Whose is this space? Using Collaborative Cartography on the Balkan Route to navigate oppressive spaces

DAVID SCHEUING

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David Scheuing

Abstract

Maps represent and make governable the social relations that underlie their production. This reinforcement of existing power structures poses challenges to groups at the margins of representation (politically and visually). Refugees on their migratory routes are usually represented as simplified arrows crossing nation state borders. This article asks if refugees can “map back” against the excluding hegemony of maps to publicly (re)claim spatial representation. Especially the vehicle of the “Balkan Route Corridor” in its materialisation and its consequences is a laboratory for inquiring into these possibilities for claim making. The aim of this research has been to explore some ways in which refugees themselves could counter cartographic representations. Collaborative “countermappings” from the route can visualise the state's essential impact on the experience of refugees, as well as offer individual responses and resistance to it. The article elaborates on how the refugee researchers and I tried to find a way to document, understand, resist, traverse and/or ridicule the traditional cartography. Results show that these mappings can to some extent allow for an active (self-) representation at the margins of representation and challenge territory-centered approaches to spatial imagination. The article also discusses the practical, methodical and interpretative limits to collaborative mapping experienced by myself and my collaborators alike.

Keywords: Critical cartography, countermapping, participatory research, Balkan Route Corridor
Introduction: Who is where? Mapmaking and the state

"Mapping is critical and the critical must be mapped!" (Herb 2009: 335)

It has often been said that the state is the primary beneficiary of maps (as most famously put by Harley 1989). Cartography has a vitally illustrative as well as formative role to play in the state. It is formative in that it makes states spatially, i.e. territorially imaginable and thus 'makes states something' as the material 'corporeality' of the state can be understood herein (cf. Campbell 1999: 401; Elden 2007: 578; Elden 2010: 809). Cartography provides the authoritative visual output to political forms, as what is displayed in a map is what is politically believed and constructed to be the 'true' shape of things (cf. Farish 2009: 442). It reformulates but also perpetuates the idea of territory, authority and belonging. In its repetition (graphically as well as mechanically), the map is often an instrument of re-emphasising and continuing state power over time. Standardised professional mapping is – by its own form of a territorial trap (cf. Agnew 1994) – caught up in reproducing a hegemonic status quo of international relations. People beyond the register of the state or in opposition to its function of building 'a people' (i.e. non-citizens, refugees, illegalised persons, stateless persons, transmigrants) seldom appear on maps altogether. "Those individuals and groups who are mapped outside of a state – and this does not necessarily have to be a physical exclusion – are also abandoned by its legal order, an abandonment which can be violent indeed." (cf. Farish 2009: 453).

Represented that way, these individuals are often merely visualised in violent forms such as on “migratory routes” maps of control organs or police, which infer the need for these routes to be curbed, prevented, policed, controlled or at least monitored (cf. Frontex 2016, Tsianos 2008). An instance of this is the standardised mapping of the “border crisis” of 2015/2016. 'Refugees' were only mapped in ways which depicted them as a problem to the status quo of the state(s). This asked for refugees to be targeted by a migration

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1 This article is the outcome of a research seminar on “New Political Geographies". Even though it was never easy to organise the field trips to the (IY)RoM, I thank all participants of the seminar, Valeria Hänsel, Mathias Krams, Alexandra Engelsdorfer, Maria Hartmann, Lucia Heisterkamp and Rebecca Meier, as well as the organiser, Jana Hönke, for their steady support in conceptualizing and shaping this research. I also thank the participants of the Annual Graduate Conference for Political Geography at the University of Warwick in May 2016, for their comments on an abbreviated presentation of the research results, especially Nick Vaughan-Williams for his encouragement. I also want to express thanks for the helpful comments of three anonymous reviewers for IReflect, who have made this a much better and well argued article. Mistakes, argumentative flaws and the overall presentation of this article, however, remain my sole responsibility.

management approach reintegrating them in the framework of the state's authoritative power to grant citizenship which simultaneously determines belonging and place. The international human right of refugees to traverse borders and territory ("Right to Freedom of Movement", Art. 13 UNUDHR), their right to claim space and asylum ("Right to Claim Asylum", Art. 14 UNUDHR), the violence used against them (Human Rights Watch 2015a, 2015b), and other challenges seldom reappear on maps.

