

Bordering encounters, sociality, and distribution of the ability to live a normal life

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In January 2010 a man in his early 30s turned himself over to the Latvian State Border Guard in Riga, Latvia's capital. He allegedly crossed into the European Union at the former boundary between the Soviet republics of Lithuania and Belarus a few days previously and continued on to Latvia. His journey began in Georgia and, as he put it, he wanted to go 'deeper into Europe' but gave up because of the sub-zero Winter temperatures.

I happened to be in the offices of the Latvian State Border Guard, talking with the Head of the Department of Immigration Control while reading case files of 'undocumented migrants.' Since space was scarce, both of us were present when an inspector interviewed the man from Georgia who called himself Gia. The four of us were later joined by a Georgian language translator who assisted with the interview. Having come of age after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gia's Russian language skills were rudimentary, while the rest of us spoke Russian well. The Georgian language translator was also from Georgia, but had moved to Latvia after meeting her Latvian husband in the early 1990s. She spoke Latvian fluently, as did the inspector conducting the interview. He, in turn, was a citizen of Latvia, but his mother tongue was Russian. The Head of Department and I shared Latvian as our first language. The Head of Department thus often assumed and suggested that as a fellow Latvian I surely must understand that the historical legacy of large-scale in-migration of Russian speakers during the Soviet times demands rigid immigration controls in the present in order to protect the cultural nation of Latvians from extinction. He referred to the fact that during the Soviet period the ethnic composition of Latvia shifted dramatically. Statistical data indicate that in 1935 Latvians made

up 75.5% of the population. In 1959, after the deportations carried out by the Soviet state, the proportion of Latvians had dropped to 62%. In 1989, just before independence, ethnic Latvians made up 52%, while the Russian population measured at 34%.ⁱ These demographic shifts are commonly attributed to the Soviet state's attempts to mix up populations in order to deepen the reach of socialism in areas with too much national consciousness. In Latvia, as elsewhere, population movement was accompanied by shifts in language use insofar as the newcomers did not learn local languages, but spoke Russian instead. Russian became the only fully shared language in the Soviet Republic of Latvia, which exacerbated the sense of existential threat felt by Latvians.

Concern with the survival of the cultural nation remains a crucial constitutive element of the 'practical ontology' of many Latvians. To put another way, it informs how many of those who identify as Latvian orient themselves and act in the world on a daily basis (Glaeser 2009: 10).ⁱⁱ Such a concern was also constitutive of the practical ontology of the Head of the Department of Immigration Control and his colleagues. For example, when I interview the Head of the Department of Asylum in 2005, he rhetorically asked me whether I knew how many Latvians there were in Latvia in relation to the total population. He was emphasizing the point that the Latvian state—as a national state established for the purpose of ensuring the flourishing of the cultural nation of Latvians—faced a unique demographic challenge.ⁱⁱⁱ He said: 'There is no unified model [of immigration control] in Europe. It is a continuous struggle, and we know why we are doing what we are doing.'

Given the historical and political entanglements, the five of us—the man from Georgia, the Head of the Department of Immigration Control, the inspector, the translator and the anthropologist—made up quite a motley crew of post-Soviet subjects. The border that was being

construed through our encounter was both a Latvian and a European border, but it also exhibited traces of what used to be a boundary between Soviet republics. We were all differently positioned in relation to the Latvian nation and the state, as well as in relation to the Soviet past and the European present. Some of us were citizens, while others legal residents or illegal immigrants. Some of us were law enforcement officers, while others lay persons and even law-breakers. Nevertheless, as the encounter unfolded, it appeared that, despite the state-based enforcement of differences between us, we were able to connect, share stories, criticize politics, laugh, and even plan alternative routes that Gia could take the next time he tries to go ‘deeper into Europe.’ Our bordering encounter was thus characterized not only by the demands of the newly consolidated European border regime and Latvian national sovereignty, but also by a particular public sociality, that is, a sociality that connected as individual strangers in the public space rather than as friends or family members in someone’s kitchen. This sociality constituted us as fellow travellers across lines of power, even as we were intensely aware of the geopolitics of power that animated the bordering encounter.

In this article, I analyse our bordering encounter as a complex articulation of state-based violence and a historically formed public sociality that exceeds it. My object of analysis is not a border conventionally understood as a line that demarcates national territories and structures the lives of diverse border communities (see Reeves 2008 for critique, also Reeves 2011, Jansen 2010, Green 2009, Mezzadra & Neilson 2012). Rather, I analyse the bordering encounter as a set of practices through which a political border is simultaneously constituted and contested as a mechanism for governing flows of people by sorting them into citizens, residents, and migrants with differentiated access to rights or, as I suggest in this article, ‘normal life.’ Moreover, the bordering that I am concerned with does not necessarily take place on the border, but is

distributed in political space (Balibar 2004, Mezzadra & Neilson 2012). For example, while involving border guards, the bordering encounter did not occur on a heavily guarded border-crossing checkpoint, but rather in a small room in a lightly protected building in the middle of the city. It did not take place at the moment someone was trying to cross a border, but rather several days after the act of crossing. The bordering encounter established the fact of border crossing after or even in the absence of the act of border crossing, as such an act could only be deduced from Gia's presence in the offices of the Border Guard. Yet, while recognizing the border work that goes into the making of a political border (Green 2009, Reeves 2011), in this article I am particularly interested in the contours of the public sociality that emerged during our bordering encounter. It is precisely this sociality that made us all into post-Soviet subjects and that constituted the border guards not only as state agents who performed sovereignty by fixing territories and regulating movement, but also as historically situated individuals who grappled with their involvement in the distribution of the ability to lead a 'normal life.'^{iv}

