Developing dynamic categorisations of transit migration

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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.

1. 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. 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, or transit migration are

now relatively common. There are four likely explanations for the creation of these new terms. First, frustration and boredom 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. Forth, 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. The task now is to translate the heterogeneity of these micro level studies into more general notions of migration that may contribute to generalised understandings of (new?) complexities in migration systems. This paper focuses on transit migration . We consider 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.

2. Basis for categorisations of migrations

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 it is now commonly argued that migration policy has become the most significant control on migration (REF). This can be seen in the politically constructed nature of existing ways of understanding and categorising migration. This section considers the variety of criteria that are important in the classification of migrants and the problems inherent in their use.

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

2.1. Time-space criteria

The term migration has both a space and a time component. Usual legal and research definitions of migration implicate the crossing of administrative boundaries, ranging from municipal, provincial (internal) to state (international) level. A second component of migration definitions is the requirement to 'stay' for a minimum period in another locality or country. The basic UN definitions distinguish internal and international migration and permanent (more than one year) from temporary (less than one year).

The resulting four-fold categorisation is one of the simplest ways of discussing migration, and it is a standard tool or demographers, but it does not necessarily coincide with a similarly neat distinction between lived experiences of migrants. Boundary crossing is frequently a poor measure of the significance of migration; international migration of members of the same ethnic group across border between, say, Zambia and Angola (Bakewell 2007) or trans-Atlantic migration from the US to the UK can involve travelling smaller socio-cultural distances than internal migration in diverse countries such as China or India. 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 certain individuals may switch from one category to the other without even moving, illustrated most recently by the uncertain fate of Serbians in Kosovo (Hammond 2008). 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.

The German, Dutch and Belgian guestworker programmes of the 1960s and 1970s are classical examples of such temporary migration policies (Castles and Kosack 1973; Entzinger 1985; Penninx 1982). 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 (Castles 2006; Ruhs 2005). There is ample empirical evidence that the longer migrants stay, the higher the likelihood of settling for an indeterminate period as a consequence of integration processes. 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' (Boudoudou 1985). The reverse is also true and many migrants who *consider* their migration as permanent may end up returning.

Not all people who move are migrants and non-migration movements are widely considered as 'mobility', a term which has far less restrictions, and encompasses virtually all human movement across space, irrespective of distance or time spent elsewhere. This includes commuting to school and work, business trips as well as leisure-related movements, such as tourism (Castles and Miller 2003; Skeldon 1997; Zelinsky 1971). 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, 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. 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.

2.2. 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 (1977) argued, all migrations are in fact both, though their practical usage makes these terms less neutral than they might seem at face value. The dominant academic literature and policy discourse reveal a 'northern' 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].

[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

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 (de Bree 2007; Hammond 1999). This challenges essentialist assumptions of natural links between people, culture and territory (Pedersen 2003). However, essentialist notions of 'home' or 'origin' pervade public discourses in sending and receiving societies. This is exemplified by the fact that children and grandchildren of Moroccan and Turkish migrants' in Europe are still commonly referred to as 'migrants' in the media.

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. For instance, labour migrants often first move to cities before possibly moving abroad, and return migrants do not necessarily return to their place of birth (de Haas 2008). In Europe, many labour migrants from Turkey and Morocco worked and migrated between several countries before settling for a longer period.

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of articles containing the word "immigration" and "immigrant", respectively, against 13,622 and 2068 hits of articles containing the word "emigration" and "emigrant". There where 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 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.

2.3. Perspective of the state

As recently as the 1960s state categorisations of migrants had little 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. An estimated 68 percent of all migration to France during the 1960s was technically illegal, for example, but most migrants were able to regularise their situation on arrival (Castles and Miller 2003). 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; until the late 1970s it was tremendously difficult for most Algerian, Moroccan or Tunisian nationals to obtain a passport, for example. There were also regular protests in Europe for improved residency rights for migrants from the 1960s onwards. Nevertheless, controls on movement itself were very limited and the passport obtained, there were few barriers for travel to Europe.