The academic and activist traditions of political geography and radical geography have tried to formulate theoretical and practical answers to the exclusions and the (epistemic) violence described above – and will continue to do so. In terms of cartography, some critical geographers have asserted that the method “cartography” will not have to be disposed and can be used to formulate a critical inquiry. As Sebastian Cobarrubias and Maribel Casas-Cortes understand it, the “traditional research tool” of cartography can be used and exploited “in new ways and to new ends” (Cobarrubias & Casas-Cortes 2009: 339) to reach this critical inquiry and formulate theoretical and practical answers. For example, to use these cartographic methods critically can mean to challenge the structure of an 'appropriateness' of maps that places those produced through cartographic conventions over other types of maps. Several examples of new critical or 'relevant' maps of public spaces, created collaboratively with people passing by or with the inhabitants of a "barrio" – so called 'collaborative counter-maps', illustrate this. They ultimately question who is to determine the 'appropriateness' of maps for what purposes (see for these methods and uses: iconoclasistas 2008-2016, Kollektiv Orangotango 2012). For critical cartography and a critical academia, undoing this structure of 'appropriateness' means making an effort to allow those at the margins of representation ways and means to 'map back'. Mapping from below as a 'democratic' exercise in participation and (self-) representation is a (political) reason why to use cartographic representation and guides this experiment with refugees on 'the Route' for a different cartography. This methodology of critical participatory cartographies (see below) allows to focus on the social and political (self-) 'placing' by people themselves. It also opens researchers ways to approach these dimensions and offers a critique of mainstream social science methodologies limiting research to hegemonic means of representation.

According to standardised cartographic norms, the map has a strict function of 'objectivity' and 'rational factuality' (cf. Hake 1976: 11; critical approach: Spillmann 2007: 156). This means the map is functioning as the metrically exact representation of the material markers of 'the world' which is to be represented. Put less descriptively, “[r]epresentation is nothing other

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3 I understand the term “Self-Placing” as a methodological dimension of inquiring into the visions and impressions of these individuals of their placing. With placing I mean dimensions, such as being placed spatially, in relation to others or to one’s social, economical and political context.
than a means to render the forces partaking in a social conflict visible to the gaze of power. Moreover, power relations operate by making social actors representable within a regime” (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 56). For no material location ‘just is’. It is understood, organised and represented by the use of social forces and relations. Understanding and making space is thus a function of social interaction structured by systems of governance and control (i.e. social forces and relations) and as such a highly political question, not a fact (cf. Massey 1998). Contemporary territorial states’ administrations rely on bordered and specifying, i.e. territorially segmenting spatial analysis to understand the ordering of its populations and its perceived ‘problems’ (cf. Spillmann 2007: 167; Farish 2009). This approach makes the aim for a (enforceable) monopoly on cartographic norms understandable. A map thus fundamentally answers the question of ‘who is where’ for the purpose of governance.

Interestingly, it can be observed that parallel to the continued interest of state authorities in cartography and the heavy decline in geographers’ academic mapping in the approximately last 30 years (for a discussion of this see Herb et al. 2009) an increasing and less disciplined use of maps in mainstream media and so-called “vernacular mappings” of (mostly digital) everyday map use (Gerlach 2010) has been on the rise. This can also be observed in cartographical exercises to spatialise the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015/2016. Through the power of many news outlets, state agencies, NGOs, political think tanks, and even in daily life, the public had been made to understand the reported movements as a ‘crisis’ through the operators of ‘maps’ (cf. Frontex 2016, Lucify 2016, SRF 2016, see maps 1-3). Academic mapping, however, has had little or no impact here. The ‘wave’ of mappings of the ‘refugee crisis’ was mainly built upon the normalised territoriality of nation states described above. Refugees in these maps seemed to ‘stream’ across nation states’ borders with an ease which is fundamentally at odds with the violence and threat that the borders and the route pose(d) to many refugees (cf. Maps 1 and 2). Even though many of these maps attempted to depict “the routes”, they were theoretically and practically limited to understand and represent the phenomena by their fundamental proposition of the state’s sole sovereignty, hegemony and dominance (cf. Map 3).

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4 For a cursory history of this Westphalian 'state bureaucracy longing’ see Elden 2010. Farish (2009: 253) cautions: “However, despite the global reach of certain cartographic conventions – certain ways of seeing – maps still carry different meanings in different locations, and there are of course varying forms of cartographic literacy and exposure to maps even within states.”

5 It has been argued to be more of a “borders” crisis (Kingsley 2016: 289, for a wider critique on the same issue, see Vaughan-Williams 2015) or of a “political” crisis (MSF 2015).

