

# Mediterranean Struggles for Movement and the European Government of Bodies: An Interview with Étienne Balibar and Nicholas De Genova

Glenda Garelli

*International Studies, DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA;  
ggarelli@depaul.edu*

Alessandra Sciorba

*Dipartimento di Beni Culturali, Università degli Studi di Palermo, Palermo, Italy*

Martina Tazzioli

*Department of Geography, Swansea University, Swansea, UK*

**Abstract:** The conversation between Étienne Balibar and Nicholas De Genova engages with the Mediterranean of migration as a multifaceted, productive, and contested space, which can represent a counterpoint to a deep-rooted Eurocentric imaginary. Looking at the Mediterranean as a space produced by the mobility of the bodies crossing it and by the combination of different struggles, Balibar and De Genova comment on some of the political movements that have taken center stage in the Mediterranean region in the past few years and suggest that the most important challenge today is to mobilize a “Mediterranean point of view” whereby the political borders of Europe and its self-centered referentiality can be challenged.

**Keywords:** the Mediterranean, migrant bodies, migrant struggles, Eurocentrism

*The interview took place on 17 February 2015 at Kingston University, in London. Étienne Balibar, Nicholas De Genova, and Martina Tazzioli convened at Kingston, while Glenda Garelli and Alessandra Sciorba joined the conversation over Skype. Prior to the interview, the guest editors shared a draft of the special issue’s introduction and the questions that would be asked.*

**Garelli, Sciorba and Tazzioli:** The year 2015 opened with a skyrocketing number of deaths in the Mediterranean area and its vicinity, with the Paris attacks in January (the attacks at *Charlie Hebdo*, the kosher grocery store, and in the Montrouge suburb), the massacre in Nigeria by Boko Haram in February, and more than 3000 migrants’ dying crossing the Mediterranean in the first nine months of 2014.<sup>1</sup> Can you comment on this Mediterranean scene and the different reactions it elicited? Do you see these deaths and reactions as pertaining to a political narrative?

**Étienne Balibar:** You'll experience the difficulty of a discussion with me: I need a kind of preliminary consideration, concerning the relationship between the time and the place. If you are certainly asking the question "Is there a single narrative?", my answer would be, in a brutal manner, no, of course, there is no single narrative, and there cannot be single narrative. But this is not a situation we must just observe or describe, without any attempt at first understanding why the situation is such and second how it could possibly evolve. I'm sure we will come back to the recent events, the complex of recent events, because already the list of the things you connected together is a fuzzy one; it depends on where you start, where you put the border, and so on.

I think that there is a preliminary question about space to be addressed: we are having this conversation among Europeans or people working here in Europe; it would be a different conversation if we were having it with people from the other side of the Mediterranean—and if another side even exists is also a question to start with. But anyway, having this conversation among Europeans, there are really two possibilities for choosing the space of reference; you either choose Europe or you choose the Mediterranean and that's not the same thing. Of course, there is a permanent interference between the two, but it is not the same. If you choose your space of reference as Europe, which I am not rejecting, then you have a variety of discourses—I was reading a special dossier in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, which is supposed to be a center-left reference type of newspaper ... it was about two weeks ago and the dossier had the following big title two weeks ago: "Europe in danger", or "Europe threatened from all sides, on different fronts" meaning by that of course "frontiers" and that included on the one side, say, Islamic terrorism coming from the South or the South-East and a danger coming from the East that is Russia, with its increasingly imperialist or neo-imperialist view on Eastern Europe, and so on ...

So, for a number of reasons I wouldn't say that there are no emergency situations, but of course *Le Monde's* presentation is extremely vast and it leaves out a number of crucial phenomena—it privileges terrorism, but neglects migration, the drowning of migrants in the Mediterranean sea, the way in which refugees from Syria and other places are treated at the borders of Europe or inside and outside, for instance. On the other side, of course, there are also problems, because I would personally not deny that there are important imperialist or neo-imperialist aspects in Russian politics but I also believe that there are imperial or quasi-imperial views on the side of the West, so of the European Union or NATO ... and it is difficult to assess the nature of the conflict.

