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## **Introduction**

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## **1 Introduction**

This special issue is the collective effort of a group of scholars working in the area of transit migration and was informed by a workshop conducted with some of the authors.<sup>1</sup> It draws renewed attention to transit and demonstrates that, despite some ambivalence in existing literature, there is a salience to transit as a space, a period of time, and an identity that speaks to the lived realities of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. We take 'transit' as a starting point for a multi-faceted and multi-sited exploration of irregular migration, which has been the focus of much attention in recent years. Across Europe, parts of Asia, Turkey and the Middle East high numbers of refugees and migrants continue to arrive by land and sea. For example, over a million people reached Greece and Italy in 2015 and, subsequently, made their way to other parts of Europe (UNHCR, 2016). This had led to expressions of concern by politicians about the security of borders and the enactment of restrictive immigration measures in many countries which are popular among domestic voters and carry strong messages about sovereignty and border protection. Policy-makers and governments, amongst others, are asking questions about the global phenomenon of irregular migration as they seek to determine the origins of new arrivals, how they are able to travel irregularly and the factors influencing their decisions to move. There are also silences in their debate about immobility, especially of those who do not or cannot move, a disproportionate interest in so-called 'destination countries' to the detriment of the sites people move through and get stuck in, and the obscuring of the social reality of migrants and refugees.

In our introduction, we first explore the ways in which transit migration has been theorised, which we take both as the critical foundation and also as the point of departure

for this special issue (Düvell, 2006, 2012; Collyer et al., 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoura, 2008). Earlier scholarship on transit acknowledged it to be a contested concept, but largely treated it as a distinct category and assumed that drivers and motivations for movement were largely individual (Collyer et al., 2012). Those who would seek to render transit linear and manageable will find little comfort in this special issue in which transit is unpacked and contextualised, but left as a contradictory space that has been created by externalisation policies and highly selective immigration regimes.

Another limitation of much of the transit literature is that it draws on the situation in Europe and portrays those outside the European Union as having one fixed goal of reaching what is often described as ‘destination Europe’. Drawing on the work of Papadopoulou-Kourkoura (2008), articles in this special issue show transit as a condition – a contradictory space that has been created through externally imposed mobility restrictions regimes funded by the Global North – and extend the application of transit to multiple geographic regions, including Mexico and Indonesia, to widen the analytical lens and show commonalities in the ways border regimes are enacted. The outcomes of border regimes are shown here as a consequence of the explicit expectation of externally funded mobility restriction regimes, that recipient governments in transit countries are responsible for containing and controlling irregular migration.

Throughout this special issue, transit is understood as a space that is both constructed and contested, and being in transit is shown to be the daily lived reality of many people on the move. Transit is constructed in public policy dialogues as a site of engagement, enforcement and a ‘space apart’ (see Oelgemöller in this issue). As a result of securitised and bureaucratic language, one of the modes of migration management favoured by the Global North, transit migrants have emerged as a category that is also interrogated here. Thus, being *in transit* is both a condition and a point in time; the temporal nature of transit is the central theme in Schapendonk’s article, which considers a ‘multiplicity of transit’ as people who reach Greece and Italy continue on to other locations in Europe where they may face transit situations similar to those in the countries they have just passed through (Griffiths et al., 2013; Dalakoglou and Harvey, 2012).

## 2 (Dis)locating transit

Although transit existed as a migratory phenomenon long before it was theorised by academics, it has been part of public policy discussions as a category of migration since the 1980s (Bredeloup, 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoura, 2008; Düvell, 2012; IOM, 1994; see also Papadopoulou-Kourkoura interview in this issue). From its first uses in public policy debates, ‘transit migration’ was embedded in the discourse on ‘illegal immigration’ and ‘asylum panic’ and thus became a highly politicised concept (Düvell, 2006, 2012; İçduygu and Yüксеker, 2012). The politicisation of the term by connecting it with illegality has had a negative impact on the study of the phenomenon. As it was first and foremost applied to the perspective of people stuck in the peripheries of the European Union unable to move forward into the EU (Papadopoulou-Kourkoura, 2008), its manifestation in many other areas in the world was either ignored or analysed by the simple transplanting of insights gained from the EU context.

In 2012, Collyer et al. edited a special issue of the journal *Population, Space and Place* on critical approaches to transit migration. In their introduction, they noted that despite the fuzziness of the term transit, ‘there is something worthy of attention amongst

these new developments around the fringes of Europe' [Collyer et al., (2012), p.407]. Since 2012, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of locations where people are in transit: in Asia where Rohingya are embarking on boat journeys to try and reach Malaysia; in Central America with people heading to the USA; and in the Horn of Africa where large numbers of Ethiopians continue to move to Yemen and on to Saudi Arabia.

Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou (2008, p.4, see also interview in this special issue) conceived of transit migration "as the situation between emigration and settlement that is characterised by indefinite migrant stay, legal or illegal, and may or may not develop into further migration depending on a series of structural and individual factors". Adding to this, Bredeloup (2012) has highlighted the precariousness of people in transit and the subjective nature of time for migrants whose journeys may be interrupted or cut short. She criticises, as do the contributors to this special issue, the way that migrants are often stigmatised and labelled as illegal because they may be in transit without valid documents or entry papers. Because of its negative connotations, we avoid the use of the term 'transit migrant' here, preferring instead to place our emphasis on transit as a *condition*. One further note about terminology; while being in transit often involves acts of illegality, it is wrong to delimit transit migration as essentially illegal, as to do so obscures the bigger picture of this long-term migration process, which often includes both regular and irregular modes of entry and residence at different points. Koser (2010, p.183) notes that switching back and forth between regularity and irregularity may be attributed to lack of knowledge of administrative regulations, but it may also be a deliberate choice. The dual nature of transit as both highly changeable and unpredictable has led others to characterise it as a stepwise process (Schapendonk, 2010), a fragmented journey (Collyer, 2007) and an interplay between subjective and objective factors that produces an impasse and immobility (Dimitriadi, 2016).

Most commonly, the term transit migration is used to refer to the phenomenon of people coming to one country with the intention of going to and staying in another (Içduygu, 2000; Papadopoulou, 2004). This oversimplified theoretical conceptualisation of transit migration has been criticised by a number of scholars (for example, Düvell, 2012; Kimball, 2007), because it does not encapsulate the inherent complexities of the migratory processes, and has triggered their inquiry into how transit migration should be classified and the parameters of its definition. What should be among the criteria for 'transit'? The duration of stay in a transit place, the intention of onward migration, or the actual outcomes of the journeys? Given the various limitations in refining a practicable definition of transit migration as a migration category, it is first and foremost perceivable as a process rather than as a status which is highlighted in this special issue and echoed in Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou's emphasis on its ambivalent nature.

Alongside transit migration, the status of a transit country has emerged as a political construction that is used by states in developing mechanisms to manage the process of transit migration (Oelgemöller, 2011). Kimball (2007, p.12) has determined that a transit country 'must border a fully developed country, exhibit high emigration, low immigration and transit migration, serve as a primary staging ground for migrants to plan clandestine entrance to heavily guarded destination countries and implement restrictive immigration policies and activities'. Mechanisms such as bilateral and multilateral deals, provision of aid funds (for example, the 2015 European Union-African Union Migration and Mobility Dialogue) and mobility partnerships (including, in the case of Turkey, expedited accession to the European Union and fast-tracked visa processing), which are

couched in humanitarian and human rights language, are some of the ways in which governments in transit sites are co-opted to take on responsibility for migration (Cassarino and Fargues, 2006; European Commission, 2015).

As public policy discourse rages around porous borders and uncontrolled migration, there is a tendency to imagine transit as a space that can be managed, controlled and acted upon. Andersson's (2014) work on illegality has demonstrated how border regimes create sites of transit onto which a logic of illegality is created and then 'solved' through policies and vast sums of money that serve to boost an industry of government departments and private sector organisations including those running immigration detention centres to enact a 'border spectacle'. The articles by Missbach and Phillips, Oelgemöller, Schapendonk and Vogt in this special issue dispel the myth that migration can be managed by deterrence-based policies. Instead, what is set out here highlights how transit needs to be seen in its own right, disconnected from any rhetoric of border control, as a diverse site where individuals engage with mobility in order to try and 'go somewhere' (see Suter in this issue). In this way, the lived realities of people in sites of transit give a new meaning to transit as a space constructed by individuals themselves. Thus, transit is constantly being redefined spatially and as a context for exploring mobilities, transgressing borders and challenging assumed boundaries of possibility.

### **3 Contradictions and commonalities of transit space**

To understand how the logics of borders and migration management are confronted by migrant realities and identities we put forward the notion of transit as a 'contradictory space' that is positioned fluidly in between sometimes extreme dichotomies. The key elements of this contradictory space analysed in this special issue are:

- a mobile/immobile
- b solidarity/exploitation
- c (supra)-state power/power inversions
- d connections/disconnections
- e place/trajectory
- f borders/passage.

This special issue contains both contextual and analytical responses to transit migration. It shows that a phenomenon that is imagined as temporary or limited often turns out to be a semi-permanent phase, making it both a place as well as a trajectory. Therefore, it gives rise to assumptions that in transit migration a whole new group of non-citizen labourers is being 'created', but as a group that is based on institutionalised exploitation, whose members lack all the rights citizens enjoy (Lewis et al., 2015). The links fostered in transit sites express solidarity, often in the face of exploitation, and show the ways in which people in transit are connected through social networks while they are at times stuck and disconnected. This condition may be a consequence of state power that attempts to render people immobile, yet their ongoing mobility highlights how individuals resist border controls in order to continue their journeys.

Christina Oelgemöller's article hones in on the concept of transit as space – a space apart and place of abjection, but also a space for solidarity. She speculates whether transit can constitute “the possibility of autonomous spaces of ephemeral political action outside the straightjacket of imposed governance driven by policies of the European Union and, more generally, countries of the Global North”. Throughout her article Oelgemöller implicates governments of EU member states and the European Union which are invested in perpetuating a logic of illegality and imposing bureaucratic violence on people in transit (through forced returns, deportations, etc.) and on so-called transit countries (in the guise of humane partnership agreements) to contain migration and limit a certain kind of unwanted mobility.

