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## The prism of new mobilities. The mobility trajectories of refugees and asylum seekers outside the Italian reception system

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### ABSTRACT

For over twenty years, Italy has faced the phenomenon of so-called “forced” international migrations. By virtue of its geographic position in the Mediterranean, this country constitutes, in many cases, the first landing and the transit country for asylum seekers in their flight from wars, political crises, environmental catastrophes and depletion of resources. This also implied a growing number of “rejections” that is, asylum seekers to whom no form of protection was granted and are unlikely to return to their country of origin. A segment of them represents an intense geographic mobility or, better to say, multiple mobilities that intersect and fuel each other. Scholars have mostly explored the trajectories of mobility of the native people or so-called “economic migrants”. Much more rarely, refugees and asylum seekers have been perceived and framed as mobile subjects, protagonists of multiple and plural geographic, social, and migration movements. Therefore, this editorial and the whole Special Issue focus on the social changes that are reshaping migration scenarios, with particular attention paid to the paths of international and national mobility of refugees and asylum seekers outside the reception system, as well as their geographical, social and migration trajectories. Specifically, after introducing the topic, this paper, on the one hand, reconstructs the framework of Italian asylum policies, progressively more restrictive and discriminatory and destined to become a model for the entire European Union, analyzing the impact of the legal system and migration policies on the construction of the material and labor vulnerability of migrants and their exploitation within the national labor market. On the other hand, it deepens and reconstructs the theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon of mobility, the intersection between spatial dimension and temporal dimensions. Particular attention is paid to the pandemic and to the sociological interpretations of this phenomenon, the “mirror function” that it performs within society and the global migration scenario, the instrumental uses that have been made of this crisis in the political, economic, legal and social fields and the impact it has had on the common ethnographic and research practices shared by the papers that make up the Special Issue. Finally, the Editorial presents the structure of the Special Issue and the

This article is the result of a shared work of investigation and analysis, however Francesco Della Puppa wrote paragraphs 1,2,3 and 5, while paragraphs 4,6 and 7 are by Giuliana Sanò

contents of the articles, organized according to coherent theoretical and empirical path, aimed at illuminating all the facets of the “prism of new mobility”.

#### **RIASSUNTO**

Da oltre vent'anni l'Italia si sta confrontando col fenomeno delle così dette “migrazioni forzate”. In virtù della sua posizione geografica nel bacino mediterraneo, il paese costituisce, spesso il primo approdo e il paese di transito per richiedenti asilo che fuggono da guerra, crisi e instabilità politiche, catastrofi ambientali e depauperamento delle risorse. Ciò, implica anche un crescente numero di “dinieghi”, ossia, di richiedenti asilo che non ricevono alcuna forma di protezione internazionale e per i quali, ovviamente, non è possibile né concepibile fare rientro nel proprio paese di origine. Un ampio segmento di questi è protagonista di un'intensa mobilità geografica o, per meglio dire, di una molteplicità di mobilità che si intersecano e si alimentano vicendevolmente. Le scienze sociali hanno approfondito, soprattutto, le traiettorie di mobilità degli autoctoni o dei così detti “immigrati economici”. Molto più raramente sono stati osservati e inquadrati come soggetti “mobili”, protagonisti di una pluralità di movimenti geografici, sociali e migratori, i rifugiati e i richiedenti asilo. Il presente editoriale e l'intera Special Issue, quindi, si focalizzano sui cambiamenti sociali che stanno ridefinendo gli scenari migratori, con particolare attenzione alle traiettorie di mobilità nazionale e internazionale di rifugiati e richiedenti asilo al di fuori del sistema di accoglienza. Nello specifico, dopo aver introdotto il tema, il paper, da un lato, ricostruisce il quadro delle politiche di asilo italiane, progressivamente più restrittive e discriminatorie e destinate a diventare un modello per l'intera Unione Europea, analizzando l'impatto del sistema giuridico e delle politiche migratorie sulla costruzione della vulnerabilità materiale e lavorativa degli immigrati e del loro sfruttamento entro il mercato del lavoro nazionale. Dall'altro lato, approfondisce e ricostruisce le prospettive teoriche sul fenomeno della mobilità, sull'intersezione tra dimensione spaziale e dimensione temporale. Particolare attenzione viene riservata alla pandemia e alle letture sociologiche del fenomeno, alla “funzione specchio” che essa svolge entro la società e nel panorama migratorio globale, agli usi strumentali che sono stati fatti di tale crisi in ambito politico, economico, giuridico e sociale e all'impatto che essa ha avuto sulle pratiche etnografiche e di ricerca che accomunano i contributi che compongono la Special Issue. Infine, viene presentata la struttura della Special Issue, appunto, e i contenuti dei singoli articoli che la compongono, organizzati secondo un coerente percorso teorico ed empirico, volto a illuminare tutte le sfaccettature che compongono il “prisma delle nuove mobilità”.

**KEYWORDS** Mobility; Immobility; Migration Policies; Migrant exploitation; Refugees and Asylum Seekers; Covid-19

**PAROLE CHIAVE** Mobilità; Immobilità; Politiche migratorie; Sfruttamento degli immigrati; Rifugiati e richiedenti asilo; Covid-19

### **A litmus test, a privileged context and the facets of the prism**

For over twenty years, Italy has faced the phenomenon of so-called ‘forced’ international migrations. By virtue of its geographic position in the Mediterranean, this country constitutes, in many cases, the first landing and the transit country for asylum seekers in their flight from wars, political crises,

environmental catastrophes and depletion of resources (Ambrosini 2018; Colucci 2018; D'Angelo 2019; Hasselberg 2016; Queirolo Palmas 2020).

