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State, Migration, and Crisis

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Migration is a statistically anecdotal phenomenon: international migrants account for around 3.6% of the world's population. When it comes to refugees and people forcibly displaced, they mostly live in poor countries, generally close to their country of origin. However, the relative quantitative insignificance of migration and the limited impact of displacement in Western democracies seems inversely proportional to the prominence given to the issue of migration in political discourse in Europe and North America in particular. It is also become an increasingly salient topic in political debates across non-Western countries throughout the world.

Why is this? While migration seems to be inviting political scientists to move away from “methodological nationalism” as “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), research has not entirely fulfilled its promises. Recent studies in migration politics seem to show that the “national order of things” to use the expression of anthropologist Liisa Malkki (Malkki 1995) still infuse perceptions and politics of migration. This means that commonly shared perceptions of the contemporary political are based on the political authority of the State, on a limited territory and a national population defined in terms of citizens and non-citizens. The national identity of citizens is conjoint with territorial belonging. The sovereign State thus arrogates to itself the legitimate monopoly of controlling movement within states and across borders (Torpey 1998) but also the legitimate monopoly of attributing or withdrawing 'papers' which attest to one's nationality, refugee status, residence status, etc. and producing 'national' or lived community identities. The control of mobility and the delineation of the polity are the two sides of the relationship between migration and politics in the broadest sense, and, more narrowly, between the State and migrants. Both are also part of the international political order, since the State ensures, through international law and multilateral cooperation, that other States recognise each other as sedentary and sovereign. While they only represent a small share of the world's population, migrants' are contributing to the transformation of societies through the gradual increase in the cultural diversity, particularly in the richest countries, where, according to the UN, immigrants account for almost 15% of the population in 2020. Refugee flows driven by wars and political instability has been on the rise since 2010s, reaching over 117.3 million internally and internationally forcibly displaced people at the end of 2023 mostly concentrated in a few regions. In this context, migration can be perceived as a disruption to the national and international “order of things”. In recent years, the structural dynamics that shape the relation between states and migrants or refugees has even been increasingly framed as a problem and a challenge to nation states, both in Western democracies and across the world. This amounts to a pervasive “crisification” of migration in relation to both mobility and identity.

However, State's relation to migration is not made of mere contradiction. Moving away from ideal types absolute but the scope of state control is changing with history, across space and with globalisation. Other theorists saw the globalisation of world politics as a form of complex

interdependence between states and non-state actors (Keohane and Nye 1973). The state-migration relation is formed and transformed, challenged, and reinforced by several processes from “above” and “from below”. Transformations from above come through diplomatic and multilateral practices while changes from below emerge from transnational social practices. The following text explores the political dynamics at work in the state-migration nexus through the lens of migration as crisis.

Migration and Sovereignty Across Borders

In general terms, debates around multilateral politics of migration are situated in a particular global context in which ‘peaceful cooperation, expanded human rights, and higher standards of living’ (for both migrants and non-migrants) are concomitant with processes of *illiberalisation* across the globe and with ‘intensified group conflicts [and] deteriorating social systems’ (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). The global politics of migration is far from irenic descriptions of *liberal* global governance converging towards labour market integration, right based migration policies (Rosenblum and Cornelius 2012) through “managerial” approaches (Geiger and Pécoud 2010). It is made up of tensions and contradictions between the national order, its migration diplomacy and multilateral architecture, on the one hand, and transnational sub- or para-state dynamics, on the other. Its political, economic, and cultural institutions, both formal and informal, generate complex relationships.

State’s sovereignty over migration is transformed and challenged from below, with the transnationalisation of societies maintained by migrants across or within borders and supported by other dynamics of economic globalisation and technological innovation in the field of communication and transport. It is also influenced by the recent breakthroughs in migration multilateralism, a sector of UN cooperation policy that is still in its infancy, involving States and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), culminating in the signing of global pacts for “safe, orderly and regular or legal” migration in 2018. While the UN insists that the Compacts fully respects states’ sovereignty, states seemed less convinced and many of them have long been resist migration-related interventions on the part of international and intergovernmental organisations, which they perceive as a challenge to their right to govern the admission and the way they chose to treat foreigners on their sovereign territory.

