The Right to Escape

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translated from the Italian by Taina Rajanti

abstract

Escape, as a political category, has always been suspicious. It seems to have close connections with betrayal, opportunism and cowardice, all categories that are both antipatriotic and foreign to the traditional virtues of political action. However, desertion, as a figure of civil disobedience, has had some success in the peace and environmental movements since the 1970s; and the massive exodus from the former German Democratic Republic that marked the end of Real Socialism was certainly a political movement. If escape has been almost an antipolitical category, it has had other connotations, like that of adventure, journey of exploration, thirst and hunger of life. It is always tied with the concept of movement and restlessness. It has been one of the basic tools to refuse banality and repetitiveness of everyday life and its suffocating restrictions. In that way escape has been almost a privileged way to subjectivity, a road to freedom and independence.

I

The days are gone when in Italy one could speak of the presence of foreign immigrants as a new factor in the history of a country that had lived in a painful manner an experience of mass emigration. Now that presence has established itself and it represents a structural element of the demographic make-up – and, a fact that has not been sufficiently stressed, of the make-up of the labour force. The moment has therefore come to make a first assessment of the way in which immigrants have been confronted in recent years. By this I do not mean so much the way in which dominant public discourse, strung between the obsession with security and the following of new nationalisms and racisms, has represented the 'foreigner' and the 'immigrant', legitimating the stigmatisation and exclusion brought about by governmental politics and legislation.[1] Beyond this, it is also necessary to come to terms with the image of the immigrant as a weak subject, hollowed by hunger and misery and needing above all *care* and *help*, which has been diffused beginning from the late 1980s, especially among those who have regarded migrants with greater benevolence. Without a doubt, around this image there have grown, among lay and catholic voluntary workers, the noblest

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1   On this point, evidently relevant, there exists a vast literature. I'll refer here only to the work of Dal Lago, A. (1999) *Non-persone. L'esclusione dei migranti in una società globale*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

experiences of solidarity with migrants. They have often played an essential role in offering points of reference within a social texture deserted by the crisis of other 'agencies of socialization' – above all the Welfare State and the traditional organizations of the labour movement. In more general terms, however, it is necessary to note that this image lends itself easily to the reproduction of 'paternalistic' logics which renew an order of discourse and a complex of practices that demote migrants to an inferior position, denying them all *chance* of becoming subjects. Likewise, on a different yet adjoining level, the emphasis on the 'right to difference', which characterises the 'multicultural' understanding shared by most of the political and social Left, often ends up (to the vantage of a stereotyped representation of migrants in which 'culture' is often understood as an element of 'folklore') removing a substantial part of the plurality of positions and problems that define the figure of the migrant in contemporary society.[2]

II

The requirements for overcoming this image of migrants, and the consequent impacts, are today *politically* given. In Italy, for example, and in relation to the development of the 'movement of the movements', the demonstration on 19 July 2001, which opened the protests against the G8 meeting in Genoa with the slogan 'Freedom of movement – freedom without boundaries', has put the issues of migrants before the 'global movement' born in Seattle for the first time. During the following autumn and winter – from Brescia to Genoa, from Treviso to Mestre, from Naples to Caserta, from Marche to Sicily – we have witnessed an intensification of initiatives against the Bossi-Fini law,[3] which concluded in the extraordinary Roman demonstration of 19 January 2002, when

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2   On the subject of multiculturalism, see the provocative works by Hage, G. (1998) *White Nation. Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. Annandale: Pluto Press Australia; and Hage, G. (2003) *Against Paranoid Nationalism. Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Annandale: Pluto Press Australia, esp. pp.108-119. Although Hage's analysis is focused on the Australian experience, he also offers a more general interpretative framework of the ambiguities of multiculturalism in the age of what he terms 'transcendental' global capitalism.

3   The Bossi-Fini Law – law number 189 (30 July 2002) – together with the so-called Turco-Napolitano Law (25 July 1998, law number 286) modify "the norms in the matter of immigration and asylum". It weakens the juridical situation of migrants in various ways: Italian consulates can deny tourist visas on the basis of public order and national security; in order to receive a permit to stay in the country it is obligatory to provide fingerprints; to get a permit to stay it is obligatory to have a working contract. It also increases the number of migrants detained in jails, since it provides for the enlargement of crimes for which migrants can be jailed. Migrants commit crimes in order to have documents; they simply fake their names. The law easily turns migrants into a clandestine state: losing the job and not finding a new one within six month is enough. Once sentenced to jail, migrants should be expelled and they no longer are allowed to hold papers. If a non-EU citizen not in possession of a permit to stay is expelled by administrative order, the expulsion must be effected by the police accompanying them to the border, except in the case where the foreigner has remained on Italian national territory after his/her permit to stay has lapsed for more than sixty days and has not applied for its renewal (in this case the expulsion order comprises an injunction to leave the national territory within fifteen days). The Bossi-Fini law forbids re-entry into Italy for a period of twelve years, and expelled foreigners who re-enter Italy without a permit to stay commit an offence. The Bossi-Fini Law also restricts the possibility for immigrants to be joined in Italy by their parents and children.

