



Dispersing their Lives: Refugees Kept On the Move between Italy and Germany

29 May 2018

Guest post by Elena Fontanari. Elena has a PhD in Sociology (University of Milan/Humboldt University of Berlin) and a certificate of Doctor Europaeus. She is currently a post-doctoral researcher in Sociology at the University of Milan (Statale) in Italy. Her ethnographic research focuses on the tension between the mobility practices of refugees and the control mechanisms implemented in Europe over their 'secondary movements'." She is part of the editorial board of the journal "Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa" (edited by Il Mulino, Bologna). She is a co-founder of the CRC (Coordinated Research Centre) Escapes, a critical research network about forced migration, at the University of Milan. She has also worked as activist on several projects with NGOs supporting migrants and asylum-seekers, namely the KuB and Borderline Europe in Berlin and the Naga Onlus in Milan. Her book 'Lives in Transit. An Ethnographic Study of Refugees' Subjectivity across European Borders' is forthcoming with Routledge (forthcoming 2018). This is the fourth post of Border Criminologies' themed series 'Migrant Digitalities and the Politics of Dispersal', organised by Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli.

Introduction

Since the end of the 2015 'long summer of migration', a process of re-bordering took place in Europe, culminating in the proliferation of bilateral agreements with third countries, the implementation of new devices for selecting and categorising migrant multiplicities (e.g, hotspots), and the enforcement of restrictions to accessing the asylum system, both at the national and local scale. While the securitization of EU external borders has become well documented in the public and academic debate, practices of border enforcement *within* the national and urban territories – i.e. internal borders – are hidden from the public view. In this blog-post, I shed light on the effects of the politics of dispersal upon refugees' and migrants' lives, drawing on ethnographic data collected during my Ph.D. research from September 2013 until the summer of 2015, with the addition of new empirical observations collected between 2016 and 2017. The focus was on border-crossing mobility of refugees between Italy and Germany, and how this is governed by EU and national policies.

'You cannot stay here'. Politics of dispersal in Italy and Germany

'We are here and we will stay' was the motto of the protest group Lampedusa in Berlin, a group of refugees who after being granted humanitarian protection in Italy they occupied a square in Berlin – Oranienplatz – in autumn 2012 to claim the right to freely decide where to settle in Europe. The stories of the protagonists of my research offer insights into the ways in which the politics of dispersal is implemented on the ground and the effects that it generates on refugees' lives and subjectivity.

The politics of dispersal is a set of police measures, municipal decrees, and bureaucratic practices to scatter migrants across a national territory, preventing the collective formation of political subjects. My research subjects experienced different manifestations of the politics of dispersal both in Italy and Germany.

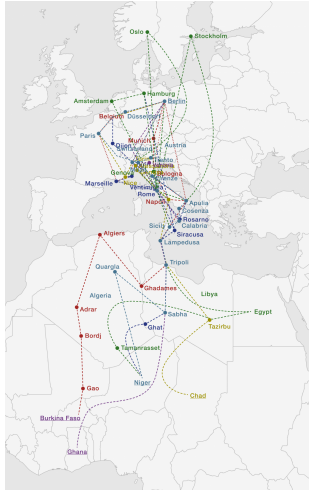
From the first moment I arrived in Lampedusa, the first thing they had us do was to get in line. 'I don't like this queue – I thought – there is something wrong!' And I was right. This would only be the first of many queues: all of us in line waiting to get in, with a piece of paper with our name on it, documents, photos, cards, a lot of cards! This is Europe. I immediately realized that queue was not a good sign ... it was a nightmare! (Interview with Dakari, January 2014)

Dakari (pseudonym) is a young man from Niger who was living and working in Libya until the war broke out in 2011, and was then forced to flee on a boat to Italy, despite the fact that he had never planned to try to reach Europe before. Once in Italy, he was channeled into an emergency program deployed by the Italian government to face what was called the 'Arab Spring crisis'. The Emergency Program – called *Emergenza Nord Africa* – was established as a parallel system to the official asylum system – the SPRAR – triggering several problems. The facilities of the emergency program were mostly inadequate for the reception of asylum-seekers as they were built with a short-term perspective. Their temporariness was inherently linked to the nature of emergency policies.

Once the Italian government issued a one-year humanitarian protection to all the migrants channeled into the emergency program, they suspended it and closed the related reception facilities.

After they gave us the humanitarian document, they said: "the camp is finish! Closed! You have to go out" and they throw us out on the street. We were told that there was a crisis in Italy, and there was no work for us migrants. They suggested us to go to Germany or France. [...] we had no place to go, no money, no information. What we should have done?! I call a friend of mine, and he told me to reach him in south Italy. He was working in the countryside... black job, terrible condition, less money. But at least, I had a place to go. [...] After many time just moving around and around, all across Italy and living like an homeless.. I couldn't resist any-more. So, I move to Germany! (Interview with Dakari, January 2014)

The Italian local authorities indirectly encouraged refugees to leave Italy, but omitted to inform them that the one-year humanitarian document would not allow them to work and live outside Italy according to the Dublin Regulation. Thus, many refugees started to move across and around Europe looking for better life conditions, since they were homeless in Italy. The consequence of that sort of 'soft' dispersal politics was to produce a multiplicity of multi-directional mobility of migrants across EU internal borders. I call it 'soft' because it was not implemented by laws or decrees that aim at *directly* dispersing refugees, but rather through abandonment practices that resulted in the invisibility of their biographic trajectories. An invisible multitude of errant refugees with precarious legal status was produced and spread across Europe. I here apply the adjective 'errant' to point to the temporality of refugees' movements that was ongoing, repetitive, interrupted and multi-directional, without a clear destination.



