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# Hidden geographies of the 'Mediterranean migration crisis'[1]

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## Abstract

This article explores the hidden geographies of what has been widely referred to as the 'Mediterranean migration crisis' of 2015 and 2016. Specifically, it draws on a large-scale analysis of migratory testimonies from across the central and eastern Mediterranean routes, in order to explore the claims or demands posed to European policy-makers by people on the move. Reflecting on the idea that migration forms a subversive political act that disrupts spatialised inequalities and longer histories of power and violence, the article sets out the argument advanced by scholars of the autonomy of migration approach that migration forms a 'social movement' involving subjective acts of escape. It makes the case for a move beyond an abstract account of migration as a social movement, to emphasise the importance of an analysis that unpacks the concrete ways in which multiple 'nonmovements' expose the hidden geographies of the so-called 'crisis'. In so doing, it draws attention to two specific ways in which migration forms a political act that exposes otherwise hidden dynamics of the so-called 'crisis'. First, the article highlights anti-colonial acts that contest the spatialised inequalities of global migration along with longer-standing historical dynamics of exploitation and dispossession that these implicate. Second, it highlights anti-war acts that reject securitised responses to cross-border migration along with longer-standing spatial and historical dynamics of masculinist violence. While imperceptibility remains a critical dimension of many migratory acts, the article concludes that paying attention to the *perceptible* claims to justice that subversive political acts of migration involve is crucial in understanding the distinct transformations put into motion by people on the move.

**Introduction**

Critical scholarship that addresses migration as a political act has burgeoned over recent years, and has been particularly important in challenging a state-centric framing of political community and the relations of privilege and exclusion that this entails (e.g. McNevin, 2011; Nyers, 2006; Rygiel, 2010). Reflecting on the situation in Lesbos (Greece), Fruili (Italy) and Calais (France), for example, Alessandro Monsutti proposes a working hypothesis that mobility can be seen as a "political act subverting classical forms of state territoriality and contesting the distribution of wealth" (2018: 448). Yet if migration is to be understood as a political act, then a more detailed consideration is required of the concrete ways in which people on the move subvert spatialised dynamics of power and violence. The autonomy of migration approach has been particularly influential in this regard, inspiring a growing body of scholarship that is concerned with spaces of governmentality and the "border interruptions" that are put into motion through unruly forms of migration (Tazzioli, 2015: 142). Such scholars have shown how precarious migration in the Mediterranean can be understood as a "subversive" (Mazzara, 2019) or "disobedient" (Tazzioli, 2017) form of "resistance" (Stierl, 2019), which involves a struggle over statist, racist and capitalist forms of international politics (e.g. Cantat, 2015; De Genova, 2017; Rajarum, 2015). Nevertheless, this article suggests that work is needed to ensure that the insights of critical migration scholars do not inadvertently contribute to the concealment of the very political demands advanced by people on the move themselves. It is with this in mind that this article engages with ideas advanced from within the autonomy of migration literature about migration as a 'social movement' that involves subjective acts of escape, to expose what I call the 'hidden geographies' of the so-called Mediterranean migration crisis.

This article draws on research undertaken for a large-scale project undertaken at multiple sites across the central and eastern Mediterranean routes in 2015 and 2016, which focused on engaging a counter-archive of migratory testimonies that 'speaks back' to European politicians and policy-makers (Squire et al, 2017; Squire et al, 2021). While cognisant of the impossibility of developing testimonies devoid of researcher influence, a key aim of the project was to counter the silencing of people on the move and facilitate direct appreciation of the political claims advanced through the migratory process. This focus on concrete demands is important because the voices of people on the move are largely hidden from policy debates surrounding the 'migration crisis'. Exposure to the testimonies advanced by people on the move across the Mediterranean during 2015 and 2016 is thus critical not only in understanding the claims of people on the move, but also the transformative potential of migration as a political act. In engaging with the autonomy of migration literature, I caution against reproducing an abstract account of migration as a social movement. Instead, I make the case for an appreciation of the concrete ways in which migration forms *multiple*, disorganised, yet nevertheless transformative 'nonmovements'. The article focuses on two ways in which migration can be understood as a political act in such terms. First, it explores anti-colonial acts that contest inequalities of global migration along with longer-standing dynamics of exploitation and dispossession. Second, it examines anti-war acts that reject securitised responses to cross-border movement and longer-standing dynamics of masculinist violence. In so doing, I contend that an analysis of *perceptible* claims to justice remains important in understanding the distinct transformations to which the political acts of migratory nonmovements (potentially) put into motion.