6 For the use of maps concerning research on migration, see Liebscher (2015); for the special role of cartography in the European border regime, see Casas-Cortés et al. (2014: 302) and Tsianos 2008.
Map 1: Trends and Routes: Migratory Routes Map (Frontex)

Map 2: The flow towards Europe (Lucify 2016)
For this reason, part of the research project underlying this article was to 'denaturalise' the state as an analytical lens in academia (cf. also Tsianos et al. 2009; Wagner 2010: 234ff.; Glick-Schiller & Wimmer 2002). Methodologically, countercartography opened up alternative ways here to imag(in)e spaces of transit and migration beyond the state. Additionally, countermapping can be a way trying to reclaim space outside the functional logics of nation states (for a critical discussion of many such countering attempts see for example: Hodgson & Schroeder 2002, Wainwright & Brian 2009). Another question in this project was to analyze to what degree the tool itself could be used to (analytically and practically) counter the narrative of the hegemonic maps. This aimed to answer criticisms from within the academic debate around the potential of countermapping (cf. Tazzioli 2015, see below). The hope was to come close to what Papadopoulos et al. (2008) describe as “outside politics”. They see these 'politics' as

"the way [of those who try] to escape the controlling and repressive force of contemporary politics (that is of contemporary policing); or else it is a way to change our senses, our habits, our practices in order to experiment together with those who have no part, instead of attempting to include them into the current regime of control" (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 70, emphasis added).

Therefore, mapping back from the route was practised as a collaborative, or at least participatory approach of experimentation. The main research question was how and to what extent it may be possible to counter/navigate the situation of (cartographic) exclusion of refugees on the Balkan Route creatively in experimentation with the ones in/excluded in these maps. Macedonia as a space allowed for ample chances to research with refugees in the situation(s) of the route(s) across the Balkans. The remainder of this article will introduce the methodology and theory of the collaborative approach to countermapping and describe the special setting of the
Macedonian case as well as the field situation. Finally, it will present the outcomes of the mapping exercises and the subsequent methodical changes to the exercises throughout my field stay in the camps in January and March 2016.

**Countermapping as a means and method to navigate oppressive spaces**

Countermapping as a practice has been methodologically established since the 1970s and more pronouncedly since the 1990s to help challenge injustices or (human) rights violations through its 'documentary nature' and visual qualities, and to depict in (territorial) 'space' what had happened when, how and to whom (cf. Wainwright & Brian 2009: 153; Peluso 1995). For the further purpose of this article, I will divide the broader field of countermapping into two 'camps'. On the one hand, there are those maps which explicate the argument pushed forward (for better infrastructure, territorial claims, etc.) by the means of a 'classical' map and normative-hegemonic cartographical conventions, 'filling the holes' of other maps. Here, the benefits of classical maps – most importantly the factor of reconnaissance through the readers of the map – are considered and deliberately chosen by their creators or instigators. The irritation for readers of this type of map comes about by contrasting the way how one is used 'to see' with information that is usually not provided. By using these means of 'official' map visualisation, they can be highly effective (informative, affecting, focusing on a clear target) but also highly affirmative, as they run the risk of confirming the status quo of what is accepted as 'space', i.e. state territory or political territoriality (cf. similar critiques with Wainwright & Brian 2009, Hodgson & Schroeder 2002, Tazzioli 2015).

The other techniques of countermapping build on radically altering the shape of the visual which the reader gets to see. By this, it changes the visuality through which the spatial imagination becomes intelligible, hence shaking learned patterns of 'seeing'. These techniques challenge metrical precision and geolocationality as a privileged attribute of spatiality, the sheer technical rationality and of the absolute formulations about the 'status quo' which maps used to entail (cf. Hackitektura 2006, AnArchitektur/a42.org 2004, Casas-Cortés & Cobarrubias 2007, Paulston & Liebmann 1993, see maps 4-7).

Therefore, Cobarrubias is in search of “examples of this new kind of cartography that: visualises ‘diagrams of power’; maps actors though without any a priori assumptions; acts as an articulator of human relations and multiple subject positions depending on when it’s used and by whom” (2006: 34). It is a reconfiguration of the whole exercise of mapping, and the maps
are usually confusing at first. Here, the process of understanding begins by being startled by the maps, instead of a process of reconnaissance.

In this sense, countercartography firstly helps to radically reimagine spatial relations and thus points beyond the territorial and the geolocational. Secondly, countercartography often uses artistic means, ways of network imagination as well as 'traditional cartographic tools' (legends, markers, contour lines, and, yes, arrows; cf. Herb 2009: 333) to express such reimaginations. Thirdly, it tries to reassemble this new understanding of 'the space' according to its meaning in the locus of enunciation. Here, the hope is that these dynamic, dizzying maps are less prone to the power 'exploitation' of hegemonic representation (compare the reproductions of the MigMap series and the "Precarity_Map" here; cf. Maps 6 and 7).

