

Developing Dynamic Categorisations of Transit Migration

Pre-print version of Collyer, Michael and Hein de Haas (forthcoming) Developing dynamic categorisations of ‘transit migration’. Population, Space and Place

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the ways in which the dynamic nature of transit migration may be captured in categories that provide a basis for developing our understanding of the phenomenon but do not attempt to artificially pin it down. The first section re-examines common ways of categorising migrants and the second turns to existing research and activism around subjects of immigration in North Africa. The final section applies the common categorisations of the first section with the developing research considered in the second to examine the data that is available to enhance our understanding and possibilities of developing categorisations of transit migration. The conclusion sets out ways of advancing the research agenda on transit migration.

Keywords: migration, undocumented migration, transit, categorisation, Maghreb

INTRODUCTION

Categorisation is a particularly unfashionable topic in the post-modernist social sciences. The clear certainties of Weber’s interpretive sociology in which he argued that abstract thinking could not take place without the ideal type, have faded with the more general shift from positivism to post-modernism over the last few decades and the associated growth of

interest in liminality, hybridity and multiple identities. Migration has provided a popular focus for research into this sort of theoretical boundary crossing, though it can be seen across the social sciences. In migration studies, as in other areas, attention has inevitably focused at the blurred edges of social categories, where they overlap, fade into each other or shift in different contexts.

There are good reasons for the suspicion or rejection of categorisation. Categorisation is rarely participatory and often symbolises discredited top-down techniques, which fix dynamic social processes into rigid structures. Categorisation is also inevitably political, particularly when applied to individuals or groups (Moncrieffe and Eyben 2007). Categories have always been an essential tool of political power, the logic of the *état civil* that Foucault was particularly critical of, but current technologies, such as the EU’s EURODAC database of asylum applicants, allow states to maintain the rigidity of social categorisations, even across borders. The ways in which migrants are assessed by the state (asylum seeker, refugee, economic migrant, family migrant, irregular migrant, victim of trafficking), often after a short official interview, will affect issues of resource distribution, residential location, labour rights and ultimately for the most serious questions such as refugee status determination, life or death.

Yet for all their inherent problems, categories are inevitable. They are the most rudimentary tools in any attempt at generalisation to offer an explanation of migration and as such are closely linked to theory. Social categories are essential elements of social scientific enquiry. They are also central to processes of social control, perhaps particularly in the context of migration. Refusing the use of categories, or focusing on situations where they are contested is itself a theoretical choice. Ignoring or rejecting them does not mean

they go away and may blind us to the important interrelationship between scientific and political forms of knowledge production that have become inherent to the creation and maintenance of categories.

Categories of migration and migrants are widely used and well established, though there seems to be considerable dissatisfaction at the problems inherent in their use. Over the last decade or so a number of new categories have come to be used in addition to more established ways of classifying movement. Terms such as 'secondary movement', 'mixed flows', the 'migration-asylum nexus' or 'transit migration' are now relatively common in both academic and policy related contexts. There are four likely explanations for the creation of these new terms. First, frustration with established categories makes novelty attractive, so there is perhaps an element of fashions changing, which we should be attentive to. Second, all of these terms have arisen in particularly sensitive political contexts and they may serve an expedient function in political discourse. Third, most of the movements these terms refer to have antecedents, often going back hundreds of years, but although the movements themselves are not new the need to refer to them specifically may result from a changing awareness of their significance. Fourth and finally, they may reflect attempts to come to terms with a more complex migration reality involving rapid diversification of migrant profiles and patterns of migration and the role of migration policy and control as a factor of overwhelming importance in shaping mobility patterns, certainly in the European context, but more and more elsewhere too.

There have been virtually no attempts to define these new terms. Research has not dwelt on issues of categorisation and focused instead on micro-level studies which aim to develop detailed assessments of individual motivations and migration routes, certainly in North Africa, a trend to which our own work has contributed (Collyer 2006, 2007, 2010; de Haas 2007, 2008). The absence of definition is also found in policy papers on the topic. The term 'transit migration' is usually considered sufficiently descriptive and is usually based on particular assumptions, as in the Council of Europe's recommendation 1489: 'the two major characteristics of transit migration are its illicit nature and an elaborate criminal organisation'

(Council of Europe, 2001, para. 3). Even research that has explicitly criticised one or both of these (usually implicit) assumptions is typically not framed as a criticism of a definition since there is no clear definition in any context to start with. Some research has found that this absence of definition has allowed research to focus on the range of issues which are at stake in all of these terms; the fluidity of mobility and the visibility/ invisibility of border controls (see <http://www.transitmigration.org> and Hess, this issue).

This paper does not aim to provide a fixed definition of transit migration, or any of the other similar terms in current usage. Indeed, we argue that fixed definitions are often unhelpful in capturing the essentially dynamic nature of migration. This paper aims to analyse academic and political uses and approaches towards recent forms of migration, which are commonly labelled as 'transit migration' in relation to more established forms of categorising movement. By doing so, this paper investigates what may and may not be novel about the concept of transit migration. It is a new term, widely used to describe previously existing migratory phenomena. It is possible that the emergence of the concept also reflects changed migratory realities, or that the term is useful in describing dynamic, non-linear forms of migration that have existed for decades or centuries, but that have never adequately been described. This paper focuses on the term as well as political and scholarly use of 'transit migration'. We consider the extent to which the dynamic nature of migration occurring at the fringes of Europe may be captured in new categories, such as 'transit migration', that provide a basis for developing our understanding of the phenomenon but do not attempt to artificially pin it down.