**Researching migration in the Mediterranean**

*Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat (CTM)* was a collaborative large-scale project, which combined site-based observational research at various locations during 2015 and 2016 with a series of in-depth qualitative interviews (see Perkowski and Squire, 2018; Stevens and Dimitriadi, 2018; Vaughan-Williams and Pisani, 2018). The research team conducted 257 interviews with a total of 271 people in Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta and Turkey, all of whom had made, or were contemplating making, the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea by boat.[2] Interviews were carried out in two phases. The first phase was completed during September-November 2015 and involved 136 interviews with a total of 139 people at three island arrival sites: Kos, Malta and Sicily. Difficulties in recruiting research participants in Malta due to reduced arrivals during the time-period of our research led to some of the interviews being carried out at this site between December 2015 and March 2016. The second phase was completed during May-July 2016 and involved 121 interviews with a total of 132 people at four urban sites: Athens, Berlin, Istanbul and Rome. Our focus was thus on what is often referred to as the central and eastern Mediterranean migratory routes, the first passing through northern Africa (usually Libya) to Italy and Malta, and the latter passing through Turkey to Greece and onwards along the 'Balkan route' to Germany.

The overarching aim of the project was to assess the impact of the European policy agenda on those most directly affected by it: people on the move themselves (Squire et al, 2017, 2021). This involved an emphasis on the importance of addressing people on the move as 'authors' of their migration projects and experiential 'experts' of migration, rather than as research objects from which the team extract migratory stories (cf. Johnson, 2016). Beyond simply mapping migratory journeys and experiences (Crawley et al, 2017), the research thus emphasised the importance of addressing the claims and demands implicated within the migratory process. Such a methodology reflects a commitment to embedding the principles of respect for, and equality with, research participants throughout all phases of the project. We drew on participatory and ethnographic traditions of research, with the aim of exposing and subverting unequal power dynamics and engaging people on the move as experts and theorists in their own right (Squire, 2018). This is not to overlook the evidently imbalanced relations that the research is implicated and embedded within, nor is it to assume that meaningful participation is always possible for people on the move in precarious conditions. Indeed, the project found it challenging to engage people on the move in the research project beyond the interviews themselves, despite the participatory ethos importantly facilitating discussion of claims to justice with which the act of migration is intimately connected.

The project did not directly or explicitly draw on the autonomy of migration approach in its conceptual formulation. Nevertheless, the research sheds interesting light on the concrete and embodied ways in which people on the move in precarious conditions engage a "right to escape" (see Mezzadra, 2004). As such, the aim of this article is to explore how far *CTM*'s migratory testimonies support the idea that migration can be understood as a 'social movement' involving subjective acts of escape. *CTM*'s research is significant here, because it facilitates consideration of how migration as a subversive political act involves (explicit or implicit) contestations of spatialised global inequalities and their longer histories of power and violence. The project does so on the basis of a counter-archive of migratory testimonies,

which challenges official forms of knowledge production in the field of migration and which involves diverse narratives, practices, and projects of migration that are otherwise rendered invisible within policy debates (Squire et al, 2021). Before examining some of the specific ways in which the research exposes these hidden geographies of the 'Mediterranean migration crisis', the article will first explore the ways in which autonomy of migration scholars approach migratory acts as a social movement.

**Migration as a Social Movement**

The autonomy of migration approach has become increasingly influential as a "heuristic model" in critical migration and border studies (Scheel, 2013: 576), particularly in its focus on cross-border movement as a way of challenging "historical configurations of social and political control" (Papadopoulos et al, 2008: 203). Framing migration as autonomous does not imply a form of freedom or agency outside of sedimented or structural power dynamics (Tazzioli, 2015), but instead reflects an insistence that migration has its own logic, and functions as a "constituent force in the formation of polity and social life" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, cited in Nyers, 2015: 27). This emphasis on migration as a constituent force involves appreciation of the inherent creativity of migration, which *precedes* structural forces as well as practices of surveillance and control:

> To speak of the 'autonomy of migration' is to understand migration as a *social and political movement* in the literal sense of the words, not as a mere response to economic and social malaise… When migrants become illegal they are commonly conceived as people forced to respond to social or economic necessities, not as active constructors of the realities they find themselves in or of the realities they create when they move.
>
> (my emphasis, Papadopoulous et al, 2008: 202)

As Peter Nyers argues, "the autonomy of migration approach reverses some of the prevailing dynamics of social analysis… suggest[ing] that the human agency involved in migration precedes the attempts by states to border, exclude, and control migrating subjects" (2015: 27). On this basis, Stephan Scheel suggests that rather than viewing migration as a response to power, the movement of people across borders is better understood as that which power seeks to capture, at least temporarily (see Scheel, 2013: 581). While migration studies scholars have classically approached migration as a *response* to 'push and pull' factors (see De Haas et al, 2020), those arguing for an approach that recognises the autonomy of migration thus take stock of "social, legal, political, cultural and economic conditions in framing migration experiences", while shifting attention directly to the "social process and movement of migration" itself (Mezzadra et al, 2011: 587). This involves paying attention both to the "decision to migrate" as well as to the conditions that compel such decisions, which are understood in terms of processes of "subjectivisation" or subjectification, rather than as a free moment of individuality (Mezzadra and Nielsen, 2014: 6-7).

