Migrations in the Mediterranean : a complex sociology

The Mediterranean is a representative space of migrations in the world. This subject, publicized and politicized, is the object of simplification and commonplaces at the very moment when, for about thirty years, it becomes more complex and diverse.

It is at the heart of this dialogue between Bernard Mossé, scientific director of NEEDE Mediterranean, and Andrea Calabretta, a sociologist specializing in migrations worldwide, in the Mediterranean and in Italy in particular. This helps to better understand this specific issue.

#1 The world we live in has been built by migrations

Bernard Mossé: Dear Andrea, would you like to introduce yourself?

Andrea Calabretta: I am a social sciences researcher at the University of Padua in Italy where I conducted my doctoral research. I have worked on transnational relations, particularly on the Tunisian community in Italy, specifically those living in Modena in northern Italy and in Ragusa, Sicily. They maintain relations with the country of origin on various levels: economic, symbolic, and identity.

After obtaining my Ph.D., I took part in a research project in Milan on the working conditions of several immigrant communities in the city. Now, I am working in Padua on a research project about the second generation in Italy: the children of migration, especially of Maghrebi origin, who are transitioning into adulthood, often in search of employment. How do they grow up in Italy, what are their living conditions, their integration into the workforce, housing issues: how do these children of migrants enter adulthood and experience their participation in Italian citizenship.

I have published works in English, French, and Italian on these issues: the relationship with the home country and the social exclusion of migrants. These are the two main aspects of my current research.

Bernard: Can you give us a general overview of migrations around the world and the evolution of sociology itself in relation to migrations?

Andrea: I think it is important to start with an observation: throughout human history, there is an obvious continuity of migratory phenomena. It is important for me to emphasize this because it allows us, especially as researchers, to step back from the pressure of current events: as sociologist Norbert Elias says, this pressure sometimes makes us lose sight of the bigger picture.

It is necessary to understand that the world we live in has been built by migrations. I was born in Rome, the Eternal City, which was founded, according to legend, by the descendants of Aeneas, a prince who left Troy in Anatolia: Aeneas is a sort of asylum seeker, if we can say that in today's terms!

Bernard: With his wife, his son, his friends, and his father Anchise on his back...!

Andrea: That's it. The history of the world is marked by migrations and by a certain permanence of this phenomenon. To stick to the Italian case and return to the contemporary period, Italy has been disrupted by migrations: it is estimated that in a century, between 1876 and 1988, 27 million Italians left for abroad: it's almost half of the population of Italy today. These are huge numbers that have changed the human and social landscape of the country. At a time, the 19th century, when the societies of Europe, America, and Oceania were reconfigured by the migratory movement.

This is to talk about the continuities and the importance of migratory phenomena. And it is the basis of the analysis: these movements of people transform both the societies of origin and the societies of arrival. It is a recurring social phenomenon: we have locals who already know each other, who have a certain social power, and newcomers who lack resources.

There is also the constant question of the temporality of migration. This is what Georg Simmel tells us: the stranger is the one who remains tomorrow. One cannot speak of migration without considering the temporality of these movements.

There is also the question of space. Not only movement in geographical space, but also movement in social space and symbolic space.

In these vast continuities, it is not simple to determine discontinuities. But in recent history, I think we can identify a moment of discontinuity in the 1990s, because it is a time when we witness the collapse of the communist model, a political renewal in the world, a new imaginary being created, related to communication, means of transportation. There is truly what the Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai thinks in terms of new "landscapes," a historical set of different mutating collective actors: nation-states, transnational societies, diasporic communities, sub-national groups and movements, and even more intimate ones such as villages, neighborhoods, and families, what he calls *ethnoscapes*...

These new imaginary worlds are crossed by people in motion: not only migrants, but also other figures (entrepreneurs, tourists, pilgrims, etc.) who, in their movement, interact with other movements, sometimes antagonistic: financial, communicative, and media movements.

One can think that from the 1990s, the typical characteristics of migration remain, but they apply and take place in a different social context. This is what is referred to in terms of "globalization", even though it is a term that I don't like very much. Nevertheless, we can say that migrations are

part of a global society that is much more interconnected, and are part of an imaginary that has shifted.