CATEGORISING MIGRANTS

Traditional understandings of migration and migrants have focused on predominantly *dichotomous* categorisations based on time/space, location/direction and causes. More recently, the importance of the state's perspective has attracted growing attention and migration policy has become one of the most significant constraints on migration. This is reflected in the politically constructed nature of existing ways of understanding and categorising migration. This section

Table 1. Ways of categorising migrants and the dichotomous categorisations they lead to.

Criteria	Categorisation
Time-space	Permanent v. temporary Internal v. International
Location – direction	Immigration v. emigration Origin v. destination ‘home’ v. ‘host’
State perspective	Illegal v. illegal Regular v. irregular
Cause	Labour, student, retirement, family Forced v. voluntary

considers the variety of criteria that are important in the classification of migrants and the problems inherent in their use (Table 1).

Time-Space Criteria

The term migration has both a space and a time component, creating two binaries in the basic UN definitions that distinguish internal and international migration and permanent (more than 1 year) from temporary (less than 1 year). The resulting four-fold categorisation is one of the simplest ways of discussing migration, but it does not necessarily coincide with a similarly neat distinction in lived experiences of migrants. Boundary crossing is frequently a poor measure of the significance of migration. Similarly, the *intended* length of stay at the time of initial migration is a poor guide to how long migrants will eventually stay. These categorisations are expressions of state power. This is most obviously the case with the internal-international distinction. As international boundaries change or states split up certain individuals may switch from one category to the other without even moving.

The common distinction between permanent and temporary migration is even more problematic. Temporary migration is perhaps the clearest example of a top-down category used by states to ‘manage’ obstinate migratory realities. European guestworker programmes of the 1960s and 1970s or the US Bracero of the 1940s–1960s are classical examples of such temporary migration policies (Castles and Kosack, 1973). More recently, new hopes have been put on temporary (nowadays often re-packaged as ‘circular’) migration

policies by EU states as a perceived win-win strategy to solve labour market shortages while avoiding permanent settlement (Ruhs, 2005; Castles, 2006). It is important to make a distinction between *de facto* settlement and the intention of migrants to return home some day, the classic ‘myth of return’. The reverse is also true and many migrants who *consider* their migration as permanent may end up returning. In fact, many migrants who adopt pendular forms of migration can be classified as neither permanent nor temporary migrants.

Not all people who move are migrants and non-migration movements are widely considered as ‘mobility’, a term which has far less restrictions, and includes commuting to school and work, business trips as well as leisure-related movements, such as tourism (Williams and Hall, 2002). Similarly, not everyone who moves significant distances is called a migrant and a variety of labels associated with particular social status positions are in use: emigrant, immigrant, foreigner and expatriate. A comparison of what is considered ‘migration’ and the broader term ‘mobility’ suggests that ‘migration’ is not a fixed and immutable category and its current formulation is ultimately tied to the nation-state and the power it exerts over territory. A telling example in this respect is the EU practice to redefine intra-EU movements as ‘mobility’ or ‘free movement’ rather than ‘migration’ (European Commission, 2010). This also implies that rejecting migration as a category would be to deny the real, albeit sometimes limited (cf. Bakewell, 2007) relevance of administrative boundaries and state power for migrants’ lives and mobility pathways.

Location and Direction: Categorising Origins and Destinations

In addition to the time-space criteria of duration and distance, migration may also be categorised according to the location of migrants and the direction of their movement, in terms of origins and destinations. A first common categorisation is the location-based distinction between immigration and emigration and their corollaries immigrant and emigrant. As Sayad (1999) argued, all migrations are in fact both, though their practical usage makes these terms less neutral than they might seem at face value. The academic literature and policy discourse reveal a receiving country bias by the more frequent use of the term 'immigration' to indicate migration from poorer to wealthier countries. The term emigration is less frequently used.¹

The familiar distinction between immigration and emigration is also rooted in a dichotomous understanding of migration as a direct movement between two countries or places, that is, the 'origin' or 'home' country and the 'destination' or the particularly popular term 'host' country.² The commonly used home-host country dichotomy is a particularly static categorisation, which not only seems to preclude that notions of 'home' cannot change due to acculturation, 'creolisation' and transnationalisation of migrants' identities (Portes, 2003; Vertovec, 2004) or other changes in migrants' perceptions and perspectives over time, but are also value-laden as they suggest that migrants are 'hosted' and therefore supposed to return. Also 'origin' and 'home' countries are to a large extent static and essentialist categories.

