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Contentious Crossings

Struggles and alliances for freedom of movement across the Mediterranean Sea

Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani

*“We are drawn to borders, not because they are signs or elements of the impossible but because **they are places of passage and transformation.** Relationship depends on the mutual influence of identities, be they individual or collective, and requires each identity to be distinct and independent. Relationship does not mean confusion or dilution. I can change by exchanging with the Other and still not lose or distort myself. That is why we need borders, not as places to stop at, but **as the point at which we may exercise that right of free passage from the same to the Other; savour the wonder of here and there.**”*

Edouard Glissant, Drawing Lines in the Sand, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2006.

A Closing Sea

The Mediterranean Sea is closing down. Once again, Europe has managed to outsource the task of border control to its neighbours, and with it the human rights violations that always accompany it. The few NGOs that strenuously continue to conduct search and rescue operations are criminalised and the precarious passengers they take onboard denied disembarkation. With each group of illegalised migrants intercepted and pulled-back to Libya or Turkey, or left stranded at sea for days, we near closer to the end of a sequence of turbulence that began in 2011 when, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, migrants succeeded in prying open the liquid frontier that had been sealed off to them.

The Mediterranean has long been the terrain of a *mobility conflict*, in which the attempts of European (empire-)states to impose a highly selective and unequal mobility regime clashes with the to freedom to move continuously seized by migrants from the Global South. This regime of uneven mobility has emerged in tandem with European imperial expansion and the consequent transformation of the Mediterranean into a “colonial sea” (Borutta and Gekas 2012, Clancy-Smith 2011). Illegalized migration across the sea has however become a structural and highly politicized phenomenon only at the end of the 1980s. It was then that, in conjunction with the consolidation of freedom of movement within the EU through the Schengen Agreement, visas were increasingly denied to citizens of the Global South (Düvell 2008). With the Europeanisation of migration policies, a truly European “colour line” was institutionalised, as the populations who were excluded from accessing European territory were marked out along a matrix of race and class. However, the perpetuation of the systemic conditions underpinning migrants’ movements towards Europe – in particular the need for migrant labour, global inequalities, and existing migrant networks, the illegalization of certain forms of migration only resulted in it operating in an increasingly clandestine form, in particular by crossing the sea on overcrowded vessels (De Genova 2013). In the attempt to control the Mediterranean, now

corresponding to the extremities of European space and transformed into a vast frontier zone, European coastal states, later joined by Frontex (the European border management agency) and a growing range of international military operations, have deployed a vast array of militarised bordering practices and techniques to contain and channel migrants' movements. Crucially, since the early 2000s, the EU has increasingly outsourced border control to authoritarian regimes in North Africa so that they contain migrants on their shores, a task which they operated in exchange for funding, military equipment and advantages in other levels of political and economic cooperation with Europe (see Schwartz and Stierl's contribution). These policies have never more than temporarily succeeded in stemming migrants' crossings, and for every route that was sealed off, several new ones - often longer and more dangerous - were opened. Migrants paid a heavy price for the persistence: more than 30,000 migrant deaths at sea have been recorded since the end of 1980, turning the Mediterranean into a liquid grave.¹ Those who succeed in arriving safely on EU territory faced precarious legal conditions, waiting in the limbo of the asylum process or becoming subjected into an illegalized labor force, included through their very exclusion (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012).

However, through these combined measures, by 2009, the EU seemed to have succeeded in sealing off each of the main routes along its external border. Looking at the Mediterranean at the time, it could seem as if a major fault-line of the world system had been pacified. This however was only the calm before the storm. The "delayed defiance" of the Arab uprisings, which constituted a moment of rebellion against "domestic tyranny and globalised disempowerment alike, now jointly challenged beyond the entrapment of postcolonial ideologies" (Dabashi 2012, 18-9), opened a sequence of unprecedented defiance against the European border regime itself.