For my research, this means that in redrawing the political spaces of the refugees from the route, the way of representing space from a disengaged 'above' is countered, though not obsolete, as it still relies on the mechanisms of representation even at the margins of representation. Power still plays an important role in the understanding of mapping as such (who maps what and why), even if produced in collaborative, less hierarchical workshops that are open to any outcome and do not predefine the means and ways of mapping (for a critique see Tazzioli 2015). The hope is that through the collaborative process these maps bear the perspective of those traditionally excluded from decision-making processes (cf. Kollektiv Orangotango 2012: 3; Peluso 1995; Counter Cartographies Collective et al. 2012).
Map 5: Geografie des Ausreisezentrums Fürth (AnArchitektur/a42.org 2004)
Methodologically and epistemologically, the first task therefore was to find people represented in the ‘refugee crisis maps’ (i.e. finding the refugee researchers on the route in places of temporary rest, such as camps or transit zones). The next step was to find ways and means to actually work with them on alternative collaborative maps. In the spirit of the latter understanding of countermapping, this project’s intention was to collaboratively arrive at what has been termed “cartographies” (Tally 1996: 414) or “cartes-graphiques” (Martouzet et al. 2010, in Mekdjian 2016: 158), mappings which burst free of the cartographic corset and invent new forms of (re)presentation. Its aim was to allow for a “recit migrantois” challenging the methodological dominance of interviews in qualitative empirical research with refugees (cf. Mekdjian 2016) as well as challenging hegemonic cartographic representations. ‘Resisting’ or ‘ridiculing’ the dominant narrative of mapping...
Map 7: Precarity_Map Draft 2008 (Cobarrubias 2009: 285)
is the visual resistance in this ‘escape’ on the part of refugees. “Escape attempts to break out from this fastidious construction of the subject and to dissolve the spectacle’s domination through representation” (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 57). Yet, in trying to escape representation, countercartography may still offer a way in which to present a claim outside hegemonic spatial representations.

An idea of this kind of expressing and imag(in)ing spatiality was put forward in my research attempts to countermap from the route across the Balkans. The mapping was planned to be organised in small workshops. I employed different approaches, such as mapping with just one other person, mapping in a group, me being the cartographer on behalf of the other person, or the persons drawing and sketching themselves. My methodology builds upon the experience of Laure-Anne Amilhat Szary and Sarah Mekdjian in Grenoble (Mekdjian & Amilhat Szary 2015, Mekdjian 2016), as well as the collaborative art workshop ort_m in Hamburg (2015), trying to implement these encounters on the routes. In Grenoble, researchers (academics, refugees and activists alike) placed certain safeguards for the encounters: they met during a two-month period at a fixed place, safe for people to enter and exit and with enough time to experiment freely (cf. Mekdjian et al. 2015). The basic principle of “ni vrai, ni faux” (neither true nor false) provided ground for trust and collaboration (Mekdjian 2016: 178). The artistic possibilities of this workshop built on the freedom to play around, to consecutively build on each other’s visualisations, and on a shared space of interaction. Dissemination via an exhibition ensured wider politicisation of the contents of this workshop (cf. Mekdjian 2016: 178 et seqq.).

My own encounters followed a more ephemeral pattern of timing and resulted in the emergence of maps as people quickly moved on. The process was shorter, people had to draw more quickly and had less time to dwell on it. Together, we started from an empty sheet of paper, developing a collaborative understanding of where the map was to begin and what it detailed. Someone usually started to ‘scribble’ and then the map started to evolve creatively, by asking questions or in absolute silence. Here, the aim to produce a collective as a collective of individual researchers was impractical in temporal as well as communicative terms. Being more of a first attempt to document, to reflect and to discuss potential issues of locality, experiences of violence and precariousness, as well as the self-positionality/localisation of refugees, it was a radically open exercise of the interactive-relational bonds between me and the refugee researchers. Nonetheless, countermapping is not an ‘innocent’ practice, nor a practice to ‘undo all power relations’. Countermapping approaches are also not available to everyone – may it be only for the lack of material, but also for infringements of certain freedoms, etc. The encounters described above were still structured by power relations of positionality (e.g. ‘legal/illegal’, ‘white researcher’/refugee Other’) – and

For similar challenges see Bacon (2015).
still continue to structure the maps. I need to constantly and carefully consider the continuation of these structures in and through the maps and the background against which they were produced in analysing the process and the outcomes of these workshops.

New Border Laboratories in Macedonia: The Corridor, resistance, and the state

Researching refugees’ countermaps from the route could have happened anywhere along the routes, but Macedonia was chosen for several reasons. In 2015, governments across Europe had been quick in responding to the ‘crisis’ of refugees in the Balkans: by closing borders in order to ‘protect’ the borders. However, challenging states’ efforts to stop the movements, people continued walking (and later driving) across Macedonian territory throughout the year. It was felt to be an “exodus” from Greece, as one UNHCR officer put it (Kojcevski, 31.3.2016). Although Macedonia briefly centred in media reports about the more visible ‘crisis’ in mid 2015, it still seemed to be the ‘forgotten country’ along the route compared to the internationally more visible situation in Idomeni just across the border. This border to Greece made Macedonia an interesting basis for a case study in the first place. Being amid EU border laboratory experiments, Macedonia, a non-Schengen, non-EU country, was used by EU politics as a tool to ‘border against’ Greece, a Schengen member state, while simultaneously providing its infrastructure and personnel to organise a corridor connecting Schengen-territories traversing its territory. This had serious repercussions for the situation of refugees.