Bernard: Excuse me, just a parenthesis; what is the reason for this reluctance to use the term *globalization*? Is it because globalization also involves regionalization for you?

Andrea: My reluctance is related to the fact that it is a term with a more political than scientific dimension, like many other terms used in sociology, including those I use myself, such as *integration*, *transnationalism*... The term globalization developed, especially in the 1990s, with a political dimension as a synonym for a very positive future of the neoliberal global society.

This political imaginary induces the idea that we will live in a world without history, as Francis Fukuyama said. And obviously, that is not the direction we are heading towards.

So, in relation to these new landscapes that are developing in the 1990s, I believe that to characterize the current migratory phenomenon, we can refer to the analyses of the well-known book *The Age of Migration* by sociologists S. Castles, H. De Haas, and M. J. Miller (2005), which can be summarized by the notion of *complexification*.

The real key to understanding current migrations is to think of them as a complex phenomenon, much more complex than what we have learned to know before.

First, the globalization of migrations. More and more countries are involved in international migration flows. Regions of the world that were spared are now right in the middle of general human movements and are key players as countries of origin and as destination countries.

A change in the directions of migratory flows. South-South flows have become more prevalent compared to South-North flows. Regions have become new migration hubs: for example, the Persian Gulf is a new arrival region.

An internal differentiation of the phenomenon and its motivations. Categories from the past are no longer valid: people on the move are no longer just factory workers or part of family reunification, but there is a proliferation of figures and paths. Transit migrations are becoming longer and more substantial.

A feminization of immigrant labor: that is a question that will be central in the coming years in Europe, especially with our aging societies, and the care work which is predominantly done by women.

These trends are in dialogue with each other.

Finally, in the midst of these upheavals, the most important thing is the increasing politicization of the migration issue. There were the European elections last June: we saw that it was practically impossible to conduct an election campaign without addressing migration.

In this sense, the objective complexification of migratory movements is closely linked to their politicization and the invocation of a tightening of the rules.

On one hand, there is a push to close the borders, on the other hand, efforts are made to make the living conditions of migrants increasingly harsh. As a result, transit routes are becoming longer and more challenging.

Countries of emigration or transit become countries of immigration because people are forced to stay there for years. This is the case, for example, of Turkey.

This is pretty much the image you need to have: an image of complexification accompanied by politicization, meaning in this case the criminalization of migrants, not only in Europe: it's the same thing almost everywhere, like in America, between the United States and Mexico.

2 – Faced with the increasing complexity of categories and motivations of migration actors, social sciences have had to adapt their analytical tools.

Bernard Mossé: You said that sociologists' categories do not always align with administrative categories. Can you give us an example of administrative categories that are reworked by sociologists? And it's also an opportunity for me to ask you, in the face of these changes, how sociology and social sciences in general have evolved in their analysis.

Andrea Calabretta: Yes, of course. It's an epistemological question: we, sociologists, as workers in the social sciences, as well analyzed by P. Bourdieu, are pushed to use and think in common sense and state categories. We undergo this pressure from normative, legal categories, as if they were objective, which is not the case: these are socially created categories. For example, there is no "human" difference between an asylum seeker and a migrant worker. We are called to work on and with people who are categorized like that by the state, and this categorization changes their lives. It is evident that this categorization has objective effects on people's lives. But our work also involves deconstructing these supposedly "natural" categories. That's why I am a big fan of the sociologist A. Sayad. Since the 1970s, he has led us to think about migration beyond state categories. Thanks to him, we know that all labor migration is also family migration. These categorizations exist, but the sociologist must be careful not to normalize or naturalize them. This is still my perspective today: in migration studies, there is a risk of being analytical, of letting institutions indicate what should be studied and how to name things. The big risk is not empowering oneself to name research objects, because that is really the basis of our work.

To address your second question, I believe that the sociology of migratory phenomena has evolved in recent years: we have learned to work within complexity. It took some time because until the 1980s, or even the 1990s, we still had rather simplistic interpretations. There has been a whole process of considering complexity and also the incorporation of decolonial thinking.

Bernard: Is it reductive to characterize this evolution of research by the fact that with A. Sayad, a collaborator of P. Bourdieu, we were able to consider the migrant as neither from here nor from there, in the wake of decolonization, and that today the migrant is considered both from here and from there, particularly through transnational analysis?