But on the other hand I know that for Europeans trying to understand the roots of the current crisis it's of course difficult not to adopt a Eurocentric point of view, even if only for methodological reasons. I, myself, before the recent attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, at the time when another of these catastrophic mass drownings of migrants in Lampedusa took place, was more or less fancying a paper with the title of "Qui est en Lampedusa?", meaning how to compare the different issues that are taking place at the external borders of Europe. I never came up with a simple narrative combining them. But if you do that, if you reason in terms of comparison between events, processes, conflicts, and tragedies that are taking place on

different sides of the European continent, you adopt a Eurocentric point of view, which—even if it's self-critical in many respects—it is still a point of view where you have only one voice. But how about adopting a Mediterranean viewpoint? That's much more productive and this is one of the reasons why I welcomed your invitation and the focus of your journal and this special issue. But, on the other hand, if the question of borders and the relationship between the interior and the exterior is difficult in the case of Europe, it is practically impossible to present in simple terms if you take the Mediterranean as your focus. Of course, the history of civilization has good reasons to explain that the Mediterranean has formed a kind of common place ... the very name seizes it for the encounter of cultures, peoples, economies, and so on, for centuries if not millennia, but the geography and the geometries of that were continuously changing.

Some years ago I wrote in a public lecture, given for geographers in fact, that Europe could be defined as a borderland (see Balibar 2009) ... With the border-sea like the Mediterranean it is even more difficult, which is not to say we shouldn't try. The problem, I believe, is threefold. First, the Mediterranean is a place, or is a region, that physically and politically unites peoples and cultures and ideologies, physically. But currently, it is a place of sharp divisions, perhaps the sharpest possible in today's world. It's a borderland but it's a land of conflict, actually speaking. It's extremely difficult not to take a side in conflicts.

Second, these conflicts are overdetermined by huge inequalities, material inequalities, that used to be pictured even in the recent past, as inequalities between the North and the South, so you have the simple picture of the European shore as being on the side of the Global North (what some friends of mine like Immanuel Wallerstein keep—and I understand why—calling the Global North) whereas on the other side you have countries and peoples that, with few exceptions, belong to the Global South, and the idea was more or less that the North exploited the South, or that the North dominated the South. Clearly the situation is changing rapidly, in the pattern of inequalities: inequalities are growing, the relationships of domination no longer take the simple form of the Northern shore being the dominant and the Southern shore the dominated one.

But then that leads to the next point, the third point, which is: how do you describe these shores, where do they reach, how far do they reach? Syria has a Mediterranean coast; Iran doesn't. So: do we include the Middle East? Do we include Africa? And on the other side what do we include of Europe? So I see big difficulties there. My tendency would be not to picture it as a limitless space on both sides, if you like, but nevertheless, to adopt a definition as broad as possible of ... I wouldn't say of the Mediterranean space but of the world which combines influences and confrontations shaping the Mediterranean space, because in fact you cannot just include the Maghreb and not other parts of Africa, you cannot include Egypt or Lebanon but not include the Middle East as such, you cannot include Ukraine without including Russia, and so on. So this is an extremely volatile space, where we have to try to take into account at the same time diversity, conflicts, inequalities, and I would say new distributions of space and forces.

So I am sorry this is extremely formal and vague ... but I agree that to choose the Mediterranean is a good point of view because it forces us essentially to take into

account the different viewpoints and the fact that the same events are not granted the same importance, and not seen in the same manner by the various participants. This is not to say that these are absolutely incompatible narratives, but they are not immediately compatible. I am sure Nicholas would like to say something more precise than me on this matter.

**Nicholas De Genova:** The first thing I should say, Étienne, is that I unfortunately have to correct you, as I don't think of myself as European at all ...

**Étienne Balibar:** OK, that's good. You are an anti-European European, I have done that all my life—the non-Jewish Jew, the non-Christian Christian—it's a perfectly acceptable and understandable kind of negative identity.

**Nicholas De Genova:** [laughter] Of course, I am situated here in Europe, I am located here, and in that sense I am very deeply interested in what I call the European Question. In fact, it is your question, Étienne, it is the question you framed for the rest of us years ago, so my engagement with that problem of how to conceive of what is Europe and who is European takes inspiration from you. In other words, as someone from the United States who finds myself now in Europe, I am very deeply interested in raising what I call the Question of Europe, and asking "What is Europe? Who is European?" in a way that takes inspiration from Étienne's work.

Nonetheless, I think the ambiguity around who is a European—including whether I myself am or am not European, being located in Europe now and being someone of European ancestry—is a productive problem that actually points us in the right direction of some of the important questions, because the question of European identity is a deeply racialized one which we need to confront in a much more forthright way. That's just one place to start.

**Étienne Balibar:** Yes, I would be tempted to return to the concrete questions you want us to discuss. I would certainly not state to you who you are: first of all you are differences, we are all differences—we come from somewhere, we work somewhere, we commit to certain projects and ideas, and these things form very complex identities. This being said, as much as we refer to matters of origin, I never thought of myself as being of Europe, as something that you can enclose in borders that would be naturally or historically defined. I wrote that Europe is a borderland and I tend to believe that it is part of Europe to interfere ... Americans are very much part of Europe, and they are very much part of the Mediterranean ... like it or not, you are always already included and involved in this.

