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Assembling traces of border violence. Counter-mapping as counter-archiving

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Abstract

This article develops the analytics of counter-mapping as counter-archiving in order to account for the continuum of violence that migrants experience during their journeys: building on administrative traces produced by states – such as expulsion orders, refusal of entry, identification papers – and combining these with migrants’ testimonies, it investigates how migrants’ geographies are affected, disrupted and rerouted by heterogenous paper trails. Focusing on migrants’ passages at the French-Italian Alpine border, both in the present and in the past, the article proceeds in three sections. It starts by introducing the analytics of counter-mapping as counter- archiving, and it takes into account migrants’ maps, showing how these rely on sort of counter- archiving processes. The second section draws on archival material and provides a historical insight into migration paper trails at the French-Italian border during the timeframe 1945– 1966. The paper moves on dealing with the present context, retracing bio-geographies, drawing on heterogenous administrative traces. The article concludes by pointing to the need of re-articulating a critique of the border regime that centers on the continuum of violence experienced by migrants, which includes the impact of paper trails.

Keywords

Border violence, counter-archiving, counter-mapping, migration, paper trails, traces

The lives of the migrants on the move are affected and harmed not only by the measures of deterrence and containment, as well as by racialised labour subordination policies but also by the panoply of legal and digital traces that states produce about them. During their journey, migrants are in fact object of multiple data extraction processes: when they are apprehended by the police they are fingerprinted and, within the EU, the data is sent to the European database Eurodac; those who claim asylum are also identified by the authorities; for illegalised migrants, it is quite common to receive an expulsion order – if they are pushed back at the internal European frontiers or enter the territory in an unauthorised way, or when they are found without permit to stay; asylum seekers who are in camps or in accommodation centers usually receive papers by humanitarian actors certifying that they are living there. In many cases, such as when they are fingerprinted by state authorities, migrants are not informed about the immediate or future consequences that this will have on their movement and stay.

Diverse administrative papers are given to migrants in the different countries in which they transit or stay for a while. Thus, it is challenging for them to reconstruct all locations and occasions in which they received an expulsion order, or where and when have been targeted by data extraction processes: migrants are targeted by multiple “bureaucratic inscriptions”, conceived as “the various processes and technologies through which information about individuals and their immigration status is incorporated into official state registers” (Horton, 2020: 5). The legal and administrative traces produced by state

authorities are stored and scattered across different countries, databases and authorities. Migrants' convoluted geographies are in part the outcome of paper trails that haunt and force them to hide, slow down and escape or to reroute their journeys. Paper trails might also be unknown to migrants – they might forget how many times and where they had been identified, or they might have lost or scratched the papers. This article develops counter-mapping as counter-archiving as an analytics for investigating how migrants' journeys are affected, disrupted and rerouted by heterogeneous paper trails, whose impact can be immediate or deferred in time.

What matters are less papers taken per se – such as expulsion orders, re-entry bans or refusals of entry – than the chain of documents that follows and haunts migrants. For instance, migrants who arrive at the French-Italian border coming from the Balkan Route usually have been identified, registered or pushed back multiple times along their journey by state authorities in different countries: at times, administrative traces pile up, as the data is shared across borders or because the police finds the paper-based evidence in migrants' pockets, while in other circumstances they remain invisible and unknown to state authorities from other countries. Even when migrants have similar paper trails' stories, the ways in which traces might hamper their journeys differ case by case. Building on that, the paper develops a twofold argument. First, it contends that the scattered amount of paper trails and the difficulty in retracing how these might hamper migrants' movements and stay are not anecdotes but, rather, are constitutive of the way in which the border regime works – that is, through heterogeneous bureaucratic and administrative inscriptions whose potential effects on migrants' movements are often unpredictable.

Second, it suggests that counter-mapping as counter-archiving enables retracing how different administrative and legal papers – such as expulsion orders, refusals of entry and identification forms – obstruct migrants' autonomous temporality, that is they hinder not only their movements but also their future (Khosravi, 2019; Ramsay, 2020). By developing this analytics for assembling the scattered traces of migration, the paper builds on and puts in dialogue three bodies of literature: counter-mapping scholarship (Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2008; Casas-Cortés et al., 2017), critical migration literature which engages with legal geography and the centrality of bureaucratic inscriptions (Horton and Heyman, 2020; Menjivar, 2006; Mitchell and Coutin, 2019), and scholars whose work has inspired reflections on counter-archives (Azoulay, 2017; Stoler, 2009). By putting these three scholarships in conversation, the piece makes a twofold theoretical contribution. First, it re-rides migrants' route from the Italian-Slovenian border to France without replicating a sovereign gaze and a security approach to migration. Second, it advances a new understanding of counter-mapping by conceiving this latter as counter-archiving and by showing how this is not narrowed to a cartographic dimension. Counter-mapping as counter-archiving consists in reading archival records against the grain: this means assembling heterogeneous traces that are scattered across different archives or that are kept by migrants and lawyers, with the purpose of reconstructing the modes of containment, control and exploitation that migrants face during their journeys.

By stressing that migrants are rarely informed about the use of the data extracted from them and about the consequences of the papers they are given, the point I want to make is not about lack of consent. Instead, it is about the difficulties in tracing back the multiple times they had been object of data extraction and in how different administrative papers sum up or are shared by authorities. That is, the violence at stake is not merely at the level of privacy violation and lack of consent but, rather, is enshrined in the production of scattered digital and non-digital subjectivities (Canzutti and Tazzioli, 2023). Methodologically, the

paper builds on empirical material I collected during my fieldwork at the French-Italian border, on the exchanges and collaboration with Italian immigration lawyers from ASGI as well as on archival records. I have conducted fieldwork at Alpine French-Italian border, in Bardonecchia and Oulx (Italian side), and in Briançon (France), between 2019 and 2022.¹ The archival records I refer to here are stored in the French National Archives (Paris), the Italian National Archives (Rome) and from the Departmental Archive in Nice. The article is structured in four parts. It starts by introducing the analytics of counter-mapping as counter-archiving, and it takes into account migrants' counter-maps, showing how these rely on sort of counter-archiving processes. The second section builds on archival material and provides a historical insight into migration paper trails at the French-Italian border during the timeframe 1945–1966. The paper moves on with a focus on the present, retracing bio-geographies drawing on heterogenous administrative traces. The paper concludes by pointing to the need of re-articulating a critique of the border regime that centers on the continuum of violence experienced by migrants, which includes the impact of paper trails.

