

## BORDER ZONES AND MOBILITY –

### **The case of the Öresund region**

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Today the Nordic countries are seen as territories with cold borders compared to other regions still haunted by old border conflicts. The Nordic image is one of homogeneous and peace-loving nation states, delineated by natural borders, but behind this image is a much more turbulent history. Once upon a time the Nordic kingdoms of Denmark-Norway and Sweden-Finland were organized as aggressive maritime mini-empires with a great appetite for military conquest. Intense and almost constant warfare characterized the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Borders were redrawn, ethnic groups and languages mixed within these conglomerate states. While Denmark became more oriented towards the North Atlantic, Sweden looked towards the Baltic. Water was a uniting element, not a separating one. It was the waterways that kept these two mini-empires together.

The straits of Öresund had for long time been a waterway connecting the central parts of Denmark and the capital Copenhagen with its Eastern provinces. After a number of bitter wars in the seventeenth century Sweden conquered these provinces. Öresund was turned into a national boundary and water came to separate rather than unite. Copenhagen looked west towards the remaining parts of the kingdom and the province of Scania and the town of Malmö found themselves on the outskirts of Sweden. Contacts across the Sound diminished.

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries there has been dreams of bridge across Öresund, but plan after plan was abandoned for many reasons, technological, political, military and economic - an later environmental concerns.

When the Swedish and Danish governments finally decided to go ahead and build the bridge in 1991 the reasons mainly had to do with a stagnating economy. Both Copenhagen and Malmö had high unemployment and an ageing industrial structure. The bridge project was seen not only a temporary boost to the local economy, but more important as a promise of a brighter future. The hopes were high for the Öresund project. With its plans for heavy investments in infrastructure and the linking of two cities on the borders of two small nations, it was seen as a model for future economic as well as cultural integration within the European Union. It was an experiment in the new Europe without borders. All over Europe transnational regions were developed or invented, but many of them were more of blueprints and EU dreamscapes than tightly integrated regions. There are many half-dead crossborder regions out there...

The bridge construction stretched from 1994 to 2000 and now the bridge is about to celebrate its tenth birthday. What have we learned so far about the attempts to build a new transnational region? What is a transnational region, a well delineated territory, a hybrid micro-nation, a shared identity, a marketplace or a case of place-branding? Together with a group of cultural and economic researchers I have been following the Öresund project, since the start of the bridge building in the 1990s. Looking back it is possible to identify three stages of regional development.

The first one covers the years up to the bridge opening in 2000. This period I will call the years of the **dreamscape**, a utopian era of visions, plans and dreams for the future. The second stage of the first years after the opening of the bridge could be called ‘**the steeplechase course**, a time of focus on obstacles, barriers, irritations and frustrations in region-making. And finally, the third stage I will call the ‘**tilting bridge**’, the ways in which regional asymmetries created flows people, ideas, investments and goods across the Öresund. The three stages of course overlap and interact.

### **The dreamscape:**

During the construction process which lasted six years it became more and more unclear what actually was going on: a bridge construction or invocations of future transnational metropolis. This bridge project was densely inhabited by visions, dreams and expectations, there was so much this bridge could do. The bridge was a feeler or tentacle exploring the world on the other side of the water, and the construction work and the artificial island out there in the sound came to symbolize a third space, - a no-man’s land - neither Sweden, nor Denmark, offering a neutral space of the truly transnational, a creative territory inbetween two nation states.

The construction company also used any opportunity to dramatize the process: only 246 days left until opening, the most inaugurated bridge ever – rituals and events for everything. The bridge was built by engineers but also by event-makers – this was the days of the experience economy.

### **The steeplechase course**

As the bridge opened in 2000 expectations were great, now the region would finally live up to all the visions and dreams of the construction years, but the media enthusiasm was soon exchanged for a mood of disappointment. Why were so few cars travelling across the bridge, what happened to the region? The mood turned into irritation and frustration: suddenly there

were all these obstacles and barriers blocking transregional development. The new regionauts who started to move across the sound in search of jobs, housing, education, shopping or leisure also made the two old nation states very visible. There was a new awareness of the thousands of minor national differences, that were embedded in administrative routines and public life, state regulations and legislation. The media were full of Kafkaesque tales of confrontations with bureaucratic red tape, routines and national traditions, endless discussions with tax authorities or attempts to secure a Danish or Swedish social security number needed to be able to get your pay check, sign for a loan or just rent a video across the street. In the same way administrators and businesspeople cooperating across the bridge realized that what they just thought to be their own natural routines or common sense, turned out to be very national styles of doing things:" On the other side of the bridge they do things differently!"

The regionauts now experienced several centuries of the thickening of the nation state in everyday practices. They were "touched by the state" in all kinds of situations. Above all this was the result of the strong homogenizing effects of the period of strong "welfare state nationalism" in Denmark and Sweden after the Second World War, which left both states with a standardized infrastructure in many fields of everyday life, from the different national standards of paper punchers to the design of kitchen sinks. (Washing up?)