Such categories are undermined by empirical evidence showing that return migration almost never means simply going 'home', as feelings of belonging need to be renegotiated upon return (de Bree, 2007). Because belonging signifies *constructing* a sense of home, migrants – and also nonmigrant descendants of migrants – reinterpret their definitions of person, culture, identity, home and place on return to their country of origin (Hammond, 1999; de Bree, 2007). This challenges essentialist assumptions of natural links between people, culture and territory (Pedersen, 2003). Another problem with dichotomous, location-based categorisation is that they assume that migrants move between two fixed

places, and that the eventual return will be to the place of origin. This whole notion is challenged by (1) the often much more complex itineraries of migrants and (2) the empirical fact the perceived destinations (and places to return to) can change over time.

Perspective of the State

As recently as the 1960s state categorisations of migrants had relatively limited sociological impact on the migrants themselves. Migrants without the proper documents were largely able to travel in the same ways, apply for the same jobs and live in the same areas as their co-nationals who had obtained visas and work permits before travel (Castles and Miller, 2009). This is not to suggest there were no controls. In many cases these controls occurred under more authoritarian systems in countries of origin, in the form of exit controls. Nor were conditions in Europe much better, in fact there were regular protests for improved residency rights for migrants. Nevertheless, controls on movement itself were very limited and the passport obtained, there were few barriers for travel to Europe.

The situation is now rather different. A positive or negative response to a visa application now governs everything about the possibilities of migration and subsequent residence in wealthy countries. Individuals who choose to travel with no documentation are separated from their documented counterparts at every stage of the journey and often for many years afterwards. They travel by different modes of transport on different routes; they must live in different places and they have different access to basic services; they take up different employment or the same employment for different rates of pay. It is of course possible to shift categorisations, through a variety of means, but in the context of migration to wealthy countries, the opportunities enjoyed by individual migrants are now significantly determined by their relationship with states.

The fundamental category of concern to the state is the distinction between legal and illegal migration. It is also relevant for the debate on 'transit migration', which is often closely associated or confounded with illegal migration. Migrant organisations typically reject this label as demeaning, a point of view best expressed by the *No one is Illegal* coalition and this receives

broad support in research (Jordan and Düvell, 2002; Van Liempt, 2007). Alternative terms such as 'irregular' or 'undocumented' are proposed in preference to 'illegal'. In contrast, Black (2003) argues that it is the legal status of migrants which is of significance, so the term should not be avoided but used more carefully. We agree that referring to *individuals* as 'illegal' is neither accurate nor useful. However, in analysing state practices of border control we must be prepared to identify particular forms of legal status, since these are of overwhelming importance in determining individuals' rights.

These are extremely fluid categories (Düvell, 2006). Defining individuals themselves as illegal tends to pathologize illegality as a fixed characteristic of particular populations. This is ethically unacceptable, but it is also inaccurate. Individuals change status frequently, rapidly and in many cases, repeatedly. In the case of overland migration from West Africa to North Africa, migrants cross many countries, some of which allow their entry, some of which do not, so that a migrant moves in and out of formal legality and illegality (de Haas, 2007).

As with other categories which we have considered, the legal-illegal distinction is not a simple binary, but a continuum. Research into what Lydia Morris has called 'civic stratification' in the UK has identified at least 25 separate categories of legal residence status, each with associated residency rights (Morris, 2002). Given the complexity of state behaviour towards migrants it makes no sense to describe residency in such polarised terms. Elenore Koffman (2002) has shown how 'civic stratification' operates across Europe, with certain migrants able to access services on a par with citizens and others, at the other end of the spectrum in extremely precarious situations of barely tolerated illegal residence (Broeders and Engbersen, 2007).

Cause of Migration

The final way in which migration may be classified is according to the most important reason for movement. We may classify 'labour' migration, the related 'highly skilled' migration or the umbrella term 'economic' migration. Other labels may be imagined as more social or cultural or relating to particular stages in the life course: 'student' migration, 'family reunion' and 'family

formation' or 'retirement' migration. It is of course the norm for individuals to defy such unitary categories; 'student' migration is widely combined with 'labour' migration and may become 'highly skilled' migration and 'family reunion' migration almost inevitably incorporates economic considerations.

The long running debate around the categories 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration continues, but it is now more widely accepted that a continuum is a more accurate representation than a dichotomy (Van Hear, 1998). To an extent, it has been replaced by a debate contrasting forced migration and refugee movements. UNHCR regularly argues that refugees are not migrants (Feller, 2005). This is something of an ideological distinction and at the very least, refugees have many characteristics in common with migrants, at least those migrants that we may wish to consider as forced. However, James Hathaway (2007) has recently argued that refugees should be kept distinct from other groups of forced migrants.

Ultimately of course (perceived), causes and motivations are individual as well as mixed and often changing. If we are to understand such complex and conflicting motivations we must focus on the relationship between macro-circumstances constraining those decisions and the agency of individual migrants. The classic, dichotomous ways of categorising migration have always been rather poor tools to address the multiple, shifting nature of migration, but the growing awareness of these inadequacies is perhaps changing the ways in which migration is conceptualised. In this section, we have shown the need to expand these original categories so that dichotomous pairs have typically been stretched out to expose broad continuums of social positions. We now turn to consider to what extent these new terms overcome the current categorisation problems and reflect a more fluid, dynamic understanding of migration processes. We will do so by focusing on the concept of transit migration.

