

From the Undocumented Migrant Movement to the Refugee “Crisis”: The Evolution of Categories of Action and Theoretical Issues

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Translated from the French by John Angell

The numerous migrants arriving on European soil since the summer of 2015 have confronted EU Member-States’ security-centered and highly restrictive responses, resulting in humanitarian dramas. This context of “crisis”¹—actually more a “crisis of hospitality” than a “migrant crisis”²— has dominated political and media discourses. Migrants’ mobility has also inspired unprecedented levels of social activity. On one hand, by organizing themselves and participating in protests against official policies, migrants improvise survival strategies, while also benefiting from concrete support despite their illegal status. On the other hand, they face overt rejection, refusal of even the most basic levels of care, brutality, and attempts to render them invisible.

In recent years, this situation has resulted in the intense, high-profile politicization of migrations,³ in turn reconfiguring the “space of social movements.”⁴ These developments have entailed the use of legitimate categories such as the “immigrant worker,” the “undocumented,” or the “refugee,” as well as grammars of public action, repertoires of collective action, the migratory experience, and the mechanisms of commitment to the “migrants’ cause.”

Given the notoriety of migrations and increased advocacy for migrant rights, it is vital to re-think two aspects of the phenomenon: First, the historicity and situated character of the identification of migration as a “problem,” and second, the theoretical paradigms that shape how researchers research the supposed problem. Our purpose in this collection is to combine

¹ Marie Bassi and Farida Souiah have investigated humanitarian dramas surrounding drownings of migrants at sea and their treatment by the media. The rapid development of this research sub-field illustrates the importance that it has acquired in the Mediterranean region and the dramas involved in the understanding and interpretation of migratory issues in Europe. Marie Bassi & Farida Souiah, *Corps migrants aux frontières méditerranéennes de l’Europe*, special issue, *Critique internationale*, 83, 2019.

² Viviane Albenga et al., “Les migrant·e·s dans l’impasse des gouvernances,” *Mouvements*, 93 (1), 2018, p. 7-11; Annalisa Lendaro, Claire Rodier, & Youri Lou Vertongen (Eds.), *La crise de l’accueil. Frontières, droits, résistances*, Paris: La Découverte, 2019.

³ Wouter van der Brug et al. (Eds.), *The Politicisation of Migration*, London: Routledge, 2015.

⁴ Lilian Mathieu, “L’espace des mouvements sociaux,” *Politix*, 77 (1), 2007, p. 131-151.

the sociology of social movements with the sociology of migration in order to call attention to two important issues in the ways in which the “migrants’ cause” has generally been addressed. First, we highlight the way in which the conception of an object whose construction is linked to categories of public action complicates the use of comparative research to study these movements in terms of both time and space. Second, we explore the influence of the theory of resources mobilization on how these movements are understood, resulting in the hyper-visibility of “supporters” and migrants’ invisibility as politically mobilized subjects.

Categories of Action and the Construction of the Object: Historical Perspectives and Geographical Decentering

As early as twenty years ago, Abdelmalek Sayad observed how the phenomenon of migrations depends on the way in which it is constructed as a public problem. In this way, he was directing our gaze towards “the social conditions surrounding the emergence of certain matters that exist as social objects only on the condition that we first constitute them as discursive objects, and, only then, as scientific objects.”⁵ This explains why academic production follows a rhythm dictated by the movement of the migrant cause.⁶

Multiple Images of the “Foreigner”

⁵ Abdelmalek Sayad, “Immigration et ‘pensée d’État,’” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 129, 1999, p. 16.

⁶ See the proliferation of studies after the 1996 occupation of the Saint-Bernard Church in Paris: Étienne Balibar et al., *Sans-papiers: l’archaïsme fatal*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999; Didier Fassin, Alain Morice, & Catherine Quiminal (Eds.), *Les lois de l’inhospitalité: les politiques de l’immigration à l’épreuve des sans-papiers*, Paris: La Découverte, 1997. See also studies after the undocumented worker strikes in France in 2008: Pierre Barron et al., *On bosse ici, on reste ici! La grève des sans-papiers: une aventure inédite*, Paris: La Découverte, 2011; Iana Mar, *Travailleurs, vos papiers!* Montreuil: Libertalia, 2011. And in the United States after the large protest marches in the Spring of 2006: Amalia Pallares & Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, *Marcha! Latino Chicago and the Immigrant Rights Movement*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010; Kim Voss & Irene Bloemraad, *Rallying for Immigrant Rights: The Fight for Inclusion in 21st Century America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Because social movements appear to determine the rhythms of scholarly production, design, and implementation, research is dependent on the sociopolitical context of such movements.⁷ Studies therefore in turn depend on the heterogeneity of the image of the foreigner that shape present-day social, scholarly, political, and media representations.⁸

