



## On Standby ... at the borders of 'Europe'

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### Introduction

The questions of migration and refugee movements and the related disputes over borders present us with vital material through which to re-conceptualize the politics in and of organization (the thematic focus of this journal). In this Note, I will provide some reflections on what is otherwise a largely descriptive account of some recent events that have played out at the putative borders of 'Europe'. Marx and Engels memorably asserted with regard to their own theoretical conclusions that they 'merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes' (Marx and Engels, 1848[1967:235]). Migration, on a global scale, is indeed a historical movement taking place all around us, 'under our very eyes', and our challenge — theoretically and politically — is to comprehend and critique what is at stake in *actual* struggles, the real social relations of unresolved antagonism and open-ended struggle that continuously constitute social life (De Genova, 2010:111). Ultimately, these questions provoke a radical reconsideration of the very meaning and consequentiality of the European project and are central to addressing what I have otherwise designated as the 'European' Question (De Genova, 2016b).

Migrant and refugee movements transgressing the borders of 'Europe' and the reactive border enforcement tactics of the sovereign powers of Europe (the European Union as well as the European nation-states, both EU members and not) have been ensnared in an irreconcilable struggle, especially since 2015,

and this protracted struggle has been a very prominent centerpiece of a dominant discourse of ‘crisis’ in Europe (cf. Bojadžijev and Mezzadra, 2015; Carastathis, Spathopoulou and Tsilimpounidi, 2018; De Genova, 2017; 2018; Franck, 2018; Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins, 2016; Lafazani, 2018b; New Keywords Collective, 2016; Spathopoulou and Carastathis, 2020). At the end of February 2020, the language of ‘migrant crisis’ rose once again to spectacular visibility when the Turkish government cynically mobilized migrants and refugees and deliberately instigated clashes with Greek border guards (Erlanger, 2020; No Border Pazarkule/ Edirne, 2020; Stevis-Gridneff and Gall, 2020).

Beginning on or around February 29, 2020, at the borders of ‘Europe’, Greek soldiers, riot police and other border guards, as well as armed civilian militias, confronted migrants and refugees with violently racist malevolence. A rush on the borders by several thousand migrants and refugees, cynically manipulated and partly orchestrated by the Turkish government, was met by Greek authorities with unbridled viciousness, including tear gas, truncheons, stun grenades, rubber bullets and live ammunition, as well as the deliberate use of high-speed boats to destabilize and potentially sink migrant vessels and endanger the lives of the passengers (Stevis-Gridness, 2020a; Stevis-Gridness et al., 2020; cf. No Border Pazarkule/ Edirne, 2020). Frustrated by a lack of European support following Turkish military losses in Syria’s Idlib province (on Turkey’s border), Turkish President Recep Erdogan unapologetically weaponized migration and defiantly proclaimed in a televised address, ‘We opened the doors’ (Stevis-Gridneff and Gall, 2020).

Remarkably, Turkish gendarmes literally escorted migrants to the border and assisted their efforts to cross. In many instances, privately operated commercial buses heading toward the border were intercepted by Turkish authorities, inspecting and partitioning Turks from (non-Turkish) ‘migrants’ and coercively relocating the migrants and refugees who were independently making their way to the border onto state-run buses that were assembled to ensure that the unruly rush would be superintended and managed as effectively as possible. Near the actual sites of border-crossing, Turkish authorities installed checkpoints, beyond which Turkish citizens, whether humanitarian personnel or solidarity activists, were generally prohibited. Thus, the Turkish authorities assembled massive agglomerations of several

