

# Transformative Trajectories – The shifting Mediterranean Border Regime and the Challenges of Critical Knowledge Production

An Interview with Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani

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**Abstract:** In 2011, the researcher and filmmaker Charles Heller and the architect Lorenzo Pezzani founded the Forensic Oceanography project to investigate the lethal effects of the militarized border regime and the politics of migration in the Mediterranean Sea. In collaboration with a wide network of non governmental organisations (NGOs), activist groups, researchers and journalists, they have produced various human rights reports as well as articles, maps, and videos that document and challenge the violence perpetrated against migrants at the EU's maritime borders. In 2012, they contributed to found the online mapping and monitoring platform WatchTheMed, and in 2014, the Alarmphone, a hotline for migrants in distress at sea. Pezzani and Heller are affiliated with the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London. Sophie Hinger, research fellow at the IMIS (Osnabrück) and member of the Alarmphone, communicated with them via skype and e-mail between July 2017 and February 2018. Their exchange was concerning transformations of the Euro-Mediterranean border regime with a focus on the Central Mediterranean and the role of activist-researchers in this contested arena.

**Keywords:** disobedient gaze, forensics, aesthetic regimes, humanitarian border, freedom of movement, genealogies of mobility and control

*Sophie Hinger: We are currently at a critical juncture of the ongoing struggles over freedom of movement and more generally human rights in the European and Mediterranean border regime – with the criminalization of those who try to save lives and support people on the move, on the one hand, and renewed cooperation between European and neighbouring states to prevent people from crossing the Mediterranean Sea on the other. In order to be able to intervene critically in this contested arena, it is important to understand the broader trajectories of change and trace the genealogy of migration control.*

*The two of you have had a long-standing focus on the politics of migration within and at the borders of Europe, and have been concentrating especially on the Central Mediterranean since 2011. I would like to revisit the main political developments with you that shaped the border regime here since then and motivated you to do research and intervene. What brought you to look at the maritime frontier? And what brought you to look at it in a forensic way?*

Charles Heller: What took us to the sea was, first of all, the deep political shifts that spread across the Mediterranean space in 2011. The political rupture of the Arab uprisings had a dramatic impact on the Euro-Mediterranean border regime. What happened in 2011 was a reopening of the Mediterranean frontier by migrants, who seized the power vacuum left by the overthrowing of the Ben Ali and Gaddafi regimes. Before that, the Mediterranean frontier had been nearly closed, due to agreements between the Gaddafi regime and European states. In the case of Tunisia, there was an extraordinary process of seizing freedom of movement – over a few weeks, crossings occurred in broad daylight to the joyful sounds of singing and drums. In Libya, as the uprising turned into a civil war that only intensified with the subsequent NATO intervention, more and more people were forced to flee. Crossings from Libya took place in particularly precarious circumstances, and several hundred deaths were recorded in just a few months over 2011. These deaths, however, were occurring in a sea which had been turned into the most surveilled maritime space on earth by the NATO-led military intervention, which had deployed more than 38 warships off the Libyan coast. The deaths were therefore occurring despite the surveillance, and with military actors possessing knowledge of migrants' distress. As the human rights NGO GISTI argued in a press release, military actors were thus guilty of failing to assist people in distress at sea, and the NGO announced it would file suit against the EU, Frontex, and NATO. This was the political context in brief: the beginning of a phase of intensified confrontation in the longstanding *mobility conflict*, which sets the desires and movements of migrants in opposition to the politics of exclusion of states, a phase which has continued to play out across the Mediterranean frontier until today, and of which we may be seeing the end with the current rollback of the border regime – we'll come back to that.

