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REGIONAUTS, MOBILITY AND THE BORDER WORK OF CULTURAL COALESCENCE.

By Tom O'Dell

In the opening episode to Bron a body is found lying on the Öresund bridge exactly and evenly distributed over the Swedish/Danish border. It is cut in two by the border, and along the border – quite literally. This is one way of understanding borders, as things that separate and divide. Lines of contestation. But in the course of the drama of “Bron”, we find that the bridge is also a border that enables certain actions, performances, and rhythms of movement, understanding, and connection. The body, the bridge and the border, as it turns out, bind things together even as they mark a point of distinction and separation. Mark has provocatively pointed to some of the ways in which we might ethnologically question the discrepancy between regional discourse and lived content... He points to the manner in which the drama of the bridge begins with the lights going out... but this is a process that is going on all the time... the lights are always going out and the border is always different when they go on again.... In what follows, I want to push this line of thought a bit further. It is all too easy to see borders as static entities drawn in sand or delineated on maps, but if we look at them in terms of what they put in motion, as mobility catalyzers, it can be interesting to see what other types of regional or trans-border “content” come into view.

The Öresund Region had a long delivery period (some of Markus Idvalls work points to a century long endeavor, and Anders Linde-Larsen's work points to connections between Skåne and Denmark that run far deeper in history than that), but in many ways it could be argued that its birth can be dated to the first week of July 2000. During that week the people of the Öresund Region were, for the first time ever, given the opportunity to make the bridge, (and the region) their own through a week-long series of events that gave them access to the bridge. I was there on one of the first days of celebration at the "bridge biking event" to conduct fieldwork on issues of national, regional and local identity. I was full of anticipation. It was emotionally exciting to be on the verge of biking onto the bridge and entering the Region. A geography which local Swedish newspapers and politicians had told us and promised us citizens so much about...

Now, I'm American, and I bear with me my own history of experiences of how national, and more regional identities can be evoked. Slogans come readily to mind such as Emma Lazarus's . "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." Or on a more regional plane, the words printed on every car license plate in New Hampshire, "Live Free Or Die" (New Hampshire is the "Granite State"). And I spent my

childhood singing a national anthem at sporting events with such lines as, “And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there”... OK, those are lines that sound as though they could have been written by Dr. Seuss... but on so many occasions I watched as they nearly brought tears to people’s eyes as they sang them. Rhetorics of identity have a certain flavor in many parts of the United States... But the contents of those identities and significances attached to them differ greatly from one context to another...

Yet there I was, in July of 2000, about to enter “*the field*”, and explore a new territory by riding onto the bridge and into a region.

OVERHEAD

It was eight o’clock in the morning and I stood with thousands of other cyclists clustered together in four long lanes in a field by a road, a kilometer away from the Øresund bridge – which I couldn’t even see from where we were standing. Long red and white carnival-style tents had been pitched beside us. Everyone had to file through the tents with their bikes in hand in order to pick-up their official “Øresund’s bridge biking T-shirt”, and a small backpack stuffed with a towel (bearing a similar Øresund’s bridge biking logo), an empty water bottle, and a second small plastic bottle of Ramlösa. The morning was crisp and clear and we all stood patiently

waiting for our turn to begin our day's biking trip over the bridge.

Over the course of the day 42,000 cyclists would make the trip over the bridge, and in order to avoid complete chaos, the organizers were starting us in small clusters. As part of the attempt to get us all in the "biking mood", music was played intermittently through the speaker system. As the J. Geil's Band's "Angel in the Centerfold" came to an end, the Master of Ceremonies was about to let the first group begin, but first he endeavored to establish the ground rules for the day, "Do *not* bike in the emergency lane," "Enjoy the view," "You are allowed to stop on the bridge, but only in the designated places," "It pleases me to see that everyone has a helmet." Of course, these were all rules that we all broke immediately, but as the first groups embarked, he continued to enthusiastically compliment us, "You are taking it nice and easy. *VEEEERY GOOD!!!*", "*OUTSTANDING!!!* You're taking it easy!" As the rest of us stood and watched, waiting our turn, he continued to try to entertain us by enticing us to start a "wave" which began in the front of the line, but did not have enough strength to make it all the way to the back.

He then asked, "Do you think that you can all ring your bike bells together?" In a half-hearted compliance scattered members of the group around me started a feeble chorus of pling-a-linging, ringing the bells on

their bikes to please the voice in the distance. The voice was not satisfied by the results, and urged us to try one more time, “altogether now!”

OVERHEAD: *Tom in Spandex*

Was this really the birth of a region? There were no bombs bursting in air. Just a lot of people dressed in spandex with large helmets on their heads. Or was this yet another example of what Paul Virilio (2000:17ff.) calls “Polar Inertia”, involving a lot of movement and the expenditure of great amounts of energy, without getting anywhere?

As it turns out, emotions of cultural identity are difficult to orchestrate, steer and lead. In arguing for the need to build the bridge, and set the ground for a new degree of regional integration, the Öresund committee had argued:

Öresund has huge scope for development. A region whose components are complementary in many ways. A region that offers more of everything. More people, more choice, more interaction, more international attention. Soon more will become better. Better market opportunities, faster growth, higher investment, a stronger competitive position and a higher standing in Europe. (*The Birth of a Region* 1999)

And they continued:

Öresunders know that good ideas have no boundaries. We look beyond convention for solutions (Ibid.)

