Commentary

Hotspots: Questioning the Future of Europe Through Its Borders

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Abstract

The article examines recent research on hotspots – the EU system for the management of incoming asylum seekers, implemented in Greece and Italy – to raise some questions on Europe's relation to its external borders, and its *others*. Briefly discussing Abdelmalek Sayad's writings on "state thinking" and the migrant condition, and drawing attention to the repeated failures that characterise the government of the external borders of the EU, we question Europe's capacity to articulate its relation to the external world and to people on the move beyond the space of the border. This question, we think, will be central in the next European century.

Keywords

The commentaries in this special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary European Research* are inspired by the 100th anniversary of the armistice that put an end to land, sea and aerial fighting in World War I, signed by the Allies and Germany on November the 11th, 1918. This month, celebrations of the armistice will be held across Europe, from London to villages along the Franco-German border. A few weeks before this anniversary, with much less media and institutional attention, Afro-European communities, migration activists and refugee advocates across the continent commemorated another event, the Lampedusa migrant shipwreck of October the 3rd, 2013, which caused the death of over 360 migrants, mostly from Eritrea, Somalia and Ghana. What can this second, much overlooked, anniversary tell us about Europe and its future? In this commentary we offer a reflection inspired by this question. We argue that exceptional measures for the government of unwanted mobilities at the European Union's external borders have become a defining mechanism of the supranational state, and raise some questions on the implications of this for visions of a European future.

Let us start with a quick snapshot of the present. Five years after the Lampedusa shipwreck, large-scale search and rescue operations in the central Mediterranean – like *Mare Nostrum*, launched by the then Italian government immediately after the tragedy – seem to belong to a recent yet distant past. The right-wing populist alliance in power in Italy has claimed to have closed the country's harbours, and repeatedly declared 'war' on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) committed to saving migrants at sea – a criminalisation of solidarity that is far from unique in Europe. On the Southern-Eastern front, since March 2016 the EU-Turkey Statement on refugees (better known as the 'EU-Turkey deal') has led to thousands of migrants being 'stuck' on Greek islands, and normalised what the European Commission calls its *hotspot approach* to migration and border management. The latter has recently been the subject of a growing body of excellent critical research in politics, geography and anthropology (Kalir and Rozakou, 2016; Martin and Tazzioli, 2016; Mitchell and Sparke, 2018; Pallister-Wilkins, 2018, Tazzioli, 2018; among others), and it is worth considering in some detail, for it is the most emblematic of the recent developments in the government of European borders.

Hotspots are inter-agency processing centres (involving the EU Asylum Office – EASO, the Judicial Office – Eurojust and the EU Border Agency – FRONTEX, alongside national governments) aimed at identifying, registering and fingerprinting incoming migrants and streamlining asylum procedures in the countries located at the Southern and Southern-Eastern borders of the EU (namely Italy and Greece). They were first formally introduced in the EU Agenda on Migration in 2015 to respond to increased migratory movements and related growing humanitarian concerns. In May 2018, the Commission report on the implementation of the Agenda confirmed their role as 'key elements' in EU border management (European Commission, 2018).

As a legal-administrative, humanitarian and policing technology, hotspots follow a dual spatio-temporal logic. On the one hand, they work by modulating the movement of migrants (Pallister-Wilkins, 2018). People are confined in enclosed facilities, camps and reception centres often located on islands or close to the harbours of first arrival in order to be identified and undergo a preliminary assessment of their claims for international protection (referred to as 'debriefing' in European Commission documents). If their request is deemed admissible, they then enter the national asylum systems as legitimate applicants, get transferred to dedicated facilities, and possibly have access to distribution and relocation programs (from countries of first access to other member states). If considered as not in need of protection, they are repatriated or, most often, left to languish in a socio-legal and geographical limbo. For example, in the Moria hotspot on the Greek island of Lesvos this limbo often takes the form of protracted encampment in hyper-precarious conditions. During fieldwork carried out by one of the authors between October 2016 and February 2017, international organizations officers, European diplomats and aid workers dispatched to Greece often defined such conditions as "abysmal" and "among the worst in the world".

