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DIGITAL MOBILITY, LOGISTICS, AND THE POLITICS OF MIGRATION

Mohammad Khalefeh, a 17-year-old boy from Syria, spoke on behalf of many refugees when interviewed about his journey across ten European countries in 2015, on foot, by boat, bus, car, and train: "without Facebook and Google Maps I really do not think I would have made it to Germany." And he was keen to emphasise that this was only possible with a strong network of relatives and friends, constantly exchanging information and knowledge. Maria Ullrich's article in this issue of *spheres* explores these new forms of media use by migrants and refugees focusing on the so-called Balkan route, during and after the "summer of migration" in 2015. And she makes a remarkable contribution to the understanding of this incorporation of logistical technologies and infrastructures (within the very fabric) of migration. Taking an "actor-centered" perspective of the "autonomy of migration approach", she sheds light on the uneven and contested process of the formation of "mobile commons" and "migrant digitalities"[1] that support and facilitate border crossings and geographical mobility.

Migrants' use of digital technologies is a relatively well-researched topic by now. To take a couple of examples, for several years now, Dana Diminescu has investigated how new digital communication technologies (DCTs) have resulted in the emergence of the "connected migrant", with deep implications for the experience of diaspora, as well as for the structure of transnational networks and spaces.[2] The use of smartphones and social media by refugees and migrants to counter isolation and to negotiate effects of distance, has been also explored in several sites, including the city of Naples and detention centres on islands in the Indian

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1 Dimitris Parsanoglou, Nicos Trimikliniotis and Vassilis Tsianos, *Mobile Commons. Migrant Digitalities and the Right to the City*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

2 Cp. Dana Diminescu, "Digital Methods for the Exploration, Analysis, and Mapping of e-Diasporas", *Social Science Information*, 51(4), 2012, pp. 451–458.

Ocean.[3] Maria Ullrich's intervention connects to recent scholarly work on the topic and uses the experiences across the Balkan route to study the ways in which digital and geographical mobility intersect to foster the 'collective power' of migrants and refugees. This is what makes up the unconventional nature of her study. I will briefly discuss her study by raising some questions that seem particularly important to me in order to pursue further research in the direction foreshadowed by Ullrich.

I spoke above of *logistical* technologies and infrastructures with respect to smartphones and social media used by migrants. One has only to think of the roles they play in the working of so-called "platform capitalism"[4] to intuitively understand the meaning of the reference to logistics. More generally, it is necessary to stress that the new developments in logistics, be it in the reorganisation of global supply chains or of urban spaces, prompted the emergence of a new "mobility paradigm", which lies at the heart of contemporary processes of capitalist globalisation.[5] We are now starting to realize that this new mobility paradigm also has deep implications for human mobility and its management. Just think of the prominence within policy debates and experimentations of the "just-in-time" and "to-the-point" labour migration recruitment schemes. Are we not confronted here with a logistical fantasy, with a kind of delivery model implemented within the field of human mobility? Processes of "logistification" are also reshaping border regimes, as the European instance demonstrates in a particularly clear way. Again, just think of the relevance of terms such as 'hotspots', 'corridors', 'platforms', and 'hubs' in recent attempts to reorganise border regimes after the challenges and disruptions of the "summer of migration".[6]

We know that what is presented as a smooth process of selection and management of human mobility, in reality has unbearable human costs, produces stranded populations, and harshly targets and punishes any form of 'unruly' mobility. But while it is crucial to continue to politically denounce all this, there is also a need to investigate the contours of the

3   Cp. Nicholas Harney, "Precarity, Affect and Problem Solving with Mobile Phones by Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrants in Naples, Italy", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 26(4), 2013, pp. 541–557; Kate Coddington and Alison Mountz, "Countering isolation with the use of technology: how asylum-seeking detainees on islands in the Indian Ocean use social media to transcend their confinement", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 10(1), 2014, pp. 97–112.

4   Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, London, Polity, 2016.

5   Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade*, Minneapolis, MI, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

6   See for instance Bernd Kasparek, "Routes, Corridors, and Spaces of Exception: Governing Migration and Europe", *Near Futures Online*, 1, 2016. Available at: http://nearfuturesonline.org/routes-corridors-and-spaces-of-exception-governing-migration-and-europe/ [accessed May 22, 2017].

new logistical rationality that is concurring to reshape border regimes. To situate refugees and migrants' media use in this framework highlights the tensions and contradictions that criss-cross that rationality. And it once again positions migration as a challenge to border regimes.

