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Rethinking Mobilities: Solidarity and Migrant Struggles  
Beyond Narratives of Crisis

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### Abstract

Recent mobilities towards Europe have been framed through a discourse of crisis. This discourse presents migratory movements as illegitimate and exceptional, and calls for the deployment of emergency measures in order to restore putative order and normality. In this article, I propose to think of mobilities beyond crisis. First, I challenge the notion that Europe is experiencing a migrant crisis by relocating recent mobilities in a larger history of confrontation between sovereign power and movement. Second, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with refugees and solidarity activists in order to bring to the fore wider histories of autonomous migrant struggles against Europe's borders and to uncover alternative accounts of identity and subjectivity that are being enacted within 'Europe'. Last, I examine the discourse of Mediterranean Solidarity mobilised by migrants and activists and assess the way in which it disrupts the dominant European geography of borders. This investigation allows us to perceive and assess existing forms of political and ethical community that transcend the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy and open up the possibilities of non-territorial imagination of identity and belonging.

*Keywords:* Mobility, migrants' struggles, sovereignty, borders, solidarity.

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## *1. Introduction*

Speaking of migration to and in Europe has become inseparable from a discourse of 'crisis'. The notion of 'Europe's migrant crisis' came into currency in April 2015, following four consecutive shipwrecks in the Canal of Sicily leading to the deaths of over 1,200 people. Over the following months, public attention was fixated on a series of confrontations opposing the borders of the European Union (EU) and its member states to refugees<sup>1</sup> attempting to move toward Western and Northern European countries. By September 2015, the battlefield of this confrontation had become remarkably mobile, and seemed to be constantly shifting, moving from the Greek-Macedonian to the Serbian-Hungarian borders, then deeper into 'Europe' to the Hungarian-Austrian border, and back to more peripheral sites of what is now routinely described as the 'Balkan route' (De Genova, n.d.).

European Union member states engaged in disparate tactics of border reinforcement in order to stop and reverse these mobilities. In mid-September, after a brief opening of its borders in the face of the spontaneous and autonomous movement of refugees, Germany introduced checks at its national borders. This was immediately imitated by the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria and later by the Netherlands, Belgium, and Sweden. Meanwhile, in Hungary, fences were erected on the borders with Croatia and Serbia. By early December, a proposal that border controls might be reintroduced for two years inside the Schengen free movement area was put forward by the EU's Luxembourg presidency. Eventually, in mid-December, in order to 'save' Schengen, the European Commission proposed the creation of a European Border and Coast Guard, which would inherit from and considerably extend the powers held by the current EU border agency, Frontex. The final agreement for the creation of the new agency was signed in June 2016.

It thus seems that the naming of a crisis authorises a set of strategic actions. The discourse of crisis frames recent mobilities towards Europe as exceptional and out of the ordinary and calls for and justifies emergency interventions – indeed the redeployment of brutal strategies of bordering – in order to restore a putative normality. Moreover, framing mobilities and migrations as crisis invisibilises and renders illegitimate forms of political communities based on solidarity between migrants and European citizens. By invalidating these already existing political identities, it also prevents us from imagining future forms of being political that go beyond state-centred logics of separation.

In this article, I attempt to rethink mobility and solidarity beyond crisis. I first deconstruct the discourse according to which Europe is experiencing a migrant crisis by relocating recent mobilities in a larger history of confrontation between sovereign power and movement. I also comment on the importance of locating this relation within particular historical and material conjunctures. Second, I examine wider histories of autonomous migrant struggles and alternative accounts of transnational solidarity within 'Europe'. By doing so, I hope to move away from binary

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use the terms 'refugees' and 'migrants' interchangeably. This reflects the belief that, although state authorities will eventually separate between these mobilities to establish which are 'refugee' and which are 'migrant', they hold more in common than they have differences.

conceptualisation of the political and contribute to imagining forms of political communities and subjectivities that bring together refugees and citizens.

## *2. What do we speak about when we speak about crisis?*

The crisis discourse is performative. It produces representations of the world and of the politically normal and desirable that fulfill particular functions. It relies on a set of binary distinctions between what is orderly and desirable and what is out of the ordinary and in needs of rectification. The autonomous mobilities of people exercising movement in search of safety or of a life beyond survival fall on one side of such dichotomous representations. They become the negative mirror image of what is by the same token re-asserted as the only acceptable form of mobilities – those organised and sanctioned by states (Rajaram, 2015). In turn, framing mobilities as crisis allows and justifies the deployment of emergency measures in order to ‘tackle the crisis’. Since the advent of a migration crisis discourse in Europe, proposals put forward in response have ranged from the re-assertion of national borders within the Schengen Area to calls for military interventions on the Libyan coasts, supposedly to prevent smugglers’ activities. Besides these grand geopolitical gestures, the idea that migrants and refugees represent a crisis and a threat for Europe and its member states has legitimated a set of repressive, brutal practices including detention, deportation and forms of physical and psychological violence.

These representations of autonomous movement as illegitimate tell us something about the relationship between sovereignty and movement and how it plays out in respect to Europe. That uncontrolled mobilities are seen as a threat encourages us to think of the state project as one that relies on the capture and fixation of various fluxes and movements. The nation-state and its territorialised sovereignty are seen as the primary political categories of the modern era. They provide an answer to the question of what constitutes political legitimacy by producing and naturalising a political authority (the state) and a political subject (the national-citizen). This answer relies on a process of territorialisation and spatialisation of political and social life: the state is sovereign over a national body of citizens within the borders of a territory.

However, both the state and the nation are social, historical constructs and their legitimacy relies on ongoing processes of naturalisation and normalisation. The practices through which nation-states naturalise their existence and authority, and successfully monopolise all conceptualisations of the political, have been called ‘practices of statecraft’ (Soguk, 1999). State-crafting requires at least two simultaneous sets of operations. The process of state formation itself, whereby the state gains and ensures sovereignty and authority over a given territory, and the process of nation building, whereby certain representations of the ‘people’ upon which the state’s authority is exercised are constructed. Both are continuous ideological operations through which the state as a practice and an idea seeks reification and normalisation (Abrams, 1988).

