

Panel 34: Migrant protests and political mobilization in North Africa and the Mediterranean: spaces, infrastructures, and embodied experiences of migrant political agency

Friday 18, 14.45-17.15, Aula 252

Convenors: **Cristina Brovia** (University of Turin / Université Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne), **Elisa Pascucci** (University of Tampere), **Marta Scaglioni** University of Milan-Bicocca / University of Bayreuth)

Discussant: **Irene Peano** (University of Bologna)

Migrant and refugee political mobilization is attracting growing academic attention. At a global level, the rise of ‘no borders’ movements has led critical scholars to consider the political mobilization of migrants as an important element of contemporary border regimes (Tyler and Marciniak, 2013). As a consequence, migrant-led struggles against detention, deportation and other forms of border enforcement or confinement within the European space have been largely explored – the case of the Calais ‘camps’ being perhaps the most paradigmatic example. This body of work has emphasized the spread of different kind of actions and mobilizations, going from the simplest demands concerning everyday needs to the formal request for political rights inside migrant and refugee camps. Mobilizing theoretical tools spanning ‘political society’ (Moulin and Nyers 2007), ‘mobile commons’ (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2008), and performativity (Rivetti 2013), research on migrant political mobilization has mostly focus on diasporic communities within Western societies, or on border struggles that take place at the European periphery. Protests and experiences of autonomous organizing by migrants and refugees along the ‘externalized Southern European frontier’ on the other hand, remain far less explored. Similarly, significant less attention is devoted to the ways in which migrant and refugee political mobilization and autonomous organizing intersect with broader struggles for democracy, human and social rights, and against austerity in the Mediterranean region. The papers here presented share an interest in the material, spatial and embodied dynamics that allow migrant and refugee political mobilization to emerge. Following recent research on the role of materialities – broadly conceived - in migrant struggles (see, among others, Squire 2014) we move from a conception of political agency as material and embodied, resulting from relational processes embedded in locality - hence our attention to the dimension of the camp/encampment, the neighbourhood etc. – and encompassing both human and infrastructural elements. We look at the role of the built environment, of everyday practices of labour, production and social reproduction in the construction of migrant political belonging. We consider these as emerging forms of non-representational politics that might – or might not - evolve into more organized and explicit political movements, and we are interested in understanding, from an ethnographic perspective, how these dynamics unfold.

Paper givers:

- 1) **Cristina Brovia** (University of Turin / Université Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne), *Control and mobilizations in migrant seasonal workers’ camps. The case of Saluzzo (Northern Italy)*

In Italy, as in many Southern European countries, intensive-agricultural areas are characterised today by the prevalence of migrant labour, often working and living in precarious conditions. In particular, the question of seasonal workers' accommodation has become a major concern for workers, but also for rural communities, as different kind of precarious settlements have spread. In some cases, as in the agricultural district of Saluzzo (North of Italy) unauthorized settlements have been progressively replaced by more institutionalized camps. On the one hand, these camps provide a decent standard of services, while also facilitating the control of workers and their evacuation at the end of the season. On the other hand, the co-presence of hundreds of people in confined spaces can also lead to forms of socialisation and collective mobilization. This paper aims to show how these camps can be at the same time an efficient instrument of control and a powerful vehicle for common identification, resulting sometimes in different kind of collective actions. We will then try to question how the geographically confined space of camps can influence the appearance, development and the results of these mobilizations.

2) **Giuseppe Grimaldi** (University of Milan-Bicocca), ***We are all on that ship: refugee mobilization and social belonging in the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora***

The journeys of refugees towards 'Fortress Europe' can activate new imaginaries and new everyday practices which, at first glance, might be seen as totally disconnected from the experience of forced migration. Drawing on research conducted in the neighbourhood of Porta Venezia, the social hub of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora in Milan, this contribution investigates the social value of the mobilization run by Italian young people of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins following the shipwreck of October the 3rd, 2013, in Lampedusa. The march organized to commemorate the victims – who were mostly of Eritrean nationality – combined the Italian public discourse, transnational imaginaries and imagined affiliation to the refugee community based on common origins (the main slogan of the march was: we are all on that ship), revealing the hybrid belonging of Ethiopian and Eritrean second generations. The performative nature of the mobilization went beyond a mere commemorative parade, challenging the dynamics of social signification in the diasporic social field of Porta Venezia. The march marked the entrance of the young in the social and political space of the neighborhood, bringing about new cultural practices, political affiliations and patterns of belonging that opened a generational gap within the diaspora.