Between the 1990s and the first part of the new millennium, the country recorded the arrival of people from Albania and Kosovo by sea. Fluctuating numbers of arrivals followed this first phase and were dictated principally by Italian policies aimed at counteracting migration. Citizens from the Horn of Africa and the Maghreb arrived in the years 2008 to 2013. From 2011 to 2013, the geography of the arrivals changed, and the numbers increased on account of the 'Arab Springs' of the Libyan Civil War and the Syrian conflict. These conflicts and wars led to about 63,000 arrivals from across the Mediterranean in 2013. Subsequently, the period from 2014 to 2017 opened a new phase of arrivals into Europe, and the Italian coast received over 600,000 sub-Saharan immigrants from the Horn of Africa and Asia (Giovannetti 2018). Thus, in these years, marked by hundreds of deaths along the Mediterranean routes towards Southern Europe, the Sicilian Channel became one of the most important migration corridors in the world, certainly the most dangerous (Pinelli 2017).

Since we are dealing here with so-called 'forced migrations', these numbers have to be read in the light of the political and legal framework which governs and regulates the right of asylum. While 120,000 requests for international protection were counted from 2001 to 2013, it is in 2014 that we see a qualitative leap: the requests for asylum doubled (from 63,000 to 123,600), arriving at over 130,000 in 2017. As regards the results of the procedure for granting protection, from 1997 to 2002, almost 74 per cent were rejected; from 2002 to 2015, the percentage stands at around 30–40 per cent, rising to 50 per cent in 2015 and over 60 per cent in 2017 (Giovannetti 2018).

This growing number of 'rejections' – that is, asylum seekers to whom no form of protection was granted – are unlikely to return to their country of origin. A segment of them represents intense *international mobility* towards the north-western countries of Europe or France (Fontanari 2019; Kofman 2019; Vianelli 2017). Another part of them remains in Italy, in situations of extreme vulnerability and social, residential and work marginalization. In the vast majority of cases, those who decide to stay in the Peninsula live in precarious, informal and unhealthy housing situations (Bolzoni et al. 2015; Netto 2011) and work in conditions of extreme labour exploitation, particularly in the primary sector (Belloni 2016; Sanò 2017; Talani 2018). However, this also implies intense *internal mobility* (Sanò and Della Puppa 2020) from the northern regions to the southern ones and, again, back to the northern regions; from eastern regions to the western ones; and from the Alpine areas to the towns in the valleys; as well as daily cross-border mobility (Aris Escarcena 2018; Belloni 2016; D'Angelo 2019; Menghi 2018; Wyss 2019). Obviously, such international and internal mobilities intersect and fuel each other (Belloni 2016; Fontanari 2019; Ingvars and Gíslason 2018).

Such conditions affect not only migrants lacking regular residence permits but frequently extend even to those who have regular documents (Sanò, Storato and Della Puppa 2021; Schuster 2005; Sigona 2012; Storato, Sanò and Della Puppa 2021; Wyss 2019). Administrative legitimacy hardly ever coincides with social, working, and housing inclusion for the refugees. On the contrary, the mechanisms of exploitation of migrant labour have intensified in recent years, and this is largely due to anomalies within the reception centres for refugees and asylum seekers. In many cases, these centres tend to be places for the informal recruitment of the workforce (Sanò 2017).

As underlined, those who try to survive in Italy are subject to intense internal mobility, which causes these people to move cyclically from the northern regions, where there is a network of minimal and low-threshold services, to the southern regions, where the migrants have access to social networks and – albeit in precarious and exploitative conditions – manage to place themselves temporarily in the informal and seasonal job market (Ortensi 2015; Talani 2018). Such a scenario thus confirms Italy's place within the 'Mediterranean model of migration' (partly based on illegal migration, amnesty laws and strong informal market labour) and its role as a 'migratory crossroads' (criss-crossed by incoming, internal and, especially, *outgoing* migration movements) (Ambrosini 2018; Colucci 2018; King 1993; King and Black 1997; King and De Bono 2013; King, Lazaridis and Tsardanidis 1999; Pugliese 2002; 2011), although, in the last decades, the profiles of the persons involved in this kind of mobility have slowly changed (Della Puppa 2018). Such a perspective would allow, on the one hand, us to delve into the current transformations of the labour market in the countries of Mediterranean Europe, including the structural importance of the informal work. On the other hand, to allow us observe the role and functioning of migrant networks: the capital of accumulated relations used before and during the migration experience (Schapendonk 2017; Vigh 2020).

For these reasons, Italy constitutes a litmus test of contemporary European mobility and a privileged context to analyse how territorial development inequalities affect internal mobility, often with contradictory results. Indeed, mobility does not seem to be oriented only towards the wealthiest and most developed areas – from minor local contexts to urban and metropolitan ones – but often starts from these areas towards the more marginal and economically backward ones (Sanò and Della Puppa 2020). Here, then, mobility – and even more so the new mobilities of these new protagonists – can be multiple, contradictory, ambivalent and coexist in their heterogeneity, like the facets of a prism.

However, before continuing, we believe it appropriate to dwell on a crucial issue for our reasoning and for the entire *Special Issue*. As the reader will have noticed, we have distanced ourselves from the expression 'forced migration', a concept that, from our point of view, should be problematized,

deconstructed and subjected to criticism. Actually, in the same way, we distance ourselves from the ideological distinction between the so-called 'forced migration' and 'voluntary' or 'economic' migration. This definition – and distinction – suitable for a science of state and a thought of state, of the dominant doxa, is meaningless when compared with the harshness of material relations, as well as social and migration dynamics. To emigrate (and, therefore, to immigrate) is almost always a 'forced choice': a non-choice, determined by structural factors that shape, condition and determine decisions and individual trajectories. Just as it is a *forced* emigration (and, therefore, a *forced* immigration) because of wars, political instability and persecutions, therefore, so is the *emigration* dictated by the depletion of natural and social resources, lack of labour and economic prospects, liberalist policies, dismantling of welfarist protections, growing social polarization, environmental disasters, climate change.

