Migrants in the midst of city life: spatial patterns and arrival logics of foreign newcomers to Brussels in 1880

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A B S T R A C T

The spatial situation of foreign migrants in nineteenth-century cities has been studied mainly in static terms and has by and large focused on cases in the Anglophone world. This has yielded an image of concentration and segregation of foreign migrants in particular neighbourhoods. Little is known, however, about the spatial situation of foreign migrants in western European cities, and about how a dynamic approach may open up the way we think about nineteenth-century cities. This paper explores the spatial implications of the inherently dynamic process of foreign migration to western European cities. It does so by investigating the places of arrival of foreign newcomers to Brussels, using the registration files of all foreigners who arrived in Brussels in 1880. The visualisation and analysis of these data with a historical geographical information system (HGIS) shows that in contrast to what the Anglophone literature suggests, spatial concentrations based on foreign newcomers' origins or class were absent. Instead, foreign newcomers mainly arrived centrally and dispersed according to workplace bound, accommodation related and event induced arrival logics. These arrival logics were expressed spatially in small scale, heterogeneous and more or less temporary 'arrival spaces'. Foreign newcomers in Brussels in the nineteenth century should thus not be imagined in isolated migrant neighbourhoods, but as an integral part of the city, and as actively shaping and producing the city and its everyday life.

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Most literature on the spatial situation of migrants in the city has presented it in static spatial terms.[1] Scholars have calculated, explained and problematised migrants' residential segregation, often in terms of 'race' or 'class'. This research dates back to the Chicago School of Sociology of the 1920s, and has, especially as regards foreign migrants in nineteenth—century cities, by and large focused on cases in the Anglophone world. The cities which have received particular attention owed their often spectacular growth and transformation to large scale industrialisation based on the extraction of raw materials, factories and/or ports and grew mostly by rural to urban migration. The resulting sociospatial image that

has emerged has been one of concentration and segregation of migrants, including 'foreign' migrants, in particular neighbourhoods in the city.[2] The spatial position of foreign migrants in western European cities seems to have caused much less ink to flow.[3] Because foreigners may have played an important role in urban society, as was the case for foreign migrants in Brussels during the nineteenth century, it is important to understand their spatial position within and interaction with the city.[4]

The static lens with which such migration has been viewed, together with the particular case studies, has profoundly influenced the way we think about nineteenth-century migration — casting it as a permanent, one-off change of residence — and cities — seeing them as bounded places. As Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick

Shiller have convincingly argued, this conceptualisation of the migrant has largely been influenced by the development of the nation state which organised land into 'static' containers and has led to conceptualisations of space in the modern period in terms of fixed borders and bounded places.[5] However, these conceptualisations have been challenged, especially in the last decade. On the one hand, migration scholars have profoundly criticised 'the bounded and static categories of nation, ethnicity, community, place, and state', while, on the other, migration has been reconceptualised as 'stability within movement'.[6] Or, as Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis Tsianos argue, 'You never arrive somewhere. … [Migration] characterises the continuous shifts and radical rearticulations of individual trajectories'.[7] Scholars of migration history have thereby stressed the importance of circular, seasonal and temporary migration, while deemphasising the importance of nationality up until deep into the nineteenth century.[8] Geographers have also reconceptualised space and place in terms of interrelations, multiplicities and as always under construction, rather than as static representations of a world divided by impermeable borders. Following Doreen Massey, places can be regarded as spatiotemporal events, made up of an ever-changing 'throwntogetherness' of multiple trajectories.[9]

Despite these insights migrants in the nineteenth-century city continue to be treated statically.[10] One key reason for this is a scarcity of data that shed light on the dynamic side of migration. In order to investigate the places of migrants in these cities scholars have used census data, which — in the best case — represent people present in the city at a given moment. These data fail to adequately represent people who migrated to the city only temporarily. They also represent the city as a static given. In addition, it is only recently that spatial representation techniques have become available that allow the visualisation and analysis of highly detailed, individual information. This has opened up possibilities that go beyond the calculation of segregation measurements based on administrative spatial units.