State-making thus is a subject-making process: it produces the political subjectivities that it deems acceptable and desirable (the national-citizens) as well as those which it deems illegitimate and undesirable. This is by no means an obvious process, and the construction of the boundaries of sovereignty and of the political

community has been a historically violent and politically contested development. Zolberg (1998) labels state-building 'a refugee-making process'. He shows that the transformation of empires into nation-states in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries led to conditions encouraging the persecution of specific groups along racial, religious or social lines. Building the nation requires conjuring representations of an 'imagined community' that shares socio-cultural traits that separate and distinguish it from others: it is intrinsically linked to the production of internal and external figures of otherness, of those who do not belong. This in turn leads to the displacement of large numbers of people both within and beyond the newly sanctified state borders.

In spite of the violence involved in the making of nations and states, the legitimacy of the state relies on its ability to frame its authority over a territory and a people as self-evident. The contingency involved in the historical process leading to the emergence of the nation-state as the fundamental political category of the modern era, and the ongoing dispute within and between states regarding issues of belonging, authority and political subjectivity, must always appear as already resolved. It is precisely these operations of normalisation that Soguk considers as 'practices of statecraft'. Soguk identifies refugees and refugee movements as a crucial site for the exercise of statecraft. The very notion of refugee and its associated imagery 'strategically converge to point to the world of the definite, self-evident normality of states, of their clearly demarcated territories, and of the domestic communities of citizen-members' (1999: 35). Or in other words, 'the name of the refugee ... serves as an alibi for the existence of the state. Vis-à-vis the name of the refugee, the state seems to exist always *a priori*' (1999: 50).

The assertion of state sovereignty thus relies on the imposition and naturalisation of certain binaries: the citizen vs. the non-citizen, the national vs. the foreigner, the inside vs. the outside. It is precisely the capacity to make these distinctions, to separate what qualifies as 'normal' and acceptable political identities, spaces and practices from what constitutes the exception, the abnormal, which provides the foundation of sovereignty. The concept of the 'state of exception', most famously developed by Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, is central to understanding how sovereign power is built but also how this is closely related to the production of particular representations of refugee identity and subjectivity. The notion of the state of exception defines these moments when sovereign power legally decides to suspend the law for the purpose of preserving the state and its laws. This power to suspend places the sovereign above the law: it is precisely what attributes it its quality as sovereign. Sovereign power is thus located at the limit between the law and its suspension, at the juncture between the normal and the exceptional.

Refugee identity is constructed through being exposed to the violent limit of the sovereign state (Nyers, 2006). The crisis discourse that is commonly mobilised to describe refugees and their movements testify to this suspension and to the location of the figure of the refugee in a space of exception. But, as explained by Agamben, 'the exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule. The particular 'force' of law consists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority' (Agamben, 1998: 18). What is of importance here is that the exception and the rule only ever exist in relation to each

other. The refugee is thus held in a particular relation to the norm and is included within the realm of the sovereign solely by virtue of her exclusion.

The formation of political structures produce excesses that are considered to be outside of the realm of the political, yet are necessary to the very definition and delineation of what constitutes the political. The frames of representations that derive from the state of exclusion and qualify what is created as excessive to the political are depoliticising and dehumanising. This is where representations of refugee identity are produced. As a category and an object of classification, the refugee is confined within the state of exception, the violent limit of the sovereign, and is trapped within a depoliticised humanitarian state or a rhetoric of disorder and threat.

The process through which the refugee is held in the space of exception is not only one of exclusion but also one of seizure and fixation. Territorialised sovereignty is, as noted by Deleuze and Guattari, 'a process of capture of flows of all kinds, populations, commodities, or commerce, money or capital' (1987: 385). It relies on a constant decomposition, recomposition and transformation of movement. The distinction between the 'inside', within which acceptable political, social and economic activities are supposed to take place, and the 'outside' is operated through the ability of the state to appropriate and internalise flows and movements. This process is however always incomplete and contested. From this perspective, the state of exception, which attempts to include through exclusion what is excessive to the political and unappropriable by sovereignty, is not a fixed site but a continuously changing space that illustrates the limited ability of sovereign power to capture and internalise certain movements. Static accounts of the state of exception tend to overlook the fact that the establishment of sovereignty and its limits is a continuous, never finished process, in a dialectic (although often asymmetric) relation with the forms of lives and activities upon which it claims to reign.

Indeed, the power of capture on which sovereignty relies is a reactive power: it constantly attempts to seize already existing activities and flows. The state and its regimes of disciplining and control always come second to the activities and movements it tries to appropriate. There is therefore an intrinsic tension between sovereign power, which tries to integrate within its own logic and relations a set of social and human activities, and those activities and movements that escape such practices of fixation. The production of the category of the refugee and its associated characteristics (depoliticised, silenced, or framed as threatening) therefore is an attempt to capture, immobilise and sanitise a set of human activities that exceed the ability of sovereign power to capture and internalise them. The mobilisation of a discourse of crisis precisely at moments when the state's incapacity to control and discipline movement gains in visibility is in this sense an operation aimed at the reassertion of the binaries on which sovereignty relies in the face of autonomous mobilities which escape its logics.

Rethinking mobilities beyond crisis thus requires problematising perspectives on refugees and refugee movements that remain located within static, state-centric accounts of the political. It entails moving beyond categories and representations of refugees derived from modern conceptualisations of the political, within which refugee identity and subjectivity are constituted through a liminal, exceptional logic and confined at the limit of what is recognised as political and politically desirable.

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One way to achieve this is precisely to start our reflections from a recognition and attentiveness to the experiences, voices, agencies and practices of the people brought together under the category of ‘refugee’. This allows us to destabilise and problematise the putative homogeneity and meaning ascribed to refugees and their experiences through state-oriented discourses of crisis.