Lorenzo Pezzani: On the other hand, and this is the second crucial element that shaped our research, a new project called »Forensic Architecture« was starting to emerge at the Centre for Research Architecture, where Charles and I were conducting our PhD research. This opened up a new horizon and pushed us to think about new methods and technologies that could be used to document human rights viola-

tions.<sup>1</sup> The forensic approach seeks to find *evidence* of events under investigation so as to reconstruct them and prove or disprove a crime. However, if the evidence considered by the inventors of forensic science since the times of Edmond Locard were stains, fingerprints, etc., today events are potentially recorded by an infinite amount of materials and media – from phone communication to payment data, from videos shot with mobile phones to satellite images and vehicle tracking data, from sound recordings to rubble analysis (Ruffell/McKinley 2008). This forensic perspective has traditionally been the monopoly of state agencies, which have often used it to police and silence the victims of their violence by pitting the alleged objectivity of technology and science against the fallibility of human testimony. Our aim has been to somehow reverse this process and reinvent forensics as a counter-hegemonic practice that could be used by non-governmental actors to hold state and other non-state actors accountable for their crimes (Weizman 2014).

*So how did these ideas about forensics become operational in the political context that you just sketched?*

Charles Heller: After reading GISTI's press release, we contacted them and offered our help to document and demand accountability for the crimes of non-assistance that they, together with other groups like Migreurop and the International Federation of Human Rights, were denouncing. It was in dialogue with this NGO coalition that we decided to focus on what then became known as the »left-to-die« boat case, in which 63 migrants died after having been abandoned to drift for 14 days in NATO's maritime surveillance area. Our contribution was to reconstruct as precisely as possible what had happened to this boat by using different remote sensing means and combining them with the testimonies of the survivors. The results of our research, which we published in April 2012 (Heller/Pezzani/Situ Studio 2012), were the basis for several suits filed in the different national contexts of some of the states involved in the military operation, namely France, Italy, Spain, and Belgium.

Lorenzo Pezzani: Taking the forensic approach to the sea presented a number of challenges. In our investigation, we had to develop new methodologies to document events that had occurred in the open sea without the presence of external witnesses. We used remote sensing means that are routinely employed to police migration but we mobilized them »against the grain«, that is, not to detect unauthorized crossings,

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1 | See URL: [forensic-architecture.org](http://forensic-architecture.org).

but rather to document the violence of borders themselves. In this sense, we sought to exercise what we have called a »disobedient gaze« (Pezzani/Heller 2013). Moreover, in order to determine responsibilities, we spatialized the traces of this violence within the particular legal architecture of the EU's maritime frontier. The sea is far from being the empty and lawless expanse we often imagine. Instead, it is a patchwork of overlapping and conflicting jurisdictions that are exploited by states in order to produce violence and escape responsibility for it, for instance carrying out unlawful push-backs, or refraining from engaging in rescue operations. A fine-grained understanding of this political geography of the sea has thus been crucial to understanding some of the conditions that have led to deaths at sea on a structural basis. More generally, you could say that our investigation had to challenge one of the cornerstones of modern forensic science, according to which »every contact leaves a trace«. This is because modern forensics has focused on registering traces of *direct violence* – in which harm inflicted onto individuals »can be traced back to concrete persons as actors«, in John Galtung's formulation (Galtung 1969). While our report shows that traces are indeed also left in the water, what is missing is a direct physical contact between a perpetrator and a victim. One need only think of the military ship that circled around the »left-to-die« boat without providing any assistance to its passengers, but many of other forms of violence we have documented since then also share a form of violence that kills without directly touching the bodies of migrants and that operates by omission (by many), rather than by commission (by any specific actor). This distance between the (in-)action of a perpetrator and the fate of a victim, the conversion of water into a deadly weapon, is precisely what has allowed states to present migrants' deaths at sea as tragic events all the while escaping responsibility for them. In a sense, you could think of all our work of the past few years as an attempt to account for and challenge these forms of contactless violence.

*Almost two years later, in March 2014, you made the film »Liquid Traces« on the basis of the 2012 report. Why did you make the film in addition to the report?*

