

# Mobility as a Political Act<sup>1</sup>

---

Alessandro Monsutti

Thomas Faist builds on his past endeavour (see, for instance, Faist 2008) to consider the relevance of migration to reflect about today's world. He develops his argument on a series of paradoxes. While the world forms a "moral polity" where most sovereign nation-states subscribe to some shared fundamental principles of human rights, the existing international refugee regime is failing to fulfil its mandate in favour of people in search of protection. People labelled as refugees rely on their own strategies to cope with hardship (Monsutti 2008). The international organizational and political structure as we know it has proven unprepared to face a situation that remains quantitatively limited, if we consider that in 2015 – widely depicted as a year of unprecedented migration crisis – the number of people who applied for asylum in the European Union corresponded to approximately 0.25 per cent of the total population of the host countries. There is a discrepancy between formal rights and actual access to these rights. On the one hand, the countries with the highest number of refugees are not party to the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol; on the other hand, the countries that have ratified international texts relating to refugees develop restrictive policies for granting a legal status of protection. Then, the liberal paradox – as labelled by James Hollifield – consists of a tension between national interests and the respects of universal rights. Finally, the welfare paradox expresses a tension between the social rights of citizens and the deregulation of the labour market progressively eroding the living conditions of the same people.

In such a situation, Thomas Faist asks how can we analyse the prominence that migration issues have acquired in European and North American political discourses and public perceptions? How can we understand and counter the

---

1 First published as: Monsutti, Alessandro. 2018. "Mobility as a political act", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41:3, 448-455, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2018.1388421.

current trend of rejection and exclusion towards migrants? If we consider the so-called European migration crisis of 2015, how can we explain that some of the better-off segments of the world's population feel threatened by a handful of asylum seekers? Ultimately, how can we make sense that the “feeling of being ‘under siege’ has become increasingly pervasive in the contemporary Western world”? (Hage 2016, 38).

One generation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the wave of optimism that might have prevailed in the 1990s is now behind us. The uncertain future of the European Union, the strengthening across Western countries of right-wing and xenophobic movements reaffirming national sovereignty over any alternative forms of political organization, the incapacity of the United Nations and the international community to bring peace to places such as Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan are only symptoms that people are not mobilized anymore by grand narratives of progress and global peace. In that sense, we live in a post-post Cold War world.

Every January, Oxfam publishes a report on the world's economy. The respected nongovernmental organization documents year after year the growing inequality that characterizes our global world. Since 2015, the richest one per cent has owned more wealth than the rest of humanity. According to the most recent estimates, just eight individuals own the same wealth as the poorest half of the world (Oxfam 2017). The Panama Papers, leaked in 2015, converge in showing the massive concentration of financial resources in the hands of few people. According to the economist Gabriel Zucman, eight per cent of the world's wealth – corresponding to 7.6 trillion dollars – is held in accounts located in tax havens; the loss in global tax revenues can be estimated at 200 billion dollars per year (2015, 35, 47). Economic growth benefits the richest, while the rest of our world's society – especially the poorest but also the middle class – suffers. In spite of the wishful thinking of the Millennium Development Goals, our world is the most unequal ever in human history. And the disparities are becoming more and more visible at global but also national levels.

Besides the series of conflicts that are shaking the Middle East but also Africa, the current migration flows can be understood more broadly within this “inequalscape”, to play with the categories proposed by Arjun Appadurai in the 1990s. In front of such ever increasing – and ever more rapidly increasing – inequalities, one may wonder how the balance of power inherited from the colonization and decolonization processes can be maintained for long. Shouldn't we assume that we are only witnessing the prelude of more

massive population displacements? Shouldn't we expect that the major migration waves have not really begun yet? Shouldn't we look for new utopia and drastically change our vision of humanity's future? If we limit our-selves to the field of migration, shouldn't we rethink a conceptual and policy framework (starting by questioning the distinction between economic migrant and forced migrant and recognizing that a rights-based approach to development and migration is incomplete) that has proven inadequate to understand and operate with what might retrospectively appear as a very modest movement of people?

