

The Bridge, The Nation State and Shape Shifting Modernity

Af Per-Markku Ristilammi

Abstract

Before and during the building period of the Öresund bridge in the late 1990's, the diminished importance of nation-states was predicted. A new Europe of the border regions would emerge and more and more decision-making would take place at a supranational EU or regional level. The new transnational Öresund connection would, both symbolically and practically, be at the forefront of this development and be a growth engine for the entire new border region.

An important element in the marketing and identity building around the new region was the highlighting of a special form of Scandinavian state-led modernity in the region with an emphasis on high quality of life, open and democratic societies, with egalitarian ideals and with rationality as a guiding light. At the same time, this promotion was also aimed at international capital markets with an emphasis on high technological know-how and peaceful labor markets

However, what was already clear during the bridge-building period was that the nation-states were not as weak as a certain form of rhetoric suggested. National differences in the perception of how the rational, modern society should be organized became clear when national regulations were to be adapted through regional construction.

The development since then with the refugee crisis in 2015, the introduction of border controls in Europe and the region shows that the national modernity projects have changed shape. The presentation is a reworking of previous research (Ristilammi 2020)

Infrastructure,¹

“A collective term for the subordinate parts of an undertaking; substructure, foundation; spec. the permanent installations forming a basis for military operations, as airfields, naval bases, training establishments, etc.”

In the fall of 2015 the Swedish government decided to impose austere border controls at the Öresund bridge with police entering the trains.^{2 3} For the citizens of Sweden and Denmark this was something that they had not experienced for generations. Before the Schengen agreement, the Nordic passport union from 1952 had meant that Nordic citizens could travel freely between the countries. Now this was no longer the case.

The civil war in Syria, together with the instability in Afghanistan and Irak, meant that an unprecedented number of refugees had sought to seek asylum in Sweden. Families and individuals that had survived perilous journeys across the Mediterranean and the so called Balkan route had turned up at the Swedish borders. Before the decision to close the borders, Swedish media had been overflowing with representations of people arriving at the central railway station in the city of Malmö. The bridge thus had become a symbol for the open borders of Sweden.

The border region

This presentation aims at highlighting the changing roles, or even *states of the states* of changing modernities through the example of the transnational Öresund Bridge, between Sweden and Denmark (Ristilammi 2000, Lapina 2016, Ristilammi 2020). This presentation also seeks to show, with ethnographic examples from border-crossing experiences at the Bridge in 2000, 2015 and the present, how the changes of modernity opens up for a new form biopolitical regime at the border, which turns the Bridge into a *zone of the abject* (Foster 2015).

Before⁴

When inaugurated June 1st in the year 2000, the Bridge was hailed as a commemoration of a new Europe, a regional Europe, with a diminished role for the nation-states. Processes of economic and cultural globalization meant that the old Europe and its borders belonged to a past surpassed by inevitable historical forces. The Schengen agreement, with its focus on the free movement of labour and capital was a political symbol of this new world. Old differences and strife's were to be forgotten and thus the heads of states of Sweden and Denmark evoked a shared history between the neighboring countries at the inauguration, conveniently omitting the fact that the highest number of wars between two European countries had been fought between these two nations. But in the year 2000 all strife was forgotten and the countries would be joined in the newly coined Øresund region.

A string of public events was launched in order to celebrate the new region.⁵ The citizens on both sides of the border were invited to partake in events that provided affective spaces where collective feeling became linked to the new region. The biggest event was the live televising of the inaugural event. The audience carried Danish and Swedish flags in orchestrations of border conviviality. Two opposing trains met at the middle of the bridge, royalties descended from the trains and met with greetings at the border. The event makers goal was 5 minutes coverage on CNN. They got 15 minutes.

One of the distributions of historical causality in the event management process was being played out through a notion of *modernity revisited*. It was not a return to an economy built on an industrial mode of production. Malmö had been a city with a strong industrial heritage, with the ship building industries located in the waterfront areas. The symbolic dismantling of this heritage took place in 2002 when a large gantry crane, the Kockums crane, was being dismantled and shipped to Korea.⁶ At this time the new symbolic landmark of the bridge had been in place for two years. The brand book for the Öresund project had the following text on the cover:

*In July 2000 the opening of a fixed link between Copenhagen, Denmark and Malmö, Sweden will herald the beginning of a new era for northern Europe. It will be the opening of a new region. The opening of countless possibilities and opportunities for inhabitants, travelers and businesses. The start of a new future.*⁷

By evoking a new future, the spectral apparition of an old future was conjured in the form of the failure of the old industrial modernity that had failed to meet the economic realities of the present. The city of Malmö was to rise as a Phoenix from its industrial past, with the aid of the new region.