It is important to note here that anthropologists have shown the pervasive salience of the category of 'normal life' across postsocialist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. This ethnographically derived notion variously marks life paths imagined as interrupted by the Soviet occupation in Estonia (Rausing 2004), particular patterns of consumption and material well-being in Hungary (Fehérvári 2002), explicitly apolitical modes of everyday life in late socialist Russia (Yurchak 2006), desire for state services, such as public transportation, in Sarajevo (Jansen 2013), the ability to move freely and to effect change in public and political life in Serbia (Greenberg 2011), and the ability to improve one's life in the future through hard work in the present in my own research on Latvian labour migration to Western Europe. It may seem on the surface that desire for a 'normal life' plays into the normative capitalist mode of existence

insofar as postsocialist subjects wish to join rather than contest it. However, anthropological engagements suggest that aspirations for a ‘normal life’ also entail a critique of the present that requires careful unpacking. In this article, the contours of such a critique emerge as participants of the bordering encounter establish how each is positioned in relation to power hierarchies that structure global patterns of distribution of the ability to lead a normal life. This happens through conversations that unfold alongside procedures carried out to effect a deportation. The sociality forged in between questions about Gia’s identity and routes brings into focus the ethical-political dimensions of the bordering encounter, that is, the recognition of another’s claim to a normal life, another’s attempt to move and thus to creatively change one’s conditions of existence (De Genova 2010). Importantly, the ethical-political dimension of the bordering encounter does not reside in abstract arguments about the nature of the border insofar as it connects or disconnects people and territories or enables or halts movement and flows, but rather in the actions and judgments of the participants of the bordering encounter.^v More importantly, however, the ethical-political dimension of the bordering encounter is not a product of universal humanism as a relation of empathy or compassion, but rather of historically formed public sociality as a relation of recognition of another as an equal. In what follows, I explore the conditions of possibility of such a sociality, as well as its political and analytical potential. I begin with a brief discussion of post-Soviet re-bordering more broadly.

Post-Soviet re-bordering

Borders and bordering became a central feature of governing after the end of the Cold War. As William Walters has noted, ‘the capacity for effective border control now sits alongside democratic reform and economic stability as a governmental pre-requisite for admission into the

EU's privileged circle of states' (2009: 485). And yet, while formally brought within 'the EU's privileged circle of states,' former socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe are 'accorded the status of a buffer zone, a space which is to insulate the heartland of the EU from what many strategists regard as the turbulent, chaotic spaces of the former Soviet Empire to the east, and more generally global movement of refugees, economic migrants and other mobile "threats"' (Walters 2009: 489).

Such positioning in relation to Western Europe is not new for Eastern European states and peoples. As shown by historian Larry Wolff (1994), in the context of the 18th century Enlightenment, Eastern Europe came to be seen as an ambiguous not-quite-European—that is, not quite civilized—space located in the buffer zone between the West and the Orient. During the Cold War, the relationship between Western and Eastern Europe was marked by an ideological opposition between capitalism and socialism. The post-Cold War period, often conceived as a return to Europe, reinstated a hierarchical relationship between Eastern and Western Europe marked by civilizational difference.

The political and economic transformations meant to bring the former socialist Eastern Europe into the properly European orbit of free markets and liberal democracy were accompanied by rising inequality and poverty. Many former Soviet and socialist subjects, including the new Europeans, such as Latvians, sought to change their conditions of existence by migrating. Following accession to the European Union, more and more Latvians began to leave in search of work in Ireland, Britain and Sweden—the three European Union member-states that did not institute transitional controls on the new Europeans' freedom of movement. In Latvia, the recent financial crisis and financial austerity measures exacerbated outmigration as a tactic in pursuit of a 'normal life.'^{vi}

Consequently Latvians and other new Europeans are in an ambiguous position in relation to both the ‘chaotic east’ and the ‘heartland of Europe.’ When encountering Europe’s borders either in border check-points or within the European political space, many of them do not only experience these borders as EU citizens exercising their right to freedom of movement, but also as Eastern European migrants variously perceived as good workers or as a burden on the social budget (author 2013a). For example, in the United Kingdom there is a widespread ‘moral panic’ about migration from Eastern Europe (Hall et. al. 1978). Some segments of the public complain about stolen jobs, others about the changing face of their community, while British newspapers, such as the Daily Mail, warn of hordes of poor and scruffy looking Romanian Roma waiting to come to Britain once the transition controls for Romanians and Bulgarians are lifted at the end of 2013 (e. g. Slack 2013).^{vii} The re-bordering of Europe thus does not merely discriminate between European and non-European citizens, but rather distributes both European and non-European citizens within a series of categories through which movement is regulated—for example, expats, vagrants, citizens, refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, seasonal workers, and undocumented migrants.^{viii}

Latvian border guards are well aware of the differences and tensions produced by the re-bordering of Europe. In addition to being agents of an EU member state charged with the responsibility to secure national and European borders, they are also underpaid employees who often leave their employment and migrate to Ireland or the United Kingdom for better jobs. As the Head of the Department of Immigration Control mused during a conversation I had with him right after he had lost an employee to emigration, the English language training that his employees receive prepares them not for guarding, but for crossing borders. As they shift from guarding to crossing borders, former border guards are reminded of their ambiguous

positionality. On the one hand, they were just part of the European migration regime, strengthening and standardizing the EU external border. On the other hand, they are now crossing the EU's internal boundaries as Eastern European migrants in search of a normal life.