Despite the grand plans of the Öresund Committee and other actors trying to establish a new region (and more importantly in their own thinking) a regional brand, the bridge opening was a very modest (at times nearly comical) beginning for the Öresund **Region**. Indeed, the week-long festivities surrounding the bridge had as much to do, if not more, with branding and marketing than region building. But that being acknowledged, the power and strength of most cultural processes lies in their modest origins – in an appreciation of what spandex, helmets, and free t-shirts can mean...further down the road. (**OVERHEAD: People on Bridge**) Because there on the bridge was a group of people who could easily be forgotten or overlooked, but whom I tend to think of as Regionauts – the people who would soon find the bridge to be an integrated part of their daily lives, people on the move through the region, on trajectories which had never previously been possible in this way. The people whom the local politicians in the year 2000 hoped would come to be the citizens of the newly opened region.ⁱ

Nearly ten years later I found myself sitting in a meeting with local politicians, bankers and entrepreneurs, reviewing plans for the development of the region. The woman sitting next to me was a consultant representing diverse Øresund based businesses. Her message was clear, “The Øresund Region needed to be better integrated”. In part she was concerned about judicial and taxation problems, but in part, the problem she repeatedly pointed to could be understood as the failure of the people of the region to develop a stronger sense of mutual interest and common identity. Others in the room showed an appreciation of her concern and echoed it. The political dream of a well-integrated transnational region seemed to have run into a few snags. And one of the bleak conclusions that might have be drawn was that the Regionauts were never able to convert the geography surrounding the bridge into a place in which they felt at home, and they had moved on. Or had they?

A review of the statistics over the number of passages made over the sound in the first decade of the bridge’s existence would, at first glance, seem to indicate that some form of regional cohesion or compression had occurred. Whereas only approximately 3,000 people commuted over the sound to work in 2000,ⁱⁱ that number had risen to over 19,000 by 2009.ⁱⁱⁱ Of these commuters approximately sixty percent opted to use the train while the

remaining forty percent traveled by car.^{iv} But the numbers here were not evenly divided across the sound. Lower housing prices on the Scanian side of the sound had attracted a great number of Danes who worked in the Copenhagen area over to Sweden, and the strong service sector in Denmark had in turn functioned as an attractive labor market for Swedes looking for jobs (jfr. Löfgren's contribution to this volume). The stronger value of the Danish crown in relation to the Swedish crown only worked to intensify the effects of these tendencies. As a result, 94% of those making the commute across the sound at the time lived in Scania.

But this is a fragile pattern of mobility more dependent on market forces than allegiances of identity. As Denmark entered a globally anchored financial crisis in 2009 the number of people commuting to Denmark sank year by year to under 16,000 commuter per day in 2013, and bouncing gently back to 16100 in 2014.^v

This is the economic and demographic context in which commuting has taken place in the Øresund Region. Despite shifts in the number of commuter per day, the direction and rhythm of the daily flow of mobility remains constant with 94% of commuters living in Scania, traveling to Copenhagen in the morning and back to Scania in the evening. And in this flow is a world of small details and contradictions that commuters are ever making note of: "Why do the coffee machines on the

train accept Danish coins, but not Swedish?” “Why can’t I use my Skånekort on the Copenhagen subways?” or “Why does the train stand still for ten minutes in the Malmö station...can it possibly take so long to detach a car or two?”

But for the Regionauts, the commute to and from work is far from limited to the period of time spent on trains. A wealth of experience and knowledge about the nature of this particular transnational journey has successively been accumulated and internalized. Like NASA scientists most Regionauts worked to fine tune their journeys, perfect them, and eliminate as many bugs from them as possible. People have learned that there is no need to get up and 6:00 AM when 6:08 works just fine. And over the years, it became increasingly possible for most people to judge one’s own schedule by the activities of neighbors: if my neighbor was getting his morning paper, then it was time for me to be clearing the breakfast dishes from the table. A glitch in the morning routine caused by a child unwilling to get dressed according to plan, or a misplaced house key, did not require a glance at a watch for people to understand where they stood in relation to a train that would be arriving at a local station in twenty minutes. It became increasingly possible to understand and feel this relationship intuitively. Clocks and watches increasingly offered fewer and fewer surprises and worked instead to

confirm what a well trained Regionaut already felt. It was time to pick-up the pace.

In a similar fashion, the train ride itself quickly accrued its own cultural grammar of rhythmical assurances and benchmarks. A Regionaut traveling on the 8:30 train from Lund, at the tail end of rush hour, would, for example, face railway cars full of standing people all the way to Copenhagen. But at Österport, a station lying just a few stops after the central station in the Danish capital, that same Regionaut would find herself/himself on a nearly empty train on its way north to Helsingør. And without explanation, the language spoken by the conductor would shift from Swedish to Danish. The only thing remaining of the cultural energy of the first leg of the journey being the heaps of abandoned Swedish newspapers, paper coffee mugs and sandwich wrapping paper. Rather than sitting on a commuter train whisking a transnational workforce to their places of employment, one now found oneself on the equivalent of a slow moving rural milk train, chugging its way through one village after the other with elderly passengers and a handful of teenagers on their way to school lethargically stepping on and off the train here and there. The train may not have actually altered speed at all, but the ride felt slower and less tense.