The bridge itself was a triumph for modern industrial techniques, but the future management of the bridge was caught in the trappings of a new neo liberal, seemingly postindustrial, economy. Exhaustive media attention to the number of vehicles passing the bridge created the kind of monitoring that is usually reserved for companies on the stock market. So, on the one hand the building of the bridge was a return to the large-scale investments in infrastructure characteristic of industrial modernity. On the other hand, this very return created a framing for all the different branding techniques so prevalent in the neo liberal economy. The industrial monumentality of the bridge thus formed a very ambiguous backdrop to the different inaugural events around the opening of the bridge.

The insistence in the new neo liberal economy on constant change, connected to the need of brand stability, was perfectly merged in the picture of the stable bridge with a constant stream of people moving across it. An infinity figure, ∞ , was placed over maps of the Öresund region in order to conjure up notions of a *growth machine* with perpetual mobility.⁸

Liquid modernity and the formless state

Within this frame of mind national identifications belonged to an older era where the state embodied stability and security, inwards and outwards, but now a specific formlessness of the state resulted from what could, in Bauman's term, be called a *liquid modernity*.⁹ The mobility across the Bridge were to forge new hybrid identifications and the states should be pliable enough to accommodate this change. With an international airport at one of the bridge endings the thought was to attract international capital and investments and care to the needs of what Nigel Thrift has called the *fast subjects*, the embodiments of international investment capital.¹⁰ The emphasis on speed, mobility, *liquidity*, seemed to demand states with loose contours that could adapt to the flows of capital.

From a political perspective, the event making process was a projection into the future forging a specific Öresund identity, not only in a branding sense, but also as a real identification possibility for residents in Sweden and Denmark, aiming for a re-formulation of the modernity project into a new liquid form. One of the strings of events, had the title "The Culture Bridge" and was meant to celebrate the role of art and history in the region. One of the high lights was a celebration, in the form of a theater performance, of the 100-year anniversary of Arne Jacobsen, a futurist Danish architect, designer of iconic design classics as the chairs The Swan and The Ant. The Öresund identity was clearly to be a modernist one with weak ties to nationalities. The aim of the state driven event making process was to balance the opposing forces of nationalism and seamless liquid modernity, but risked entering into another state of the state, a *plasmatic* one. The plasmatic state could be seen as a short lived, volatile, state of the state, which must return to solidity or liquidity, otherwise threatening the state itself.¹¹

A few years after the bridge opening, the situation was a bleaker one for the consortium that had built the bridge. The number of cars passing the bridge did not reach up to the expected 11 000 per day and the statistics showing integration when it came to people moving to work on the other side did not rise up to expectation. The growth machine seemed to be halting. In many ways, the notion of the new future, gave way to a feeling of being back to a struggling present, with the exception of now having a bridge to manage. Events were no longer used in order to manage popular support for the bridge connection.

What could be seen on political plane was also an increasing emphasis on difference between the two states. The ever-increasing restrictions within the Danish migration policy created concerns on the Swedish national political level with leading politicians using the neighbor country as a negative example. Likewise, Danish politicians and intellectuals used Sweden as an example of a country where political correctness prevailed at the expense of freedom of speech. Difference, seemed to be symbolized by the bridge and the region. Commuters and other travelers still continued to use the bridge and the “fast subjects” still populated the executive lounges at Copenhagen Airport, but the rhetorical power of a bridge region was disappearing when reaching the 2010’s and after.

