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# Border and im/mobility entanglements in the Mediterranean: Introduction to the special issue

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/epd](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/epd)**Beste İşleyen** 

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The material violence of borders and border control has turned the Mediterranean Sea into a ‘border spectacle’ (De Genova, 2002) – a nodal spectacularized meeting point between the North and the South; EUrope and ‘non-EUrope’ (Cuttitta, 2018; van Reekum, 2019). Advanced technologies of surveillance, calculation, communication, coordination and interception (e.g. Andersson, 2012; Follis, 2017; İşleyen, 2021; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; Stierl, 2021), empowered by narratives of ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’ (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins, 2016), statistics (e.g. Tazzioli, 2015; van Reekum, 2019), mediatic images (Ibrahim, 2018) and cartography (Cobarrubias, 2019), have contributed to the construction of understandings of the Mediterranean as a site of violence, death, and disappearance, rather than of circulation. Furthermore, these narratives and images rely on racialized oppositions (Mainwaring and DeBono, 2021) which draw and redraw the Mediterranean as a demarcation separating EUrope from its ‘Others.’ In contrast to these dominant perceptions of the Mediterranean as a borderzone constituted by EUrope and policed in cooperation with a co-opted (or enlisted) “South”,<sup>1</sup> a plethora of academic work has shown that the Mediterranean has historically been shaped by multiple forms of connectivity.

Fernand Braudel (1995), for instance, influentially conceptualizes the Mediterranean Sea as an agent conditioning life with direct effects on the people crossing it, and emphasizes the role its physical features play in determining political, economic and social processes, exchanges and events. Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (2000) also note that the Mediterranean has historically been home to the circulation of ideas, people, goods and technologies, thus complicating a unidirectional understanding of transfer and reception. As David Abulafia (2011) explores, it has been a source of manifold conflicts between empires

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for territorial control and the administration of passage and flows, while threats posed by army enemies and groups, such as pirates, have influenced routes, brought alliances into being and fostered and constrained certain types of mobility and not others. Ian Chambers (2008) also highlights the historical and cultural construction of the “liquid materiality” (5) of the region and interrogates it through a “more fluid cartography” (24). Chambers puts colonial encounters and racial violence at the heart of the political construction of the region and its different divisions. Alessandra di Maio (2013) highlights the role of race in the history of the Mediterranean as a “transnational site of globalization” (42), through the expression “Black Mediterranean,” inspired by Paul Gilroy’s (1993) *The Black Atlantic*. The success of this expression has spurred collective reflections in Italy and beyond (see for example Proglione et al., 2021), that understand the Mediterranean as constituted simultaneously by cultural exchange, economic extraction and racial violence. Even though migration is at the heart of these reflections, they have mostly focused on narratives, images and citizenship, through a theoretical and/or historical lens.

In this special issue, we aim to contribute to the rich body of existing critical work on the Mediterranean through ethnographic research on migration and border policies. We propose the concept of ‘entanglement’ to examine a variety of interconnections at play with regard to Mediterranean im/mobilities and border regimes. We use entanglements as a fruitful metaphor to explore the intertwining of places, histories and different sectors in ways that not only shape human mobility and its control within and across the two sides of the Mediterranean. But we also show how the kind of im/mobilities emerging out of such intertwinement impact context-specific economic, social and political realities. The contributions that follow this introduction study ‘entanglements’ of Mediterranean im/mobilities and border regimes through a range of perspectives that are particularly attentive to the histories of imperialism and capitalism as well as to the local, national (e.g. nation-building) international histories of borders and borderlands. Recognizing context- and sector-specific mobility and border histories helps us address some stumbling blocks of migration studies: methodological nationalism, presentism and the discussion of migration as distinct from other economic, social and political dynamics. Taking into account the multiple entanglements at play allows for a better understanding of border and im/mobility in and around the Mediterranean, considered in itself as a historically constructed space.

## **Eurocentrism in border and migration research on the Mediterranean**

So much research on migration across the Mediterranean has been conducted from its Northern shores, for reasons pertaining mostly to the international political economy of academic research. While many analyses have been critical of political conceptions and narratives of borders and border controls, they often inadvertently reproduce certain biases of the policies they are studying.