**Nicholas De Genova:** Yes, I think this is a very important point about a world that is constituted as one (single) world where the United States has its hands everywhere, so there is no way that I can *not* be answerable because I am part of this constellation. Indeed, that's why I am troubled by your question. But let me come back to what Étienne said, pointing to the multiplicity of ways that we can understand the space of Europe and of the Mediterranean. What occurred to me—alongside his point that there is an articulation of many different viewpoints—is

that this is also about an articulation of bodies. In other words, we should consider that the most elementary space is that of the body itself. If we see spaces produced by the articulation between bodies and as being about the movement of bodies, then let's also think about the mobility of bodies across the Mediterranean, the distribution of bodies across the Mediterranean. In this way, we can start to see more clearly this question about what use there is to conceive of the Mediterranean as a kind of counter-point to the Eurocentrism that establishes the fixity and stability of the referent that is "Europe".

When we think about this space of the Mediterranean, immediately it begs the question about all the different things that are not separated by it but rather are connected by it. I like the suggestion that there may be more than two sides of the Mediterranean, but as long as we think of it as having sides we are already involved in an imagination of it as a kind of border. Of course, it does have sides that produce very concrete consequences for people distributed across those different sides, but in another sense we need to bear in mind the idea that any borderland is not just about division but also about connection, encounter, and mobility across the space in question. The critical lens that's made possible by the Mediterranean allows us to see all these different directions at once, so these new formations and all their ambiguities—as, for instance, in the question: where does the Mediterranean stop?—provide a very productive way to underscore the impossibility of ever seeing Europe without Africa, the impossibility of ever seeing Europe without the Middle East.

The other point that I just wanted to raise was the escalation in the deaths of migrants crossing. In the original question that you asked, alongside the monumentalization and spectacularization of the deaths of Europeans, we have this incredible banalization of the deaths of migrants. So we can hear about 200 people this week and 300 people next week, day in and day out, this proliferation of deaths of people crossing the Mediterranean that have no impact at all comparable to the way that these spectacularized kinds of deaths have in the instance of the events in Paris or Copenhagen. I think that this is very striking—that we are systematically becoming accustomed (and accommodated) to the idea that the Mediterranean is a cemetery, a mass grave. And that's in some sense the ultimate naturalization of the notion of the Mediterranean as a border—as a border of Europe. In fact it trivializes these deaths and naturalizes the idea that these deaths are somehow external.

**Étienne Balibar:** I'd like to continue on that—bodies and borders—if you can give me a minute before moving to the next question.

I think you are absolutely right to insist that we should put at the center of our perception the question of bodies and their visibility, and their use or destruction. Bodies are the main and always primary target of racism and especially institutional racism. The phenomenon of racism is of course very complex. I personally maintain that Islamophobia is a kind of racism ... but nevertheless at some point it always comes to identify bodies, their way of being in the environment, their behavior, the possibility of classifying and distinguishing people based on what kinds of bodies they have. (The second important thing you raised is about death, and I also have something to say about that.) But bodies are living bodies first. It's not just a

philosophical point: if you adopt the point of view of living bodies, then you try to reach an understanding of today's situations not only in terms of deaths and even mass eliminations, but also in terms of all sorts of active bodies—crossing the sea, working, becoming visible or invisible. This is extremely important and remains extremely important for viewing the Mediterranean—like many other places in the world—as a unique space of encounter between extremely diverse and active bodies. Here I refer to some common friends, people like Sandro Mezzadra who rightly insisted on that, trying to ground in the actual practices of migrants the capacities of survival, of resistance, of autonomy.

