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“Exit Italy”? social and spatial (im)mobilities as conditions of protracted displacement

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the experience of protracted displacement interacts with mobility desires and practices of a diverse population of asylum-seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants in Italy. Drawing from ethnographic data collected in different Italian localities and among different nationalities, we focus on participants' translocal connections, both as ways 'out of limbo' and as factors in protracted legal and socio-economic precariousness. We propose an interpretation of complex spatial mobilities to understand under what conditions spatial mobility translates into an improvement in the living conditions of migrants, producing upward socio-economic mobility, and under what conditions spatial mobility perpetuates marginality and isolation. Although translocal connections provide space for action, migrants risk being trapped in a loop of movements between different countries and different localities within Italy, without the possibility to achieve legal protection in any of these.

KEYWORDS

Displacement

Introduction

Sometimes novelists are able to describe social phenomena much better than social scientists. In his acclaimed book 'Exit West', Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid tells of a remote country where there are mysterious doors that, when people go through them, instantly allow them to access another place. The novel's protagonists, the young lovers Nadia and Saeed, flee from conflict in their country and face a journey full of uncertainties. Behind every door, they find a new room, that is, a new country, with unimagined conditions of stay. Nadia and Saeed go through many doors, but the uncertainty continues over time. After years of travelling, they realise that they no longer have any feelings for one another and separate. Only at the end of the novel, when they are old, do they meet again, in their home country, where they decide to walk together through the last door (Hamid 2017).

Etzold (2017) uses the same metaphor of doors and rooms to explain how migrants' social and spatial trajectories are closely related in multifaceted ways. He takes up the concept of livelihood strategies used by de Haan and Zoomers (2005) when they speak

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of a 'historical route through a labyrinth of rooms, with each room with multiple doors giving access to new livelihood opportunities' (de Haan and Zoomers 2005, 44).

The metaphor of the livelihood strategy as a journey through rooms is useful to understand the multiple configurations of protracted displacement in Europe. In the last two decades, a growing number of scholars and policy-makers have used the concept of protracted displacement to define the conditions of refugees usually living without long-term prospects in the Global South (Crisp 2002; Loescher et al. 2008; Milner 2014). More recently, scholars have started to apply this concept to the situation of migrants in Europe (Monsutti 2017; Tazzioli and Garelli 2018).

Although also relevant in the Global North, the category of protracted displacement remains rather vague in its analytical application. It is urgent to unpack this category, consider what it means in practice to lead one's everyday life in protracted displacement in the Global North, and to connect this condition to various forms of spatial and social (im)mobility. To reach this goal, it is essential to reflect on how dimensions of legal, economic and social insecurity interact, overlap or diverge. When a migrant reaches stability in one or more of these dimensions, it does not mean that they are, once and for all, leaving protracted displacement behind them.

In this article, we show the interdependencies between spatial im(mobilities) and legal, social and economic displacement; we consider the interplay of different forms of spatial mobility – translocal and transnational – but also how they interact with the absence of mobility. Various mobilities must be placed within specific regulatory regimes, namely legal provisions, policy measures and administrative practices. Mobilities and immobilities are at the same time a consequence of regulatory regimes as well as a specific response developed by migrants.

Along with mobility, places matter. Physical places are regulated by specific local regimes, they are crossroads of multiple flows, and they are transformed and reproduced by migrants' im(mobilities) (Cathrine 2001). By adopting a spatial approach, we observe the existence of multiple configurations of interconnected places across Italy, which are important to understanding spatial mobilities and their role in the perpetuation of protracted displacement. The localities we investigate are characterised by a high level of interconnection at a translocal and transnational level. However, localities' interconnect-edness does not automatically imply migrants' social improvement: circulation between places may, on the contrary, trap migrants in a condition of protracted displacement, despite their ongoing mobility.

Based on these considerations, this article is organised as follows. Firstly, we present the theoretical debate on protracted displacement and mobility in Europe; secondly, we describe the evolution of the Italian and European regulatory regimes and their impact on migrants' precarity; thirdly, we discuss our methodology. We then present three illustrative biographies of migrants encountered during our fieldwork in the localities of Saluzzo, Rome and Castel Volturno.

In the discussion, we propose a framework to explain under what conditions spatial mobility translates into an improvement in the living conditions of migrants and under what conditions it perpetuates marginality and isolation. We consider migrants' spatial immobility, translocal and transnational mobility, and we cross-analyse these with legal, social and economic opportunities to which migrants have or do not have access in specific localities.