NEW WAYS OF LABELLING MIGRATION

This section explores a relatively narrow example of categorisation through a focus on the characteristics of a group of people who are now widely referred to as 'transit migrants'. This term is commonly used, manifestly political in its

origins and fundamentally Eurocentric (Düvell, 2006) though, as we have already discussed it has no clear definition beyond an association with illegality and criminal networks. We aim to highlight the mutually reinforcing contributions of academic and policy fields to the politically charged process of categorising mobile populations as transit migrants. Through an analysis of migration to and through North Africa, we assess the way it has been used and its potential added value as a conceptual tool.

At first sight 'transit migration' offers a way around some of the dilemmas of categorisation discussed in the previous section, which partly explains the popularity of the term. Yet many of the characteristics of 'transit migration' are also common to much earlier forms of mobility. To an extent the perceived need to apply the term reflects the quickening pace of intellectual fashions and the influence of largely ahistorical approaches to research and policy making. However, there seem to be more significant changes at work, certainly a changing awareness of how migration is organised beyond networks of state control and perhaps a more fundamental shift in the reality of structural processes governing mobility, which relate to broader aspects of globalisation.

Discourse and Categorisation

The intensity of intellectual production devoted to migration in recent years, in both academic and policy related institutions, has led to a variety of new ways of considering and categorising migrants, such as transit migration. These frequently challenge the range of problematic, dichotomous categorisations considered in the previous section, and may be conceptually useful, yet, in most cases, they result from predominantly political debates surrounding migration issues that are driven most significantly from within the European Union. Academic research is inevitably involved in this process and studies into these phenomena may echo this new language. Gradually, terminology that arises from the mutually reinforcing environments of academic and policy arenas may find its way into popular conceptions of migration, where it enters broad circulation, its origins are no longer questioned and it becomes a constituent part of the new political reality.

This can best be illustrated by one of the most successful examples of developments in categorisation and associated discourse shaping migration realities. 'Asylum seeker' is a term now thoroughly engrained in media, policy and academic fields, yet it only began to gain currency in the early 1980s. It marks a shift from a period when refugees were universally assumed to need protection, and were therefore called refugees from the moment they registered a claim, to the reverse situation in which their claims were presumed to be unfounded by state authorities, unless proven otherwise. The new term 'asylum seeker' began to be used to describe an individual's status during this period of doubt. The doubt itself began to constitute the status of asylum seeker to the extent that by the mid 1990s it was firmly established, particularly in sections of the British tabloid press, as a shorthand for undeserving and fraudulent. This term is now an unassailable part of common vocabulary, hegemonic, and with hindsight it is clear that it has provided the rhetorical tools necessary to undermine protection offered to refugees by creating a new category of individual to whom the state owed fewer obligations.

This raises broader questions about how academic forms of knowledge production on migration should respond to explicitly political processes of categorisation. As we note above, the two fields are mutually interdependent and are increasingly difficult to distinguish clearly, but they do have some separate characteristics. Perhaps central amongst those characteristics that identify academic practice are ideals of reflexivity and rigorous self-examination, which at worst justify derogatory labels of navel gazing, but at best encourage a long historical perspective and an active awareness of the complex repercussions of any social intervention.

The state in general and migration policy in particular now exert such a fundamental influence over migration processes that it has become an essential element in any theoretical account. Yet it is also difficult to theorise migration policy without being drawn into the fast changing kaleidoscope of policy discussions. This is particularly the case when considering undocumented migrations in the countries surrounding Europe, the field of study in which the term 'transit migration' has been circulating for more than a decade. Such migrations in the Euro-Mediterranean area

have been the subject of international ministerial level meetings every few months in recent years (Collyer, 2008). In this environment new policy ideas and (fashionable) terminology are inevitably created, discussed and recycled very rapidly and it is sometimes difficult to find any sure empirical footing on which to base an analysis.

Studying Transit Migration: The North African Case

Transit migration has become paradigmatic in current explorations of migration to Europe. This does not mean that migrants who apparently seem to fit within these categories are numerically dominant; in fact the opposite is true, they are certainly a minority of all migrants to Europe (de Haas, 2007). Rather, the evocative image of the transit migrant in a boat or scaling a tall fence is so powerful that it has captured the public imagination, has been widely illustrated in media portrayals of the subject. It also dominates policy discussions due to the alarming perception of 'loss of control'. Transit migration also represents a growing area of interest for researchers; inquiries into migration to, from and through Europe's 'neighbourhood' have begun to identify the complexity of these movements.

However, a closer consideration of the North African case casts significant doubts on the appropriateness and usefulness of the term 'transit migration' to characterise the migration processes. Since the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of African migrants moving to Europe have originated from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. While traditional destination countries were located in North-Western Europe, since the late 1980s, Maghrebi migrants have increasingly moved to Italy and Spain in response to the growing demand for low skilled labour in southern Europe. Europe has long been familiar with irregular migration from the Maghreb. Since Spain and Italy introduced visa requirements in the early 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Maghrebis have attempted to cross the Mediterranean illegally in *pateras* (small fishing boats), speedboats, hidden in vans and trucks, or carrying false papers (de Haas, 2007).