more than 100,000 people marched without the support of the major unions and parties of the 'Left'. From that day up to the present, despite the approval of the Bossi-Fini law, the mobilisation against this law has continued to shape Italy's political landscape, resulting in a series of actions against detention centres, struggles for housing and labour rights of migrants, and eventually involving a significant part of the traditional organizations of the labour movement (most notably the unions). A characteristic element of all these initiatives has been the exceptional, leading role of migrants who have closely followed the movement of 'Social Forums' compelling them in fact to make the question of immigrants as one of the central fields of their political activity. It is this subjective, leading role of migrants that puts the struggles of these last three years objectively beyond the defensive, especially antiracist, character of the migration-initiatives that had been produced during the 1990s. From this point of view it is quite significant that within 'Social Forums' there has been a strengthening climate of debate and organization about these themes, which aims at the political development of the *paradigmatic* capacities of the condition of migrants. This debate unites the struggles against 'temporary detention centres' with the slogan 'strike of migrant labour', which is emerging with force precisely there where the establishment of migrants in industry and their penetration of the dynamics of trade unions is more consistent. And indeed in May 2002 the first strike of migrant labour took place in the province of Vicenza, in the north-east of the country, involving more than 30,000 migrant workers.[4]

III

In this context it becomes urgent, also in the field of research and theoretical debate, to perform a substantial revision of the way with which migrations are regarded: the subjectivity of migrants must be placed at the centre of attention. This operation becomes even more necessary the more it is formulated as a countertendency against a certain contemporary understanding within the 'critical Left', as well as against the way migrations are represented in dominant public discourse and how they have historically been studied by the *mainstream* of social sciences. Regarding the view of the 'critical Left', one can note, for example, that in the writings on 'neo-liberalism' the bodies of migrants are mostly represented as simple objects, dragged along and overwhelmed by the 'global mobilisation' of capital. Regarding the dominant public discourse, let us think of the media's obsessive use of naturalistic metaphors ('waves of migration', 'flood-gates of migration', 'migratory floods', etc.) and interpretative schemes derived from demography – which present migrations as a necessary outcome, modelled after a mechanism borrowed from the workings of channels of communication and the imbalances of the development of populations in various adjacent geographical areas – to understand how deeply it is conditioned by an image of migrations as 'objective' processes, which are determined completely independently of the actions of subjects. Social sciences, for their part, have been characterised during the 20th century by a substantial predominance of 'hydraulic' models, which too completely reduce migrations to 'objective' causes, looking for the factors of 'push out' and 'pull up', and

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4   For an analysis of this strike, see Raimondi, F. and M. Ricciardi (eds.) (2004) *Lavoro migrante. Esperienze e prospettive*. Roma: DeriveApprodi, esp. pp.62-73.

putting a particular emphasis on the naturalised imbalances of the international division of labour.[5] Also, when the behaviour of migrants has actually been the focus of sociological research, as in the case of the Chicago School since the 1920s, it has still been carried out from the unilateral assumption of the 'receiving society'.[6] This is shown especially by the predominance, even if very innovative and original, of the preoccupation of these works with the 'integration' and 'assimilation' of migrants.