3) **Martina Lo Cascio** (University of Palermo), ***Migrant workers' agency in a rural area of the European periphery***

The aim of this paper is to analyse how the agency of migrant seasonal workers can change common perceptions of the power of social movements in a rural area. The essay is based on ethnographic research conducted in a small rural town in Sicily as part of my PhD project, which focuses on local agriculture and economic development. The year 2014 saw the emergence of an autonomous political group among the migrant workers – mostly olives' pickers recruited as daily laborers – who were living in a 'ghetto' located near the town.

Their critical reflection on the effects of agrarian capitalism on their territory led the workers to question prevalent conceptions of the relationship between resources and everyday life. The mobilization gradually involved locals: a new field of knowledge exchange emerged among the weakest actors of the chain of olive oil production, including migrant workers, farmers and young precarious workers living in Western Sicily. Together they were acting in order to find new ways of conceiving their rural environment, opening up possibilities for transforming traditional production models into alternative forms of shared knowledge, welfare and income.

4) **Elisa Pascucci** (University of Tampere), *Refugee protest camps: material infrastructures and migrant political mobilization in Cairo*

Recent research has identified protest camps as an emerging field of social movement research. This body of work identifies in the material and spatial practices that characterise protest camps – like living together in shared spaces, building makeshift beds, engaging in reproductive and care work, organizing political action through slogans, banners, marches and sit-ins etc, – as politically significant. Through them, it is argued, a particular form of nonrepresentational politics is articulated, one where affective atmospheres and infrastructures play an essential role. Moving from such a perspective, the paper focuses on two protest camps organized in by Sudanese and Ethiopian refugees in Cairo in 2005 and 2013, with the aim of contesting the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) policies. Through the analysis of both grey literature and interviews with migrants that took part in the protests, the paper argues that the refugees' experience of building self-sustaining infrastructures in the protest camps – where large group of migrants lived for several months – worked to re-appropriate and contest the 'governmentality of care' that characterizes humanitarianism, exposing at the same time its growing inadequacies.

5) **Marta Scaglioni** (University of Bayreuth / University of Milan-Bicocca), *A self-organized refugee experience: the camp of Choucha and the political and social commitment of refugees fleeing 2011 Libya*

The intensive focus on migrations towards the Southern European border has shifted academic and media attention away from North Africa, overshadowing the global tendency to 'externalizing the border', according to which the European Union demands border patrol operations and the management of migrants' flows to extra-European countries. The Libyan unrest of 2011 caused a huge flow of migrants to neighbouring countries, in which Sub-Saharanans were the people most at risk, triggering a humanitarian crisis and a political and diplomatic impasse. Nearly one million people fled violence and harassment in Libya, and were sheltered mostly in Tunisia and Egypt. Choucha, a UNHCR refugee camp created 7 km away from the frontier outpost of Ras Jedir, in Tunisia, was opened in 2011 and dismantled officially in 2013, after the closure of all procedures of refugee status determination. However, nearly 70 persons still occupy the former Choucha camp living in a legal vacuum, destitute of the social, economic, and psychological resources necessary to stay alive. Nonetheless, the refugees' human identity, while disintegrated institutionally, has

been re-constructed by the subjects themselves, organizing their daily lives and maintaining embryonic yet long-lasting forms of political mobilization.

6) **David L. Suber** (Tuebingen University / SOAS, London), ***‘Open the Border!’ An ethnography on the politics of contestation in the migrant camps of Calais and Dunkerque***

Of the thousands of migrants arriving to Europe in the latest year, roughly 1% made their way speedily through France to arrive at the port of Calais. Their hope is to reach Britain, which they can only do by illegal and extremely dangerous means. Inevitably, only very few manage to achieve the "crossing". The rest remain bottlenecked in Calais in a no man's land known as the "Jungle", subject to municipal humiliation, social exclusion, substantial police violence and racist attacks by right-wing groups. The "Jungle" has a paradoxical dual reality –on the one hand a state-organised ghetto that applies the logic of the concentration camp; on the other, a liberated space of autonomous self-activity of determined and resourceful peoples, a space of resistance, endurance and hope. Since late 2009 No Border activists and migrants have been co-operating to mobilize against police brutality, unlawful arrests and deportation, raising international awareness about the situation in Calais and actively mobilising against the border regime authorities through a spontaneous but coordinated politics of contestation. This contribution aims to give an ethnographic account of the political mobilization in the camps of Calais and Dunkerque since December 2014, when numbers grew exponentially and migrants and activists started systematically organising daily active contestation against stricter European border control policies, a contestation that is bound to grow into active resistance as soon as plans to dismantle these camps will commence.