Counter-mapping as counter-archiving and migrants' maps

What is left after the multiple violent evictions that migrants are targeted by? Which legal and political traces are produced and recorded by states and non-state actors about migrants' passages and border violence? By developing the idea of counter-mapping as counter-archiving, I foreground the making of migrants' routes beyond its spatiality, as a sedimented and contested crystallisation of struggles for movement and tactics for differentially regulating mobility and subordinating labour. Counter-mapping as counter-archiving retraces the making of the route building on the partial and scattered traces produced and stored by states and non-state actors, as well as on the silences of the archives (Chakrabarty, 1988). That is, counter-mapping as counter-archiving is an analytical approach that shifts attention from acts of making visible and bringing evidence (of state's violations) towards tracing and re-assembling the paper trails of migration. As is well known, the notion of counter-mapping, introduced by Nancy Peluso in 1995 (Peluso, 1995), has been adopted first in critical geography scholarship and then also in other academic disciplines for describing a range of grassroots map-making projects, cartography from below and ways of visualising both modes of exploitation and forms of agency which remain overshadow in traditional maps (Wood, 2010).

Overall, counter-mapping is an analytical approach for studying social phenomena out of the purview of the state, that is without reproducing a state-based view.² Counter-mapping practices are contrapuntal to maps that craft migration as a problem and to "invasion cartography" (van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2020: 201), which consists in translating migration into flows and arrows that head towards Europe. In fact, at the core of counter-mapping there is the idea that mapping and knowing are co-constitutive. The 'counter' dimension of counter-mapping does not designate only a deconstructive approach: rather, it also points to practices of re-purposing and generating new map-making practices or modes of knowledge production (Casas-Cortés et al., 2017; Pickles, 2012). Importantly, counter-mapping is not narrowed to cartographic practices, that is to counter-cartography: it also encompasses different knowledge production practices which radically question and disrupt the ways in which social phenomena are mapped, known and made visible. This emerges in feminist understanding of counter-mapping, where map-making practices cannot be disentangled from embodied experiences of precarity and gender violence nor from the nexus between the body and the territory (Precarias a la Deriva, 2004).

Understood in this way, counter-mapping contributes to “a plotting that allows for new meanings and possibilities in understanding gender-based violence” (Emerson, 2023: 11). Along these lines, Iralu (2021) has problematized the theoretical and political stakes of counter-mapping, pointing to the risks for this latter to be co-opted by state-based perspective and colonial cartography, as long as it is grounded on the same epistemic principles. Indigenous feminist approaches to spatial justice, Iralu contends, are not narrowed to a critique of the colonial predicaments of mapping: rather, they refuse to become legible to the cartographic logics (Iralu, 2021). In other words, by developing counter-mapping in the field of migration it is key to bear in mind that “neither mapping nor law are justice” per se (Wainwright and Bryan, 2009: 170; see also Tilley, 2020). Drawing on this debate and pushing it forward, I conceive counter-mapping not in cartographic terms but, instead, as an analytics that retraces how migrants’ movements and presence are affected, violently obstructed and diverted by paper trails. More specifically, by conceptualising it in terms of counter-archiving, I stress that counter-mapping is not narrowed to challenging a state- based gaze on migration: rather, the analytics of counter-mapping might be helpful for assembling traces of border violence and for reconstructing its layering over time.

This entails relying on the heterogenous administrative records which index actions that have been taken by nation states or that can be enforced in the future (for instance, expulsion orders that can be followed or not by deportations, or documents that report the fingerprinting procedures, which might mean that the biometric data has been sent to the European database Eurodac or that might hamper migrants’ presence in the future). Thus, counter-mapping is grounded on the nexus between legal-administrative papers, spaces of confinement and migration movements, as it investigates how migrants are obstructed in the present or can be hampered in the future because of administrative measures and data exchange. Counter-mapping as counter-archiving highlights the centrality of legal geographies and, at the same time, it deals with the partiality – interrogating what (administrative) traces do not unveil as well as what has not been non-recorded and non-tracked or which is hard to reconstruct. In fact, legal geographers have unsettled the idea according to which space could be “simply a territorial backdrop to the law, or a neutral container within which law plays out”, stressing instead how law is “productive of spatial meanings” and appropriates space (Brickell et al., 2021: 558). Paper trails contribute to craft socio-legal identities: documents of “various sorts come to stand in for people, creating a papereality that may or may not correspond to individuals’ actual lives” (Mitchell and Bibler Coutin, 2019: 880).

Counter-archiving can be conceived both in terms of processes and as the production of repositories. As Ann Laura Stoler explains, an archive can be also virtual. That is, it does not necessarily consist in physical repositories of documents: it can also be a “nodal network” in the making, which emerges from “cross-referenced articulations” (Stoler, 2009: 80).

The immaterial and the material dimensions of counter-archiving are not in contrast to each other and, rather, at times they can be developed in simultaneity. That is, the production of material counter-archives and the assembling of traces of border violence as processes can be complementary. Scholars have used the notion of counter-archive for designating the assembling and storing of traces that make “previously silenced voices audible” (Kros, 2015: 153) or that are used by displaced and racialised communities for building counter-narratives with respect to the state (Salime, 2022). However, in this paper, I focus on counter-archiving processes,³ which designate the assembling of state and non-state archival records, testimonies and other kinds of traces, to reconstruct how the continuum of violence experienced by

migrants along their route and enforced also through invisible bordering mechanisms – such as paper trails – affects and disrupts their journeys.