It is also important to recognise that the processes of state formation and nation building always take place in particular historical and material conjunctures. In that sense, the sovereign project of particular states is also shaped by economic and political circumstances. In western Europe, the emergence of the centralised nation-state was intertwined with the rise of industrial capitalism.

Since the emergence of the European nation-state, those in power have invested concerted efforts in the establishment of the national idea and in the policing of borders. Nation and nationalism were congenial to the ruling classes as means of stabilising the institutional and legal bases for the entrenchment of particular privileges, including property rights, and to regulate the circulation of groups uprooted by processes of industrialisation and urbanisation (Marfleet, 2016). Importantly, they were also convenient ideologies for the assertion of forms of allegiance that could subvert and neutralise class antagonisms. The ‘imagined community’ of the nation has thus been of prime importance to sustaining capitalist relations. In 1870, Marx already commented on how national sentiment and the politics of exclusion served capitalist interests. Referring to the hostility of the English working class towards Irish workers, he observed: ‘[t]his antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes’ (see Marfleet, 2016).

Yet, on the other hand, these arrangements lead to a number of contradictions. The idea of the nation has not always aligned with the drive for profit and cheap labour of capitalist classes. The nation-state, while necessary to the production and reproduction of capitalist relations, has been at various historical times seen as restricting access to resources, labour force and markets. Disagreements regarding the way in which nationalism and border control should be activated have long divided capitalist classes. In recent years, in the UK for example, a ‘business case’ for immigration was put forward by key actors of the British business sector against the project of immigration reform of the Conservative government of David Cameron.<sup>2</sup> Such debates already divided the British ruling classes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when some politicians argued for unrestricted immigration while other already painted migrants as dangerous and detrimental to the nation (Marfleet, 2016). Similarly, in France, the Minister of Social Affairs said in 1966 that ‘clandestine immigration in itself is not without benefit, for if we stuck to a strict interpretation of the rules and international agreements, we would perhaps be short of labour’ (Fysh and Wolfreys, 1998: 32). In other words, the border (and its control) is, on the one hand, intrinsic to nationalism and capitalism, and holds key significance as a site for the display of the state’s power of capture and of exclusion. On the other hand, it is an apparatus which operationalisation is conditional on economic and political circumstances.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://centreforum.org/live/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/business-case-for-immigration-reform.pdf>

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In this article, I will attempt to rethink the binary produced by states' separation between legitimate and illegitimate political subjectivities by observing solidarity practices linking refugees and activists in several sites of the European Union and examining the emergence of discourses and identities that challenge statist and bordered accounts of belonging.

### *3. Migrants' and solidarity struggles against the European Union's borders*

This permanent state of 'crisis' thus corresponds above all to the enduring tension and struggle that oppose states and their borders to people attempting to move outside state-sanctioned or tolerated migratory channels. What does it mean, then, to speak of 'Europe's migrant crisis' and what forms of tensions and struggles does it refer to?

In the EU, frameworks governing migration (which types of migration are legitimate and which are not, and how they should be organised) have been increasingly harmonised since the mid-1980s and the 1985 signing of the Schengen Agreement. The rationale for Europeanising immigration and asylum policies was that free movement of people within the EU space could only happen if, on the one hand, all member states applied identical criteria regarding entry requirements into their territory for 'third country' nationals and, on the other hand, the controls which had been waived at the EU's internal borders were replicated and reinforced at its external borders. In other words, the EU developed a system concerning international and crossborder movement which aims at operating as a single state and relies on conceptualisations strikingly similar to those underpinning state building processes. The justification informing the EU's immigration and border frameworks very much echoes traditional views on the border and mobilises bounded understandings of territories and identities. The border is still represented as a territorial demarcation between an 'inside' and an 'outside', between those perceived as legitimately belonging to Europe and those considered as not. The EU mobilises national traditions of exclusion, and reproduces aggressive bordering practices associated with the local state.

In preparation for the implementation of Schengen, originally planned for 1993, but which in fact occurred in 1995, the then European Community drew up a series of measures, such as the 'Common Manual' for border guards and the 'Visa Information System', which regulated the management of the Schengen Area's external borders as well as entry requirements and permitted duration of stays (Peers, 2012). These pieces of legislation, which had started as inter-governmental regulations, were fully incorporated into European legislation with the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, which enabled the EU to legislate on migration. The Treaty of Amsterdam was implemented at the 1999 Tampere Summit, which was supposedly about creating an area of 'freedom, justice and security' but was strongly criticised by European civil society organisations for its secrecy, lack of transparency and the association it made between 'immigration' and 'security' (Bunyan, 2003). In other words, all EU member states were encouraged to adopt the exclusionary policies and practices of some of the core European nation states. Paradoxically – though not surprisingly – this has encouraged the resurgence of nationalisms across the EU and has led to an increasing

scepticism towards the 'European project' itself. Aggressively exclusionary agendas and the politics of the border have again gained centrality in national and regional politics in Europe.

Soon after the formation of this harmonised border regime, migrants' struggles against Europe's new borders emerged. In 1999, a migrant centre was opened in the town of Sangatte, only a few kilometres away from Calais and the Eurotunnel, to host some of the several thousand people stranded in the Calais region on their way to the UK. The centre, designed to host a maximum of 900 people but which often accommodated over 2,000, was precariously run by the local Red Cross in an attempt to provide food and shelter to the many migrants (temporarily or permanently) unable to continue their journey to their chosen destination, the UK. The centre was closed in 2002 by then French Interior Minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, after an agreement with then UK Home Secretary, David Blunkett. This followed a relentless anti-immigration media campaign in France and even more so in Britain (Article 19, 2003).