The fast emergence of what was then termed the “Balkan Transit Corridor” or “Balkan Route Corridor” within weeks or even days, could be observed in the latter quarter of the year. As Autorino (2015) has elaborated, the ‘corridor’ works as a powerful tool to transform the political landscape. The very specifics of a corridor cut across what are generally believed to be coherent territories of nation states. The route from the Greek-Macedonian to the Serbian-Hungarian, or then to the Croatian-Slovenian border was suddenly a route from one part of Schengen space to the next, a space that was somehow EU-ropoan in itself. The formal setup of the

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9 See for this the European Commission’s communiques on coordination of the situation, cf. European Commission 2015.
10 Exemplary for this: cf. Deutsche Welle 2015.
11 EU-ropoan is a term coined by theorists writing about the EU as a project premised on a common understanding by the member states of being “European”. This research however poses that this claim to a common space is highly specific and different to a general understanding of Europe (cf. Bialasiewicz 2012).
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corridor was changing throughout. Its main material features were camps, “transit centres” and railway or bus connections. The complex interplay of EU border interests and the active use of third countries (such as Serbia and the (fY)RoM) was what made the corridor an interesting subject of investigation – it broadened a general ‘laboratory experience’ of border politics.

The corridor reminded the observer that in fact “the so-called ‘inner European space’ is spatially segmented” (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 173) and that the corridor was yet another instrument which complicated this spatial segmentation. I therefore want to speak of this field research as being placed in the spaces of “Macedonia[". With regards to the multiple overlapping dimensions of camps, the corridor, the multiplicity of state actors, and the transversal movement of refugees, it becomes hard to speak of just one space called “Macedonia” as it cuts across the normalised idea of a state. What this “Macedonia[" then consists of is the assemblage of these different claims to power and control.

This corridor was believed to be a mere ‘transition space’ judging by the way these infrastructures were designed and by the organisation of the camps and trails. From the beginning, it factually ruled out arrival or asylum in the countries along the route. It was a reaction to the ‘escape’ of refugees, an attempt to ‘win back’ control over the route(s). Here, the corridor is an effective tool to stage the spectacle of caging, dispersal and holding of the migrant body (cf. Agamben 2002[1995], on the spectacle of immigration: Vukov 2003, Scheel 2015: 3). As has been recounted numerous times (most famously by researchers of the “Autonomy of Migration”, cf. Scheel 2015; Pieper 2010: 224; Panagiotidis & Tsianos 2007.), this is neither an impermeable condition nor prohibitive to social interaction as such. Resistance to the corridor’s logic is possible, and creativity is to a degree a necessary condition of ‘everyday life’ in and around the camps (strategies may include e.g. leaving the camp through holes in the fence; for similar strategies of general subversion: cf. Scheel 2015: 5, for “relative porosity” of camps see: Tsianos et al. 2009: 8). This navigation is the refugee’s agency to coordinate her/his presence in the given conditions (cf. Papadopoulos et al. 2008; Tsianos et al. 2009: 8). Thus, it seemed to be a methodologically

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12 For an account of the first outfit of a self-organized activist version of the corridor in August 2015 see: Baker 2015.

13 Laboratory only insofar as that the outcome here – the “Corridor” – is not so much an aberration of politics, but a purposeful arrangement by the states (cf. Bialasiewicz 2012). It is a laboratory of alternative topographical functionalities (camps, extrerritorialisations, corridors, and the like). For explicit accounts of border politics as “laboratories” also refer to Zaiotti 2011: 74 et seqq., for a view on the role of FRONTEX as a laboratory institution see Kasparek 2010.

14 In Macedonia, the camps have for this reason purposefully been labelled “Transit Centers” where only “transit” was officially allowed. I have been reminded of this in interview situations with officials who refused to use “camp”, but reinforced the “transit center” nomenclature.
sensible measure to me to countermap the arrowed-out spaces of migration from within these structures in order to open avenues to collaboratively understand the navigation of this canalisation and regularisation by the corridor. This started my visual experiments in the camps.