First, the way in which the Mediterranean Sea features in border and migration research displays what Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu term “spatial tunneling.” Spatial tunneling divides the world into self-contained units with a high degree of separateness, unity and homogeneity in terms of dynamics, developments, processes and relationships (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2015: 24–25). When applied to border and migration studies, spatial tunneling works through the portrayal of the Mediterranean Sea as a sort of a passage; a point of transit for mobile individuals to move from one enclosed and uniform space to another. The ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the journey is marked by distinction and difference in terms of, for example, pull-push factors causing migratory dynamics as well as access to political and economic rights and life opportunities. The specific imaginaries,

practices and policies which conceive of the Mediterranean as simultaneously a starting and an endpoint shape the concepts and methods used in migration and border research. For instance, the adjectives ‘sending’, ‘transit’ or ‘receiving’ categorize and position states in concentric lines on the world map, with Europe as the center. Treating Europe as a primary geography of migrant destination and the ‘Rest’ as either transit and/or sending countries have been countered by historical and empirical data on South-South mobilities, migrant trajectories and mobility aspirations (de Haas et al., 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020). Meanwhile, as Luiza Bialasiewicz and Enno Maessen note, border control and migration management are “differentially spatialized inside and outside the EU’s boundaries” (2018: 211; see also İşleyen, 2018a, 2018b) as countries making up the EU external border (Greece, Italy and Spain) take on specific and growing roles and responsibilities. The concentration of human resources and material investments in Europe’s edges, such as the setting up of new refugee camps on the Greek islands or the 24/7 monitoring of the Mediterranean through radars, thermal cameras and drones indicate that migration control is based on heterogeneous and uneven geographies of action and responsibility across Europe.

Second, the North-versus-South conception of the Mediterranean is Eurocentric because it ascribes Europe both historical priority and hyper-agency (Bhambra, 2007; Chakrabarty, 2000). Europe is seen as the primary subject of history (Chakrabarty, 2000) in developing migration and border policies and establishing institutions (Vigneswaran, 2020), which are then externalized to the countries on the other side of the Mediterranean. Border and migration control in and around the Mediterranean is therefore an end-product of developments, processes and ideas originating from the North, whereas the South is on the receiving end although it can negotiate, appropriate and resist the former (Cassarino, 2010; El Qadim, 2017; Paoletti, 2010; Üstübcü, 2019; Wolff, 2014). The upshot of this binary understanding is that the diverse histories and local conditions of emergence and management of intra- and cross-continental mobilities and their relevance for the present-day Mediterranean are not adequately taken into account.

Instead of categorizing spaces or creating typologies, we need to complexify our understanding of this dense space. How can we understand entanglements? The term describes the complexity of a situation in which seemingly separate entities are interconnected and tied together. As an explanatory concept, it was first used by historians to underline an interconnectedness that has been constructed overtime, stretching multiple periods in history, and potentially continuing until the present. Originating in the disciplinary field of colonial history (Conrad and Randeria, 2002), the idea of “entangled histories” shares characteristics with reflections on “connected histories” (Subrahmanyam, 1997, 2016) or “shared” history (Stoler and Cooper, 1997), as well as “histoire croisée” (Werner and Zimmermann, 2003), and specifically a familiarity with postcolonial and subaltern studies (Bauck and Maier, 2015). It is also part of a project of “global history” (Conrad, 2016), which since the 1990s has proposed a reformulation of previous “world history” approaches by focusing on interdependencies and connecting local and global contexts. In doing so, these studies refuse a comparatist approach in which each case is deemed separate, and instead propose a relational approach. The idea of “entangled histories” puts the interconnectedness of societies at the heart of research, insisting on dependencies and interdependencies, as well as multidirectional transfers. These approaches also integrate the findings of postcolonial and subaltern approaches to history (Maurel, 2009): through the study of entanglements and connectedness historians have interrogated the construction of modernity in both “western” and “non-western” societies, in particular in highly asymmetrical international contexts, both in colonial and postcolonial times (Randeria, 2002). The ambition of “entangled histories”

(and all neighboring approaches to history) means that they most often rely on a grounded approach and thick description.