CONCLUSION:

I could go on, and if I had the time, I probably should, because an understanding of the cultural changes occurring in the region requires a close analysis of the small but significant details unfolding in people's lives as they move about, as much, if not more, than a discourse analysis of regional planners', and politicians' grand words. Politicians and planners have a need to assert that which is "bigger", "better", and "more" but beneath the radar of such political rhetoric, I have been trying to point to processes of "cultural coalescence" that are taking place around the bridge and the border it bridges. To coalesce is "to grow or to come together as to form one whole; fuse; unite". As I see it, cultural coalescence is a slow, fragile, and asymmetrical process that looks very different depending upon the perspective from which it is viewed. What is seen from the Danish side of the border ("camping site wilderness Sweden") is not at all the same as what is seen from the Swedish side, but this is the nature of cultural borders. "Cultural coalescence" is not a neat process, and it may not result in a single tightly knit, thoroughly-integrated community, region, or form of cultural identity. But being incomplete is not the same non-existence.

In contrast to cultural coalescence, Cultural **contestations** and **conflict** around issues of "difference" are more dramatic processes that tend to be

easier to see – if for no other reason than the fact that they can be explosive, and explosions are hard to miss. And yes, borders contain these processes too. But *cultural coalescence* is interesting because it *contains the processes that prevent borders from developing into gaps*. They may not be an integrated aspect of the daily experiences we valorize, or to which we readily assign great significance in the course of daily life, but I'm rather interested in this odd ethnological topic: the cultural processes of coming togetherness (which may very well occur over lines of difference)... It is here along the borders of this territory that we find the essence of the prefix "Co" which means: 1) "together" 2) "mutually, equally", 3) "jointly." I wonder, what are the movements, rhythms, and materialities that are subtly at play behind these types of processes? What is it that pulls us together, that keeps us together, when it would otherwise be so easy to turn our backs?

So...what exactly is it that prevents Martin Rohde from telling his aspergers ridden Swedish counterpart, Saga Norén, from taking a hike? Perhaps it's the fact that she's different, and that can be magnetically intriguing in and of its self.

THE END

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Describe commuting, then back to the bridge as border and a symbol for the region. Borders separate. They are easily perceived as lines that divide, while we view regions and contained/containing wholes. But all regions are permeated by borders of all kinds. Borders are mirrors, and they are also seams that stitch cultural phenomena together.

Maybe this is where you can talk about the rhythm of commuting and flows of bodies over the bridge. Moving a service sector to Copenhagen in the morning and taking it home in the evening. High wages and for quite a while a favorable exchange rate of Danish Crowns to Swedish.

Growth of Danish suburbs around the bridge, attraction of lower housing prices... but all of this could change..

But at the moment

Borders as separating people. But borders as shifting centers of attention
Talk about driving from Ystad to Malmö with Christer and him commenting on the fact that E6 (or E4?) was posted for Gothenberg.
“Well Christer, from the view point of many in Skåne, Stockholm is a periphery in the woods... Different perceptions of centers and peripheries. Make a theoretical point here.

...

Build a bridge where you talk about how you live in Stockholm & Lund
People in Stockholm know little about what is happening and vice versa
ESS as an example. Few even within academia know what ESS is.

Plans for 40,000 på Brunnshög.

Give the example of the site in Ohio tripling in size over 30 years. Would make Lund grow from 112,000 to 350 000 making Lund Malmö over a half million people. All of a sudden the little brother to Copenhagen isn't quite as small anymore.

Confusion in the film Bron as to who had responsibility for the dead body in the middle of the bridge, but the balance of regions are ever shifting, borders have different

qualitites Värmland & Norway
Texas & Mexico
Isreal and Gaza

The Öresund border is a quiet borer, the region has been designed as “safe place” not to threaten Stockholm or Copenhagen...

It is lagon in this sense

But perceived very differenty lin Denmark than in Slåne

ⁱ For a larger discussion of the mobility as related to the bridge opening, and for a larger discussion of the concept of “Regionauts” please see Tom O’Dell, “Øresund and the Regionauts”, In *European Studies*, 19:31-53, 2003, and Tom O’Dell, “Regionauterna”, in Anders Linde-Laursen, Per Olof Berg & Orvar Löfgren (eds.) *Öresundsbron på uppmärksamhetens marknad: Regionbyggare i evenemangsbranschen*. Pp. 97-114. Lund, 2002.

ⁱⁱ www.oresunddirekt.com/article.aspx?lang=1013&id=39177

ⁱⁱⁱ Öresundsbro konsortiet, *Öresundsbron og Regionen*. 2009, s.13.

^{iv} <http://www.tendensoresund.org/sv/download/14pendling.pdf>

^v <http://www.oresundsinstittet.org/fakta/pendling/>