Counter-archiving often deals with the piecemeal partiality of archival traces and lays bare states' silences and invisibilisation of border violence. Counter-archiving has been conceptualised "as a critical function within and besides legal processes" that challenge "universalised categories" (Motha and van Rijswijk, 2016: 2). If, as Appadurai has stressed, archives can be also "outside the purview of the state" (Appadurai, 2003: 16), counter-archiving accounts for the continuum of violence without replicating a sovereign-gaze on migration and by foregrounding instead how state's bureaucratic inscriptions obstruct migrants' geographies and occlude their futurity. Hence, processes of counter-archiving are contrapuntal to the archives of the state, although they are not fully autonomous. In fact, they rather rely on administrative traces produced by states and, yet, combine these with migrants and lawyers' testimonies and with archival records produced by non-state actors, and assemble them for understanding how states put in place new modes of containment to regain control over migrants' unruly mobility.

Counter-mapping as counter-archiving situates the current migration context within a longer timeframe, in order to grasp partial similarities as well as differences between present and past migrant expulsions and rerouting through paper trails. A specificity of counter-mapping as counter-archiving with respect to migration is that the administrative traces are often accessible because migrants keep the copy of the papers that the authorities give them. Importantly, in order to read administrative traces against the grain it is not sufficient to rely exclusively on documents: it is rather necessary to combine these latter with migrants' testimonies as well as reconstructions done by lawyers. Indeed, counter-mapping as counter-archiving does not provide an overwhelming and exhaustive picture of the continuum of violence that migrants experience: the theoretical and political relevance of traces of migration does not (only) consist in what they unveil – which is always partial and fragmented – but also in their irreducible opacity. If on the one hand traces "hold clues" also "for subtle events that could be registered" (Weizman and Herscher, 2011: 115), on the other it is key asking what they are clues of: more than unveiling, revealing and unfolding border violence, I suggest, they index the mechanisms through which migrants' lives are choked and their journeys are disrupted.

Both counter-mapping and counter-archiving as processes refrain from replicating state's gaze or positivist knowledge (Culbert, 2016)⁴: "the file is thus not only an archive of the world, it also produces unforeseen counter-archives to the world, and to legal practices" and, thus, counter-archiving processes re-inscribe and re-claim the meanings attached" to state's records (Motha and van Rijswijk, 2016: 15). A non-cartographic counter-mapping approach unsettles "conventional spatial imaginaries" that legitimise and obscure racializing bordering mechanisms and their differential functioning (Delaney, 2016: 268). The silences and the absences in the archives are not side-effects: they are part of it and of the politics of knowledge and memory. Thus, counter-mapping as counter-archiving involves shifting the attention from the cartographic representation towards a spatial account that relies on legal geographies, the materiality of scattered traces and the transmission and circulation of knowledge of border struggles.

Migration, it can be argued, is emblematic for developing counter-mapping as analytics apt at disrupting ways of "seeing like a State" (Scott, 2020). This is because of the centrality of maps produced by states and international agencies about migrants' movements, abstracting and translating them into linear routes and flows, with the purpose of diverting, containing and channelling them. A "cartographic impulse" (Said, 1994: 272) percolates migration governmentality. Indeed, migration is not simply

visualised on and through a map; rather, cartopolitics produces a specific knowledge about migration, as unidirectional movements – heading towards Europe – which put state's sovereignty at risk. Maps reiterate a state-based knowledge about migration, at the same time that they envision tactics deployed for rerouting and foreseeing migration movements: the map, as Sebastian Cobarrubias observes, enforces a spatial truth about migration that appears as incontestable as it conflates knowing with the act of unveiling – migrants' strategies (Cobarrubias, 2019). A focus on migration enables developing counter-mapping also for another key reason, which is at the core of this article: in order to move on, migrants rely on their own maps, that are often collective ones, and that partly overlap with and eschew states' maps.

Migrants' maps are the outcome of a shared spatial knowledge, that circulates across space and transmitted over time, about tactics for crossing, safe routes and dangerous places, legal obstacles, smuggling networks and asylum procedures: far from being fixed once for all, migrants' maps need to be constantly updated with respect to changes in border control activities and state's operations (Mengiste, 2018). Migrants' maps are often non- cartographic, as they consist in the sedimentation of what can be called modes of *knowing by assembling* – that is, assembling piecemeal and often divergent information. Knowing as assembling concerns also the multiple paper trails generated by states and non-state actors that migrants need to retrace, hold together and understand how these impact on their journey and on their presence on the territory. Although we cannot speak of archival records nor of archival repositories, migrants' non-cartographic maps are grounded on counter-archiving processes, insofar as they navigate state bureaucracies, understand how these have affected their movements or might hamper them in the future, and share such knowledge with other people in transit.

One of the key challenges of migrants' maps consists in the intertwining between spatial borders and invisible administrative-legal boundaries. That is, knowing by assembling requires taking into account both state's heterogenous spatial tactics – border controls, push-back, detention, deportation – and legal loopholes. For instance, migrants who move across EU's internal borders are confronted both with spatial hindrances and with the legal conundrums of EU's laws, such as the Dublin Regulation. Migrants' maps are counter-geographies in action not only insofar as they dodge states' spatial traps but also because they unsettle the (cartographic) assumption about knowing as unveiling. Indeed, migrants' maps shift the focus from a spatial visualisation of the routes towards modes of knowing as assembling. In a way, they destabilise the binary opposition that sustains cartographic knowledge between making visible and keeping invisible: even if migrants' maps can be translated into a route, the “counter” dimension of those maps relies precisely on their irreducibility to the spatial representation of their journey. What the act of unveiling cannot grasp is the physical, legal and psychological impact that borders have on migrants and the operations of assembling scattered traces and information for crafting migrants' maps which are up to date.