The multilateral management of migration during the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century was underpinned by the political narration of migration crises. Over the last thirty years or so, forms of regulation, normative discourse, political and legal frameworks, and meetings have multiplied in the multilateral arena, consecrated by a series of events and non-binding negotiation processes. At regional level, governments have set up consultative processes¹ (such as the MIDWA process in West Africa, the IGAD-RCP in East Africa, the Rabat Process in North Africa, the 5+5 Group in the Mediterranean, the Budapest Process in Central Europe, the Puebla Process in Central America etc).

From the early 2000s onwards, the more consensual theme of the relationship between migration and development came to the fore of discussions: migration has been included in the Millennium Development Goals, it has led to the organisation of the UN High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (HLD) in 2006 and 2013. The intergovernmental Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) on the side of UN venues has been held almost every year since 2006. The 2015 crisis and the 2018 New York Declaration on Migrants and Refugees gave rise to two global *compacts*, one on migration (the GCM) and the other on asylum (GCR).

Although these meetings brought together governments, international organisations and civil society players, the results were mediocre: they focused on the relationship between migration and development, an angle that was perceived as less “political” and mainly concerned the countries of the South. They also made visible the conflicts surrounding the norms and practices of global migration

¹ See <https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/rcps/RCP-Infosheet.pdf>

policy. While migration is at the heart of this multilateralism, it is the sovereigntist perspective that dominates (Rother, Thiollet, and Wihl de Wenden 2023), particularly through the work of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which joined the UN fold in 2016 and promotes mobility that is ordered and regulated essentially by States.

Bringing the State (Back) In: the “Rise” of Migration Diplomacy

Like all other aspects of sovereignty, the relationship between territorial and political sovereignty and mobility is complex and made of contradictory processes, as well as constant changes of scales. The international politics of immigration and emigration management have always been important in the pursuit of state interest across borders (Weiner 1992; Hollifield 2012; Adamson 2006). States have sought to control immigration and emigration to control their population dynamics, the composition of their population as in the case of colonial territories populated by settlers in Northern America, Oceania or in French dominated Algeria, or the immigration by design organised in the United States through the selection of immigrants (Zolberg 2008).

However, the international politics of migration only recently became integral to the study of diplomacy and foreign policy. As a response to this gap, scholars recently introduced the notion of *migration diplomacy* to study to analyse the politics of mobility through formal and informal, explicit and implicit processes through which states govern and use migration internationally (Thiollet 2011, 110). The study of state-led bilateral and multilateral diplomatic tools, processes, and procedures (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019, 116) is now getting more traction. It connects domestic politics and international power relations and articulates the workings of private and public actors across countries. It leads states to engage in direct or indirect diplomatic relations around migration management in a context where migration flows are overwhelmingly driven by economic forces, social networks, and political reasons, that pull and push workers, people, and refugees across spaces. Such a multilevel and multi-actor approaches to economic, social and political interdependence is important to avoid the analytical traps of state centrism (Rosenau 1984).

In recent years, diplomacy is becoming strained in both northern and southern countries. A growing number of states have orchestrated migration crises for the purposes of negotiation, or even blackmail. This was the case with Mu' ammar Gaddafi's Libya, which agreed to act as an anti-migrant gatekeeper for Europe in exchange for a return to favour on the international stage. Turkey, for its part, used Syrian refugees as leverage in its relations with Europe, but also to silence critics of its policies towards the Kurdish minorities and Syria. In 2021, in response to Spain's reception of a Polisario Front official, Morocco encouraged sub-Saharan migrants to converge on the enclave of Melilla. Belarus, under Moscow's remote control, channelled several thousand migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East to its border with Poland to create a political frenzy and weaken European unity.