All this being said, I should come to the question of dead bodies. And here I want to come back to an expression I heard at a conference in Nice—indeed, a Mediterranean place—at the end of January by my colleague Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp who's been very engaged in organizing actions with refugees for the past 20 years. She said that she read in the paper after the Paris events that there had been 17 deaths, counting the journalists from *Charlie Hebdo*, the two police officers, and the Jewish customers of the kosher grocery store ... but she said: there weren't 17 deaths but 20 deaths because the three terrorists, the three murderers, have died as well. Of course no newspaper will write that because it would seem to put them on a par with the victims, comparing the victims and their murderers. This is a slightly different case from what Judith Butler famously mentioned some years ago in one of her essays about the war in the Middle East, when she says that there are victims of the war which are visible and counted—meaning: the Americans—and victims who are not counted and not identified as individuals, who are the Arabs (see Butler 2009). This is a similar argument, but not quite the same. The point is not to be neutral in the case of counting the victims—I am not saying that the victims are representing somehow the imperialist side and the terrorists are representing the side of the dominated ... neither am I saying that on the one side you have a brand of fascism and on the other you have innocent victims. No, I am just saying that there is a problematic situation that this includes many different deaths, victims of violence, interventions, mass murders, tortures, targeted assassinations, and I am saying that these forms are now complete ... so you have the Palestinians, and the Syrians, the people in Northern Africa, you have terrorists in France or Europe who are not suicide bombers but murder others, so that's part of a global pattern. The simple move would be to say, "This is evil, horrible, we are in the middle of violence"; and the other simple move would be to say, "One side is good, the other is bad". Instead I think we need a genealogy of the lines of forces which make this situation continuously evolving, and which have produced an extremely dangerous situation. Where the logic is the logic of retaliation, of identifying the other as the absolute enemy ... that's a very difficult situation and that's for the Mediterraneans to take up. I have a tendency to think that each of us has a special responsibility to try to stop his or her government from making the situation even worse, but also to keep a point of view that is general, that is common, in which all the dead are taken into account. This leads to the question of borders. The point of view I was adopting is the point of view of the common: the common is divided, the common is full of hatred, but it is a common space and a common fate so that's why you can't be indifferent to what is happening in

Syria or Northern Africa. Instead the common situation tends to be seen in terms of borders. And the main characteristic of that Mediterranean divide is that the people from each side see each other as a threat, the people from the North see people from the South as an economic threat; but also people from the South see people from the North as a threat, a military threat first of all. This is the kind of blockage where we are at, and that's very difficult to overcome.

**Garelli, Sciarba and Tazzioli:** We've been looking at the Mediterranean as an interesting political space for possibly articulating struggles—struggles for movement, for instance—beyond the notion of the dichotomy of shores, ideologies, cultures. In other words, we know exactly what the struggles are that are developing in the Mediterranean, but these days it seems very difficult to find lines of argument by which one could focus on the Mediterranean political space in these terms, in terms of shared struggles across opposing shores ...

**Nicholas De Genova:** As you point out, the Mediterranean is a real space, a real space of real struggles, and it seems to me that what's at stake in this endeavor is also elaborated in a way that it is also an epistemic field for the elaboration of these struggles. So those struggles articulate themselves in a variety of ways, but there's also a question of what's the role for us, as intellectuals, toward the task of theorizing and understanding what's at stake in those struggles. If we conceive of that epistemic field—the Mediterranean—as a framework for seeing lived intersections and real socio-political relations, then it becomes impossible to think Europe without Africa, or without the Middle East, and this would make it impossible to think the question of Europe as if the Mediterranean were a sort of buffer zone. Rather, it appears as a space that is constantly about the production of social relations—first and foremost, relations of mobility. In this sense the question of racism in Europe, the question of racism toward a variety of so-called non-Europeans, becomes inseparable from the subjection of those places where migrants come from, beyond the so-called borders, both real and conceptual.

**Étienne Balibar:** Yes. Going back to the question; when you say “we know what the struggles are”, that can be disputed. I mean, we very well know what some of the struggles are for migrants and refugees; for instance, struggles for survival, struggles for dignity (to have a say on their lives, which includes family life, culture, work, not simply being tolerated or even eliminated), and struggles for citizenship (or, as I say in French, *droit de cité*, which is not reducible to citizenship in one specific nation but rather citizenship in a sort of post-national order). These are very important struggles, I agree with you. But increasingly we suspect that there are less visible struggles combined with them: the questions that racism and Islamophobia are raising in contemporary Europe; the struggles linked to the huge problem of the democratization of Arab states in general in the southern edges of the Mediterranean (illustrated in the recent period both with great advances and backfires in Tunisia, Egypt, and other places)—all sorts of struggles that are not just reducible to the struggles of migrants.

A second point: we need more analytic work to describe that multiplicity in more concrete terms. With all my admiration and fondness for Toni Negri and others, I can say that I think that to put the stamp “multitude” on all of that is not very helpful: it’s too general, it’s too abstract. I am convinced that the subject of these struggles needs to be complex, combined, heterogeneous groups of people with different conditions ... what is necessary are combined struggles for people from the South and the North, combined struggles for workers and families ... we as intellectuals have the job of putting together their experiences and describing them, but there is not only one pole, if you’d like, that dominates or serves. Among the struggles of migrants, there are the struggles of youth who are increasingly exploited—as students, as professionals, as unemployed. There’s no longer a bipolar picture, I want to suggest. The collective subject who needs to intervene in this political space is heterogeneous. They cross the geographical, professional divides.