Paper trails' history of the French-Italian border

In order to unfold the main argument of this paper about counter-mapping as counter-archiving, I focus on the French-Italian border: this is not considered here as an exceptional site of migration governmentality but, rather, as a fruitful vantage point in Europe for observing how the multiple and scattered paper trails impact migrants and hinder their journeys. Moreover, the French-Italian border has a longstanding history of migrants' passages as well as of border policing. Since when the frontier line between France and

Italy was established in 1861, the Italian-French border started to be patrolled both by Italian and French police. In particular, in the first half of the last century and, more consistently, in the aftermath of the Second World War, many Italian workers crossed the Alps on foot to find a job in France, due to the mobility restrictions in place under fascism and that remained in place until the mid-1960s (Rinauro, 2009; Tombaccini, 1988). The workers who were not selected by the French National Immigration Office (ONI) or who did not want to go through thorny bureaucratic processes, tried to make it to France with the help of local smugglers and Alpine guides (Hanus, 2020).⁵ In the 1950s and in the 1960s, refugees and workers from Yugoslavia and from some Eastern European countries – Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania – crossed to France, either to find a job or to seek asylum (Rolandi, 2015; Tazzioli, 2020a).

The history of migrants' passages at the French-Italian border is also a history of paper trails and administrative records produced by police as well as by national and local authorities: like nowadays, in the last century, migrants' unauthorised presence has been object of repeated data extraction processes, identification procedures and expulsion orders released. However, it is not a matter of stating a full continuity between past and present state-produced traces. In fact, alongside similar police practices and identification procedures, important differences are at play – among which the blurred boundaries that emerge from the paper trails in the period 1945–1965 between migrant workers and refugees, as well as the massive need in the aftermath of the Second World War of cheap labour force across Europe that pushed states like France and Germany to be relatively tolerant towards unauthorised border crossers. The administrative documents and paper trails constitute an important common thread over time for investigating how bordering mechanisms affect migrants' geographies and how, in turn, migrants put in place tactics for dodging controls, as well as for navigating and twisting state's bureaucratic inscriptions and administrative captures.

The two decades that followed the end of the Second World War have been crucial in this respect, since during that period asylum and labour policies have consolidated across Europe and have played a key role in governing migrants' mobility. Actually, the administrative traces produced about migrants' passages did not concern police activity only; rather, border security papers – such as identification forms and refusals of entry – asylum cards and labour mobility documents form the range of paper trails that migrants who crossed the French-Italian border after the Second World War and until the late 1960s had been given and that diverted their geographies. Migrants who were apprehended by the French police in the early 1940s were fingerprinted on ink and were asked questions in order to register their personal data (name, surname, nationality, gender), their job skills and the reasons for going to France. Ultimately, the paper was not very dissimilar from the refusal of entry that nowadays the French police gives to the migrants who are pushed back to Italy.

As it is possible to reconstruct from archival records found in the national archives in Rome and in Paris, Yugoslav nationals apprehended by the police at the French-Italian border kept in their pockets the form used by the Italian police to identify people seeking asylum who entered from the current Italian-Slovenian border or the registration cards of the refugee camps where they were sent by the Italian authorities and in which they stayed for weeks or months. Many Italian workers and Yugoslav refugees who crossed the Alpine border on the sly also had job contract papers.⁶ Conceiving counter-mapping as counter- archiving in terms of an analytical approach that eschews a state-based approach to migration, it involves foregrounding migrants' tactics for staying and struggles for moving. Migrants' tactics for dodging identification and getting rid of papers

or, reversely, for keeping all documents and becoming visible in front of the state, depend on the context as well as on the information they receive, which in turn is usually based on practices of *savoir-circuler* (Menjivar, 2006). This was the case also with migrant workers who in the 1950s were heading to France. In particular, at that time job contracts were crucial for getting access to other states in Europe.

Authorised mobility from Italy to France was also regulated, selected and channelled through labour bilateral agreements, hiring procedures run with the intermediation of the French ONI, informal workers selections made directly by employers as well as ad hoc negotiations between French and the Italian workers' unions – CGT and CGIL, respectively (Rinauro, 2009). As far as Yugoslav nationals are concerned, United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) acted as intermediary between French and Italian authorities, supporting the French Ministry of Labour to select workers who were hosted in refugee camps in Italy. Many of these accepted the job contracts offered by French employers, in order to make it to France; and, yet, it was quite common that after few weeks, working usually as miners or in the agricultural sector, they ran away and reached Paris, where they were seeking for a different and less strenuous job. Thus, migrants' subjective drives exceed by far the path that, if we follow the paper trails in a linear way, they were expected to do (De Genova, 2010; Mezzadra, 2010). However, state authorities became aware of migrants' escapes through data and information exchange with non-state actors. For instance, the NGO Secour Catholique recorded migrants' workers who stayed in the accommodations provided by them nearby the job place – mostly in the mines in the Moselle region.

Similarly, they registered all foreigners who asked for an accommodation in Paris. In so doing, through a sort of humanitarian data's crosscheck, they found out that many of those hosted in Paris were in other French regions few days before. The analytics of counter-mapping as counter-archiving traces partial continuities between migrants' paper trails in the present and from the past, building on the administrative traces produced by state authorities, as well as other documents released by private actors or international agencies. However, it is difficult to retrace how paper trails from the past have impacted migrants' geographies. Indeed, as far as present migrants' crossings and border violence are concerned, in order to figure out how paper trails affected migrants' movements, it is possible, at least in some cases, to cross-check migrants' testimonies and administrative documents, some of which certify that migrants have also left digital traces, such as fingerprints. Instead, by building exclusively on archival records it is unlikely to be able to reconstruct how expulsion order papers and refusals of entry have impacted single individuals.