Charles Heller: We shared the desire to make our research available to the broadest possible public. That meant giving it a form other than a 100-page report. Thinking of aesthetic strategies, video seemed to allow us to provide an answer to a question that we had since the very beginning of the project and that we had not fully been able to answer through the report: how do we combine the view from the boat with the view from the sky? Satellite imagery, one of the main technological means of documentation that we used, is often criticized for reproducing, through a technologically mediated vision, a highly asymmetrical power relation in which an objectifying

analysis ends up silencing victims of violence (Parks 2009). In this video, we wanted to find a way to combine this kind of distant vision of events, which was crucial in our quest for accountability, with the lived, subjective experiences of the migrants on the boat. As we produced the video, another important dimension of the film emerged for us. Several authors have argued that, in our analyses of borders, we have to move beyond their spatial dimension, to include their temporal dimension as well, as it allows us to become attuned to how illegalised migrants' movements are accelerated and decelerated throughout their trajectories of inclusive exclusion rather than complete exclusion by the spatial limits of borders (Tsianos/Hess/Karakayali 2009; Mezzadro/Neilson 2013). However, it is very difficult to account for the temporal dimension of a border regime through static maps. The moving image instead really allowed us to give a form to the temporality of migrants' movements, and the hierarchized rhythms of the Mediterranean mobility regime. In *Liquid Traces*, when we saw the slow movements of the trajectory of the drifting migrants' vessel superimposed with the pulsating movement of maritime commercial traffic through the central Mediterranean – it looks like London at rush hour – it was the first time that we felt that the argument of the *differential temporalities of movement* was given an adequate visual form. So, while this was not really an aim when we set out to produce *Liquid Traces*, it was certainly one of the major outcomes for us.

*What have been the main outcomes of your work on the »left-to-die-boat case« in legal and political terms?*

Lorenzo Pezzani: From the perspective that legal scholar Robert Knox has called »principled opportunism« (Knox 2012), filing a contentious case such as this one has undoubtedly the merit of inserting »grains of sand« into the migration regime's mechanisms, blocking it temporarily, forcing it to change slightly. For instance, one might say that the echo that the »left-to-die case« – and other similar cases we documented at the time – had on the press has probably contributed in some way to stopping the practices of non-assistance that were prevalent at the time. However, strategic litigation has also clear limits. Some of these limits are practical – legal cases are notoriously slow: All of the suits that we filed in 2012 and afterwards are still ongoing. But the limits of strategic litigation are also more substantial. For better and worse, the whole edifice of criminal law is based on the principle of individual responsibility, which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for legal arguments to address structural causes. Even if the helicopters and the military ship that refrained from rescuing the passengers of the »left-to-die« boat were identified, and their crews found guilty, it would be utterly unrealistic to think that this might challenge the foundations of the

border regime, as the responsible individuals would probably be singled out as »bad apples«. Our attempt has always been to use singular events as a prism through which we can unpack and challenge more systemic forces, but clearly the aim of holding states accountable for the deaths of migrants at sea is very far from being achieved.

Charles Heller: In general, I think it is very difficult to say what kind of political effects an activist and/or academic piece of work has. It often depends on the way ideas, methodologies or images are appropriated by others – and that may be for the best and for the worst. In the past, I have produced some images that have been appropriated by the IOM to deter potential migrants (Heller 2014a, 2014b), but through the methodology we developed in the process of our work on the left-to-die boat and other cases, we have also contributed to migrant solidarity movements.

Lorenzo Pezzani: This is for me perhaps the most important outcome. Together with many others, we introduced not only a new methodology, a new vocabulary for documenting and contesting the violence of the border regime, but we also contributed to creating a new awareness, as more and more groups fighting for migrants' rights have started to use technologies such as vessel tracking and mapping to exercise a critical »right to look« at sea. Making these techniques available to the larger movement was precisely what spurred us to create the WatchTheMed platform in 2012, in the wake of the »left-to-die-case«.<sup>2</sup> Initially our idea was that this online platform would be used primarily to document other cases of human rights violations at sea. However, among the WatchTheMed founders and members were also various other activists, who had previously been involved in networks like No One Is Illegal, No Border, and Welcome2europa. They sought to seize some of the methodologies that we had developed towards a different but equally important political tradition, which is that of direct support to unauthorized mobility.