At the same time, as highlighted by the echoes of technocratic managerialism that are found particularly in early EU documents on the topic, hotspots have the function of collecting and ordering biometric data on incoming migrants, and making EU migration and asylum bureaucracy more efficient. In doing so, they accelerate the temporality of asylum in the EU (Tazzioli, 2018). Significantly, hotspots also act as inter-governmental 'control' mechanisms (Martin and Tazzioli, 2016). Conceived to ensure and facilitate the implementation of Dublin III Regulations, according to which the responsibility for examining asylum applications lies with the country of first arrival and registration, hotspots allow the Commission and the other member states to exert control on 'unruly' Greece and Italy, plagued as they are by financial crises, economic recession, and chronic corruption. They are thus as essential to the stabilization of intra-European relations as they are to the Union's external border policies. Finally, hotspots enclose and order the spaces and practices through which basic humanitarian assistance is provided to migrants, and establish which actors can legitimately provide that assistance. Only specific NGOs are allowed to operate inside hotspot facilities, while others, like Doctors Without Borders, have in many instances refused to be partners, objecting on ethical grounds due to the extremely poor infrastructural and legal standards that are part of the EU-Turkey deal. Thus, hotspots regulate compassion and solidarities, such as those seen at work in Greece at the height of the so-called 'crisis', with the arrival of thousands of volunteers (Pallister-Wilkins, 2018). They intervene in the relation between the states, and the supra-national state, and its engaged citizens and communities. They are a central, perhaps *the* central, site of twenty-first century European politics.

In the last couple of years, academic research, media, NGO reports, activist mobilizations and migrant voices have repeatedly exposed how unsubstantiated the claims of streamlined and effective asylum and border bureaucracies, harmonized procedures, and professionalized, prompt humanitarian response that accompany the implementation of the EU hotspot approach actually are. Identification and asylum procedures are confusing, slow and arbitrary, and the promised transfer to other European countries is often made impossible by lack of agreement and political will, as in the

case of the 73 migrants rescued at sea in July 2018 and then stuck for months in the Pozzallo hotspot, in Eastern Sicily (Ruta, 2018). Infrastructures and sanitation are notoriously inadequate. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) report on the Moria hotspot, published in September 2018, is but the latest of a series of horrific accounts of everyday life in the camp. In the report, the IRC details how problems in the sewage system are reported to have caused waste water to spill on to the mattresses where children were sleeping, and estimates that, due to the camp being severely overcrowded, there is approximately 1 toilet facility for every 70 inhabitants (IRC, 2018). On October the 3rd, 2018, The Guardian reported the attempted suicide of an Iraqi girl as young as 13 – yet another case in a generalized, severe mental health crisis particularly affecting children and adolescents (Tondo, 2018). In September 2018, the Greek government made a commitment to work on improving conditions in the camp, and relocated approximately 2000 people from the island of Lesvos to the mainland. Meanwhile, the EU anti-fraud office, OLAF, following orders by the Commission, started an investigation on the alleged misuse of funds devoted to food for refugees in Greece (Bayer, 2018). None of the institutions involved, however, have so far questioned the legitimacy of the hotspot itself, as a space of protracted containment and an approach to the government of migration and mobility. The people sleeping close to sewage water in Moria might in the future get a slightly better hotspot, or a hotspot that has been externalized to Libya, Turkey, or other extra-EU transit countries. Yet there will still be hotspots. Hotspots, Commission and members states seem to say, are here to stay. They are part of the European future.

In his essay *Immigration et 'Pensée d'Etat'*, Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad, director of research at French *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* from 1977 to 1998, and a pioneer in European migration studies, famously argued that thinking about migration means reflecting upon "how the state thinks of itself" (1999: 6). For Sayad (1999), only migration can expose the fundamental nature, the truth of the state as an unstable, unfinished, even fictional political project. The mere presence of non-citizens on the state territory constantly exposes this essential precariousness. In the hotspot, we see this inherent precariousness at work as the European Union attempts to define itself through its borders. Barak Kalir and Katarina Rozakou (2016) have offered an impressive account of the frustrated "search for the state" by local officers in Moria, as they go about daily administrative and management tasks in the abject chaos of the camp, claiming to be unable to identify who actually is or should be in charge among the many national and supranational agencies involved.