Nevertheless, by analysing and combining different traces, it is feasible to retrace some trends, in terms of how some migrant nationals were identified, classified, expelled, tolerated or not on the territory or hired and exploited as workers. For instance, what emerges from the archival records is that Yugoslav nationals who crossed to France on the Alps were identified and labelled as “clandestine” or “undocumented” but then many were allowed to remain in France, provided that they accepted to move to regions across the country where there was high labour shortage. Indeed, although border patrolling and police checks increased in the aftermath of the Second World War, it was not uncommon that French authorities let illegalised border crossers enter the country after notifying them an expulsion decree: that is, they could receive a police administrative paper, that labelled them as “unauthorised migrants”, and a document that certified the possibility to stay and to be regularised in the future, if some conditions – moving to selected areas with labour shortage – were met.

This information can be deduced from the multiple identification records stored in the archives, in combination with job contracts as well as documents written by French local authorities explaining how Yugoslav apprehended to cross on the sly were identified and then admitted into the territory. Hence, following the legal geographies of migrants who nowadays are identified or pushed back at Europe's borders means partially reconstructing also individual routes; that is, the imbrication of heterogeneous administrative documents has pushed some to undertake specific convoluted geographies that might be different from how the same or very similar paper trails have affected other migrants (Canzutti and Tazzioli, 2023; Menjivar, 2006). In other words, following the paper trails that haunt migrants does not automatically allow us to retrace individual bio-geographies. In fact, the supplement of direct migrants' testimonies or of people who provided legal or humanitarian support, is often necessary for reconstructing their geo-biographies.

Counter-mapping as counter-archiving relies on to the papers that migrants receive during their journey, but it cannot be narrowed to that. Moreover, it entails unsettling the sovereign-gaze on migration that paper-based evidence often unfolds, in order to interrogate the disjuncture between states' decisions, actual police practices and migrants' subjective drives and mobility practices. Hence, ethnographic and archival research pushes us to highlight and elaborate on the internal tensions and instabilities that underpin counter-mapping as counter-archiving. More precisely, as far as migration is concerned reading archival record and paper-based evidence "against the grain" (Stoler, 2009) means analysing them in conjunction with and in light of how state authorities *de facto* enforce those administrative decisions and migrants dodge, navigate and tactically appropriate administrative traces. Nevertheless, as the section below illustrates, nowadays the effects of bureaucratic inscriptions on migrants' geographies have partially changed as a result of different assemblages of paper trails and, in particular, due to the increasing digitalisation of datafication (Maguire, 2012). In a way, the bureaucratic conundrums that haunt migrants today appear more insidious than in the past as a result of chains of digital and non-digital documents that can be hardly retraced.

Re-assembling traces of border violence

Every day in the Italian village of Oulx, located at the Alpine French-Italian border, migrants stop at the shelter Massi, which is run by a local cooperative with the support of volunteers and activists: there, migrants can rest, eat and receive mountain clothes for crossing on foot to France.⁷ Since 2018, Oulx has increasingly become a landmark on migrants' geographies in Europe, as the refuge Massi on the Italian side and the refuge Terrasses Solidaires in Briançon, on the French side of the border. Indeed, the route to France along the coast through Ventimiglia and Menton is highly patrolled by the French police that systematically checks means of transport and does violent pushback operations (Bachelier, 2020; Tazzioli, 2020b). At the French-Italian Alpine border, migrants often share and update their knowledge of the route with other border crossers; in so doing, they produce their own counter-map about the Alpine frontier that deals with the scattered information about police controls in order to find safe passages and avoid dangerous ones. Many of them reach Oulx after crossing the Italian-Slovenian border and, thus, they re-ride the route done by other asylum seekers and migrant workers from Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia in the 1950s and in the 1960s.

When migrants arrive at the shelter in Oulx they often hold multiple papers and documents they receive along their route by state authorities: expulsion order, refusals of entry, refugee camp cards, temporary permits to stay, asylum seekers cards and police

identification papers. In many cases, they report to the volunteers at the shelter that they lost their paper on their way, sometimes after being robbed by the police in Croatia or Serbia; in other cases, they get rid of the papers on purpose, in order not to leave any trace about their passage, although this is stored digitally. The paper trails that pertain to a single person unfold that border violence is played out also by scattering across, dispersing, and multi- plying modes of containment. Yet, it also shows that by assembling those administrative traces it is possible to reconstruct both the convoluted geographies that migrants have been forced to undertake and the potential future displacements that they might face. The assembling of migrants' paper trails unfolds a two-step temporality of border violence: it is retrospective as it reveals how migrants' movements have been obstructed and diverted, as well as which tactics migrants have used and, at the same time, it is forward-looking as it signposts what might happen to them in the future. The convoluted geographies that emerge by jointly analysing paper trails reveal, I suggest, migrants' enacted counter-mapping practices; they are modes of spatial disobedience that do not consist in a critique the border regime but, rather, in an active refusal of the legal and spatial hindrances enforced against them. In fact, these silent spatial disobediences are non-cartographic enacted counter- mapping practices, as I argued in *Border Abolitionism. Migration Containment and the Genealogies of Struggles and Rescue* (Tazzioli, 2023).