The main argument behind the closure of the Sangatte centre was that a 'migration crisis' was mounting in Calais. British media in particular claimed that the centre had become a hub for 'illegal migration' towards the UK, encouraging disorderly and illegitimate mobilities (Article 19, 2003: 6-8). The coverage of the situation in Calais was already dominated by the populist notion that governments were 'losing control over borders' and that emergency measures were necessary to re-establish order (2003: 7). Since the closure of the Sangatte centre, refugees have lived in squats and outdoor camps, which have been dubbed 'jungles', around Calais. Despite the French authorities' regular dismantlement of these camps, at times through bulldozing or using teargas against residents, thousands of refugees still live in the Calais area and regularly succeed in entering the UK.

Since then, Calais has become a notorious site where refugee mobilities experience more or less protracted periods of deceleration, but also where they organise forms of collective life and prepare onward journeys. Although up to fifteen years have passed since the discourse of a migration crisis in Calais was first formulated, it remains a key site of confrontation between refugee mobilities and states' and the EU's attempts to immobilise and return them. In July 2015, a few thousand refugees charged the Eurotunnel barriers in an attempt to board vehicles on their way to the UK. In response, French authorities deployed riot police and planned yet another dismantlement of the southern part of Calais' largest jungle which took place in February and March 2016. The UK invested in the construction of a new razor-wire fence in an effort to prevent further border crossings.

The Sangatte 'crisis' of 1999-2002 was also a key turning point in the organisation of resistance to the European border regime among European activists. French pro-migrant activists I interviewed explained that they had rising concerns since the 1985 signature of the Schengen agreement, particularly as it did not mention what would happen to third-country nationals and started to refer to the reinforcement of Europe's external borders. In 1992, the Treaty of Maastricht created the European Union and 'European citizenship' as an exclusively derivative status (leaving out all EU residents who were not already citizens of a member state). Activists soon developed critiques pointing out that the aim of the European project to produce political belonging beyond static and statist forms manifested in national contexts were

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not being fulfilled. The 1999 Calais ‘crisis’ was one of the first concrete manifestations of these preoccupations. Chantale, who works with French migrant solidarity group Gisti and was a founding member of transnational pro-migrant network Migreurop in 2003, summarises this period as follows:

At Gisti, there was a preoccupation since, I’d say, the late 1980s or early 1990s, regarding what would come out of the Schengen Agreement. Some of our members were paying close attention – in particular because they had informal links with Dutch and Belgian activists – to something which French people, at least the French *associations*, were not talking about, and which was the implementation of this Schengen agreement, which was going to reorganise circulation inside what was then the Schengen Area and which is now the whole of the European territory... and all the consequences it would have on the status of migrants in Europe and in France... But we quickly anticipated that from this system would come many things which would have rather serious implications, and that we had to be ready for what would come next. And in 1999, the Sangatte situation emerged<sup>3</sup>

Chantale’s group, Gisti, had been active in Calais for a few months before the opening of Sangatte’s Red Cross centre. By the time the centre opened, and the media controversy started, these activists had witnessed the situation first-hand, and this experience had led them to develop a critical understanding of the European immigration and border system-in-formation. Chantale explains how activists started denouncing the situation in Calais:

So, we had the Schengen system, which organises the free movement of people within a given space, limited by the external borders of states that are members of Schengen. On the other hand, there is the UK, which is not part of Schengen but is a member of the Dublin system, which allows it to send back asylum seekers to any other Dublin country they have transited through – in this case, France. So people could travel relatively freely from the moment they entered the EU all the way to Sangatte and Calais, and then they became stranded. And even if they could pass, they would be sent back. For us, the only cause of the Sangatte situation was this absurd system<sup>4</sup>

Importantly, Gisti activists started realising that this ‘absurd system’ had consequences elsewhere and that such spaces of deceleration and immobilisation of migrant movements were multiplying across the EU and its borders. For Gisti, these phenomena followed a pattern indicative of a certain model of immigration management by the EU. The contradictions of a system encouraging the free circulation of goods, services, capital and some but not all people were dealt with by using ‘immobilisation as a method’<sup>5</sup>. Simultaneously, they denounced the way in

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<sup>3</sup> Chantale, 17 September 2012, Paris, interviewed by author.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

which the EU, by signing readmission agreements with an increasing number of countries from which migrants came and through which they transited, engaged in a process of externalisation of its borders, which led to the multiplication of formal and informal migrant camps and gatherings beyond Europe's territory.<sup>6</sup> The involvement of the EU in practices of fixation and immobilisation became the object of growing concern for people who had been fighting against border regimes in their national settings and could identify the reproduction of exclusionary dynamics at the supra-national level.

Through their experience in Sangatte and the analysis they produced of the EU border regime, Gisti activists also concluded that there was an urgent need for crossborder activist collaboration in order to better understand how the new EU border regime impacted on the experiences of migrants and refugees:

At that point, we looked into getting in touch with organisations in Europe which were facing the same kind of issues. We first met up with Italian groups, because of what was also starting to happen in Sicily, and with Spanish organisations, as Andalusia was experiencing the same type of phenomenon with an increasing number of informal gatherings of stranded people... We spoke with people involved in similar cases in Greece... And we started to see where were the fixation points, and where we could act together.<sup>7</sup>

It is through such links, weaved first and foremost pragmatically and in response to an urgent need for information sharing and concrete joint action, that activists from various European countries came up with the idea of a more formal structure to coordinate activities around the EU border regime and its consequences. When the first European Social Forum (ESF) took place in Florence in November 2002 under the slogan 'Against war, racism and neo-liberalism', pro-migrant activists made sure a session around migration was scheduled and they brought the issue of the Europeanisation of immigration and asylum policies to the agenda. The creation of Migreurop, a pan-European network of groups and activists involved in migrants' rights and anti-border struggles, was the outcome of the 2002 ESF session.