These subtle and not so subtle ways of differentiating movement cannot be captured through an all-encompassing critique of Fortress Europe, which tends to dominate in critical inquiries of bordering (see Mezzadra & Neilson 2012 for critique). The stark juxtaposition between Europeans and non-Europeans that informs such inquiries risks obscuring the ways in which bordering produces not only others, but also ‘contiguous others,’ as in the case of Eastern Europeans in the UK or of Georgians and Ukrainians in Latvia or in Poland (see Follis 2012).^{ix} To be sure, the violence of the European border regime should not be underestimated. There is a growing body of important work that eloquently shows how the European migration apparatus is a space of violence despite or perhaps precisely because of its commitment to the liberal politics of human rights and humanitarian care (e. g. Feldman 2012; Fassin 2011: 2005; Tiktin 2011; see also De Genova & Peutz 2010; Mountz 2010; Torpey 1998). My analysis is informed by this critical perspective, yet here I focus in particular on how and to what effect excess emerges in spaces of violence.^x Consequently, in what follows, I argue that bordering encounters in the former Soviet space are shaped not only by the rationality of securitization and by standardized border control technologies and procedures, but also by historically specific forms of public sociality and critical geopolitical awareness on the part of border guards and border crossers alike.

The encounter

When I entered the office, the inspector and Gia, the man from Georgia, were looking at a map, trying to reconstruct his travels. Gia drew his finger across the map and called out: Kajeti (a region in Georgia), Minsk, Lithuania, Latvia. He had taken a van, a plane, a taxi and then walked 8 hours by foot. He did not have a passport; he said it disintegrated while he was walking and he threw it out in the forest. The Head of Department intervened: ‘you need a passport, what is the purpose of your trip?’ By now the translator had arrived. The inspector asked Gia whether he wanted to apply for asylum to which he responded that, no, he did not. He had heard that one could be imprisoned for a long time as part of the process and he wanted to return home to his wife and two children. ‘No, no, I am going home,’ Gia exclaimed. He said he had just wanted to go through Latvia and get to France for medical treatment, but the cold got to him. His practices and desires thus reiterated the ‘buffer zone’ status of Eastern Europe. They confirmed what the border guards thought all along, namely that most people who ended up as illegal immigrants, undocumented migrants or asylum seekers in Latvia did not actually want to go to or stay in Latvia, but rather were on their way to ‘deeper into Europe.’ Having stopped in Latvia, with no place to go, Gia walked and walked at night to stave off the cold. He had walked so much that he wore out his shoes. He said: ‘I will go home now, but I will go to Europe again. I cannot get care in Georgia. My father died with Hepatitis C. What’s the difference where I die? I will definitely go to Europe.’ The Head of Department asked: ‘And you could not just get a visa?’ ‘Oh, no! That costs too much money,’ Gia replied and explained that the only way to get a visa was to pay a large amount of money to an intermediary who then liaised with embassy employees to secure a visa. The Head of Department responded: ‘Yes. Then it would be more sensible to wait out the winter so as not to lose another pair of shoes.’ Everyone laughed. The Head of Department continued more seriously: ‘I don’t know what to suggest. Next time try in the summer. Winter is

rough here. If you had come in December when it was even colder, walking would not have helped. Isn't it closer to go through Bulgaria or Romania?' Then the Head of Department turned to me and said: 'It's understandable. We got lucky. If we had a different passport [not an EU passport], we would be doing the same.' Having completed the initial interview, the inspector and Gia stepped outside for a cigarette. In the meantime, the translator told the Head of Department and me about her own bureaucratic nightmares when trying to secure a residence permit in Latvia. We nodded our heads in understanding.

The scene caught me by surprise. Despite it being a scene of deportation, that is, of a hierarchical and violent relation between border agents and a border crosser, it was also characterized by a relation of equality. On the one hand, the conversation attempted to elicit all the necessary information to effect a deportation; on the other hand, it conjured up a modality of engagement in which we conversed about what our lives were like vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the migration regimes that shaped them. Gia had turned himself in and faced deportation, but, in a way, he thought of the deportation as a state provided service that will get him home after he had failed in his attempt to get to 'Europe.' He therefore was not anxious or fearful, but rather relaxed and cooperative. The translator, while there to enable communication between Gia and border guards, felt compelled to share her own migration story, which critiqued the state that the border guards represented. Having done everything by the book, she had still gone through quite an ordeal to finally secure a residence permit in Latvia. The Head of Department acknowledged that he and I got lucky to have ended up with the kind of passports that allowed us to freely cross the border which Gia was struggling to cross in the cold purportedly in search for medical treatment, but also more broadly for a normal life. The Head of Department was partaking in effecting a deportation—or providing a service, depending on the perspective—while at the same

time acknowledging the geopolitical differences that rendered us lucky while setting Gia on an arduous journey. More than that, he considered whether other routes might be better for getting to ‘Europe,’ which still marked a promissory space of future possibility even for those—like the Head of Department—who were supposedly already in it.