By questioning the possible and real meanings of the adjective 'forced', we realized that if forcing exists, it should rather be framed within the processes of categorization, labelling, infantilization and cohabitation that are put in place when migrants arrive in destination countries (Feldman 2012). By reversing the point of observation, therefore, one can see that people are *forced* to play the role of the asylum seeker, as otherwise they would be left out of the system or deported; that they are *forced* to live with other people they do not know (forced cohabitation) within the reception centres; that they are *forced* to abide by the rules of the system and be dependent on the operators (relationships of dependency and infantilization). Based on these elements, we believe that to be correctly understood, the definition of 'forced' must be applied to the context of arrival and not so much to the reasons for departure.

### Once again, 'a model for Europe'

The issues that characterize the framework of international protection in Italy also seem destined to escalate on account of governmental measures (the so-called 'Security Decrees': D.L. 113/2018; L.132/2018; D.L. 53/2019), which aim to dismantle the SPRAR (Protection System of Asylum Seekers and Refugees) system – the only system that guarantees a minimum opportunity of social inclusion for asylum seekers (Driel 2020) – and to eliminate the possibility of 'humanitarian protection', a status that covers a wide range of situations and that has provided a regular residence permit to a large part of asylum seekers (Campesi, 2018; D'Angelo 2019; Della Puppa, Gargiulo and Semprebon 2020; Felsen 2018). Basically, these political and legislative changes, which *have not been abolished* by further recent legislative changes (D.L. 130/2020; L. 173/2020) (Della Puppa and Sanò 2020), fit well into a wider international framework, modify the whole European migration scenario (Pinelli 2017), starting

from the Italian one. It should be underlined that social sciences have mostly deepened the trajectories of mobility of the native people (Amit 2014) or so-called 'economic migrants' (Della Puppa 2018). Much more rarely, refugees and asylum seekers have been perceived and framed as mobile subjects, protagonists of multiple and plural geographic and migration movements. On the rare occasions when this has been done, the mobility has been observed exclusively in its international declination and never as internal mobility with its implications on the international one. Despite the so-called 'mobility turn' (Faist 2013; Salazar 2017; Sheller and Urry 2006; Heil et al. 2017) and the fact that mobile ethnography is by no means new in anthropology and migration studies (Heil et al. 2017), the anthropological and sociological literature have considered the mobilities of refugees and asylum seekers outside the reception system even more rarely.

Therefore, the mobility of refugees and asylum seekers is a new and noteworthy issue that should be deepened into a collection with an international and not only an Italian-centred view. Indeed, it must be emphasized that Italy can be considered a starting point and a privileged observatory through which to observe migration and mobility transformations in Europe. Italy is a crucial country for the arrival and transit of asylum seekers in Europe and, above all, for the analysis of their future mobility trajectories. Thus, the *Special Issue* intends to collect contributions focused on the social changes that are reshaping migration scenarios in Italy, with particular attention to the paths of international and national mobility of refugees and asylum seekers outside the reception system, as well as their geographical, social and migration trajectories. It focuses on the movement of refugees and asylum seekers as well as the impact of the policies aimed at governing their mobility on their everyday life and daily strategies, looking at Italy and towards Europe from the vantage point of view of the Italian side of the Mediterranean basin (Pinelli 2017).

The migration dynamics that affected the Mediterranean route in the last years constitute a point of discontinuity and rupture in the governance of migration, namely a crisis of the mainstream model adopted to manage the mobility of so-called 'forced' migrants. It should be noted that EU governments and institutions set the goal of modifying this model, as – from their point of view – many factors put the Schengen agreement and the system of control, discipline and management of migration mobility under pressure, such as: (1) arrivals by the sea (partially uncontrolled and ungovernable); (2) the Italian lax policies of '*laissez-faire/laissez-passer*' through and outside its territory (especially in 2013–2015) not applying the Dublin Regulation and putting the European and intra-European borders in crisis; (3) and, especially, the so-called 'secondary movements' from Italy and through the Schengen territories and within the Schengen area (Fontanari 2019; Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2018).

Here, then, the EU pushes to reinforce both outer borders – the Mediterranean and the Balkan ones – and inner borders, ‘imposing border areas within the Schengen area and transitional territories’ (Pinelli 2017, 6), placed in Italy, such as Ventimiglia, Chiasso, Pozzallo. The so-called ‘hot spots’ should not be forgotten either (Tazzioli and Garelli 2020), ‘disembarkation areas and contiguous zones’, in which migrants are subjected to identification and fingerprints procedures, once again, placed especially in southern Italy (Trapani, Lampedusa, Taranto, Pozzallo, Porto Empedocle) (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2018), but defined by EU documents as ‘areas of external borders of EU’. That is, ‘buffer zones’ aimed at filtering, separating, stratifying, hierarchizing migrants and controlling their mobility (Sciurba 2017) that achieved ‘a new frontierization of the border control regime’ (Fassin 2016).