For this research I make use of a different dataset, which I visualise and analyse using a historical geographical information system (HGIS). Historical GIS is a relatively new tool for exploring past activities and the environments in which they took place. It has been brought to the fore by Ian Gregory and Anne Kelly Knowles and championed not only for its great visualisation capacities, but also for its ability to link information based on spatial location and to promote spatial analysis.[11] The dataset used here contains the digitised *bulletins de reseignement*, or foreigners' registration files, of all foreigners who arrived in Brussels in 1880. It allows me to investigate the migration flows into the city, instead of the migration stocks already present in the city. These migration flows are particularly well suited for investigating the dynamism of

migration to a city. Based on the investigation of the *bulletins* within an HGIS, I shed light on the dynamic character of migration and the spatial implications of the arrival of newcomers to the city. I argue that, in contrast to many cities in the English speaking world, Brussels was characterised by 'arrival spaces' into which foreign newcomers arrived irrespective of their ethnic and social background, attracted instead by workplace bound, accommodation related and event induced 'arrival logics'. I explain that the specific characteristics of the migrants contributed to this spatial mix. I also show that these arrival spaces were to a greater or lesser extent temporary and strongly connected with the outline and the characteristics of the built environment. Lastly, I argue that the resulting insights into the spatial implications of migration, understood as a dynamic process, are crucial to achieving an understanding of nineteenth–century cities that goes beyond a static representation of spatial patterns.

In what follows, I first discuss the existing literature on the spatial distribution of foreign migrants in nineteenth-century cities. I then elaborate on the source materials and methods used in my analysis, and on the historical context of late nineteenth-century Brussels, before proceeding with a discussion of the main empirical findings. These propose an alternative image of the arrival of migrants to the city. I conclude with some reflections on the implications of this research for the conceptualisations of migration, mobility and cities in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Migration and the nineteenth-century city

Where, according to the current literature, did foreign immigrants arrive in the city? To discuss this issue I combine different strands in the literature, including studies on the socio-spatial structure of cities and residential segregation, studies focussing on one or several distinctive groups in the city (such as the Irish, Scots and Welsh in English cities, the Italians in French cities or Germans in Dutch cities), and more general literature on migration in the nineteenth century. Most work on the spatial situation of foreign migrants in nineteenth–century cities deals with cities in the United States or Great Britain. Robert Park and Ernest Burgess of the 1920s Chicago School of Sociology presented a now classic image of the city, consisting of specialised concentric zones, in which the innermost zone surrounding the central business district and manufacturing area was labelled the 'zone of transition' and functioned as 'port of entry' for newly arriving internal as well as foreign immigrants.[12] This was one of the first urban theories that situated newcomers in a concentrated and segregated area within the city. Many scholars have since described the segregation of newcomers, including foreign newcomers, from the rest of the urban population, although the 'ecological' causes of these spatial forms have largely been replaced by other factors, notably 'class' and 'ethnicity'.[13] According to class-related explanations, people are forced to live

[5] A. Wimmer and N. Glick Schiller, Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences, *Global Networks* 2 (2002) 301–334; D. Massey, *For Space*, London, 2005.

[6] M. Sheller and J. Urry, The new mobilities paradigm, *Environment and Planning A* 2 (2006) 211; R. King, Geography and migration studies: retrospect and prospect, *Population, Space and Place* 18 (2012) 136.

[7] D. Papadopoulos and V. Tsianos, The autonomy of migration: the animals of undocumented mobility, in: A. Hickey-Moody and P. Malins (Eds), *Deleuzian Encounters: Studies in Contemporary Social Issues*, Basingstoke, 2007, 224.

[8] B. De Munck and A. Winter (Eds), *Gated Communities? Regulating Migration in Early Modern Cities*, London and New York, 2016.

[9] Massey, *For Space*.

[10] Kwan, Beyond space (as we knew it).

[11] I. Gregory and R. Healey, Historical GIS: structuring, mapping and analysing geographies of the past, *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007) 638–653; A.K. Knowles and A. Hillier, *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS are Changing Historical Scholarship*, Redlands, 2008.

[12] See E.W. Burgess, The growth of the city: an introduction to a research project, in: R.E. Park, E.W. Burgess and R.D. McKenzie (Eds), *The City*, Chicago, 1925, 47–62; E.W. Burgess, Residential segregation in American cities, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140 (1928) 105–115.

[13] See, for example, D. Ward, The internal spatial structure of immigrant residential districts in the late nineteenth century, *Geographical Analysis* 1 (1969) 337–353 and Pooley, The residential segregation of migrant communities, on cultural versus class explanations for the segregation of Welsh, Scottish, Irish and overseas migrants in Liverpool, but also contributions dealing with American cities, for example D. Hiebert, Class, ethnicity and residential structure: the social geography of Winnipeg, 1901–1921, *Journal of Historical Geography* 17 (1991) 56–86; Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality* and more recent contributions, for example Gilliland and Olson, Residential segregation in the industrializing city.