The transformation of migrants and asylum seekers into diplomatic or military "weapons" is not a new phenomenon. The multiplication of deals and transactions around migration and asylum management is also increasingly occupying the diplomatic arena. Creating migratory crises across borders have become a favoured foreign policy framework for countries in both North and South. In this context, migration and asylum politics have become an area of choice for international cooperation and diplomatic conflict. It might become increasingly salient and institutionalised as climate change exacerbates internal displacement within countries and regions and potentially forced mobility between continents.

The Politics of Transnational Social Processes

Against this diplomatic and multilateral backdrop, the international politics of migration needs to incorporate social and economic dynamics between migrants' countries of origin or destination and the countries they cross. Research in sociology and anthropology has highlighted the fact that the

alternative between "here" and "there" does not sum up the identity dilemmas of emigrants (Sayad 1999), nor the thorny issues of the benefits and costs of migration for host countries and countries of origin. Migration accompanies and feeds local and global change but does not summarise it. Through the transnational links they forge and maintain across space and generations, migrants create hybrid identities and transcend territorialised logics. A world of migration (and exile) is emerging as an alternative or complement to the sovereign international order, contributing to social transformations that may be discrete or processual, but are no less crucial. Transnational dynamics driven by networks, associations and civil society organisations, economic and religious players, are therefore taking place alongside, below and beyond diplomatic relations between states and multilateral organisations.

Furthermore, research into migration in international relations opened a field of theoretical exploration into the *biopolitics* of regulating migration and borders or migratory experiences. The new frameworks of analysis combine attention to transnational phenomena and the question of the return of the State or the "sovereign turn" (Thiollet 2019). It leads for instance geographer Camille Schmoll (Schmoll 2020) to discuss the tension between autonomy and constraints for women migrants across the Mediterranean, which she calls "autonomy in tension". The trajectories and projects of migrants today are confronted with an increased politicisation of debates on migration and diversity, and a 'brutalisation' of migration diplomacy and border control policies that jeopardise their rights and their lives^[8].

However, individuals, wherever they go, need passports, visas or visa waiver schemes negotiated between states. The international asylum system also theoretically allows them to migrate as refugees. These statuses and the mobility of those who benefit from them remain subject to the goodwill of States and to the geopolitics of migration. The international politics of migration are made of fora, summits and global "pacts", and shot through with tensions linked to the calculation of interests or the defence of standards. Whether or not a country exempts its nationals from visa requirements, whether or not it grants the right of asylum to certain individuals or groups, whether or not it allows its nationals to leave, whether or not it allows foreign residents, their children or grandchildren access to citizenship: policies vary, as do their implementation. Border and individual controls may be more or less effective, political power more or less exclusive, regimes of exception more or less respected, individuals more or less protected... the fact remains that the global political order is the sum of sedentary national orders and (mono)identities, even if, in practice, multiple forms of mobility are partly if not entirely beyond the control of the latter. If it is wrong to think that there is a transnational social world disconnected or emancipated from territorialised societies, it is equally wrong to believe that the national is autonomous.

In a global order that is both inter- and transnational, political and media discourse and social representations remain strictly state-centric, and migration is often presented as an anomaly that needs to be dissolved by integrating immigrants or exiles into the host nation, or as an aberration that needs to be corrected by returning exiles or immigrants to their country of nationality. Simplistic though it may be, this interpretation remains dominant and justifies brutal policies that lead to the deaths of thousands of people at borders, today in the Mediterranean, in the Pacific, in the Bay of Bengal on the southern border of the United States, yesterday in the China Sea. Using the neologism coined by Achille Mbembe (Mbembe 2003), Blanca Garcés Mascareñas has described the necropolitics of borders (Garcés-Mascareñas 2022), the right to life and death that states exercise over migrants' bodies and bodies at borders, in the microscopic space of a boat adrift or a cell in a detention centre, or in the macroscopic space of seas or long border zones bristling with walls. Worked on and represented by artists or activists such as the teams of the Forensic Architecture collective², this concrete and material violence is based on the symbolic legitimacy that the national model confers on border control.