Finally, the EU, through Italy, is also relocating and outsourcing its external border, making agreements with adjacent peripheral countries and ‘institutions’, such as Libya and Turkey. A reinforcement of the system of physical and social borders located outside and within the EU is taking and took place. It is no coincidence that the European Agenda on Migration was launched, in May 2015, to better regulate migration movements, between 2015 and 2020, and defined as ‘the European response which conjugates internal and external European policy for better managing migration in all its aspects’, by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, in 2015. It should be stressed that the Agenda directly impacted and is still impacting, on the one hand, on the mobility trajectories and strategies of refugees and asylum seekers both in Italy and Europe, and, on the other hand on Italy as the ‘southern European borderland’ (Bigo and Giuld 2005; Borri 2017; De Genova 2017; Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2018; Rigo 2018). Therefore, for migration policies, Italy proves, once again, to be ‘a model for Europe’ (Basso and Perocco, 2003).

## A political and economic issue

This ‘mobile border strategy’ (De Genova 2017; Fontanari 2017) implies a continuous externalizing and localizing control over the EU’s borders, aimed at reducing migrants’ rights and the so-called ‘secondary movements’ and ‘asylum shopping’, that is to say, migrants’ mobility (Tazzioli and Garelli 2020), represented by the EU and its members as ‘a political and social scandal’. However, the movements, strategies and practices of migrants always exceed, in one way or another, the regulatory, disciplinary and governmental devices of state powers (De Genova 2017; Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2018). If, on the one hand, the EU and its member countries segment and ‘nationalize’ refugees and asylum seekers, anchoring them to specific national and local territories through the Dublin regulation and the devices above described; on the other hand, the individuals put in place forms of resistance that implies mobility practices within the borders of the EU. In



concrete, this means that they factually claim a European right to asylum and put into practice the potentially subversive nature of mobility (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2018). Migration does not start or finish with crossing a physical and political border, nor with the recognition of the asylum status, obtaining a residence permit (Borri 2017; Fontanari 2019; Pinelli 2017). Rather, it implies a long struggle and everyday forms of resistance, that take place also through different forms of mobility, through and within national, political, symbolic, geographic and daily borders. Thus, it represents an issue that involves the whole of Europe and not just its southern border – Italy – just as the European Agenda on Migration has lucidly grasped and how, with equal lucidity, anthropologists, sociologists and ethnographers must frame and deepen.

These political devices have the effect of undermining the right to mobility and movement, but also the right to rooting and immobility (San Della Puppa 2020). Hence, the articles of this Special Issue also aim to highlight the consequences that such political strategies have on migrants, emphasizing the fundamental issues of freedom of movement and the abolition of borders, the denunciation of repression and the disavowal of rights to which migrants are subject while entering into Italy and Europe – or into Europe through Italy – and the obstacles placed by Italian and European governments to their mobility.

At the same time, however, in these pages, we would like to recognize the structural causes underlying contemporary migrations (global inequalities, wars, colonialism and neocolonialism, environmental and climatic devastation ...) and, consequently, underline how international migrations themselves – from global peripheries towards the metropolizes of the world system and within them – do not constitute a generic response to a generic impulse to migrate, but, as we have anticipated, a mandatory choice, since no one leaves their country, family and friends relations if, somehow, not forced to do so (Basso and Perocco 2003). Therefore, if the forms of disavowal and denial of the right to immigration and mobility must be denounced, the causes that emigration and mobility impose on them must be denounced even more.

Above all, we want to make it clear that the political devices embedded in the borders and acted upon through the repression of migrants and the criminalization of mobility are not ends in themselves or the mere denial of a 'civil right', rather they constitute instruments of repression, a tool of submission and discipline, aimed at making migrants accept increasingly worse living and working conditions. Therefore, the issue of mobility (and its denial) must be read in its intimate connection with that of work (and its exploitation), and the political dimension must be traced back to the economic sphere.

## Spatial, temporal, existential im-mobility

In a sense, the contributions collected here all strive to recount the infinite 'odysseys of illegality' (Khosravi 2010) undertaken by those who travel and move within and outside the borders of Europe, in an attempt to find or reach their destination.

Observed from a distance, these infinite odysseys all seem to resemble each other; that is, they seem to be part of a great and unique epic narrative, held together by the constant repetition and revitalization of semantic and geographical *topoi*. However, closely observed – as the authors of this issue have done – the uniqueness and compactness of this great epic narrative give way to the inevitable cracks caused by the distinctions that can be drawn between one life story and another.

What these close observations shelter us from is the risk of placing the geographical and biographical trajectories of today's migrants within a mythological basis that, although fascinating, tends to 'naturalize' and 'universalize' the singular implications of a journey. In other words, since myths by their very nature tend to crystallize events and provide us with a univocal and universally valid key to interpret them, the stylistic and rhetorical operation that accompanies the mythologization of travellers' experiences coincides with what can certainly be defined as a practice of de-politicization of experience (Malkki 1996).

Another risk from which close ethnographic observations protect us is that of attributing to the experience of the journey a purely spatial connotation (Brux, Hilden Per and Middelthon 2019; degli Uberti 2019; El Shaarawi 2015), namely devoid of an analysis of the category of time and, above all, of the perceptions that subjects in transit (Fontanari 2019) experience and process depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves.

The introduction of the category of time in the study of migrants' geographical trajectories undoubtedly gives rise to considerable epistemological and methodological complications, since the observation of this category cannot disregard an orientation of the ethnographic gaze capable of scrutinizing the mechanisms and processes of subjective incorporation of the notion of time.

Highlighting these mechanisms leads to the discovery of a tendency that, starting with Fabien's work (1983), anthropology has endeavoured to deconstruct (Kirstoglou and Simpson 2020), showing the hegemonic character that is hidden in the narrative strategy: 'of projecting the Other, the "object" of representation, in a time different from that in which the "subject" who writes lives' (Palumbo 2021, 5).