In the conclusion, we come back to the main arguments of our article. Protracted displacement is a category that describes well the condition of many migrants in Europe. Migrants display a variety of strategies of spatial (im)mobilities to cope with uncertainty; to understand the effects of these strategies on protracted displacement, it is important to consider the complex interplay between the legal, social and economic opportunities open to migrants in various places. By moving from one place to another, migrants' condition can progress in one domain but, at the same time, regress in another. Although translocal connections provide space for action, migrants also risk being trapped in a loop of movements between different countries and different localities (Hatziprokopiou et al. 2021), perpetuating a condition of never-ending displacement.

Protracted displacement, mobility and places: a review of the debate

Protracted displacement does not end when migrants arrive in Europe. In our research in different Italian localities we have tried to explore the meanings and the aspects of living in protracted displacement, to highlight the continuities of the lived experience of refugees before and after arriving in Europe.

While structural forces produce and reproduce displacement at different stages of migrants' journeys, a conceptualisation of displacement as a dynamic figuration of shifting state, policy, family and community configurations (Etzold et al. 2019) allows us to account for the active attempts of migrants to exit the condition of limbo they are pushed into. Therefore, the article analyses the effect of the aforementioned forces in different Italian locations to show how migrants are affected and react to these structural circumstances.

Protracted displacement has emerged as an important policy concept in developing countries – first countries of asylum – where refugees tend to remain for years without tangible prospects for long-term social, legal and economic inclusion. While the number of displaced people has increased in recent decades, lasting solutions, namely return, resettlement, and local integration, have not been able to unlock the situation of those who remain stuck for years in 'limbos' (Brun 2015; Crisp 2002).

Whereas the attention to protracted displacement in developing countries has increased in international discourse, only a few attempts have been made to link the debate on protracted displacement with migrants' marginalisation and exclusion in Europe (Belloni and Massa 2021; Agier 2019). However, empirical studies in several European countries seem to suggest that there is continuity between the lives in limbo of refugees in developing countries and of those who arrive in Europe, who have to face exhausting asylum procedures, difficult reception policies and limited labour prospects (Arora-Jonsson and Larsson 2021; Cabot 2012; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016). Moreover, even for those granted some form of protection, the proliferation of juridical labels (Zetter 2007) has stratified the set of rights that displaced people can access and produced groups of migrants with extremely precarious legal positions.

Spatial mobility is, in this context, often used as a livelihood strategy: intra-European movements of asylum-seekers and refugees have emerged as a key resource for migrants, enabling them to overcome the socio-economic restraints they face in their first country of arrival in the European Union (EU). Nevertheless, spatial mobility often does not overlap with socio-economic mobility. Given the restrictive regimes regulating mobility

of refugees and migrants in Europe (i.e. the Dublin Regulation), protection beneficiaries in southern Europe may end up working as irregular migrants in the north. At times, this spatial mobility results in loss of legal protection. Therefore, transnational mobility can both represent a way out of displacement and a trap. Moreover, transnational – and translocal – mobilities often occur in interstitial spaces (Artero and Fontanari 2021; Fontanari 2018) that connect ghettos in different cities and rural spaces across Europe and Italy. Although the trajectories of displaced migrants are characterised by high spatial mobility, their lives are somehow stuck – immobile in a socio-economic and cultural limbo.

Some scholars working on migrants' (im)mobility in Europe have adopted a spatial approach, highlighting the key role of place in migrants' lives (Carter 2010; Merrill 2014) and trajectories (Riccio 2019). The difficulties migrants experience when attempting to reach and move within Europe have affected the social spaces that they inhabit or cross. All around Europe, migrant settlements have emerged: in these spaces, the boundaries between formal and informal become blurred and different forces operate and overlap, from public institutions to humanitarian organisations to more or less organised crime. These spaces range from informal settlements and housing occupations in large cities (Fontanari 2016; Belloni 2016), to ghettos inhabited by seasonal workers in rural areas (Raeymaekers 2021), to entire territories that become spaces of more or less permanent settlement of displaced migrants (Caruso 2014).

On the one hand, places characterised by protracted displacement in contemporary Europe take the shape of segregating ghettos (Wacquant 1997). On the other hand, they are lively from a social and economic point of view: they are crossed by transnational and translocal flows of people, images, money, and they flourish with formal and informal economic activities. These places represent perfectly the constraints and the opportunities characterising people's lives in protracted displacement.

