Tracing mobilities regimes: The regulation of drug smuggling and labour migration at two airports in the Netherlands and Indonesia

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In today’s mobile world, people, objects, capital and information cross international borders on a daily basis. Worries about unwanted or risky mobilities, such as illegal migration, smuggling and terrorism, lead to an urgent wish to regulate and control international movements. Regulating mobilities, however, does not just consist of restricting undesirable movements; the majority of people and goods need to be screened in such a way that their cross-border movement is facilitated. This dissertation examines efforts to regulate international mobility and argues that we need to understand these regulatory practices as a ‘mobilities regime’. The concept of mobilities regime allows us to better understand how diverse state and non-state actors are involved in spatiotemporally extended regimes that entail particular technologies and modes of regulation. I develop the concept of mobilities regime through an empirical analysis of case studies of regulation of international mobilities at two airports in different parts of the world: drug smuggling at Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands and labour migration at Soekarno-Hatta Airport in Indonesia.

In this thesis, the concept of ‘mobilities regime’ serves as a bridge between the two largely separate fields of mobilities studies and border studies. Despite the emergence of more critical approaches in mobilities studies that seek to understand the politics of mobility, or, in other words, the way mobilities are related to unequal power relations, scholars in this field tend to pay more attention to how mobility is enabled than to how it is regulated and restricted. In border studies, the idea of the border as merely a territorial line is losing ground and is now complemented by the notion that borders today are as mobile as the people and goods they seek to control. Combining mobilities studies’ sensitivity to the politics of mobilities with border studies’ reconceptualization of the border, I ask the following questions. How are mobilities problematized and how are practices of regulating them legitimized? What technologies of classifying, examining, and controlling mobilities are used to regulate mobilities? What actors are involved in regulating mobilities and what are their stakes? And where and when is mobility regulated? An overarching question concerns the politics of mobility entailed by regulation, for example how the workings of a mobilities regime affect travellers’ movements.

In Chapter 2 I take the airport as a method for tracing mobilities regimes. I distinguish four characteristics of the airport that serve as points of departure for my analysis. First, the airport is a node through which people and goods move, and at the same time a border for these mobilities, which makes it a key site for the regulation of mobilities. This means that from the airport, mobilities as well as the daily efforts to regulate them can be researched. Second, airports are a constellation of public and private actors. Tracing a mobilities regime
in this sense compels us to examine which state and non-state actors are engaged in regulating mobilities and what their stakes are. Third, airports are linked to other places and grounded in local contexts, and tracing a mobilities regime through the airport therefore entails being sensitive to (transnational) connections, but also to the local context in which the mobilities regime is situated. Fourth, moving through an airport is experienced in very different ways by different people. This provides a reason to follow mobile subjects other than the white academic, whose airport experience has so far been dominant in scholarly airport literature. Hence, I trace mobilities regimes through the airport in two ways: first, the airport represents a research site for studying the regulation of mobility, and second, the airport provides a lens to look at the regulation of mobility in a particular way. Using a mix of qualitative data including interviews, (participant) observations, and document study, I examine efforts to curtail drug smuggling at Schiphol Airport and the regulation of labour migrants’ return journeys at Soekarno-Hatta Airport.

When it became clear that the historical connections and good air transport networks between the Caribbean and the Netherlands facilitated not only legitimate movements, but also illegal drug smuggling, the Dutch government in the early 2000s introduced a range of measures to curtail drug smuggling via Schiphol Airport. Chapter 3 examines the technologies for classifying, examining and controlling (potential) drug smugglers that are used in this mobilities regime, such as profiling, body searches, and black lists. It turns out that many practices of classifying (potential) drug smugglers are invisible to passengers, and increasingly entail their automatic and unknowing cooperation. Some of the more recently introduced technologies, such as digital profiling, work with ‘data doubles’, thereby creating a virtual traveller who is classified in terms of risk. While in many instances the use of data doubles makes checks faster and less burdensome, travellers also lose control over their data doubles and can no longer decide whether to cooperate, ‘play along’, or resist being classified or screened. In this mobilities regime, travel between the Caribbean and the Netherlands has become ‘risky’ mobility, and people arriving on ‘risk flights’ are treated differently to people arriving on non-risk flights. For some travellers, this results in a feeling that they are automatically suspect. Moreover, this chapter shows how classifying travellers from the Caribbean as risky travellers becomes a particularly sensitive issue when added to existing social differences.