Jabobsen and Karlsen (2021) come to the same conclusion when they describe the way scholars generally tend to represent the life and waiting experiences of migrants while travelling or in destination countries. In

particular, the two authors take up the considerations of Ramsay (2019), according to whom the act of denying the coevalness of refugees and migrants, by analysing them as a distinct category of experience, defined by their being 'stuck' and perpetually 'in crisis', is tantamount to hiding the widespread level of precarization generated by global capitalism (Antunes 2018) and internalized by most contexts, and not only by migrant ones.

In this sense, relying on the effectiveness of paradigms – and in this case on the epistemological compactness provided by the mobility turn (Heil et al. 2017; Faist 2013; Salazar 2017; Sheller and Urry 2006;) or the temporal turn (Kirstoglou and Simpson 2020) – can lead to error, since if, on the one hand, these paradigms ensure the understanding of a society that is no longer static but in continuous evolution and mutation, on the other hand, they neglect to highlight the practices of subjectification that occur in the act of migrating, where migration is configured as the spatial response to the impossibility of progressing in time (Ferguson 2006; Karlsen 2021; Mains 2007) and to the condition that Hage (2009) has defined as 'stuckedness'.

Based on these considerations, it is, therefore, necessary to make use of a category of time that, just as for space, critiques the processes of naturalization and universalization, synchronizing itself rather with the complexity of individual experiences that are determined from time to time. Making a further interpretative effort, it is then necessary to pay attention to the images that run after both categories and that strategically try to synthesize them through the use of phrases such as 'landscape of time' (Andersson 2014) or 'timescape' (Kirstoglou and Simpson 2020). But more than that, attention must be paid to the 'temporal architectures' (Sharma 2014) that underpin and traverse migration, distinguishing the relational nature of the movement, waiting or stuckedness, implicitly subject to the fact that subjects experience these conditions to different degrees and always from their particular geopolitical and chronopolitical location (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021). On closer inspection, the combination of mobility and immobility expressed through the notion of im-mobility (degli Uberti 2019; Nimführ and Sesay 2019; Shapendonk and Steel 2014), also aims to deconstruct the hegemonic character of a narrative that claims to represent the mobility of 'others' only from the point of view of the subject who observes and not of those who move, generating the belief that being spatially immobile is equivalent to being so from a personal and existential point of view.

Rather, mobility and immobility should be observed in the light of ethnographic accounts and findings, including by analysing the metaphors that subjects use to describe and express the conditions in which they find themselves (Karlsen 2021). In doing so, both will appear as the result of a combination that creates a prism, which in turn is composed of other combinations and multiple faces.

This level of analysis, therefore, allows us to add a further piece to the mosaic of studies and research on the international and internal im-mobility of migrants, mainly that which refers to the existential dimension. To argue that at different levels and to different degrees, migrants' paths are shaped by the politics of time and space is to assert that they also operate on an emotional and existential level (Jackson 2008; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019). The expectation generated by the protracted uncertainty (Bailey et al. 2002) and limbo (El Shaarawi 2015; Menjívar 2006; Nimführ and Sesay 2019; Shapendonk and Steel 2014) – which can be traced back to the moments before the journey, as well as to those determined by the difficulties of regularization (Karlsen 2021; Khosravi 2010) and of fitting into the socio-economic fabric of the destination countries (Bryan 2018; Lucht 2012; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019) – brings into play the relationship between the situational and existential dimensions (Dwyer 2009). Considering the existential dimension within im-mobility pathways, therefore, means paying attention to the emotional oscillation of subjects, who as Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019) suggest, can go through several stages, passing from depression to hope, but also to the mechanisms of agency that are activated in conditions of waiting or limbo (Brun 2015; Karlsen 2021).

Referring to the work of Berlant (2011), Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019) argue that the scholars' task is to document how cruel migratory regimes cultivate expectations and false promises of a better life in transiting individuals, thus generating a continuous emotional oscillation. To this objective, which is undoubtedly primary, the effort to recognize and attribute to waiting a nature that is not necessarily negative must be added, showing how it can instead take on the role of tactic (Andersson 2014; Khosravi 2014): freeing it, that is, from what is understood as non-time (Lucht 2012) or non-action (Bourdieu 2000; Crapanzano 1985).

The decision to wait or to remain anchored to a place does not always have to do with the subject's inability to navigate im-mobility (Nimführ and Sesay 2019), but on the contrary, these decisions can reveal the subject's ability to forge alliances and build relationships with local actors, to find stability and make space for itself in so-called 'transit' territories (Sanò 2019; Shapendonk 2017; Shapendonk and Steel 2014) and thus also to re-signify the territorial contexts in which it lives. In this sense, studying mobility in the terms in which the authors of this *Special Issue* have done so, amounts to an attempt to connect im-mobility pathways with local actors and networks, but also to show how these pathways modify and shape territories from time to time.

Together with the attempt to reinterpret the categories of space and time in the light of migrants' im-mobility paths, the authors of this *Special Issue* also question the role of territories and, more specifically, of the representations that arise from the idea that mobility is always directed from south to

north. Through Altin's ethnographic investigation (in this issue), we can, for example, observe the movement that migrants make as they move from eastern to western Italy. And again, in Sanò and Della Puppa's contribution, as well as in Cottino's (both in this issue), we observe how the south is constantly changing its skin, transforming itself from a place of arrival and transit into a place of 'rootedness', albeit a problematic one. The choice of comparing two territorial contexts, located in the north and south of the peninsula, as Filippi, Giliberti and Queirolo Palmas and Sanò and Della Puppa do in this issue, aims more at establishing connections than focusing on differences. The primary objective is indeed to deconstruct the common sense that gives rise to the image of a depressed and inhospitable south and a rich and hospitable north, giving more space to the role of social networks and territorial solidarity in the paths of arrival, transit and destination. Paying attention to the subjectification processes of migrants and, in particular, to how they renegotiate the notions of space and time regulated by the devices of borders, reception system and post-reception, the image that emerges is that of prismatic mobility, that is, shaped by projects, aspirations and instances of freedom that are difficult to represent under a single large movement.