Regulatory regimes: the Italian legal and policy framework

Building on the concept of 'migration regime' (Sciortino 2004; Cvajner, Echeverria, and Sciortino 2018), this article considers regulatory regimes as a complex set of evolving legal provisions, policy measures, administrative measures and bureaucratic practices governing migration and asylum. The high degree of discretion of bureaucracies and public administrations determines a significant differentiation in how regulatory regimes are put in practice in different local contexts. This results in differential effects on migrants' daily lives and prospects based on their locality, or depending on the local authorities responsible for their legal and administrative paperwork.

Over the last decades, the evolution of regulatory regimes has produced a proliferation of migrant legal statuses in many European countries, particularly the increase of temporary, discretionary, and thus more fragile statuses (Kofman 2002). This has also produced a hierarchy of statuses, which defines the long-term inclusion and exclusion prospects of migrants (Cvajner and Sciortino 2010). The proliferation and stratification of legal statuses has blurred boundaries between regular and irregular and results in frequent shifts back and forth from regularity to irregularity. In fact, achieving a regular status at some point is no guarantee of staying documented.

Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) describe the proliferation and heterogenisation of borders, looking at borders not only as geographical lines between nation-states but as ‘complex social institutions’ (3) within societies, having multiple – legal, political, social, economic and cultural – components. As such, borders are not only devices of exclusion but also of inclusion, where the latter is seen in a continuum with (rather than in opposition to) the former. From this perspective, borders have a ‘hierarchising and stratifying capacity’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 7) and have regulatory functions, ‘even in instances where they are not lined by walls’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 7).

Thus, migration and border regimes are crucial factors contributing to creating and reproducing over time conditions of protracted displacement, in the form of uncertainty over legal status, limited access to rights, socio-economic precarity and marginalisation. In particular, regulatory regimes play a crucial role in migrants’ mobility and immobility (Wyss 2019; Brigden and Mainwaring 2016), as manifestly exemplified by the effects of the Dublin Regulation not only on migrants’ intra-EU mobility but also on their existential precariousness (Picozza 2017; Tazzioli 2020). Migrants’ mobility rights – especially within the EU and to a lesser extent across Italy – are determined by the legal status in that precise moment, within a broader context of overall restrictive intra-EU mobility policies targeting third-country nationals.

Intra-national mobility of asylum-seekers is not formally prohibited in Italy. However, those hosted in reception centres risk losing their right to accommodation in case of prolonged unauthorised absence; this provision hampers work- or network-related mobility to other regions. Conversely, for asylum-seekers and protection beneficiaries who are no longer in the reception system, intra-national mobility is extremely common. As we will see, this is often employment-driven mobility, frequently of a circular type, as in the case of seasonal agricultural workers.

Migrants’ possibilities to move across the EU are tightly linked to their legal status and type of residence permit, with irregular migrants being most disadvantaged. However, intra-EU mobility constitutes a huge challenge for asylum-seekers and protection beneficiaries too. Regarding asylum-seekers, secondary intra-EU mobility is often motivated by family reasons (other factors include cultural and linguistic affinities, ethnic networks, and perception of future prospects). Even when, based on Dublin rules, legal intra-EU movement is possible for an asylum-seeker (e.g. for unaccompanied minors), the main problems are the administrative hurdles and extremely long waiting times. Protection beneficiaries holding an Italian residence permit are allowed by EU law, provided that they can obtain travel documents, to move across the Union freely, but only for tourism and for a maximum of three months. They formally cannot overstay this period, although many take the risk to do so. As we shall see, they adopt specific strategies: on the one hand to preserve their legal status obtained in Italy, and on the other hand to continue living and working informally in another EU country. The intersection between the EU and the Italian national regime produced varied effects on the lives of our informants, as we show in later sections.

Methodology

This article is based on data collected during fieldwork from February 2020 until April 2021, facing interruptions and adaptations due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualitative

and ethnographic research was carried out in multiple locations and targeted different national communities. For this article, we focus on the city of Rome, where we interviewed Eritreans, and the areas of Saluzzo in the Piedmont region (north-west of Italy) and Castel Volturno in the Campania region (southern Italy), where we interviewed West Africans. By researching these two groups, we wanted to explore the trajectories of those granted some kind of protection in Italy (Eritreans) and those who were more likely to have had difficulties in achieving a stable legal status (West Africans).