Long a determining factor in how foreigners are represented in public discourse, the image of the “immigrant laborer”⁹ gradually faded after the 1980s under the combined effects of collapsing working-class institutions, the loss of legitimacy of Marxist views, and the supposed closing of borders to labor immigration.¹⁰ The image of the “children of immigration” replaced the immigrant laborer as the public face of immigration, reinforced by marches in support of equality and against racism¹¹ and movements of young people from low-income neighborhoods.¹² At the same time, given reduced prospects for legal immigration, stricter border controls have turned the limelight onto illegalization¹³ and hence towards the “clandestine” migrant who represents the new public face of immigration. In response to what was perceived as a stigmatizing representation, a number of protests such as the occupation of the Saint-Bernard Church in 1996 subsequently emphasized a more political category: “the undocumented.”¹⁴

Because asylum is among the few remaining paths to regularization, the “refugee” has recently become the legitimate public face of migration that was henceforth accepted by migrants themselves and by a number of support movements and associations. Using the figure of the refugee has indeed shaped activist discourses, which increasingly center on

⁷ Claire Cossée, “L’impossible neutralité des sciences sociales face aux catégorisations militantes,” *Migrations Société*, 128, 2010, p. 159-176.

⁸ For example, migrant women chronically lack visibility in research. Mirjana Morokvasic, “L’(in)visibilité continue,” *Cahiers du Genre*, 51 (2), 2011, p. 25-47.

⁹ A. Sayad, *La double absence. Des illusions de l’émigré aux souffrances de l’immigré*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1999; Maryse Tripier, *L’immigration dans la classe ouvrière en France*, Paris: CIEMI, 1990; Alain Morice & Swanie Potot (Eds.), *De l’ouvrier immigré au travailleur sans papiers: les étrangers dans la modernisation du salariat*, Paris: Karthala, 2010.

¹⁰ Danièle Lochak, *Étrangers: de quel droit?* Paris: PUF, 1985.

¹¹ Samir Hadj Belgacem & Foued Nasri, *La marche de 1983. Des mémoires à l’histoire d’une mobilisation collective*, Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2018.

¹² Sociology is highly loquacious on the subject of “*les quartiers*” [a French euphemism for majority-immigrant suburbs/neighborhoods]. See Sylvie Tissot for a critical review, “Les sociologues et la banlieue: construction savante du problème des “quartiers sensibles,” *Genèses*, 60 (3), 2005, p. 57-75.

¹³ Nicholas De Genova, “The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant “Illegality,” *Latino Studies*, 2 (2), 2004, p. 160-185; Daniel Veron, “Sociologie des sans-papiers. Processus d’illégalisation et expériences clandestines (Paris, Buenos Aires, Montréal),” Doctoral dissertation, sociology, Université Paris Nanterre, 2017.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Terray, “Quelques réflexions à propos de la lutte des sans-papiers,” *Journal des anthropologues*, 66 (1), 1996, p. 249-253.

migrant vulnerability¹⁵ instead of on their role as an important labor source. To counter this reduction to victimization, some discourses of both activists and academics use the image of the “exiled” to describe a condition shared by all individuals or groups made vulnerable by their migratory itineraries.¹⁶

Presenting those different figures here—each of which is a blend of representations, rhetorical strategies, theoretical sensitivities, and political positions — allows us to define our subject, i.e., the struggles faced by “migrants,” understood as encompassing a variety of images whose legitimacy varies depending on timing, specific movements, public policy, and/or academic discourses.¹⁷ This historical sequence should not mask the concurrent existence of different figures of migration and their multiple uses in the legitimation of the cause.¹⁸ Depending on time and place, diverse images tend to cohabitate, including refugees and/or asylum candidates in the contributions by Pauline Brücker and Elias Steinhipler, undocumented immigrants in Daniel Veron’s article, and the status-less in the work of Adrien Jouan.