Since 2000, Sub-Saharan Africans have increasingly joined Maghrebis in their attempts to cross the Mediterranean. This was preceded by a

period of increasing trans-Saharan migration. While having ancient historical roots in the trans-Saharan trade, trans-Saharan migration was particularly boosted by Libya's pan-African labour recruitment policies after instauration of the UN air and arms embargo in 1991. Since an anti-immigration backlash in Libya in 2000, an increasing number of migrants started to move to Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia and to cross the Mediterranean. Although the media focus on 'boat migrants', most migrants use other, less risky, methods to enter Europe – tourist visas, false documents, hiding in (containers or vehicles on) vessels, scaling or swimming around the fences surrounding the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In fact, the majority of irregular African migrants enter Europe legally and subsequently overstay their visas.

Transit migration seems to be one of the few more dynamic categorisations of migration, which applies particularly to this most recent type of movement. However, the concept has often been applied in a rather rigid way to pin down particular categories of migrants. The meaning of the concept has also been considerably shaped by states in apparent attempts to re-brand de facto settlers (e.g. Sudanese in Egypt) as people who should leave (cf. Roman, 2006). The North African case shows that the commonly used term 'transit migrants' may be misleading in three senses.

First, the trans-Saharan journey to North Africa may take months and even years and is generally made in stages, complying with step-wise migration patterns typical for many African countries. On their way, migrants and refugees often settle temporarily in towns to work and save enough money for their onward journey (Lahlou and Escoffier, 2002; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005; Collyer, 2006). Substantial numbers of migrants end up settling in such towns and cities.

Second, the image that all sub-Saharan migrants present in North Africa are 'on their way' is highly misleading. At least temporary settlement in North Africa has been the rule rather than the exception. Libya and, to a lesser extent, Algeria and Mauritania have been destinations for labour migrants in their own right. For limited numbers sub-Saharan students, professionals and sportspersons, also Tunisia and Morocco have been destinations (Barros *et al.*, 2002; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005).

Third, a considerable proportion of migrants failing or eventually not venturing to enter Europe prefer to settle in North Africa on a more long-term basis as a 'second best' option rather than return to their generally more unstable, unsafe and substantially poorer origin countries (de Haas, 2007). After investing considerable personal and family resources in reaching North Africa, and often having connections to those migrants who already succeeded in entering Europe, migrants do generally not want to abandon their migration project at the fringes of Europe. Therefore, migrants who are expelled from North African countries commonly migrate back (cf. Barros *et al.*, 2002; CIMADE, 2004; Escoffier, 2006; Goldschmidt, 2006).

Increasing repression in North Africa and particularly the anti-immigrant backlash in Libya is also likely to have played an important role in the decision to migrate onward (Barros *et al.*, 2002), that is, to convert into 'transit' migrants. This is another example of how policies can shape new migration realities. For instance, Lahlou and Escoffier (2002: 23) mention the case of migrants from Nigeria, Chad and Sudan who fled Libya to Morocco after the violent riots against sub-Saharan workers in 2000. However, a considerable number of migrants and refugees who intend to migrate to Europe get 'stuck' in countries such as Morocco because of a lack of means to cross to Europe and tend to stay for increasingly longer periods (Lahlou and Escoffier, 2002; Collyer, 2006). This exemplifies the difficulty of using the term transit migrant as an identifier, because, depending on their experiences, migrants' (mixed) motivations and aspirations often change over the journey. Intended transit countries can become countries of destination, and the other way around.

In contrast to common perceptions of North Africa as zone of transit or a 'waiting room' for migrants waiting to cross to Europe, there are probably more sub-Saharan Africans living in North Africa than in Europe. Increasing trans-Saharan migration and settlement of migrants has played a key role in revitalising ancient trans-Saharan (caravan) trade routes and desert (oasis) towns in Mali (Gao), Niger (Agadez), Chad (Abéché), Libya (Sebha and Kufra), Algeria (Tamanrasset and Adrar) and Mauritania (Nouadhibou) (Bensaad, 2003; Boubakri, 2004; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005; Spiga, 2005). Such

towns now house significant resident sub-Saharan populations.

Besides the revitalised desert and oasis towns of Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Algeria and Libya located on trans-Saharan migration routes, also most major North African cities, such as Rabat, Oran, Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, Benghazi and Cairo, harbour sizeable communities of sub-Saharan migrants as a result of their voluntary and less voluntary settlement (Boubakri, 2004: 4; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005: 11–12). Although they generally lack legal status and are vulnerable to exploitation, sub-Saharan migrants, including those living outside Libya, find jobs in specific niches of the informal service sector (such as cleaning, dishwashing, domestic work and baby-sitting), construction, petty trade, manufacturing (shoemakers, tailors), agriculture, mechanics, fishery (in Mauritania) and tourism (Boubakri, 2004; Alioua, 2005). Others try to pursue studies in Morocco and Tunisia, sometimes also as a means to gain residency status that simultaneously gives them a foothold in local labour markets (Boubakri, 2004; Alioua, 2005). This resembles the beginning of a settlement process.