### The pandemic factor

The explosion and eruption of the pandemic, being a global phenomenon that can only bring profound social transformations, will inevitably have an intense impact on the – equally global – phenomenon of international migration and, therefore, on the trajectories of mobility of asylum seekers and refugees.

Despite relatively little time, much has already been written on the impact of the Coronavirus crisis on migration, migrants and mobility (Della Puppa and Perocco 2021), both from an international perspective (Della Puppa and Perocco 2021; Pastore 2021; Prencipe and Sanfilippo 2021; Sirkeci 2020; Sirkeci and Cohen 2020) and with a specific focus on Italy (Ambrosini 2020; Della Puppa and Perocco 2021; Pastore 2021; Prencipe and Sanfilippo 2021, Sanò 2020).

What we can frame as a double (health and social) crisis (Della Puppa and Perocco 2021) – as well as an economic crisis and of the capitalist system – has affected social classes, workers, genders, territories, 'ethnic', national and social groups in different ways, deepening social inequalities and worsening the social conditions of the disadvantaged ones: among the most affected social groups, we find migrants and, among migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (Costanzo et al. 2020; Pitzalis 2020; Sanò 2020). As Della Puppa and Perocco underlined (2021), restricted in their mobility and stranded in countries of departure or transit, huddled in reception centres in precarious

conditions and hampered in admission procedures and applications for asylum or international protection, forced to work despite health risks, discriminated against in their access to prevention or treatment, impoverished and more exploited in the labour market, accused of carrying the virus or being immune from it (Costanzo et al. 2020; Della Puppa and Perocco 2021; Pitzalis 2020; Sanò 2020), asylum seekers and refugees are one of the most vulnerable groups at risk of suffering the heaviest consequences of the pandemic.

Both Pandemics and migration reveal the deepest contradictions and social issues of contemporary society, its political organization (Della Puppa and Perocco 2021). If much has been written on the social transformations brought about by migration, as well as, in the wake of Sayad's lesson (1999, 2006), on the ability of migration to reveal what one has an interest in ignoring; still little has been said about the global change that the pandemic is bringing about, as well as about its social revealing and political unveiling action (Della Puppa and Perocco 2021).

Some aspects of the 'mirror effect' of the pandemic have already emerged. We can give two examples: (1) an even more intense criminalization of the immobility of refugees and asylum seekers, represented as 'infectors'; manifested in the media and political attack against the reception centres in which COVID-19 pandemic broke out, almost always attributable to the Italian social workers who worked there and, above all, to the conditions of massing and absence of security measures that characterize these places. But also revealed in their confinement on quarantine ships moored in the ports of the Italian coasts; and (2) The reduction to 'work fodder' of refugees and asylum seekers and the function of 'industrial – or, better, agricultural – reserve army', in which they are confined and to which they are condemned, to the point that it is possible to speak of a process of 'refugeeization' of the agricultural workforce (Dines and Rigo 2015); as emerged on the occasion of the amnesty provision for illegal migrants (enormously increased thanks to the aforementioned governmental measures – D.L. 113/2018; L.132/2018; D.L. 53/2019), who should have put their health at risk, exposing themselves to contagion, in exchange for a temporary and short-term residence permit, to relaunch the Italian agricultural economy, in crisis due to the pandemic and the first lockdown, during the harvest season.

Furthermore, it is possible that, shortly, when humanity will have learned how to live with the pandemic and societies will be reshaped by its social-economic effects, the 'virus issue' will be used instrumentally and ideologically in politics and the rhetoric against refugees and asylum seekers. That is, punishing legislation and propaganda against them – temporarily supplanted in the media by the theme of the pandemic – could become even harsher in affecting refugees and asylum seekers, making entry and regular residence more difficult, discriminating them in the labour market and several

areas of social life, making their im-mobility more difficult (Della Puppa and Perocco 2021).

However, already today, the pandemic and its instrumental, ideological and political uses against refugees and asylum seekers are having a strong impact on their trajectories of im-mobility. If, as we have anticipated, these mobility paths were already contradictory and apparently paradoxical, the impact of the Coronavirus crisis – which has not been linear – has contributed to making them even more ambivalent. Therefore, with this *Special Issue*, we will also try to deepen and analyse a part of this impact, showing its ambivalence.

### **Ethnographic research in times of ‘Security Decrees’ and COVID-19 pandemic**

Although directly related to the work of social scientists, another aspect that coincided with the outbreak of the pandemic concerns the changes, the difficulties and the disappearance of the possibility of doing ethnographic fieldwork. When we discussed with the authors of this issue the appropriateness of devoting passages of our contributions to the transformations and continuities that have emerged in our respective fields of enquiry, we could not help but assess the effects of the epidemic on our research and, more generally, on the ethnographic method – since the contributions contained in this *Special Issue* are all the result of research carried out with qualitative and ethnographic methodologies.

