

Roundtable on “Refugee Aspirations”

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BEYOND TRAFFICKING AND SLAVERY

The aspirations and vulnerabilities of migrants in Ventimiglia

Migration policy can exact a human cost, but it rarely breaks migrants' will to aspire.

[Silvia Aru](#)

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Ventimiglia, 2017. | Fotomovimiento/Flickr. Creative Commons (by-nc-nd)

ROUNDTABLE ON REFUGEE ASPIRATIONS

Introduction: The refugees who dare to aspire

Milena Belloni, Lea Müller-Funk, Ayşen Üstübici, Natalie Welfens

Roundtable discussion

Participants: Silvia Aru, Laura Cleton, Weam Ghabash, Lea Müller-Funk, Reinhard Schweitzer, Maria Shaidrova & Chloe Sydney

How do refugees' aspirations and vulnerabilities interact?

How do migration policies affect the life aspirations of displaced populations?

How do refugees adapt to realise their aspirations for (im)mobility?

Stories of aspiration

Once displaced, always on the move? Life aspirations of refugees in Turkey

Ayşen Üstübici & Eda Kirişçioğlu

Stuck in a Greek hotspot: when getting out is more important than where to go next

Ilse van Liempt

How counsellors convince asylum seekers to accept 'voluntary return'

Reinhard Schweitzer & Laura Cleton

'You feel like in prison here': imagining a future in Lebanon through Syrian eyes

Lea Müller-Funk

No way to find home: Common stories of Eritreans in Italy and the Netherlands

Milena Belloni & Aurora Massa

The aspirations and vulnerabilities of migrants in Ventimiglia

Silvia Aru

Ventimiglia is a city in north-west Italy, about 10 km from the French border. Since 2015, it is also a focal point within the EU's internal migration control and management system. National authorities have put measures in place aimed at blocking and controlling the flows of migrants seeking to cross into France. And migrants, for a variety of reasons, have done their best to circumvent these controls and continue their journeys in accordance with their own plans and desires. They rarely fail. It's a tense, active place that brings the complex relationship between migration policy, migrants' vulnerabilities, and migrants' desires into sharp relief.

During the last five years, a higher number of rejections on the French side of the border has led to an increase in the number of people stuck in Ventimiglia. The Red

Cross established a camp in 2016 to provide them with some basic services, and a number of informal camps have been set up in the surrounding countryside as well. These are under constant threat of eviction by the Italian authorities. It is impossible for those stuck in Ventimiglia to move regularly from one country to another, and they are further impeded by a range of policy measures designed to make their journeys difficult, longer, and more fragmented. These include being repeatedly compelled to move, periods of waiting and blockages at the border, and forced transfers from the different EU countries.

Yet despite increasingly restrictive policies, the Italian authorities have not been able to stop irregular mobility. Policies cannot annihilate migrants' desires and plans, or their aspirations to a better life. So irregular migration cannot be stopped. It can only be made to exact a higher human cost, measured in deaths and the creation of new vulnerabilities. As a result, a wealth of coping strategies and adaptations can be found wherever migrants and migration policy come into contact.

Adapt to survive

Migrants react differently to the restrictiveness of EU migration policies depending on the peculiarities of their situation: their legal status, their social and economic capital and, of course, their individual will. For instance, the decision to leave Italy frequently arises from the direct experience of living in this country, where the opportunities for social and economic integration are scarce. The situation in Italy runs against the general aspiration to find a place to settle and to establish secure foundations for the future. For this reason, many choose to continue their journey in the hopes of finding a better economic situation as well as a chance to regularise their legal status.

Some migrants use policies functionally in order to bring their project and aspirations to a successful conclusion. For example, after first being turned away from the border, they could decide to stay in Italy, obtain their documents, and only move on when the opportunity is there. They don't give up on their general plans to move to specific EU countries, they only postpone them while seeking a holding solution in Italy.



Each time a journey is fragmented, a life has to be remade and a set of aspirations reimagined and reconfigured.

Others are travelling back the other way. They made it further north, were expelled when they got there, and are now hoping that Italy will accept their asylum claim. This group also includes those who are seeking to avoid repatriation at the hands of more pro-active EU states.

Migrants' adaptability to the hurdles thrown in their way comes, of course, with physical and psychological consequences for the people involved. Each time a journey is fragmented, a life has to be remade and a set of aspirations reimagined and reconfigured. Migrants' stories collected in this emblematic place, which is the border, show how aspirations and consequently migration plans are constantly modified over time because of, but also despite of, migration policies.

The belief that things might be better elsewhere urges people to act and helps them to endure a difficult present. In a sense, aspirations compensate for the vulnerabilities migrants experience. They help them to see a brighter future and drive their actions in a dark daily life.

What awaits those who cross the border irregularly?

What lies on the other side for migrants crossing irregularly depends once again on the relationship between aspirations and vulnerabilities. These two are in constant dialogue with each other. Once migrants get across the border, their previous desires and plans often collide with the difficulty of moving elsewhere (if France was not the final destination) or of obtaining a regular resident permit. Given the legal framework of the EU and its member states, migrants who move irregularly into the union risk being 'out of place' everywhere and always. Indeed, those who cannot regularise their status are generally exposed to the constant risk of being expelled, either back to the first arrival country or, depending on the circumstances, to their own country of origin.

This dynamic of exposure/expulsion is accompanied, in an almost paradoxical way, by one of invisibilisation/differential inclusion. Indeed, the prolongation of an



irregular situation brings new vulnerabilities, such as the inability to access basic services or insecurity in the illegal job market. The constant frustration connected with the difficulty of obtaining a resident permit causes hopes to rise and repeatedly fall, in particular for those who believed that once in Europe they would not have to fight any longer to start a new life. In this regard, time plays a crucial role in intensifying the exhaustion related to the unsolved situation.

What is happening at the EU internal border brings out some crucial aspects of the relationship between migration policies and migrants' aspirations and vulnerabilities in more general terms. Policies have a powerful impact on migrants' lives, and can shape how a migrant evaluates whether to stay in a certain country or move on. But they seldomly derail migrants' core aspirations to stay in the EU and to live independently.

Focusing on migrants' aspirations allows us to move beyond a mechanistic interpretation of migration phenomena, which interprets the movement of people as the direct outcome of specific push and pull factors that are mainly economic in nature. Furthermore, centring migrants' experiences in understandings of the politics of migration represents a kind of 'Copernican revolution' – it has significant political implications. In particular, it moves migrants to the centre of action within migration policy and acknowledges their role as active subjects rather than as merely passive objects upon whom policies are enacted. By putting desires, hopes and actions of people on the move in the spotlight, we challenge the simplification of the way in which laws and policies too often represent them and migration issues. From this perspective, the analysis of migrants' vulnerabilities reveals not the 'victimhood' of migrants, but instead the violent nature of policies aimed at managing movement towards and within Europe.

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