Although they run the risk of flattening power differences, these historical approaches have strongly resonated in the social sciences more broadly, and have been incorporated within sociology and international relations, with the development of postcolonial sociology (Go, 2013), postcolonial global sociology (Bhambra, 2014a), “connected sociologies” (Bhambra, 2014b) or global historical sociology (Go and Lawson, 2017), with similar developments in international relations (Bhambra, 2007). In these instances, power asymmetries have been central to the understanding of interconnectedness. Debbie Lisle proposes the study of entanglements in terms of “a process of intensification” (2021: 447). Situations of ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’ serve as moments where long-standing power relations are reproduced in racialized, economic, gender-based and militarized terms. In other words, far from being devoid of power relations and asymmetries, entanglements are moments of intensification “in which multiple bodies, objects, systems, attentions, imaginaries and resources are drawn further into relation” (Lisle, 2021: 447). Being attentive to entanglements highlights ‘subaltern’ agency in everyday politics of migration. It shows how migrants, in their everyday existence, struggles and decisions, enact a politics of power, rights and resistance that connect the local with the global (Johnson, 2016).

The term entanglement has been discussed and criticized, with special attention to the underlying assumption in many uses of the term that what is entangled is the ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’, ‘the West’ and ‘the non-West’, ‘Europe’ and ‘the other(s)’ (Çapan, 2020). However, if we multiply the subjects of entanglements, beyond the artificial duality of these categories, we can recover the potential for creative research offered by the concept of entanglement. It is particularly useful to deconstruct and question geo-political regions that are often presented as given (Bouris et al., 2022). The Mediterranean, with its history and circulations within what appears at first to be a contained and limited space, offers, in a way, the perfect context to do so.

## Im/mobility entanglements

In analyses of migration, mobility and border regimes in different contexts, the term entanglements has served multiple purposes. It can refer, for example, to the multiplicity of scales of analysis, to describe the variety of levels of governance or actors involved in border and mobility regimes, as they are deployed within a political landscape, “that is increasingly populated by complex entanglements of public and private, state and NGO, subnational, supra-national and transnational governmental agencies” (Walters, 2006: 147). Similarly, the term entanglement is also used as a way to describe the co-presence or co-construction of elements that at first sight appear opposed, such as human mobility on the one hand and border control on the other, for example in Maurice Stierl’s (2017: 211) examination of “border entanglements in Greek EU-rope.”

Most often, the term has been used in order to bring a historical perspective to the analysis. For Jelena Tošić and Annika Lems (2019: 3), focusing on the “entanglements of experiences, legacies, and regimes of contemporary migration” can be helpful in challenging the dominant discourse portraying “migration between Africa and Europe as bereft of history and legitimacy” (2019: 3). History is brought in to *explain* migrant motivations, experiences and conditions of the present. In other words, looking back can help us understand “the longer histories of entanglement that shape migrants’ experiences moving across [the] landscape [of migratory regimes]” (Gross-Wyrzten and Gazzotti, 2021: 829). Parvati Raghuram (2021) identifies “entangling” as a way to take into account the colonial and

postcolonial construction of the political categories used to classify migrants and delineate distinctions between insiders and outsiders: she argues it also draws our attention to the gendered and racialized components of these dynamics. Looking at historical entanglements and at the connection between past and present (post)colonial contexts sheds new light on postcolonial migration and on arguments that present it as a matter of decolonization (Achieme, 2019) or of reparation (Nevins, 2019), even if only among other forms of reparative actions in favor of “global distributive justice” (Bhambra, 2021: 94–95). Historical approaches describing entanglements have also highlighted the intertwining of imperial and capitalist dynamics over time. This is central to the emergence, transformations and consolidation of migration regimes (El-Enany, 2020).

How do we understand entanglements, then, as a starting point for examining Mediterranean im/mobilities and border regimes? As we have argued elsewhere, it is also necessary to look at the “variety of moral underpinnings of policies and practices *on all sides of borders*” (El Qadim et al., 2021: 1613) in order to better understand migration and border regimes. A focus on entanglements allows us to do that while at the same time questioning the definition of “sides”. We believe that, beyond the poetic appeal of the metaphor, the idea of entanglements allows for a finer understanding of the geographical and historical ways in which these regimes have emerged and developed. This is only possible through detailed descriptions of local contexts and practices in connection with international dynamics. The articles gathered in this special issue allow us to explore the historical, spatial and economic dimensions that underpin the construction and development of im/mobility regimes in the Mediterranean, by questioning and expanding the very definition of the Mediterranean as a space of circulation, immobility and violence.