Charles Heller: Specifically, this happened after we had documented a second major case of non-assistance by Malta and Italy with the shipwreck of 11 October 2013. At that time, some members of WatchTheMed asked, »How could we prevent these cases of non-assistance and other violations of migrants' rights from occurring in the first place, instead of simply documenting them after the facts?« One of the ideas that emerged was that if Dr. Jammo, a Syrian refugee and survivor of that shipwreck on 11 October, had not only called the Italian and Maltese coast guard, but also a wide net-

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2 | See URL: [watchthemed.net](http://watchthemed.net).

work of civil society, that could have pressured the Italian and Maltese coast guards to comply with their obligations to rescue migrants; maybe the deaths could have been prevented. This impetus materialized into the Alarmphone project, which involved institutionalizing and collectivizing the practice of lending direct support to migrants in distress at sea through a phone line, which had been practiced for a number of years on an individual and informal basis by a few exceptional individuals such as Father Mussie Zerai. With the Alarmphone, this individual support was consolidated into a strong, political practice aiming to support migrants in their movements across borders and to pressure state actors into complying with their obligation to rescue migrants in distress or preventing push-backs in all parts of the Mediterranean.

Lorenzo Pezzani: We tend to think about the two activist traditions that came together in these projects – strategic litigation and direct support – simply as different tactical tools that can be mobilized for the same strategic aim: enabling the exercise of freedom of movement. I don't think that a choice between different styles of struggle needs to be made, and in any case they never exist in »pure« form. The question is rather for us what tactic is more effective in which context.

*If one thinks about of the way your project began and how it has been transformed, one can only be struck that possibly the most effective way to exercise a civilian »right to look« at the maritime frontier is not through high-tech, visual means of monitoring, but relatively low-tech mobile phones, technologies based on listening. In relation to this shift, you have suggested the concept of »disobedient listening«, as distinct from the »disobedient gaze« you mentioned earlier (Heller/Pezzani/Stierl 2015). How and why did you develop these concepts and how are the two connected?*

Charles Heller: Forging new concepts is a way for us to be self-reflective, to think critically about our own work, as well as to help us decipher emergent processes. Hannah Arendt wrote about the imperative to »think what we are doing« (Arendt 1958), but for us it is at least as important to *think through doing*, and *do through thinking* – thinking as a way to reorient or sharpen what you're doing. It is clear for us that any form of activism and »militant research« is a complex practice moving between resistance, compromise, and evasion. These concepts have been important for us in terms of reflecting on our practices and, in turn, have served as a political compass of sorts to navigate this complex terrain from which there is no outside. More specifically, »disobedient sensing« – the concept we have recently used to encompass both the visual and aural dimensions you mentioned – was a way to reflect on our own attempt of *détournement* of the technologies usually associated with border surveil-

lance. We realized that while state actors seek to shed light on acts of unauthorized border crossing and to obscure the violence of the border regime, a critical practice had to reverse this looking.

Lorenzo Pezzani: What is very important to keep in mind is that you're never dealing with a static field, in which conditions of (in)visibility and (in)audibility remain unchanged. Consider this: As we mentioned before, it is often states that try to make migrants visible and migrants who try to stay invisible to cross borders. At times, however, you have a complete reversal of this aesthetic relation: migrants desperately trying to become visible and audible – on the boat, for example, through satellite phone calls, through gestures of waving etc. so as to be rescued, and states, on the contrary, seeking *not* to see and *not* to listen. So this is an immanent field of struggle, and one fraught with ambivalence at all times: here, visibility and invisibility do not designate two independent and mutually exclusive realms, but rather a topological continuum. This means that there is no single practice connected once and for all to disobedient sensing, one gesture that can be replicated in all situations. Instead, these are tactical concepts that can guide constant repositioning. They allow us to ask always anew the questions of what is power seeking to make visible and to hide, and what are migrants seeking to make visible and to hide. By providing answers to such questions that are always temporary, we seek to insert ourselves into this shifting *regime of (in)visibility and (in)audibility*, to counter the practices of states and to support the practices of migrants.

