

Inland Empire

A conversation with BAVO

Metahaven

BAVO is a collective of philosophers and architects consisting of Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels, whose analysis of neoliberal and consensual urban and cultural policies is among the sharpest heard today. They edited [Urban Politics Now; Re-Imagining Democracy in the Neoliberal City](#), which was recently published by NAI Publishers. BAVO is responsible for the transdisciplinary and transnational discussion platform ‘Euregional Forum’. The Euregional Forum is based at the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht.

MH What is the Euregion Meuse-Rhine? Being architects and philosophers, how did you become interested in it?

BAVO Geographically speaking, the Euregion Meuse-Rhine is the trans-national area formed by cities like Maastricht, Heerlen, Aachen, Hasselt, Genk, Liège and Eupen – and their surroundings. What binds the latter is not only their relative proximity, but also the fact that they are all provincial towns that, within their respective nation-states, are marginally located. The mutual organisation and joint performance considerably sharpens the position and especially the image of these cities. From this perspective, the Euregion Meuse-Rhine is more than an actual geographical unit. It is in the first place a mental construction that helps people from different nations to conceive of their interests – economically, political, socio-cultural and even libidinal – on a trans-national scale. There are some plans, for example, to enlarge the Euregion Meuse-Rhine by including strategic satellite cities such as the university city of Leuven, brainport Eindhoven and even Venlo. This geographical flexibility is the strength of the Euregion Meuse-Rhine: whereas old nation-states frequently stumble upon their own borders, the Euregion Meuse-Rhine transgresses these effortlessly. In other words, the Euregion Meuse-Rhine can be conceptualised as the paradoxical entity of a potentially unlimited micro-state.

MH You have mentioned before that the Euregion, overlapping Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, does not have its own legal structure, but legal topics within the Euregion are addressed and handled through a foundation. In the Netherlands, the foundation is the most ‘abused’ legal structure, and is also not supposed to make profit. Do you know what type of foundation we are talking about, and what it aims to contribute to? Is the foundation a possible new legal format for a separate state?

BV There is nothing principally wrong with using the format of a foundation for mobilizing and organizing a certain area or people towards certain goals. Especially since the official goal of the Foundation Euregion Meuse-Rhine is to help the inhabitants of this trans-national region to escape from the archaic, national structures in which they clearly figure as second-rank citizens. In the Netherlands, for example, it is clear that the most important investment flows are concentrated in the so-called Randstad, the area around Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague. Of course it is fun to enjoy superfast and frequent rail links between these cities. People who also travel in other parts of the Netherlands, however, will soon discover that areas in the North and South of the country are less well taken care of when it comes to public transport. Arguments such as ‘investments in Amsterdam South Axis secure a high return, since it sharpens the competitive position of the Netherlands as a whole’ are all too transparent and are ultimately based on the neo-liberal fallacy of ‘trickle down’ economics. If such questionable propositions increasingly go unquestioned within the usual political channels, it is more than justified to look for other ways to politicize this matter. So why not use the legal and organisatory structure of a foundation to launch an alternative to politics as usual, to found a government outside government? If this might appear to be illegitimate or undemocratic, this is already less so in the face of the organised underdevelopment of large parts of the Netherlands.

The latter only becomes problematic when the foundation is used to found a new bureaucratic and even autocratic layer of governance accessible only to a limited circle of privileged people and businesses. Sadly enough, this is also the reality of the Euregion Meuse-

Rhine: its fake chambers are filled with representatives of the provincial governments of its different national constituencies as well as non-democratically chosen parties from civil society and the business world. This led us to grant the Euregion Meuse-Rhine with the dubious title of the first ‘state without citizens’. Although the Euregion Meuse-Rhine massively invests in its market potential – thereby falling for the today dominant, post-political mistake of confusing market processes with democratization – it remains a self-propelling apparatus lacking any popular base. Since the 1970s, the Euregion Meuse-Rhine launched countless campaigns to hook onto the desire and demands of its subjects and turn the latter into rebels for the Euregional cause... After thirty years of action, however, even the official logo is hardly recognized by the inhabitants of the Euregion Meuse-Rhine! The question is how long the Euregion Meuse-Rhine can continue such interpassive game, in which its frantic attempts to engage with ‘the people of the Euregion’ are meant to hide the fact that it is there only to serve the narrow interests of an elite.

MH From the Euregional Forum (EF) website: ‘[The EF focuses on the way the Euregion Meuse-Rhine deals with its ambition – be it conscious or otherwise – to integrate its constituent parts and enhance mobility between these parts](#)’. This is something the European Union has tried to solve and address through design competitions and marketing strategies. The question is: if countries and supranational state organizations can be referred to as brands, how do they stick to their internal multiplicity. What is your take on this?

