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Reconfiguring migration: an introduction

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Mobility patterns in Africa are changing. They never were fixed, but they have been embedded for centuries in the policy regimes regulating local, regional and global economies. However, currently, the intersection of global politics of securitization and African everyday politics governed by inequality, disenchantment, survival and aspiration has accelerated changes. This themed section is concerned with the social effects of these changes as Africans struggle to attain their goals, whether they are migrants or not.

Contemporary figures of success mesh not only with the desire for elsewhere but also with deferral and obstacles requiring creativity and resources, and with the experience of disappointment. An analysis of the emotive and moral dimensions of migratory pathways is therefore of paramount importance. It is clear from the transformations in African mobilities that both migratory practices and regimes of mobility are awash with feelings ranging from fear to moral commitment. Among migrants, the fear of being symbolically stuck and hindered in using physical mobility as a springboard for upward social mobility is common (Hage and Papadopoulos 2004: 112), as is the sense of moral commitment to ensure a better future, whether this is inscribed in a narrow set of intergenerational relationships or in the broader social dynamics of patron–client relations in contemporary Africa (Cole 2011). In countries where migrants live for shorter or longer periods of time, the whole spectrum of attitudes towards them, whether antagonistic or not, has come to rest on their division into categories of legitimate residents and irregular migrants. In some segments of the local population, fear and animosity govern this division; in others, it is driven by humanitarianism and a sense of moral commitment to people in need (Watters 2007; Willen 2015). These divergent feelings compel us to look at moral economies on different scales, broadly understood as 'the economy of moral values and norms of a given group in a given time' (Fassin 2005: 365), and the ways in which they intersect. They underscore the plurality of moral economies at each level, reflecting the vernacular discursive frames surrounding local debates and practices (Willen 2015: 71–2). It is thus important to unpack the theoretical underpinnings of moral economies at the intersection of global and national scales, and at the micro-scale of family relations.

The intersection of several regimes of mobility accentuates the discursive frames at the macro-level and demonstrates how political and humanitarian concerns are gradually obscured. Didier Fassin has pointed out that the contemporary regime of mobility in Europe involves a restructuring of humanitarian principles towards

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the conferring of legitimacy on the suffering body while rejecting any safeguarding of the threatened body (Fassin 2005: 371). Although his argument refers to asylum seekers and the fact that their ability to obtain protection is increasingly guided by a display of sympathy rather than by the moral obligation to protect human rights, it is of relevance for all migrants. Indeed, sympathy comes in measured quantities and is ever more medicalized. Intangible ways of suffering – such as experiencing aggravated poverty, lack of security and protection, and lack of opportunity during and after conflict, or even without conflict – rarely bring about sympathy but rather a belief that many asylum seekers are economic migrants trying to cheat their way into Europe (Watters 2007: 413). As a result, it has become more difficult for asylum seekers to be recognized as deserving protection. Migrants who are perceived to be 'economic' migrants are increasingly considered to be criminals and therefore undeserving subjects.

This distinction between deserving and undeserving subjects is an interesting one and it merits scrutiny according to a moral economy perspective. A first step is to revisit E. P. Thompson's analysis of the poor during the spontaneous riots over food prices in eighteenth-century Britain. Thompson concluded that, because of a shared set of societal values sketching out what was considered legitimate and illegitimate behaviour, the poor were able to influence the price setting of food through the occasional riot for a considerable time. Thus, they were able to safeguard access to affordable food as long as their actions against food sellers who transgressed the norms of fair trade were seen as legitimate (Fassin 2009; Thompson 1971; Watters 2007). Employing a moral economy perspective in relation to contemporary mobility regimes enables an analysis of the way in which the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate migrant behaviour operates. On the one hand, it works as border control to prevent people from entering the country legally; on the other, it opens up the possibility of regularization for irregular migrants who behave in legitimate ways within the local society, even if the process of formal regularization is non-linear and increasingly complex (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012).

In addition to the normative dimension of what people should or should not do, any analysis must examine what is deemed tolerable and what is not. This evaluative dimension emerged in James C. Scott's (1976) analysis of peasant uprisings in South-east Asia. He contended that, even though the potential for rebellion increased in times of sudden change affecting the livelihoods of many people, the possible risks and the ability to cope weighed heavily on peasants' predisposition to rebel. So, where Thompson's notion of the moral economy stressed the effect on the polity of the threat of rebellion, Scott's notion stressed the effect on peasants of the threat of repression and of the existence of adaptive strategies deflecting negative change (Fassin 2009; Scott 1976: 193–5). In a moral economy perspective on mobility in migration, this translates to an analysis of the social effects on migrants of restrictive mobility regimes. The three articles explore the risks migrants experience when they do not practise their mobility in accordance with these regimes and attempt to set off on journeys that lead them to various situations of irregularity and, ultimately, expose them to the risk of social and corporeal death. The articles also explore the adaptive strategies migrants employ to stave off the effect of being physically or symbolically stuck en route or after involuntary repatriation.

At the micro-level, a moral economy perspective throws light on the discursive frames of migration and how they revolve around local ideas about other places,

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the figure of the successful migrant, and the expectations non-migrants have of absent family members. These frames, however, are not merely discursive but reflect and shape the way in which resources are entangled with bundles of privileges and responsibilities. Within families, these bundles connect different kinds of tangible and symbolic resources and are embedded in a shared set of norms that sketch out the obligations, responsibilities and privileges of women and men, young and old (Guyer 1988; Whitehead 1984). Even if such norms change at a slow pace – unless they are subject to rapid and profound economic and social transformations – they are by no means static or all-prescriptive. Family members negotiate their interpretations of obligations, responsibilities, rewards, punishments and social positions in numerous arenas. Of course, these relationships are highly emotive and, what is often forgotten, they are rooted in a temporality that involves both the acknowledgement of past favours and the hope for future opportunities. Individuals' actions are thus determined by their interpretation of the responsibilities and privileges associated with their social position, their ability and inclination to meet others' expectations of them, and, not least, whether they perceive the chastisement or accolades relating to their actions as legitimate and just (Whitehead 1998: 22–5). Families are thus sites of joint and separate interests, and, while competing interests may cause conflict, they do not necessarily do so (Whitehead and Kabeer 2001). In a moral economy of migration perspective, distance impacts on family relations, as do unfulfilled expectations.

The themes addressed in the three articles are situated in the intermediate layer between individual narratives about motivations, hope and disappointment and macro-level migration management. To encapsulate the intangible and rather elastic dimensions of social relationships, let alone of intimate and affective relationships unfolding over time and across space, the authors have chosen to ground their articles in extended migrant stories. The voices of informants are thus posited as a critical means of representation and analysis (Abu-Lughod 1993) through which both personal and wider political and social situations are examined. Maybritt Jill Alpes describes the moral economy surrounding migration brokerage, Dorte Thorsen the intertwining of waiting, hope and morality in precarious border zones, and Nauja Kleist how involuntary return impacts on moral and economic relations within families. By bringing these articles together, we wish to give substance to this intermediate layer between narratives and mobility regimes. We thereby demonstrate that migratory decisions are embedded in a complex dynamic of social identities, moralities, affection and material desires, which at different levels are linked to money and the idea of what money can do materially, socially and symbolically.

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