and cared for with officers, street vendors and other habitual commuters. Of course, not all borders are the same, and not all people are free to move across them. The exact borders can be virtually non-existent for a particular category of citizens and insurmountable for others (for instance, within the Schengen area). Border regimes are also clear reflections of global inequalities and power asymmetries. The Greek-Albanian border reflected in its scale how global inequalities were being rephrased by the new international division of labour and massive labour migration in the context of post-1989 Europe. Besides, Albania's peculiar history of isolation made it a rather impressive case of outward mobility in the 1990s (King, Mai and Schwander-Sievers 2005; Vullnetari 2012). In countries of emigration like Italy and Greece, Albanian immigration contributed to crafting a new self-perception of the position of both countries in the changing geography of international migration. When crossing the border in 2006, the experience was shaped by the cross-border relationships that made Albania a reservoir of cheap labour for the Greek economy. Since the 1990s, the Greek-Albanian border was also one of the increasingly militarised external edges of the European Union. The spontaneous anthropology encountered (and learned) on both sides of the border was very much moulded by the structural inequalities that impinged border relations (Dalakoglou 2017, Papailias 2003). In the remaining part of this section, I focus on border crossing as a fieldwork learning practice, emphasising how diverging experiences of border crossing shape different ways of engaging with the spontaneous anthropologies of border populations. I illustrate two specific fieldwork research experiences. In one case, large groups of students reach various Albanian locations passing through the border post. In the other case, a small group of students walk through the border along a mountain path leading to a nearby Albanian village.

In the first exercise, the students travel by bus to the border post and then to their final destination once they cross the border. On the first day, a group goes to a little village of the Greek minority (that is, officially recognised as such by the Albanian state), which stands very close to the border, at a short distance from Molivoskepasto – the place where students had their first sight of – and class on – the border. Another group goes to Leskovik. On the second day, the students repeat the exercise, but this time they all go to Leskovik, where a religious festival is taking place in a nearby Christian Orthodox church. Every day they pass through the border post, and every time they detail all the procedures of the border crossings through the Greek and Albanian border posts. In the places they reach, they meet people they can communicate with. It is summer, and they can quickly come across returning migrants. This is how they manage to chat about moving across the border ‘as migrants’, with or without a residence permit in foreign countries. They can also get an idea of how cross-border relationships materialise in the festival – such as in the forms and objects of consumption or even in the financial support for restoring a church. In brief, despite the short length of the exercise, students are confronted with the many interrogatives solicited by living along or across a concrete national border regime and by the complex networks that unfold across borders and boundaries (Nitsiakos 2010; Sintès 2010).

In the second border crossing exercise, some students follow an experienced anthropologist who had been studying for years the border and trans-border relations. He is also a native of the region. They set out to walk from an abandoned border post they had reached, driving a dirt back road. They walk along the mountain path until they get a spot near a creek. Their attention is drawn to some ruins they just passed. They learn these were the remains of a Muslim village abandoned after World War II. They are also told that they did cross the border, entering Albania. They glanced at Radat, an Albanian village nearby. Yet, they cannot identify any sign of the border, which is then pointed to by the teacher. A practical class indeed, in which students experience the lability of territorial separation – of the border regime. They learn it is a path through which Albanian villagers who work on the Greek side commute, and they even meet someone walking back home to Albania. It is not an extraordinary situation the one they are experiencing. Still, in the specific context of their focused discussions and reflections on the border and boundaries, that experience makes sense, far beyond the simple idea of people commuting across an invisible boundary. Looking at the guy walking back home at dusk, they get essential lessons about the complexity of borders, either as places or powerful metaphors of nations and cultures, which are not univocal nor bounded, but continuously (and creatively) remade through practice, connections, and disconnections.

Two concluding remarks need to be made about the above-described fieldwork learning practices. The first concerns the ways borders are deconstructed as historical facts, as arbitrary divisions etc. The second concerns the need to approach the border through a constructivist view, which emphasises the role of spontaneous anthropology in making and remaking borders. In the case I have illustrated here, spontaneous anthropology can help us think of borders as historical realities made by the people who act and live along and across them. Building upon spontaneous anthropology, we can use borders as learning devices to highlight separation and disconnection and connections and the interrelationships. This is what spontaneous anthropologies can teach and what we take up as anthropologists, making this empirical evidence the basis of emancipatory teaching and learning practices.

Conclusion

This article proposed to think about our relationships with the places and people we study through the framework of spontaneity, pointing to fieldwork learning practices as concrete engagements with spontaneous anthropologies. Inspired by Gramsci's reflection on spontaneity, I have outlined spontaneous anthropologies as ways of making sense of the world that is grounded in lived experience and common sense. Far from assuming spontaneous anthropologies grasp authentic and immediate experiences, I have stressed how they are always mediated by the complexities of the social and material world we inhabit, often at very complex levels. As such, they are shaped by dominant narratives and the social and material contingencies of livelihoods and life trajectories. Spontaneous anthropologies invite us to think about the active and fragmentary reproduction of social life from the point of view of its discrepancies and contradictions. This seems to be particularly poignant in the case of border regimes as paradigmatic manifestations of contemporary experiences of connection and disconnection. The fieldwork learning practices across the Greek-Albanian border are a telling example of the kind of pedagogical engagement that brings together the border as a learning device and the spontaneous anthropologies that elaborate on the stories and experiences of separation and connection, inclusion and exclusion.

Since the years of the fieldwork exercises described in this article, the proliferation of highly militarised and securitised border regimes has been making life difficult for a growing number of migrants and forcibly displaced people. More than ever, borders have become critical sites of epochal transformations (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). As the globalisation narratives started spreading in the 1990s, a surprisingly borderless world was being celebrated. Yet, the 1990s were also the decade of the fast-changing world political map, resulting in increased international borders (e.g. in the former Soviet Union or the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). This fact buttressed the emergence of Border Studies (Wilson and Donnan 2012: 1), a trans-disciplinary field rapidly expanding over the last three decades. Borders have increasingly become more important than they used to be in the past. We can legitimately say that border studies contributed to thinking about important issues linked to international borders – from sovereignty to international (im)mobility regimes. However, we cannot neglect how securitarian narratives of borders that call for radical separations, walls and protective barriers, have become dangerously popular. These are fundamental issues to be addressed in anthropological teaching. Fieldwork learning practices that cope with borders as concrete (and yet varied) historical realities can provide the challenging framework to learn through experience, hence critically approaching biased assumptions about bounded cultural worlds.

In this article, I have proposed to think about our teaching and learning engagements through the category of spontaneous anthropology. Using this formula, I wanted to highlight how discourses and conceptions on how people are and can be essentially connected across borders co-exist – and might be in tension with – ideas of separateness, historical disconnection etc. I have resorted to Gramsci's thinking about possible strategies for radical social emancipation to link anthropology as a project of knowledge to the need for continuous learning engagement with the world we study and inhabit.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

¹ The International Konitsa Summer School in Anthropology, Ethnography and Comparative Folklore of the Balkans started in 2006. The KSS is organised by the Border Crossings Network in collaboration with the University of Ioannina and the Municipality of Konitsa (<https://www.border-crossings.eu/konitsa> access 20 February 2019).

² 'Common sense' translates the Italian *senso comune*, which does not bear the same positive connotation as the English term. See the editors' note in Gramsci (1971: 323, fn. 1).

³ My first trip to this region dated back to 2001 while spending a semester at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki as an undergraduate student.

⁴ About Albanian migration after 1990 see (Vullnetari 2012); about Albanian migration to Greece see (Sintès 2010); about regional transborder mobility see (Nitsiakos 2010).

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