We engaged with about 130 research participants, including migrants, practitioners, civil society representatives and members of local communities. We used multiple research methods, including 32 expert interviews¹, 51 semi-structured interviews with migrants and members of local communities, 26 biographical interviews with migrants, and two focus group discussions involving the three participant categories mentioned above.² We started with a wide and open-ended understanding of protracted displacement, to grasp what protracted displacement is like in Europe: who is affected, why, what are the features characterising those who fall into that condition of 'limbo' and how the actors define their condition.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions, in some periods we had to replace face-to-face interactions with online interviews and virtual meetings. We conducted online interviews by mobile phone or through our laptop using audio-visual interfaces such as Skype or Zoom, according to the preferences of our interviewees. This worked well for expert interviews, while it was more complex for interviews with migrants. As these interviews focused on personal life stories, they required long and repeated interactions to gain the trust of the research participants. Many migrants found themselves comfortable with video calling on mobile phones as they are used to this form of communication (Kaufmann 2020). Despite this, some refused to speak without meeting us in person. In some cases, however, people felt more open to sharing intimate information because the absence of physical presence created a feeling of confidence. Participants felt in control of the type of information they could share with us because we were not able to observe their environment and to pay attention to their body language (Gruber et al. 2021). These online interviews were then accompanied by face-to-face meetings as soon as the Covid pandemic allowed us to. Ethnographic research was also severely affected by the pandemic. Our participants often lived in crowded housing, squats and settlements and some of these locations became completely inaccessible during Covid-19 due to quarantine measures. Although we were unable to access these places, we took the opportunity to reflect on these issues in the following interviews, namely on the relationship between physical spaces, mobility and immobility during the pandemic.

Narratives of protracted displacement³

Abdullahi: Saluzzo as an area of circulation

Abdullahi is a 26-year-old Senegalese man. He arrived in Italy in 2015, from Libya, across the Mediterranean Sea. After being identified in Sicily, he was transferred to Piedmont, where he applied for international protection and was placed in a reception centre in a little mountain village in the province of Cuneo. In 2018, three years after his arrival, his

application was rejected, and he is still waiting for the outcome of his appeal. In 2018, he left the reception centre and moved to Saluzzo, searching for seasonal work. We met him in the summer of 2020 when he was working as a seasonal fruit-picker in the town of Saluzzo.

The Saluzzo area, with its 12,000 hectares of land planted with kiwis, peaches and apples, is one of the foremost fruit-producing districts in Italy. In recent years, the number of migrants in this area has increased enormously. Almost all people hired seasonally are asylum-seekers, beneficiaries of humanitarian protection or refugees. Like Abdullahi, they come to Saluzzo from Piedmont but also other parts of Italy. Abdullahi considers Saluzzo a site of passage, a place where people stay for shorter or longer periods because they can find a job even without documents while waiting for the outcome of their asylum application.

The complex relationship between mobility and living and working conditions of migrants in the agricultural sector has also been documented in other Italian regions (Corrado, De Castro, and Perrotta 2017; Dines 2018). At the end of each harvest season in Saluzzo, thousands of migrants move to other locations in Italy, looking for other jobs and accommodation. In October 2018, Abdullahi moved to Calabria, where some acquaintances lived, searching for work. In Calabria, Abdullahi faced similar working and living conditions to those in Saluzzo: precarious accommodation, irregular employment contracts, absence of welfare measures, and indifference from the local population.

After some time in Calabria, Abdullahi moved again to Saluzzo, and this time he met members of the anti-racist movement (a local grassroots association). First, they helped him and other migrants obtain a certificate of domicile in the reception facilities from the municipality where they were housed, and then they helped him to find an apartment to rent and legal assistance for his appeal.

Given his precarious legal condition, Abdullahi declared he has always preferred to move domestically in Italy because:

There are people who travel around Europe without documents to find a job. But if they move and then stay, they are forever undocumented. It is better to stay and work not too far from the place where you have your asylum application under consideration and wait for the situation to be resolved. Because without documents you will never be able to return to your country, which is the most important thing for me! Or you can go back to Senegal but then you can't go back to Europe, and that's even worse! (SS-PC021)

The work that migrants find in Saluzzo is temporary, linked to agricultural seasonality. Contracts are often irregular because employers declare fewer days worked than the actual number, to pay lower taxes. Poor working and housing conditions are accepted only because they are considered temporary and necessary for future improvement.

Legal limbo pushed Abdullahi to settle into mobility. This is a type of circular mobility within Italy, with significant social and emotional costs. Through his mobility, Abdullahi has connections with various places in Italy with similar characteristics. What has really changed Abdullahi's situation is the support of the local anti-racist movement, which helped him improve his situation.

