

## Autonomy of Migration

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The term autonomy of migration, introduced by Yann Moulier-Boutang (cf. Moulier-Boutang and Garson 1984, cf. [interview](#)), saw widespread affirmation at the turn of the century through the activities and postulates of anti-racist pro-migrant groups and movements (e.g. [Frassanito Network](#) or [Kanak Attak](#)), and afterwards through the works of researchers such as Sandro Mezzadra (2006) or the authors contributing to the [TRANSIT MIGRATION](#) project (2002-2006): Manuela Bojadžijev, Sabine Hess, Serhat Karakayali and Vassilis S. Tsianos. The works of these authors were promptly recognized in the Balkan route region as well, primarily in the Slovenian context (Bojadžijev 2009; Mezzadra and Rigo 2004; cf. Lipovec Čebren and Zorn 2016), and a decade later they were integrated into the interpretations of the [long summer of migration](#), the [Balkan corridor](#) and the period that followed (Bužinkić and Hameršak 2018; Hameršak et al. 2020; Kurnik 2019; Kurnik and Razsa 2020; Lipovec and Pistotnik 2016; Stojić Mitrović et al. 2020, etc.), as well as in research into several recent cases of local “exodus”, especially the one from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Majstorović 2021), and its convergence with transnational migrant movements leading through Bosnia and Herzegovina (Majstorović 2022).

In the heterogeneous research field of autonomy of migration, which is continuously redefined in response to criticism and new field and theoretical insights, several meanings of autonomy are accepted. Autonomy from the phrase autonomy of migration primarily refers to autonomy in relation to the idea of push and pull factors, [coercion](#), labor market demands, migration control and other traditional frameworks for understanding migration. Migration, in this approach, is not unambiguously and without exception determined by some external structure. They have a logic of their own, their own motivations and their own trajectories (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013: 184). Moreover, according to Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos, migration is a “constitutive force” of sovereignty, politics, architecture and border practice, but also more broadly, of different forms of sociality, new relationships, forms and practices (2008: 202; cf. Mezzadra 2011; [TRANSIT MIGRATION](#) Forschungsgruppe 2007 and others).

Autonomy in the approach to the autonomy of migration is not inherent in migration itself, but it is a result of the “relation of irreconcilable conflict between migration and attempts to control it” (Scheel 2019: 81). Of course, this is not a binary conflict between migrants on the one hand, and control on the other, but a conflict that includes different actors and forces that are in opposition and negotiate with each other and within themselves. In this context, for example, as elaborated by Stephan Scheel (2019), the visa system can be both a means of control, as well as a tool for its avoidance. This dynamic, fragmentary and processual nature of autonomy of migration was sometimes terminologically emphasized in works not necessarily related to the approach itself, and in which autonomy was explicitly designated as the relative autonomy of migration (e.g. Castles and Miller 1998: 283; Buckel et al. 2020: 61).

In a kind of response to early criticisms that the autonomy of migration homogenizes heterogeneous migrant experiences (Sharma 2009), research into the autonomy of migration has often focused on migrant experiences and practices while relying on ethnographic approaches. Today, ethnography is recognized as a privileged methodological option of the autonomy of migration, and the [irregularization of migration](#) and the practices of irregular migrants in general as its privileged thematic points (Mezzadra 2011: 122). Irregularization, i.e. the production of irregularity, is not exclusively approached as a result of state actions, nor is it exclusively linked to mechanisms of exclusion from society, the legal order, from the territory, etc. Instead, it is interpreted while keeping in mind the production of different (non-)citizen statuses and related subjects of labour, as a result of differential inclusion and procedures that create different formats of exploitation of labor and workers through different modalities of entering the country and different administrative statuses (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013: 183). In line with the perspective of the autonomy of migration, migrant movements and migrant struggles are also recognized as constitutive factors of irregularization. To put it simply, there would be no irregular migration if people, despite prohibitions and controls, did not cross borders. By circumventing or [appropriating](#) means of migration control and the prioritization of humanitarian needs (e.g. categorizing [vulnerabilities](#)), investing significant financial resources, risking lives and health, and developing and using [mobile commons](#) such as knowledge of routes and crossing points or methods to receive assistance and protection while on the journey, people migrate regardless of state efforts to prevent them from doing so. In the words of an asylum seeker who was placed in the Asylum Home in Ljubljana in early 2002: *Once a person decides to go where they want to go - no visa or border can stop them, they can only make it difficult* (Lipovec Čebren and Zorn 2016: 62). Or, as phrased, worthy of a newspaper article title, by a young man with whom [we](#)