The power in the media choice of the concept of "barriers" was strong. The whole discussion about barriers to integration and contact had a passivating effect for many actors, who resorted to the lament: if only... "If only the ministers in charge of the tax systems could harmonize the rules or government officials weed out all the irritating problems involved in making a living or moving a family across the Sound... If only we could understand the language and mentality of those Danes or Swedes better..." There was the idea that someone else had to get those road blocks of the bridge before action was possible.

The focus on national barriers also overemphasized the differences between the two countries. In an international perspective the political, economic and cultural similarities between the two nations are more striking, but what we learned from these years is what Freud has called the narcissistic tendency... Swedes and Danes have mirrored each other for centuries, shaping their own national identity with the help of the neighbour. When you discover that this mirror image is pretty close, perhaps to close for comfort, there is a tendency to emphasize all the minor differences. National stereotyping is still a favourite sport around Öresund.

But looking back we can see that all the reports of problems, all the mundane irritations, and the grating sounds in the machinery were really a symptom of that actual integration slowly was taking place and as in any process of change this also meant a battle for power between different institutions and interests.

### **The sliding bridge**

But slowly new groups of regionauts developed everyday paths and projects, and learned to handle the potentials of the two nations now united by the bridge and a swift commute. Swedes continued the tradition of visiting Copenhagen as a fun outing, enjoying the bright lights of the city, shopping and also bringing back bargains such as low-taxed alcohol. In Copenhagen there was no such strong tradition of going to Sweden for pleasure shopping or weekend fun. And after all why should inhabitants in a capital be interested in the periphery on the other side of the bridge?. Slowly, however, Danes started to take advantage of the widening currency gap. The strong Danish krona combined with higher wages and a booming economy created a Danish buying power, that made shopping in Sweden a bargain in many fields. How much cheaper was a fridge, a bag of groceries, a pair of eye glasses or dental work? A consumer program on Danish TV in 2007 illustrated the new economic potentials with the slogan, “Sweden – Discountland”. The reporter crossed the border illustrating all kinds of price differences: a shopping cart full of groceries, 25 % cheaper on the Swedish side, a month of child day care only a third of the price in Denmark, 3000 crowns in Denmark, only 900 in Sweden, a new car 35 % cheaper in Sweden, a three room flat or a house with a sea view almost half the price in Malmö compared to Copenhagen... etc. (Rabatten DR 1, 4 jan 2007)<sup>i</sup> This kind of border pedagogy led to a growing number of Danes settling on the Swedish side and thanks to the bridge it was now possible to live on the Swedish side and commute back to jobs in Copenhagen.

At the same time the high unemployment figures in Malmö made growing numbers of Swedes start to commute daily to Copenhagen, where job opportunities were many. At last, in 2006 traffic forecasts were surpassed, after the first five slow years and in 2007 the figures were higher than even the most optimistic expectations.

It was the many small national differences and the economic asymmetries that made the bridge tilt in ways that made some regionauts, goods, ideas and investments to slide easily across the bridge. The new regionauts slowly learned to scan the market for bargains, and possibilities as well as legal loopholes and tax advantages, but it is not a just a simple

calculation of monetary gains and physical distances. There is also the dimension of what could be called cultural logistics, definitions of what kinds of border crossings are attractive, familiar or uninteresting. Seen from Sweden, Copenhagen and Denmark is “South of the Border”, the continent starts here! While Copenhageners used to joke that Asia started in Malmö. When Swedes go on shopping trips to Copenhagen, they still do it in the tradition of the fun outing and the fact prices nowadays mostly are higher in Denmark than in Sweden doesn’t dissuade them.

### **Unwanted regionauts**

During the construction of the Öresund bridge there were both utopian and dystopian visions of the future region. Not only would the bridge bring cheap liquor to Sweden, but also illegal immigrants, drugs, prostitution, and continental laxity. In Denmark on the other hand there was fears of the wrong kinds of regionauts searching for fun and sin in Copenhagen. All such images conjure up situations of the wrong kinds of visitors, goods or influences crossing the bridge.

There were, however, a number of surprises in the ways in which things worked out. The first surprise had to do with a tightening of Danish immigration laws which meant that many young Danish citizens could not bring a partner from a non-EU country into Denmark without a number of strict qualifications being filled.<sup>ii</sup> In reality this meant that many newlywed young couples had to find other strategies, and the most popular one was to move to Sweden, where immigration laws were less strict. A new Danish exile community developed in Malmö, waiting the necessary years for one of the spouses to obtain Swedish citizenship, which then made it easier to go back to Denmark. The Danish partner could commute to work in Copenhagen, but for the immigrant partner Denmark was a closed labour market and the high unemployment in Malmö made it difficult to get jobs.

Differences in immigration policies have become a constant source of irritation between Denmark and Sweden. Swedes have accused Denmark of creating new barriers and leaving Sweden to deal with refugee and immigrant problems, while some Danes, especially from the populist right-wing party ‘The Danish People’s Party’, which is the main force behind the tough immigration laws, accused Sweden of being too lax.

A quite different kind of small but visible exile community was created by Swedish homeless drug addicts who moved over to Copenhagen in order to take advantage of easier access to alcohol and drugs. This time Danes accused Swedes of exporting their problems.