It is equally important to observe the diverse “return” effects of certain representations, specifically of “the refugee,” which was already present in the popular imagination after the 1980s “boat people” episode, while the image of the “worker” was accentuated by the strike of undocumented workers in the metropolitan area of Paris between 2008 and 2012.¹⁹ As a consequence, the promotion of the image of the “refugee” after 2015 appears to be only the most recent in a long sequence of episodes.²⁰

In the face of such a wide variety of definitions to describe these phenomena, our approach enables us to adopt a coherent perspective on otherwise fragmented struggles, while also isolating political and academic field focusing on migrant individuals’ “quest for status.”

¹⁵ D. Fassin, *La raison humanitaire. Une histoire morale du temps présent*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2010.

¹⁶ Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, “Le glissement des catégories de migrants,” *Migrations Société*, 128, 2010, p. 193-195.

¹⁷ The use of the term “migrant” is clearly debatable, since by definition any attempt to rigidly categorize the shifting reality of human mobilities is doomed to fail. Nevertheless, “migrant” seemed to us to be the most flexible category.

¹⁸ See the narratives of the spokesperson of the Church of Saint-Bernard occupation, which clearly reveal the overlaps between the legitimacy registers of humanitarian, legal, and labor. Madjigène Cissé, *Parole de sans-papiers*, Paris: La Dispute, 1999; Ababacar Diop, *Dans la peau d’un sans-papiers*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1997.

¹⁹ Lucie Tourette, Sébastien Chauvin, & Nicolas Jounin, “Retour du travailleur immigré,” *Mouvements*, 22 September 2008.

²⁰ Ahmed Boubeker & Abdellali Hajjat (Eds.), *Histoire politique des immigrations (post)coloniales: France, 1920-2008*, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008.

Invitation to a Transnational Perspective

The need for a historical perspective, as well as spatial decentering, reflects the growing importance of places and the geography of mobilizations in the analysis.²¹ The transnational breadth of this collection of studies, which includes fieldwork in seven countries spanning three continents – also contributes significantly to our understanding of the realities reflected by such categories.

Although they appear to involve comparable demands and to act in similar ways, including migrant marches in the United States, Europe, and Israel,²² advocacy movements for migrants' rights tend to be fragmented, a fact that also extends to research into these same phenomena. The temptation to characterize the protagonists of these movements as structurally weak undoubtedly contributes to the lack of cohesion between such studies.

Indeed, a critical overview of the migrant phenomenon reveals first that it is not systematically a prominent public topic and second, that academic approaches tend to be grounded in distinct theoretical fields. This dual obstacle impedes the use, in a comparative perspective, of both sociologies of collective action and sociologies of migrations.

Migrant movements in the United States have inspired a strand of American scholarship that is strongly influenced by the theoretical framework of resource mobilization and generally focuses on “community organizing” rather than on the impacts of the migratory condition on the forms of mobilization.²³ In Canada, the “No Borders” movement,²⁴ the

²¹ Choukri Hmed, “Espace géographique et mouvements sociaux” in Olivier Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, & Cécile Péchu (Eds.), *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010; Hélène Combes, David Garibay, & Camille Goirand, *Les lieux de la colère. Occuper l'espace pour contester, de Madrid à Sanaa*, Paris, Aix-en-Provence: Karthala, 2016.

²² Walter J. Nicholls, *The DREAMers: How the Undocumented Youth Movement Transformed the Immigrant Rights Debate*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013; Pauline Brücker, “Voicing Refugeeess: Sudanese Struggles for Belonging in Egypt and Israel,” *Égypte/Monde arabe*, 15, 2017, p. 95-123.

²³ Janice Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream*, Ithaca, ILR Press, 2006; Ruth Milkman, Joshua Bloom, & Victor Narro (Eds.), *Working for Justice: The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy*, Ithaca: ILR Press, 2010.