Sandro Mezzadra suggests that a focus on subjectivisation or subjectification inserts a radical *ambivalence* in the analysis of migration as an autonomous political act. Indeed, he argues that the subjective practices and behaviours of people on the move lie between liberty and

domination, as part of a struggle that is always ambivalent in effect (2004: 271, 2011: 587). Yet it is not only the ambivalence of migration as a political act that I want to suggest is important in the analysis of migratory testimonies, but also the *multiplicity* of political acts that emerge in situations such as the Mediterranean during 2015 and 2016. The autonomy of migration approach is grounded in an Italian autonomous Marxist tradition (Moulier Boutang, 1998). This involves the insight that migration functions as a form of subordinated labour-power, a point upon which Nicholas De Genova (2011) has elaborated in significant detail (see also De Haas, 2008). Nevertheless, some autonomist scholars importantly emphasise that the right to escape functions "in different ways depending on the diverse figures of migrants and refugees on which the attention is focused" (Mezzadra, 2004: 271). For example, Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos caution against "reduc[ing] mobile subjectivities to a productionist subjectivity of capitalism" (Papadopoulos et al, 2008: 207). They argue that such an approach can end up "separating mobility and its embodied experience", with the result being "that the specificities of countless localised, embodied, situated experiences of migrants are elided at the expense of focusing on the single subjectivity of the one productive subject of capitalist production" (Ibid).

The criticality of a more nuanced analysis of concrete migratory experiences has been further highlighted by feminist and anti-racist scholars in their engagement with the autonomy of migration approach. For example, Nandita Sharma, raises concerns about the ways in which an abstract notion of the autonomy of migration effectively empties "classed, racialised, gendered, sexualised, territorialised bodies…both of people and meaning" (2009: 474). Building on such arguments, Stephan Scheel emphasises the importance of investigating migration in terms that account for "both the *diversity* of migrants' experiences, and their varying possibilities to realise their migration projects due to their unequal access to resources" (2013: 585, original emphasis 587).  In taking the insights of such arguments on board, the analysis developed here precisely seeks to pay attention to diverse embodied experiences of migration, to consider the *multiple* political interventions that the act of escape engenders. While scholars engaging the autonomy of migration approach over recent years have emphasised the political importance of "migrant multiplicities" (Tazzioli, 2019), what is notable to date is that scholarship in the field has largely avoided a direct engagement with migrant testimonies. As will be suggested later in this article, this is indicative of a cautious attitude toward the exposure of imperceptible migratory politics, which ethnographic forms of analysis can more subtly navigate (e.g. see Fontanari, 2018). Yet the absence of migratory testimonies from accounts of the autonomy of migration is also problematic, because it risks further concealment of the multiple demands that are advanced by people on the move through the act of migration. It is this limitation that the article seeks to address, specifically by considering how far migration can be understood as a social movement on the basis of the concrete demands advanced by people crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat in 2015 and 2016.

It is worth clarifying that scholars who engage migration as a social movement do not suggest that migration forms a conventional type of organised political protest. That is, the autonomy of migration approach does not formalise migration as a mode of politics that is organised through informal networks of interaction or that is based on shared beliefs and solidarity (see della Porta and Mattoni, 2016). Rather, autonomist scholars emphasise that there is an active dimension to migratory struggles, which emerges in the context of existing societal relations

or conditions and which is thus indicative of an active battle against existing relations of power, violence and exploitation. To put it simply, the autonomist approach views migration as a social movement in its "reclaiming precisely of a 'right to escape'" (Mezzadra, 2004: 270). This article takes the insights of autonomy of migration scholars as a starting point to consider how an understanding of migration as enacting the right to escape can further our appreciation of migratory struggles over spatialised global inequalities and longer histories of power and violence. However, rather than referring to migration as a social movement, I draw on the work of Sabine Hess to refer to the importance of migration as a *nonmovement* or series of nonmovements. Hess draws on Bayat's conception of "nonmovement", which is understood as "collectivised actions by non-collective actors that are not organised by an organisation and that do not follow one single ideology" (Hess, 2015: 88-9). She highlights the ways in which Bayat's approach facilitates analysis of the "everyday practices performed by many people at the same time", which though often of a "fragmented nature, they, in sum, may nevertheless trigger [broader] social transformations" (Hess, 2015: 89). In other words, rather than a coordinated social movement, Hess emphasises that migration enacts a transformative intervention in distinctly uncoordinated terms.