I suggest that this modality of engagement exhibits traces of the Soviet sociality of *svoi* (in Russian: one of us, ours). *Svoi* is not a community, but rather people who recognize each other as ‘normal people’ across lines of power even if one’s job is to deport the other (Yurchak 2006).^{xi} In his book ‘Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation,’ Alexei Yurchak elaborates on the sociality of *svoi* as part of his critique of the juxtaposition between collaborators and dissidents that had long informed Western understandings of how Soviet power worked at the level of the population. Yurchak suggests that most people lived or strived to live like ‘normal people,’ which meant neither as activists—those who took the Soviet state too literally by enforcing laws and regulations—nor as dissidents—those who did the same only through protest. ‘Normal people,’ who may or may not have subscribed to socialist ideals, found the state too ritualistic and bureaucratic and tried to minimize its effects on their own and their friends’ and colleague’s lives. These ‘normal people’ were connected by the sociality of *svoi* whereby they practiced an *ethics of responsibility* towards each other by trying not to get each other in trouble. Thus, if one of *svoi* was supposed to hold a Party meeting, others went to the meeting to support that person. As Yurchak notes, the question was not whether you believed in socialism or not, it was not whether you were with the state or against it, but rather whether you were the kind of person who understood that the rituals of the state had to be performed to enable normal life, that is, whether you were part of *svoi*. *Svoi*, then, was not a community that defined itself against state power or against another

community. *Svoi* were people who recognized each other as fellow travellers from across the lines of state-based power.

The staff of the Border Guard continuously grappled with the dilemma of controlling the movement of people they considered, in a way, to be *savējie* (*svoi* in Latvian). Thus, on another occasion, an inspector of the Department of Immigration Control explained to me that many of those who are categorized as illegal immigrants and placed in detention are former Soviet citizens who for one reason or another have fallen through the cracks of the system. Some did not pay attention to the fact that they had to change documents once the Soviet Union collapsed. Others did not have money for obtaining the necessary papers to prove their right to Latvian citizenship and thus still had invalid Soviet passports in their pockets, which placed them in a legal limbo.^{xii} ‘All these former Soviet people,’ said the inspector, ‘it is difficult to put them in the category of illegal immigrants. They simply did not get lucky. They are kind of *savējie* and yet they are not [because they are subject to migration control]. The same Ukrainian who lives next door, he is *savējais*. Communication, elementary things, it is known to us. We have a chat, no problem.’ The inspectors generally felt that the former Soviet citizens were forgotten by human rights activists who demanded rights for asylum seekers. Indeed, from all the illegal immigrant cases I reviewed, only those who had applied for asylum had any record of interest by human rights organizations.^{xiii} This was in part the result of resource distribution patterns. The EU project monies that the NGOs worked with were earmarked for addressing asylum procedures. Since former Soviet citizens asked for asylum less frequently than other migrants, it indeed looked as if the human rights NGOs ‘did not care’ about this group of people. Ironically, the human rights-based approach of NGOs and other monitoring institutions had the effect of

producing asylum seekers as rights-based migrants who were not *savējie* and whose claims to a decent life through migration did not resonate with the border guards.

Moreover, by pointing to the forgotten Soviet people in lieu of the concern with the rights of the ‘new migrants,’ border guards inadvertently suggested that they too felt neglected by the new rights discourses. As noted earlier, the border guards were also underpaid employees who often left their employment to migrate to Ireland or the United Kingdom for better jobs. While the border guards could legally cross the internal EU borders in comparison with Gia who could only cross them illegally, the reasons they may have wanted to cross them were not all that different—all went in pursuit of a normal life. The Border Guard inspectors’ conduct in relation to the former Soviet citizens-cum-illegal migrants entailed an implicit commentary on their own ambiguous status in relation to Europe even as they manned its borders – ‘we are just like them, except that we got lucky.’ For the border guards, the fact that ‘we have the right passports, but they don’t’ was a matter of historical contingency and global power relations. Thus, throughout the bordering encounter, none of those present questioned the validity of Gia’s attempts to change his conditions of life by migrating, though the state demanded that we all questioned their legality. It is this connection, that is, the understanding of another’s attempt to ensure a normal life for oneself as a valid, if illegal, action, that I refer to as the ethical-political dimension of the sociality of *savējie*, a sociality through which we connected across lines of power and across the distinction between legal and illegal movement.