By toppling or destabilizing the authoritarian regimes in North Africa that had served as the pillars of Europe's policy of externalized border control, these popular uprisings (and the foreign military interventions that accompanied them in the case of Libya) also made the European border regime vacillate. In Tunisia, migrants took advantage of the power vacuum to seize the freedom to move the Ben Ali regime had denied them in tandem with the EU (see Bellingeri's contribution). The counter-revolutionary turmoil that spread in Libya and Syria further triggered large-scale population movements across the region. Illegalised migration across the sea but also onward movement across European space, in contravention of the Dublin regime according to which the first country of arrival should be responsible for processing asylum requests, became another major source of European conflict and disintegration after several years of "debt crisis" and punitive austerity policies. The processes and contexts that migrants' unruly movements have connected since 2011 reveal the contours of a *Mediterranean Spring*, with uprisings against authoritarianism and neoliberalism spilling over its southern and northern shores, both brought closer by migrants' transgressive crossings of the liquid frontier. "If it happens", the Observatorio Metropolitano of Madrid wrote back in 2011, "the European revolution will have begun in North Africa." (Quoted in: Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 308)

Just as migrants' capacity to overcome European borders peaked in 2015 when Syrians crossed the Aegean to reach the Greek shores and marched across European territory towards more wealthy states such as Germany and Sweden – not incidentally mirroring Europe's uneven

¹ See the list of migrant deaths at the European borders established by UNITED for Intercultural Action: <http://unitedagainstrefugeedeaths.eu/about-the-campaign/about-the-united-list-of-deaths/>.

geography – so too did it signal the beginning of a violent roll-back. In the name of preserving the neoliberal peace in Europe against further infighting and the rise of the far-right that has threatened the “extreme centre” governments in several states, EU institutions and member states have desperately attempted to re-impose policies of control on migrants’ entire trajectories – reaching far beyond the Mediterranean frontier, and subjecting those already within EU European territory to new regimes of control. In the process, the EU has once again banked on the authoritarian regimes on the middle sea’s southern shores, which have survived the revolutionary turmoil. Just as revolution and migration went hand in hand – as Marta Bellingeri underlines in her contribution – so have the counter-revolutionary restoration of political order and borders. As we write at the end of 2018, Mediterranean crossings are overall at their lowest since 2013.

Resisting solidarities

It is not only migrants however who are being expelled from the sea. The sequence that began in 2011 also saw activists stemming from different political traditions transform the sea into a central space of political struggle, inventing new strategies and tactics to contest the violence of borders and support migrants’ movements. We have attempted to sustain and be part of that process in the context of a project called “Forensic Oceanography”.² In collaboration with a wide network of NGOs, lawyers, scientists, journalists, and activists, we have produced maps, videos, visualisations and human right reports that attempt to document and challenge the ongoing death of migrants at sea.³ By forging new tools for the documentation of violations, we have sought to support human rights NGOs have fought through strategic litigation to block violent state practices; the underground networks of solidarity of No Border activists, which have been extended across the sea through civilian emergency phone lines such as the Alarm Phone (see Schwartz and Stierl in this issue); and European citizens and humanitarian organisations, who have deployed an unprecedented rescue flotilla. Importantly, European citizens have had no monopoly over solidarity at sea, as the activities of Tunisian fishermen described by Bellingeri demonstrate. However, in order to impose the roll-back of the border regime, European states have criminalised solidarity at sea and on firm land. As we write at the end of 2018, only a handful of rescue NGO boats are still able to operate at sea, leaving a free hand to the operations of violent containment through outsourced border control.⁴

As a result of these trends, the illegalized migrants who nevertheless continue to attempt crossing the sea face ever-greater risk of dying. Those who succeed in landing on European shores continue to be used by the far-right to channel the deep resentment populations in post-crisis Europe, and translate its exclusionary drive into electoral gain. The rise of the far-right in turn has created a climate in which a growing number of racist attacks have been perpetrated in impunity. Meanwhile, the level of precaritization and exploitation experienced by migrants is only heightened. These hard times demand multiple forms of resistance, which are being courageously enacted by migrants and activists alike across the Europe. Let us think only of the *Diciotti* stand off in the heat of the summer of 2018, when more than 150 migrants who were denied disembarkation from an Italian coast guard ship in the Sicilian port of Catania, mustered

² For an overview, see Hinger 2018.