This article argues that a focus on migration as transformative *non*movement is helpful both in guarding against the inadvertent reproduction of an abstract account of migration as a social movement, as well as in highlighting the diversity of embodied experiences of migration. Yet it also emphasises the importance of nonmovement*s* in the plural, echoing Martina Tazzioli's discussion of "heterogeneous migrant multiplicities", which "do not share an identity or organisation but come together in places" (2019: 16). It does so specifically by contributing an analysis of the claims advanced by people on the move in enacting the right to escape across the Mediterranean during 2015 and 2016. The aim is not to assess the degree of autonomy embodied by different people on the move in the face of contemporary bordering practices (Scheel, 2013). Rather, it is to explore the multiple *demands* posed to European policy-makers by people migrating across the Mediterranean in the midst of what was widely defined as a 'migration crisis'. In so doing, I take seriously Sandro Mezzadra's argument that autonomy of migration scholars need to focus on "the subjective stakes within the struggles and clashes that materially constitute the field of the migratory experience" (2011: 587). Such an analysis is not to be mistaken for a subjectivist one that takes individual experiences as meaningful out of concrete context. Nor is to be understood simply as an attempt to rebalance migrant agency analytically in the face of works that emphasise dominating structures of border control (see Squire 2017). Rather, the approach developed here pays attention to the processes of subjectification people on the move play an active role in creating, through "contested acts of mobility" that occur in the context of broader dynamics and longer-term spatial histories of power and violence (Squire, 2011). It does so with a view to asking: in what concrete ways was migration enacted as a series of transformative nonmovements in the Mediterranean during 2015 and 2016, and how do the claims to justice that these political acts involve enable us to perceive the otherwise hidden geographies of the 'migration crisis'?

**Hidden Geographies of the 'Migration Crisis'**

    …many people are leaving Gambia, many youth men are coming this way, they are

coming because of problem[s], not because I like to go Europe, no.

(Interview with man from Gambia, ROM2.27)

It is because of instability in our countries that there are many illegal refugees [sic] coming into Europe. Total insecurity is pushing us to migrate. Politicians need to solve that issue. War is terrible, I have seen girls wearing bombs, I even know some of them. I left in order to not have to carry bombs and to have to blow myself up. If security issues are not solved, migration will only continue to increase. This is my message.

(Interview with woman from Cameroon, ROM2.11)

…use your brains, stop selling weapons to our country to kill ourselves… go to Warschauer Strasse and see the pictures there. There are a big pictures … you see pictures of war, images of war. …Very simply… very simply stop interfering with our country, we will go back to our country. Stop bombing us. Stop the big lie which you have invented.

(Interview with man from Syria, BER2.26)

The testimonies above suggest that the decision to migrate, as well as various decisions along the way, are not only complex and ambivalent, but also emerge in multiple ways due to the diversity of embodied experiences that migration involves. In a substantive sense, the testimonies show how migration across the Mediterranean in 2015 and 2016 rarely represented a straightforward desire to go to Europe, but instead highlighted the need for people to escape various unlivable conditions (Squire et al, 2017, 2021). As "active constructors of the realities they find themselves in" (Papadopoulos et al, 2008: 202), those providing testimonies for *CTM* often contested the social and political circumstances driving or serving as the underpinning conditions of migration, while posing demands to European politicians and policy-makers that either implicitly or explicitly involved claims to justice. This section explores such claims to consider how they reflect struggles over spatialised global inequalities and longer histories of power and violence. It draws attention to two concrete nonmovements that expose the hidden geographies of the so-called crisis of 2015-16. First, it explores anti-colonial acts of migration that contest inequalities of global migration along with the longer-standing dynamics of exploitation and dispossession that these implicate. Second, it explores anti-war acts of migration that reject securitised responses to cross-border movement along with the longer-standing dynamics of masculinist violence that they involve.

*An anti-colonial nonmovement*

Wars, people dying even now. We have been losing agriculture and there is no rain… there is no agriculture... The women, they buy things and put [them] in front of their house, [I am] told they just buy and sell, this is the life. Difficult, the life out there [in Sudan].