thousands of migrants and refugees in makeshift staging areas, on standby — with no shelter or facilities, fending for themselves against the cold, rain, mud and hunger — where they were presumed to eventually cross the border into Greece but also violently cordoned off from returning back into Turkey. Turkish authorities even engaged in skirmishes with Greek border guards in order to facilitate migrant border-crossings by land and intervened to regulate the price of crossing by boat. In some instances, the very same Turkish police or soldiers who assisted migrants in their efforts to cut through and tear down border fences later brutalized them when they had not succeeded to cross and sought to head back toward the nearest Turkish towns (No Border Pazarkule/Edirne, 2020). Thus, even as Turkish authorities appeared to be supporting migrants' border-crossing endeavors, they also thereby enacted a policy of containment. Plainly, for Turkey, such facilitation of the autonomous momentum of human mobility was motivated by the desire to channel the movements of migrants and refugees onward toward 'Europe', where they could become someone else's 'problem'. But it is instructive all the same to note how state powers are compelled by the subjective force of migration to respond and adapt their tactics, whether through brute resistance or cynical, self-serving cooperation and complicity. The very same actors who previously colluded as junior partners in enforcing EU-rope's border (İşleyen, 2018; Topak, 2014) were now actively dismantling it.

'The borders of Greece are the external borders of Europe. We will protect them', responded Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (Stevis-Gridness, 2020a). Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission President, immediately rallied behind Greece: 'Our first priority is making sure that order is maintained at Greece's external border, which is also Europe's border' (Erlanger, 2020). Greece's flagrant and ruthless refoulement of asylum seekers was accompanied by a presidential decree that summarily suspended Greece's consideration of all asylum petitions for a month. Likewise, Greece resorted to herding border-crossers into secret extrajudicial detention camps (Stevis-Gridness et al., 2020). Mitsotakis stoked well-worn Greek nationalist distrust of Turkey and invoked the specter of Turkish aggression, declaring: 'The problem is an asymmetric threat and illegal invasion of thousands of people that threatens our territory' (Stevis-Gridness, 2020b). Several migrants were shot and killed outright by Greek border enforcement authorities. Galvanized

by the ferocity of the official response, armed civilian vigilante patrols in Greek border villages physically attacked migrants and refugees as well as journalists and humanitarian aid workers and other NGO staff and violently obstructed migrants and refugees, including pregnant women and small children, from disembarking from small precarious dinghies and boats (Stevis-Gridness, 2020b). Eye-witness solidarity activists in Turkey, in particular the members of No Border Pazarkule/ Edirne who traveled to these borderzone sites to set up soup kitchens to provide food for the migrants, reported migrants having been beaten and having had their money, phones, clothing and shoes confiscated by Greek border guards before being pushed back to Turkey in freezing temperatures and heavy rain, naked and barefoot (No Border Pazarkule/ Edirne, 2020).

When we are witness to the sorts of ruthless and gratuitous violence that plays out at the borders of Europe, particularly in these examples of both the border enforcement authorities and fascistic paramilitary mobilizations by civilian vigilantes in Greece, what is at stake is the manifestation of a distinctly *European* postcolonial racism (cf. Balibar, 1992; De Genova, 2016b). In this context, it matters little that Greece was not historically a colonial power. What is far more salient is that Greece is being pressed, as has been true for several years, to ‘prove’ its deservingness for continued inclusion in the European Union and the larger orbit of European (racial) prestige (Cabot 2014:23-40) and therefore to ‘earn’ its place in ‘Europe’ – and counteract its marginalization within EU-rope – by serving dutifully as the EU’s frontline border guard (Spathopoulou, 2016; 2019; Stierl, 2017). Indeed, the fact that Greece was itself colonized under the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire only exacerbates the Europeanism of Greek reaction, such that longstanding Greek nationalist resentment and suspicion toward Turkey can be so thoughtlessly channeled into violent hostility toward those (non-European) migrants and refugees who are constructed to be an ‘illegal invasion’ and an ‘asymmetric threat’, racialized as non-white and very likely perceived to be a virtual ‘mob’ of ‘Muslims’. And very soon thereafter, with the rising panic of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, this perceived menace of migration predictably came to be re-framed as a contagion of suspect, unruly, unwashed bodies, presumptive carriers of infectious diseases and ghoulish viruses. Here, Europe confronts migrant and refugee mobilities by spiraling into a delusional frenzy.