This timing is of importance. For Sandro Mezzadra, in the European context, the first encounter between migrant self-organised struggles and the emerging alter/anti-globalist movement occurred in 2001, during the Genoa anti-G8 protests (Mezzadra, 2004: 268). On this occasion, the kick-off demonstration was led by irregularised migrant workers, together with anti-G8 protestors. This close connection between migrant workers struggles and emerging forms of anti-capitalist protests meant that reflections on the role of borders and border control in relation to capitalist globalisation were central to some of the migration-related struggles and subjectivities in formation in several EU states. This also brought issues related to the politics of borders and mobility to the heart of anti-capitalist debates in segments of the European left.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* and Laura, 6 September 2012, Paris, interviewed by author.

<sup>7</sup> Chantale, interview cited.

The situation in Sangatte centre was one of the first episodes in a series of struggles opposing mobilities and the oppressive, exclusionary conceptualisations of European belonging underpinning the EU border regime. While particular locations have gained in visibility and became symbols of the confrontation between mobilities and borders, migrants trying to make their way to Europe constantly face extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances. The Central Mediterranean also quickly became one of the central stages for the unfolding of so-called migration crises. By November 2012, at least 6,166 migrants had died at sea in the Strait of Sicily alone (Del Grande, n.d.). In 2011 alone, at least 1,822 people lost their lives whilst trying to reach the shores of Italy or Malta, amounting to 77 per cent of all deaths at sea in the Mediterranean that year. This means that an average of over 150 people a month, or eight a day, died in the Strait of Sicily in 2011. People transiting through Sicily were coming from Libya, Tunisia and Egypt to the islands of Lampedusa and Pantelleria, Malta and the Southeastern coast of Sicily, as well as from Egypt and Turkey towards Calabria. The death toll in the Mediterranean rises every year: in 2014, the number of recorded migrant deaths between North Africa and Southern Europe reached 3,419 (Day, 2014). As of August 2016, of the 4,254 deaths recorded globally, 3,171 had taken place in the Mediterranean (Missing Migrants Project, 2016).

The small island of Lampedusa, off the coast of Sicily and only 113 kilometres away from Tunisia, has been at the centre of these struggles and been the focus of acute media and political attention for years. Since the early 2000s, the island (the Southernmost point of Italy) has become a transit point for migrants trying to reach Europe. Its only migrant reception centre, with a maximum capacity of 850, was regularly housing around 2,000 people, leading to criticisms by the UNHCR in 2009 (UNHCR, 2009). In 2011, following the Tunisian and Libyan uprisings, tens of thousands migrants arrived at the island in an attempt to reach mainland Europe. By August that year, it was estimated that almost 50,000 people had reached Lampedusa. Migrants were kept on the island, many living in the streets around the port, surviving mostly thanks to the generosity of the local population. Reception conditions on the island prompted severe criticism from various human rights groups and NGOs, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (2011), Amnesty International (2011) and the Red Cross (Zambello, 2011).

Italian politicians' response to the 2011 situation consisted, unsurprisingly, of a discourse of crisis, underpinned by alarmist declarations about a 'human tsunami' engulfing Italy and a 'biblical exodus' threatening the country and Europe (BBC, 2011). On the other hand, Italian authorities insisted that the refugees were only on the island temporarily and that they would soon be removed, thereby 'bringing life back to normal' (France 24, 2011). By the time I conducted fieldwork on Lampedusa in 2012, Italian activists were already familiar with the process through which crisis discourses are formulated around mobilities. They denounced the spectacularisation of migration as a convenient distraction from the political crisis faced by the then-Italian government, including the various scandals surrounding Prime Minister Berlusconi's private life. The small island of Lampedusa was the perfect place to stage a border spectacle that fulfilled various political agendas. As one of the participants in my research put it:

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The Italian government needed a place like Lampedusa; a small island, so small that it appears overcrowded even with a few thousand people. Lampedusa is perfect to reify the spectacle of the invasion and this serves the purpose of many actors. The Italian government, which needs a distraction from its own failures; agencies like Frontex, which get an excellent opportunity to justify their existence and increase their budget; and even dictators like Gadhafi who gains political weight from appearing as the guardian of EU borders.<sup>8</sup>

For Sandro and Antonio, two migrant solidarity activists whom I met in Italy in 2012, the fabrication of a narrative of crisis manufactured popular anxiety and produced the need for a life-saving intervention. It called for the ‘involvement of a charismatic leader, who could unite Italian society and restore national cohesion in the face of this manufactured external attack’.<sup>9</sup> Berlusconi’s visit to the island of Lampedusa, in late March 2011, seemed to be specifically designed to serve this purpose. The then-Prime Minister paid a short visit to the island during which he promised to ‘get all the migrants out in the next 48 to 60 hours’ and offered ‘solutions’ such as personally purchasing all the boats on the Tunisian coast so as to prevent people from using them, and commissioning a TV series on the island in order to boost tourism. He also decided to buy a villa in Lampedusa as a proof of his ‘personal commitment’ to the fate of the island and its population (BBC, 2011b).

The analysis put forward by Sandro and Antonio echoes De Genova’s study of the ‘border spectacle’ (2005, 2012) and brings us back to points previously mentioned regarding the contradictory working of the border in relation to sovereignty and capitalism. Spectacular scenes of enforcement at/of ‘the’ border serve a double purpose. On the one hand, the border spectacle renders migrant ‘illegality’ hyper-visible and conjures the spectre of a devious migrant against which the sovereign state needs to protect the nation’s integrity. On the other hand, it presents migrant illegality as self-evident, and invisibilises the processes through which this illegality is produced (De Genova, 2015). In doing so, it further naturalises the sovereign logic of inclusion/exclusion. In that sense, the border spectacle seems to be all about exclusion – ‘unwanted’ and ‘illegal’ migrants are to be stopped and returned. Yet, again, this spectacle of exclusion comes with an unspoken auxiliary – the large-scale subordinate and discriminatory inclusion of illegalised migrants. Those who succeed in making their way through these highly militarised, securitised and spectacularised borders are indeed recruited in large numbers as vulnerable and readily exploitable labour (De Genova, 2015). The production of illegality at the border, and the spectacle associated with enforcing the border, thus allow at once for the affirmation of sovereign power and for the production of cheap and precarious labour.