“Comité d’action des sans-statuts algériens,” [Action Committee of Non-Status Algerians],²⁵ and the “sanctuary” as a range of actions²⁶ have not generated a global discussion of theories of collective action. Despite numerous movements involving “non-status,” the few existing studies have instead explored this phenomenon through the perspective of “governmental studies.” In countries in which migration is absent from the public debate – and in which pro-migrant movements consequently lack visibility – research appears to be principally conducted by sociologists or anthropologists of migration or public policy, to the detriment of a focus on collective action. This is true in both Argentina²⁷ and Egypt,²⁸ for example, both of which have historically been “destination” countries for migrants. At the same time, the dynamics of externalization and border security²⁹ in several Central American and southern Mediterranean countries tend to frame the migratory phenomenon as a public problem, contributing to the visibility of conflicts associated with migratory flows.³⁰

Given this diversity in the scholarly treatment of migrant issues, our goal is to interrogate the transnational dimension of a decisive issue³¹ – the right to mobility – that presents diverse local and regional variations. From this perspective, this special issue is closely related to an earlier issue (See n° 83 *Critique Internationale*) coordinated by Marie

²⁴ Nandita Sharma, “Global Apartheid and Nation-Statehood. Instituting Border Regimes,” in James Goodman & Paul James (Eds.), *Nationalism and Global Solidarities: Alternative Projections to Neoliberal Globalisation*, London: Routledge, 2009.

²⁵ Peter Nyers, “Abject Cosmopolitanism. The Politics of Protection in the Anti-Deportation Movement,” dans Nicholas De Genova, Nathalie Peutz (Eds.), *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

²⁶ Randy Lippert, *Sanctuary, Sovereignty, Sacrifice: Canadian Sanctuary Incidents, Power, and Law*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005.

²⁷ Roberto Aruj, Susana Novick, & Enrique Oteiza (Eds.), *Inmigración y discriminación: políticas y discursos*, Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Universitario, 1997; Alejandro Grimson & Elizabeth Jelin, *Migraciones regionales hacia la Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2006; Gerardo Halpern, *Etnicidad, inmigración y política: representaciones y cultura política de exiliados paraguayos en Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2009.

²⁸ Fabienne Le Houérou, *Forced Migrants and Host Societies in Egypt and Sudan*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006; Katarzyna Grabska, “Marginalization in Urban Spaces of the Global South: Urban Refugees in Cairo,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19 (3), 2006, p. 287-307; K. Grabska, “Brothers or Poor Cousins? Rights, Policies and the Well-Being of Refugees in Egypt,” in Katarzyna Grabska & Lyla Mehta (Eds.), *Forced Displacement: Why Rights Matter*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 71-92.

²⁹ Didier Bigo, “Sécurité et immigration: vers une gouvernementalité par l’inquiétude?” *Cultures & Conflits*, 31-32, 1998; Gabriella Lazaridis & Khursheed Wadia (Eds.), *The Securitisation of Migration in the EU: Debates Since 9/11*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

³⁰ Anaïk Pian, *Aux nouvelles frontières de l’Europe: l’aventure incertaine des Sénégalais au Maroc*, Paris: La Dispute, 2009; F. Souiah, “Les politiques migratoires restrictives: une fabrique de harraga,” *Hommes & Migrations*, 1304, 2014, p. 95-101; P. Brücker, “Introduction - Les migrations internationales dans l’Égypte postrévolutionnaire,” *Égypte/Monde arabe*, 15, 2017, p. 9-26.

³¹ Nina Glick-Schiller, Linda Basch, & Cristina Szanton-Blanc, *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*, New York Academy of Sciences, 1992.

Bassi and Farida Souiah that presented several studies that explored the construction of the “cause of the deceased” throughout the Mediterranean Basin. The purpose here is to interrogate the connections between local, national, and global levels by means of a series of ethnographic studies.³² Although this approach implies setting aside “methodological nationalism,”³³ the national referent remains central to an understanding of both migratory dynamics and forms of migrant mobilization.

Interrogating Theoretical Paradigms and Diversifying Analytical Perspectives

While it is important to examine the various ways in which the object itself is constructed, it is equally necessary to examine how theories frame the scientific approaches of migrants’ struggles.