Yodit: Rome as a final refuge

Yodit comes from Ethiopia and is 32 years old. When she was 14, she migrated to Dubai to work as a domestic worker. After a few months living there, the police sent her back to Ethiopia. She left for Sudan, where she met her partner, a young man from Eritrea, and in 2012 they left for Libya and from there to Italy. She was pregnant at the time.

When she arrived in Italy, she was later diagnosed with a problematic pregnancy and delivered a baby who did not survive. Although this was a distressing episode in Yodit's life, maternal and child health problems were sadly not uncommon in the migration biographies of the women we interviewed. Being a woman in a context of protracted displacement comes at a high cost for many of our respondents, suffering from reproductive health issues and the stress of being single mothers (Hirani and Richter 2019).

Yodit and her boyfriend gained protection status, but like all other refugees in Italy, had to find their way after that. They ended up living in a squat inhabited by Eritrean, Somali and Sudanese people in the outskirts of Rome. Yodit and her boyfriend had two children while living in the squat. They worked in a packaging company until both lost their job. As Yodit said: 'It is impossible to rent in Rome ... you have a job today, but nothing is guaranteed for tomorrow. How could I have brought up my two children unless I lived in this squat?'. While living in the squat, they could not obtain registered residence there, hampering their access to healthcare and social services (Gargiulo 2017). Tired of the continuous economic constraints, Yodit decided to try her luck in Denmark. She went there by train with her two children and asked for asylum. She did not say she had protection status in Italy, hoping that they would not find her fingerprints, but she was soon discovered and sent to a deportation centre. In the meantime, she had separated from her partner, who wanted to reach Germany, and became a single parent. Yodit's transnational mobility did not result in a way out of protracted displacement but rather intensified her precarious socio-economic and family configurations.

When she went back to Rome, she discovered the local movement for housing rights. In particular, she became an activist in an anarchist group fighting against housing speculation in Rome. She participated in squatting actions, protests, and regular meetings. She was among the first squatters in the Hotel 4 Stars, an experiment in cohabitation involving a multi-ethnic group of people. Today she lives there with her children, she has a precarious job, and in her free time, she performs with a local theatre company.

Mohamed: Castel Volturno as an interconnected ghetto

Mohamed is a 46-year-old migrant from Ghana. He arrived in Italy in 2005, and after a few months in the reception system, his asylum application was rejected. Mohamed started to live his informal life in the area of Naples, and made the town of Castel Volturno his base.

According to an expert we interviewed working in the area, around 15,000 migrants live in Castel Volturno, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa. At least 10,000 of them are undocumented. Castel Volturno is a 'rur-urban' space (Caruso 2014) connecting the agricultural area of the northern province of Napoli and Caserta with the city itself. It is a safe space, especially for undocumented people, as they are able to participate in the informal economy of the area. In fact, one of the most common methods to find work is to go early in the morning to the roundabouts around Castel Volturno.

Mohamed is used to going there every morning, hoping to be offered a job. Sometimes he works as an agricultural worker, sometimes as a bricklayer or in private gardens. Unfortunately, he does not always find a job, and during the pandemic, the situation became worse. During his stay in Castel Volturno, however, he met a group of local and migrant activists, fighting labour exploitation in the area. He engaged with this movement, and thanks to their help, he obtained a humanitarian protection permit in 2016, 11 years after his arrival.

At the beginning of 2017, he decided to leave Castel Volturno. He moved to Malta to work informally as a bricklayer since the daily wage was significantly higher. In mid-2018, while working on a building, he had a serious accident. Since then, he has been unable to work and has not received any welfare benefits. He spent one year and seven months in a house in Malta without a job. His housemates, mainly co-nationals, helped him with food and basic needs in Malta. In summer 2020, he started to work again to gather enough money to return to Italy. In the meantime, his Italian residence permit had expired, and he had to return to Italy to renew it.

He arrived in Italy in autumn 2020, and he decided to settle in Castel Volturno since he had some friends there who could help him. Because of his accident, his health deteriorated, making it difficult for him to work and, due to the Italian legislation, he was unable to renew his residence permit without a job.

Mohamed's story exemplifies key features of how marginalisation and insecurity interconnect in a place like Castel Volturno. While undocumented people may perceive it as a relatively safe space to survive in times of crisis, Castel Volturno is a sort of ghetto, where national and local mechanisms of precarisation constantly reproduce extreme marginality. However, Castel Volturno is not secluded; rather, it is deeply interconnected with other localities in Italy and Europe, which migrants navigate despite their precarious legal statuses.

Discussion: the intersections between spatial, socio-economic and legal mobilities

From the three stories we have presented, it emerges that spatial mobility or immobility is not in itself an absolute positive or negative resource but should rather be considered in relation to specific socio-economic and legal contexts (Sheller and Urry 2006).