Even if we should be wary of mainstream discourses according to which we are "in an era of unprecedented human mobility, with more people on the move now than at any other time in recorded history," as repeated by stakeholders such as William Lacy Swing (2013), Director General of the International Organization for Migration (for a historical contextualization showing that the figures are far from being so clear, see Hoerder 2002 and McKeown 2004), it is difficult to disagree with Thomas Faist when he asserts the profound relevance of migration to think about the world in which we live. I consider here as a working hypothesis that mobility, beyond any dichotomy between voluntary and forced migration, must be situated in this global landscape of exclusion, that mobility can be seen as a form of moral protest and a political act, or at least as an act with wide-ranging political dimensions and effects. In that sense, beyond any label, mobile people represent a testimony of the immorality of our global moral polity.

I illustrate this point with three vignettes from my ethnographic wandering among Afghans from the island of Lesbos, the port of entry in Europe for many of them, to Friuli, on the north-eastern border of Italy, and finally the (in)famous jungle of Calais, where many asylum seekers ended up in very precarious living conditions.

Wednesday 28 January 2015, I visit the Screening Centre run by the Greek authorities near Mytilene, the main town of the island of Lesbos. I am conducting a research commissioned by UNHCR on the protection situation of Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers in various European countries (Donini, Monsutti, and Scalettari 2016). The local representative of the UN agency for refugees introduces me to the local police chief. This middle-aged man looks disenchanted but not unconcerned by the plight of the people landing on the shores of his country. He seems almost content to let me discover the dreary working conditions of his team and the absurdity of the situation. I pass the brand new Reception Centre financed by the European Union. It is not in use

... “No staff!” comments soberly my guide, “EU pays only for infra-structures, not salaries.” I get access to the adjacent site where Iraqis, Afghans and others are packed behind barbed wire fences. I talk first to the young female physician who is in charge of the small team of Médecins du Monde running the dispensary. She joyfully proclaims: “At least, here they are safe!” I look around and find difficult to share her happy mood. I am then approached by a group of Iraqi Kurds. As I do not have access to their living quarters, they ask to borrow my smart phone to take some photo-graphs, insisting that I need to be aware of their accommodation conditions. They come back with a series of images that are just appalling: wrecked mat-tresses, bathroom sinks severed from the walls, blocked toilets and broken pipes ... As I am asking if there are any people from Afghanistan, two young men approach me. Dressed with training suits, a scarf tied around their necks, they are covered with mud, drenched and cold. At first coy, they do not stop talking once they get started. Reza and Mahdi are Hazaras originating from Central Afghanistan, where I spent time in the past, but they grew up in Iran. They crossed the sea at night and just landed on Lesbos the same morning. They tell about the vexations suffered during their youth in exile, their lack of trust in the political and economic future of Afghanistan, and their feeling of being invested by their families with the crucial social mission to succeed, get a legal status somewhere, in Germany or Sweden, and then found a family with a girl from their village. They keep repeating, as if to convince themselves: “It is not Europe here, it could not be Europe!” Thomas Faist talks about the cognitive dissonance among peoples in Europe to describe the tension between knowledge and action. These two young men also experience discrepancy between their hope and what they face. More than disappointed, they seem surprised. They expected something else from Europe and their first reaction is a protective denial ... they have not reached the heart of Europe yet.

Summer 2015, I spend some time in Tarcento, my father’s village of origin, in Friuli, northeast of Italy. I am surprised to see that two small local hotels are filled up with more than forty Afghan asylum seekers. Having got acquainted with them, I invite on the 8th of August Akmal, from Kandahar, Gul Agha, from Wardak, and Mahmud, from Nangarhar to accompany me with my two children aged 10 and 8 to a concert in Stella, an abandoned hamlet up the mountain. On the way, I talk about local history, the conflicts of the past, the migration of many Friulians around the world, the 1976 earthquake, the American reconstruction aid during the Cold War. The road climbs the slopes in tight turns, the view opens on the vast plain. “On a clear day, you