³ See for instance: <https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/>

⁴ For the connection between the criminalisation of NGOs and outsourced border control see our *Mare Clausum* report (Heller and Pezzani 2018).

the courage to go on hunger strike in protest of their captivity, even after spending months and even years in detention in Libya (Brodie 2018). They were encouraged by the cries of thousands of Sicilian activists who gathered in the port in solidarity, until they were eventually released. We are also inspired by the launch of a new disobedient rescue operation, *Mediterranea*, initiated by a Left leaning platform in Italy, which has explicitly formulated its project as an act of defiance to Italy's far-right government (Hardt and Mezzadra 2018). Several other exemplary practices and initiatives are evoked in the contributions gathered here.

The entangled politics of freedom of movement: Beyond “us” vs. “them”?

In this moment of violent roll-back, which hardens the expressions of state borders and social boundaries alike, we are convinced that forms of immediate resistance should be accompanied by renewed strategic thinking and geared towards a broader horizon of transformation. *How do we define and even prefigure our political horizon in the present political conjuncture? How can we create the alliances to advance towards it? Under what conditions can migration struggles become the engine of a broader project of political transformation operating across different forms of boundaries?* These are some of the questions that inhabit us at present, and which we share with many of our fellow researchers and activists, including those we have brought together for this *Against the Day* section.

While the urgent need to resist state violence is often foregrounded in the migrant solidarity movement, and for a good reason, as a result of this focus alternative visions to the current exclusionary migration regime are to often left rather undefined, and simply thought of as the absence of state sanctioned violence imposed through border controls. The focus on state borders and policies in turn risks occluding the role borders play as a political technology used to govern and hierarchise racialised populations and labour, and leaves the system of domination and exploitation borders are embedded in unchallenged (Walia 2013). Abolishing state borders or border control would be insufficient to enable migrants' full exercise of their freedom to move and life aspirations as long as their bodies continue to be channelled towards capitalist regimes of exploitation and encounter the disseminated social boundaries of race and gender. Furthermore, the focus on state borders risks to unwillingly reinforce the split between different subject positions (such as citizen vs. illegal migrant), and thus make even more difficult the possibility to see commonalities and forge alliances *a-cross* those divisions. As a contribution to working through the difficulties – in terms of practical realisation, but also ambivalences, even antinomies – that forging an alternative horizon entails, we have begun to reflect, with our colleague Maurice Stierl, on what we call the *politics of freedom of movement* (Heller, Pezzani and Stierl 2018).

While certainly not discarding the focus on state violence – the effects of which are all too perceptible – this approach involves taking as starting point the multiform constraints encountered by migrants along their trajectories and that limit their freedom to move and very existence, so as to point to each one of these as a potential site of struggle. As the contributions gathered here allow us to see, the struggle towards freedom of movement starts with the unauthorized movement of migrants and demands that one seek to contest, block, and undermine *all* the bordering practices that are deployed in the aim of governing not only migrants'

movements, but also their very existence.⁵ In addition, from this perspective, border struggles cannot but be articulated with a broad range of practices and demands on other levels, which might not always appear directly related to those surrounding migration and borders. These include anti-racist, de-colonial, and feminist struggles, the environmental justice movement, struggles directed against uneven development and neo-liberalism to counteract the undoing of social citizenship, and those based upon the forging of new alliances, such as those between migrant and non-migrant workers for better labor conditions. The need to weave these entangled struggles together resonates with the intersectional politics pioneered by Black feminists, that emerged out of the realisation that the forms of oppression based on race, class, gender and sexuality “weren’t separate in our bodies”, as Angela Davis puts it, and that as such, they could not be separated in terms of struggles (Davis 2016, 19). But it is also made increasingly necessary by the proliferation and heterogenization of borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) that creates more and more divisions between various “us” and “them”, pitting people against each other and preclude the emergence of broad oppositional movements. Weaving these multiple struggles together is essential both to enable migrants’ *movement* in a kinetic sense, and to build a broad political *movement* that may seek to achieve progressive change, in the field of migration and beyond.⁶