Yet the recent increase in migrant raids and xenophobia in North Africa have made migrants more vulnerable to discrimination. Migrants are often denied access to legal assistance, public health care and schooling. Their irregular status and the increase in policing and raids have made migrants vulnerable to extortion by officials and severe exploitation on the housing and labour market. In Morocco, for instance, migrants live in highly degrading circumstances in overcrowded houses, or sometimes, in improvised camps (CIMADE, 2004; Alioua, 2005; Collyer, 2006; Escoffier, 2006). Collyer (2006) found that Moroccans rent apartments to irregular migrants for double or triple the price that Moroccans would pay. Furthermore, sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco working at markets or in shoe-repairing were not paid but were given some of the left over vegetables at the end of the day, or a meal. Only migrants that had particular skills that they could employ under their own terms, such as repairing electronics or teaching, succeeded in making money for themselves. Many relied on remittances received from family and friends in Europe and even their countries of origin (Collyer, 2006). Although this might reinforce the wish to leave Morocco, many are unable to do so

and prefer to stay for an indeterminate period as a 'second-best' option rather than to return to their (often poorer and less secure) origin countries. Alioua (forthcoming) describes how this leads to increasingly permanent forms of settlement and even partial social integration.

Does Transit Migration Overcome Dichotomous Categories?

The previous description of sub-Saharan African migration to and through North Africa reveals the complexity, diversity and fluidity of migration experiences, which do seem difficult to lump into one single category. This raises some fundamental doubts about the usefulness of the term transit migration to describe this phenomenon. At first sight, the term transit migration appears to be a *fremdkörper* as (1) it is not part of a dichotomous pair such as immigration-emigration, per-manent-temporary migration or voluntary-forced migration; and the term (2) seems to describe a *process* rather than a static situation. Transit migration also seems to (3) simultaneously integrate both *location-direction* and *time-space* criteria for categorising movement.

Although this may make the term look innovative, it is hampered by essentially the same limitations as other categories. Transit migration seems innovative compared with the other pairs because it adds a third, intermediate space a migrant transits. As such this seems an empirically justified advance and departure from dichotomous models. However, this is misleading because the term does not challenge but actually *reinforces* the notion that migratory moves have fixed starting and end points. Transit migration is equally deterministic as *origin-destination* in the sense that it essentialises the transit space, which only serves as a space to move 'through' towards another destination. However, this notion is challenged by ample empirical evidence stressing the changing motivations, perceptions and perspectives of migrants, which also means that imagined places of transit might evolve into destinations, and the other way around. We have seen that in North Africa, for instance, many Saharan towns have flourished thanks to recent increases in trans-Saharan trade and migration and have become destinations in their own right (cf Bredeloup this issue).

This relates to a second critique, that is, transit migration suffers from the same problem of

analytical blurredness with regard to the time dimension as temporary and permanent migration. As such, transit migration somehow keeps a middle ground between transit as commonly interpreted used in international travel (and rarely taking more than a few hours or days) and *temporary migration*.

We have argued that the line between permanent and temporary is largely arbitrary. Because the term transit migration also includes the notion of *temporariness* with regards to the stay in the transit country, we are facing the same problem of arbitrariness, or the impossibility of objectively determining when a transit migrant becomes a (semi) permanent settler.

In most empirical studies, transit migrants are typically seen as people using countries and places in between as staging posts, where they remain for several weeks or months to rest, to work, to organise the next leg of the journey travel or to work and save money to finance the onward journey. This normally involves looking for a place to reside, which distinguishes it from transit as used in travel. In this way, we can conceive of a continuum of immobility to travel-transit-temporary permanent migratory behaviour. Düvell (2006) suggested that migrants staying for less than 1 year before their onward journey should be considered as transit migrants. However, the problems remains where to draw the exact boundaries between transit and temporary and ultimately also between transit and permanent migration.

However, the main problem remains the usual interpretation of transit migration (and other categories) as linked to supposedly *fixed* intentions of migrant and fixed spatial outcome of migration, that is, ending up at the destination. The North African example illustrates that this is empirically naïve. Although the term transit migration adds conceptual nuance to the debate by conceptualising an important, intermediate, and often ignored form of migration, it does not really resolve this problem.

TRANSIT MIGRATION OR FRAGMENTED MIGRATION?

Considerations in Developing Dynamic Categorisations

Any attempt at categorising is also an implicit attempt at theorising. If categorisation is theoretical, the relevant question is: what do

notions of transit migration say about our theoretical conceptions of migration. As has been argued above, intentions and outcomes of migration often change. Moreover, intentions and outcomes may also temporarily and permanently differ from one another. For instance, 'transit migrants' in North Africa might fail to enter Europe and subsequently end up settling there permanently even if their intention is to move on. Many sub-Saharan migrants migrate to North Africa to work, but once there, some change their mind and decide to migrate onwards to Europe if provided the opportunity. And many non-migrants who intend to migrate never do so just as others who never intended to move end up moving because they are compelled by external circumstances such as police raids (particularly relevant in the North African case), political persecution, violent conflict or natural disaster. This also shows that changing migration intentions and outcomes are not unidirectional, in the sense of moving from transit to temporary and more permanent forms of migration. Transit migrants may become settlers and vice versa.