*For a long time, European states made great efforts to conceal what was happening on their maritime borders. In the 1990s, it was only thanks to civil society organizations like UNITED that deaths of persons trying to reach the EU were documented and thus made visible.<sup>3</sup> Today it is a lot more difficult for states to hide deaths at sea. At least since the shipwreck off the island of Lampedusa on 3 October 2013, deaths at sea have been omnipresent in the European media and political discourse.*

Lorenzo Pezzani: Indeed, the public outcry caused by that shipwreck marked a moment of rupture in this respect. Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission at that time, travelled to Lampedusa with the Italian Prime Minister and held a speech in front of the line of coffins to mourn the victims. What is interesting, though, is that far from being an occasion for questioning the migration regime that, arguably,

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3 | For the list of deaths documented by UNITED, see URL: [unitedagainstracism.org](http://unitedagainstracism.org).

led to those deaths in the first place, his speech urgently called for more surveillance, more controls and more militarization, i.e. some of the very mechanisms at the core of that same regime. Similarly to the way in which the spectacle of border enforcement ends up reifying and naturalizing the border and the conditions of illegality it creates (De Genova 2013), the spectacular »visibilization« of deaths was mobilized to make the very practices and policies of border control vanish from critical analysis, pushing the larger social, legal, political and economic context in which border deaths happen out of the analytical frame. In this context, denouncing migrant deaths loses part of its oppositional edge, or may even become complicit with the policies and discourse of states. We can understand this paradox through the concept of *structural violence*, which has been used to describe forms of indirect violence that are not committed by any identifiable perpetrator(s) but that are rather the outgrowth of seemingly legitimate, institutionalized practices. Structural violence does not operate by removing knowledge and keeping violence in the dark. Instead, it is made invisible by its very repetition and reproduction. In this sense, accounting or concealing violence is also an aesthetic problem – if by aesthetics we mean, with Rancière (2006), the politics of »framing and re-framing the visible and the invisible«.

Charles Heller: This focus on the deaths of migrants as a crucial justification of, rather than a challenge to, the border regime, as well as the consequent framing of security operations as acts of saving, should be understood in the context of what William Walters has characterized as the »humanitarian border«. At the same time as EU states sought to make their own responsibility for the deaths of migrants at sea invisible, they have also sought to displace it onto smugglers. EU institutions and heads of states have argued that it is they who are putting these people's lives at risk, and as such the smugglers have been the targets of increasingly militarized operations, such as the EUNAVFOR MED – Sophia operation. So this is a very tricky move, which makes a spectacle of migrant deaths and places the responsibility of smugglers front and centre, while hiding the responsibility of states, even as we all know that smuggling networks would not exist without the EU's illegalization policies, which force migrants to resort to clandestine means of crossing.

*The intertwined logics and discourses of humanitarianism and securitization have certainly characterized the operations launched by European states since 2013 starting from Mare Nostrum, which was launched by the Italian government immediately after the 2013 shipwrecks. But while Mare Nostrum still had a strong search and rescue component, its successor Triton, which was launched in 2015 and operated by*

*Frontex, was mainly about surveillance and border control. What did these developments in the Euro-Mediterranean border regime mean for your work?*

Charles Heller: Our work underwent a shift with the ending of Mare Nostrum and the lethal consequences it had – the record number of deaths that we observed at the beginning of 2015. While the »left-to-die-boat-case« and the October 2013 case sought to meticulously document and seek accountability for particular *practices* of non-assistance, what happened with the ending of Mare Nostrum was rather an overall *policy* of non-assistance that involved keeping operations far away from the areas in which migrants encounter situations of distress, and thus refraining from rescuing not one, but dozens of migrants' boats. So our report »Death by Rescue: The Lethal Consequences of the EU's Policies of Non-assistance« essentially reconstructs the conclusion of Mare Nostrum and its lethal effects, and demonstrates that EU Member States and EU institutions implemented this policy with full knowledge of its lethal consequences. To this effect, we had to complement a *forensics of cases* with a *forensics of policies*. The report relies not only on the reconstruction of the April 2015 shipwrecks – in which 1,200 people lost their lives in a week – but also on an analysis of the institutional process leading to changing policies and of the changing conditions of migration that emerged as a result of them. In particular we looked at the way mortality (which is the relationship between arrivals and deaths and is a measure of the danger of the crossing) evolved in relation to shifts in EU policy, thus seeking to reconnect the relationship that had been severed within the discourse of the humanitarian border.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the »Death by Rescue« report both responded to the shift in the forms of violence operating on the maritime frontier – from practices of non-assistance to policies of non-assistance, and the new difficulties that emerged with the humanitarianization of the border that entailed a need to reconnect state policies and their lethal effects. In turn, this demanded a shift in our appropriation of methodologies. If the »forensics of cases« demanded that we seize surveillance technologies, a »forensics of policies« demanded that we appropriated statistics, a form of knowledge production that is also deeply enmeshed with governmental practices (Heller/Pécoud 2018). Foucault noted in his 1978 lecture at the Collège de France that »statistics«, which etymologically means the »knowledge of the state«, played a central role in the emergence of forms of governmentality (Foucault 1978). Statistics were collected by a state apparatus that, in return, operated upon and through this knowledge. The collection of national population statistics are