² <https://forensic-architecture.org/category/migration>

This is, of course, in stark contrast to the globalisation of trade, finance and even culture, which has produced a certain ideological and discursive consensus on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. Free trade policies, the deregulation of financial markets and the circulation of cultural goods have enshrined the free movement of goods, money, and ideas. While on a regional or local scale, such as in Europe or West Africa, the free movement of people is the subject of numerous measures, on a global scale it is seen as a utopia (Pécoud 2013). Migration therefore remains framed a critical challenge, or even a threat to the national and international political order.

From “Migration Crises” to Migration As Crisis

Europe has been experiencing mass inflows of asylum seekers and migrants since 2014 which were rapidly characterised as a “migration crisis”. This has challenged European governments and societies. The migration crisis has spurred intense and ongoing research and policy debates. Key issues therein include the following: the ways in which this crisis is called (whether a ‘migrant’, a ‘refugee’ or even a ‘European’ crisis’); the appropriate policy measures to address the crisis (‘hotspots’, ‘search and rescue’ operations, anti-trafficking initiatives, etc.); the political strategies deployed by EU member-states and the divergence/convergence between them. Yet, we have argued that the “summer of migration” in 2015 and related political development around it, have created a context in which human mobility is widely perceived as a “crisis” (Cantat, Pécoud, and Thiollet 2023). Such a perception of “migration as crisis” is a central factor in understanding the politics of migration and asylum in today’s Europe, and beyond.

Diagnosed very early on by the American political scientist Myron Weiner (1995), migration crisis discourses centred on immigration (rather than emigration) and asylum (rather than exile), can be dated and located: it emerged in the 1990s in the OECD countries and in other major immigration countries such as the Gulf monarchies (Thiollet 2021). During this period, migration policies became increasingly restrictive and selective, and migration became a security concern in the public sphere. The tensions surrounding the reception of large numbers of asylum seekers from Syrian in Europe in 2015 or from Venezuela and Central America in the United States reinforced the perception of a "migration crisis" (or “asylum crisis”) missing forced and economic migration together. However, Weiner points out that this "global migration crisis" is not so much a question of increasing figures (for migration, asylum and above all the diversity of populations within OECD countries), because of the way in which these figures are assembled, interpreted, and used. A dialectical relationship must be established between the quantifiable realities of migration and their representation in a constructivist perspective of the phenomenon. France is a case in point: while the country recorded no increase in the flow of asylum seekers or irregular migrants in 2015, the media and political sphere took hold of the “migration crisis” and the subject polarised public opinion as if an invasion were threatening. Similarly, rescue operations for travellers in distress in the Mediterranean or border crossings in the Alps or Calais were able to inflame the press, social networks, and political debates, while the gradual and limited increases in the number of asylum seekers between 2016 and 2020 received almost no attention.

The European 'moment' of 2015 provides an emblematic case of the crisis of migration in Western democracies. The influx into Greece, Germany and Italy of Syrian asylum seekers, who had initially been received in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, gave rise to contradictory responses that pitted irregular migrants, often described as “illegal”, against refugees, divided Europe and accelerated the tightening of border policies and the criminalisation of mobility. Conversely, the arrival of Ukrainian migrants in 2022 mobilised regional solidarity for exiles considered to be European. This difference in treatment raises both political and legal questions about the racialisation of asylum and migration policies (Pastore 2021). These crises are taking place in an economic and demographic context that is also “critical”, with the countries of the European Union faced with ageing populations and a need for labour, highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. We can go further: the crisis of migration is not just a historical contingency linked to variations in flows within or between states, but a paradigm

consubstantial with the stato-national order and, therefore, at the foundation of global migration policy (Thiollet 2022).