The death toll in the Mediterranean Sea had been the focus of activist work for over ten years, but the escalation of state and media violence, both real and symbolic, during the 2011 ‘Lampedusa crisis’, had a revitalising effect on solidarity practices. As with Sangatte in 1999, the events brought to public awareness the way in which the European border regime operates and provided further tragic evidence of its human

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<sup>8</sup> Nidal, 2 August 2012, Lampedusa, interviewed by author.

<sup>9</sup> Sandro, 4 August 2012, Rome, interviewed by author.

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cost. A number of campaigns were launched to condemn and challenge the fact that national governments and European institutions failed to respect their international commitments and to ensure access to the right of asylum. One example, among many others, was Boats 4 People (B4P), a solidarity flotilla between Italy and Tunisia which denounced events that took place in the Strait of Sicily in 2011. B4P participant Ahmad explains:

We wanted to mobilise people in the Mediterranean, both on the African and on the European shore, so that the Mediterranean becomes a place of solidarity and ceases to be a mass grave for migrants.<sup>10</sup>

Calais and Lampedusa are among the most visibilised borders of the European border regime, and key sites for the deployment of a border spectacle where states and the EU display their putative capacity to exclude, while vulnerabilising people and producing a precarious labour force. They have also been key sites of migrants' and solidarity struggles against this logic of exclusion and subordinate inclusion. As such, they are spaces where pro-migrant and solidarity activities are organised and where new political practices and identities are experienced, created and negotiated through joint struggles between migrants and activists from various European countries and beyond. Such focal points of repression and resistance are of crucial importance to the establishment of solidarity networks and contentious political identities. This can be perhaps understood in relation to their ability to feed into narratives about power and rebellion. In his discussion of revolutionary events, Eric Selbin (2010) raises the question of why certain episodes of resistance and rebellion take place at particular moments in time, in particular places. He emphasises the 'power of story': the importance of developing a framework of analysis of both domination and reaction that successfully compels people to act on their indignation.

Selbin considers this imaginary as a necessary condition for the emergence of new resistance movement and identity (p. 161-183). The composition of a cultural repertoire of claims, tactics, strategies and inspiration is a crucial element in the process of transforming individual indignation into collective mobilisation. The importance of such repertoires has long been a focus of analysis for social movement scholars, who highlight that, in order for a social movement to form, it must be able to offer a catalogue of tools and actions which are compelling and considered efficient in a specific context, as well as reproducible in other contexts (see for example Sidney, 1998; Tilly and Wood, 2004). The narratives that migrants and activists developed around Calais and Lampedusa are precisely characterised by the type of 'associations and connections across time and space' which Selbin shows are necessary for 'people ... to construct a revolutionary imaginary comprising symbols, names, dates, places, grievances, stories, and means and methods, [and] which they then draw on as they consider the world and their options' (p. 166). They rely on a joint understanding of how the EU border regime functions and on detailed knowledge of how it is manifested and operates in particular local settings.

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<sup>10</sup> Ahmad, 22 November 2012, Paris, interviewed by author.

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In the next section, I will draw on ethnographic data collected through fieldwork in Italy to illustrate the process of formation of a sense of Mediterranean identity among refugees and activists involved in struggles against the borders of the EU and its member states. I will show how this alternative account of political belonging becomes the basis for contentious practices of solidarity that challenge the binary logic that underpins state and EU discourses of identity and belonging. This, in turn, signals the possibility of new forms of political subjectivities that place the experience and legitimacy of migrants and refugees at the heart of their conceptualisation of the political.

#### *4. Mediterranean solidarity*

The only reason why we are talking about Europe is because there are lines of movement, of migration, that are converging towards Europe, for various reasons to do with history, imperialist and capitalist relations. They converge *here*, and we are *here*, we respond *here*, from where we stand. But these lines start way before the borders of Europe. Following them would take us all around the world. Ideally, our network would expand all the way – and in all these places, we will also find Europe and have to confront Europe, because Europe is present all around the world as a global power...<sup>11</sup>

This quote by French activist Michel highlights a key point articulating migrants' and solidarity struggles around borders. Michel dialectically links, on the one hand, an identity that does not identify with geographical areas and borders – either national or European – and that is characterised by movement and, on the other hand, a need for a situated struggles that tackles European anti-immigration policies as they are manifested 'here'.

Migrants and activists engaged in contestation of the border regime of the EU and its member states condemn the way in which 'Europe' has been building a (material and symbolic) wall around itself – as reflected in the now commonplace expression 'Fortress Europe'. Of course, as discussed, the border works as much to display the state's exclusionary capacity as to organise various forms of differentiated and subordinate inclusion – it is not, in this sense, an impenetrable wall. Yet the expression of 'Fortress Europe' is a powerful metaphor for activists and migrants, which brings attention to the violence experienced by people on their way to and at the borders of the EU. Destabilising this 'wall' through movement or in support of movement implies challenging the boundaries of the identity proposed by EU and states. As in Michel's quote, migrants and activists produce forms of identity and subjectivity that are, rather, shaped by their experience and engagement with movement and its trajectories. Migreurop activist Laura explains:

[W]e work with a holistic notion of migration that includes departure as much as arrival. Migrating means also leaving, and so many people forget this. (...)

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<sup>11</sup> Michel, 19 September 2012, interviewed by author.