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4 | See URL: [deathbyrescue.org](http://deathbyrescue.org).

historically intimately related to the very emergence of the category of »migration«. Today, migration statistics play a central role in the »border spectacle« (De Genova 2013): statistics of »irregular migration« quantify a »threat« that is measured (and measurable) only when neutralized by border patrols. Through them, it is thus simultaneously the threat of illegalized migration and the securitization work of states that are made visible. Migrant illegality is thus produced as an objective »reality« that migration policies must respond to. The relationship between counting and governing migrants is evident in Frontex's »risk analysis« reports. If statistics of intercepted illegalized migrants are central to Frontex's *state-centred* risk analysis – focusing on the alleged »risk« that irregular migration »flows« constitute for the states of the EU – statistics of mortality are instead at the core of our own *migrant-centred* »counter-risk analysis«, which focuses on assessing the risks that EU policies themselves pose for the lives of migrants, with the aim of contesting this very government.

*Following the April 2015 shipwrecks, several NGOs launched their own civilian rescue missions to denounce and make up for the lethal retreat of state-led rescue operations. . .*

Lorenzo Pezzani: In fact, MOAS had already been operating rescue operations in 2014, but only for a short period. At the beginning of 2015, they were joined by several other NGOs such as Doctors without Borders (*Médecins Sans Frontières*, MSF) and Sea Watch, and many other organizations over 2016. These were and are extraordinary initiatives that have revolutionized the capacities of non-governmental civil society actors to monitor and intervene at sea, reclaiming the sea as a central space of politics and struggles (Stierl 2016). Only a few years earlier, such initiatives seemed unthinkable, because of the degree of criminalization of rescue at sea.

Charles Heller: While these new initiatives were framed as critical responses to European state policies, within the first year of their deployment they entered a relationship of relative complementarity on an operational level with European state actors: SAR NGOs operated rescues, and state actors destroyed the vessels that had been used by migrants. By the end of 2015, it seemed that somehow everybody could be satisfied: On the one hand, even if several thousand deaths were recorded, the danger of crossing had been brought down to a level close to that which prevailed during Mare Nostrum. On the other hand, state actors could be satisfied because the number of crossings had also decreased in the Central Mediterranean – which was temporarily eclipsed by unprecedented arrivals across the Aegean. So there was an operational complementarity, and a »win-win« outcome emerged from this first year

during which humanitarian action was operated by NGOs, and securitized action by states.

*Only that, in 2016, the number of crossings in the Central Med and the danger of crossing increased again, which sparked a backlash against rescue NGOs. . .*

Charles Heller: Yes. The »long summer of migration« represented the climax of migrants' capacity to overcome borders, but also sparked a violent rollback. As the EU revealed itself to be utterly incapable of managing the movements of migrants within the EU, the push towards violent containment outside of the EU grew exponentially. After the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, which led to a drastic reduction in crossings of the Aegean, all the attention was focused on the Central Mediterranean. This led Italy and EU agencies to adopt a two-pronged strategy: criminalizing rescue NGOs, and stepping up their collaboration with the Libyan coast guard to intercept and return migrants to Libya. Since the end of 2016, Frontex and the political class in Italy have led a virulent campaign to delegitimize proactive rescue activities, now operated almost exclusively by NGO actors. They have accused the NGOs of constituting a »pull factor« – a criticism which was used against Mare Nostrum as well in the past, of cooperating with smugglers, and – ironically – also of increasing the risk for migrants. Our most recent report, »Blaming the rescuers«, seeks to subject these accusations to empirical analysis.<sup>5</sup> We demonstrate that these accusations are unfounded, and that without rescue NGOs, the crossing would be far more dangerous.