Some authors in this issue recount the difficulties they encountered in accessing the camps and collecting in-depth interviews. If at the beginning im-mobility was a condition intimately linked to the experience of migrants in transit, with the onset of the epidemic and the measures aimed at containing the spread of contagion – domestic confinement above all – the criticalities linked to this condition ended up assuming a much more general and complex scope. Although the consequences for researchers are minimal, and certainly not comparable to those that occur along migratory routes and trajectories, the criticalities linked to im-mobility have nevertheless generated considerable complications in terms of research in the field. In particular, among the main methodological concerns now raised by the pandemic, we can list at least three: how to reconcile physical and social distancing with what most characterizes and distinguishes the ethnographic method, namely prolonged immersion in the field and the practice of participant observation? Is it possible, once these two crucial moments of field research have disappeared, to continue doing it? The possibility of contracting the disease or, worse, of becoming a vehicle of contagion to the detriment of the people we are researching with may ethically force us to

backtrack on our research projects and goals? (see also Venables and Pellecchia 2017, on Ebola)

The answers to these concerns derive in part from what the authors put on paper when discussing mobility and immigration in this issue, where each of them insists on the need to underline the mechanisms of agency and the reactions of subjects to the conditions of stuckedness, waiting and crisis created by the devices that govern the phases of crossing external and internal borders. On the other hand, the answers to these concerns derive from the very nature of the ethnographic method, which, unlike other methods, does not depend solely on the subject who uses it, but also on the subjects and terrains with which the ethnographer relates and measures himself. Ethnography is in this sense a process in the making – restlessness to use Palumbo's words (2021) – which tends to take on the forms and risks that arise from time to time in the contexts of investigation. In other words, in this specific case ethnography is reserved the task of documenting how individuals react and cope with the transformations imposed by the epidemic and what means they use to make the 'adjustments' they need to survive (Fine, Cahn and Bassetti 2020).

Although the pandemic has certainly generated several fractures (Abramowitz 2017) in the everyday experience of the subjects observed and of the researchers, what we as ethnographers feel is essential to point out is that none of these fractures derives solely from the epidemic, which has, if anything, served to exacerbate pre-existing criticalities and problems.

If this is amply demonstrated in the contents of the contributions collected here, which more or less explicitly outline lines of continuity between the pre- and post-Coronavirus, even from the methodological point of view the feeling is that some conditions and conditioning do not originate only from the pandemic but from previous situations. This is particularly true if we consider the Italian case, in which in the years between 2018 and 2020 migration policies and economic management of socio-welfare services for migrant people have contributed to making the ethnographic practice more difficult. Specifically, we are referring to the application of the security decree converted into law, due to which the functioning of the national reception system has undergone heavy changes and reported important repercussions. The reduction in the number of places in the second reception, intended only for holders of international protection and for unaccompanied foreign minors, as well as the drastic reduction in the cost specifications for the facilities and assistance to guests, caused the collapse of the system, resulting in both a drastic decrease in the number of people received in the institutional circuits and a reduction in the number of those employed in reception (Pitzalis 2020). But, also from a normative point of view, the decree had consequences, due to the cancellation of humanitarian protection. As this form of protection was statistically the most widespread among asylum



seekers, its disappearance caused the loss of status and the irregularity of many people. Thus, faced with the impossibility of regularizing or renewing their status, many migrants decided to abandon the Italian territory or became invisible.

The circumstances arising from the implementation of the security decree had already compromised the conduct of research in the field and, more importantly, the relationships that researchers had built over time and relied on to achieve the results and intentions inscribed in their research.

### Structure of the *Special Issue*

This *Special Issue* of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* stems from reflections that emerged during a panel hosted by the 'Migration Conference', organized in Bari, in June 2019. As we have said elsewhere (Della Puppa and Sanò 2020), not all the protagonists of that panel are featured in this issue and not all authors included here have had the opportunity to physically participate in the conference. Despite this, that dialogue was one of the first moments in which, as curators, we began to systematically discuss the new migratory phase that is characterizing Italy, its reception system, and Europe.

Since that meeting, despite a relatively short period, the planet and the capitalist system that organizes its economic and social activities have been deeply and irreversibly marked by the profound changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent – ecological, health, economic and social – crisis on a global scale. As a factor characterizing this phase of capitalism, the pandemic will leave nothing 'as it was before' and will constitute a watershed moment in what has been called the 'age of migration' (de Haas, Castles and Miller 2020). For this reason, all the authors of this *Special issue* could not exempt themselves from returning to fieldwork, updating and, often, rewriting their contributions and reviewing the reflections made during the conference.

After this Editorial, the *Special Issue* opens with a contribution by Stefano degli Uberti who offers a theoretical reflection on the concepts of mobility and immobility, on decision-making processes, geographical trajectories, aspirational horizons, practices and migratory imaginaries, introducing operational categories used in subsequent empirical contributions.

Then, Sanò and Della Puppa, through the narration of two ethnographic cases placed in northern (the Autonomous Province of Trento) and southern Italy (the Plain of Gioia Tauro), inaugurate the analysis of the facets of the prism of new mobilities, analysing the forms of mobility and immobility of migrants and asylum seekers who are outside the institutional reception system. The authors retrace the biographical and geographic trajectories of migrants and compare them with territorial policies. By analysing two very different contexts from the economic and social point of view, they highlight

the similarities between these territories, the mobility and immobility they generate and through which they are crossed, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, by criticizing the 'common-sense' and ethnographically operating the categories of mobility and immobility, the article introduces and outlines the general framework, directions, perspectives and key concepts that guide subsequent articles.