can see the sea in the distance!” Gul Agha sighs, he would so much like to go to the beach, listen to the sound of the waves and watch the endless horizon. Akmal abruptly interrupts him: “The sea? I saw enough of it when I was in Turkey!” Mahmud, nestled in the trunk, remains silent. Gul Agha and Akmal are more talkative. They marvel at the landscape: “What a beautiful place, so green!” They are bewildered by the abandoned cherry orchards, by so much land left unexploited. They laugh without real joy: “They should bring us here rather than in hotels where we are left to languish. We know how to take care of fruit trees.” Arrived at Stella, many acquaintances greet me. But no one pays attention to my companions, nobody welcomes them, nobody expresses interest in exchanging a few words with them. We eat chicken legs, polenta and beans. Akmal is lost in his thoughts. He looks at my son with tenderness. He finally takes him on his knees, hugs him gently in his arms and then starts talking about the family he left behind in Afghanistan. I bring the three companions back to their hotel. Standing at the entrance to the terrace, two carabinieri peacefully converse with guests. Akmal jumps out of the trunk of my car. A part of me wants the men in uniform to approach me, question me about my overloaded vehicle, my ties with these Afghans ... but they only glance at us, indifferent. As in Stella, my new Afghan friends are invisible. Akmal thanks me with an energetic but quick accolade: “You do not behave like the people here ... you are like an Afghan.” Solidarity, hospitality and a sense of honour are values that he hardly noticed among the Europeans he met along the road of the Balkans and in Italy. He fled a conflict that is not his anymore, an armed combat between a government from which he does not receive much benefit and an insurgency that is now divided and increasingly brutal; he was hoping for better living conditions. But his experience of the West was not that of humanistic benevolence. He is beyond the initial denial of Reza and Mahdi in Lesbos. He dares an ethical judgment: European people do not behave properly; Afghans have higher moral standards.

Friday 13 November 2015, I am in Calais, in the North of France, to visit the so-called jungle. It is late afternoon when I arrive on the site, east of the town. It is already dark; the wind is blowing hard. After moving past a few vehicles of the riot control forces of the French National Police, I notice a group of men, Sudanese from Darfur, lining up behind a white van. A retired couple distributes loaves of bread. We exchange a few words. They cooperate with a local association and have been helping refugees and asylum seekers for fifteen years. “Where may I find Afghans?” do I ask. “Do not go there, they might be aggressive?” answers the elderly man.

In the previous days, asylum seekers and human rights activists have protested against the precarious living conditions. Indeed the jungle is presented in the media as an informal settlement where hardly any service is available, where up to 5,000 people from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Eritrea or Sudan converge in the hope to cross the Channel and set foot on British soil. Is it a place of exception, where the rule of law is suspended, where the state's involvement does not go beyond containment?

I pass some mobile toilets and walk on the muddy path between the tents and the makeshift shelters. I reach an Eritrean-Ethiopian church made of tarpaulins nailed on wooden frames and then some shops: a tandoor, several grocery stores and restaurants. Most shopkeepers appear to be Afghans. I stand in a queue to buy some bread and take the opportunity to start a conversation. Beside Kurdish and Arab speaking patrons from Iraq or Syria, the Afghans are mostly Pashtuns from the South and East. In a gesture of hospitality, the baker does not want at first to take money from me. I have to insist. Even in this space of supposed social vacuum, the sense of pride and honour is not lost.

In the same evening, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks occurred in Paris. Suspicion falls immediately on Islamic militant groups. On the next day, all the conversations turned around the potential policy consequences on the asylum seekers and refugees, many of whom are Muslims. A fire broke out in the jungle during the night and many wonder if it was an act of retaliation by some far right groups. I go to a restaurant that I quickly visited the previous night. Three partners run it; they are Pashto speakers from different provinces of Afghanistan. More than by geographical origin or tribal affiliation, they are united by a common experience of long-term mobility. One of them, Ehsanullah, spent seven years in England but has circulated widely in other European countries. He spontaneously shows me an Italian identity card for foreigners, which allows him to travel legally within the Schengen Area. "How is it that you stay here, in the jungle, and do not try your chance in a more welcoming setting?" I ask. "Here, that's true, I sleep under a tent, it is cold and windy. But I run my own business, I can make some money. One day, hopefully, I will be able to save enough and bring my family." His tone is half playful, half afflicted. The quest for autonomy comes with a cost. His goal is not to go to England and settle there; not yet at least. He inhabits mobility. A place such as the jungle offers to people like him an economic niche. It cannot be solely depicted as a dead end for migrants; it is a microcosm, a site where people on the move reinvent social relations. Many come here knowing that