Sociality has recently received heightened attention in anthropology. Among other scholarly engagements, the journal *Cambridge Anthropology*, re-launched in 2012, dedicated a good part of its first issue to sociality. In her contribution to the issue, co-editor Henrietta Moore (2012) calls for a renewed attention to human interaction as a counterweight to network theories,

which gloss over differences between network elements, however, many of the recent engagements with sociality go beyond marking out the uniquely human modality of interaction (Enfield & Levinson 2006).^{xiv} Such engagements attend to the specificity of practices and processes through which people are connected or disconnected from each other and to the material and / or discursive conditions and effects of these (dis)connections (Allison 2012; Dzenovska & Arenas 2012; Feldman 2012; Long 2012; Pink 2008; Yurchak 2005; Warner 2005). In many of these interventions, sociality is a crucial formative element not only of persons, as Strathern (1996) would have it, but also of collective subjects. Thus, for example, Michael Warner (2005) has shown how a particular form of stranger sociality has been formative of modern publics (and an embodied sociality as formative of counterpublics). In her analysis of community activism, Sarah Pink (2008) has argued that the collective subject of community is not pre-given, but formed through embedded social relationships, thus emphasizing the importance of analysing sociality to understand activism. Dace Dzenovska and Ivan Arenas (2010) have shown how what they call a barricade sociality emerges through the material practices of building barricades and is formative of the populist collective subject of the people in particular historical moments in Mexico and Latvia. Rather than stable entities, all of these subjects—publics, communities and people—are fleeting subject positions much dependent not on the fact that people come together as a collective, but on the ways in which people are simultaneously formed as both individual and collective subjects through concrete practices and emerging socialities.

In this article, I focus on another dimension of sociality, namely, its ethical-political dimension (Feldman 2012; Long 2012; Yurchak 2006). For example, in a recent analysis of the European ‘migration apparatus,’ Gregory Feldman (2012) describes not only the systemic

violence underlying the migration apparatus insofar as it categorizes, regulates, and incarcerates people, but also the practices that form the migration policy community—that is, government officials, experts, and NGO activists. Sociality is an important constitutive element of this loosely defined community. It connects its members to each other through a series of practices, such as seminars and conferences, and at the same time disconnects them from the migrants who are the objects of their expert knowledge and policy work. Feldman describes a policy officials' visit to a migrant holding centre where the migrants were immediately available for updating expert knowledge through direct engagement, however officials avoided it at all costs. Feldman further argues that the violence of the migration apparatus is predicated upon a liberal moral argument about humanitarian care and human rights, which would be exposed to attack in conditions of direct engagement across lines of power (Feldman 2012: 4). There are at least two ways in which this moral framework works to support the European migration apparatus: on the one hand, the EU space is upheld as a space of 'freedom, justice, and security,' as a space of essentially good people that need to be protected from international networks of terrorism and criminality (Feldman 2012: 63). On the other hand, in carrying out this protection through migration control, EU migration experts and officials claim to do so in accordance with moral principles, that is, with care for the individual human rights of migrants and in a humane manner (Feldman 2012: 83).^{xv}

What I find of particular interest in Feldman's analysis is the connection between the disengaged sociality and the moral justification of European migration politics. The disengaged sociality through which migration officials and migrants are linked in a subject-object relation is productive and reflective of a particular moral framework that underlies liberal politics. Within this framework, it is not necessary to engage with migrants, but rather to treat them in

accordance with humanitarian principles and human rights treaties. In a more recent article, Feldman (2013) considers whether and how ruptures in this subject-object relation enacted by individual technocrats can serve as a basis for political action. Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Feldman works through ethnographic scenes in which migration officials feel, think or act against the grain of the ‘migration apparatus.’ For example, Feldman describes the case of Maria, an employee at the Interior Ministry in the Non-Resident Nationals Unit of a European Union member state, who, upon visiting a holding centre for illegal migrants, felt compassion for the people she observed (Feldman 2013: 135). Consequently, instead of treating them as files, she started to teach English at the holding centre and ‘became their friend’ (Feldman 2013: 136). At the same time, Maria supported the state’s move to detain the migrants insofar as ‘you don’t know who they [the migrants] are, what diseases they have...’ (Feldman 2013: 136). He also narrates the story of Ricardo, a police officer tracking down traffickers and smugglers, who was often in face-to-face contact with migrants. Contrary to many of his colleagues, who thought that all Arabs were radical militants, Ricardo had, in his own view, ‘a reasonable perspective’ (Feldman 2013: 147). He had learned some Arabic and even read Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. However, in an interview with Feldman, Ricardo recounted a situation where he deceived an Algerian man who misrecognized him for a potential ally by turning the man over to the authorities. The man accused Ricardo of betraying him. Ricardo felt guilty and could not sleep for a couple of nights (Feldman 2013: 148).

Feldman concludes that, even though Maria and Ricardo felt ‘compassion’ and exhibited ‘thinking’ in the Arendtian sense, they did not transform these ruptures into political action.^{xvi} Consequently, Feldman suggests that ethnographers ‘have a unique role to play ... in helping to initiate *vita activa*’ in what he calls ‘mundane miracles’ (2013: 150). To that end, Feldman works

through the tension between compassion and thinking, especially pertinent in the current historical conjuncture characterized by what Didier Fassin (2012) calls ‘humanitarian reason.’ He suggests that the risks of compassion identified by Arendt, namely turning into pity once brought into politics (Arendt 1990, Canovan 1992), can be reworked if mere cognition is replaced by thinking (2013: 144).^{xviii} My article resonates with Feldman’s approach insofar as I too explore the possibilities and limitations of ruptures, however I locate such ruptures in a public sociality animated by a *historically formed understanding*.