The situation is now very 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 in Europe, North America, Oceania and East Asia, the opportunities enjoyed by individual migrants are now significantly determined by their relationship with the states, above almost everything else. State categorisations operate most obviously in formal, administrative terms and individuals are grouped according to the rights and benefits they are granted by the states in which they live or travel.

The fundamental category of concern to the state is the distinction between legal and 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 widely used in preference to 'illegal', though they do not always mean the same thing and so are not directly synonymous. For instance, Van Liempt (2007:129) observed that smuggling can be both 'illegal', but licit, or socially accepted in migrant sending or receiving societies, at the same time.

In contrast to those who reject the term 'illegal' for its normative content, 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. Care in the use of the term means clarifying exactly what we mean by 'illegal'. 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. Particular types of residence or migration may be accurately described as legal or illegal and while these do not correspond exactly to what is licit or illicit, documented or undocumented or regular or irregular, it is the legality which is of most significance in understanding official state responses to these activities.

These are extremely fluid categories. 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. It is common for individuals to migrate illegally but for their subsequent residence to be perfectly legal. Or the reverse, since it is widely recognised that most people who are illegally resident in Europe entered through legal channels (Black et al 2006). In the case of overland migration from West 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 regularity and irregularity (de Haas 2007).

As with other categories which we have considered, this 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).

This is further complicated by the fact that official state attitudes to illegal migration and residence are not always supported by all state institutions. Notwithstanding public discourses stating exactly the contrary, European, North American and East Asian governments often tacitly tolerate the presence of irregular migrants, especially if they meet pressing labour demands. Hence, the existence of categories of registered irregular migrants in a country like Spain (de Haas 2007), or irregular Mexican migrants paying US taxes and the increasing acceptance of Mexican consular cards as IDs in the US. Moreover, governments' perception of what is 'illegal' migration vary greatly from one country to the other, reflecting differences in legislation and how it is applied in practice (Brennan 1984: 409).

2.4. Cause of migration

The final way in which migration may be classified is according to the fundamental or 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. All of these terms and many others aim to describe the essential essence of the migration in question. 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. Nevertheless, these terms are widely used and provide a meaningful, if not entirely satisfactory, indication of the type of migration we are talking about.

The long running debate around the categories 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration is probably one of the most controversial outstanding debates in this area. The notion of a discrete category of migrants who effectively have no agency and are 'forced' to move by life threatening circumstances is still widely used yet it was first questioned more than two decades ago (Richmond 1988). Richmond argued that all human behaviour is constrained to some degree. In similar vein we could also argue that almost all migrants have some degree of agency, though again this obviously varies widely. From a social science point of view, it would therefore seem more appropriate to conceive a continuum between forced and voluntary migration and there is now a wide range of empirical support for this that has arisen over the last few decades (Black 1994, Van Hear 1998).

A further debate concerns the link between forced migration and refugees. UNHCR regularly argues that refugees are not migrants. 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. His main argument for this is that refugees are a well defined group of people, with a unique legal status, whereas forced migrants are not. Such legal interpretations are usually not substantiated by broader social scientific realities and as others have argued (cf. Cohen 2007) refugees have a lot in common with 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. Existing ways of categorising migration provide relatively poor tools to assist us in this task. The classic, dichotomous ways of categorising migration were never really adequate 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 detailed the expansion of 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.

3. 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 and is manifestly political in its origins and fundamentally Eurocentric (Duvell 2006). 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 'transit' 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 need to apply the term reflects the quickening pace of intellectual fashions and the influence of largely ahistorical approach to 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.

3.1. 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. It has been widely argued that that was the explicit intention, but intended or not, that is certainly the effect.