Resources and Improbability

Johanna Siméant’s book – *La cause des sans-papiers*³⁴ – was undoubtedly the first study by a francophone scholar to establish a specific link between migrations and theories of collective action. Earlier studies of migrations had analyzed migrations according to such variables as labor issues,³⁵ integration,³⁶ or the State.³⁷ Siméant’s book also belongs to a specific intellectual context: The social movement of undocumented migrants that developed in the mid-1990s attracts scholarly interest to collective action³⁸ driven by movements of “precarious actors”³⁹ such as the unemployed and homeless. From the beginning, analyses of

³² Alain Caillé & Stéphane Dufoix, *Le tournant global des sciences sociales*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013.

³³ Andreas Wimmer & Nina Glick-Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and the Study of Migration,” *European Journal of Sociology*, 43 (2), 2002, p. 217-240; Anna Amelina, et al. (Eds.), *Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Research Methodologies for Cross-border Studies*, London: Routledge, 2012.

³⁴ Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1998.

³⁵ M. Tripier, *L’immigration dans la classe ouvrière en France*, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Andrea Rea, *Immigration et racisme en Europe*, Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1999.

³⁷ A. Sayad, “État, nation et immigration: l’ordre national à l’épreuve de l’immigration,” *Peuples méditerranéens*, 27-28, 1984, p. 187-205; A. Sayad, “Immigration et ‘pensée d’État,’” *op. cit.*

³⁸ Which contributes to the “renewal” of the pointed conflicts at the time. Sophie Bérout, “Le renouveau des luttes: entre fragmentation et convergences anticapitalistes,” in Paul Bouffartigue (Ed.), *Le retour des classes sociales, inégalités, dominations, conflits*, Paris: La Dispute, 2004, p. 231-247.

³⁹ Daniel Mouchard, “Les mobilisations des “sans” dans la France contemporaine: l’émergence d’un “radicalisme autolimité?” *Revue française de science politique*, 52 (4), 2002, p. 425-447.

movements of the undocumented have been grounded in the theory of resource mobilization.⁴⁰ Although this theory is applied in its richest versions⁴¹ and gives particular attention to social proprieties according to the heritage of Bourdieu, this framework remains influenced by axioms derived from the theory of rational choice imported from economics by Olson's⁴² famous paradox.⁴³

This framework has undeniably exerted a powerful influence on theoretical and empirical approaches to migrant mobilizations. Its greatest influence is to suggest that, because of the supposed lack of resources among migrants, these movements are "improbable." This assumption leads Thierry Blin to inquire: "How does one 'succeed' in politics when one is weak?"⁴⁴ It also underlies J. Siméant's assertion that "'groups' do not mobilize themselves. They are mobilized"⁴⁵ (a paraphrasal of Bourdieu's aphorism, "The dominated classes do not speak, they are spoken"⁴⁶). Although some researchers have attempted to amend the idea that migrant movements are "improbable" without necessarily distancing themselves from its theoretical foundation,⁴⁷ it remains true that, because of their status as foreigners, migrants are widely assumed to lack resources.

⁴⁰ John D. McCarthy & Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, 82 (6), 1977, p. 1212-1241.

⁴¹ i.e., drawing on the historicist viewpoint of Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading: Longman Higher Education, 1978; the institutionalist views of Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982; and the cognitivist perspectives of David A. Snow & Robert D. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization," *International Social Movement Research*, 1, 1988, p. 197-217.

⁴² Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1966.

⁴³ Instead "of one of the most persuasive attempts to anchor social reality within the Olson Paradox" (J. Siméant, *La cause des sans-papiers*, op. cit., p. 46), the theoretical framework of the allocation of resources is only in reality "a displacement in practice of the paradox," as Daniel Cefaï observed in *Pourquoi se mobilise-t-on? Les théories de l'action collective*, Paris: La Découverte, 2007. The Olson paradox, a sophisticated version of the prisoner's dilemma, is not a genuine paradox because it postulates rational choice. Instead, it reveals the tautological nature--everyone prefers what they prefer--of this theoretical framework, whose analysis of collective action Alessandro Pizzorno finds highly revealing, "Considérations sur les théories des mouvements sociaux," *Politix*, 9 (3), 1990, p. 74-80.