Today the majority of migrants who cross the French-Italian border entered Europe through Italy – landing in Lampedusa or in Southern Italy – or through Greece, and then have travelled along the Balkan Route (Hess and Kasperek, 2021). Thus, it is highly unlikely that someone who arrives in Oulx had not been identified before. Particularly those who came via the Balkan Route have crossed many countries and they might be identified, pushed back violently, registered in camps or as asylum seekers (El-Shaarawi and Razsa, 2019; Hameršak et al., 2020; Minca et al., 2018). This should not lead us to conclude that migrants' passages are recorded in a capillary way. To the contrary, some states produce traces about migrants' passages in a scattered and uneven way, often engaging in a politics of nonrecording unauthorised crossings, in order to avoid legal-political responsibilities about asylum claims as well as about their violations of international law (Rozakou, 2017). Yet, despite the partial nonrecording, migrants receive expulsion orders, push-back notifications, as well as identification and registration forms. As M., an Afghani citizen I met at the refugee shelter in Oulx, explained, most people along the Balkan Route are “fingerprinted many times, without knowing what it means. It is also common to receive unreadable papers, which it is unclear if they mean re-entry ban in the territory and for how much time”.⁸

For many it is hard to keep track of the times when “the blank gaze of power comes to rest” on them (Foucault, 1979: 79), that is when their presence has been recorded, as a result of violent containment or of more invisible and indirect techniques of control. The repeated harassment and traumas and the strenuous journey enhance the state of confusion that many migrants experience and which is in itself one of the modes in which border violence is enforced (Beneduce, 2008). However, it is not only a matter of remembering or keeping the material traces – the papers – of their multiple encounters with migration agencies,⁹ with the police and with other state actors. Rather, it is also (and mainly) a question of the opacity that migrants, lawyers and activists face about how data and information collected will be used and by which actors (Saltsman, 2014). Indeed, the knowledge of European or national regulations is not sufficient in itself for understanding the actual impact that some papers will have on migrants, both in the present and in the near future. For instance, while according to the Dublin Regulation

migrants can lodge an asylum application only in the first EU's country they enter – and this can be verified through the fingerprint stored in the European database Eurodac – migrants do not know whether their biometric data is sent to Eurodac when they are pushed back at the internal frontiers of Europe.

To what extent are paper trails traces of border violence? And what does violence stand for, when it comes to administrative traces related to migration containment? The violence that migrants experience along the Balkan Route is both enshrined in and enacted through the paper trails that they are given. In fact, police documents, administrative notifications, and humanitarian cards¹⁰ are markers of the encounters between state authorities and migrants as well as the specific power's hold exercised over their lives. Paper trails show how and in which way migrants had been forced to divert their routes, doing convoluted geographies, and to slow down their journey. In some cases, papers are the material traces of biometric data extraction processes – that is, of fingerprinting procedures. This range of legal, police and administrative practices is not exhaustive of border violence nor of the ways in which migrants' lives are harmed and their future is stolen (Khosravi, 2019). Nevertheless, I suggest, they foreground the ways in which migrants' geographies and the temporality of their journeys and of future plans are hindered by bordering mechanisms. More precisely, they index migrants' legal geographies, that is the way in which the spaces and temporality of migration are affected by administrative and police practices. They unfold the nexus between legal geographies and bordering mechanisms. Counter-mapping as counter- archiving retraces the multiple modes of confinement, police harassment, carcerality and expulsion enacted against migrants.

More precisely, it enables composing traces of border violence that are scattered across space and over time. In fact, one way in which the border regime chokes and harms the lives of those who are labelled as “migrants” is by producing what Keramet Reiter and Susan Bibler Coutin have defined a disintegrated subject (Reiter and Coutin, 2017: 568). Migrants' presence is object of a state's inscription which takes place through a panoply of documents and that is played out at different levels, ranging from administrative measures to arbitrary decisions to local decrees and European laws (Hull, 2012). Thus, the act of composing heterogenous traces is a way for reconstructing migrants' diverted routes and, at once, for re-assembling their disintegrated and scattered subjectivities, as a result of bordering practices. Migrants' convoluted geographies are the outcome of both states' multiple mechanisms of containment and the tactics that migrants deploy and readjust for dodging controls, push back and deportations. The reconstruction of the three “geo-biographies” (Yacobi and Misgav, 2019) here below has been possible by intertwining administrative traces and migrants' testimonies. M., an Afghani citizen who was trying to cross to France with two friends in July 2022, stressed this difficulty of recalling how many times, where and by whom he was identified by the police and, even more, which documents he was given.

In many circumstances, migrants are not even given papers when they are stopped, identified or pushed back. When I met M. in Oulx, he took out of his pockets a paper signed by the Swiss authorities which marks that he was pushed-back to Italy. Indeed, as it was possible to deduce from that paper, after entering Italy via Slovenia, M. tried to cross to Switzerland in order to reach Germany but he decided to reroute his journey towards France after being pushed back. Yet, what M. did not know is that the paper he was given by the Swiss police notifies also a re-entry ban in the Schengen territory for 5 years that he received a refusal of entry. Indeed, M.'s unauthorised entry was inserted into the Schengen Information System (SIS II), as that box on the paper was ticked. This means that M.'s geographies in Europe have been both obstructed in the present or near past – as he was forced to re-route his path, due to the push back – and

potentially impaired in the future, since a SIS alert entails a series of consequences among which re-entry ban and more hurdles in obtaining the refugee status.¹¹

Alongside the Swiss paper, M. also kept the document that the Italian police gave to him near Trieste, at the border crossing point with Slovenia, after being identified and fingerprinted. The document in question did not contain any information about Eurodac data-base and this because M. declared that he did not intend to claim asylum in Italy as he wanted to rather do it in Germany.¹² He got rid of all the papers that different state authorities gave him along the Balkan Route – in Greece, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia – with the exception of a card registration from a camp in Croatia, where he stayed for about two weeks. However, in the end, he decided to scrap the camp card from Croatia as well before making it to France, since being aware of the spatial traps enforced through the Dublin Regulation, M. was worried about carrying with him any evidence of his passage into a EU's country. The geo-biography of A., an Iraqi national who arrived at the shelter in Oulx in August 2022, reveals the extent to which paper trails forced him to undertake convoluted geographies; and, yet, it also reveals that far from giving up, A. re-routed his journey.