BV The dubious role of the internal borders of the Euregion Meuse-Rhine is symptomatic in this regard. One would expect that the borders that once artificially divided old nations would loose any substance within an ultramodern micro-state like the Euregion Meuse-Rhine. Nothing could be less true, however. In the Euregion Meuse-Rhine a complex economy is erected around its internal borders. We are here not only referring to informal, half-legal practices, such as that of Belgian companies bypassing national labour legislation by using Polish temporary workers from the Netherlands. Such informal economies sometimes spell over into the official economy or even become the latter’s most important modus operandi. Think of the plan of the city of Maastricht to install a ‘weed boulevard’ next to the Belgian border. One close look at the economic, cultural and social programmes of the Euregion Meuse-Rhine will do to convince you of the ambiguous role the old national borders are playing. The Euregion Meuse-Rhine continuously promotes the proximity of different nation states as its ultimate trump card to tourists, consumers and investors. Some industrial areas are set up literally on the border with companies being able to choose the tax scheme or labour legislation of the one or the other country. The united ‘Euregional Chamber of Commerce’ even proposed to extend this arrangement to an area up to 20 km on each side of the internal borders of the Euregion. Given the fact that the internal borders are everywhere in the Euregion, this would turn the latter into one large special economic zone – to borrow the term from the Chinese success story. This business approach to the old borders has been institutionalised to such an extent that we elsewhere described the Euregion Meuse-Rhine’s politico-economic status as that of a ‘to the inland directed imperial movement’. To be sure, the Euregion Meuse-Rhine does not exploit any overseas area as its colony, but it does treat its own territory in the same way. If anything, it is this internal, self-consuming movement that is communicated by the existing logo of the Euregion Meuse-Rhine.

MH The questions you pose in the Euregional Forum about representation of the Euregion, are similar to questions raised around visual representation of Europe. On the EF web site you say: ‘[Everyone is invited to express their opinions, passions and hopes concerning the Euregion Meuse-Rhine and discuss it with other enthusiasts, experts, Euregion lovers and haters](#)’. One of the problems with representation of Europe is that it aims to be all-inclusive, at the same time simplifying the real pluralism of the supranational state. All inclusiveness implies that one is unable to agree or disagree. When you talk about Euregion-‘haters’ or ‘lovers’, what is it that could be agreed or disagreed upon?

BV A huge part of Europe’s economy feeds on the cheap labour and products from ‘new’ European member states. The alternative flag which artist Maarten van den Eynde designed for the European Union symbolized this unequal exchange between member states by rearranging the stars on the flag to match the geographical location of the different capitals thus subverting the imaginary equality expressed by a circular arrangement. Moreover, the artist deliberately forgot to grant a star to the capitals of the new European member states – such as Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria, etc. By doing so, his alternative flag reduced the EU to what it is: a collection of nation states that use and abuse each other with mutual approval. How else can we understand ‘the real pluralism of the supranational state’ you speak about, except in terms of such endless ‘circle-jerking’? It is exactly at this point that the Euregional Forum intervenes. When everybody is allowed to speak out at the Forum, it is not to affirm and fix their respective identity and differences! On the contrary, it is seen as a means to discover how people from totally different backgrounds share the same problems. As such, the Forum is one of the rare institutions that take serious the emancipatory idea of the European cross-border integration. Given the dubious exploitation of borders within the Euregion Meuse-Rhine it is more than ever necessary to reveal how all the existing differences are ultimately futile, superficial and artificial in light of the common, daily struggle of its inhabitants against an ‘inland empire’.

MH OMA/Rem Koolhaas, in their 2002 study, have defined the region between Amsterdam, Brussels and Ruhr as the ‘Hollocore’. One of the characteristics of the Hollocore is a lack of density, and an upsurge of extreme right wing political convictions, along with car clubs, and countless other subcultural identity formations. What is your view on the Hollocore concept?

BV The Hollocore concept clarifies nothing but the unequal development between powerful metropolitan cities and their hinterland. The latter is shamelessly reduced to a reserve for the unemployed or dispossessed and – indeed – an ideal recruiting ground for the extreme and populist Right. But we should rather see the rise of populism as a local symptom of a more widely institutionalised populist reason. As we suggested above, the Dutch people are frightened of investments not being used for further strengthening the competitive potential of its ‘core’ (that is, the Randstad we spoke of earlier). Remember the big fuss in the media about the construction of a fast train connection between Amsterdam and a city in the far North of the Netherlands like Groningen. Eminent politicians and economists warned how this project could mortally harm the Netherlands’ competitiveness on an international scale, with all kinds of disastrous effects. In short, the populist abuse of underbelly sentiments is not merely the fundamental property of the hinterland, but also the very engine force of metropolitan machinations. Our brochure ‘[Ten things you should simply do for spatially developing a top region](#)’ – the outcome of research on the neo-liberal discourse surrounding the making of the South Wing of the Randstad – precisely deals with this use of the fear of somebody stealing one’s enjoyment or privilege as a coercive means to create consensus on neo-liberal schemes.

MH What makes the Euregion Meuse-Rhine more interesting than other Euregions?

BV The Euregion Meuse-Rhine is the mother of all Euregions as well as one of the most complex Euregions. It therefore carries with right the title of ‘test garden of Europe’. We endorse this official tale wholeheartedly – not without adding a modest recommendation, however. The Euregion Meuse-Rhine should find the courage to no longer reduce its ambitions to being the intermediary between the nation-states and the EU and that it will take its mandate as the first outpost of a new, boundless Europe dead seriously. Our proposal is to introduce a real Euregional membership. The Euregion Meuse-Rhine is not only a ‘state without citizens’ but also a ‘foundation without members’. Introducing membership cards will oblige the Euregion Meuse-Rhine to stop acting like a fictitious state catering for a fictitious subject and for the first time to seduce and enthuse its inhabitants for the Euregional cause.

See: www.euregionaalforum.net and www.bavo.biz.