As this testimony from a Sudanese man with whom we spoke in Rome indicates, the decision to migrate is often the result of multiple conditions that drive movement. War and death, as well as poverty and environmental deterioration are key drivers of flight highlighted in this statement. This diversity of migratory drivers was particularly marked along the central Mediterranean migratory route, whereby there were also a diversity of groups travelling. While the majority of people on the move along this route passed from Libya or sometimes Egypt to Italy in 2015 and 2016, the journeys that they had taken beforehand were wide ranging, fragmented, and often lasted for months or even years (Squire et al, 2017). Many people along this route had passed from one place to another in the attempt to find reprieve from their difficulties, only to experience further difficulties along the way. In this regard, most notable over recent years have been the reporting of experiences of exploitation, forced labour, sexual violence and torture in Libya (see also Crawley et al, 2017). Such experiences often compound longer-standing personal and social experiences, and many are bound up with colonial legacies and longer-standing spatialised histories of violence and inequality (Danewid, 2017). This is evident in a closer examination of the claims and demands made by people arriving to EU territory at key arrival sites along the central Mediterranean route.

During our interviews for the *CTM* project, we asked our research participants what they would ask of European politicians or policy-makers if they had the chance to do so. Responses to this question varied, but for those travelling from various sub-Saharan states via Libya to the EU we found multiple claims about the need for action to be taken to improve the situation in the regions from which people had travelled. For example, one man from Sierra Leone with whom we spoke in Rome made the request for a focus on tackling the problem of corruption, supporting efforts to educate children, and addressing the issue of poverty:

> …what I think they should do is to sit down with our Head of States, try to solve, because there are some certain problems in Africa, yes, the governments must amend, yes, especially the problem of corruption, corruption is so much in Africa … So the problem of corruption they should try and amend it, try hard for children to go to school. As for me I dropped out of school, yes I dropped out from school because of monetary issue, yes, so they should support education, yes, and help at least the people because [in] Africa we are very poor, yes, but we are rich again, in my country we are very rich, but the people are very poor, my country situation, it's a rich country, poor people, yes, because we have plenty things if we can utilise them properly our country will be good, so they need to sit down with our Head of State try to know some of our problems if possible, they solve them for us.

That the people of Sierra Leone are described as poor even whilst the country itself is described as "rich again" is significant here, because it raises the recurring dynamic of dispossession which has a long history across sites that have previously been governed by colonial powers. Indeed, this is a point to which the man ambivalently points in his expression elsewhere in the interview of love for England and the English as his "colonial masters" (Interview ROM2.29). Yet whilst some of the people we spoke to appeared to have trust in the capacity and willingness of EU states to facilitate positive change in African states, others

did not. As one man from the Ivory Coast who we spoke to in Malta stressed:

> I never saw a real action taken by the EU that can make really change in Africa. So if this are all are problems from Africa, if the European want to solve it, I know they can solve it… Listen, if you go to my country for example, in Ivory Coast…the Europeans of those who colonise us they have a lot of organisations, or [organisations run] by the government by the country of Europe to cooperate with our government in my country. You know you want to help this, you want to do that, to open projects but in reality when you look at the project they open and [at] what they said that they are doing or [what] the project is for…what you will found them doing is really totally different. You know?
>
> <div align="right">(Interview with man from Ivory Coast, MAL1.22)</div>

By explicitly highlighting on-going colonial relations in discussing contemporary migration, this statement draws attention to the way in which cross-border movement is understood by many people on the move as inseparable from longer-standing histories of power and violence. The act of migrating in this regard can be understood as an attempt to escape unequal relations of exploitation and dispossession, which continue to resonate in Europe's violent "postcolonial present", particularly among populations with longer-standing colonial ties (see Bhambra, 2016).

Indeed, the spatialised inequalities to which legacies of colonialism give rise are directly challenged during an interview with three Nigerian women in Rome. On being asked whether they believed they have the right to enter EU territory, the women answered as follows:

> **ROM2.06b:** To enter?
> **Interviewer:** To enter Europe, or Italy?
> **ROM2.06c:** Yeah. [I think we have the right to enter].
> **Interviewer:** Why would you say that?
> **ROM2.06c:** White people normally go to Nigeria, they are safe, they are ok. I know that very well. So everybody I want, you know God created everybody.
> **ROM2.06a:** Everybody have equal rights.
> **ROM2.06c:** So it is the same. Everybody is free. You are free to go to Nigeria, there is your choice. So your push allows us enter Italy freely without no problem, that is what we want.
>
> <div align="right">(Interview with three Nigerian women, ROM2.06)</div>

