

Articulo - Journal of Urban Research

Book Reviews

2013

The daily-life of European cross-border workers: Old phenomena on a new scale?

Book review of: Christian Wille, *Grenzgänger und Räume der Grenze*.

BERNHARD KÖPPEN

Bibliographical reference

Christian Wille. 2012. *Grenzgänger und Räume der Grenze*. Peter Lang, Frankfurt/Main.

Full text



[Full size image](#)

Credits : (C) Peter Lang

- 1 Author Christian Wille is researcher and scientific coordinator at the University of Luxembourg and lecturer at the universities of Saarbrücken (Germany) and Metz (France). His book, written in German language, is a doctoral thesis co-defended at University of Saarland (Germany) and University of Luxembourg (Luxembourg).
- 2 This study focuses on the 200,000 cross-border commuters in the Saarland (Germany)-Lorraine (France)-Luxembourg Greater Region, whose perceptions and constructions of space, society, and culture are explored in the context of transnational daily life and practices. Cross-border commuting is an important area of study because it is a relatively unexplored phenomenon, and also because of its

potential to contribute to a better theoretical understanding of cross-border living environments. Cross-border commuting is a very specific type of living environment resulting from major societal mutations. Hence, a pivotal question of the study is how (and if) cross-border references in daily lives and societal coherence can be adequately “detected” theoretically as well as empirically.

3 Christian Wille argues that current phenomena of cross-border-commuting do serve as a prototypic example of versatile post-modern concepts of life, being multi-local and extremely mobile, in the specific context of daily mobility. As empirical research has been focused on social practices, perceptions, and creation of space, and to a certain extent identities within these contexts, national entities and borders are perceived as socially constructed realities.

4 This empirical research is based on a multi-methodological three-tier approach, starting with elite interviews and literature analysis. A second group of 458 successful interviews was carried out. The results of step one and step two have finally been critically assessed and backed up by further in-depth interviews with cross-border commuters. Chapters 1 to 3 are devoted to the theoretical framework and methodology. Chapter 4 sets out the phenomenon of cross-border commuting in the Luxembourg Greater Region starting from 1900. This being said, the heart of Wille’s book are chapters 5 and 6, dealing with the socio-cultural dimension of current cross-border commuting as well as the individual constructions of space and border(ing).

5 This book attempts to “measure” the making of and the quality of individual spaces by exploring the following issues: (concepts of) cross-border life and work; integration and “otherness” at work; language and styles of communication; perceptions of cross-border commuting; identities and stereotypes, and finally social relations and practices of common sense. It appears that cross-border commuting is a distinct versatile phenomenon, shaped by a significant variety of different factors. The archetypical cross-border commuter does not apply in the Greater Region, where there are – besides the socioeconomic distinctions based on age or career – quite many possible combinations of origin, workplace, and residence. Nevertheless it occurs that this plurality is more a “potential”, as most commuters are employed in workplaces in which co-workers also commute from similar residential locations and nationalities.

6 The main motivations for working abroad seem to be connected with greater job opportunities as well as higher incomes relative the country of residence; both important factors that outweigh the disadvantage of daily commuting. The effective action of getting a job, though, is often tied to personal networks and informal strategies. At this point it might have been relevant to consider citizens originating from Luxemburg but living elsewhere (due to lower prices in real estate or renting) as another specific group of border-commuter. This aspect was not really discussed in Wille’s study although the above-mentioned motivation should not be neglected, as that kind of “borderlanders” seems to have high impact in certain regions (e.g. French border close to Karlsruhe). Although he argues that rather simple, traditional approaches to assessing cross-border-commuting are not appropriate, Wille himself seems to stick to a less flexible definition of the “transfrontalier” as being a foreigner rather than a Luxembourg national who has chosen to live abroad. That said it should not be forgotten that reliable and comprehensible results such an apparently evasive topic can be limited, thus a restricted typology needs to be applied at some point.

7 Most interesting of the empirical findings are the aspects of integration, conflict, and identity. From the Luxemburgish point of view, cross-border-commuters are partially perceived as competitors on the job market, whilst in their home-communities they occur seemingly as rivals on local property markets (as they are esteemed being wealthier due to higher salaries paid in Luxembourg).. This

is also true even when there is no real competition. Hence, those conflicts that do occur say more about identity and (local) society than cross-border-commuting. Wille concludes that the commuters in this study have not integrated at the location/region where they are employed. Social life at home is more important and the (long) time spent commuting functions as another barrier to “extended workplace-integration”.

8 In sum, Christian Wille shows that cross-border-commuting is not tied to a distinct group, specific status or educational level. Its dominant feature is the diversity of cross-border commuters. Nevertheless “being” a cross-border commuter in Luxembourg Greater Region is generally a rather stable way of (work-)life.

9 What is important from a more theoretical point of view is that Wille proposes to investigate social practices from a descriptive and an interpretative perspective. His book shows how this can be done in a convincing way based on a strong and reliable empirical research. *Grenzgänger und Räume der Grenze* is an outstanding example of a theoretically ambitious study that provides highly interesting material from original survey and inquiries, and which could serve as an exceptional basis for further studies on “daily” or “common” crossings in European borderlands.

References

Electronic reference

Bernhard Köppen, « The daily-life of European cross-border workers: Old phenomena on a new scale? », *Articulo - Journal of Urban Research* [Online], Book Reviews, 2013, Online since 04 January 2013, connection on 17 September 2013. URL : <http://articulo.revues.org/2224>

About the author

Bernhard Köppen

Bernhard Köppen is chercheur/chargé d'études at CEPS/INSTEAD (Luxembourg). He holds a PhD in Geography from Chemnitz University of Technology (Germany). His research interests include spatial demography and planning studies, border studies, multilevel territorial governance and urban studies with emphasis on quantitative analysis Email: bernhard.koeppen@ceps.lu

Copyright

Creative Commons 3.0 – by-nc-nd, except for those images whose rights are reserved.