

“Keeping on the move without letting pass”: rethinking biopolitics through mobility.

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“This is the sixth time that I am coming back to the border, in Ventimiglia, after being taken by force to the city of Taranto. I am now trying again to cross to France, I really hope that this time I make it, as I have no money and no energies left”. M., a Sudanese national who arrived in Italy in 2018 from Libya, is one of the many migrants who try to cross to France, along the coast, passing through the Italian city of Ventimiglia. Yet, most of those who try are pushed back to Italy by the French police, sometimes being held for hours in the police station at the border, without being allowed to claim asylum. On the Italian side of the border, some migrants are randomly caught by the police and put on one of the coaches and, on a weekly basis, transferred to Taranto, a city located 1200 kilometres southern of Ventimiglia. Migrants are taken to the Hotspot of Taranto and, after being identified, they are usually released few days later; the majority of them goes back to the Italian-French border, by train or by bus, despite they might be exhausted and running out money. Such a routinised police practice of internal forced transfers does not discourage migrants from going back to Ventimiglia and from trying again and again; nor are migrants taken to Taranto with the goal of detaining them for long time. And yet, they are kept on the move, forced to divert their routes and to repeat the same journey multiple times. The forced hyper-mobility of the migrants who try to cross to France from Ventimiglia is not an exceptional case study; rather, the focus on Ventimiglia sheds light on the dramatic *migrants’ goose game*¹, that is, on the convoluted geographies that they are forced to undertake due to legal restrictions, police measures, spatial blockages and administrative violence.

What is left of the ‘bad circulation’?

Mobility is thus used by state authorities as a political technology for regaining control over ‘unruly’ migration. More precisely, these political technologies are biopolitical mechanisms, insofar as they are deployed for managing and disrupting migrants’ lives. How should we rethink the nexus between biopolitics and mobility in light of that? How can we account for biopolitical tactics *through* mobility? And how does it affect migrants and their “infrastructures of livability”²? In order to engage with these questions, I suggest going back to Michel Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics. While in the Lecture series at the College de France *Society Must Be Defended* (1976-1977) and in *The Will to Knowledge* (1978) Foucault defines biopolitics through the formula “making live, letting die”, in the Lectures series at the College de France *Security, Territory, Population* (1978– 1979) he historically situates the emergence of biopolitical mechanisms in relation to the governing of circulation: security, Foucault contends, “is simply a matter of maximizing the positive elements, for which one provides the best possible circulation, and of minimizing what is risky and inconvenient like theft and disease, while knowing that they will never be completely suppressed” (Foucault, 2007: 19).

¹<https://www.osservatoriodiritti.it/2017/05/04/gioco-delloca-migrante/>

² With this expression I mean the material infrastructures of life support - which might consist in temporary encampments, solidarity networks and what migrants in Calais define as *lieux de vie* (“spaces of life”) - as well as digital infrastructures -e.g. digital connectivity.

Nevertheless, the intertwining between biopolitical modes and the governing of circulation has remained relatively marginal in the rich existing literature on biopolitics (but see Aradau, Blanke, 2010), and also, quite surprisingly, in migration scholarship. Indeed, both proponents of affirmative biopolitics (Hardt, Negri, 2003; Revel, 2008) and of negative biopolitics (Agamben, 1998) as well as of its multiple variations - necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), thanatopolitics (Murray, 2006) - have prioritised the focus on life. At a close glance it is noteworthy that Foucault himself has never fully developed the nexus between biopolitics and circulation nor did he elaborate a theory of biopolitics of mobility. As I have argued in a recent piece co-authored with XXX (authors XXX), it should be stressed that Foucault speaks of governing circulation, and not of mobility³; and that, in arguing that modern governmentality consists in ‘making a division between good and bad circulation’ (Foucault, 2007: 18), he has not actually engaged with the “bad circulation”, that is, with the ways in which criminalised and unruly subjectivities on the move are governed. Or better, while Foucault has highlighted that the government of cities in the eighteenth century was driven by the need to deal with “the influx of the floating population of beggars, vagrants, delinquents, criminals...” (18), he has not dwelled upon how such a “bad circulation” was disciplined and managed in practice. Thus, rethinking biopolitics in light of the criminalisation of “unruly” mobilities and, at once, of the use of mobility as a political technology for governing migration, entails analysing how the “bad circulation” that Foucault mentions in passing is actually obstructed, contained and expelled. Yet, as Foucault himself points out, bad circulation and the unruly subjectivities it is formed by - like beggars, vagrants, delinquents etc. - could neither be fully eliminated nor stopped⁴. If we turn our attention to the present and the biopolitics of mobility at the internal frontiers of Europe, it is noticeable that, as the opening vignette highlights, migrants are neither detained nor expelled; they are disciplined and controlled by being kept on the move and being forced to undertake convoluted geographies (Tazzioli, 2019a). In fact, it is precisely in the interstices between “good” and “bad” circulation that, I suggest, biopolitical technologies which target illegalised migrants are implemented - by repeatedly disrupting migrants’ movements and violently dismantling their infrastructures of livability without necessarily killing them nor letting them die. Indeed, it is not only a question of expanding on the exclusion and expulsion of the “bad circulation”; together with that, the mobility and presence of unruly subjectivities is also governed and obstructed by exhausting migrants, by keeping them on the move even without deporting or detaining them. Ultimately, while biopolitical technologies of exclusion involve investigating the governing of the so called “bad circulation”, the focus on the border-zone of Ventimiglia indicates that a more nuanced analysis is needed. That is, migrants’ unruly presence is in fact the object of heterogenous tactics of obstruction, which include deportation and detention but that are not limited to them.