An important entry point for illuminating the historical specificity of the public sociality emergent in the bordering encounter I have analysed is the observation that the border guards’ ability to recognize movement, legal or illegal, as a valid tactic for changing one’s conditions of life was limited to those hailing from the former Soviet space. That is, to those who could historically be articulated as *savējie* not necessarily because they belonged to particular groups or territories or the mankind in general, but because their lifeworlds were shaped by resonant fields of power and understandings of normal life. When it came to asylum seekers or migrants from African or Middle Eastern countries, with whom border guards also had face-to-face encounters, the Head of Department and inspectors diligently and passionately reproduced the prevailing European migration discourses, which juxtapose Europe as a space of morality and goodness to the risk of criminality racialized disorder by migration. In other words, when it came to ‘new migrants,’ the border guards did not relate to them as *savējie*, as people who, like themselves, aspired to a normal life, but rather as a category of people subject to migration control and human rights.

This orientation towards asylum seekers or undocumented migrants from outside the former Soviet space was common in government corridors beyond the State Border Guard. A

staff member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with whom I discussed asylum politics during a dinner party at a friend's house told me that she has learned from her Swedish colleagues that the Somali asylum seekers do not want to work, but prefer to live on social assistance. Similar to the staff member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when talking about asylum seekers and illegal migrants from outside of the former Soviet space, border guards often referred to the experiences of their Western colleagues from which they were eager to learn. On several occasions, inspectors told me about their exchange trips to older European Union member states, such as Ireland and Finland, where they had seen and learned from operations much larger than anything they had experienced in Latvia. The Latvian border guards were overwhelmed by the volume of migration in Western Europe and often noted that their task was to prevent this from happening in Latvia. The border guards were convinced that what they needed to learn from their Western colleagues was how to see through the cunning ways of asylum seekers who tried to trick the state. For example, a large and controversial asylum case unfolded during my fieldwork. It involved seven people who claimed to be from Somalia. During my discussions with the border guards who handled the case, I was told that the 'Somalis had learned their scripts.' Apparently, they consistently repeated the same less than informative story, thus, in the view of border guards, exhibiting lack of cooperation. Indeed, as far as I was able to ascertain during my fieldwork, the allegedly Somali asylum seekers deeply distrusted all state-based agents, whether their aim was to deport them, such as border guards, or to protect their human rights, such as NGO workers.^{xviii} Many of the post-Soviet undocumented or illegal migrants did not exhibit such a deep distrust towards all state-based agents, partly because, contrary to the Somali asylum seekers, they recognised that state agents were also particular individuals with whom they could

connect on other terrains. They were, in a way, *savējie*. The post-Soviet migrants, thus, seemed more cooperative to the border guards.^{xix}

Overall, in a matter of minutes, the border guards could switch from thinking of themselves as subjects still aspiring to become European and relating to former Soviet citizens trying to do the same to already being European and keeping out those who threatened the European mode of life, however understood. This suggests that it was not only technologies of border control that were being standardized in the process of European integration, but also understanding about how and why people moved. Such standardization of the European border work and border thinking hinders understanding of how relations between states, their positioning in the global hierarchies of power, set people on the road in different ways. It conceals the fact that some people's goodness is deeply entangled with other people's misery. The bordering encounter I have analysed here, however, was both standardized and situated insofar as while shaped by the increasingly standardized European migration apparatus, it also entailed connections that surprised me and urged me to rethink how we might approach bordering encounters as dense articulations of closures and openings.

The political potential of understanding

In conclusion, I want to reiterate the specificity of the political and analytical possibilities that may have been forged together with the post-Soviet sociality of *savējie* during the bordering encounter. Given my emphasis on how the connection formed between the actors involved in the bordering encounter interrupted the formalized space of migration control, it may be tempting to liken what I have marked as the public sociality of *savējie* to universal humanist empathy or compassion. The latter are emerging as privileged sites for thinking about conditions that might

disrupt the violence of migration and border control practices that draw distinctions between ‘abject lives’ and ‘political citizens.’ (e.g. Hall 2010; see Amin 2012 for a constructive critique, also Feldman 2013). For example, Alexandra Hall (2010) in her analysis of an immigrant removal centre in the United Kingdom argues that the imperative to ensure secure borders in a humane manner that characterizes migration regimes in European liberal democracies, such as the United Kingdom, produces a tension between the ‘secure’ and the ‘humane’ in the everyday lives of the staff of the centre. While the rationality of securitization that informs migration control practices produces an affect of fear and contempt through which staff members relate to detainees, Hall argues that ‘the humane, however, periodically surfaces and troubles the sovereign distinction [between ‘abject lives’ and ‘political citizens’]. ... Periodically, the officers have cause to recognize that the detainees—far from being wholly other, dangerous, threatening—are *just like them*.’ (Hall 2010: 894).

