



EU-Limboscapes: Ceuta and the proliferation of migrant detention spaces across the European Union

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Xavier Ferrer-Gallardo and Abel Albet-Mas

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

This Euro-commentary puts the lens on the European Union (EU) North-African city of Ceuta. In so doing, it introduces the notion of EU limboscapes. In the 1990s and early 2000s the iconic twin-metal fencing of Ceuta's borders added powerful visual strength to the metaphorical Fortress Europe. Today, Ceuta is still (or even more) central when it comes to the conceptual understanding of the socio-spatial articulation of the EU project vis-à-vis migration management. In this respect, we suggest that the limboscape profile drawn by Ceuta's spatial dynamics is now iconic in terms of current EU bordering practices. The notion of limboscape helps us conceptually grasp/map the expanding archipelago of migrant confinement spaces scattered within and beyond EU space.

Keywords

border, Ceuta, detention centres, European Union, limbo, limboscape, migration

Limbo

1. *Roman Catholic Theology*. A region on the border of hell or heaven, serving as the abode after death of unbaptised infants (limbo of infants) and of the righteous who died before the coming of Christ (limbo of the fathers or limbo of the patriarchs).
2. A place or state of oblivion to which persons or things are regarded as being relegated when cast aside, forgotten, past or out of date.
3. An intermediate, transitional or midway state or place.
4. Place or state of imprisonment or confinement.

(<http://www.dictionary.reference.com>)

Introduction

Spain joined the European Union (EU) in 1986, and signed up to the Schengen Agreement five years later, in 1991. At that time, the Spanish city of Ceuta in North Africa¹ started gradually to become a key hub of irregular sub-Saharan migration toward the European continent.² Since then, both the increasing securitisation of its borders and the fluctuating, though persistent, arrival of migrants have transformed the

Corresponding author:

Xavier Ferrer-Gallardo, Departament de Geografia, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Spain.

Email: Xavier.Ferrer.Gallardo@uab.cat

socio-spatial scenery of the city. What we argue here is that this, in turn, tells us much about the socio-spatial transformation of the entire EU project.

In this light, the present commentary begins by looking at how the management of Ceuta's borders influences the opportunities of migrants en route to the EU. In particular, it focusses on the situation of those sub-Saharan migrants who, having managed to cross the EU's North-African border fence irregularly, are not allowed to reach European-EU soil and find themselves stranded in Ceuta. Under these circumstances, the city becomes a limbo-like space: a transitional zone, a threshold or midway territory between two different borders, where the migrants' trajectories towards the 'European-EU' are spatially and temporally suspended, confined between the land border with Morocco and the Straits of Gibraltar. This can be defined as a limboscape.

This limboscape profile is, in fact, well rooted within the history and geography of Ceuta: its peculiar geography (a small peninsula defined by a narrow isthmus) makes it a unique and secluded location in itself; for centuries Ceuta was a city-prison (*presidio*) to which major criminals from the Iberian Peninsula were deported. Our main point here, however, is that the current limboscape profile of Ceuta is by no means exceptional. Per contra, it exemplifies the contemporary EU-wide proliferation of limbo spaces where the selection of access to the EU is performed. Ceuta therefore constitutes a key component within an archipelago of limboscaping developing within and beyond EU space.

European Union bordering on African soil

The range of legal modifications associated with the Schengenisation of Spain's borders coincided with the implementation of securitisation techniques and the physical reshaping of the Spanish–Moroccan border complex. In order to prevent the irregular entrance of immigrants, controls were reinforced all along the border with the financial assistance of EU institutions. The city of Ceuta was exactly in the middle of this process of border reconfiguration.

The tough, though ineffective, measures taken to obstruct the movement of some 'undesired' non-EU citizens across the border of Ceuta contrast with the elasticity that EU legislation shows when it comes to facilitating the free cross-border flow of 'desired' non-EU citizens. The economic sustainability of Ceuta largely depends on the interaction with its Moroccan hinterland, and for this reason, Spain waives the visa requirement for Moroccan citizens from the neighbouring province of Tetouan. This exemption was incorporated in the Protocol of Accession of Spain to the Schengen Agreement in 1991, together with the commitment to maintain tight identity controls regarding those wanting to travel to the rest of Spanish territory (Planet, 1998). The fact that document controls are conducted both at the land crossing-point between Morocco and Ceuta and at the maritime crossing-point between Ceuta and the Iberian Peninsula implies that the entire territory of Ceuta functions as a threshold between two EU borders, as an intermediate border-zone of some 19.5 km².

Fencing the 'Fortress'

The reconfiguration of the Spanish border regime ran parallel to the reshaping of migratory dynamics in the north of Africa (see, among others, Carling, 2007; Fekete, 2004; Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008, 2011; Mutlu and Leite, 2012). The border of Ceuta emerged as a new frontier to be crossed within the trajectories of sub-Saharan migrants to the EU. By 1995, the irregular access of migrants to Ceuta was already a common phenomenon. These migrants were not repatriated to their countries of origin nor allowed to cross the maritime border towards the Iberian Peninsula. This was the source of tensions in the city, where both racist attacks and migrants' riots in support of their rights proliferated (Planet, 1998). In order to halt the increasing flows of irregular immigration, a double metal fence, whose height later reached 6 m., was erected on the city's land border with Morocco. This is how the Ceuta border scenario started to become a paradigmatic example of the EU's sealing-off of its outer perimeter. As a consequence, the city became widely known as an icon of so-called 'Fortress Europe'.