We can therefore only achieve an advanced understanding of the phenomenon of transit migration if this is built on a theory that acknowledges that migration is a *process* by embracing a dynamic categorisation of (transit) migration. So, instead of rejecting migration categories as such, which will only harm our generalised understanding of migration processes, we should aim for a *dynamic* application of such categories, allowing for migrants to cross categories. Furthermore, any discussion of these categories should always distinguish between intentions and outcomes, as these might fundamentally differ. In fact, the relationship and nature of likely reciprocity between migration intentions and migration realities is a largely unexplored field of academic inquiry.

First, it is essential to distinguish different levels of analysis in categorising and analysing migration. A lack of such distinction seems one of the major sources of analytical fuzziness. At the level of discourses, (access to) resources and action, similarly sounding categorisations may have very different meanings at the individual, community and state level, or categorisations that are applicable on one level may be highly problematic at another level. This was already highlighted in our discussion of 'illegal

migration' that seems a relevant concept when considering state responses, because the real-life impact of such legal and policy categories for enforcement, such as visa regimes, border control, immigrant raids and rights regimes, although it is neither accurate nor useful in categorising individuals.

In the same vein, it seems highly problematic to impose the category of 'transit' on individuals' experiences, which, as this paper has tried to show, are too heterogeneous and dynamic to fit into such a general category that imposes as assumed eventual destination elsewhere. These are the tautological pitfalls of the application of a macro-term to individual's experiences. While the term 'transit' is difficult to apply to individuals, it is possible to describe it as a migratory phenomenon at the macro-level. In addition, we cannot discard its use on the macro and state level. The main reason is that although they might have little sociological value, we have seen that the use of such categories in official discourses does have an impact not only on public perceptions of migratory phenomena, but also on real lives of migrants through enforcement of state policies.

Fragmented Migration

We have shown that transit migration is just as problematic as other ways of categorising migration. Although it appears to offer the insights of a process, and so to have advantages of crossing the wide variety of static categories considered in the first section, it is in fact equally fixed, as we demonstrated in the second section. Within this relatively rigid understanding, it brings in such a wide variety of migration experiences and projects that it has little conceptual value. It is also just as politically expedient as other categorisations, perhaps more so. By providing a convenient term for most migrants in the vicinity of Europe, regardless of their legal status, migration history or future intentions, it serves an important function in EU discourse on migration, allowing all migrants in this region to be primarily identified by their potential to reach Europe, and to cast them collectively as a 'migration liability'.

Transit migration then seems to become a synonym for potential migration or 'migration pressure', a term evoking an image of an

increasing number of poor people accumulating at the fringe of the European Union, ready to engage in massive maritime movements, scale fences or swim rivers as soon as they are offered the opportunity. Hence, the claim by the Italian minister of the interior in June 2003 that 1.5–2 million Africans would be waiting in Libya to illegally cross to Europe (Boubakri, 2006). Although this statement lacked any empirical backing, and ignores the fact that Libya is a migration destination in its own right, this shows that terminology can have a real impact on public perceptions and, ultimately, government action and the real lives of migrants.

Rather than describing a process, as it first appears, transit migration describes a location, destination and a perspective, just as clearly as emigration or immigration. Being 'in transit' is extremely difficult to define outside of a particular political context. The most accurate understanding of transit migration requires a tautological definition: transit migrants as those migrants currently living in transit countries, and transit countries are first and foremost those that border the EU or the Mediterranean Sea.

Yet we do not wish to simply abandon the category. There is something new and interesting about forms of migration around the Mediterranean that have highlighted the inadequacy of static categories and have the potential to push forward our understandings of migration more generally. It is not the focus on these forms of migration that we wish to challenge but the terminology. 'Transit migration' is not only politically charged (that, as we have established, is common to all forms of categorisation) but inaccurate and so unhelpful from an analytical perspective. 'Transit' is not the essential element of what has been called transit migration for it is only a minority of migrants who set out with the explicit objective of reaching Europe and then finally get there. Like all migrants, 'transit' migrants are trying to make their lives better and the ways they plan to do this change regularly with the opportunities that are presented to them.

Collyer (2007, 2010) has called these movements 'fragmented journeys' and it is their fragmented nature that appears to be their key characteristic. Those individuals who do manage to get to Europe may not have intended to travel there when they left their homes and they may,

as many are, be profoundly disappointed with what they find when they arrive, but from an outsider's perspective it is tempting to impose a linear logic on their journeys. Wherever it was they have been, wherever it was that they wanted to go, only on reaching Europe have they really arrived. This linearity imposes fixed points of origin and destination on much more complex and dynamic lived realities so that everything in between, perhaps many years of wandering, becomes 'transit'. For those people involved in this process, as we have demonstrated, 'transit' is a totally inadequate term. Yet 'transience' or 'wandering' suggests a lack of purpose that is not accurate either.