Indeed, as it has been possible to retrace by combining his own testimony and the papers he carried with him, he arrived in Germany in April, via Switzerland, and there he applied for asylum but his request was suspended due to a hit in Eurodac: German authorities sent a Dublin request to Italy, where A. was fingerprinted (in Trieste). Aware of the possible forced return to Italy, A. escaped and went back to Italy autonomously. He decided to change his plans and going to France, crossing along the coast, from Ventimiglia to Menton but there he was pushed back by the French police, that gave him a *refus d'entrée* paper (refusal of entry). Few days later, he re-routed towards the Alpine border, and the day after I met in Oulx, he sent a text to say he made it to France and he was in the migrant shelter in Briançon. The paper-based documents that F., a 17-year old Moroccan national, was carrying with him at the refuge in Oulx after being pushed back by the French police enable instead to reconstruct police's infringement of the law and how migrants navigate it by creating multiple fictional identities. Like few other unaccompanied minors,

F. claimed to be an adult to the Italian authorities, as he was worried of being stuck in Italy and not able to continue his journey to France. When he was apprehended by the French police near Briançon, he was identified as adult, despite declaring this time that he was an unaccompanied minor and reiterating his willingness to claim asylum in France.

Thus, both papers – the expulsion order given by the Italian police and the French refusal of entry – contained false information and they had an immediate and tangible impact on F.'s mobility: after being returned to Italy by the French authorities, he claimed to be an adult, at the police station in the Alpine village of Bardonecchia and the police inserted the correct age. Nevertheless, since he was previously registered as an adult in Lampedusa, he could not be taken back to France for claiming asylum. Moreover, in order to prevent from being identified, F. gave different names at each of these encounters with the police but this was turned against him, since he could not prove on the spot that he was the same person and this had to be found through fingerprinting checks. Yet, drawing attention to the paper trails does not mean that migrants' geographies are fully determined by them. In fact, “seemingly arbitrary differences in the ways that time, presence, securitisation and documentation figured within [...] legal histories” might have “strikingly different out-comes” (Bibler Coutin, 2020: 132). That is, same (or very similar) paper trails might lead migrants to undertake different routes and their lives

might be affected in diverse manners depending on the political context, on how those documents are used, by whom and how migrants themselves navigate administrative-bureaucratic snares.

The documents per se – and in particular some of them, such as re-entry bans – might have tangible and immediate implications, but it is also a matter of how migrants tactically deal with them, as well as on the leeway that authorities have for enforcing discretionary power and, more broadly, for enforcing or partially not enforcing the law. It is noteworthy that the papers that migrants are given along their route do not remain the same. More precisely, while documents as such can be the same, the ways in which state authorities use them and how migrants themselves navigate and tactically deal with those paper trails might vary over time.

For instance, expulsion orders and refusals of entry that are given to migrants when they are pushed have affected migrants' geographies in different ways depending on the frontier and on the specific moment. At the French-Italian border, since 2017, the French police gives refusals of entry (*refus d'entrée*) to the migrants detected and returned to Italy but they do not take fingerprints – in order to avoid to be politically responsible for their asylum applications (Casella-Colombeau, 2017).

At the same frontier, the Italian police has changed its practices multiple times: while back in 2018 when the first migrants started to cross on the Alps they were not fingerprinting those pushed back, nor did they give them a paper, nowadays they both take their fingerprints – without, however, sending these to the European database Eurodac – and release an expulsion order. At the Italian-Slovenian border, the Italian police gives similar expulsion orders; but on some occasions they include a reference to the Dublin Regulation, when migrants apprehended declare their willingness to claim asylum and, therefore, the consequences this might have on migrants is potentially more significant. Another case in point is constituted by how Swiss authorities tactically give refusals of entry, and how this fluctuates in time: refusals of entry are at times given to migrants who are pushed back to Italy while in some cases they are released as sorts of informal *laissez-passer*, insofar as associated to the papers there is an order to leave the country in seven days, during which migrants manage to cross to Germany. As it is possible to reconstruct from the documents kept by migrants who arrive at the French-Italian Alpine border, since 2015, the paper trails which haunt migrants along the Balkan Route have changed multiple times (Minca and Collins, 2021).

Many did not go through any “bureaucratic inscription” (Horton, 2020: 3) in Serbia, Croatia and Albania; that is, they had not been notified any expulsion order nor were they identified. Instead, those who decided to stop in camps in Bosnia and Croatia receive registration cards. Yet, despite the repeated changes in police practices and border controls, what remains constant over time is the opacity generated by the assemblage of digital and non-digital paper trails. In other words, the difficulty in navigating paper trails and in figuring out how these might affect migrants' geographies are not solved by reconstructing which paper-based documents have been given to the migrants. In fact, the chain of tangible (paper-based) documents is intertwined with the invisible chain of digital traces and data that might overlap or partially differ from the former. Retracing the paper trails that follow migrants along the Balkan Route and at the internal frontiers of Europe is quite hard as it relies on scattered material traces – the documents they hold or that they leave at the shelter in Oulx – as well as on their testimonies. In fact, the knowledge that emerge from counter-archiving paper trails is scattered, partial and discontinuous over time. Yet, partiality is not coterminous with lack: rather, as stressed earlier in the paper, counter-mapping as counter- archiving grounds on the partiality of traces. In particular, by paying attention to

the temporary trends in the papers that migrants are given and in how these are used by the authorities enables reconstructing how during a certain timeframe migrants' geographies have been channelled, diverted and obstructed.