Particularly after the year 2000, an increasing number of migrants had converged in the environs of Ceuta, waiting for an opportunity to be able to enter the city. They started to gather in informal camps near the border fence, in the forests of Belyounech, Morocco (see Soddu, 2006). In this context, during September and October 2005, irregular entry to the city grew substantially. Border guards, both in Morocco and in Spain, harshly repressed the attempts at entry (Blanchard and Wender, 2007). According to the Spanish Ministry of Home Affairs, 5566 immigrants irregularly entered Ceuta and Melilla in 2005. Yet there were many more who could not make it. Eleven immigrants died and many more were wounded during these incidents.

These dramatic events placed Ceuta and Melilla under the global lens of media interest and led to a significant transformation of border securitisation practices. The immediate response was the physical reinforcement of the fences and the strengthening of border patrols on both sides of the perimeter. Spanish and Moroccan army units were sent to the border and remained there for a short time. This meant, in consequence, that the border was effectively militarised. Ceuta (and Melilla) thus became the two most heavily securitised border posts of the EU. Since then, surprisingly enough, Moroccan border and police authorities have increasingly cooperated in managing migrant flows towards the Spanish/EU border (see Casas-Cortés et al., 2013: 52; Migreurop, 2012). This occurs despite the fact that Morocco claims sovereignty over Ceuta (and hence does not recognise its land border as an official border).

Ceuta within the archipelago of European Union limboscapes

The abovementioned events were followed by an increase in the number of detention camps throughout the European continent. According to Migreurop (2012), the number of camps grew from 324 in the year 2000 to 473 in 2012. With different names³ and duties, and adjusting to different national laws (and sensitivities), these centres (being camps or special buildings) hold irregular entrants to the EU, who are waiting for a legal decision concerning their expulsion from or acceptance into the EU.

In Spain these centres are called CIE (Centro de Internamiento de Extranjeros, closed centres) and CETI (Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes, open centres) and, of course, Ceuta has its own CETI. The CETI of Ceuta is sometimes described as a sweet prison by those who live there. It is in fact an open centre. It is not exactly a detention centre. It is not a prison. It is a sugared version of it, one might say. CETI residents can get in and out of the centre as they wish. The city hence functions as the CETI's backyard. Immigrants can move freely within the city, but they cannot freely leave it. They are isolated, trapped, immobilised in Ceuta. Ceuta as a whole hence works as an intermediate territory, as a transitional space of confinement. It is a waiting area of some 19.5 km², where the legal status of immigrants (the granting or denial of the right of access to the EU) is resolved. The implementation of Schengen's legal apparatus determines the extent to which they deserve to have a right to free mobility.

This has transformed Ceuta into a space of oblivion between the heaven of regularisation and the hell(s) of repatriation/deportation/expulsion. This region on the diffuse margins between EU space and non-EU space hence serves as a temporary abode for those who have managed to cross the EU external border irregularly but have not yet received the baptism or the conviction of the Schengen law. In other words, it has transformed Ceuta into a limboscape.

Purgatorial geopolitics

By putting the analytical lens on Ceuta, we have proposed the notion of limboscape as a useful conceptual tool for a better grasp of the development of current practices of EU b/ordering.

Over the last two decades, the iconic twin-metal fencing of Ceuta's borders has added powerful visual strength to the spatial metaphors of the Fortress Europe/Gated Community. Time has gone by and the political geographies of EU b/ordering vis-à-vis migration management have evolved remarkably. Scholarly literature in the field has grown in consequence. Its review, of course, goes beyond the scope of this commentary. What we have argued here is that, today, in the light of this geopolitical and theoretical evolution, spaces like Ceuta are still central (or even

more so) when it comes to conceptually understanding (and illustrating) the socio-spatial articulation of the EU project.

In the past, the militarisation/fortification of the city's land border with Morocco shed valuable light on the process of physical reinforcement of the EU's external border. Over the years, the implementation of the EU border regime has transformed the spatial nature of this EU-African territory. Ceuta has turned into what we have defined as a limboscape. This categorisation enables us to illuminate a highly relevant parcel of current EU geopolitical practice. This is the fabrication of a new cartography of territories of exception where the discriminatory granting of access to the EU operates. Altogether, these spaces⁴ constitute what can be described as an emerging EU limboscape, consisting of a constellation of EU and non-EU spaces where EU purgatorial geopolitics vis-à-vis international migrants comes into force. These are transitional spaces where (some) migrants must face the uncertain process of waiting on the EU law. That is where an essential piece of what Van Houtum (2010) identifies as the human-blacklisting bureaucratic machinery of the Schengen regime is deployed; the grey zones where an essential part of the EU project is socio-spatially constructed. These are EU limboscapes.

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Notes

1. Ceuta has a surface area of 19.48 km² and a total perimeter of 30 km, of which 8 km constitutes its land border with Morocco. The city is inhabited by 84,018 people (1 January 2013, Instituto Nacional de Estadística, www.ine.es).
2. The same applies to the city of Melilla.
3. Centre/Local de Rétention Administrative (France), Centro de Instalação Temporária (Portugal), Centros de Internamiento de Extranjeros (Spain), Centri d'Identificazione ed Espulsione (Italy), Aliens Centre (Slovenia), Centrul de Cazare a Strainilor Luati in Custodie Publica (Romania), Coercive Shelter (Bulgaria), Centre Fermé (Belgium), etc. (see Migreurop, 2012: 83).
4. See Migreurop's map: http://www.migreurop.org/IMG/jpg/map_18-1_L_Europe_des_camps_2011_v9_FR.jpg.

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