These movements are certainly migrations, often interspersed with periods of fixity, during which individuals may find work for years at a time. When these migration histories are viewed as a whole the only logic that emerges is one of continual or regular dissatisfaction with the working or living conditions encountered or the regular deterioration in individual security. The only real pattern is one of fragmentation as individuals continually strive to improve themselves and their situation, to find better than they have now. Such migrations may obviously be considered individually, as separately motivated journeys. Yet viewed collectively there is often a common logic to a series of such journeys. When successive journeys have both means and motivations in common, it makes more sense to view them as a continuation of a broader, fragmented pattern. This common logic may well be explained by a desire to reach Europe, as the 'transit' category suggests, although just as commonly it seems that it is not and it is only a minority who eventually make it there anyway. Many others fail and many more never really consider the possibility yet share this pattern of successive movements.

The term 'fragmented migration' does not project an imagined future; unlike 'transit migration' it can only be used to describe the migration itself (rather than countries or migrants) and it only labels past events, not an imagined future, though it fits them into a more general explanatory framework. The insight that an individual may not be certain of the end of their journey cautions against the amalgamation of a variety of different motivations and practices of mobility, that occurs in with the 'transit' label. It also has policy

implications, highlighting the difficulty of developing successful awareness campaigns in migrants' regions of origin, for example, 'Fragmented migration' is not a clearly defined category, it simply highlights a more accurate focus for further investigation of these new mobility patterns.

CONCLUSION

Transit migration has become paradigmatic in current explorations of migration to Europe, but is highly problematic as a tool for understanding migration processes occurring in countries surrounding Europe. In this paper, we have discussed the ways in which the dynamic nature of what has been called transit migration may be captured in categories that provide a basis for developing our understanding of the phenomenon but do not attempt to artificially pin it down. In order to embed this analysis into the broader debate on migration categories, we have explored the traditional understandings of migration and migrants, which have mainly focused on predominantly *dichotomous* categorisations based on time/space, location/direction and causes. However, these classic, dichotomous ways of considering migration as either temporary or permanent, from a fixed home to a temporary host, a place of origin to a prearranged destination, for a particular purpose in either legal or illegal ways were never really adequate to address the multiple, shifting nature of migration.

As an apparently more dynamic categorisation, 'transit migration' seems to offer a way around some of the classical dilemmas of categorisation. However, based on an analysis of migration from sub-Saharan Africa to and through North Africa, we have seen that the concept has often been applied in a rather rigid way by states to pin down particular categories of migrants or to re-brand de facto settlers as people who should leave. The term can also be misleading by ignoring that journeys may take years, are generally made in stages, often have no fixed end-points. Even when they do have clear destinations, they are not necessarily located in Europe. Second, North Africa is a destination in its own right and at least temporary settlement has been the rule rather than the exception. Third, a considerable proportion of migrants failing to

enter Europe prefer to settle as a 'second best' option rather than return. The complexity, diversity and fluidity of migration experiences raises some fundamental doubts about the usefulness of the term transit migration to describe a phenomenon and, certainly, individual experiences. Although the term may look innovative, it does not challenge but actually *reinforces* the notion that migratory moves have fixed starting and end points, and, by doing so, it essentialises the transit space by reducing it to a 'through' space.

Current forms of migration in North Africa highlight the inadequacy of static categories and have the potential to push forward our understandings of migration more generally. We advanced the idea of 'fragmented journeys' as a way of conceptualising migration as a process, in which people shift from one categorisation to another.

This is the more general inference that can be drawn from our specific analysis of 'transit migration'. If we consider them more carefully, we may find that many other migration projects that are analysed as smooth transitions from one stable state to another are actually far more fragmented. It may be more accurate to consider them in the line of Table 2 as individuals experiencing a disjointed succession of changing projects, community attitudes and state categorisations. Fragmented migration highlights this process of shifting from one categorisation to another. It is an essentially dynamic way of understanding migration, which is not only relevant in the context of 'transit migration', but also to achieve a more empirically founded understanding of migration processes, the 'fragmented' realities of which may often have limited or no relevance in the broad (policy) categories to which they are supposed to belong.

NOTES

(1) A search in JSTOR (8 April 2008) among relevant disciplinary journals (anthropology, economics, sociology, geography, political science, sociology) returned 33,542 and 19,686 hits of articles containing the word 'immigration' and 'immigrant', respectively, against 13,622 and 2068 hits of articles containing the word 'emigration' and 'emigrant'. There were 54,504 and 11,128 hits for 'migration' and 'migrant', respectively. A search in Google Scholar (8 April 2008) returned 315,000 hits for the

Table 2. Towards dynamic understandings of ‘transit migration’.

Individual		Community	State
<i>Discourse</i>	Projects, plans, hopes	Attitudes	Categorisation
<i>Resources</i>	Potential	Location, support, employment	Enforcement
<i>Action</i>	Practical action	Civil society	Inclusion/Exclusion

search strings ‘immigration and society’ and 96,500 hits for ‘emigration and society’.

(2) A search in JSTOR (8 April 2008) among relevant disciplinary journals returned 1166 hits for ‘countries of origin’ (54 for ‘origin countries’) while the term ‘home countries’ returned an almost similar number of 1178 hits. While ‘destination countries’ returned only 112 hits (and ‘countries of destination’ 86), ‘host countries’ is by far the favourite term with 1744 hits.

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