Alarmist reactions to a putative 'migrant' or 'refugee crisis' in Europe have nonetheless repeatedly offered fresh and compelling evidence of the primacy and autonomy of (transnational, cross-border, postcolonial) migrant and refugee mobilities, as well as the great variety of migrants' and refugees' urgent, defiant and incorrigible practices of exercising an elemental freedom of movement, disregarding or subverting borders and making audacious claims to space (De Genova, 2016a; 2017; De Genova, ed., 2017; New Keywords Collective, 2016; cf. Bojadžijev and Mezzadra, 2015; El-Shaarawi and Razsa, 2019; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013a; 2016c; Hess and Kasperek, 2017; Kasperek, 2016; Kasperek and Speer, 2015; Lafazani, 2018a; Mitchell and Sparke, 2018; Razsa and Kurnik, 2014; Scheel, 2017; 2019; Tazzioli, 2014). The forces arrayed to alternately govern, discipline, punish and repel them — the reaction formations of border enforcement — render Europe, rather than a space of refuge or freedom, into a space of rejection for most migrants and refugees. Indeed, on the EU-ropean scale, the regime of so-called 'hotspots' installed since 2015 for sorting and ranking distinct migrant and refugee mobilities has served as a crude mechanism for the preemptive rejection and mass illegalization of the great majority of asylum-seekers (Antonakaki et al., 2016; Carastathis, Spathopoulou and Tsilimpounidi, 2018; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2016a; 2016b; Mitchell and Sparke, 2018; Neocleous and Kastrinou, 2016; Papoutsi et al., 2018; Sciurba, 2016; Spathopoulou, 2016; 2019; Tazzioli, 2016; Vradis et al., 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, accompanying the official 'emergency' measures, we have witnessed a larger sociopolitical process of what Aila Spathopoulou has called

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1 The implementation of the so-called 'hotspot' strategy was devised by the EU in response to the escalating numbers of migrants and refugees in 2015 and implemented at several ports in Italy and the Greek islands, the most prominent of which are Lampedusa and Lesvos. 'Hotspots' were proposed as emergency 'reception centers' with the capacity to provide shelter for as many as 1,500 people at key ports of first arrival on EU territory, for the purpose of speedy identification, registration and fingerprinting. In practice, the hotspots operate as detention camps dedicated to perfunctory and crass sorting between those deemed to be likely to have a credible asylum petition, who are then to be redistributed to other EU countries, and everyone else, who have commonly been served deportation orders as quickly as possible.

‘hotspotization’ (Spathopoulou, 2019; cf. Spathopoulou and Carastathis, 2020), which has extended the borders of ‘Europe’ and permeated a variegated spectrum of other spaces of containment and confinement, forced or self-organized migrant encampment, blockage and deceleration and other forms of protracted dispersal and the entrapment of migrants and refugees within their own mobility without relief (Franck, 2017; Tazzioli, 2019a, 2019b; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2018). Consider the makeshift self-organized migrant and refugee camps at Calais, long branded in an unmistakably colonial/ racist idiom as ‘The Jungle’. The Calais Jungle has presented a kind of inverted image of the official hotspots installed by the EU as emergency reception centers that quickly devolved into permanent detention camps. Notably, Calais is full of people with papers that grant them some provisional ‘legal’ residency status in Italy or elsewhere in the European borderlands, but they seek another ‘Europe’ — the price of which is ‘illegality’, precarity and destitution. The Calais camps were repeatedly viciously assaulted and destroyed by French police and eventually violently evicted in 2016, but still today migrants and refugees continue to re-organize themselves and new camps re-appear. These camps are, in effect, permanent staging areas organized autonomously by the migrants themselves as an amorphous platform for activating their mobility projects. They are a space of ‘standby’, sites where migrants constantly alternate between waiting and self-activation.

Goaded forward by Turkish forces and barricaded and blocked by Greece, it might appear as though the migrants and refugees stalled in dismal borderzone camps were mere pawns in some larger geopolitical game. That impression, while partially accurate, would be incomplete and misleading. Without trivializing the dire predicaments and desperation of many of them, the Turkish state’s opening of the border catalyzed a force that it might seek to manipulate but that it could never really control — the subjective force and autonomous determination of a great confluence of human mobilities. For years now, literally millions of migrants and refugees who initially sought to simply pass through Turkey en route to ‘Europe’, for whom Turkey was meant to be a zone of ‘transit’, have resided and worked in Turkey, in a more or less indefinite condition of enforced waiting, while also oftentimes actively and persistently seeking to resume their larger mobility projects (Biehl, 2015;