**Nicholas De Genova:** I just wanted to quickly refer back to one of the points of whether we know or don’t know what the struggles unfolding are—because I think this question of knowability is a very vexed one but also a very potentially productive one. It seems to me we really do have to grapple in important ways with being in what has been famously called by Guy Debord (1994) “the society of the spectacle”. So I am not so sure that we know what we think we know, or, rather, I’m not so sure that we can accept to believe what we are told, and what we are meant to understand by some of the kinds of events we look at. So it poses a fundamental question about how intellectuals can intervene if the access that we have even to the most elementary details and facts are themselves completely obfuscated, and the only thing we know in the end is the official story, which is provided to the journalists by the state. For example, there is a way in which during the last few months the proliferation of these so-called “terrorist” events—in Canada, in Australia, in Paris, in Copenhagen, etc.—this incredible proliferation in a very short period of time of these events that are fashioned to be mini-September 11<sup>th</sup>s for every particular country involved—to me, is a very worrisome configuration. Speaking as someone who comes from the US, there is a kind of spectacle of terror that is exceedingly productive for the ends of state projects and militaristic projects, but I am not so sure that we know what we think we know about these things. So there is this question about what is knowable as such ...

In relationship to some of the things we are discussing—and for me, particularly migration, borders, and mobilities, and so on—it seems to me that we always have to be able to conceive of what is incipient, what is the potentiality, because what these struggles are in their immediacy is only the beginning of what there is to understand. I like to say that if there were no borders, there would be no migrants, there would only be mobility (De Genova 2013). It is the very existence of borders—or, as Étienne has said, the “world-configuring function of borders” (Balibar 2002)—which produces a distribution of distinct populations that then figures some kinds of mobilities as “migration”. If we begin to see the ways that this global regime of borders is subverted in practice by the mere fact of people’s mobility, then we can begin to ask: What’s actually incipient there? What are the potentialities there? What kind of other world is possible when we begin to theorize from the implications of



that fact—that people actually refuse in practice, refuse through their actions, to abide by a law that institutes a world partitioned into separate state powers. That's part of the task: not only to try to understanding what's immediately at stake in particular struggles but actually to see what they gesture toward, what kinds of possibilities they allow us to seize.

**Garelli, Sciorba and Tazzioli:** What is the meaning of struggle then? Nicholas said that not every migrant struggle is a political struggle and that actually taking the point of view of migrants corresponds to challenging the very meaning of struggle as codified in our political imaginaries. In our recent contribution, “New keywords: Migration and borders” (Casas-Cortes et al. 2014), we suggest that in the very notion of migration there is something that pertains to the domain of struggle as such ...

**Étienne Balibar:** Yes, of course. The migrant is a sort of living illustration or embodiment of someone whose life is a bundle of struggles, and that includes different meanings of the idea of struggle.

But to return for a minute to what Nicholas said a minute ago about the society of spectacle and Debord and the current transformations and the political functions of images ... toying with a formula that I proposed to two French journals—*Multitudes* and *Les Temps Modernes*—who each asked me to contribute to special issues that they are preparing on current events ... I said to myself: there are different aspects to be tackled, so let's say “yes” to both, which is of course a little frightening for me. One of the papers that I want to write goes something like “terror effects in the space of asymmetric communication” by which I mean not “asymmetric wars” but asymmetric *communications*, which is, I believe, a very crucial dimension of the space in which we live today. But then it's complicated because think of the speed at which images from Islam or from the Arab Islamic world are being switched over the last period ... some time ago we were bombarded with pictures of the Arab Spring and the idea that this was the place where, as Badiou (2012) famously said, this was the place where history was starting again.

This was not said only on the part of leftists or post-Marxists; it was a widely shared representation, which enjoyed a huge place in the media, including in North America and Europe. Now we are back to another picture whereby what comes to the fore is not the democratic aspirations of Arab countries—the convergence with a general trend of democratization that would be common to all of us—but really ... the idea that decades of war, including Western interventions with catastrophic results, have now pushed the populations of the Southern Mediterranean and the Middle East to a kind of situation of exasperation, where in fact anything is possible. So these pictures are continuously changing.