This exchange is critical, because through it the women explicitly deny the right of EU states to prevent people from migrating while highlighting the ways in which border control and visa policies are highly racialised in practice (see Van Houtum, 2010). This dialogue points to what E. Tendayi Achiume refers to as the "asymmetrical…structure of co-dependence" embedded in the postcolonial present, whereby migration emerges as what she calls a "decolonising movement" in which the "severe political-economic conditions and the fall-out of these conditions" are rejected (2017: 142-5). Rather than representing a request from the EU to provide aid and support to African states, the migratory acts associated with this testimony can thus be interpreted as more far-reaching political contestations both of the spatialised inequalities of global migration as well as of the longer-standing colonial histories of

exploitation and dispossession in which they are grounded. In this regard, we might understand migration along the central Mediterranean route to form a subversive political act that constitutes nothing less than an *anti-colonial nonmovement,* which is grounded in the escape from (and the potential transformation of) on-going relations of violence and inequality on which the EU and its policy agenda on migration is founded (see Hansen and Johnson, 2014a, 2014b).

*An anti-war nonmovement*

> I was afraid to be taken to the army because normally the students are exempted for [a] temporary [period] to serve the army. But with my friend, they didn't allow them… so they went to the army. And I didn't want that to happen to me. [*without translation*:] I don't kill anyone.

> (Interview with Syrian man in Berlin: BER2.03)

> I had to serve in the army. And at the first checkpoint in the border, I will be taken away, because I, I didn't go to the army myself. I would be taken away to serve the army and carry the weapons to kill innocent people. I didn't want to carry the blood in my name.

> (Interview with Syrian man in Berlin: BER2.22)

> I was called, summoned to the army, I didn't want to join the army. If I join the army, I have to kill people. I don't want to kill anybody, not from inside either [the] opposition, or the regime. Furthermore, I wanted to do my postgraduate studies.

> (Interview with Syrian man in Berlin: BER2.30)

This series of statements from different Syrian men with whom we spoke in Berlin all resonate strongly with each other in providing a clear specification of the decision to migrate: in the face of forced conscription, leaving Syria is deemed necessary in order that a commitment to not kill others can be fulfilled. The first statement involves a direct statement without translation, highlighting the powerful conviction of the research participant's refusal to kill. The second statement points to the threat of punishment that occurs in the act of escape from army forces. The third statement draws attention to the ways in which forced conscription not only occurs at the hands of the Syrian state, but also at the hands of opposition forces. Collectively, the three accounts represent a powerful contestation of masculinist warfare as this is advanced both by governmental and by oppositional forces within Syria. Indeed, while the migration of these three young men would be defined as desertion and as such would be deemed punishable from the perspective of army forces, from the perspective of the young men making such statements desertion might be better understood as a form of escape that involves a more fundamental contestation of the Syrian war.

While migration as an act of escape from army conscription is most directly enacted by young able-bodied men, as a gendered process it also implicates different family members. For

example, the wife of a couple from Syria who we interviewed in Berlin describes how the couple fled Syria together to escape her husband's conscription:

> There's something particular, which forced us to have…to leave. We were forced to leave Syria, because the Syrian regime wanted to call my husband to the army to serve the reserve. And so we had to flee as soon as possible before…getting to the army, [because] he doesn't want to kill any Syrians.

> (Interview with Syrian couple in Berlin: BER2.12)

What is important to highlight here is that, more than simply an anti-war act, the escape of people on the move from Syria might be understood as an 'anti-terrorist' nonmovement in the sense that migration often implies a rejection of fighting for non-state militant groups. This is evident in the statement of another young Syrian man with whom we spoke in Berlin, who highlighted the risk of conscription by militant groups as well as by the army as the primary reason for his decision to migrate.

> I decided to leave because I didn't want to join the regular army, I didn't want to join the army at all. The city I live in, Daesh- ISIS controlled it. Their main objectives [are] … to get all the young people to join them. I cannot flee to the regular territories which are under the control of the regime because they will take me [for] their army, [to] be a soldier in their army. That's why I had to flee Syria, to start a new life…a new life again from the beginning.

> (Interview with Syrian man in Berlin: BER2.21)

Although many of the testimonies of escape from conscription were from people travelling along the eastern route from Syria via Turkey and Greece, we also spoke to people along the central route who had experiences of fleeing the army. For example, one man from Eritrea with whom we spoke to in Rome described how he limited his period of national service by working as a teacher for the government, only to be punished when he left his role as teacher:

> … I have started to working in teaching [in Eritrea for the government]…first of all [I did] national service and the pocket money…[then I was teaching, but the money]…it is not enough, [you] cannot buy anything…I ask to the government to leave the teaching to join another work, but [I was] not allowed to do another work…Then I decided to change myself, I left teaching and I…do another work, a business. Then after six years the policemen come and take me to prison. I [was i]n the prison two years and six months.