In this special issue, we seek to highlight three different types of entanglements. The first one concerns historical entanglements, through which we emphasize the connected histories of im/mobilities and their governance within and across the two sides of the Mediterranean. The ‘border spectacle’ has meant that attention, in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, has often focused on crisis, and immediacy in the present. Lucy Mayblin and Joe Turner (2020) point to the limited attention in migration research to history, especially the history of colonialism, which the authors identify as a form of ‘sanctioned ignorance’, borrowing the concept from Gayatri Spivak. They argue that sanctioned ignorance, “is an institutionalized way of thinking about the world which operates to foreclose particular types of analysis or considerations from entering into debate” (2). Sanctioned ignorance is achieved through presentist thinking, whereby contemporary mobilities and their management are reduced to recent events and are detached from their colonial origins and conditions (El-Enany, 2020; Mayblin and Turner, 2020). The presentist bias of migration studies conceals the constitutive role of European colonialism in (im)mobilizing populations along racialized lines (Mongia, 2018) and disguises the extra-European colonial geographies where early attempts of modern migration control took shape (Vigneswaran, 2020). As Hassan Ould Moctar (this issue) demonstrates, Europe’s present-day interventions on the other side of the Mediterranean cannot be fully captured without considering the entangled histories of colonialism and its aftermaths, local accumulation regimes and intra-African (im-)mobilities.

An analytical focus on historical entanglements also highlights the importance of national histories and national belonging in shaping how states, societies and local communities make sense of and react to human mobility, border security and international cooperation. As Zeynep Kaşlı (this issue) argues, conceptualizing the Greek–Turkish border merely and/or predominantly as the EU’s external border is reductionist in that it fails to account for the essential role of bilateral conflicts and the militarized approach to border security

tied to the two countries' memories of post-imperial, nation-building processes. History also shapes geographies and segregative politics of humanitarianism across the Mediterranean (İşleyen, 2022). EUropean formal and legal responsibility-shifting efforts targeting the Western Balkan countries are rooted in historical imaginations that construct this region as a space of exception, danger and lawlessness (see Luiza Bialasiewicz and Noemi Bergesio, this issue).

A second type of entanglements we focus on in this special issue is spatial. Two decades have passed since Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller offered a comprehensive critique of *methodological nationalism* as a dominant epistemic filter in migration scholarship. Questioning the booming interest in transnational communities after the Cold War, Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) argued that migration studies “did not discover ‘something new . . . The ‘discovery’ was a consequence of an epistemic move of the observer, not of the appearance of new objects of observation” (218). Their study has been highly useful in moving beyond a nationalist and territorialized understanding of human mobility. In this special issue, the historically informed analyses of the Balkan “route” (Bialasiewicz and Bergesio), of the Greek–Turkish border (Kaşlı), or of Nouadhibou, Mauritania (Ould Moctar) are a great reminder that an attention to the entanglements created by circulations and interactions over time in localized settings is necessary. It helps us bring in varieties of scales and actors. This attention to local spaces and to their connection to regional and global mobilities is essential to the understanding of the ties that are created and the dynamics of border and im/mobility regimes. Spaces of border and migration regimes are both local and transnational by design, but we can also interrogate the (dis)continuities of the spaces they draw. By including Mauritania (Ould Moctar), for example, in an issue on the Mediterranean, we see how “the Mediterranean” as a space of circulation and of migration policies reaches beyond the countries on its immediate shores. By bringing together pieces that look at spaces on different parts of the Mediterranean, this special issue also enquires into logics of exploitation that span multiple national spaces. Looking at the exploitation of agricultural workers in Southern Italy (Dines, this issue) and at the role played by humanitarian logics in this context, for example, puts in perspective the common analytical divide made between spaces of departure, entry and stay.