⁴⁴ Thierry Blin, *Les sans-papiers de Saint-Bernard: mouvement social et action organisée*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005.

⁴⁵ J. Siméant, *La cause des sans-papiers*, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, "Une classe objet," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 17 (1), 1977, p. 2-5.

⁴⁷ L. Mathieu, "Les mobilisations improbables: pour une approche contextuelle et compréhensive," in Antoine Roger (Ed.), *Passer à l'action: les mobilisations émergentes*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007, p. 187-198; C. Hmed, "Contester une institution dans le cas d'une mobilisation improbable: la "grève des loyers" dans les foyers Sonacotra dans les années 1970," *Sociétés contemporaines*, 65, 2007, p. 55-81.

“Supporters”: An Analytical Object of its Own

An additional effect of the critical role of “resources” in the literature is a central focus on “supporters” of the migrant cause because they are considered to be required “resources” for the “undocumented” to be able to rally.⁴⁸ Indeed, by focusing on non-governmental and civil society organizations that maintain close relationships with migrant activists, some researchers have not addressed migrants primarily as mobilized political subjects, concentrating instead on the ways in which the migratory phenomenon structures the activist landscape.

Pursuing J. Siméant’s approach, and in an attempt to develop a typology of the diverse forms of “support,” these studies emphasize biographical analysis. This is particularly true of Mathilde Pette,⁴⁹ who uses a continuum that ranges from “protestation” to “attestation” to categorize the various forms of commitment of migrant supporters. Studies of the Sicilian case by Marie Bassi demonstrate the extent to which “experts” contribute to the professionalization of support for foreigners, thereby partially replacing associative actors long involved in the field.⁵⁰ Drawing on the idea of a dichotomy between “political supporters” and “humanitarian supporters,” Youri Lou Vertongen attempts to measure the effects of these commitments on the organization of struggles and on the discursive strategies and representations constructed by each individual.⁵¹

Although “supporting” the cause of migrants is a specific form of activism that entails commitment to the “the cause of the Other,” studies have also suggested that it sometimes coincides with other types of commitment. The collection of studies coordinated by M. Bassi and F. Souiah reviews a particular aspect of “the cause of migrants”: Individuals involved in

⁴⁸ This is undoubtedly accentuated by researchers’ social profiles, which foster social proximity to “supporters.”

⁴⁹ Mathilde Pette, “Venir en aide aux migrants dans le Calaisis,” *Savoir/Agir*, 36, 2016, p. 47-52; Mathilde Pette & Fabien Éloire, “Pôles d’organisation et engagement dans l’espace de la cause des étrangers,” *Sociétés contemporaines*, 101, 2016, p. 5-35.

⁵⁰ M. Bassi, “Les acteurs non étatiques face à l’immigration en Sicile et à Lampedusa,” *Après-demain*, 39 (3), 2016, p. 36-38; M. Bassi, “Politiques de contrôle et réalités locales: le cas du centre d’accueil (pour demandeurs d’asile) de Mineo en Sicile,” *L’Espace politique. Revue en ligne de géographie politique et de géopolitique*, 25, 2015.

⁵¹ Y. L. Vertongen, “Soutien politique et soutien humanitaire. Retour sur les solidarités citoyennes avec les réfugié-e-s en Belgique,” *Mouvements*, 93, 2018, p. 127-136.

activist efforts to return identity, dignity, and justice to those who have died as migrants.⁵² Daniela Lustic’s research, for example, similarly emphasizes the way in which the migrant question is framed as part of a struggle to valorize a marginalized territory,⁵³ while Isabelle Coutant’s work shows that support for the foreigner cause sometimes intersects with the dynamics of movements in a specific neighborhood.⁵⁴

Much of the research on migrants’ support movements implements a process-based, contingent vision of activists’ commitments⁵⁵ to migratory issues. Adrien Jouan’s contribution to this collection, for example, illustrates the thickness of a local social micro-history in Montreal centered on a commitment to the struggle for migrant rights. Examining a number of activist episodes since the 2000s, Jouan’s work also portrays the roles of the primary actors in local pro-migrant movements.