Sayad (1999) discusses at length the effects of this frantic "search for the state" on the condition of the migrant. He does so by elaborating on the relation between migration, criminalization and what he, drawing on the work of his mentor and friend Pierre Bourdieu, refers to as *pensée d'Etat* (state-thinking). He thus defines the status of migrants in the eyes of the state as one of nearly 'ontological' delinquency, where delinquency is not only the condition of those who commit a crime (Sayad 1999:7). Rather, it is the state of being at fault because of one's radical non-belonging to the community and the place where she is physically present. It is the potential ontological delinquency of people who migrate that hotspots are supposed to modulate and produce data about, acting as a spatial bulwark against it. Sayad documented this logic at work in the condition of Algerian guest workers in the banlieues of 1970s metropolitan France. In the first volume of the collection of essays titled *L'immigration ou Les paradoxes de l'altérité* (Immigration or The Paradoxes of Alterity, 2014)*,* he shows how this condition of non-belonging is reflected in the temporariness, provisionality, and poor living standards of the physical spaces – in his case, the *foyers* – where migrants are accommodated. Nearly twenty years after Sayad's essay on *pensée d'Etat* was published, we see similar dynamics being reproduced at the territorial borders of Europe. The confining of migrants to the "internal colonies" of European cities, so lucidly diagnosed, alongside Sayad, by spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre (2009: 181), has been coupled with their protracted confinement at the border. As a

supranational state, the European Union thus reproduces the inherently exclusionary aspects of "state thinking", as diagnosed by Sayad (1999), revealing the inherent limits of its self-definition as a space of freedom, security and justice, limits which are particularly evident in the progressive deterioration of the right to asylum.

The resonances between Sayad's reflections on the condition of Algerian workers in France in the 1970s-1980s, and the spaces and practices of confinement and encampment through which Europe deals with the people who, confronted with the lack of sufficient legalised, safe routes to migration, attempt to access its territory to seek protection, are reminiscent of Didier Fassin's (2016) provocative observations on the relation between asylum and labour migration. For Fassin (2016), European states have (partially) welcomed asylum seekers only as long as their prosperity and need for workers demanded a comprehensively open migration policy, and the Cold War required the maintenance of a liberal space nominally marked by the defence of individual human rights. Highlighting the convergences between the political economies and the moral economies of asylum, Fassin details how geopolitical and structural economic change has de facto transformed the latter from right to favour, with "selective humanitarianism" replacing "legal entitlement" (2016: 1). As these changes intersected with the creation and solidification of the European supra-national state, and later with military occupations, unrest and war in the neighbouring North Africa and Middle East (Iraq 1991, 2003, Syria 2011, Yemen, 2015, to mention but three of the major, still ongoing conflicts) the humanitarisation and exceptionalisation of asylum has gone hand in hand with the growing identification of Europe with its borders.

However, the research reviewed in this commentary has shown how, rather than leading to the creation of a well-guarded "fortress", as the popular activist narrative goes, this identification translates into conflicts between member states, tensions between border enforcement and citizens' displays of solidarity, and an apparent repeated failure in establishing who is actually responsible for the abject conditions to which some migrants are relegated. In the meantime, arrivals to Greece and Italy via sea never completely stopped – they just became slower and dramatically more complicated and dangerous. EU border management through hotspots appears, at best, futile (Kalir and Rozakou, 2016), and continues to be deadly. The current growing hegemony of right-wing populist politics seems to suggest an imminent violent drift of the 'state thinking' discussed in this piece. Yet the attempt at defining Europe through its borders remains unfinished and unstable, deadly and contested – as Sayad reminds us, it could not be otherwise. Refugee movements over the last 100 years of European history, and particularly in the aftermaths of WW I, are a testament to how 'state thinking' produces displacement and makes mobilities unwanted, dangerous, abject. In the next European century there will still be people on the move – will Europe, as a spatial political imaginary that goes beyond nation states and 'state thinking', be able to respond to them with something else than just borders?

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