Hall’s ‘just like them’ is, however, different from the ‘just like us’ recognition exhibited by the border guards in the bordering encounter I have analysed in this article. ‘The imagination of similarity,’ Hall writes, ‘can creep up upon detainees and staff in an emergent fragile empathy,’ as in the case when a man who had spent a year at the detention camp suddenly found out that he was to be deported (2010: 894). In her elaboration of empathy, Hall draws on Martha Nussbaum who argues that ‘empathy is the imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience. The experience of empathy, and that accompanying possibility of compassion, have at their core the recognition of one’s related vulnerability’ (Nussbaum 2001: 319). At heart, then, compassion involves a notion of common humanity, and thus has a radical potential to disrupt’ (Hall 2010: 894). The argument here is that barriers between people, such as the ‘sovereign distinction’ between ‘abject lives’ and ‘political citizens,’ are politically construed and

emotionally enforced, but that they can be disrupted by universal human qualities, such as the ability to empathize.^{xx}

However, in the bordering encounter that I have analysed, the border guards' connection with the former Soviet people-cum-illegal migrants is not located (or not reduced to) an individual capacity for empathy. Rather, it stems forth from understanding as a 'process of orientation from within a particular pursuit in a specific context which orders relevant aspects of the world by simultaneously differentiating and integrating it, thus stipulating a practical ontology' (Glaeser 2009: 10). This understanding is formed on the basis of shared historical experience and critical awareness of global power hierarchies, and it seems to co-exist with the nationalist 'practical ontology,' which also informs the border guards' practices. As in the case of the Soviet sociality of *svoi*, the post-Soviet sociality of *savējie* that emerged in the bordering encounter does not connect, or does not only connect, people vis-à-vis their basic humanity. Rather, it connects them through shared understanding about the conditions of life, including power relations, within which one finds oneself. The sensibility that emerges is thus best described as understanding grounded in a sense of historical justice (or injustice) rather than empathy grounded in common humanity.^{xxi}

The limited reach of the border guards' recognition of the validity of the claim to a normal life—that is the denial of such recognition to asylum seekers and undocumented migrants from outside the former Soviet space—supports the point that what emerged during the bordering encounter was not universal humanism. And yet it also was not a privileging of a bounded or homogenous community against those deemed to be outside of it. While the differences may seem subtle, they are important: what the border guards were able to do was to relate to people whose conditions of life they understood. They understood how the Georgians

and the Ukrainians, like themselves, experienced the turmoil of postsocialist transformations and how the situation, which they tried to change by crossing borders, was not entirely of their own making. For example, they thought that it was not because the Georgians or the Ukrainians did not want to work that they crossed borders, but because improving life through work was rendered difficult, if not impossible, in the context of post-Soviet transformations and the associated rise in poverty, corruption, and inequality. The border guards understood that they too could have been in the same situation had they not gotten so lucky as to have the right passports. They did not quite have the same understanding of the conditions that set people from outside of the former Soviet space—such as Somalis or Palestinians—on the road. There they tended to rely on the hegemonic narratives, categorizations and stereotypes continuously reproduced in the European public and political life, as well as in bordering practices throughout Europe.^{xxii} As much as one would like to sympathize with the humanist turn in critical thought, as Ash Amin has argued, such entrenched differentiations are unlikely to be overcome by humanist ethics (2012: 106).

Rather than valorising a universal humanist ethic, therefore, I suggest that it is *historically shaped understanding* that opens or forecloses political and analytical possibilities. In the case that I have analysed here, the shared understanding lead to the conclusion that bordering is not only about regulating movement through the distinction between citizens and non-citizens or Europeans and non-Europeans, but also about distributing the ability to live a normal life. This is what all five of us—the man from Georgia, the inspector, the Head of Department, the translator and the anthropologist—recognized in our conversation. For a moment, we connected vis-à-vis a mutual recognition of the validity of each other's desire to live a normal life regardless of our legal or political status, as well as to change one's material

circumstances in order to do so. Except, our ability to change our conditions of life was differentiated by political boundaries and migration regimes.

Because of the limited reach of the connection we forged, I am not romanticizing the post-Soviet sociality of *savējie*. It entailed serious limitations even as it seemed to open possibilities. Nevertheless, I contend that it invites a rethinking of the ways in which we engage bordering. Scholars have shown that within bordering encounters where ethical-political relations are negotiated, borders and bordering can become subjected to critique—even if they are not directly challenged—by the very people that enforce them (Hall, 2010; Feldman 2013, Rapport 2013). I contend here that their ability to do so does not stem forth from their capacity for empathy or compassion, but rather from their *understanding* of the conditions that shape lives—theirs and those of the people whose movement they control. Inquiry into the formation of understanding is therefore crucial for an inquiry of bordering as a social practice that unfolds in a historically specific context and field of power relations. It is also crucial for locating political possibilities.

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ⁱ See data from the Centre for Demography (http://www.popin.lanet.lv/lv/index_lat.html). The remaining percentage was made up of Belarusians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Roma, Estonians, and Germans.

ⁱⁱ Andreas Glaeser writes that: 'Understanding is a process of orientation from within a particular pursuit in a specific context, which orders relevant aspects of the world, thus stipulating a practical ontology' (2009: 10).

ⁱⁱⁱ A critical discussion of the concept of a national state is beyond the scope of this article, but it is crucial in the current historical conjuncture, when Latvian legal scholars and politicians are

considering amending the Constitution by inserting a preamble that defines Latvians as ‘*valstnācija*’ or ‘state people’ (Levits 2013).

