

MOBILITY & POLITICS

Series Editors: Martin Geiger,
Parvati Raghuram and William Walters

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**TUNISIA AS A
REVOLUTIONIZED
SPACE OF
MIGRATION**

**Glenda Garelli and
Martina Tazzioli**



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Human mobility, whatever its scale, is often controversial. Hence it carries with it the potential for politics. A core feature of mobility politics is the tension between the desire to maximise the social and economic benefits of migration and pressures to restrict movement. Transnational communities, global instability, advances in transportation and communication, and concepts of 'smart borders' and 'migration management' are just a few of the phenomena transforming the landscape of migration today. The tension between openness and restriction raises important questions about how different types of policy and politics come to life and influence mobility.

Mobility & Politics invites original, theoretically and empirically informed studies for academic and policy-oriented debates. Authors examine issues such as refugees and displacement, migration and citizenship, security and cross-border movements, (post-)colonialism and mobility, and transnational movements and cosmopolitics.

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Tunisia as a Revolutionized Space of Migration

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SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD

Much like the rest of the Arab world, by the end of 2010 Tunisia was at the epicenter of mass demonstrations against governmental entities. These protests, which ultimately ousted President Ben Ali, stemmed from public discontent with high rates of unemployment, corruption, and a lack of civil rights and freedoms. Coinciding with the demonstrations and following his ousting, Tunisia saw an *en masse* exodus of its people to various European countries, and with it the conquest of the political right to freedom of movement. This newly acquired freedom in conjunction with the president's ousting saw the disintegration of the externalized European border that Ben Ali had agreed to enforce in exchange for political and economic partnerships. While European states were keen to commend the laudable actions of the Tunisian people in standing up against a corrupt government, this approach quickly shifted as thousands of migrants arrived at European capitals claiming their right to protection. This migration has posed one of the biggest challenges to the European community and threatens the viability of the Schengen area.

Through a reflection on the Tunisian Revolution, Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli provide an analysis on the revolution and its nexus with mass migration while answering what it means to be writing in the space of mobility in the four years following the Tunisian upheaval. As part of their argument, the authors identify different strands of mobility running across the Tunisian space and, in doing so, aim to intervene in the debate surrounding migration in the Mediterranean region. By framing the discussion through notions of precarity and by introducing the notion of migrantization, *Tunisia as a Revolutionized Space of Migration* provides

insights that open up the “Mediterranean signifier” past the fixation on its shores. Instead, it embraces a critical epistemology which provides a counter-mapping and interrogates institutionalized spaces as the primary framework of mobility and politics in the Mediterranean.

Garelli and Tazzioli structure their discussion through four conceptual parameters: the protean humanitarian border, mobilizing precarity in migration, autonomous returns, and statistical invisibility. These themes are addressed through the difference that two key moments present for mobility and politics—the upheaval in Tunisia and the global financial crisis. The authors draw on analysis of ethnographic research and archival materials that focus on different types of migrants, including European migrants in Tunisia, Tunisians who resided in Europe but returned home, Tunisian migrants to the Gulf states, and refugees from the Libyan or Syrian wars. They seek to explain how new spaces of migration in Tunisia impact the lives of refugees within the context of an emerging humanitarian regime.

The volume concludes by advocating that the internal discourse of the migration debate must move past mere “citizen politics” and “methodological citizenship” while adequately measuring the process of migrantization and precarization. Garelli and Tazzioli therefore propose that the debate should move beyond juridical categories and traditional incipient spaces and instead focus on non-cartographic counter-mapping of new routes of mobility into and out of Tunisia.

In the form of publications that critically examine the tension between the social and economic benefits of migration on the one hand, and with political pressure for restrictions on mobility on the other, the *Mobility & Politics* series pushes the envelope of transnational discourses surrounding migration. In an effort to address the aforementioned tensions, this new addition to the *Mobility & Politics* series provides the reader with an insightful look at one of the countries at the center of the Arab Spring, and in so doing, attempts to reformulate the global discourse on migration by advocating for smart borders, which meets the demands of current migration debates, and if not, exceeds them.

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FOREWORD

The economic and social conditions of mobile people, be they labor migrants or asylum-seekers, highly or low-skilled, educated or not, rich or poor, are inextricably anchored in national settings. National laws and administrative regulations adopted by governments, as well as the ways in which they are practically translated and enforced by their bureaucracies, continue to shape the destiny of mobile (and immobile) people across all continents.

Today, their resilience is palpable, despite repeated calls for regional harmonization of migration policies and for the recognition of an “international migration regime.” Rightly, international organizations (IOs) continue to defend their own moral vision of world politics when calling on states to respect their international obligations, especially those related to the protection of the fundamental rights of migrants and asylum-seekers. They also have the authority to express concerns and criticisms when the transposition of internationally recognized standards in national law is partial or just non-existent, despite states’ official commitments. However, their power and scope do not necessarily put at risk the manifest centrality of the state in the so-called “management” of asylum and migration matters. Nor are they designed to question the principal-agent model in which the relationships between states and IOs have been powerfully embedded to date. These issues raise a host of challenges that have been critically addressed in academic debates and across disciplines.