Finally, in Damien Simmoneau and Pietro Castelli Gattinara employ a seldom-used approach⁵⁶ to examine “militantism” and “migration” through the prism of “anti-migrant” movements in Europe and the United States that emphasizes their similarities.

Rethinking Improbability and Refocusing the Study on Migrants

While movements surrounding migratory issues have diversified since the 2000s, the scholarly study of migration has also experienced a period of growth and renewal. A number of researchers now study migrant actors’ subjectivities and strategies,⁵⁷ the environments in

⁵² This is particularly true of F. Souiah’s article, which focuses on movements involving the families of the disappeared. F. Souiah, “Corps absents: des fils disparus et des familles en lutte? Le cas des migrants tunisiens,” *Critique internationale*, 83, 2019, p. 87-100.

⁵³ Daniela Lustic, “Riace, “village de l’accueil”: l’hospitalité comme opportunité politique d’élever la voix d’une région marginalisée,” conference paper, “FOCALE – La fabrique locale de la frontière,” Nice, May 2018.

⁵⁴ Isabelle Coutant, *Les migrants en bas de chez soi*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2018.

⁵⁵ O. Fillieule, “Propositions pour une analyse processuelle de l’engagement individuel. Post scriptum,” *Revue française de science politique*, 51 (1-2), 2001, p. 199-215.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Camille Guenebeaud, “Dans la frontière: migrants et luttes des places dans la ville de Calais,” Doctoral dissertation, geography, Université Lille 1, 2017; Céline Cantat, “La Hongrie, chien de garde de l’Europe,” *Plein droit*, 111, 2016, p. 19-22; Hartmut Rosa, “Aux racines de la crispation anti-migrants,” *Revue Projet*, 363, 2018, p. 80-88.

⁵⁷ Martin Deleixhe & Youri Lou Vertongen, “L’effet de frontière dans les mobilisations collectives de migrants en situation administrative précaire,” *Raisons politiques*, 64, 2016, p. 67-84; D. Veron, “Quand les sans-papiers prennent la parole. Espaces d’interlocution et énonciation du tort,” *Variations. Revue internationale de théorie critique*, 18, 2013.

which they operate,⁵⁸ and their repertoire of actions.⁵⁹ These scholars have shed light, for example, on the experience of migrant illegality and on more tenuous and rarely reported actions.⁶⁰

The empirical richness of these studies, which is also reflected in the present collection, informs a new paradigm in migrant collective action that can distance itself from the assumption that migrant movements are “improbable.” The theoretical position supported here is that collective mobilizations in favor of migrants’ rights emerge not only at the intersection between a context (i.e. political, economic, social, and cultural opportunities) and the capacity to mobilize resources (including social, economic, cultural resources), but also need to be understood in light of the trajectories of the individuals who are engaged in it. The need to increase our understanding of the migratory experience advocates strongly in favor of ethnographic research.

Brücker answers this imperative by situating migrant commitments within the context of their biographical backgrounds as both militants and migrants. Based on the consequences of migration and violence for three trajectories, Brücker demonstrates that the notion of “experience” —more than “resources”— informs our understanding of how both engagement and disengagement can occur over time within an individual’s itinerary. Being a migrant requires “making do with what’s to hand” and seizing opportunities. Veron, inspired by Michel de Certeau’s sociology of daily life,⁶¹ describes the commitments of undocumented individuals amid the uncertainty and precariousness of a labor strike, emphasizing the effects of an enduring kind of tactical *bricolage* in migrants’ daily lives. Elias Steinhilper, motivated by a similar desire to understand commitment by closely focusing on migrants’ subjective

⁵⁸ Clara Lecadet, “Le feu et la révolte. Le camp comme foyer politique,” in Michel Agier (Ed.), *Un monde de camps*, Paris: La Découverte, 2014; A. Lendaro, “No finger-print!”: Les mobilisations des migrants à Lampedusa, ou quand l’espace compte,” *L’Espace politique. Revue en ligne de géographie politique et de géopolitique*, 25, 2015; Laurence Pillant & Louise Tassin, “Lesbos, l’île aux grillages. Migrations et enfermement à la frontière gréco-turque,” *Cultures & Conflits*, 99-100, 2015, p. 25-55.