Chapter 4 traces where and when mobilities are regulated and identifies the multiple actors that play a role in the mobilities regime. I propose to understand the anti-drug-smuggling checks as a mobilities regime of selective immobilization. The term selective
immobilization allows us to depart from border scholars’ tendency to focus on the border as a site of regulation: in the anti-drug-smuggling regime it is not the crossing of the border but movement itself that has become the object of regulation. The aim of the anti-drug-smuggling mobilities regime is to immobilize those people who are considered a risk while at the same time facilitating the movement of those travellers who are considered bonafide. In this regime of selective immobilization, with the help of airlines, joint border control teams, and exported technologies, (potential) drug smugglers are increasingly screened before they even reach the arrival gate at Schiphol Airport. Hence, this chapter argues that the mobilities regime has expanded in time and space, extending spatially to places outside Schiphol and the Netherlands and extending temporally to include the phase of departure as well as future journeys. In addition, airlines have become part of the mobilities regime and now participate in ‘traditional’ border functions of the state, for example by barring travellers considered risky from boarding the airplane. In contrast to scholars who argue that airlines participate in such private-public participation at the behest of states, this chapter illustrates that airlines too may benefit from collaboration with state actors. This requires us to acknowledge that airlines as private actors do not just facilitate mobility, but are also involved in classifying travellers and blocking potentially malafide travellers. Tracing the times, spaces, and actors of regulation also reveals how collaboration between the Dutch government, airlines, and Caribbean authorities problematizes issues of accountability and sovereignty, and how the legitimacy of certain regulatory practices has been contested.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the second case study: the regulation of labour migrants’ return journeys at Soekarno-Hatta Airport in Indonesia. When Indonesian migrant workers return home, the Indonesian government sets them apart from other travellers in order to protect them from extortion at and around the airport, and to assist them during their return to their home villages. Chapter 5 examines the technologies used for classifying, screening and controlling migrant mobilities and shows how the regulation of migrant workers’ movements relies on stereotypes of female migrant workers and on self-sorting of migrant workers. While this mobilities regime is based on the intention to provide care and safety, at the same time it creates a mobile subject who is vulnerable and not capable of going home on her own. The regulatory technologies make the mobility of these migrants different from that of ordinary travellers. Technologies that work at the micro level of the body reinforce the existing subordinate status of female migrant workers, and the mobility of migrant workers is controlled in such a way that they have little say in deciding or choosing where, when and how they travel. Yet this chapter also discusses how both officials and...
migrant workers have room for manoeuvre in classification practices. The effects of creating a particular mobile subject, and of reinforcing existing stereotypes, are manifested when migrant workers leave the terminal to go home by minibus. During the final part of the journey home, it becomes clear that visibly setting the migrants apart and channelling them through a separate process not only protects the migrants (to some extent) on their journey home, but also facilitates extortion. En route to the villages, the migrants’ safety that the government intends to produce can no longer be taken for granted and needs to be renegotiated.

Chapter 6 seeks to further unpack this protective yet controlling mode of regulating mobilities. Similar to what Chapter 4 argues, movement itself, in this case the return journey, has become the object of regulation. Through the organization and regulation of the return journey, a mobilities regime of encapsulation emerges that is not aimed at immobilizing migrant workers, but rather at channelling and controlling their mobility. In this encapsulation regime, with the help of different state and private parties, migrant workers’ journeys are increasingly controlled and supervised over larger distances and time-spans. Encapsulation of migrant workers has expanded spatially to the home villages. Temporally, the regime extends to the moment of arrival, but the strict government supervision also leads to an increase in the duration of the journey. In addition, the migrant mobilities regime turns out to be an unstable constellation of various state and non-state actors, in which authority over the return process has often shifted hands, different actors blame each other for malpractices, and some actors attempt to use the ambiguities of the regulatory framework to their own advantage. In addition, and similar to what we see in the anti-drug-smuggling regime, private actors who facilitate journeys, such as transport companies and airlines, engage in regulating mobilities, in this case by offering special services for migrants. Even family members are incorporated in the regime, as they need to sign a receipt when the migrant has arrived home. The legitimacy of this mobilities regime is contested, because legitimate practices of providing return services are intertwined with illegitimate practices of extorting migrant workers. Similar to the way the recruitment, training and placing abroad of Indonesian migrant workers has become an industry that has made migrant workers dependent on the services it provides, it turns out that state and non-state actors can make profits from facilitating and securing migrants’ return journeys.

Having traced two mobilities regimes empirically in Chapters 3 to 6, the final chapter seeks to identify some general characteristics of mobilities regimes, or in other words, to map contemporary mobilities regimes. Arguing against theories that characterize mobilities
regimes as simply aimed at blocking and containing movement, this thesis emphasizes that 1) each mobilities regime has a specific mode of regulation in which the enabling and restricting of mobilities work in tandem. While border scholars do pay attention to the involvement of non-state actors in border control, the concept of mobilities regime requires us to consider the broader question of all those involved in the regulation of movement during the entire journey, and to identify their different and overlapping stakes. This helps us to see that 2) mobilities regimes are constellations of state and non-state actors, including government actors (national and foreign) at national and local levels, airlines, transport companies, local actors, and NGOs. Tracing the mobilities regimes for labour migration and for drug smuggling also shows that 3) mobilities regimes have extended spatial and temporal contours. The case studies show that a mobilities regime can extend spatially to sites outside the nation-state borders, such as overseas territories, but also to localities within the nation-state, such as to roadside restaurants and home villages. Temporally, a mobilities regime can extend to pre-departure, to arrival at destination, and even to future and past journeys. The fact that these specific spatial and temporal contours are shaped by historical circuits of colonial mobilities, religious travel, and labour migration, leads us to recognize that mobilities regimes are grounded in particular geographical circuits and historical contexts. Finally, given the contested nature of certain regulatory practices of both mobilities regimes, we are led to acknowledge that 4) mobilities regimes are on the margins of legitimacy.

In short, this thesis argues that we can no longer understand the regulation of international mobility by focusing exclusively on state borders. In our contemporary mobile world, movement is regulated by spatiotemporally extended mobilities regimes in which both state and non-state actors play a role. In addition, in these mobilities regimes, the enabling and restricting of movement work in tandem through the use of particular technologies of classifying, examining, and controlling mobilities. The tracing and mapping of contemporary mobilities regimes as is done in this thesis not only allows us to understand their workings and constellation of actors, but also their effects. I have shown that mobilities regimes create differences in actual movement, in access to movement, and in control over movement, and how these regimes, by blurring the tasks and responsibilities of public and private actors and crossing geographical borders and legal boundaries, challenge borders and boundaries in several ways. In that light, I hope this thesis will encourage the critical analysis of contemporary efforts to regulate international mobility.