Andrea: In my opinion, it's a bit reductionist, yes. Because in Sayad's works, we don't only have absence. There is also the whole question related to presence, the permanence in France of migrants, especially Algerians, which results in intergenerational trajectories in the immigration country.

In fact, today as yesterday, in the 1970s, these two poles dialogue in the life of the migrant: presence and absence. Even though there are changes that recompose them. For example, mobile phones and social networks now allow for maintaining a social relationship in a broad, communicative, symbolic sense. But it would be simplistic to speak of a "double presence."

Sometimes, despite more powerful analytical tools, the researcher is led to simplify their discourse, to respond bluntly to complex phenomena. This is particularly the case in responses to research programs of large international organizations and to requests from political

decision-makers. This is somewhat the risk that I see in the sociology of migrations today: the simplification of complexity, to meet the needs of the research "market."

Bernard: Maybe you also think it is too simplistic to say that the sociology of the 1970s considered the migrant as someone enduring their fate, whereas today it sees them more as an actor?

Andrea: No, this is not a simplification. I think indeed, as I said, the 1990s represent a change in the imagination of migrations. Today, there are tools, individual, identity-related, that lead migrants to move not only from one country to another, but within the social world, differently than in the past. The self-image of the migrant allows them to consider themselves more as actors than mere participants in a host society in search of workers. I agree with this process of building more active actors in migration.

Although there is sometimes a somewhat overly optimistic and oversimplified sociological reading on this aspect.

#3 – The Mediterranean is characteristic of the politicization of the migration theme

Bernard Mossé: You have outlined an overview of migrations around the world and the sociology of migrations over the past decades. Can you refocus on the migratory phenomenon in the Mediterranean?

Andrea Calabretta: Yes, of course. The risk with the Mediterranean is to think of it as the center of the world. But I truly believe that the Mediterranean is one of the paradigmatic spaces of migration. It is a space that allows us to understand new dynamics, reshaping the dynamics of the past. And in relation to this, I think we can now discern four aspects, four dimensions.

The first one, I have already addressed, is the issue of politicization. It is truly at the heart of the migration challenge today, and we can see it very clearly in the Mediterranean.

Let's take the Italian case. Until the 1990s, one could arrive in Italy without a visa system. Truly, one could depart from anywhere in the world and, with a passport, arrive in Rome or Milan... It was truly free movement, and it's something so distant today that it takes an effort to imagine... it's incredible: we don't even have the tools to conceive it anymore, and it's in the span of 30 years that it has completely changed.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there have been 30,000 deaths while crossing the Mediterranean in the last 10 years, with 80% of them occurring in the Central Mediterranean, meaning to reach Italy. We are talking about thousands and thousands of people who have died trying to cross a border that did not exist until the 1990s.

In the Mediterranean, we can clearly see how the politicization of the issue, its criminalization, has tragic and multidimensional effects. It starts with the observation that there are populations on the move, lacking resources, easy to marginalize, foreigners beyond our group. And this vulnerability allows us to construct a social identity at little cost.

This is the first Mediterranean dimension, paradigmatic of what is happening in the world.

A second dimension, linked to this first one, is that of borders. The visibility given to migrations has accentuated the weight of the question of borders. Not only in the common sense, but also among researchers, with the development of *Border Studies*, which did not exist 30 or 40 years ago. The works of Sandro Mezzadra, for example, tell us that we can use the border as an

epistemological tool to understand migration and society in general. This is the case with the Mexican border or elsewhere. But the Mediterranean is central in the construction of the border as a normative object, a political object, and also a scientific object.

We talk about the "European fortress". But the border should be seen less as a wall than as a filter that holds back some and lets others pass. And it remains on the backs of those who have crossed. Thus, we see the multiplication of internal borders in the European societies north of the Mediterranean. This creates a fragmented society with a "citizenship pyramid": we have citizens on paper, but who are not recognized as such; long-term residents, short-term residents, asylum seekers... These different statuses are functional for our economies. If we think about migrant workers from the 1990s, or even 1970s, they arrived with a very specific status, whereas today asylum seekers, for example, are pushed to work to prove they deserve asylum. As if there were a suspicion a priori on this matter... This is obviously a much more precarious situation than before...