Winter 2015

For the refugees in the winter of 2015 the bridge crossing was another kind of event where the excess of meaning was not something designed to foster regional feelings, but instead the carrying of excruciating experiences coming close to the silence of trauma. The speaker voices in the train carriages pulling in to Hyllie station at the Swedish side of the border made it clear to everyone, commuters, tourists and refugees alike, that the power of the state was now going to be performed on their bodies in the very specific rituals of border crossings.¹² Guards standing at wire fences ready to check identity papers; police persons, some of them with dogs, entering the train, scanning faces, comparing them to pictures, retaining the gaze of the state longer on some faces than other. The *biopolitical state machinery* performing it’s task to regulate the nature of the bodies entering the jurisdiction of the state by pushing the unwanted into the *zone of the abject* (Foucault 1978, Foster 2015) and neutralizing any notions of a borderless society.

The states of the state in the Öresund region 2024

One problem that was evident in the construction of the region even before the events of 2015, was the difference between the notion of the diminishing importance of the nation state inspired by globalization theories and the everyday experiences of actors trying to facilitate cross border initiatives. It became obvious for these actors that rules and regulations of the nation state were still evident in the minuscule workings of the different bureaucracies. “Ways of doing things” had a profound impact on those who wished to have an everyday life that entailed border crossings.

But the events in 2015 pushed the “stateliness” of the border to a new level. The states entered into a plasmatic state that could not be sustained, a perceived political “death zone”. Using Agambens thinking one could argue that the commuters found themselves in a double camp where the jurisdictions of both states created a grey area that was virtually impossible to navigate with any logic (Agamben 1998). What was left were the interests of the “bare” states.

One might see the enforcement of the austere migration policies in the fall of 2015 as a core activation of the Weberian iron cage (or more correctly the iron shell) “*stahlhartes Gehäuse*”, the bureaucracy that, in its last instance, is able to contain and shape the form of the State. The formless, or plasmatic (or even phantasmagoric) iteration of the neo liberal, neo modern state, shape shifts under pressure. The formlessness turns into the shape of the penal state (Barker 2017) a state not in flow, not liquid, but in a regulatory mode, making distinctions, diagnosing, politizing biology acting the machinations of the old modernity.¹³

What was meant to be an infrastructure designed to foster economic growth, a virtual growth machine, turned into another form of regulatory machinery. The bridge became part of a biopolitical mechanism driven by state regulation and group affects.

References

- Agamben, G 1998: *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Askanius, T: Engaging with *The Bridge*: Cultural citizenship, cross-border identities and audiences as 'regionauts'. In: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2017
- Barker, V: Penal power at the border: Realigning state and nation. In: *Theoretical Criminology* 2017, Vol 21(4), 441-457
- Barker, V 2018: *Nordic Nationalism and Penal Order. Walling the Welfare State*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Berg, P-O (ed) 2000: *Invoking a Transnational Metropolis. The Making of the Øresund Region*. Lund: Studentlitteratur
- Borradori, G 2003: *Philosophy in a time of terror. Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Diken, B and C Bagge Laustsen: Zones of Indistinction – Security, Terror and Bare Life. In: Franke, A 2003: *Territories – Islands, Camps and Other States of Utopia*. Köln: Verlag der buchhandlung Walther König.
- Gilroy, P 2004: *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* Abingdon: Routledge
- Gil, J 1998: *Metamorphoses of the Body*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foster, H 2015: *Bad New Days. Art, Criticism, Emergency*. London & New York: Verso
- Foucault M 1978 *The history of sexuality. Volume 1, An introduction / Michel Foucault ; translated from the French by Robert Hurley*. New York: Pantheon Books
- Lapina, L: Besides Conviviality: Paradoxes in being 'at ease' with diversity in a Copenhagen district In: NJMR, 2016, 6(1), 33-41
- Molotch, H: The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place. In: *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (Sep., 1976)
- Ristilammi, P-M: The Bridge: Redux – The Breakdown of Normative Conviviality. In: *Conviviality at the Crossroads: The poetics and politics of everyday encounters*, eds. Oscar Hemer, Maja Povrzanović Frykman & Per-Markku Ristilammi. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-28979-9.
- Ristilammi, P-M: Cultural Bridges, Events and the New Region. In: Berg, P-O (ed) 2000: *Invoking a Transnational Metropolis. The Making of the Øresund Region*. Lund: Studentlitteratur
- Ristilammi, P-M 2010: I brons skugga. In: Löfgren O & F Nilsson (ed) 2010: *Regionauterna – Öresundsregionen från vision till vardag*. Göteborg, Stockholm: Makadam Förlag.
- Ristilammi, P-M 2007: Urban globalisering i Öresundsregionen. Mångkulturalitetens varierande grader av synlighet. In: Nilsson F, H Sanders & Y Stubbergaard (ed) 2007: *Öresundsgränser. Rörelser, möten och visioner i tid och rum*. Göteborg, Stockholm: Makadam Förlag.
- Valluvan, S: Conviviality and Multiculture: A Post-integration Sociology of Multi-ethnic Interaction In: *Young* 2016 24(3) 204–221
- Wonders N: Global flows, semi-permeable borders, and new channels of inequality: Border crossers and border performativity. In: Pickering S and Weber L (eds) 2006: *Border, Mobility and Technologies of Control*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Feldman, A 2015: *Archives of the Insensible. Of War, Photopolitics and Dead Memory*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Foster, H 2015: *Bad New Days. Art, Criticism, Emergency*. London & New York: Verso
- Thrift, N 1996: *Spatial Formations*. London: Sage