FRAGMENTED AND MULTI-DIRECTIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF SIX REFUGEES. MAP CREATED BY SIMON BURKO IN COLLABORATION WITH ELENA FONTANARI, IN FONTANARI, E., LIVES IN TRANSIT. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF REFUGEES' SUBJECTIVITY ACROSS EUROPEAN BORDERS. ROUTLEDGE (FORTHCOMING 2018). THIS WORK IS LICENSED UNDER A CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL-NODERIVATIVES 4.0 INTERNATIONAL LICENSE.

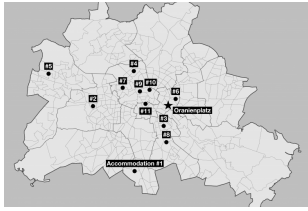


[HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-NC-ND/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

After moving around Europe for some months, many of these ‘Italian refugees’ joined a refugees’ protest in Berlin, where they occupied the square Oranienplatz with a protest tent camp. Refugees protested against the restrictive German asylum system, their deportation, and the Dublin Regulation. The group *Lampedusa in Berlin* claimed the right to decide where to live, and the right to not being anchored to (i.e., imprisoned in) a single EU member state, in this case Italy.

According to the local authorities of Berlin, the concentration of ‘unauthorized’ loud voices in the middle of the city was a problem of public (dis)order. During 2013 and the beginning of 2014 there were negotiations between the Berliner Senate and protesting refugees. In April 2014, a political agreement was signed between the Berliner Senate and some members of the *protesting* group: the local authorities committed to allow access into the German asylum in exchange of the eviction of the protest tent camp. A list of all those refugees occupying Oranienplatz was compiled in order to categorize them and to get information about their legal statuses. The Berliner senate split them into small groups and scattered them across different residential facilities for asylum-seekers or hostels in Berlin, and allowed them to file their asylum applications. The German local authorities proceeded to a case-by-case analysis reviewing the situation in the countries of origin of each person in the group. After some months, the administrative offices started to reject each of these asylum requests. The rejections were not issued at the same time but, rather, in a very fragmented way and spread out in time in order to avoid a collective reaction. At the end of 2014, all the cases of ‘*Lampedusa* people’ were rejected on the grounds of juridical competence, i.e. the fact that by holding an Italian document they were under the juridical responsibility of Italy and not Germany. The rejection was followed by the eviction of the ‘Italian refugees’ from their temporary accommodation. During the spring and summer of

2015, the central figures of this story found themselves again on the streets with no documents; thus, becoming 'unwanted' both in Italy and in Germany.



POLITICS OF DISPERSAL: SCATTERED ACCOMMODATIONS AFTER ORANIENPLATZ'S EVICTION. MAP CREATED BY SIMON BURKO IN COLLABORATION WITH ELENA FONTANARI, IN FONTANARI, E., LIVES IN TRANSIT. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF REFUGEES' SUBJECTIVITY ACROSS EUROPEAN BORDERS. ROUTLEDGE (FORTHCOMING 2018). THIS WORK IS LICENSED UNDER A CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-NONCOMMERCIAL-NODERIVATIVES 4.0 INTERNATIONAL LICENSE.



[HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-NC-ND/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

The effects of politics of dispersal: dispossession of time and claim for temporal justice

The experience of the protagonists of this story is characterized by a strong disruption in their biographies as their lives were constantly kept on the move. The main consequence upon their everyday life is a strong precariousness protracted in time and space:

I waste too much time, this is the real problem! I am here since five years, and nothing happens. No work, no home, no life. We are not living... we are waiting to start to live! The problem is that I have to do something! I cannot stay still any-more! I am young, strong, I can do everything .. I had also dreams, like have a girlfriend, a family, a job, a normal life .. but I waste so much time in Europe that makes my head turn, I am afraid I will get crazy! (Interview with Obasi, June 2015)

The politics of dispersal deployed through the intertwining of police measures and humanitarian operations led them to a life of permanent transit: constantly on the move and not being able to settle, sometimes being forced, or hampered to move. Being in state of protracted transit renders those caught in it deprived of their lifetime: they experience a present time without linearity, which is characterized by wait, judicial uncertainty, and impossibility to settle. Indeed, the main effect of the politics of dispersal is the dispossession of refugees' lifetime due to the lengthening precariousness in which they are forced to live. Politics of dispersal keep refugees constantly on the move hindering the possibility for them to settle and to start their life. The participants of my research felt as 'not yet arrived' despite having landed in Europe five years earlier. 'Not yet arrived' means in a point of their lives where some of their desires and life projects can be satisfied.

At a first glance, the claim of *Lampedusa in Berlin* group appears as a struggle for spatial justice. Instead, I argue that their claims and their everyday struggles could be understood more as a struggle for *temporal justice*, in reference to their biographical time. This time has been repetitively fragmented and disrupted by the politics of dispersal, which protracts over time their juridical and existential precariousness. Their voices claim to re-gain control

upon their time and to actively re-draw their biographies; namely, to be recognized as historical subjectivity.

Any comments about this post? Get in touch with us! Send us an [email](#), or post a comment here or on [Facebook](#). You can also [tweet](#) us.

How to cite this blog post (Harvard style)

Fontanari, E. (2018) Dispersing their Lives: Refugees Kept On the Move between Italy and Germany. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2018/05/dispersing-their> (Accessed [date]).

Share this



Recent blog posts

18 Jun 2020

[Trump's Crimmigration: Imposing Authoritarian Power on Dispensable Bodies](#)

Border Criminologies

17 Jun 2020

[Bordering as Political Strategy](#)

Border Criminologies

16 Jun 2020

[Introduction to Themed Series: Crimmigrant Nations](#)

Border Criminologies