In the debate concerning migrants' forms of mobility in protracted displacement, we find some clichés, which have also influenced the political approach to these phenomena. As D'Angelo observes, 'pre-conceived, simplistic ideas about 'positive' and 'negative' ties, 'stable' and 'temporary' ones, do not do make justice to the complexity of people's social fields' (D'Angelo 2021, 497). There is a consolidated view of the needy and helpless refugee that has affected scholarly debates, policy-making and service provision (Mazur 1988). As argued by Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden (2020), it is necessary to reject all forms of network determinism and instead adopt an approach to mobility and social networks that recognises the changeable nature of networks and social endeavours. Once started, the migratory journey seemingly never ends, and social networks continue to evolve in both their local and transnational components (Moret 2017). At the same time, we should also avoid any form of spatial determinism, as places are interconnected sites where social figurations change over time. To return to Mohsin Hamid's

metaphor invoked at the beginning, not only the doors, but also the internal structure of the rooms is constantly changing. Our research identified different forms of spatial mobility, ranging from long periods of immobility, to continuous translocal and transnational mobility. Different forms of mobility are not exclusive: they can occur at different moments in a migrant's life cycle, and their effects can be various depending on conditions and contexts (Schapendonk 2020). Specific forms of mobility are, in fact, the product of specific regulatory regimes (Cvajner, Echeverria, and Sciortino 2018). However, regulations are applied very differently at the local level. Our aim is to understand what kinds of places, with specific legal, social and economic opportunities, are connected by migrants' mobilities. Do migrants find places with similar characteristics, or are they radically different? How do migrants cope with these varieties and with the unpredictability?

Bearing in mind the impact of regulatory regimes, we propose a complex interpretation of spatial mobilities (Heil et al. 2017) to understand under what conditions spatial mobility translates into enhanced living conditions of migrants, producing socio-economic legal improvements, and under what conditions spatial mobility perpetuates marginality and isolation.

There is an ascending and a descending socio-economic mobility. To understand these forms of mobility, it is necessary to consider the intersection with local structures of opportunities (Phillimore 2021). For example, there are social opportunities offered by local networks of relationships (Korac 2005); economic opportunities that allow for economic integration into local economies (Jacobsen 2005); and legal opportunities, which may allow people to regularise their legal status and benefit from various rights (from labour rights to welfare services). On the basis of these multiple conditions, we created a typology that we present below. This typology allows us to cross-analyse how different forms of spatial mobility intersect with social, legal and economic immobility and create different configurations of protracted displacement among our respondents.

Protracted displacement and mobility: A typology

Socio-economic Mobility	Spatial mobility	Immobility	Translocal mobility	Transnational mobility
	Social opportunities	A) The migrant does not move, and their social condition improves (A+) or deteriorates (A-)	B) The migrant moves translocally, and their social condition improves (B+) or deteriorates (B-)	C) The migrant moves translocally, and their social condition improves (C+) or deteriorates (C-)
	Legal opportunities	D) The migrant does not move and improves their legal status improves (D+), or deteriorates (D-)	E) The migrant moves translocally and their legal status improves (E+), or deteriorates (E-)	F) The migrant moves transnationally and their legal status improves (F+), or deteriorates (F-)
	Economic opportunities	G) The migrant does not move and improves their economic condition improves (G+), or deteriorates (G-)	H) The migrant moves translocally and improves their economic condition improves (H+), or deteriorates (H-)	I) The migrant moves transnationally and their economic condition improves (I+) or deteriorates (I-)

A range of forms of spatial mobility and immobility are linked with various structures of opportunities. Local opportunities change over time and due to the action of different social actors: institutional local actors who apply the laws, local communities who can act in support of or against migrants, other longer-term migrants who may join forces with the newcomers or oppose them. These variable configurations clearly emerge in the three researched localities.

Saluzzo is a place that once was peripheral and, at some point, has acquired an increasing centrality in migrants' trajectories, becoming a destination for their transnational and translocal mobility. The increased presence of migrants in Saluzzo has prompted many civil society organisations to organise themselves to offer legal, work and housing assistance services. Aside from the local residents, migrants have also been present for many years, organising themselves in associations to provide help to newcomers. Consequently, for many displaced migrants, Saluzzo has been transformed from a zone of passage into a place to settle, interrupting, at least temporarily, paths of spatial mobility and allowing, in some cases, the creation of socio-economic upward mobility.