Phillips and Missbach delve further into the consequences of enacting a logic of illegality onto transit sites by investigating the micro-techniques of the exploitative economies of transit in what might at first appear to be two incommensurable sites of transit – Indonesia and Libya. Arguing that exploitation of individuals by corrupt state and non-state actors is a tolerated by-product of border control regimes, they show how people who remain in transit are stuck in a situation where they witness misuse of financial contributions from international organisations by local actors, extortion of their labour or their financial reserves, and violence both in immigration detention and outside in the community. The creation of a continuous cycle of people trying to make money out of migrants and refugees temporarily inhabiting transit sites may be an unseen consequence of immigration policies but is a stark reminder of the reality for people who remain in transit or become stuck as their journeys are thwarted. While it is easy to express outrage over the fact that smuggling and trafficking may be a billion-dollar industry, Phillips and Missbach show the need for similar attention towards the micro-economies of exploitative transit as yet another consequence of deterrence-centred immigration policies that show the barriers people face in their attempts to be mobile.

Focusing on what has recently been one of the most significant transit regions, Suter, as well as Zijlstra and van Liempt, investigate conditions for people in transit in Istanbul and for those who embark from Turkey towards Greece, Germany and the Netherlands. Highlighting the lived experiences of people at one of the ‘crossroads of mobility’, Suter explores how the dynamics of social networks amongst migrants from African countries both facilitate and hinder mobility. Through rich narratives she is able to point to ‘the logics of transit’ that conceptualise transit as a space where people are in constant anticipation of movement. The logics of transit have, as Suter shows, consequences for all aspects of social and economic life and also for trajectories of mobility from Istanbul. Her exploration of the everyday lives of people in transit in Istanbul also reveals how their physical mobility is part of a desire to ‘go somewhere in life’ and find existential mobility. This adds a double edge to the feeling of being stuck in transit, as migrants in Istanbul may see their goal of a better life also on hold. In disentangling the ‘black box’ that transit has constituted in migration research for some time, her article offers insights into why some people continue travelling while others stay in what may be considered as solely a transit site.

Zijlstra and van Liempt's attention to material tools for navigating through transit shows how migrants in Turkey and Greece are connected transnationally through a focus on smartphone use along migration trails. Employing a trajectory ethnography, they show how mobile technology can be used to shape routes, destinations and facilitate the financing of irregular migration. The impact of smart phone technology for people at the

crossroads of mobility has been underestimated so far, as it offers much more to those who rely on it than just better chances to transgress fast-changing borders, self-reliance and mobility, allowing them to also belong to a supportive and informative social network online. It is clear from their research that migrants and refugees transform transit spaces once they have more autonomy and can manage their own migration trajectories through resourceful use of new technologies.

Vogt's article demonstrates how bordering practices in Mexico are 'historically contingent and embedded within specific socio-political contexts'. Focusing on the interactions between migrants and state actors along US-Mexico border, Vogt argues that the performance of bordering practices has led to the construction of an 'arterial border', the material and ideological dimensions of which force people into more dangerous routes and illicit economies. As a result, Mexico's 'other' border with Guatemala and Belize and Mexico itself have become securitised and characterised by violence, extortion and human rights abuse. Illustrating how a logic of illegality is used to construct an ideological border, the case of large numbers of unaccompanied minors arriving from Central America during 2014 exemplifies how both the USA and Mexico increased deportations and border practices under the guise of assisting minors, who were cast as agentless victims. The social arena of this historical transit site shows how the arterial border 'expands and contracts across space and over time depending on local, national and transnational socio-political contexts'.

Schapendonk's contribution also demonstrates how borders expand and contract over time by examining how transit migration has shifted from a phenomenon on 'the fringes of Europe' to one that is experienced inside the European Union as migrants continue to be mobile after arriving in Europe. The migrants from African countries in his research are on turbulent trajectories across multiple transit situations where they 'switch gears' and cope with periods of boredom and immobility as they canvass a palette of mobility opportunities within Europe (Simone, 2003). Using a trajectory ethnography, he shows how, even within the European Union, migrants must cope with waiting, frustration and precariousness as they try to navigate its mobility regime. Connections and identities are also important features that emerge from the migrants' journeys rather than mobility restrictions. Finally, he shows how distinctions based on legality/illegality and forced/voluntary movement do not necessarily further understanding of how individuals transit across borders and subvert regimes designed to keep them waiting and of the social networks they draw on to keep moving in order to achieve their aspirations.

The rich offerings in this special issue, from scholars across different disciplines, show the salience of transit as a theme of inquiry. Attending to the contradictions of transit offers a reconceptualisation of it as a space of great connection, solidarity, disconnection and exploitation. In defiance of supra-state power that seeks to render migrants and refugees immobile, one finds multiple instances of the inversion of power and mobility. Transit can be viewed through its borders and through its ongoing trajectories and individual passages.

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**Notes**

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