Bernard: On this point, can we say that there is a porous social boundary between the Immigrant and the Refugee, even a politically maintained confusion between the Migrant and the Exiled?

Andrea: Let's say that it is not a "natural" confusion in the sense that it is based on the need for foreign labor: thus, a more precarious, more exploitable status is obtained, for example, for the agriculture in the south of Italy. This multiplication of external and internal borders in the Mediterranean makes people's lives more complex...

That was the second dimension. The third point brings us back to questions already addressed: the increasing complexity of the motivations of the actors who are moving.

We have moved from a very specific framework of international agreements in the 1950s for the sending of labor from the south bank to the north bank, between the countries of the Maghreb and France, between Italy and Belgium, between Turkey and Germany...

We also had another very specific category, that of family reunification.

But today, the motivations are multiple and intertwined, and the categories of the State are inadequate: the applicants are individuals who come to work, but also those who travel for health, family reasons...

One can also consider the question of the climate crisis as a motivation for migration. Is it a motivation among others or is it a priority, in the world and in the Mediterranean in particular?

There is a rather catastrophic discourse from international organizations on this. I believe, of course, that we are experiencing a very deep climate crisis, but the connection made by these organizations between the climate crisis and migration seems politicized and exaggerated to me.

I will pick up on the analysis of the Dutch sociologist, Hein de Haas. For example, IOM tells us that during the decade 2012-2022, more than 21 million people migrated due to natural disasters. And the same organization tells us that by 2050, there will be 1 billion people exposed to climate risk in coastal areas. This is a rather mechanistic view of migration. Migration is never monocausal. Migrants are not objects that move mechanically in the world. This does not take into account two well-known recurring phenomena:

- First, the phenomenon of resilience: populations tend overwhelmingly to stay where they grew up and adapt to changes in environmental conditions.
- On the other hand, it is not the most deprived who migrate. They are neither the poorest nor the richest, but rather individuals from the middle class seeking to improve their conditions.

If we use the numbers and proportions provided by international organizations for projections very far in the future, we do not anticipate an objective reality, but we pose a problem to manage. We always come across this question of politicization.

There will certainly be areas strongly affected by climate change that can generate migratory movements, combined with the search for a better economic life or the search for biographical experiences, but we cannot think of the climate crisis as a game of marbles pushing balls. It is a theme to be addressed, yes, but not as a fear.

Bernard: In the common sense, as you say, there is also the idea of invasion. Isn't it contradicted by the fact that South-South migrations are becoming the majority and by the importance of nearby migrations?

Andrea: Yes, many misconceptions need to be dispelled, including in sociological discourse. Regarding South-South migrations, I have identified very interesting data from IOM. It is always thought that poor countries are countries of emigration. However, among the countries with the highest emigration rates in the world, we find the United Kingdom and Germany in the 14th and 18th positions. On the contrary, China, considered a poor country, receives a large number of migrants. It is a much more complex world than discourses suggest. There are short movements, South-South movements, increasingly complex secondary movements. And the climate crisis further complicates the picture... It's our world... it is complex, but the alarmist rhetoric of invasion does not correspond to reality.

I would finish, if you agree, with the fourth dimension of Mediterranean migrations. It involves the increasing complexity not only of the categories of actors and motivations, but also of the contexts. One can think of the case of Italy, which, until the beginning of the 20th century, was a country of emigration and, from the 1970s onwards, while continuing to be a departure point for emigrations to France and Northern Europe, also becomes a destination for international migrations. In recent years, it has also experienced the reality of internal migrations, increasingly becoming a transit country. And this is the case throughout the Mediterranean, in Spain, Greece, or Portugal, as well as in Turkey or Tunisia.

This complexification is also linked, as we have seen, to an internal complexification of social hierarchies, with different legal and social statuses, but also because of a complexification on an international scale, as there is a need to negotiate with the countries on the southern shore that are interconnected by migratory movements.

4 In Italy, since the 2010s, the geopolitical and economic context exacerbates the competition between incoming groups and established groups.

Bernard Mossé: If you don't mind, let's finish with a theme at the heart of your research: the construction of the collective identity of migrants, their relationship with local populations, and their own community. Perhaps through the examples you have studied of Tunisians in Italy?