Rome is a mobility hub for many migrants; it is the point of arrival but also the starting point in many trajectories of protracted displacement. In Rome, newcomers find well-organised co-ethnic communities, which help them to integrate into the local economic and social structures. At the same time, migrants risk remaining encapsulated within these social networks, trapped in socio-economic marginalisation and exclusion, unable to get out of their limbo situation. The long-term activities of political groups involved in the movement for housing rights, however, can balance these exclusionary forces and allow migrants to access not only housing but also a local network of social and economic support and resources, as illustrated in Yodit's story (Belloni 2016).

Castel Volturno has become, over the years, one of the main destinations for West African undocumented migrants in Italy. Castel Volturno represents the focal point of an informal world, where it is possible to activate local and translocal connections while trying to find a way to obtain a residence permit. At the same time, for many protractedly displaced migrants, Castel Volturno is a place where they feel they 'surrender' to fortress Europe.

Many of these places are 'heterotopias', physical and symbolic places in which a social, racial and economic Other is located in the minds of citizens and in the eyes of policies (Agier 2019). These places emerge from a need to find refuge and feel protected from the outer world, but they often end up as places of exclusion, reproducing inequality at a local and global scale (Belloni, Fravega, and Giudici 2020). In our research localities, we identified both the exclusion and the refuge function: migrants find themselves segregated in these places, but at the same time, these places paradoxically protect them from the institutional and the everyday violence they may experience outside.

Immobility, translocal mobility and transnational mobility are strategies that migrants in protracted displacement adopt to deal with regulatory regimes and, at the same time, they can be factors that perpetuate the condition of protracted displacement. National regulations find different applications in various local contexts and thus produce different impacts on spatial mobilities.

Many migrants choose transnational mobility because it temporarily improves their economic situation (condition I+). They move from Italy to another EU country, find

an informal job and settle irregularly there. However, in the new country, they do not find a solution to their legal precarity and they have to come back to Italy to renew their residence permit. Each protection beneficiary has, in fact, to renew their Italian residence permit (every two or five years, depending on the form of protection granted). This is the case of Mohamed, who returned from Malta to renew his permit, although unsuccessfully (condition F-). He ended up in Castel Volturno because he knew that he could live and work there without any documents. For this reason, Castel Volturno has become, over the years, a pole of attraction for migrants with precarious legal statuses who come from other parts of Italy or from abroad.

Translocal mobility is another strategy to cope with economic uncertainties. Many asylum seekers we met in Saluzzo move translocally, returning every year for the harvest season. For several years many of them faced difficulties getting a registered residence in the reception facilities, and their legal status deteriorated (E-). In 2019, thanks to the advocacy actions carried out by local civil society organisations, the municipality of Saluzzo granted residence to migrants living in temporary reception facilities during the harvest season while working for local agri-food companies. This initiative, which has not occurred elsewhere, has prompted some migrants to remain in the area longer, as was the case for Abdullahi, after years of moving around Italy. His circular mobility stopped, he settled in Saluzzo and his legal situation improved (condition E+). Immobility can thus act as an involuntary condition (Carling 2002) as well as another survival strategy for people in protracted displacement. This strategy is often closely linked to local administrative decisions.

Trajectories of displacement are not linear but result from the interaction of multiple factors, at both the micro and macro levels. In migrants' biographies, immobility, translocal and transnational mobility can occur at different times and in different orders (Adey 2006). Ascending and descending socio-economic mobility can alternate in migrants' life paths.

The close connection between the im-mobility regime and the legal precariousness experienced by migrants shows how time (and temporality) is a crucial dimension impacted by the border regime (Jacobsen, Karlsen, and Khosravi 2021). Asylum seekers' temporalities alternate between experiences of confinement and hypermobility across borders: these lead to the lengthening of migrants' temporary and precarious condition. Fontanari (2017) shows how this protracted transit experience is internalised by refugees and affects their self-construction process. The power dynamics inherent in the European border regime create temporal ruptures that fragment individual biographies. Refugees follow 'fragmented circuits' within various cities, criss-crossing the Italian peninsula and extending across Europe. These movements are sometimes interrupted, and refugees experience a suspension of the progression of time typical of a condition of limbo. Periods of waiting alternate with hyper-mobility, contributing to the fragmented everyday temporality of migrants. The stories of Abdullahi, Yodit and Mohammed destabilise any linear notion of migration and socio-economic and legal mobility.