Going back to definitions, the term *crisis* can be used at the same time to characterise a dramatic change in migration or asylum flows and to characterise the systemic challenge posed to societies and polities, by the diversity of origin of their members. Both are related but dissimilar issues. Crisis is also what causes migration and notably forced migration. A war, an economic, environmental, political or health crisis leads to population movements that are more forced than voluntary and, by extension, can also cause a crisis in the migrants' country of arrival: an asylum crisis, a reception crisis, an integration crisis, a geopolitical crisis between the migrants' country of arrival and their country of origin. Conversely, the Covid-19 pandemic, between 2019 and 2022, has led, in the name of “politics of life” (Cantat et al. 2020), to a health, societal and political crisis that confined most of the world's inhabitants to their own borders, and immobilised migrants and refugees in interstitial spaces such as refugee camps or informal settlements.

Three points can be made about these considerations, which describe causal mechanisms that are certainly relevant, but which largely naturalise the link between migration and crises. The first concerns the disjunction between different types of migration, which are said to give rise to a variety of crises depending on the context. Scientists are questioning the political use of the distinction between voluntary and forced migration (Thiollet, Pastore, and Schmoll 2024), which is of limited analytical value given that there is a continuum of motivations among migrants, continuity of migration experiences and the coexistence of flows mixing people of different statuses.

The second observation concerns the temporality of the link between crisis and migration. The inflammatory and momentary nature of crises that provoke forced migration should not be understood without analysing the determinants of population flows over the long term. The low-intensity wars and long-term political crises affecting Afghanistan, the Congo, Somalia, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Burma, and Venezuela are part of the long-term pattern of forced displacement, sometimes spanning several decades. The global structure of political and economic inequalities and socio-cultural transformations also give rise to more diffuse population movements, which are rarely defined by international law, but which are structural forms of violence.

The third remark is prompted by the lack of critical reflection on the normative and political foundations of the link between crisis and migration, as a constructivist approach invites us to do. As part of various research projects³, Céline Cantat, Antoine Pécoud and Hélène Thiollet (2023) have shown that it is not necessary to (re)think about the 'migration crisis(es)', but rather to conceptualise migration *as a crisis* in the national and international political order. This paradigm shift moves away from the causal perspective and the feedback loops between crises and migration: one-off or diffuse crises cause migration, which causes crises. It is the result of a political and social construct with very concrete mechanisms and effects, whether in terms of the formation of public opinion, national and international public policies, the transformation of the State or relations between State and society. Consequently, the question of migration as crisis is part of a more radically critical line of research that goes beyond migration. It includes other types of crises – such as the 2008 financial crisis (Roitman 2014) or the COVID 2019 crisis – and works as a narrative device that justifies extraordinary measures or unusual political practices. Migration as crisis gives way to the management of migration through states of exception, the breaks free from the normalcy of norms and legal constraints, from the usual negotiations around civil processes.

³ See notably MAGYC Migration Governance and asylum Crises <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/822806> and PACE The Politics of Asylum Crises in Europe <https://anr.fr/Project-ANR-18-CE41-0013>

Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between migration and state politics is marked by a persistent state of crisis, which shapes and is shaped by both national and international dynamics. The "crisification" of migration, as detailed in this article, reveals a paradox where the relatively small number of migrants has a disproportionately large impact on political discourse and policymaking. This phenomenon underscores the influence of state-centric narratives and the enduring power of nation-states in defining and controlling mobility and identity.

As migration becomes increasingly politicised, the sovereignty of states is both challenged and reinforced through complex interdependencies with non-state actors and transnational processes. The rise of migration diplomacy illustrates the strategic use of migration as a tool in international relations, reflecting broader geopolitical interests and conflicts.

Furthermore, the depiction of migration as a crisis perpetuates a constructivist view that shapes public opinion, policy responses, and international cooperation. This perspective often leads to exceptional measures that bypass standard legal and normative frameworks, exacerbating the vulnerability of migrants and creating ethical dilemmas.

Ultimately, the politics of migration demands a nuanced understanding that goes beyond simplistic binaries of voluntary versus forced migration or national versus transnational identities. It calls for critical engagement with the underlying political and social constructs that define migration *as a crisis*, recognising the long-term structural factors and global inequalities that drive population movements. By rethinking migration through a lens that acknowledges its role in both disrupting and transforming political orders, we can better address the complexities inherent in migration politics.

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