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Citation: PAINTER, J. ... et al, 2017. Hotspot politics-or, when the EU state gets real. *Political Geography*, 60, pp. 259-260.

Additional Information:

- This paper was published in the journal *Political Geography* and the definitive published version is available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.02.012>.

Metadata Record: <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/24610>

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Elsevier

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Please cite the published version.

Hotspot politics—or, when the EU state gets real

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Received 26 January 2017, Accepted 27 February 2017, Available online 7 March 2017

What is a hotspot? Ask a random passer-by in your average city street and the by now ubiquitous wireless internet access point will most probably come up immediately in response: the hotspot is somewhere that connects you to the internet's everywhere. Ask most European Union officials, however, and the very same word will make them sing the praises of the EU's blueprint for a holistic approach to the migration crisis: a very special "somewhere" that may very well be on its way to become—as this editorial wishes to warn—a new kind of "everywhere", one that commences with the decades-long European integration finally reaching a tangible form.

In this editorial we reflect on our fieldwork in Lesbos and Athens as part of the Transcapes project (part of ESRC's Mediterranean Migration Research Programme, 2015–2017) in order to call for a threefold direction for future research. First, we argue geographers need to take seriously into account the ramifications of the EC's hotspot approach for the future of the EU integration project as a whole. This will then add to, and bring to date geographical thinking over the production of EU territory in the past decade ([Bialasiewicz, Elden, & Painter, 2005](#)) below and beyond its mainstream portrayal as an 'uncertain' Union ([Bialasiewicz, 2008](#)); one that is to the contrary built meticulously through everyday, calculative practices ([Luukkonen & Moisio, 2016](#)). Second, we argue that the birth of the hotspot needs to be brought into, and to update the discussion on the future of the nation-state within ([Leitner, 1997](#)) and beyond ([Swyngedouw, 2000](#)) the EU project. From the revival of area studies in spite and against the prevalence of the nation-state ([Sidaway, Ho, Rigg, & Woon, 2016](#)) to the quest of cities for autonomy from their immediate regional or even their national context ([Bulkeley et al., 2016](#)) geographers are already tracing the ongoing globally occurring shift in the relationship between political power and territory ([Elden, 2009](#) ; [Sassen, 2012](#)) while striving to answer what the future geographical distribution of said power might look like after the nation-state. Third, the hotspot offers a stark warning on the future of mobility ([Painter, Papoutsis, Papada, & Vradis, 2016](#)); the way in which the state creates differentiated temporalities ([Griffiths, Rogers & Anderson, 2014](#); [Vitus, 2010](#)), altered geographies ([Mountz, 2016](#)) and mobility regimes ([Shamir, 2005](#)) and exposes certain populations to these regimes through new, arbitrary and wholly flexible categories. A transformation that opens up a new chapter in the nature of citizenship and territory-related rights: Studying the EC hotspot approach is now key in answering these questions.

Superstate-building

In the summer of 2015 we commenced our fieldwork on the island of Lesbos, NE Greece and in the country's capital, Athens. It very quickly became apparent to us that the EC's "hotspot approach" ([2015](#)), hailed as an encompassing, bold and effective response to the said crisis, was in fact little other than the material grounding of the EU's increasingly coercive policies, taking over elementary

state functions such as border control, examination of asylum claims, detention—by this point, all of which are almost exclusively EU funded. Not unlike the state-building exercises encountered following the apparent roll-out of neoliberalism into previously public institutional “hardware” infrastructure ([Peck & Tickell, 2002](#)), this process of building fragments of an EU superstate within the marginal territories of peripheral member-states now requires the triggering of all key functions of a conventional state apparatus.