Andrea Calabretta: We talked about migrants who are victims of the categories used to name them, as well as institutions that politicize and criminalize their presence. But these questions interest the entire civil society, associations, and public opinion: it is a key to understanding very typical dynamics in the construction of groups, still relying on sociologists Sayad and Elias.

To begin with, one must grasp an illusion: the perception of the migrant as a “temporary” individual. Firstly, because the migrant themselves does not want to betray their origins; then because the host society considers them as a workforce that meets a temporary need which does not require integration into political citizenship. And even the home country does not want to consider them as lost to its national population.

This illusion has consequences on the representation of the migrant, as a temporary, marginal person who does not belong to the community, and on self-representation: it is a process of symbolic exclusion that leads to social exclusions.

There is a known phenomenon in social sciences that Norbert Elias analyzed: when a new social group begins a stabilization process, dominant groups seek to restore differences, to reestablish a distance. There is this conflict, we can say, between groups that assert themselves as part of European societies, aspiring to a normal life, and dominant groups seeking to maintain their power and deny entry to those considered foreigners. The latter construct a cultural, ethnic, religious difference to distance migrants and their descendants in public discourse. I observed this process of differentiation with a group of Tunisians in Italy, in Modena, near Bologna.

This Tunisian community has been established since the 1980s. These Tunisian workers have integrated into the industrial fabric, rented and then bought houses, brought their wives and children, made Italian friends, friends from other communities, etc. They have integrated into civic life, even though in a somewhat marginal position as workers and foreigners.

In 2011, there are two new elements. The first one is the economic crisis of those years that will greatly affect the industry world with a large wave of unemployment. Immigrants, even if they have been in Modena for decades, are still considered foreigners and therefore the first ones to lose their jobs… The idea of interdependence, that they are in a certain way useful for the local society, is lost.

The second event is the Arab Spring. Many young Tunisians flee Tunisia and arrive in Italy without always having a very specific migration plan: hundreds of them pass through Modena. There is then a lot of media coverage, politicization of this presence. These young Tunisians are considered criminals. It is very clear how ethnic difference, being Tunisian, which was not a problem in 2008, becomes one in 2012. This is a very important difference that has concrete consequences on the possibility of finding housing, finding work. And this is not only the case for newcomers, but also for people who have been there for 30 years.

This is what I wanted to conclude: we tend to think that these national or cultural distinctions are natural and obvious, but that’s not the case. These are constructed distinctions, over time, based on conflicts, depending on contexts and power differences. I believe that the relationships between groups in Mediterranean societies and European societies could be less tense, less violent, through a global reconfiguration of social alliances. During COVID, for example, there wasn’t this big rhetoric around migration. The enemy of our society was elsewhere. The social reconfiguration generated by migrations will be a slow process of modifying social hierarchies, also involving the descendants claiming their place in the societies where they live… It will be long and conflictual, due to the resistance of established groups, but it is inevitable.

Bernard: I would like to address a question that you have not mentioned, stemming from your work, independent of the geopolitical and economic context: the fact that, within the same group of immigrants – sociologist Sylvie Mazzella has also observed this for Tunisians in Marseille – there is a distancing. Based on what she called the “neighbor-thug,” the younger Tunisian, who has just arrived, and from whom one must differentiate. A bit on the theme of the common place: the last one to arrive, closes the door.

Andrea: Yes, it's a very common phenomenon. I noticed this in Modena as well, it was very evident. From my point of view, it's a dynamic that is linked to this question of social hierarchies. For Tunisians who had integrated into the local society, being assimilated with the newcomers was seen as negative. They would tell me, "We have nothing in common; when I see them on the street, I change my path…". It's about differentiating oneself from the stereotyped image that affects migrants. But the very interesting thing is the impossibility of moving away from these culturalist, ethnicized visions, from escaping this assimilation with the newcomers. I remember interviews with young women who were born and raised in Modena, with the Modena accent. It was really sad because, in the city, in bars, etc., interactions went well until the person they were talking to discovered they were of Tunisian origin…

Yes, relationships within foreign communities are sometimes difficult and conflictual, but this internal stratification is due to the attempt of migrants – settled or newcomers – to find a space within the local society. This society, however, sometimes uses these internal differences to keep them on the margins.

Biographies

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