In this section of *Against the Day*, we have brought together researchers and activists to account for and reflect upon some of the most inspiring struggles against the European border regime. Each contribution offers unique insights into a complex and changing field of struggle, the ambivalences activists must navigate, the alliances they build to forge movements fit for the present conjuncture. Importantly, each essay adopts a reflexive stance on the difficulties and limits of their respective practices, not to lament on them, but to sharpen their positioning. The “anchor” of these different contributions is the Mediterranean Sea, which has remained the main front line opposing the migratory movements of the populations of the Global South to the restrictive policies of European states, and has been the centre of our own research and activism. The Alarm Phone project (Schwarz and Stierl) exemplifies the vivacity of the forms of struggle and solidarity with migrants crossing the sea. The intense crossings in the Western Mediterranean – between Morocco and Spain – the project has supported shows that despite the current roll-back, the liquid frontier is far from pacified. However, each of the articles also ventures on firm land, connecting migration and borders to broader emancipatory struggles – such as the revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East (Bellingeri), but also regimes of exploitation – as in the role of housing and welfare for asylum seekers in the reproduction of precaritized migrant labour in Southern Italy (Brodie). Importantly, they underline the intersection of the violence of state borders with that of the social boundaries of gender – as in the case of trafficked women in Italy (Rigo and De Masi) and race – as exemplified by the mobilisation of Black communities across Europe against the resurgent forms of slavery in Libya (Gabriel).

Our own work has mainly focused on the crossing of the sea by precarious travellers risking their lives in the hope of attaining a better one as a fundamental space-time of violence but also of subjective transformation. A space of transition through which women and men with complex life-stories are turned into “migrants” to be treated as victims or exploited as a dequalified labour force; but also a collective experience which forges new bonds and identities, as the hundreds of

⁵ This vision, as we acknowledge more fully in the article quoted above, is of course deeply indebted to several traditions of thought and practice, including the Autonomy of Migration (Mezzadra 2004) and No border perspectives. (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009),

⁶ The polysemy of the term movement has been underlined by Angela Mitropoulos and Brett Neilson (2006).

videos taken during the maritime crossing and then posted on social media (especially by North African youth) attest. In these we can see and hear collective defiance and hopeful trepidation expressed in songs and jokes. These many “*Mediterranean Passages*” (Portelli 1999) carry a distinct echo to the process of subjection and subjectification that characterised another, infamous maritime passage, that of transatlantic slavery. As Hortense Spillers (1987, 72. Quoted in: Mawani, forthcoming) has noted, “those African persons in the ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic’ if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity. [...] [They were] thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that ‘exposed’ their destinies to an unknown course.” This passage should not be understood merely as a phase in a longer voyage, but rather “as a concept – the structuring link between expropriation in one geographic setting and exploitation in another.” (Rediker et. al. 2007, 2) While the differences with contemporary migration across the Mediterranean are many, we draw inspiration from the important perspectives on the “Black Atlantic” in underlining the centrality of the maritime crossing. At the same time, we emphasise the multiplicity of other moments of violence and transformation that precede, follow and exceed the maritime crossing, so as to point to as many sites of struggle. What the contributions in this issue underline is that if the state borders and social boundaries that striate both land and sea and shape migrants’ entire trajectories are deeply intertwined, then the struggle for freedom of movement must also involve a multiplicity of *contentious crossings*. In this sense, the multiple crossings that characterise migrants’ contemporary trajectories and struggles, enacted both through individual practices and collective movements, seem to us essential. Taking them as point of departure, we may give flesh and meaning to the politics of freedom of movement, but also undo the boundaries in our subjectivities and struggles that are policed through border enforcement. It is not only “migrants” who need to cross borders, but those who seek to act in solidarity with them. As the feminist struggles carried out by Non Una di Meno (Rigo and De Masi), which considers migrant trafficking as yet another manifestation of male violence against women, Italian and migrant alike, through crossings, we “forge transversal relations across a multiplicity of borders” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 308) from which *common struggles* emerge. It is perhaps through these multiple crossings that the borders that have become the tools and sites of lethal mobility conflicts, can cease to be a “sign or elements of the impossible” and become more fully, in the words of Edouard Glissant, spaces of “passage and transformation.”

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