> (Interview with man from Eritrea, ROM2.26)

What these various testimonies of escaping combat highlight are that migratory acts of escape challenge assumptions within the policy field about the 'security threat' posed to European societies by people on the move (e.g. see Bialasiewicz, 2012; Huysmans, 2006; Vaughan-Williams, 2015). They also challenge assumptions that people on the move are victims who require both care and control (e.g. Aradau, 2004; Isleyen, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins,

2018; Tazzioli, 2015). Pointing to the longer history of masculinist violence embedded in various conflict situations, migratory testimonies show that is not simply war or conflict that is a driver of migration here, but also a refusal of forced conscription. This suggests that migration can be understood as an anti-war nonmovement, which is grounded in an act of desertion in and of itself.

In this context, there is a poignancy to Sandro Mezzadra's suggestion that "desertion, as a figure of civil disobedience, has been almost a privileged way to subjectivity, a road to freedom and independence" (2004: 267). Although the testimonies of the various people with whom we spoke imply that this may be an overly optimistic view of the escape of many young men from Syria and elsewhere in 2015 and 2016, it is worth recalling the *ambivalence* of desertion itself here. Elsewhere, I have discussed how desertion is a concept and practice that not only involves an act of abandonment, but also of refusal or renouncement (Squire, 2015). It is precisely in terms of this ambivalence that migration might be viewed as a subversive political act, characterised by (often young) men and their families fleeing wars that they don't support. Far from posing a 'threat' to European societies, those escaping conflict and warfare are better understood as forming part of an anti-war nonmovement, which challenges longer histories of masculinist violence within which the EU is seen to be heavily implicated. Like the anti-colonial nonmovement*, this anti-war nonmovement provides opportunities for the transformation of on-going relations of inequality and violence on which the EU and its policy agenda on migration is founded, yet that are hidden from view within policy debates. A question remains, however, as to whether it is helpful to expose these nonmovements or whether they are better left hidden. It is to the question of perceptible and imperceptible politics that the article will now thus turn.


**Im/perceptible politics**

The analysis in this article has suggested that the demands of people migrating across the Mediterranean in 2015 and 2016 highlight ways in which that migration can be understood as a subversive political act, which challenges the spatialised inequalities and relations of violence, exploitation and dispossession within which the EU's 'crisis' response is grounded. On the one hand, people escaping war, poverty, climatic changes, corruption, and a lack of services appeal to European policy communities to address the historical legacies of exploitation and dispossession that create conditions of "total insecurity" (woman from Cameroon, ROM2.11). On the other hand, people escaping warfare and enforced conscription highlight the ways in which masculinist violence infringes on their commitment not to kill, leading to appeals to European policy-makers to "stop selling weapons" and "stop bombing us" (man from Syria, BER2.26). Ranging from the non-confrontational to the directly confrontational, and ranging from claims representing relations of trust with European politicians to those that represent blatant mistrust, what the analysis in the previous section suggests is that migration can be understood as a subversive political act that involves multiple claims to justice. I have suggested that such interventions can be understood as nonmovements – as contestations of the social relations that people escape, which are enacted in an uncoordinated way by many people at one time and that are multiple in their very formation. In particular, I have identified two nonmovements as important in

understanding the concrete ways by which migration across the Mediterreanean during 2015 and 2016 can involve subversive political acts:  anti-colonial and anti-war nonmovements.

Scholars drawing on the autonomy of migration approach suggest that European authorities seek to capture the movement of people and domesticate the unruly forms of subjectification that the act of escape or desertion involves (e.g. Scheel, 2013). Representations of people on the move as victims (as voiceless and powerless to make decisions) or as criminal (as threatening in the decisions that they make) can be understood as a key attempt at domestication (cf. Ticktin, 2016). Yet the picture that emerges from our analysis of interviews with people on the move is not a situation in which people are simply "push[ed] to migrate" (woman from Cameroon, ROM2.11). People make decisions to migrate – "not because I like to go Europe, no" (man from Gambia, ROM2.27), but because of various forms of "instability" that are likely to "increase" if the drivers of migration are not addressed (woman from Cameroon, ROM2.11). In making such decisions, people on the move emphasise the ways that longer-standing histories of dispossession condition migratory dynamics today, and contest the unequal right to movement embedded in the EU's policy agenda. People on the move also point to the ways in which a longer history of masculinist violence cuts across various sites and conditions the lived experiences of people in flight. In a context whereby state concerns over 'terrorism' have often been linked to migration (Nail, 2016), our interviewees thus provide powerful testimonies that reject the assumption of such an association. Women as well as men describe migration as an act of escape that directly contests conflict: "I have seen girls wearing bombs, I even know some of them. I left in order to not have to carry bombs and to have to blow myself up" (woman from Cameroon, ROM2.11). Understood as a political act, migration in this regard involves a direct challenge to EU politicians and policy-makers, who are addressed as responsible – at least in part –  for the very conditions that render escape necessary or desirable. In this regard, the exposure of hidden geographies of the 'Mediterranean migration crisis' is to point to histories of violence and contestation of a longer duration (see also Davies et al, 2019).