IV

Among the theoretical approaches that have questioned the dominant paradigm within the social sciences – as well as within many of the 'neo-Marxist' analyses – with regard to migration, especially feminist research comes to my mind.[7] By concentrating in particular on the specific structure of the gender relations prevailing in migrants' societies of origin as well as countries of destination, they have placed an emphasis precisely on the decisive role of those factors determining female migrations that are not simply 'economic'. But at the same time, contesting precisely the implicit assumption of mainstream research on migratory processes – according to which the only migrant of any importance is the man, and the woman is considered only in her position inside the family – feminist studies have put the subjectivity of the migrant women into ever sharper focus: they have, above all, underlined how the migration of women outside family dynamics not simply represents a compulsory response to conditions of economic needs by single women, widowed or divorced, but stems more often than we imagine from a conscious decision to leave behind the long shadows of societies dominated by patriarchy. It is elaborating these and other suggestions that I have recently proposed to utilize the concept of the 'right to escape'.[8] It is to highlight the elements of subjectivity which permeate the migratory movements and which must be kept in mind if one wants to produce an image of these movements as *social* movements in the full sense. I want to stress that this is not to claim the irrelevance of the 'objective causes' at the origin of contemporary migrations: wars and misery, environmental catastrophes and political and social tyrannies prevailing in vast areas of the planet. The point is to underline the fact that for migrations to exist, there must be an individual motion (made concretely by a concrete woman or man, embedded in family and social 'networks', but nonetheless capable of *agency*) of desertion from the field where those 'objective causes' operate, a reclaiming precisely of a 'right to escape', which, even if most of the time unconsciously, constitutes a material critique of the international division of labour and marks profoundly the subjectivity of the migrant also in the country where she/he chooses to settle down.

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5   For a criticism of this approach, see the important work by Papastergiadis, N. (2000) *The Turbulence of Migratio: Globalization, Deterritorialization und Hybridity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

6   For an excellent historical account, see. Rauty, R. (1999) *Il sogno infranto. La limitazione dell'immigrazione negli Stati uniti e le scienze sociali*. Roma: Manifestolibri.

7   A useful synthesis is Kofman E. *et al.*, (2000) *Gender and International Migration in Europe. Employment, Welfare and Politics*. London: Routledge, pp.21-43.

8   See Mezzadra, S. (2001) *Diritto di Fuga. Migrazioni, cittadinanza, globalizzazione*. Verona: Ombre corte.

V

It must be specified that the concept of 'right to escape', applied to the analysis of contemporary migratory movements and constitution labour forces, functions of course in different ways depending on the diverse figures of migrants and refugees on which the attention is focused. If we look, for example, at the destabilisations of entire populations caused by various 'local' and 'global' wars of recent years, we confront a situation of mobility where the degree of subjective 'voluntariness' of migration is quite limited, if not nonexistent. A different case is that of 'illegal' migrations, where too often, also and especially within the Left, there is a tendency to focus the attention only on the role of the criminal organizations that are running it. The rhetoric of 'merchants of human beings', of 'new slave trade' and 'new slavery' cannot hide the fact that, even if there are undoubtedly elements of coercion within the organization of the 'travels of hope', the majority of their participants, unlike the slaves of all times, set out on their voyages *of their own will*.[9] But more generally, the 'average' experience of contemporary migrants (as is shown, for example, by the research done on the conditions of the *Latinos* in the United States, or those of Moroccans and Senegalese in Italy) clearly shows how the migration is often undertaken purposefully. It thus represents a proper strategy of organization from 'down-up' in a 'transnational' dimension of the social reproduction of vast 'subaltern' sectors in countries which the capitalistic command continues to confine to the periphery of the global system. And finally, to put the emphasis on the subjectivity of migrants and on the elements of the 'riches' of which they are carriers does not mean to assume the theoretical attitude of Anglo-Saxon 'cultural studies', which considers the migrant as a paradigmatic figure of the rootless and 'hybrid' character of the postmodern subject, no more bound to any kind of roots and free to cross nomadically the boundaries between cultures and identities. The paradigmatic characteristics of the condition of migrants are instances of transformations which do not regard only migrants. Rather, these instances emerge there where the *ambivalence* that distinguishes the condition becomes underlined, strained as it is between reclaiming a radical instance of liberty and the functioning of old and new mechanisms of domination and exploitation.

VI

But the light that a political interpretation of contemporary migrations sheds on the very processes of *globalisation* is ambivalent. First of all, it leads to putting into focus a main characteristic of these processes: the tendency to sweep away every obstacle of free circulation of goods and capitals, while the free circulation of labour – of women and men who are the carriers of labour – is upheld by the multiplication and strengthening of borders. We are facing a truly global tendency, which manifests itself from the 'outer

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9   For an excellent illustration of this point with reference to the rhetoric of 'trafficking' women in prostitution, see Andrijasevic, R. (2003) 'The Difference Borders Make: (Il)legality, Migration, and Trafficking in Italy among "Eastern" European Women in Prostitution', in S. Ahmed, C. Castaneda, A. Fortier and M. Sheller (eds.) *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*. New York: Oxford University Press.