they will be among people with whom they share the experience of displacement, knowing that they will be able to collect information on the migration routes and the ever-changing asylum regimes of EU countries.

Lesbos, Friuli, Calais, three sites on a long journey from uncertain presents towards uncertain futures, a journey without final destination. These three vignettes also illustrate the moral journey undertaken by the people I met, from the initial defensive denial of Reza and Mahdi that could not admit that Europe was mistreating people like them, to the negative ethical judgment of Akmal against Europeans, and then Ehsanullah's loss of faith in Europe and subsequent entrepreneurial effort on the fringe of the surrounding society. We paradoxically reach a form of cosmopolitanism from below, what the Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has called "engaged withdrawal" (2004): an exodus defined as defection from the state, an act of resistance towards established power. It is not a new positioning if we refer to James Scott's description of "the art of not being governed" (2009). Reza, Mahdi, Akmal and Ehsanullah have experienced in their bodies the global landscape of exclusion I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. All of them fled violence or injustice; all of them aspire to a better life. More than putting them under a label, that of migrant in search of employment or refugee in need of protection, I see them as living witnesses of the growing unequal world in which we live.

In this brief paper, I take inspiration from Thomas Faist's invitation to bring together various scholarly traditions and think outside the existing boxes. Considering that we live in a post-post Cold War world, seemingly the most unequal ever in human history, I suggest that it is time to reexamine our conceptual framework of human mobility, cross-dress forced migration and find a way to reveal the human cost of existing dichotomous categories. The massive arrival in Europe of Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, Eritreans, Sub-Saharan Africans do not only result from a series of regional conflicts or an individual quest for labour. The people knocking at the door of Europe tell something that needs to be listened to, they tell their moral fatigue towards the growing gap between the wealthiest and poorest segments of humanity. They are active participants in the global moral polity in showing how immoral it is. Their mobility represents a protest against the global distribution of wealth and security, as well as a subversion of classical forms of political territoriality. As such, it can be conceived – through its structural consequences more than individual intentions – as a political act.

## References

- Donini, Antonio, Alessandro Monsutti, and Giulia Scalettaris. 2016. *Afghans on the Move: Seeking Protection and Refuge in Europe*. (Global Migration Research Paper No. 17). Geneva: The Graduate Institute
- Faist, Thomas. 2008. "Migrants as Transnational Development Agents: An Inquiry into the Newest Round of the Migration–Development Nexus." *Population, Space and Place* 14: 21–42.
- Hage, Ghassan. 2016. "État de Siège: A Dying Domesticating Colonialism?" *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 1: 38–49.
- Hoerder, Dirk. 2002. *Culture in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McKeown, Adam. 2004. "Global Migration, 1846–1940." *Journal of World History* 15, no. 2 :155–189.
- Monsutti, Alessandro. 2008. "Afghan Migratory Strategies and the Three Solutions to the Refugee Problem." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27, no. 1: 58–73.
- Oxfam. 2017. *An Economy for the 99%*. Oxford: Oxfam International (Oxfam Briefing Paper).
- Scott, James C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Swing, William Lacy. 2013. *Statement*. New York: International Organization for Migration (11th Coordination Meeting on International Migration).
- Virno, Paolo. 2004. *Virtuosity and Revolution*. Accessed June 9, 2017. <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude2.html>, 2004.
- Zucman, Gabriel. 2015. *The Hidden Wealth of Nations: The Scourge of Tax Havens*. Chicago: University of Chicago.