This brings us to the third type of entanglement investigated here, that between the logics of capitalism and exploitation on the one hand, and the logics of compassion and repression on the other; that is to say, entanglements between regimes of political and moral economy. Economic dynamics and migration are tied in many different ways: colonial exploitation and underdevelopment create the conditions for people's search for new life opportunities (Sayad, 2004); development aid is sometimes seen as a way to address the ‘root causes’ of migration, a perspective which has been criticized (de Haas, 2010); and border control cooperation also works through funding or bargaining on commercial issues or development aid (Andersson, 2014; El Qadim, 2018; Gazzotti, 2021). These entanglements between migration, capitalism, diplomacy and aid, can be complicated even further when we consider the different components of the moral and political economies that sustain them.

The concept of entanglements often refers to the diversity of actors who partake in the construction of border and im/mobility ideas, policies, institutions and practices. Morals, ethics and rights are integral to the everyday governing of im/mobilities (El Qadim et al., 2021). Didier Fassin's description of the articulation of compassion and repression in the humanitarian government of migration and borders is one example (Fassin, 2011: chapter 5). Moral values are also articulated via the operation of a political economy of border and mobility regimes, most notably through the role of non-state and/or private actors. Responsibility-shifting from the North of the Mediterranean to the South is carried out

by international organizations whose activities combine securitized and humanitarian logics of im/mobility management (Fakhoury, 2019). As part of the intertwined operation of care and control on an everyday basis, migrants are far from being passive subjects but they selectively and strategically deploy morals and rights and appropriate them for im/mobility decisions and aspirations, even in the face of the immense hardship generated by border policies (see Annissa Maâ, this issue).

Humanitarianism is entangled with capitalist logics of control and extraction. During the so-called 2015 ‘migration crisis’, private actors offered “humanitarian recipes” to address the perceived sovereign failure to provide order and care. The kind of economic solutions inscribed in these humanitarian recipes perfectly dovetailed with neoliberal logics of space, subjectivity and borders while emptying refugeeness of its political meaning (İşleyen, 2016). Nick Dines (this issue) engages in a discussion of the entangled histories of capitalism, borders and humanitarianism that has national, European, Mediterranean and international dimensions. Dines’ ethnographic research of sub-Saharan tomato pickers in Southern Italy is a productive attempt to go beyond “spatial tunneling” in the way that humanitarian action is commonly examined with respect to the two sides of the Mediterranean through narratives of ‘the EU’s external border’, ‘freedom of movement and European citizenship’ and ‘exploitation and race.’ Second, Ould Moctar’s article traces the (re-)production of legality and illegality in Mauritania by looking at the entanglement of the heterogeneity of capitalism, EU–Mauritania migration relations and social dynamics on the ground.

The special issue starts with in-depth explorations of historical and situated contexts: Zeynep Kaşlı looks at historical entanglements at the Greek–Turkish border in Thrace and proposes the concept of “regime of bordering” as a way to examine different facets of the local border: citizenship, migration and bilateral relations. Luiza Bialasiewicz and Noemi Bergesio’s contribution on the “Balkan Route” also adopts a historical focus: it examines the ways in which different narratives have entangled overtime to construct a “geography of responsibility” that assigns roles in the “management of migration” along what is re-imagined as a “dangerous corridor (...) funneling irregular migration to the EU’s borders.” Nick Dines’ analysis of the exploitation of migrant workers in the fields of Southern Italy examines the deployment of work shelters in parallel to recourse to criminal law: he uses the framework of “humanitarian exploitation” to describe the entanglement of humanitarian logics with workforce regulation and the agricultural industry. Hassan Ould Moctar’s historical and sociological perspective on the political economy of Nouadhibou, in Mauritania, contextualizes “the interplay between illegalised migrants and the border regime” in order to articulate autonomy of migration as seen from the South. Finally, Annissa Maâ, by looking at how migrants in Morocco appropriate “voluntary returns”, examines the complex entanglements between border regimes and migrants’ autonomy. Altogether, these articles draw a multi-faceted picture of the historical, social and economic entanglements that define border and im/mobility regimes around the Mediterranean.

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### Note

1. The North–South divide is the result of an Orientalist construct, with the “South” denoting here a socio-political rather than geographical space, including, for example, some countries which are located East or even North of the Mediterranean Sea, such as Turkey.

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