And I agree with you: one picture is missing there—it is a complete moral representation of people's lives, cultures, and demands. And especially one that would come from inside; this is the reason why I think that it is strategically important today that Muslim intellectuals, or intellectuals who identify themselves with the Muslim tradition, become heard and are helped to be heard, to say things

about Islam that are not merely either contrition (we are guilty, we are modernizing, etc.) or just responding to the expectations that the Christian North is directing at them. So images, and particularly images of violence, are manipulated by Western governments, and are also manipulated or counter-manipulated by some of the most active and negative forces that are now seizing power in some of these regions. It's clear that ISIS has an extremely sophisticated strategy of communication—it probably has money to do it, probably coming from the Gulf countries—of which horror is a part. Of course, they couldn't use this strategy if they had no taste for torture ... so that's where the field of the inter-penetration of violence and communication is a multilateral one, and it's been used by different sites and actors and of course it makes the Mediterranean a space of incivility rather than civility, where arguments and knowledge are progressively coded. So we have a huge task to accomplish on that front, I don't know if it is as intellectuals, or as people who work for television networks and so on.

**Garelli, Scirba and Tazzioli:** Let's get back to the notion of “combined struggles” evoked by Étienne and the notions of “spectacle” and “circulation of images” evoked by Nicholas. In 2011, with the Tunisian revolution and the Occupy movements in Europe, we witnessed a moment when the Mediterranean was fantasized as a “space of combined struggles” where the circulation of images across shores seemed to build some kind of hope; certainly triggered curiosity; and definitely prompted engagement and participation with what was going on. How do you think back about that time?

**Étienne Balibar:** These are elements that made some of us perceive something like a return of a kind of the political atmosphere that had existed in '68, and the actors in all these movements were young people, so there seemed to be a mutual identification and community feeling on different sides of the geopolitical border, like in '68 when you had movements in the East and West. As we know, in most cases, this was short-lived. In spite of what I was saying about mixed movements, however, the current situation of the world pushes the younger generation into a dangerous corner where it is bound to react—the whole question is “how?”.

**Nicholas De Genova:** I am struck by the fact that the disaffection and outrage and dissatisfaction and so forth that were clearly, as always, a motivation for revolutionary struggle that were evident in both examples, had their counterparts on both sides of the Mediterranean in the manifestation of new kinds of right-wing movements. There is a certain ebullience today about Syriza's victory in Greece but the real story of the last few years from 2011 to now is predominated by the rise of a neo-fascist movement. Similarly, in Egypt we could point to the ways in which various manifestations of anti-Mubarak sentiment were able to be mobilized very effectively by the Muslim Brotherhood.

It seems to me very important to think about the fact that fascism also responds to a certain kind of elementary dissatisfaction and anger and so forth, and that all of the kinds of questions that might inspire us to feel newly optimistic are coupled with the possibilities also for the fueling of a misdirected expression of that

frustration and anger. It is particularly resonant when we think about Greece, that at the same time that you can have these militant, anti-capitalist, anti-state struggles, you also can see the rise of a really vicious kind of right-wing movement, and you can't separate these things. So it's not as if there was a moment of possibility and now it's been lost. We have to understand the continuous kind of conflagration of different forces. Many things are possible simultaneously, and the struggle is not yet concluded or resolved in any of these places.

**Étienne Balibar:** I don't think that anti-capitalism is on the order of the day in Greece. I am not attributing that utopian perspective to you, but I believe that the crucial problem right now is whether or not Syriza, upon its victory, will find enough support and will be able to use the internal disagreement of the dominant European structure which blocks the process of a new corporatization of their own people as such in Europe. Evidently this is a modest goal, and the difficulties are huge. The support is weak and shaky in other European governments, and the interests are huge—ask why the banks do not want the Greek debt to be restructured; this is because they make a lot of money with the Greek debt. This is a modest goal but we are at a turning point in the relationship of forces within Europe, and this is a critical point.

You are right about the importance of the role of fascist movements. What's interesting in Greece is that the far-right is very explicitly neo-Nazi; it's even more radical than the French National Front, and could become a dangerous force, but up to now Syriza proved stronger in terms of their capacity to mobilize the population. Perhaps there are some ambiguities about nationalism, etc., but Syriza essentially overcame the rising of the Right by mobilizing people on the Left in a way that was very progressive and not xenophobic and not anti-European in the general sense. This is the reason why I find it hopeful, and I had used in 2010—already before 2011—an expression like “we now need a European populism” (Balibar 2010). I realized this was a difficult expression to understand, to make clear, and perhaps a dangerous formulation, so I reversed it somewhat, and I said “we need a European counter-populism”, of which Syriza is a perfect example.