Cramp, choke and disrupt:

³ By speaking of circulation, Foucault mainly referred to the emergent capitalist economy and, therefore, to the need of regulating the influx of goods and people at the same time. Analytically, I argue that it is important to distinguish between circulation and mobility; in this piece I use “mobility” to designate the movement of human beings as long as it is subjected to and restricted by a multiplicity of rules and laws that are not the same for everyone.

⁴ Rather, according to Foucault, they are minimised, contained and marginalised: “it is simply a matter of minimising what is risky and inconvenient, like thefts and disease, while knowing that they will never be completely suppressed” (Foucault 2007: 19).

Before moving on with the analysis of the biopolitics of migrants' mobility at the internal frontiers of Europe, I want to briefly draw attention to other research pathways in Foucault's work that enable coming to grips with the bad circulation and all its grey areas. Indeed, in an earlier lecture series at the College de France, *The Punitive Society* (1972–1973), Foucault interestingly develops an insightful analysis of the criminalisation of popular illegalisms and of acts of vagabondage in the eighteenth century. More broadly, it could be argued that in the 1972-1973 lecture series Foucault pays attention to what the 'bad circulation' that in *Security, Territory, Population* he just mentions in passing to define dispositifs of security. In fact, in *The Punitive Society* he focuses on popular illegalism, that is, conducts and practices of mobility that started to be criminalised in the seventeenth century: "illegalism takes the form of absenteeism, lateness, laziness, festivity, debauchery, nomadism, in short, everything that smacks of irregularity, of mobility in space" (Foucault, 2015a: 188). Thus, mobility is approached by Foucault not merely as movements in space but as those criminalised practices that were considered against the norms of (sedentary) societies – such as vagabondage – and that became the object of disciplinary controls. Such an insight into criminalised marginal mobilities equips us with the analytical tools for distinguishing mobility from both circulation and movement, by bringing attention to the racialised hierarchies of access to mobility and to the strugglefield between practices of freedom, on the one hand, and modes of disciplining and control, on the other.

A focus on mobility as a political technology and on migrants' convoluted routes, foregrounds biopolitical tactics which cannot be fully captured through the "making live/letting die" formula. Indeed, the exhausting mobility that migrants are forced into, pushes us to find ways for registering modes of governing that consist in pestering and harassing migrants. As Jasbir Puar has compellingly observed focusing on the Palestinian context, "alongside the 'right to kill' I noted a complementary logics [...] that of creating injuries and maintaining Palestinian populations as perpetually debilitated, and yet alive, in order to control them" (Puar, 2017: x). Along similar veins, we might argue, migrants are exhausted and debilitated, both physically and psychologically, without necessarily being killed or let to die. Both in Ventimiglia and in Calais spatial tactics for choking, cramping and obstructing migrants' presence are enacted on a daily basis by the police (Tazzioli, 2019); tactics that chase migrants away, evict them from informal encampments and violently dismantle their temporary and precarious infrastructures of "collective livability" (Aradau, 2017: 7) and of what migrants themselves in Calais called "liveable places" (*lieux de vie*). The incessant dismantling of informal encampments in Calais and the police operations apt at chasing migrants away, deprive these latter of a space to stay: these biopolitical tactics do not only obstruct migrants' presence, they also hinder the emergence of migrant collective formations and the persistence of shared infrastructures of support (Tazzioli, 2019b).

Cramping, choking and obstructing are verbs that refer to a generalised spatial harassment of migrants who are stranded in Europe's border-zones. And yet, they also involve a temporal dimension, that echoes what Shahram Khosravi defined as "the stolen time" (Khosravi, 2018) of migration, that is the sequestration of time that many migrants experience by being stranded in camps but also by being entrapped in forced and convoluted hyper-mobility. The biopolitical technologies for governing migrants' mobility that I discussed here illuminate what might be called as *biopolitics through mobility*: indeed, mobility is not only an object of government; it appears to be also a political technology used by states for hindering and disrupting migrants' presence, as well as for regaining control over them. Shifting the focus towards the nexus between biopolitics and mobility thus entails grasping modes of violence that are nei-

ther exercised through direct killing nor through blatant exposure to death. Relatedly, engaging in a “politics of cramped spaces” (Walters, Luthi, 2016), as Barbara Luthi and William Walters invite us to do, ultimately consists in developing an analytical sensibility towards practices of resistance that emerge from within coerced and suffocating spaces and in which, however, there is always for the migrants a leeway for action. This involves paying attention to biopolitical technologies enforced not only by discarding and minimising the “bad circulation” but also by incessantly disrupting, hindering and choking unruly migrants’ presence and mobility.

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