**Mapping back from the route: first attempts at collaborative cartographies**

When I entered the field situation in early January, the corridor through Macedonia[ consisted of so-called “transit centres” near the villages of Gevgelija and Tabanovce/Slanishte, linking the southernmost border with Greece to the border with Serbia through a straight 4-hour ride on the train. Additionally, the previously existing “Welcome Center for Asylum Seekers” in Vizbegovo, the “Safe House” for Minors and Vulnerable Families run by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and the detention centre “Reception Centre for Foreigners”, dubbed “Gazi Baba” after the suburb of Skopje in which it is located, have to be included as “outer waiting rooms” (Nyers 2003: 6, cited in Autorino 2015: 15) as these places function as temporary holding centres for people (voluntarily or involuntarily) who have left the direct function of the corridor (transversal of national territory) but are nonetheless part of a migratory regime which is informed by the corridor. Secondary, informal(ised) corridors were winding themselves “around” the official corridor, in some instances benefiting from its “holding rooms” (centres). Some of these informal corridors were not linked with the primary corridor at all (i.e. being illegalised and thus off the spectre of visibility), even though they were functionally dependent on the (political) incapability of the primary corridor to ‘absorb’ all people transiting Macedonian state territory. This is because people’s presence in the corridor was conditional on their nationality. This condition produced an ever more aggressive “illegalisation” of people on the route, consequentially leading to the active creation of informal(ised) corridors by refugees themselves (Scheel 2015: 3).

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15 By Macedonian law, refugees in need of medical treatment were forced to claim asylum in order to be transported to the nearest hospital, lying outside the corridor’s operational logic (i.e. respectively, hospitals in Gevgelija, Kumanovo or Skopje). After having received treatment they were brought to the Vizbegovo Center, however, a majority of people placed themselves on the corridor track again from there.

16 This is the infamous process of allowing only nationals of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (SIA procedure) into the corridor, then step by step blocking first Afghans in February 2016 (SI proced.), then most nationals of Iraq (S+ proced.) at the end of February 2016, then blocking most of the Syrians (S- proced.) if they could not present themselves as residents of villages affected by direct fighting at the time of reaching the “entrance” to the corridor, before finally blocking the whole corridor in total (corridor terminated) on March 8th/March 9th.
Thanks to contacts to different NGOs, access to the camps was relatively easy for me in January. However, the changing organisation of the transit route prevented me from gaining access in March. On the night of my arrival in March (08./09.03.2016), the corridor was closed. Even though I easily reconnected with the NGOs I had been in contact with before, they no longer catered to Tabanovce. Any other attempt to reach the camp as an independent researcher was blocked by administrative procedures. However, I still had access to the Safe House in Skopje, where I interacted with the minors and the few adults who were present (16 people in total at my first visit – two families, two pairs of siblings travelling alone and one solo teenager). During my stays, I conducted several ‘mapping sessions’ with people. Even though some of the researchers were suspicious of the idea at first and started from the viewpoint of that they “could not make [themselves] a problem” (B., 16, Syrian, said this explicitly in another workshop), most of them took up the method (and eventually worked around this difficulty). The idea was to research together and not just ‘the Other’, which should also find its expression in the text visually (hence the colouring).\footnote{The colouring of the following text blocks is part of this exercise. I tried to feedback what I was writing about the situations with the people I met. Where this was possible, it is indicated by ‘blue’, whereas ‘red’ stands for the impossibility to do so. The digital communication post-mapping posed a classical challenge to collaborative research about who owned the story. Thus, I felt colouring became necessary.}

\* In January, I meet Jamel.Dine\footnote{All names are chosen by the researchers themselves.} on a random occasion in the camp. He fetched the food package for breakfast. We start talking about his situation and a spontaneous mapping session develops. He left his country in dire circumstances hoping for any meaningful future – without having a proper plan for what the future might bring in Europe. He made an irregular crossing of the border into Macedonia and made his track on his own, walking, running through the undergrowth, taking taxis for short trips. He made it to the camp and entered it. Here, he is to some degree ‘safe’, as there is no institutionalised or working agreement on what to do with illegalised people at the moment, and the camp is open on two adjacent sides. However, the situation is still tense – institutionally and in terms of personal wellbeing. We speak about his situation and the options he sees for his way forward, as well as his stay in the camp. He starts mapping as soon as he has a pen, and details his travels in a very linear manner. My ‘contribution’ to this map is encouragement rather than active participation, which has to be considered when understanding the map. It is an onlooker’s perspective. Yet, in partaking in the mapping exercise, it appears obvious to me that I influence the maps, too.
Jamel.Dine places heavy emphasis on modes of transportation in his mapping – arrows appear more as logical consequences of the preceding marker (see map 8.1).

These markers can be words, place names, sketches of means of transport, sums of money, and other descriptions. The places, the camps, the 'stations of arrival' hardly figure – and where they do, they are no more than mere names. Thus, an important feature of the map is the absolute irrelevance of distance in the picturing. What he expresses is the continual movement. One important break is marked by the moment he cannot legally enter the corridor and is forced to take a more clandestine route. Here, a completely new mode of travelling as a “problem” enters the map (see map 8.2).