Osseiran, 2017a; 2017b). As Souad Osseiran (2017b) has demonstrated, for most, these are not experiences of merely marking time in passive resignation, but rather prolonged yet productive engagements in *making time* — making time work, making time productive, toward the ends of making a living, making a life and making a future. Even in a kind of standby mode, the subjectivity and autonomy of migration remains operative and poised to reactivate itself given the right opportunity. It is this autonomous subjective force that the Turkish state summoned forth with Erdogan's proclamation that the borders would be opened. Many migrants abandoned their jobs in the informal economy, sold off their possessions and spent their meager savings in a bid to seize upon the occasion and make their way to the Greek border (No Border Pazarkule/ Edirne, 2020). Thereafter, it was this same incorrigible subjectivity that the Turkish state fecklessly sought to tame and control into a manageable force that it could deploy to its geopolitical advantage. Yet, even when repelled by the Greek border guards and corralled by Turkish checkpoints in a kind of no-man's land at the border, the standby modality of the migrants and refugees remained a resource for prospectively out-waiting and potentially out-witting the two faces of the border regime.

What is at stake in all of this, therefore, is the veritable *struggle* over the borders of Europe — migrants' and refugees' struggles to realize their heterogeneous migratory projects by exercising their elementary freedom of movement, thereby appropriating mobility, transgressing and subverting the border regime and thus making spatial claims, as well as the reactive struggle of state powers to subdue and discipline the autonomy of migration (cf. Ataç et al., 2015; De Genova et al., 2018; El-Shaarawi and Razsa, 2019; Garelli and Tazzioli, 2013; Kasperek and Speer, 2015; Pezzani and Heller, 2013; Rigo, 2011; Scheel, 2017; Soto Bermant, 2017; Stierl, 2019; Tazzioli, 2015). The autonomy of migration and refugee movements repeatedly presents itself as an obstreperous subjective force — indeed, a pronouncedly postcolonial reprise — enacting various configurations of human life in its active (productive) open-ended relation to the space of the planet and thereby reasserting the primacy of human life as a mobile constituent power in itself.

Thus, the European space of migration is also a platform of spatial experimentation and sociopolitical organizational innovation, above all distinguished by migrant productions of *differential spaces*. While accelerated

transnational migration has arisen as an effect of European integration, it also operates as a remarkable motor for further integration. In spite of the diverse historical particularities and local peculiarities of each instance of migrant productions of space, from one European country to the next, from one city to the next, there is a larger process that encompasses the space of Europe as a whole and indeed exceeds the conventionally understood borders of 'Europe' as such (De Genova, ed., 2017). Migrants and refugees develop unforeseen linkages between apparently disparate zones of transit and tentative destinations such as the migrant metropolises of Istanbul, Athens, Palermo, or Rome (in the ostensible borderlands) and the migrant metropolises further afield, such as London, Paris, Hamburg, or Stockholm (Osseiran, 2017a; 2017b; Picozza, 2017; 2019; Stierl, 2017). Elsewhere, from Lesvos to Calais, migrants and refugees gather in self-organized camps as staging grounds for the renewal of their border-crossing projects. Such camps eventually become semi-permanent spatial nodes in the extended geography of migration, particularly for rejected refugees whose abandonment and preemptive or de facto illegalization eventually re-distribute them to various far-flung European destinations. There are also the remarkable examples of migrant self-organization that, in their very names, invoke a counter-intuitive geography of global connections realized through the spatial practices of migrants, such as the Collective of Tunisians from Lampedusa in Paris (Sossi, 2013; Tazzioli, 2014) or Lampedusa in Hamburg (Meret and Rasmussen, 2014; Oliveri, 2016). These apparently European sites are not mere 'destinations' for migrants, not simply sites of migrant 'reception' and 'integration' and in no simple sense 'assimilation' machines. From these varied standpoints, we begin to appreciate how the extended and uneven urbanized social fabric of all of 'Europe' itself emerges as one single migrant metropolis (De Genova, 2015).