Conclusion

Heterogenous paper trails haunt migrants during their journeys and also once they decide to stop. Most of the papers that migrants carry with them or scratch are the manifestations of administrative measures – such as expulsions orders and refusals of entry; or in some cases they are proofs of humanitarian records, that is of registration in refugee camps or of asylum procedures. The way in which administrative traces affect migrants can be direct, on the spot, or potential and deferred in time: migrants can be slowed down and obstructed in their movements or forced to undertake convoluted geographies and stay in a condition of hyper-mobility; and, beyond mobility drifts, temporary blockages and diversions, they disrupt their migratory plans and journeys, and they foreclose their futurity (Secor et al., 2022). To be particularly relevant is the way in which violence is enforced by generating “disintegrated subjects” (Reiter and Coutin, 2017), as a result of multiple data extraction processes and of the fact that often migrants do not remember when and how many times they have been identified and fingerprinted. In addition to that, migrants often are not aware of how the data extracted from them is actually used and shared, nor about the consequences of each administrative order and even less of the multiple paper trails that follow them from country to country. The partial “nonknowledge” (Aradau and Perret, 2022) about how those traces are used and administrative orders are enforced does not concern migrants only.

In fact, in many circumstances even lawyers and activists are not aware of the specific consequences that administrative traces might generate, since states unevenly change their ways of controlling, disrupting and choking migrants' movements and presence. As this paper has shown through a historical insight into the French-Italian border, the disruption of migrants' geographies and the channelling of their “unruly” mobility through and as a result of paper trails is not a new phenomenon: even in the past, migrants were object of multiple datafication processes and their movements were obstructed, diverted and slowed down due to expulsion orders, labour selection procedures and asylum process. What emerges from archival records is that in order to retrace how different papers affect migrants' geographies, it is paramount to analyse jointly asylum, labour and border policies. The apparent banality of administrative traces shows that power relations “are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply” (Gordon, 2008: 3).

That is, the consequences of single administrative orders on migrants' movements often differ from what they are officially designated for, since how they are enforced depend on the specific political context, including the conflict between national and local authorities, and on how migrants re-route their geographies in light of administrative orders. Indeed, the analytics of counter-mapping as counter-archiving destabilises state-based approaches to migration by foregrounding the role of migrants' tactical appropriations, ways of erasing their digital and non-digital traces and of twisting and navigating state's bureaucracies. Yet, the ways in which migrants reroute their journeys and deal with administrative traces show the inadequacy of analyses that conceive migrants 'tactics and resistances in direct opposition to paper trails and state's registration; rather, migrants at times use and twist papers tactically – for instance, an expulsion order in some circumstances might be used as a sort of *informal laissez-passer* towards another EU member state; at times they get rid of paper- based evidence of their passage; and at times they want to be identified and registered in order to

visibilise their presence in a country.

Migrants' tactics consist also in the production of counter-maps that most of the time are not cartographic and that, rather consist in processes of knowing as assembling, meaning by that their attempts of putting together detailed and updated information about how state authorities change their identification procedures, data sharing practices and border policing. However, as this paper has noticed, migrants do also enact counter-mapping practices through modes of spatial disobedience: looking at modes of counter-mapping in action is crucial, since counter-mapping as such might remain a sterile practice or being coopted into modes of seeing like a State if it is not "weighed against the political struggles they derive from and are intended to advance" (Wainwright and Bryan, 2009: 169). Retracing migrants' convoluted mobility by following the legal geographies of the state unfolds that the "hold" exercised over migrants' lives is not only the result of direct police actions and blatant infringements of the law but also of a continuum of violence. Thus, counter-mapping as counter-archiving foregrounds the importance of articulating a critique of the border regime that is not narrowed to the exposure of its blatant manifestations and that, instead, interrogates how to connect together the scattered traces of administrative and bureaucratic violence that migrants experience along their route.

Notes

1. I interviewed volunteers and workers at the migrant shelter in Oulx, with doctors from the NGO Rainbow for Africa, with French and Italian immigration lawyers, with interpreters at the shelters in Oulx and Briancon, and with 32 migrants from different nationalities in Oulx and Bardonecchia who were trying to make it to France, and with 14 migrants at the shelter in Briancon who managed to enter France.
2. Counter-mapping does not simply consist in making visible what is left out of traditional maps; rather, it shapes knowledge production processes through a non-sovereign lens and, thus, it has a transformative function.
3. On archives as process versus archives as things, see Stoler (2009).
4. As Culbert stresses, counter-archival projects reject the positivism on which the epistemological power of the archive rests (Culbert, 2016: 26).
5. On the basis of bilateral agreements signed between Italy and France in 1946, 1947 and 1948, French authorities selected Italian workers in a center located in Milan. The selection entailed medical checks, job skills and matches with employers.
6. Usually, these were job contracts signed with French employers. Those who crossed the border on foot were workers who, after signing the contract opted for reaching France autonomously.
7. The number of border crossers that stop in Oulx per day might oscillate a lot, depending on multiple factors (weather conditions, changes in migrants' routes, hardening in border controls, etc.).
8. Conversation conducted with M., an Afghani citizen, in the Italian village of Oulx, located at the Alpine French-Italian border, July 25, 2022.
9. Even non-state actors play an active role in producing paper trails. For instance, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) are in charge of extracting data from migrants. Refugee agencies, first and foremost the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are key actors in this respect. NGOs that manage refugee camps are likewise involved in registering migrants' presence, and in some cases in giving them papers or cards.
10. Through that term I encompass the different kinds of registration cards given to migrants in refugee camps to receive food and/or to be recognised as an authorised camp resident.
11. The Schengen Information System (SIS II) is a European database for security and border management. As far as migration is concerned, when there is a SIS alert in the database, it means that the person has a re-entry ban into the Schengen space for 5 years. Moreover, given that a SIS alert might flag a security threat, it might affect asylum decisions. Migrants' data can be inserted into SIS for instance when they receive an expulsion order.

12. Since the Italian-Slovenian border is a EU's internal frontier, the police can enter the biometric data of the migrant into the European database Eurodac only if the person claims asylum (CAT 1 of the Eurodac database). While at the external frontiers of Europe – for instance, when migrants enter Italy by the sea – authorities are obliged to put the fingerprint into Eurodac even in case of irregular entries (CAT 2).

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