spoke in late October 2018 in an improvised camp at the edge of **Velika Kladuša**: *No matter how much they stop us, turn us back and beat us, we will cross this border, even if we have to dig a tunnel all the way to Italy*. In conversations with people on the move at different “stations” of the **Balkan route**, we easily recognized autonomy both in the temporal dimension, as the migrants were the ones deciding for themselves when to move on, i.e., when they would go on the **game**, as well as in the spatial dimension, as they could choose the path or direction of movement for themselves, to a certain extent. However, in the field, we could also clearly see how the autonomy of movement and decision-making became more limited and modified the closer they were to the countries of the European Union, where the precarious autonomy from the borders is replaced by the desire to control virtually every aspect of migration.

Approaches that rely on the autonomy of migration are often criticized for neglecting the repressive aspects of border control. While responding to these criticisms, Papadopoulos and Tsianos point out that it is unquestionable that migration is shaped by:

Harsh, often deadly, realities of control. However, the point is migration is not just responding to them. Rather it creates new realities that allow migrants to exercise their own mobility against or beyond existing control. In this sense, the autonomy of migration thesis is about training our senses to see movement before capital (but not independent from it) and mobility before control (but not as disconnected from it) (2013: 184).

When looking at the issue from this perspective, border control mechanisms and systems are constantly being changed and adapted to unauthorized and also ever-changing, always-new migrant practices (Hess 2010). On the micro level, adaptations are manifested in the daily modifications of interventions at the borders and elsewhere, in new places and ways of control that incorporate features of migrant practices that they try to control or prevent. The Balkan corridor, which imitated an autonomous, self-organized migrant movement with its changing itineraries and constant improvisation (Hameršak and Pleše 2018: 16-21), is an example of systems developed for the purpose of controlling migrant movements taking over the characteristics of those same movements. A somewhat more abstract example is the increasing emphasis on controlling routes, or the shift from border control to movement control, which the literature refers to as “acknowledging the power of migrants’ itineraries” (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 905-906).

The approach of autonomy of migration has a pronounced political dimension. In addition to the political aspect of migration, the autonomy of migration is also interested in the possibilities of political intervention and transformation of current policies. By crossing borders they are forbidden to cross, migrants position themselves as “political subjects by self-authorising themselves to take what border and citizenship regimes deprive them of, without and instead of claiming it from someone” (Scheel 2019: 214). Therefore, even the smallest movement or just a hint or desire to move can in totality (and historical extension) “result in political moments, events, and acts that can be central to understanding ruptures in social and political life” (Nyers 2015: 26-27). The mentioned notions, however, do not imply that the autonomy of migration necessarily romanticizes and glorifies migrant practices, which is an accusation often and incidentally directed at it (cf. Scheel 2019: 49-55). In the words of Mezzadra: “The proponents of the autonomy of migration approach do not in any way contend that (irregular or regular) migrants can be thought of as a kind of avant-garde or as revolutionary subjects. Rather, such an approach locates the analysis of irregularity within a wider analytical framework that examines the transformations of contemporary capitalism” (Mezzadra 2011: 137).

The autonomy of migration, despite its imprecise, perhaps even tendentious name, as well as the abstractness and occasional vagueness of its starting points, is recognized as important due to its terminological apparatus (e.g. the already mentioned appropriation, mobile commons) and its specific, dynamic and action-oriented perspective, i.e. because it encourages another kind of “gaze” (Mezzadra 2011: 121). The focus of that gaze, which “transforms perspectives on migration into perspectives of migration” (Bojadžijev 2009: 134), is on migration and migrant practices. Simply put, just as **humanitarianism** primarily views migration and migrants through the concepts of suffering, oppression and victimhood, the matrix of autonomy of migration sees them from the perspective of constant migrant struggles, negotiations, resistance and protests, which are one of the privileged sub-themes in the field (Stierl et al. 2022). Within this framework, state borders become the site of social and political disputes, and often the futile struggle of states to maintain their territorial sovereignty and the monopoly on deciding which movements are legitimate, and which are not (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 898). In short, the autonomy of migration replaces the border as a place of materialization of the norm with the border as a place of struggle or “the border as a method”, as termed in the title of the formative book in the field of autonomy of migration written by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013).

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