

**ON THE EU/AFRICA BORDERLAND
PLURAL AUTHORITIES, MIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES, POSSIBILITIES OF
COMPARISON**

Alice BELLAGAMBA, Timothy RAEYMAEKERS

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Summary

The developments of the past two decades have belied the dreams of a world without borders, which developed after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In response to global migration as well as the real or imaginary threat of terror, governments in both the northern and southern parts of the globe have conceived ever more sophisticated means to track and monitor human mobility. As for Europe, growing attention has gone to the externalizing of its Southern border into the African continent. This process has included often new and restrictive ways to channel and push back South-North immigration flows. Besides classical fences (including walls, barbed wire, and checkpoints), human movements from Africa to Europe have started to be tracked through biometric data, satellite communications, and 'smart' visions of unmanned drones.

In the meantime efforts have been directed at the close monitoring of African immigrants' lives within Africa and the European Union. Through their agreements with African governments, European member states like Italy, Spain and France are facilitating the repatriation of undocumented migrants and rejected asylum-seekers on grounds of close bilateral co-operation. European states have also increasingly urged African governments to warn their citizens against the potential risks of migration across the Mediterranean Sea. This policy of migration control has been supported by an increasing range of non-state agencies, which cross territorial boundaries in varying and often surprising ways. All these evolutions were closely discussed by participants in the Pavia workshop.

The three days meeting addressed emerging mobility patterns across the

Mediterranean and the Sahara by focusing on three main themes:

- (1) the differentiated and often conflictive participation of state and non-state actors in the management of human mobility;
- (2) the way African migrants themselves interiorize and reshape European policies of border externalization;
- (3) the possibility to compare the EU/AFRICA borderland with other processes of border securitization in other parts of the African continent.

Senior and junior scholars from a variety of disciplinary fields (e.g. political geography, history, social and cultural anthropology and sociology) cast light on the interaction between border legislations, surveillance technologies and migrant experiences through either in-depth ethnographic or historical analysis. Contributions were grouped in three different sections in order to facilitate the dialogue between specialists of African and European border studies and their respective intellectual traditions. The organizers were particularly interested in testing whether the approach developed by ABORNE for the study of African national boundaries could deepen the understanding of an EU/Africa borderland, which so far has been largely discussed from a Eurocentric perspective. The second aim – which materialized quite well – was to bring authors a chance to cross intellectual boundaries and intermingle through an exploration of the rich empirical material available from recent field work in the sites under discussion.

Three broad points have emerged from this workshop.

First, the growing interconnection of state and non-state authority in the management of migration flows across the Mediterranean borderland somehow forces us to rethink the study of territorial boundaries in a more “networked” way.¹ The reason for this – already mentioned by others – is that the materialization of such boundaries involve specific practices of de-localization and de-territorialization through the (joint or separate) operations of international organizations, NGOs, human rights activists,

¹ P. Hassner, “Fixed borders or moving borderlands?: a new type of border for a new type of entity”, in j. Zielonka (ed.), *Europe Unbound: Enlarging and Reshaping the Boundaries of the European Union*, London, Routledge 2002; G. Delanty, “Borders in a Changing Europe: Dynamics of Openness and Closure”, *Comparative European Politics* 4(2-3), 2006: 183-202; C. Rumford, “Does Europe have Cosmopolitan Borders”, 4(3), 2007: 327-339.

security companies, intermediaries of migrants' travels and other agents². These ambiguous spaces of regulation often make borders privileged sites to observe the transformation of sovereignty, as many of the workshop participants observed. Next to territorial lines and physical checkpoints, for example, borders across the Mediterranean increasingly can be conceived through "pixels on screens" and other mobile monitoring patterns operated by a range of agencies (see papers of Lemberg and Andersson, for example). The network of detention sites where migrants are intercepted and physically kept at a distance furthermore makes the Mediterranean border appear like an archipelago of oases and islands, rather than a fixed set of nation-state borders (Mountz and Lloyd, Cuttita). Partly building on previous knowledge³, some of the papers focused on the Mediterranean Sea border as a laboratory of change. While Calchi Novati discussed the colonial legacy of contemporary relationships between Europe and North-Africa, Morone delved into the partnership between Italy and Libya. Brambilla proposed the notion of borderscape to identify the dialectical spaces that emerge out of the often violent renegotiation of preexisting logics of rule. Recent changes in Libya were discussed together with a detailed historical analysis of the peculiar bordering role that this country played between Africa and Europe over the last decade.

The second point relates to migrants' own experiences and the way they shape mobility paradigms in various ways. Many contributors addressed migrants' capacity to channel goods, people and ideas across borders (e.g. Marcelino, Loher, Echeverri) as much as the kind of migrant lives (and subjectivities) that are the by-product of European increased restrictions on mobility (e.g. Merrill). The migrant has become a powerful symbol of the policies of inclusion and exclusion pursued by EU member states. Throughout the workshop, the paradox of sovereign power – which tentatively tries to capture mobile flows on the border and in doing so changes life of and on the border itself – offered an intriguing theme for reflection and comparison.

The third and last point touched by the discussion was the possibility to compare the

² R. Andrijasevic and W. Walters, "The International Organization for Migration and the international government of borders", *Society and Space*, 28(6), 2010: 977-999.

³ D. Bechev and K. Nicolaidis (eds.), *Mediterranean Frontiers. Borders, Conflict and Memory in a Transnational World*, IB Taurus, London 2010.

dynamics of the borderland between Europe and Africa with similar/dissimilar processes in other areas of the Mediterranean and the African continent. The case of Israel (which was addressed by Yacobi and Lijnders) was particularly relevant. While Yacobi focused on the changing ways in which African migrants have been perceived and represented by Israelis, Lijnders illustrated the violent experiences of border crossing of Eritrean refugees living in Tel Aviv. David Coplan, finally, opened up a discussion on South African immigration policies and their comparability to European ones.

Outcomes and future plans

Looked at from the perspective of individual participants, the workshop has contributed significantly to the broadening of conceptual frames, the strengthening of interdisciplinary dialogue and the creation of new intellectual networks. Many of the contributors were young scholars who highly benefited from the possibility of exchanging ideas and establishing academic connections, which will prove useful in the future. From the scientific point of view, the papers were so rich and varied, and the participation so lively, that the organizers are now discussing two proposals of publication. First, there is the plan to submit a Special Issue on the Mediterranean frontier to an international geography journal, like for example *Geoforum*, *Transactions* or a border studies journal. A number of papers have already been selected for this purpose. Second, there is the idea to submit a volume proposal to the ABORNE Palgrave Macmillan series. The volume will focus on the multiplicity of actors that interact on the EU/Africa borderland (e.g. international organizations, national governments, NGOS, security forces, militants and migrants) on the ways they represent, shape and challenge this shifting border. Participants have been contacted and the organizers are now waiting for their reactions to pursue the initiative forward.

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