Number-wise the most striking influx is, however, the recent and rapid flow of Danes in

search of affordable housing and other economic advantages mentioned earlier. There is an irony here, often discussed in Danish media. The risk of the development of immigrant ghettos has been a constant worry in Denmark, and then all of a sudden ‘**Danish ghettos**’ started to evolve in Malmö. Certain housing estates close to the bridge came to be dominated by Danes, who created commuter enclaves in these Swedish settings. This was not how Öresund integration was supposed to develop.

In a sense this development created a mocking mirror image, which the Swedish media also took up. When Denmark started to introduce tests for immigrants applying for citizenship, a Malmö newspaper jokingly constructed a similar Swedish test for Danish immigrants in Malmö.

In the Danish media there was also a discussion about the wrong kinds of Danes taking up residence in Malmö. Young men just out to get a fancy BMW or a cheap flat and with no interest in their new Swedish surroundings. They were accused of being a typical ‘Brian’, a derogatory name that in Denmark denotes a vulgar consumerist and working-class lifestyle.

This raises the important question of attitudes to different kinds of regionauts and what kinds of contact create cross-border integration. A quick shopping visit or a Sunday outing across the border does not have to lead to anything much. In the same way, a young Dane deciding to move to Malmö for a couple of years or a Norwegian spending summers in Sweden may not create any strong ties across the border. He or she has job, friends and leisure back in Copenhagen – this is exile light. Many regionauts see their engagement across the bridge as a temporary phase in the life cycle, but what happens when the young Danes in Malmö form families? The decision to take your kids to a Swedish day care centre or school may be the start of a different kind of anchoring, or as one Dane put it: ‘When we get kids we have to move back to Denmark, if they start going to Swedish day care they may eventually become Swedes ...’

As we know from migration studies regionauts may start out thinking of their move across the border as a temporary arrangement, but as time moves on things change and they may decide to stay for good.

### **The lessons**

So what have we learned from these last 15 years?

First of all, never underestimate the power of the nation state. In an age that loves to talk about global flows and friction free mobility. The bridge made the thousands of small national routines and rules visible.

There is also a reification of the national and a production of stereotypes like ‘typically Danish’ or ‘the Swedish ways of doing things’. An simplified image of two national cultures meeting. This has also meant, for example, that the many non-Scandinavian immigrants in the Öresund region have been written out of the narrative, although they are an intensely transnationally mobile group, but also that the great variations inside the nation are played down. For regionauts moving across the border simply become Danes or Swedes, gender, class, generation etc is played down.

The national also works on another level. One shouldn’t underestimate the role of national vanity and competitiveness. The cultural tensions that surface when nation states are forced to work together in new ways makes transnational regions like these special. Cooperation between two nations can be driven by national vanity and competition. ‘Let us show that we can do the job of region building better or differently from our neighbours on the other side of the bridge.’ At a meeting discussing Öresund experiences with Stockholm region builders, one of them remarked: ‘We envy the fact that you have a region stretching across a national border, we lack that creative energy and challenge up here.’

There is an ambivalence in the ways this ‘national othering’ is used. On the one hand the regional project is seen in terms of new forms of integration and homogenization, on the other there is also the hope that there will remain a tension of abroadness, maintaining the magic of ‘trans’, as in transnational, transforming. The magic and potential of a cross-border region is not about integration into homogeneity but about keeping up a certain amount of creative otherness. a balancing act

Secondly: a dynamic transnational regional development must use the advantages, imbalances and asymmetries created by national differences and economical conditions. Asymmetry creates tilting bridges, makes it easier for people, ideas, goods and investments to slide across, but it also makes them vulnerable. Changing house prices, a tougher job market, currency changes, new legislation may rapidly change the landscape of possibilities for regionauts. This kind of often market driven integration also makes it hard to plan for the future. Regionauts may all of a sudden develop new paths, use new niches or decide to stay at home.

And this brings us to an important lesson. Like so many region building projects the Öresund region has focused on the seductive power of the map. The region starts and ends here, but integration is always uneven, affecting some groups and actors more than others. Instead being the well-delineated territory that is marked in homogenous red on the maps of the planners, the Öresund region today is rather like an archipelago, connecting some places,

some interests, some people. For some the region is an important tool, for others it may be uninteresting. There are winners and losers in this project.

Finally, again like so many other cross-border regions there has been a misleading obsession with identity. Both the media, the planners and the researchers keep asking: how long will it take for a common Öresund identity to emerge. “Do you feel more or less Danish or Swedish now, the journalists love to ask. Identity is an overexploited and often misused concept, that we should try to use less. Instead I think we should focus much more on how regionauts like these develop transnational skills. How they learn to navigate in different national contexts and develop everyday competences? All over the world people develop these everyday skills of living transnational lives.

## References

see:

Löfgren, Orvar 2008. Regionauts: The Transformation of Cross-Border Regions in Scandinavia. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, vol 15:3:195-210.

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<sup>i</sup> See the television program “Rabatten”, Danish Public TV, Channel DR 1, January 4, 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, age over 24, housing and job arranged, a bank guarantee, stronger ties to Denmark than to the country or origin for the couple, no pro-forma or enforced marriages, see Kornum 2007.