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[And] Europe controls the movement of people way beyond its borders (...) Basically the EU is creating a big line of division, a wall, in some places an actual real concrete wall, between its member states and the rest of the world. (...) The fight is to keep creating links, connections, lines of solidarity and contact. The solution will not come from just one or the other of these spaces.<sup>12</sup>

Thinking of migration as a 'holistic' experience also leads activists to critically reflect on the reasons behind people's journeys. Participants in the research engage with the matter on two levels. On the one hand, they identify capitalist globalisation and global inequality as a key cause for mass displacement and condemn the contemporary order that pushes people into migratory journeys in order to sustain their economic and social reproduction. They also connect this with the process of illegalisation of migrants and its role in the constitution of a cheap army of labour beneficial to European capitalist classes. On the other hand, participants assert that the reasons behind people's journeys are infinite and irreducible. In this sense, they contest the narrow categories of classification of people on the move used by governments and the EU (e.g. asylum-seeker, refugee, economic migrants and so on). They also challenge mainstream representations of migrants as either victims or threats. This is of importance: as noted by De Genova (2015) such representations 'effectively eras[e] the kind of agency that might count as self-determination'. Representing migrants as being either victims or criminals thus implies that they are not capable of achieving the status of politically autonomous subjects or citizens. In turn, as highlighted by De Genova, their illegalisation and exploitation only comes to confirm this inferiority. Against this subjugation, the production of connections and links between activists and migrants attempts to challenge the politics of difference operationalised by border regimes and to produce common struggles.

Similarly No Borders UK activists Sean and Alex speak of their interest in building a collective identity that links localised struggles across space in a way that defies the territorialised identities ascribed through binary conceptions of belonging developed by states and the EU.

The way I think of it, and at least some other No Borders [activists] think of it: we are not interested in creating a new Europe, or a tolerant Europe or whatever Europe. I am not interested in this idea of Europe as a territory. In terms of theory, Deleuze speaks of the notion of territorialisation - so, here, of Europe as a political project linked to a territory with borders and boundaries around it. And, at No Borders, I think we're thinking much more in terms not of territory but of lines of movements. When I am talking about a network, it is about the routes around which people move, routes of movement (...) It is about a space defined by how people move...<sup>13</sup>

At stake, thus, is the emergence of collective identities and political subjectivities that bring together local struggles against particular expressions of borders in a way that

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<sup>12</sup> Laura, interview cited.

<sup>13</sup> Sean and Alex, 15 December 2012, London, interviewed by author.

follows the lines of movement of people and defies state-enforced lines of separation. Focusing on movement as a complex process that both results from and subverts the capitalist and nationalised organisation of the world encourages migrants and activists to imagine alternative narratives of belonging. One remarkable example of such an identity I came across during fieldwork was the notion of ‘Mediterranean Solidarity’. As mentioned, Lampedusa has long been at the heart of media and political discourses concerning a migration crisis and an imminent catastrophe. Yet, on the island, the stories one can hear about the situation of migrants moving towards the island and attempting to continue northward often mobilise very different representations. Responsibility regarding the difficult situation that had taken place on the island in 2011 was primarily identified not with refugees but at the governmental and European levels.

In contrast to authorities’ lack of compassion and cooperation, Lampedusani I spoke to highlighted their own popular ethics and sense of solidarity. Numerous episodes of local solidarity practices, ranging from clothes distribution to food sharing and hosting people but also including local residents collectively organising to rescue people at sea, were recounted. A narrative revolving around the idea of a Mediterranean identity forged at sea, precisely in the in-betweenness of that sea, and bringing its two shores together, was formulated. One of the subplots of this narrative revolved around the traditional activity of fishing. For centuries, the island’s economy had relied primarily on fishing (though tourism has become the first source of income in the last 20 years). The practice of fishing came with that of encountering fishermen from other countries and more particularly from Tunisia, which is a mere 70 miles (113 km) across the sea. Lampedusa’s local residents were mobilising these local memories and histories to develop a popular frame of contention that articulated their opposition to the treatment of refugees by ‘Europe’ and called for forms of solidarity and openness towards the southern shore of the shared Mediterranean Sea. While seemingly anodyne, the conjuring of common identities also critically challenges the subordinate and incomplete subject positions ascribed to migrants in governmental discourses. The evocation of an existence based on forms of work not associated with industrial labour also constitutes a call for the preservation of economic relations less shaped by capitalism. For some politically engaged residents of Lampedusa, the image of a Mediterranean Sea providing livelihood to small fishermen is also a counter-point to global capitalism. One participant told me:

Capitalism always wants to expand, it needs to steal, to consume – land, resources... It needs to enslave people for profit. No one person can stop this on their own, and migration is part of this, it produces the slaves of capitalism, it is inevitable within this system. But Lampedusa tries to resist on a small scale. We try to practice alternative solutions. We see the whole Mediterranean as a space where to try out alternatives.<sup>14</sup>

While these traditions and practices are local, their formulation in terms of a Mediterranean culture gives them a larger dimension and the potential to be

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<sup>14</sup> Nidal, interview cited.

replicated in various sites in Southern Europe. Within the EU, the sense of a common Mediterranean historical experience was further reinforced by the perception that the Southern European countries were now sharing the same fate and were relegated to a peripheral position. Another participant in the research, Zak, told me:

Us people of the Mediterranean are not seen as equal in Europe. For those in Brussels and in the North, we are PIGS<sup>15</sup> (...) Northern Europe is trying to impose its cold mechanical way of dealing with humanity all the way to Ceuta, Melilla and Lampedusa.<sup>16</sup>

This comment, which was echoed in other interviews, illustrates the feeling of a shared destiny among Southern European countries within the EU project, which contributed to cementing Zak's sense of 'Mediterraneanness'. In this context, positioning himself as Mediterranean was used by Zak as a way to propose a counter-narrative based on a counter-positioning to the official discourse on European identity and to the role he perceived as assigned to him in this respect.