So counter-populism is also a way of mobilizing the masses and the youth; it's not just playing by the rules of the established center-right or right-wing governments in Europe and, especially now, backing down before the imperatives and the orders of the European Central Bank and the European Commission. It involves a kind of virulent critique of the establishment and power's “technostructure”, as Habermas (1987) would say. But it's not to be confused with fascism or nationalism, not only in terms of the goals but also not in terms of the language and the forms of mobilization. The reason why I am so furious when I hear French politicians like Mélenchon,<sup>2</sup> who's supposed to be our Tsipras, and who from time to time shouts extremely vulgar and anti-German formulas about Merkel, like “she's the new Hitler” ... this is not the language on which a mass progressive movement especially of the younger generations can be (and must be) built in Europe. There's a line of demarcation there that takes us back there where you, Nicholas, were pointing: fascism is one possibility, but the alternative is what we are looking at.

**Nicholas De Genova:** Let me just ask a question here. One of the possibilities that seemed to be implied by the question is that there is not only a Global South but also a European South, and that the countries increasingly affected by austerity could actually produce quite a fracture within Europe and a disarticulation of some of the “European” projects, however defined ... In light of that, it seems that the formulation of European counter-populism still needs to retain an idea that there is in fact “a European people”?

**Étienne Balibar:** Yes, I understand, that’s a problem. These are not essentialist formulae, they are not relying on the idea that *there is* a European people that is different from the people of other places. They make sense only in a given conjuncture. What I have argued in various places is that there is never such a thing as a pre-existing people or demos on which you build the democratic institution; it is the reverse that is true. It is only inasmuch as there are democratic popular forces—what Deleuze (1989) calls “the missing people”—that are able to coalesce and come together around common objectives, it is only inasmuch as this is true that you can speak of “a people”. This is the core of counter-populism as I see it.

But of course there is a tremendous ambiguity, because almost everybody will keep thinking that the participants in such movements ought to be already-established European citizens, or carrying European passports, and voting in a European country—and that would create another line of demarcation and make the motto in a sense absolutely contradictory to what we were arguing in the beginning here—namely, that in the Mediterranean space we are looking for intersecting and heterogeneous combinations of struggles which are from both North and South. So if it is true that Greece, Spain, to some extent Italy, and maybe other countries are now finding themselves with what ... on each side they may be strategic places for making clear that the European people is not purely European: it’s simply a geographic location of a certain struggle. But I agree: there is a danger ... [laughing] I was trying to guide myself on the one side, but now I find myself in danger of falling on the other side, that is to say, invoking the ethnic or cultural label of the movement ... this is very true.

**Nicholas De Genova:** Another noteworthy recent phenomenon is the rise of Pegida in Germany,<sup>3</sup> which for me is most remarkable because they articulate themselves exactly as “patriotic Europeans”.

**Étienne Balibar:** Absolutely, it is the perfect illustration of the fact that nationalism and racism work at both levels: it’s rooted in the national idea but it’s also rooted in the European myth, and the reproduction of what are in fact colonial or postcolonial prejudices. I never thought we would have something like a racist and xenophobic movement at the scale or within the European space, as such ... I always thought that the nationalist component was so strong ... but I have to admit that in the recent conjuncture, Islamophobia threatens to be a very powerful, unifying element that could unfortunately pave the way for a European fascism or neo-fascism. It’s not immediate because the Greek nationalists, the German nationalists, they all ... but the Germans are more in that sense, in quotation from

Marx ... they are not really speaking of the preservation of some pure German identity but rather are really speaking of a European identity, which unfortunately has some precedents in German history as well ... actually, it was Hitler who wanted to unify Europe under the idea of a kind of pure European-ness that would dominate all the others—the Slavs, the Latin people ...

**Garelli, Sciorba and Tazzioli:** We asked about 2011 because migration practices have radically changed recently and this also forces a re-discussion of the categories through which we think about migration; for instance, the distinction between economic and forced migration—harshly opposed by critical scholars engaged with migrations—is now more difficult to contest ...

**Étienne Balibar:** Every sociologist or economist knows that there is no such pure line of demarcation between these different types of migration. These are administrative tools that are used to divide the population and block some of them on one account and others on another account.

**Garelli, Sciorba and Tazzioli:** This can be useful for us as a strategy, maybe, in the sense that it could offer a path to the right to asylum in a moment when European policies are securitizing?

**Étienne Balibar:** I will surprise you, but I was never against the language of human rights in the absolute ... not even—I know this is very dangerous to say—but not even against the idea of humanitarian intervention as such, in the name of national sovereignty, etc., although of course I totally recognize that in 90% of the cases (if not 100%), the so-called right of humanitarian intervention was totally monopolized and manipulated by imperial forces who used it when they found it convenient for their strategic purposes and refused to use it and shut their eyes whenever it was against their interests—but this is a different matter from the principle. I am not against the principle as such. I am against its use by the US or Europe with no international legitimacy. In the case of the current flow of refugees, Europe is in the most blatant contradiction with itself regarding the matter of asylum. It's incredible, but millions of people—in particular, in Syria—are chased, are trying to escape from violence and death, and in fact Europe's doors are closed, once again, as it's been at other times in history. Germany does more than France in that respect, but it should be a pan-European question. If your question was "should we insist on the importance of human rights and asylum?", I would say yes, of course, very much so.