Once an area is declared a hotspot, key EU agencies are offered an effective *carte blanche* in their respective areas of jurisdiction; namely the judiciary (EUROJUST), the police (previously FRONTEX, now Border and Coast Guard Agency), and the European Asylum Support Service (EASO); add to these the NGOs charged with a very particular, hybrid kind of population management and welfare provision that corresponds to, while at the same time essentially replaces more conventional welfare state provisions: essentially, a new form of privatisation within EU territory where past state and public sector functions are routed toward UNHCR, who then acts as a proxy allocator of funds to NGOs. In this way the foundation and operation of the hotspot constitutes a crucial trial field for the EU operation at the local level in terms of (i) border security, (ii) population management and (iii) welfare provision: three key functions that have been historically reserved for the nation-state. The importance of centralising these at the EU level would of course easily surpass and outlive any seemingly hasty responses to momentary crises at the Union’s entry points. If successful, the hotspot approach will then be pointing at a model of territorial administration and governance that supersedes the national in favour of hybrid, super-national governance: a model whereby security and population management are dealt with above the national level, while welfare is provided through superstate/private partnerships, an evolution of the 3P (Public-Private Partnerships) ([Wettenhall, 2010](#)) now apt for this emergent superstate governance landscape.

The misty rise of the EU superstate

The vagueness surrounding the legal and operational framework of the hotspot is not a design flaw and it works, even if inadvertently, toward the formation of the EU superstate: being able to designate entire areas, islands, regions—potentially even national territories—as hotspots with all the emergency measures accompanying this declaration conveniently helps bypass obstacles of national legislation, while curbing potential local resistance along the way. In terms of its actual, prescribed and declared function as a border dispositif the hotspot becomes a highly flexible informal mechanism for governing diverse migrant populations. In this way, it not only enforces existing boundaries but even draws in and materialises new ones on an often fluid basis of deservedness (i.e. migrant arrival date in relation to the enforcement of the EU-Turkey statement). At this moment in time, the EU needs this flexible and adjustable device to serve the shifting needs of its border regime; to choose who to let in depending on internal labour, demographic needs, or political aspirations.

Beyond integration: a call to study the contested geographies of the EU superstate

Geographers have been quick at grasping the importance of studying Europe's edges as spaces that are "marginal and central" ([Steinberg, 2016](#)) to its future: spaces at the continent's geographical edge but that are, at the same time, in the core of its monumental political transformation. We have spent the past year in the continent's geographical edge and we have seen how the hotspot approach has been used at the cutting edge of the Commission's migration and bordering policies. And yet to understand the hotspot as little more of yet another—however important—element in the EU's bordering policies misses out what we believe to be an absolutely crucial point: the potential capacity and even more so, the potential threat of the hotspot to become a trial site for a much widespread mechanism of population filtering and control. The global outlawing of spontaneous migration is a long running project and central to the EU's liberal interventionist agenda ([Duffield, 2010](#)), most evident in the ever increasing set of agreements with countries of origin and transit. Yet at the same time the hotspot still introduces, however violently or even inadvertently, a more universal understanding for the subjects that find themselves in its jurisdiction: the sweeping generalisation and bundling together of an ever-increasing segment of 'unwanted' populations can potentially outburst into a new kind of universalism recognised between these very subjects.

The hotspot therefore emerges as a key site of study: it can help us understand the potential future directions of the European Union superstate, as outlined in this initial commentary. This is not however to assume we are solidly on track toward the formation of a teleological structure of absolute and final European integration; to think so would be falsely alluding toward a linear and largely uncomplicated or unhindered process of said integration, thereby simultaneously obscuring the contestation between the multiple social and political forces fighting both toward and against it. To the contrary it is reasonable to assume that within, during and beyond the formation of the EU superstate territory, an array of contradictions and struggles emerge continuing to produce, to shift and to alter prevalent and pre-existing models of citizenship and non-citizenship alike.

The hotspot approach, we argue, is at the same time both an experimental field site and a potential precursor of a future form of graduated sovereign control and governance whereby the nation-state as historically known so far may be giving way as the fundamental unit of power; progressively overtaken by a much more flexible, spatially and chronologically variable form of territorial governance and control. Most crucially the form of sovereign control that emerges in the case of the hotspot paradigm does not overthrow, but instead succeeds the nation-state as the core unit of sovereign power: in this way, it still carries forward the inherent contradictions and antithetical forces found within the nation-state itself. The hotspot paradigm is both a geographically limited and specific precursor and a potentially generalised *avant première* of a new type of governance. In taking a close look at the hotspot, political geographers will be called to unpack the variant spatialities of a new form of sovereignty as this becomes discernible under the dawn light of the European Union superstate.

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