Lorenzo Pezzani: We are also currently supporting *Jugend Rettet*, whose vessel *Iuventa* was seized in August 2017 due to an accusation of colluding with smugglers. We are producing a counter-reconstruction of the events for which it was accused – demonstrating that the allegations revolve around what we call »factual lies«: the use, for example, of a photograph, a statistical graph, a vessel track, all forms of documents that have a »factuality« to them, and weaving around them a narrative of events which is so entirely and intentionally false that it amounts to a lie.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, this campaign of criminalization has escalated in parallel with the collaboration with the Libyan Coast Guard. On 2 August 2017, the very same day as the *Iuventa* was seized, Italy authorized the deployment of its warships within Libya's territorial waters to provide logistical support to the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent and intercept mi-

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5 | See URL: [blamingtherescuers.org](http://blamingtherescuers.org).

6 | For the *Iuventa* Case, see URL: [blamingtherescuers.org/iuventa](http://blamingtherescuers.org/iuventa).

grants' departures. This contributed to an expansion of interceptions operated by the Libyan Coast Guard. This is a policy of »*refoulement* by proxy«, through which Italy has attempted to operate push-backs without touching migrants, and without getting caught, which we are currently seeking to document and contest. In this sense, we have been witnessing a new wave of policies of externalization through which the EU has been seeking to bring to a close the cycle of turbulence in the border regime sparked by the Arab uprisings – which is precisely what had put the previous wave of externalized border control into crisis.

*What are the chances of civil society actors to counter the recent defamation campaigns and the various measures that the EU has undertaken to make the crossing of the Mediterranean more difficult?*

Lorenzo Pezzani: It is quite stunning for me to think how quickly we have gone from that incredible moment of struggle that was the »long summer of migration« to the present conjuncture, where we witness the desperate and violent attempt to reimpose externalized border control. Back in 2015, spurred by the incredible scenes of people relentlessly overcoming borders along the so-called »Balkan route«, migrant solidarity networks became mass movements for a fleeting moment and took centre stage. They were joined by a lot of people who were less political and certainly not part of existing initiatives, but who felt the need to somehow show their solidarity with migrants, for instance greeting them as they arrived at German train stations. Without wanting to romanticize this moment, I think that we do need to understand the recent wave of the criminalization of solidarity – whether on land or at sea – precisely as a reaction to the position of power that migrants and those standing in solidarity with them managed to reach at that point. We have to keep this in mind when looking at the present situation, because it is essential to hold our ground and not let the current rollback of the EU's border regime push us out. At the same time, we need to deploy every possible tool to block the new levels of violence against migrants.

Charles Heller: What is interesting in relation to both the levels of criminalization and the violent containment is that documenting violations via strategic litigation, which had maybe lost traction during the affirmative and transgressive moment of the summer of migration, has become quite important as a defensive strategy once again, and as such this is once again one of our main focuses. But after several years of research and activism, ranging across different political traditions, we also clearly see the limits of the hand-to-hand struggle with the border regime. While we are able to win some important battles and temporarily enable more freedom of movement

for migrants, there is no fundamental transformation of the border regime. There is an urgent need to rethink strategic visions that seek to combine and articulate daily struggles *and* fundamental change towards the freedom of movement.

*What would it take, do you think, to move in that direction?*

Lorenzo Pezzani: This is a challenging question, which lies at the heart of two interrelated strands of research we are currently exploring – one tracing genealogies of mobility and control, and the other thinking about the politics of the freedom of movement. Concerning the first strand, looking at the *longue durée* of the mobility conflict that is currently taking place in the Mediterranean is a way for us to move beyond what William Walters has called a sort of »presentism« affecting critical migration and border studies. The very trajectory of opening and closure of 2011–2018 that we have just sketched here needs to be embedded in a longer genealogy of change that would be able to account for the successive ebbs and flows of migration and control. The work of historians clearly shows that the highly uneven mobility regime which we currently observe can be traced back to European imperial expansion across the sea and the transformation of the Mediterranean into a »colonial sea« (Clancy-Smith 2010; Borutta/Gekas 2012). In turn, it will endure along with its lethal effects as long as the colonial asymmetries which gave rise to it are perpetuated, and the demands for freedom, equality and autonomy of the people of the Global South continue to reverberate through the movement of migrants. So we are interested in poly-temporal and poly-scalar analytical lenses, such as those allowed by the concept of *viapolitics* initially forged by Walters (2015) and that we are now exploring together.