Yet a question arises from within the autonomy of migration perspective as to whether the analysis developed here falls fowl of the tendency to "reterritorialise escaping subjectivities". Does the analysis here cast anti-colonial and anti-war nonmovements as "just another political force participating in the negotiations for shaping contemporary politics on migration", thus undermining an "imperceptible politics of escape" (Papadopoulous et al, 2008: 208-9)? While there are certainly ambivalences and risks in rendering migratory politics explicit or visible, this article contends that the importance of approaching people on the move as "active constructors of realities" renders analyses such as the one developed here necessary. Paying attention to the diversity of embodied experiences of migration and further understanding the concrete nonmovements that the political act of escape puts into motion is crucial in understanding the distinct transformations to which migration (potentially) gives rise. The hidden geographies exposed by our counter-archive of migratory testimonies cannot simply be translated into a list of claims and institutionalised within the existing political order, because they expose a more fundamental refusal of masculinist and colonial histories and their ongoing resonance within contemporary relations of violence and inequality. While it is thus important to respect as a political tactic concealed subversions, it is also important to explicitly acknowledge the political demands and claims to justice that are expressed through the politics of escape. Indeed, while the imperceptible politics of escape can be

critical, it might be argued that people on the move cannot be burdened with the necessity of enacting a politics that remains hidden. Paying attention to the *perceptible* claims to justice that migration involves is important both in countering the concealment of migratory demands in the field of policy, as well as in guarding against the reproduction an abstract account of migration as a social movement. Such demands precisely enable appreciation of the *diversity* of migration as an embodied experience and as a subversive political act, thus fostering understanding the multiple transformations that distinct migratory nonmovements put into motion.

**Conclusion**

In focusing on the situation across the central and eastern Mediterranean routes during 2015 and 2016, this article has sought to contribute to debates about how migration forms a subversive political act in two interrelated ways. First, it has emphasised the importance of engaging in a close reading of a counter-archive of migratory testimonies with people on the move in order to unpack the hidden geographies underpinning policy debates surrounding the so-called Mediterranean migration crisis. Second, it has drawn on the autonomy of migration literature in order to show how migration can be understood less as a social movement, than as a multiplicity of *nonmovements* that emerge in uncoordinated yet concrete, embodied and situated terms. Engaging migratory testimonies in order to explore "the subjective stakes within the struggles and clashes that materially constitute the field of the migratory experience" (Mezzadra, 2011: 587), has enabled identification of two nonmovements that, in different ways, highlight how migration can be understood as a subversive political act that disrupts spatialised inequalities and longer histories of power and violence. First, I have identified an anti-colonial nonmovement, which contests both the unequal right to movement as well as longer histories of exploitation and dispossession that condition migratory dynamics today. Second, I have identified an anti-war nonmovement, which contests assumptions about the 'security threat' posed to European societies by people on the move, as well as a longer history of masculinist violence that cuts across various sites and that conditions the lived experiences of people in flight. In so doing, I have highlighted the ways in which the 'Mediterranean migration crisis' forms part of a masculinist postcolonial present, whereby EU policies continue longer-standing histories of spatialised violence and inequality that people on the move directly contest. Focusing attention on the *perceptible* demands that are otherwise concealed from policy debates is critical, because it facilitates understanding of the multiple transformations to which the political acts of distinct migratory nonmovements potentially put into motion. Rather than recapturing movements of people through an "extension and expansion of rights and responsibilities" (Papadopoulous et al, 2008: 208), such an analysis exposes dynamics that may be known but are nevertheless left unconsidered in policy debates. Exposing the hidden geographies of the 2015-16 'Mediterranean migration crisis' in this respect is to emphasise the importance of countering the silencing of people on the move at experts and theorists of migration.

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