borders' of the European Union to the border between United States and Mexico, passing by the new walls against the mobility of labour erected around Hong Kong, to southern China and the countries of South-East Asia assailed by the crisis of 1997. For years a proper *war* has been going on around these and other 'global borders', which has caused (and continues to cause) the death of thousands of refugees and migrants in their attempt at bypassing them. Taking up the thesis presented in an important work by Yann Moulier Boutang[10], one can claim that the intensity of such struggles is determined by the violence with which the freedom – cosmopolitan in the objective sense – there is in migrations crashes with the imperative of control over the movements of labour. Today, this imperative – ever central to the capitalistic mode of production – finds itself challenged on a global scale by various elements of unpredictability and 'turbulence', which mark migratory movements.[11] It is indeed on this unstable terrain that the 'neo-liberalist' apology of the market, as well as the 'fluid' and flexible character of social relations it promotes, meets and co-exists without particular difficulties with the rhetoric of 'small homelands' and with the defence, often openly xenophobic and racist, of the presumed purity of cultures on a varied scale, from the 'Padanian' to the 'Occidental'. At the same time, nevertheless, the analysis of migrations allows to bring to light an *other globalisation,* or rather an unspoken genealogy of contemporary processes of globalisation. Recently it has been claimed, in a quite convincing way, that the above mentioned processes characterise a historical phase in which the command of capital is compelled to extend itself on a planetary scale by the necessity of following the very rhythm of the proletarian and anti-imperialist struggles of the twentieth century.[12] Communist internationalism, anti-colonialist rebellions and the *global uprising* of 1968 all constitute in this sense fundamental passages in the 'secret history' of globalisation. They picture at the same time a prospect of unifying the planet in a radically different way from the hegemony of capital, which has guided its progress during the last two hundred years. Analogously, even if on a rather different level, the new migratory movements represent a formidable laboratory of that which we can call 'globalisation from below', and this has been going on and strengthening since Seattle and Genoa. In an absolutely elementary sense, it is through the migrations that millions of women and men have materially organized their own existence, their own social relations, their own production and reproduction, giving no thought to the boundaries between states and constructing new 'transnational social spaces'.[13]

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10 Moulier Boutang, Y. (1998) *De l'esclavage au salariat. Économie historique du salariat bride*. Paris: Puf.

11 On the concept of 'turbulence' applied to an analysis of the movements of contemporary migrants, see again Papastergiadis's *The Turbulence of Migration*.

12 Cf. Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

13 The prospect of study suggested by this concept is one of the most interesting followed by the international research on migrations: for an introduction to the theme, see Faist, Th. (2000) *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and the report 'Emigrare, immigrare, transmigrare', in *Afriche e Orienti*, II (2000), 3/4 (with articles from F. Calvanese, R.D. Grillo, B. Riccio, R. Salih and K. Koser).

VII

The condition of migrants reveals itself as paradigmatic, again in its ambivalence, with regard to the transformations that have influenced the dimension of *citizenship*. It tells us of a rupture of universalism and of a crisis of the inclusive and integrative model of social citizenship that has been asserted in the 'Occident' after the World Wars – especially in the context of the construction of the *Welfare State*.[14] This model of social citizenship was no earthly paradise, and has indeed been dismantled and criticised – long before neo-liberal politics – by the workers' struggles and movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which, from a multiplicity of perspectives, have exposed its tendency to domination and social discipline. But without doubt it incorporated a material credit, truly democratic, that translated into specific conquests and found its approval in the acknowledgement of a series of rights.[15] That credit has been equally attacked materially by the capitalist offensive during the last two decades. The re-appearance of the problematic of *exclusion*, not limited to migrants, is a symptom for how profoundly it has affected the redesign of the contemporary profile of citizenship. The ghost of 'clandestine', the radical denial of the very 'right to have rights' (H. Arendt), is indeed exemplified in a dramatic way by the condition of migrants and finds its most disturbing incarnation in the scandal of what an Italian law, which has been promoted by a centre-left government in 1998, calls 'Centres of temporary stay and help' (proper concentration camps where subjects who haven't committed any crime are imprisoned).[16] But it also insinuates itself within the formal space of citizenship, shattered by the politics which have 'performed' the crisis of the Welfare State. Under this profile, then, the condition of migrants can be defined as *paradigmatic* since it exposes in full light a series of 'negative' processes of the de-structuring of citizenship and social stigmatisation. But this is not all: migrants also tell us of an attitude of 'suspension of identity' and of a problematic relation with the, nevertheless, defined belonging they experience, which, if investigated appropriately, is collocated in resonance with a series of movements and social behaviour that bear the 'positive' mark of ambivalence. Consider for instance the distrust with which many migrants, even though quite determined to reclaim specific rights of citizenship, regard the prospect of 'integration'. It is true that this distrust transforms itself – in the conditions of rigid social and political exclusion in which migrants are condemned to live in the 'receiving society' – into a 'communitarian' turn (which must be studied in the complexity and ambivalence of its significations). But it is also true that it introduces again the positively problematic nature of the relation between the individual and collective dimensions of experience, which has expressed itself, among other things, in the fortune