From his arrival in Italy until now, Abdullahi has been through various phases: (A -) / (H+) / (H-) / (E-) / (E+). In the first years, living in a remote and disconnected locality in the Cuneo province, he experienced the condition A-. He did not move, and his socio-economic situation worsened since he did not have any opportunity to improve his language and working skills and survived only with the financial aid provided in the

reception centre. After this period, he passed to condition H+. He moved translocally to Saluzzo, found seasonal work in agriculture, and his social condition apparently improved compared to the previous situation. After that, he passed to condition H-. He moved translocally to southern Italy, where he worked seasonally picking oranges in the Calabria region and lived in a shantytown. There, his legal status deteriorated, as he could not renew his residence permit. Subsequently, he passed to condition E +, moving again to northern Italy, and working again in agriculture. This time he managed to obtain both decent accommodation and legal assistance, and for these reasons, he decided to remain in Saluzzo.

Yodit's life path was different: (I+) / (F -) / (F+)/ (F-)/ (C-) / (G +)/ (C+). She moved transnationally from Ethiopia to Dubai. Although her socio-economic condition improved, she had no legal status, so was imprisoned and forced to return to Ethiopia. Then, after international migration across the Mediterranean, she settled in Rome, and her legal condition momentarily improved since she gained a protection status. However, her socio-economic situation remained extremely precarious and that led her to move to Denmark to seek asylum. Her attempt, however, failed and she was forced to return to Rome in even more precarious living conditions, as she had lost her place in the squat and the relationship with her partner had ended. Finally, thanks to her involvement in the housing rights movement, she managed to find accommodation in a squat with a registered address where she could be reunited with her parents and her sisters from Ethiopia.

Mohamed experienced a different trajectory: (G -) / (A+) / (I +) / (F-) / (D -). At the beginning, he stayed in one place and suffered downward socio-economic mobility in Castel Volturno. Then, he improved his situation thanks to his involvement with a grass-roots organisation. Moving transnationally to Malta, he experienced an apparent improvement in his economic condition, but then he remained stuck there. Back in Castel Volturno, his legal and socio-economic situation deteriorated, and he is now experiencing extreme marginality.

Concluding remarks

This article has explored features of protracted displacement among migrant populations in different localities in Italy. We analysed whether spatial mobility within Italy or Europe allows migrants to overcome protracted displacement, defined as a condition of socio-economic and legal precariousness. In the last few years, the concept of protracted displacement has been used by a growing number of scholars and policy-makers to describe the condition of migrants in Europe. Although we agree that this concept is extremely relevant, we argue that it remains rather vague and heterogeneous in its analytical applications. Conditions of displacement have to be analysed in the local micro-contexts, where legal, social and economic opportunities are divergent. We found the metaphor of doors and rooms used by the novelist Moshin Ahmid perfect to describe the unpredictability of local situations faced by migrants and, at the same time, migrants' continuous struggle to overcome obstacles and to improve their situation.

To unpack the category of protracted displacement, we analysed how European and Italian regulatory regimes affect migrants' possibilities to move and construct more or less successful pathways towards socio-economic and legal inclusion. Then, drawing

from three life histories of migrants living in Rome, Castel Volturno and Saluzzo, we showed that spatial mobility does not necessarily lead to an improvement in living conditions, and that ascending and descending socio-economic mobility can alternate in the life path of a migrant. In their trajectories, we can see the variable significance of the structures of local opportunities: institutional actors, activists, social workers, long-term migrants and local communities can act in support of or against migrants and can crucially change their possibilities on the ground, even within a common national and European regulatory framework. Moreover, the stories of our participants show that migrants can exit and re-enter the condition of protracted displacement at various points in their life, irrespective of the mobility pathways they have undertaken.

We thus propose a typology of how spatial (translocal and transnational) and socio-economic and legal mobilities interact, leading at times to upwards trajectories and other times to downwards trajectories. This typology allows us to account for the complex and varied intersections of spatial mobility and socio-economic and legal mobilities that characterise the lives of our respondents. Finally, our work shows the centrality of place in defining the social and economic conditions of migrants in protracted displacement. We show how structural factors characterising local places (e.g. institutional choices, presence of grassroots movements, organised crime) affect migrants' opportunities and trajectories.

Notes

1. The experts interviewed include: representatives of local institutions, members of the judiciary, representatives of international organisations, immigration lawyers, scholars, representatives of civil society organisations and migrant or refugee-led organisations, activists, members of grassroots organisations.
2. For further details on the employed methods, the study sites and respondents as well as the ethical concerns in conducting this research see Roman et al. (2021).
3. The names of the persons mentioned in this article are fictitious; their stories are not.

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