^{iv} John Agnew puts forth a normative argument that ‘the answer to what borders do should always be related to the overriding ethical concern that they serve and not undermine human dignity and ... the right to a decent life’ (2008: 329). Agnew draws on political theorist Jonathan Seglow who defines decent life in abstract normative terms as a life that requires ‘freedoms, resources, opportunities and particular relationships with others,’ as well as equally abstractly puts forth a normative argument for global solidarity whereby resources would be distributed from rich to poor countries to enable people in the latter to lead decent lives. My aim here is not to advance a normative ethic or to work with an ideal-typical definition of a decent life, but to ethnographically trace how postsocialist bordering encounters are entangled with the distribution of the ability to lead a life deemed decent or, as is common in former socialist and postsocialist contexts, ‘normal.’

^v In suggesting that the bordering encounter has to do with ethics, I draw on Michael Lambek’s (2010) work where he treats ethics as a dimension of ordinary life, as well as a field of practical judgment.

^{vi} Mihails Hazans (2011) estimates that since 1991 Latvia has lost about 9% of its population largely to emigration. See also Dzenovska 2012, 2013b.

^{vii} When Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, the United Kingdom instituted what is known as ‘transition controls,’ that is, restrictions on the Bulgarian and Romanian labor rights. Romanians and Bulgarians could establish their own business, but could not be employed by British employers.

^{viii} See Karolina Follis' recent book 'Building Fortress Europe: The Polish-Ukrainian Frontier' (2012) for an analysis of the emergence of the category 'economic migrant,' as well as for a resonant argument about the differentiated regulation of movement across the European Union's external and internal borders.

^{ix} As Lisa Lowe (2006) has written with regard to British colonial practices in the Caribbean, 'contiguous others' or Chinese coolies were deliberately introduced to create distinctions between variously positioned laborers, between free labor and almost free labor. The term might be useful to think with in the context of Eastern European migration and the postsocialist rebordering more broadly.

^x See author 2013a for further analysis of bordering in Soviet, post-Soviet and liberal democratic contexts.

^{xi} There is no direct translation of *svoi* in the English language. It is most often translated as 'one of us,' 'ours,' but it is not a precise translation, for it leads to the assumption that *svoi* demarcates a community, which is not the case (Yurchak 2006). Rather, it could be thought of as a network of understanding. I elaborate on the specific contours of *svoi* (or *savējie* in Latvian) further in the article.

^{xii} The current Latvian state is legally defined as a continuation of the interwar Latvian state (1918-1940). In 1918, citizenship was granted to all those who had resided in the territory of Latvian prior to August 23, 1914. The post-Soviet body of citizenry was restored on the basis of kinship links with the interwar body of citizenry. This meant that people who had settled in Latvia during Soviet times and did not have links with the interwar body of citizenry had to naturalize or take another citizenship, such as Russian.

^{xiii} I was able to view these cases, because their request for asylum was denied and they were transferred to the category of illegal immigrants

^{xiv} See also Ingold 1996 and Strathern 1996 for a discussion of sociality in the context of a debate about the theoretical fate of the concept of society.

^{xv} See here Didier Fassin's (2005) work on the 'humanitarization of policies' whereby humanitarian concerns are replacing political claims as the grounds for granting asylum.

^{xvi} Hannah Arendt defines compassion as a sentiment that belong to personal relations and manifests as being 'stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious' (Arendt 1990: 85). She defines thinking as an internal dialogue with oneself that goes against the grain of the system (Arendt 1971, Canovan 1992),

^{xvii} Feldman describes the difference between cognition and thinking by suggesting that cognition 'seeks logical certainty about about what is given to the senses and is aided by 'common sense,' which itself emerges out of customary forms of interpretation,' whereas thinking 'searches for meaning in ambiguous circumstances through speculative reason in the examination of ultimately unanswerable questions' (2013: 146). Whereas cognition reproduces the order of things, thinking has the potential to disrupt it.

^{xviii} I was able to conduct fieldwork on this particular asylum case, because the asylum seekers invited me to visit them at the detention centre. The Border Guards could not grant such an access without the explicit agreement of the asylum seekers. As suggested by one of the anonymous reviewers, it would indeed be useful to consider the bordering encounter I describe alongside such an asylum case to bring into sharper focus the distinction between the sociality of *savējie* and the modality of relating to asylum seekers from outside the former Soviet space. It is not possible in this paper due to space limitations, but will be pursued in further writing.

^{xix} Though the statistical data of the Department of Migration and Citizenship indicated that the number of asylum seekers in Latvia had increased from 60 in 2010 to 335 in 2011 mainly on the account of 176 Georgian citizens who had put in asylum applications. The number of asylum seekers fell to 189 in 2012. See <http://www.pmlp.gov.lv/lv/sakums/statistika/patveruma-mekletaji.html>

^{xx} Paul Antze (2012) has pointed out that Nussbaum takes empathy to be a matter of education and knowledge rather than a natural inclination. In other words, it is not nature that needs to be freed from the oppression of political structures, but rather it is people that need to be educated to cultivate their capacity for empathy.

^{xxi} It should be noted this shared understanding of the conditions of life does not necessarily translate into solidarity as a political project, not least because in the Soviet context solidarity was cultivated as a state-imposed public sociality over and against family and friendship ties and therefore against the grain of how ‘normal people’—*svoi* or *savējie*—would conduct themselves (Krasteva 2012).

^{xxii} See Ash Amin's (2012) poignant analysis of how racialised categorization is reproduced in long duration and how it informs everyday racism through "pre-cognitive categorization" and "sensory response."