My interpretation of the whole idea of his map is shaped by the concluding “to be continue...[sic!]” (see map 8.3) with which he ends his
account as if the relevance of all that has gone before will only be proven when he finally ‘arrives’ somewhere.

This map, however, is destroyed as some of the information is tangible at that moment. Now, with some distance to the events, it is safer to publish some of the digitalised remains of this documentary map. Even though we agreed to continue to work on the mappings in the spirit of this one, we never got to do this again. The constant surveillance of movements in the camp makes it hard to start an exercise like this. The NGO team with whom I enter the camp allows me to stay there. However, they are not really happy with me speaking to these people. As these are illegalised people, the NGO fears to be punished for too much focus on them by losing their access to the camp. I cannot endanger the NGO’s mission to safely and routinely operate in the camp and provide for the refugees passing through. Since then, my contact with Jamel.Dine has not allowed us to continue the mapping experiment.

This first contact with him encourages me to actively search for a stabilisation of the mapping context. I understand that the time pressure hardly allows for any collaborative mapping, but rather gives rise to a biographical critical cartography whose unendedness may be as much of an obstacle to read the map, as it is a chance to understand the radical unendedness of the journeys of the people on the route. At this moment in January 2016, stabilising means a more permanent set-up of the ‘workshop’: a transportable folder with maps, documents, markers, ideas, legends, etc. I know that this inhibits the freedom of the interaction, but it also circumvents the problem of too much explanation in a context of arbitrary communication across the language divide (the camp operates in English, with many speaking Macedonian as their mother tongue, as well as Farsi, Arabic (of all dialects), Swahili, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Urdu, Hindi, and other languages. I interacted with people mainly in English, sometimes in French, and through handheld translation devices). Here, a more pre-prepared ‘portable workshop’ could help.

As the activists from Kollektiv Orangotango and the research group of Casas-Cortes/Cobarrubias/Heller/Pezzani have highlighted in general, the expectations towards counter-maps themselves should not be exaggerated (cf. Kollektiv Orangotango 2012: 4). Some of the maps do not even ‘survive’ the moment of temporal fixation, they become nothing more than an intimate
shared bracket for group communication and exchange (cf. Casas-Cortes et al. 2014: 312) and are then destroyed. This is what became necessary here, too. However, it allows for a study of the exercise itself.

After I returned to Macedonia in March 2016 for a second field phase (with the pre-prepped ‘workshop folder’), I was confined to working with a very select group of people. These were the children in the Safe House in Skopje. As it now became a workshop with kids, I had to ensure they knew what we were doing and understand the questions with which these encounters started. Here, I drew on literature about children’s geographies and mapping experiments with children, mainly by Katharyne Mitchell and Sarah Elwood (2012, 2013; also: Gordon et al. 2016). They used mapping to explicate the politics of children’s geography, taking them seriously in their positionality while also taking the differences made by adults into account.

“The [...] learning activities are not designed around pre-scripted competency-building steps. Rather, we provide open-ended prompts or activity goals [...] and have the students develop their own set of operations to achieve the goal” (Gordon et al. 2016: 5). The aim was to work against the affective and often ‘intuitive’ infantilisation of youth.

The first session I conducted with a group of about 8-10 children thus aimed at visually understanding our respective ‘coming from’. This was also meant to include not only the means and ways by which we came to the place where we all met, but also under what conditions and with which knowledge of the situation we ended up at the ‘here’ of the JRS house. The main feature which starkly contrasts Jamel.Dine’s map is the picturing of the journey (cf. map 9).

Map 9: Excerpt Kids

Here, the places are reduced to a few unrecognizable, yet memorized structures: mountains, cars, camps. The imaginations of the camp structures
stand out in two ways. First, the camp is the dislocated past to which the children do not want to return; they are faceless structures, yet very indicative. The repetitive character of most of the camp architecture had made a deep impression on the children I interacted with – no specifics, just “refugee architecture”. Secondly, the anonymisation – different to an adult’s imagination with camp names – of travelling between faceless camps; only the Safe House is any different to the places before. It has been the same over and over again, and back beyond the last camp there is no memory left. The Safe House becomes synonymous with the dream of safety. After a few mapping approaches with the kids in the House, the potential of it was increasingly lost. The day came, after several mapping attempts and two weeks of knowing each other, when some of the kids sighed at the sight of the characteristic “blue papers” of our past exercises: “Oh no, not this.” It appears that the idea of collaboratively engaging people in this method was not as emotionally affecting for the children as I had imagined. 'Problems' in assumptions and conceptualisations such as these limited the extent to which the method could be a meaningful exercise in the specific setting I found myself in. The shortcomings of the research methodology have generally limited the extent to which the navigation outside of the standard spatial imagination can be understood and a claim be presented.