**Nicholas De Genova:** The problem, however, is that—as, Étienne, you were just alluding—that all these examples have a governmental logic, an administrative logic, so if we talk about humanitarian intervention, it's really impossible to conceive of that in the real world that we live in without that being a pretext for an imperial sovereignty which is supra-national. That is to say, if it's not a juridical overt explicit kind of sovereignty, it's a kind of alibi or insinuation of the idea that "someone" has to be a sovereign on the global scale. I think it works similarly with

this question of the government of asylum: if we make asylum the claim or demand of a popular movement or a revolutionary politics, then asylum still has to be administered and adjudicated. So unless we are prepared to think of asylum for the whole post-colonial world as retribution for the imperial powers having colonized the entire globe for centuries ...

**Étienne Balibar:** I agree with you. These are questions of timely urgency. Asylum is not a goal, per se. But it can be an urgent necessity and duty. The question of whether Europe can become something different, building on asylum, has to be—I am sorry to sound like a very traditional Marxist—discussed in the framework of economic and social transformation, and the type of economy that exists on the global scale. If we believe that these questions can be discussed by abstracting entirely from the reasons why people migrate, removed from the economy they come from or that attracts them, we'll never reach any comprehensive solution.

**Garelli, Scieurba and Tazzioli:** Do you think that we can use human rights as something that we enlist against the humanitarian approach?

**Étienne Balibar:** Look, the question with human rights is always more or less largely the same, abstractly speaking: human rights are always defined and vindicated in a discourse that is individualistic in its principle. They're supposed to be rights for individuals, individuals seeking asylum. Just as current discussions about rights of free speech, freedom of expression and blasphemy or whatever ... these are immediately defined within the old liberal point of view, that is, as subjective rights (as lawyers would say), as rights of individuals. I am not saying that individuals don't exist and have no rights—but the problem that has to be tackled is the problem of victims of warfare seeking rescue in the Mediterranean space, or the problem of the space of communication where terror effects are used. These are not individual problems: these are political problems and economic problems that involve populations, masses, whole groups. So I am not saying that we should eliminate the point of view of individual rights, but we should definitely work—this is again the good old Marxist point of view—for the elaboration of notions of “right” which are both collective and reciprocal, mutual, and not only defined in terms of who is entitled to do or receive what.

I am sorry that this is a little abstract, but this is the way I am trying to enter into a more adequate vision. But it is of course very difficult because the idea of democracy and rule of law in which we live is consistently based on that individualistic call, even when it comes to great collective issues ...

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This is arguably an underestimate, given that migrant death statistics are based on recorded deaths.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Mélenchon is a French politician who co-founded the *Parti de Gauche* (Left Party) in 2008 upon leaving the *Parti socialiste* (Socialist Party). He came in fourth at the 2012 presidential election.

<sup>3</sup> A German anti-Islamist political organization founded in 2014. The acronym Pegida stands for “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West”.

## References

- Badiou A (2012 [2011]) *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (trans G Elliott). New York: Verso
- Balibar É (2002 [1998]) *Politics and the Other Scene* (trans C Jones, J Swenson and C Turner). London: Verso
- Balibar É (2009) Europe as borderland. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27(2):190–215
- Balibar É (2010) Europe is a dead political project. *The Guardian* 25 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/25/eu-crisis-catastrophic-consequences> (last accessed 9 May 2017)
- Butler J (2009) *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso
- Casas-Cortes M, Cobarrubias S, DeGenova N, Garelli G, Grappi G, Heller C, Hess S, Kasperek B, Mezzadra S, Neilson B, Peano I, Pezzani L, Pickles J, Rahola F, Riedner L, Scheel S and Tazzioli M (2014) New keywords: Migration and borders. *Cultural Studies* 29(1):55–87
- Debord G (1994 [1967]) *The Society of the Spectacle* (trans D Nicholson-Smith). New York: Zone Books
- De Genova N (2013) “We are of the connections”: Migration, methodological nationalism, and “militant research”. *Postcolonial Studies* 16(3):250–258
- Deleuze G (1989 [1985]) *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (trans H Tomlinson and R Galeta). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Habermas J (1987 [1985]) *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System—A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (trans T McCarthy). Boston: Beacon