This raises broader questions about how academic forms of knowledge production should respond to explicitly political processes of categorisation. As we note above, the two fields are mutually reinforcing and are increasingly difficult to distinguish clearly, but they do have some separate characteristics. Perhaps central amongst those characteristics which identify academic practice are ideals of reflexivity and rigorous self examination, which at worst justify derogatory labels of navel gazing, but at its best encourage a long historical perspective and an active awareness of the complex repercussions of any social intervention. Migration policy now exerts such a fundamental control 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 a ministerial level meeting every few months in recent years. In this

environment new policy ideas 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.

3.2. *Studying transit migration: The North African case*

Transit migration has become paradigmatic in current explorations of migration to Europe. This does not mean that transit migrants are numerically dominant; in fact the opposite is true, they are certainly in a tiny minority of 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, 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.

Transit migration seems to be one of the few more dynamic categorizations of migration. However, as we will see, 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 commonly used term 'transit migrants' may be misleading in three senses. We will illustrate this by focusing on 'transit' migrant to and through North Africa. First, the 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 (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005; Collyer 2006; Lahlou and Escoffier 2002). Substantial numbers of migrants end up settling in such towns and cities.

Second, 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, Lahlou, Escoffier, Pumares, and Ruspini 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 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 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 (Collyer 2006; Lahlou and Escoffier 2002). 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 (Alioua 2005; Boubakri 2004). 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 (Alioua 2005; Boubakri 2004). 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 (Alioua 2005; CIMADE 2004; 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 shoerepairing 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).

3.3. Does transit migration overcome dichotomous categories?

The previous description of migration 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, permanent – 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 the same limitations as common categories. While its *location-direction* component is deterministic, its *time-space* dimension is in fact static. Transit migration seems innovative compared to the origin-destination, sending-receiving, home-host 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 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.

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. This suggests that the concept has substantial limitations.

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 of 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 one 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. We know that this is empirically naïve. Although the term transit migration certainly adds conceptual nuance to the debate by conceptualising an important, intermediate, and often ignored form of migration, it does not resolve this problem at all.

4. Transit migration or fragmented migration?

4.1. 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 outcome 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. And many non-migrants who intend to migrate never do so as much as other people who never intended to move end up moving because they are compelled to do 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 which acknowledges that migration is a *process* by embracing a dynamic categorisation of (transit) migration. So, instead of rejecting migration categories as such, which will do only harm to improving 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 the intentional and factual component, 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.

Table 2: Towards dynamic understandings of 'transit migration'

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

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 categorisation that are applicable on one level may me highly problematic at the other level. This was already highlighted in our discussion of the 'illegal migration' which 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. However, the use of the category 'illegal' to achieve a sociological understanding of individual migrants' projects, plans and hopes is neither accurate nor useful.

In the same vein, it seems highly problematic to impose the category of 'transit' individuals' experiences, which, as this paper has tried to show, are too heterogeneous and dynamics to fit into such a general category which 'imposes' their eventual destination outside of the 'transit country'. We will come back at the tautological pitfalls of the application of a macro-term to individual's experiences. While the term 'transit' is difficult to apply to individuals, 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 migration through enforcement of state policies.

4.2. 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 all 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 almost an equivalent 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 to 2 millions of 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 or migrants.

Rather than describing a process, as it first appears, transit migration describes a location 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 which 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. '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 which are presented to them. Collyer (2007) has called these 'fragmented journeys' and it is the fragmented nature of these movements which appear to be their key characteristic. The term 'fragmented migration' has the added advantage that, unlike 'transit migration' it refers explicitly to a process and cannot also be used a category of individual migrant; neither 'fragmented migrant' nor 'fragmented country' makes any sense.

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 for '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 the broad (policy) categories to which they are supposed to belong.

5. 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 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 the 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 pre-arranged 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 categorization, '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 denying that journey may take years, are generally made in stages and often have no fixed end-points. 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 this phenomenon. Although the term may look innovative, the term 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.

Forms of migration around the Mediterranean have highlighted 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. It is likely that also many other migration projects that are analysed as smooth transitions from one stable state to another are actually far more fragmented.

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