Charles Heller: From this perspective, and this leads us to the second strand, the demand for the freedom of movement also appears in a different light, as we argue in a forthcoming piece we wrote with Maurice Stierl (Heller/Pezzani/Stierl 2018). If the movements of migrants are not only restricted by state policies, but also constrained by uneven global relations, and overdetermined by deep social boundaries such as race, class and gender, then the simple opening of borders would have limited and probably ambivalent effects – after all, as Etienne Balibar (2004) has often reminded his readers, the most vocal advocates for the freedom of movement have emerged from the neoliberal camp, which sees any state regulation on the mobility of people as an attempt to impose its nefarious distortion of the market. If this is the case, then the demand for fundamental transformation of migration policies towards ones that would enable more freedom of movement need to be articulated with a broad range of practices and demands on other levels (Anderson et al. 2009). These include

anti-racist, de-colonial, and feminist struggles, the environmental justice movement, struggles directed against uneven development and neoliberalism, and those based upon the forging of new alliances, such as those between migrant and non-migrant workers for better labour conditions. This complicates the struggle for freedom of movement, but it also makes struggles surrounding borders and migration a crucial node around which to weave the many entangled struggles, which together are forming an emerging agenda for radical transformation.

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# Inhalt

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Umkämpfte Wissensproduktionen der Migration. Editorial  
*Katherine Braun, Fabian Georgi, Robert Matthies, Simona Pagano, Mathias Rodatz, Maria Schwertl* 9

It is Obvious from the Map! Disobeying the Production of Illegality  
beyond Borderlines  
*Maribel Casas-Cortes, Sebastian Cobarrubias* 29

## Aufsätze

Practices and Power of Knowledge Dissemination.  
International Organizations in the Externalization of  
Migration Management in Morocco and Tunisia  
*Inken Bartels* 47

Knowing Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change.  
The Self-Perpetuating Circle of Research, Policy, and  
Knowledge Production  
*Sarah Louise Nash* 67

Other Paths, Other Destinations. Towards a Manifold Reading of  
Mobility across Borders  
*Léonie Newhouse* 83

## Debatte

MARS Attacks! A Cautionary Tale from the UK on the Relation between Migration and Refugee Studies (MARS) and Migration Control

*Joshua Hatton*

103

## Forschungswerkstatt

Die Interessenvertretung der ›Anderen‹. Unterkunftsbetreiber als neue Akteure der Wissensproduktion über Asylsuchende

*Ole Oeltjen*

133

## Interventionen

Was wir wissen. Über kritische Wissensproduktion in der Bildungsarbeit als und mit Migrant\*innen

*Rubia Salgado*

149

Der globale Süden ist hier! Wie Refugee-Aktivismus den Zusammenhang von Flucht und ›Entwicklung‹ aufzeigt

*Daniel Bendix*

157

Worüber wir reden, wenn wir mit jemandem nicht reden wollen. Zum Spannungsverhältnis von Rassismuskritik und Meinungsfreiheit an der Universität

*Katharina Hoppe, Darja Klingenberg, Vanessa Eileen Thompson, Felix Trautmann, Alexander Vorbrugg*

167

## Interviews

Violence against Migrant Women: Evidencing the Matrix of Colonial Power. An Interview with Ursula Santa Cruz

*Katherine Braun, Simona Pagano*

181

Transformative Trajectories – The shifting Mediterranean Border Regime  
and the Challenges of Critical Knowledge Production.

An Interview with Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani

*Sophie Hinger*

193

Autor\_innen

209



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[transcript]