Perhaps one of the most emblematic policy developments which contributed to reinforcing the managerial centrality of the state lies precisely in the adoption of the international agenda for migration management.

It may seem paradoxical to argue that a multilateral initiative—based on common understandings and principles as to how human migration should be best administered and regulated—has been conducive to the reinforced centrality of the state and its law-enforcement agencies. However, this paradox can easily be tackled if one considers that the abovementioned international agenda was created in 2001 by states to consolidate their own sovereign preserve. “Migration remains largely in the sovereign realm of states” became probably the key precondition to the unquestioned acceptance of this state-centered agenda by all countries of migration worldwide. Its global diffusion was contingent on the production and reproduction of conventional tools with which IR students are familiar: repetition of general statements, identification of “shared problems” and policy priorities, and a vocabulary made of new notions and concepts used in an ad hoc manner. The latter have been essential to creating a reigning orthodoxy as to how migration and asylum-seeking should be addressed, framed, and understood by decision-makers, officials in governmental and international institutions, the media, and the public at large.

In the words of Raymond Boudon, we find ourselves in front of a “satisfactory system of reasons to support our belief.” This system is based on the production of a knowledge expertise as well as on categories of thought and invented notions to rationalize political decisions, be they ill-grounded or not. Such notions and concepts have been produced and renewed at such a high speed that official statistics find it difficult to systematically respond to them. How can statistical offices precisely deal with “economic migrants”, “bogus asylum-seekers”, “economic refugees”, “illegal border-crossing”, and “voluntary vs. forced returnees”, to mention but a few notions, when these categories turn out to be highly erratic political constructs? In this connection, repeated calls on the part of officials and policy-makers for “adequate” and “reliable” statistical data are more reflective of the speed with which such notions and political constructs have proliferated in multilateral migration talks than of the reliability of official statistics per se. In a similar vein, the quest for “effectiveness”, including the recurrent reference to “best practices” and “operability” in official statements, stems from a normative discourse which would never have made sense to those who produced it, and those who repeated it, without the prior consolidation of this system of reasons.

Never before has the need to question these developments been so important. There exists a substantial academic literature which sets out to critically interrogate the vast repertoire that has accompanied and justified

by the same token policy decisions made by governmental actors and delegated to intergovernmental institutions. Another growing body of literature also focuses on the mechanisms exposing labor migrants and asylum-seekers to enhanced vulnerability and abuse of their rights, especially at a time of recession. Finally, there is a third body of literature which draws on the previous ones while exploring whether these developments are a consequence of migration gaining tremendous momentum in the external relations of state actors, or, rather, the manifestation of a much broader phenomenon associated, among many others, with the drive for wage flexibility and precarious work, the perceptible retrenchment of the welfare state in all countries of migration, rising social inequalities, and, last but not least, the reconfigured relationships between states and their own citizens in a globalized economy.

This essay, written by Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli, belongs to this last body of literature. What the authors are interested in is not the statistical description of migration flows or their physical mapping with thick arrows and colored circles. To use their words, they lay emphasis on the perceptible “migrantization” of people, namely, the necessity for a growing cohort of people to leave their homeland regardless of the legal obstacles lying ahead. Today’s Tunisia epitomizes a situation where various patterns of “forced displacements” co-exist. Forced displacements refer not only to people fleeing armed conflicts and violence in neighboring countries, but also to those who have been expelled from the socio-economic environment of their own countries in a context marked by labor market deregulation, long-term unemployment, occupational risks, and the drive for wage flexibility. Perhaps the common denominator, shared by the various patterns of forced displacement identified by the authors, lies in the thinkable and acceptable circumscription of human rights.

In sum, this essay goes well beyond the mere denunciation of the conditions facing migrants in contemporary Tunisia. The authors are well aware that this endeavor would lead to no concrete change, if not to the paradoxical acceptance of things as they are. Their rich ethnographic material collected in Tunisia, five years after the popular uprisings leading to the collapse of the Ben Ali regime, shows that, today, the abovementioned system of reasons has remained untouched. Actually, this essay demonstrates that this system has been unimpaired by the popular revolts that utterly exposed the social political and economic realities faced by the dispossessed under Tunisian authoritarianism, and with the silent acquiescence of the West. Admittedly, short-lived self-criticisms publicly expressed by

international donors and European leaders in early 2011 were more an attempt to deal with the worldwide exposure of these realities having clear democratic significance in other parts of the world, especially in Europe, than an attempt to rethink the blueprint.

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