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14 For an analysis of the transformations of citizenship in the last two decades, see the several seminal studies devoted to the subject by Balibar: e.g. Balibar, E. (2001) *Nous citoyens d'Europe? Le frontières, l'État, le people*. Paris: La Découverte; or Balibar, E. (2003) *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

15 On This point, see Mezzadra, S. (2002) 'Diritti di cittadinanza e Welfare State. Citizenship and Social Class di Tom Marshall cinquant'anni dopo', Introduction to T.H. Marshall, *Cittadinanza e classe sociale*. Roma and Bari: Laterza, pp.v-xxxiv.

16 See Regazzoni, S. (2002) 'La nuova frontiera dei campi di detenzione per migranti', in *DeriveApprodi*, 21: 23-26; and Sossi, F. (2002) *Autobigrafie negate. Immigrati nei lager del presente*. Roma: Manifestolibri.

that the concept of 'multitude'[17] has had. And it also introduces itself, for example, even if at a very abstract level, in a line of continuity of the refusal of a specific model of 'integration' – that is based on the patriarchal family – which the feminist movement has criticised as one of the unexpressed presuppositions of the very social politics of *welfare*.

VIII

An analogous discourse can be made regarding *labour*.[18] Migrant labour, in fact, charges itself with 'paradigmatic' forces in as much as it exemplifies the radical condition of stripping off rights which involves the whole problematic of social labour. From this perspective, the purpose of the Bossi-Fini law is – even if it puts itself in many regards in a continuum with the Turco-Napolitano law and with a model of government of migrants' flows defined by the Schengen pact at the level of the European Union – to produce a relevant leap of quality. The figure of the 'contract of residence' in particular, the very strict link presupposed in the proposed law between employment contract and residence permit, shows how the initiative of the right-wing government turns against migrants in general. It succeeds in calling into question the very distinction between 'the regular' and 'the clandestine': bound to the power of personal mood of the private entrepreneur with whom he signs the employment contract, the 'regular' migrant is daily and *explicitly* exposed to the *instability* of his condition, to the threat of falling back to 'clandestinity' and thus becoming 'expellable' at any moment. It is evident how here opens the space of an objective convergence between the condition of migrants defined by the proposed Bossi-Fini law and the complete redefinition of employment relationships foretold by the White Book of Maroni, which has been the base of the attempt undertaken by the government to dramatically change the structure of the labour market in the direction of further 'flexibilization'.[19] Also for this reason the analysis cannot stop here. Instead, it must be confirmed how the mobility of migrant women and men is an expression of a series of subjective movements of escape from the rigidities of the international division of labour. These movements of escape constitute one of the eradicated and denied motors of the radical transformations which have influenced capitalist modes of production during the last two decades. It thus puts itself in a definite continuum with those refusals by workers that have played a leading role in putting materially in crisis the regime of accumulation defined as Fordist: the refusals of the specific model of organizational and 'biographical' rigidity of industrial labour within the very 'Occidental' countries, as the

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17 For a development of this concept see Virno, P. (2002) *Grammatica della moltitudine*,. Roma: DeriveApprodi; and Mezzadra, S. and F. Raimondi (2002) 'Oltre Genova, oltre New York. Tesi sul movimento globale', in AA.VV., *La guerra dei mondi. Scenari d'Occidente dopo le Twin Towers*, Roma: DeriveApprodi, pp.194-224.

18 For a first account of the several experiences of 'militant investigation' in the field undertaken in Italy, see again Ricciardi and Raimondi's *Lavoro migrante*.

19 The White Book of Maroni on Welfare is a dossier on the reform of the labour market. Marco Biagi, a professor of Law from Modena, was preparing the reform when the new 'red brigades' murdered him in Bologna in 2002. It practically liberates the use of every kind of 'atypical' working contract.

best informed sociology now recognises.[20] Discovering the power and the immanently political character of the mobility of migrant labour can in this sense be a decisive theoretical step for articulating a critique of capitalism truly capable of answering the challenges put forth by the composition of contemporary living labour.

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20 See Boltanski, L. and É. Chiapello (1999) *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.