⁵⁹ Hunger strikes cannot be reduced to a mere strategy for mobilization. Placing one’s body and even life at risk assigns the conflict a critical character that signifies the violence experienced. Hunger strikes are therefore a clear expression of “a grammar of political violence.” J. Siméant, “La violence d’un répertoire: les sans-papiers en grève de la faim,” *Cultures & Conflits*, 9-10, 1993; Patrick Cingolani, *La République, les sociologues et la question politique*, Paris: La Dispute, 2003.

⁶⁰ Collectif, *Feu au centre de rétention (janvier-juin 2008). Des sans-papiers témoignent*, Montreuil: Libertalia, 2008; Stefan Le Courant, “Vivre sous la menace: ethnographie de la vie quotidienne des étrangers en situation irrégulière en France,” Doctoral dissertation, ethnology, Université Paris Nanterre: Nanterre, 2015; D. Veron, “Sociologie des sans-papiers. Processus d’illégalisation et expériences clandestines (Paris, Buenos Aires, Montréal).”

⁶¹ Michel de Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien*, Volume 1, *Arts de faire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

experiences, shows that emotions —particularly indignation— are a key factor in the mobilization of Afghan migrants in Germany.

Rather than invoking a “sociological miracle”⁶² to explain commitment of —or for— migrants, this collection of studies situates collective action within individual life experience, thereby revealing the continuity between commitment and the tactical everydayness of the migratory experience.

Migratory issues in today’s world are fundamentally constructed as a site of struggle. Contributing to visibilization of migrants and of their commitments requires building a research field that combines the sociology of migrations with the sociology of collective action. Because researchers often gain access to terrains through either support groups or migrant groups themselves, this collection also interrogates researchers’ implication in different mobilizations, as well as the influence of their postures on the production of knowledge.⁶³ More broadly, the purpose here is to contribute to legitimize contemporary mobilities in a context of systematic public delegitimation. Our interview with the philosopher Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp,⁶⁴ long committed to “the undocumented,” helps put into perspective what the many struggles carried by migrant populations tell us about current political challenges and future horizons.

Finally, we must recall that this collection arrives within a particularly critical context. Indeed, isn’t it, rather than a “migrant crisis,” a crisis of the “migrant cause”, as people in movement —and those who support them— are facing an ever-expanding criminalization? In order to apprehend concrete experiences produced by this situation, it is crucial to examine reconfigurations of the “cause of the Other,” as well its connections to other contemporary struggles. Most importantly, it is vital that subaltern subjectivities inform the focus of the

⁶² T. Blin, “L’invention des sans-papiers. Récit d’une dramaturgie politique,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, 125 (2), 2008, p. 241-261. L’auteur fait référence au “miracle social” que représentait le mouvement des chômeurs pour Bourdieu. P. Bourdieu, *Contre-feux*, Tome 1, *Propos pour servir à la résistance contre l’invasion néolibérale*, Paris: Raisons d’agir, 1998.

⁶³ Emmanuel Terray is an important figure from this point of view who symbolizes the organic connection between researchers of the “migrant cause” and political commitment. Gérard Mauger & Louis Weber, “De l’anthropologie à la défense des sans-papiers. Entretien avec Emmanuel Terray,” *Savoir/Agir*, 24 (2), 2013, p. 67-78. See also M. Bassi & F. Souiah, “La violence du régime des frontières et ses conséquences létales: récits et pratiques autour des morts et disparus par migration,” *Critique internationale*, 83, 2019, p. 9-19.

⁶⁴ Available on the site of *Critique internationale* (<https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/vers-un-imaginaire-democratique-radical-reaffirmer-les-droits-la-mobilité-et-lhospitalité>).

researchers' gaze,⁶⁵ the only available tool that can ensure that the ability of migrants to constitute themselves as political subjects is taken seriously.⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ James C. Scott, *La domination et les arts de la résistance: fragments du discours subalterne*, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008.

⁶⁶ M. Agier, “Penser le sujet, observer la frontière,” *L’Homme. Revue française d’anthropologie*, 203-204, 2012, p. 51-75.

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