Short CV

Per-Markku Ristilammi is Professor of Ethnology at the Department for Urban studies, Malmö University and former Vice Dean at the Faculty of Culture and Society, Malmö university (2008-2011). He has been Senior Lecturer of International Migration and Ethnic relations, Malmö university (1999-2010), External Senior Lecturer at Copenhagen University (1998 and 1999) and Research Associate at the Department of Ethnology at Lund University (1994-1998). Spring 1999 he was resident Fellow at SCASSS (The Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences) in Uppsala. Ristilammi is now Director for Institute for Studies in Malmö's History (IMH).

-2023: Zlatan Ibrahimović – a monument and a mirror of his time. In: *Soccer & Society*, 2023, 24:3 Roger Johansson, Per-Markku Ristilammi, & Helena Tolvhed

-2020 (a): The Bridge: Redux – The Breakdown of Normative Conviviality. In: *Conviviality at the Crossroads: The poetics and politics of everyday encounters*, eds. Oscar Hemer, Maja Povrzanović Frykman & Per-Markku Ristilammi. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-28979-9.

Notes

¹ "infrastructure, n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/95624?redirectedFrom=infrastructure&> (accessed November 13, 2017).

²<http://www.regeringen.se/artiklar/2015/11/regeringen-beslutar-att-tillfalligt-aterinfora-granskning-vid-inre-grans/>

³ <http://www.regeringen.se/4ae76f/contentassets/23c37b142cd54d658d660dc5ca27afe5/sarskilda-atgarder-vid-allvarlig-fara-for-den-allmanna-ordningen-eller-den-inre-sakerheten-i-landet-prop.-20151667>

⁴ The account and analysis of the events surrounding the bridge opening in 2000 stems from my participation in the project "Frambesvärjandet av en transnationell region. En flervetenskaplig studie av Öresundsområdet," lead by Orvar Löfgren and Per-Olof Berg (see Berg, Linde-Laursen and Löfgren (eds) 2000 and Berg, Linde-Laursen and Löfgren (eds) 2002).

⁵ At the time of the bridge opening, in the beginning of the 2000's, the notion of events and *event-making* was en vogue among economical analyses connected to the so called *New Economy*. The events were a new kind of marketing and governance strategies connected to the volatility of the neo liberal economy precisely because they catered to emotions instead of calculative intellect (Berg, Linde-Laursen and Löfgren (eds) 2002).

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kockums_Crane

⁷ From the cover of the official brand book for the Øresund region

⁸ The concept of *growth machine* was initially coined by Harvey Molotch already in the 1970's as a way of critically describing the specific economical and social processes regarding land use that leads to the growth of cities (Molotch 1976)

⁹ Bauman, Zygmunt 2000: *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press

¹⁰ Thrift, Nigel 1996: *Spatial Formations*. London: Sage

¹¹ One apparition of the plasmatic state could be the "spectrality" that haunts the state in specific historical moments (Gil 1998:143f)

¹² As Nancy Wonders has shown, all kinds of border crossings contain a performative dimension where bodies are being staged in very specific rituals (Wonders 2006)

¹³ This tendency of shape shifting belongs to the realm of stasiology, where *stasis* contains the necessary tension between movement (*kinesis*) and firmness within the field of the political (Feldman 2015:9ff)