A clear outcome of this mapping exercise is the challenge it poses to more classical maps of ‘routes’. It is the unconnected places of passage and the heavy emphasis on the modes of transport along the route in the mappings described here which stand out in opposition to the topology of a space-smoothing arrow of the maps criticised here. In Jamel.Dine’s case, the moment he encounters problems specific to his own route, the spatial quality of his path changes tremendously. The kids, however, are imagining the spaces they transit through in a repetitive fashion, limited to the last few steps in their journey. Both ends of the ‘arrow’ fade, they are in this radically unended 'arrows'. The “to be continue...” of Jamel.Dine and the children’s radical shortening of their stories similarly fall into this mode: of making the route specific. It is not all people who arrive (as the arrow-routes suggest), and the spatiality of nation-state territory does not feature in the spatial representations of these refugees on their trail. At least in these moments, when not referring to national territory, the maps question the hegemony of a nation-state territorial approach to mapping.

**Conclusion**

Following Cobarrubias’ (2006: 34) search for “examples of this new kind of cartography”, this article explored uses of counter-mapping strategies to counter the main type of visualisation of the 2015/2016 ‘refugee crisis’. The aim was to counter the (not only cartographic) narrative of the all-present, all-mighty state and its b/ordering processes from the route, by engaging the
people rendered as objects in its course. The refugee researchers and I developed the unstable, fleeting moments of these cartographies together – as structured by power hierarchies and positions as they were: me being ‘the researcher’, whereas collaborating people being ‘the refugees’. The collaborative development of working definitions of what was to be seen and what was not, did not form as strong an element of the mapping encounter as I would have wished, leaving the interpretative task to a renarration by the researchers themselves or to my part. However, it has sparked some creative expression as Jamel.Dine has started to work on his own account of the journey. What the method did establish was a less inquisitive way to allow for a “*recit migrantois*” (cf. Mekdjian 2016). The mappings which resulted from these ‘workshops’ go against the grain of the state maps of flows and arrows. The unconnected places of passage and the heavy emphasis on the modes of transport along the route stand out in clear opposition to standard topologies of migrant maps. The mode of these maps is to render visible the sheer difference in people arriving, not all of them arriving, and a relative absence of the state in the “*cartes graphiques*” of the people I worked with. At least then the hegemony of a nation-state focus to cartography (cf. Farish 2009) is questioned.

How much of a navigation of the circumstances can be read from the maps is a question which needs to be tackled in a more in-depth workshop setting, yet it may open a deeper understanding of spatial imagination from the route. Here, workshops in more stable settings (e.g. Mekdjian & Amilhat Szary 2015) have proven to produce better circumstances in which people could map as well as read the mappings with more time, deeper exchange and greater degrees of development. Nonetheless, countermapping can help to a certain extent to counter the spatial logic of the corridorilised route management approach of the EU/third states border laboratory of the Balkans. Even though many more examples of mapping are necessary to evaluate (with a more critically engaged mapping methodology) what this means in terms of a practice of countering or resistance, the experimentation “together with those who have no part” (Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 70) at least brought to light the possibilities of such methodology for rendering visible a different geography of ‘the Route’.

These elements of successful navigation of their situation by refugees illustrate that it is possible for this methodology to highlight what cannot be seen by standard means of cartography or inquiry. The spatial imagination of people on the move focuses on other ‘places’ than published maps. The abstraction of the countermaps follows the logic of the individual’s self-placing on the route. Compared to standardized mapping, this depends less on the geopolitical map of nation states. Not all researchers in this project, however, have chosen to map outside of the traditional geopolitical understanding. In this regard, the hopes for a different form of making a claim and to counter/navigate can at least be seen.
– I reflect –

When reflecting back on the research period about one year ago, I can see what have been major obstacles to this research project but also what might be a valuable nudge for research in the future: the very difficulties of mapping collaboratively on the route. While I learned how tough, impossible and immensely structured by power privileges it is to guarantee a research setting "on the route" which can protect more vulnerable people, it is nonetheless important to collaboratively map with people on the move, as I hope to have shown. The time in Macedonia has changed me – not only in terms of academic thinking, writing and collaborating (or better: in taking critical reflections on academia more seriously), but also in personal terms. This article will find its way to the people who have been part of this endeavour, at least those whom I can still contact or who have remained my friends.

David Scheuing
M.A. Friedens- und Konfliktforschung, 5. Fachsemester
Universität Marburg
Kontact: d.a.scheuing@web.de
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**Scheuing: Whose is this space?**


Scheuing: Whose is this space?

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