In her analysis of migrants' agency, Ullrich proposes to distinguish between "visible" and "invisible" forms, respectively characterised by a "political" and a "tactical" dimension. Again, the economy and politics of migrants' visibility has been often discussed in recent years.[7] Practices aimed at making themselves invisible in front of the state and other control agents are part and parcel of migrants' agency, both en route and where they eventually settle – particularly when they confront processes of illegalization. Social media and smartphones, Ullrich shows, have important roles to play in supporting such practices. Firstly, I think it would be important for further research in this area to take into consideration migrants' relations with the booming "migration industry".[8] This notion includes both actors that provide migrants with the expertise and infrastructural resources needed for border crossing and economic actors engaged in the control and limitation of mobility. Importantly, therefore, it blurs the boundary between legality and illegality, including smugglers and traffickers. How does social media use influence migrants' negotiations with these actors? What kind of economy and politics of visibility is deployed here to foster migrants' collective power? These questions seem particularly relevant to me in order to get a wider vista of the whole process of migration and of the incorporation of logistical technologies and infrastructures within it.

The second remark has to do with the distinction between the "political" and "tactical" dimension of migrants' agency, the former attributed to "visible" and the latter to "invisible" practices. It is not to deny, of course, that several forms of political agency imply a high degree of visibility. The so-called "march of hope" from Keleti station in Budapest toward the Austrian-Hungarian border in early September 2015 is a particularly impressive instance of that.[9] At the same time, I think there is a need to carefully investigate the relations between such forms of political engagement and the wide fabric of practices that either

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7   See for instance Martina Tazzioli and William Walters, "The Sight of Migration. Governmentality, Visibility and Europe's Contested Borders", *Global Society*, 30(3), 2016, pp. 445–464.

8   See for instance Ninna Nyberg Sørensen and Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen (eds.), *The Migration Industry and the Commercialization of International Migration*, London/New York, Routledge, 2013.

9   Cp. Bernd Kasparek and Marc Speer, "Of Hope. Ungarn und der lange Sommer der Migration", *Bordermonitoring.eu*, 2015. Available at: http://bordermonitoring.eu/ungarn/2015/09/of-hope/ [accessed May 22, 2017].

remain invisible or work the boundary between visibility and invisibility. What is a "tactic", after all? We can hark back here to Michel de Certeau's definition. While strategy, he writes, "assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it", a tactic is "a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localisation), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality".[10] The absence of a "proper" is something that shapes the condition of refugees and migrants, particularly while they are on the move, attempt to cross borders and as they traverse stretches of sea or land trying to eschew interception. The "tactics" they invent and deploy in such situations are also part of a specific politics of mobility and they shape in multiple ways the explicitly political forms of migrant agency. In the persistent and stubborn chant "Freedom" that characterises migrants' and refugees' demonstrations in many European cities, one can hear the resonance of such "tactics" and of the experience of mobility they enabled under the most violent forms of border control.

The autonomy of migration finds its expressions at this juncture between invisible and visible and political and tactical forms of agency. The investigation of these expressions requires an awareness of the structural framework within which they take shape. The use of smartphones, digital resources, and social media by migrants and refugees takes place within and against a border regime that is increasingly "logistified", digitalised, and securitized. The growing entanglement of technological devices with human mobility and its management is of course something that resonates with wider social developments. This entanglement, as Ullrich demonstrates, is also a field of contestation and struggle, where "mobile commons" are continually produced and reproduced, laying the basis for the circulation of knowledge and providing the resources for crossing borders. With an experience like "Alarmphone/WatchTheMed", also discussed by Ullrich, activists inspired by the militant tradition of abolitionism and by the project of building up a transnational "underground railroad", use the phone as a "thing" through which "migration struggles at sea become politicized".[11] The forging and multiplication of such devices of politicisation, combining technology, localised knowledges, and militant engagement, figure among the most important tasks we are confronted with today.

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10 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984, p. xix.

11 Maurice Stierl, "A Sea of Struggle – Activist Border Interventions in the Mediterranean Sea", Citizenship Studies, 20(5), 2016, pp. 561–578.