These incipient transnational migrant spatial formations radically destabilize and contradict the spatial premises and racial conceits of nationalism and Europeanism. Borders have imploded deep into the everyday life of Europe and are creating new social divisions, contradictions and conflicts. As a site for the veritable production of new formations of racialized difference and subordination, the space of Europe is an historically specific conjuncture of unresolved postcolonial tensions and conflicts, reconfigured as a tentative



and tenuous configuration of the politics of class, race and citizenship. These migrant and refugee spaces are inevitably generated within the territorial boundaries and jurisdictions of Europe and its constituent nation-states and in relation to the very palpable enforcement of EU-ropean and nation-state space through immigration law and border policing. They are also ever more frequently the targets of fascistic (extra-state) racial violence. Yet, the Europe of migrants and refugees has proliferated and flourished all the same.

Indeed, 'Europe' is confronted with repeated assertions of a migrant and refugee *politics of presence*, which I have previously characterized as a politics of incorrigibility (De Genova, 2010). Notably, beginning in October 2009, a wave of strikes by several thousand undocumented migrant workers demanding legal residence in France, articulated the themes of migrant presence and labor through their principal slogan: '*On bosse ici, on vit ici, on reste ici!* [We work here, we live here, we're staying here!]' (Barron et al. 2011). Similarly, in 2013, there emerged the Lampedusa in Hamburg collective, whose signature slogan has been: We Are Here to Stay (<http://www.lampedusa-in-hamburg.org/>; cf. Meret and Rasmussen, 2014; Oliveri, 2016), as well as the 'We Are Here' collective in Amsterdam (Amaya-Castro, 2015). These articulations of border struggles that erupt from deep within the ostensible 'interior' of Europe are evidently claims of *presence* — enunciating the simple but insistent affirmation, 'We are here' — but above all, they operate as claims to space. Precisely in the face of the threat of deportation, forcible expulsion from the space of the state, migrants intermittently but repeatedly proclaim: 'We are here and we will not be "removed"!'. And in this simple but defiant gesture, the very 'here' that migrants invoke is always-already a new and radically transformed one. Thus, despite the ugly paroxysms of its postcolonial racial reaction, the borders and boundaries of the 'European' problem are inexorably being unsettled and, potentially, undone.

What may often appear to be equivocal or ambivalent manifestations of migrants' unresolved waiting thereby reveal themselves to be practices of 'standby', with their own more profound logic. Being on standby, as an organizational form, signals an indeterminate and amorphous potentiality, a capacity to be activated (or indeed, a capacity for self-activation). This indeed is the ultimate postcolonial boomerang effect: despite the violent spasms of

its border regime, 'Europe' is already something profoundly new. And this remains true even when the subjective force of the autonomy of migration assumes forms that are less evidently distinguished by movement than of waiting and biding time — on standby, but tentatively and tactically gathering force, all the same.

What does this mean for the future of Europe? Evidently, it signals that the ever more trenchant devotion of the state powers and political authorities of 'Europe' to deploy violence against the postcolonial harvest of empire embodied in migrant and refugee movements is inherently reactionary and finally doomed. The self-organization and self-activation of migrant autonomies, however diminutive, presents these constituted powers with an incorrigible and indefatigable subversive force that is *objectively* political, regardless of any overt or explicit political articulations, inasmuch as they unrelentingly set out to disregard immigration and asylum law, defy border policing and subvert the larger immigration, asylum and border regimes of 'Europe'. Moreover, through their quotidian practices of appropriating mobility and making claims to space, migrant and refugee struggles exercise a freedom of movement that re-poses the very question of the relation of the human species to the space of the planet. The intrinsically postcolonial/ racial politics of this subversive subjective force — at least implicitly and increasingly explicitly — therefore are harbingers of a long overdue radical sociopolitical transformation and usher in, however agonistically, a new world — one in which 'Europe' as such may finally have no place.

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## acknowledgements

I am thankful to Cemile Gizem for alerting me to the day-by-day reporting from the Greek-Turkish borderzone by No Border Pazarkule/Edirne, published by Göçmen Dayanışması [Migrant Solidarity] <[www.gocmendayanisma.com](http://www.gocmendayanisma.com)>.

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