If Sanò and Della Puppa delineate the trajectories of an *internal* im-mobility on the south–north–south axis, Elena Fontanari, although on the same geographical axis, proposes the analysis of European and *international* mobility that, of course, also involves the Italian context. Drawing on the ethnographic field with a group of refugees moving from Italy to Germany, she gives insights on how refugees daily negotiate the European borders and how borders affect their lives in the long term and analyses the process of migration to Europe stressing how human mobility is governed at the global level along with differential and racialized lines. Her contribution discusses the theoretical concept of 'Departheid' developed by Kalir (2019) to highlight the structural violence deployed by European and national institutions upon migrants, and adds a focus on the temporal dimension stressing the intrinsic relation between the structures of power and the management of time embedded in the governance of migrant mobility. Practices of institutional abandonment and criminalization of refugees in their intra-EU mobility are affecting the temporality of refugees, who react through everyday struggles of time re-appropriation aimed to regain control over their own lives and subjectivity.

Referring again to a framework of European and international mobility that intersects the Italian context, Roberta Altin shifts her ethnographic gaze on the east–west axis, on the passage of asylum seekers across the Italian eastern border and the so-called 'Balkan routes'. Indeed, since the last so-called 'migrant crisis', this route has resumed its old function as an overland passage from Eastern to Central Europe and the area between Italy and Slovenia has constituted a migratory crossroads towards Northern Europe. In the last two years, there has been a constant increase of rejection policies in Italy and in the western Balkans that has forced asylum seekers on undercover paths, with stops, blocks, rejections and many attempts to overcome the militarized borders. Her article reports the consequences of the new migration policies on the Balkan route toward Italy, with a particular focus on the exclusion and the resistance of migrants that, like karst waters, are changing trajectories and tactics along the road. She states that the Balkans constitute a liminal area where the process of 'bordering' is played both by migrants and by European policies. Through the concept of 'tidemark', the underground flow of migrants is interpreted as a typical rite of passage with suspended temporality and reflux mobility where the Balkans constitutes a 'waiting room' and a liminal transit area toward Central Europe.

Altin uses the metaphorical and explanatory images of ‘tidemark’, and ‘underground – and karst – flow’ of migrants to bring to light and show the dynamics of what Davide Filippi, Luca Giliberti and Luca Queirolo Palmas ethnographically and analytically describe as ‘underground railroad’. Specifically, they focus on the networks supporting migrants in transit and the practices of solidarity carried out since the beginning of the ‘migration crisis’ in 2015. These networks – while increasingly important and prominent in contemporary Europe – are still understudied and have only recently been addressed in migration studies. The ethnographic fieldwork takes place in two crucial border zones: on the one hand, the island of Lampedusa, which is a sea point of entry into Europe through Italy; on the other, the Susa Valley, an alpine point of exit from Italy that allows the passage to France. The authors try to explain how the solidarity networks put together to interact with the mobility practices of migrants in transit, as well as how these practices of solidarity fit in with the ways authorities act at the border. Furthermore, they focus on these border zones – entry and exit points for primary and secondary movements – explaining how the pandemic has shifted the functioning of the solidarity network. Therefore, Filippi, Giliberti and Queirolo Palmas illuminate the link between solidarity and mobility and add a further piece to the analysis that the *Special Issue* offers of the phenomenon of the prism of mobilities of asylum seekers and refugees, putting internal and international mobility in tension and comparison, the one entering from the south and the one exiting from the north and westward. Finally, the analysis of the prism of the new mobilities is completed with the deepening of the facet concerning the geographical mobility from the mountain areas to the valleys that Gaia Cottino describes as ‘vertical’ to refer to this regional and local mobility. Indeed, in the past twenty years, a renewed trend of migration has flown into the Italian Alps, inverting the out-migration trend. New mountain dwellers, a heterogeneous population ranging from former urban residents who chose to inhabit highlands to asylum seekers forced into a highland life while waiting for their documents, have adjusted to the socio-ecological environment which imposes mobility. The author analyses in the first place the twofold mobility of the mountain dwellers, vertical in altitude and latitude, and stresses, on the side, the inequalities and exploitation at the basis of the latitudinal mobility and, on the other side, the mobility power and capital migrants agentively play in such regime of mobility. Questioning to which extent mobility can affect the multiple and varying migration projects, the article argues that juridical tools such as the network contract within the alpine farming system can introduce migrants and enhance their social mobility.

The *Special Issue* is crossed by several intersections and references between the various articles of which it is composed. In fact, in addition to a general theoretical framework, outlined by Stefano degli Uberti, which acts as a common frame for all articles, an example is the dialogue between the effectively explanatory ethnographic suggestion of the ‘underground railroad’, developed by

Giliberti, Filippi and Queirolo Palmas, and that of ‘tidemark’ and ‘karst flow’, adopted by Altin – both of which have already been addressed in this Editorial. Again, the gaze on the alpine valleys that act as a barrier and, at the same time, hinge, to the north-west, of Giliberti, Filippi and Queirolo Palmas, calls into question the analysis of ‘vertical mobility’, in local contexts, of Gaia Cottino. The same Giliberti, Filippi and Queirolo Palmas who, in their ethnography on entry and exit points for primary and secondary movements, create an ethnographic connection with the internal im-mobilities presented by Sanò and Della Puppa, who move from south to north to south, with their multi-sited ethnography, between the Autonomous Province of Trento and the Plain of Gioia Tauro. If we connect the geographical dimension to the temporal one, the proximities between the space factor and the time factor, between spatiality and temporality, which cross the ethnographies of Elena Fontanari and Roberta Altin, are emblematic.

Therefore, once again, the mobility – and immobility – of refugees and asylum seekers are reconfirmed as being the facets of a prism, difficult to define with univocal formulas, as it is characterized by luminous shades and shadows, contradictions, ambivalence. We leave it to the reader to trace further connections and further facets of the prism.

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