The discourse of Mediterranean solidarity was actively relayed, appropriated and mobilised by migrants and activists. It features in the leaflets and campaign literature produced by pro-migrant associations, such as local Lampedusani organisation *Askavusa*, which is also part of a network called 'Mediterranean Hope'. It was a prominent framing reference for the Boats4People (B4P) campaign, which called for 'Freedom and Solidarity in the Mediterranean'. Activist Gabriele del Grande, who created the blog *Fortress Europe*, said in an interview, 'I'm not just an Italian; the Mediterranean Sea is part of my identity and it has two shores: North and South. It's my sea, these are my people, and we have to show solidarity' (cited in Zafeiri, 2014).

A common expression was that of a 'two-shored Mediterranean', which was used to reject the creation of a divide between its northern and southern coasts and the terrible consequences of the enforcement by Europe and its member states of this new border. Calling for a common Mediterranean space, through a discourse drawing on local experiences and memories of circulation and encounters, was thus a way to oppose the idea that 'the sea becomes a border' or, worse, 'a collective grave for migrants'. This act of counter-positioning asserted a common history and destiny between migrants, residents and activists, and redrafted identities along inclusive lines. B4P organiser Nino explains that the discourse of a Mediterranean identity allowed for a more open political identity to be developed precisely because

... the Mediterranean is not related to one political entity or authority – be it a state or a supranational authority like the European Union. So the Mediterranean doesn't have enforced borders: it is an open space, one which can include many different people. When I say Mediterranean, I include; when

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<sup>15</sup> The acronym PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain) was coined by European mainstream media to refer to Southern European countries.

<sup>16</sup> Zak, 23 July 2012, Rome, interviewed by author.

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I say Europe, I exclude. That's one thing. The other one, I mean, it is linked to this, but of course the Mediterranean is a divided and segregated space politically - it includes Palestine and Israel, Turkey and Cyprus, Algeria and Tunisia - but at the same time it has not been used, there hasn't been a real dominant discourse developed about the Mediterranean. And that gives it flexibility, it gives us freedom to define it, to expand it, to make it synonymous with solidarity and freedom, as we said in B4P. We cannot do this with the term European, even with the term African, they are terms with borders...<sup>17</sup>

What was also striking was that this sense of Mediterranean solidarity and identity travelled much further than the Southern parts of Europe. References to Lampedusa, as a key passageway that migrants went through and where they endured a common experience, but also as a symbol of resistance and solidarity, have been used in widely different contexts. An interesting illustration of this can be found in the sustained series of protests that started in May 2013 in different German cities under the original name of 'Lampedusa in Hamburg'. The protests quickly spread to other cities, giving rise to a series of 'Lampedusa in ...' and leading to a session called 'Lampedusa in Berlin, Hamburg and Bielefeld' at the yearly festival of Lampedusa in 2014. Migrants who transited through Lampedusa and had by then reached Germany, where they struggled to obtain status and a decent level of living, organised with German activist groups (notably the German No One Is Illegal) to claim their right to a dignified life and to denounce the situation of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

The expression 'Lampedusa in Germany' refers to the trajectory routes of those involved in the protests. But, an activist involved in 'Lampedusa in Hamburg' explained, it also reflected that 'we want to be linked to Lampedusa not just as a place where tragedies occur but as a place where solidarity takes place'.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Lampedusa has become one of the symbols of resistance to anti-immigration European policies and of the possibility of renewed concepts of solidarity based on a regional yet non-geographically bordered identity defined as 'Mediterranean', in reference to a cultural and historical tradition of exchanges and tolerance.

The emergence of new political subjectivities that bring together refugees from a range of horizons and activists in solidarity with them challenges the geography of borders and separation promoted by the EU. For some of the participants, it is also integral to anti-capitalist struggles in the contemporary era: fighting processes of migrant illegalisation is seen as an indispensable aspect of worker solidarity under condition of global capitalism. This contests the binary conceptualisations of politics underpinning state power. Where migrants are spoken about as exterior to political communities in Europe, these joint struggles and their use of the narrative around Mediterranean identity in sites as far away as Germany insists on the interiority of a migrant presence and claims their possibility of and right to belonging. It is a statement against Europe's and its member states' practices of bordering, othering and marginalisation and a denunciation of the instrumentality of these practices for the

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<sup>17</sup> Nino, 24 October 2013, Skype, interviewed by author.

<sup>18</sup> H., 2012-2013, email exchange with author.

purpose of economic exploitation. Migrants' and solidarity struggles thus bring what has been produced as geographically (but also in the symbolic realm as socio-culturally) external to Europe inside its territory and signal the possibility of new inclusive political identities and subjectivities that reject the discourses of crisis and emergency usually surrounding migration. In their most radical form, the fights against neoliberal globalisation and its effects worldwide, the associated inequalities producing mass displacement and the process of migrant illegalisation and exploitation come together in the form of a joint anti-capitalist, anti-racist and pro-migrant struggle.

### *5. Conclusion*

Contemporary narratives of 'crisis' in relation to migration present migrant struggles against the European border regime as exceptional and chaotic. This privileges sanctioned and 'orderly' mobilities, and suggests a coherent European space and identity that can be separated from non-European groups and subjectivities. At the same time, illegalised migrants are routinely tolerated on the territory of states, where they are desirable as vulnerable and exploitable labour.

A study of the broader histories of refugees' struggles against the EU and state borders, and of the practices and discourses of solidarity enacted by pro-migrant activists in Europe, points to the existence of alternative accounts of political subjectivities. These challenge the binaries upon which modern conceptions of sovereignty and the political rely. They open up new imaginations of political communities where the differences enforced by statist and European regimes of borders and mobility governance lose their relevance. Instead, forms of identity and belonging that recognise the centrality of movement to our experience of the contemporary era and that call for solidarity-base responses are put forward. They also imagine alternative forms of economic relations.

Taking migrants' and solidarity struggles as a starting point to rethink the political allows us to move beyond state-centred accounts of the sovereign and dichotomous narratives of crisis. In turn, it enables us to perceive and assess existing overtures to forms of political and ethical community that transcend the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy and privileges non-territorial forms of belonging.

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