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# Migration and the racialised politics of desire

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## Abstract

This article interrogates the reservations in the Left in Europe towards claims for freedom of movement and stay. The piece argues that an unequal right to desire – conceived as an aspiration move, to stay and to seek for a better life – underpins those criticisms and suggests that for developing counter-politics of migration, it is key to challenge such racialised predicament. The first section shows how expansive claims for equal access to mobility and the right to stay are discredited as utopian and non-realistic. The second section unsettles the politics of number that sustains public discourses on migration showing that this can be turned to the advantage of arguments in support of border controls. It moves on contending that a critique of racialising borders needs to unpack the unequal right to desire. The fourth section draws attention to the nexus between the disruption of futurity and the unequal right to desire and argues that this enables tracing connections between migrants and (some) citizens through the lens of dispossessed future. It suggests that the allegedly utopian character of claims for freedom of movement does not depend on the failure of past struggles but on the unquestioned racialised right to desire.

## If borders were open

The sheer politics of migration containment in 'Europe'<sup>1</sup> (Heller et al., 2017; Stierl, 2018) has foregrounded states' blatant violations of human rights. Journalistic investigations and non-governmental organisation (NGO) campaigns bring evidence of states' infringement of international law and demonstrate that migrants are not only left to die in the Mediterranean Sea; rather, they are hampered from landing in Europe, through coordinated pushback (and pullback), through ad hoc bilateral agreements with third-world countries and due to deliberate failure of rescuing people in distress at sea. Although the politics of migration containment in Europe is not by any means recent, as it traces back to the late nineties, in the last decade, the politics of border offshoring has become a central pillar of the European Union's (EU's) migration agenda, and nation-states do not hide their systematic violations. Within such a context, the piling up of evidence about the repeated violations and the documentation of migrants' conditions in detention centres and in camps have been rife. Nevertheless, despite such evidence, faced to murderous immigration policies and to extra-legal measures adopted by states to prevent migrants from entering Europe and from claiming asylum, anti-immigration sentiments have escalated, triggering utterly racist reactions to migrants' incorrigible presence.

While populist anti-immigrant mobilisations have been the object of wide investigation (Akkerman et al., 2016; Closs Stephens, 2019; Lucchesi and Romania, 2023; McCluskey, 2019), this article draws attention to the widespread reservations in the Left realm in Europe towards claims for equal freedom of movement and choice to decide where to live and argues that a racialised and unequal right to desire underpins those positions. By speaking of Left in Europe, I encompass both political centre-left wing parties and centre-left (and leftist) electorate. The timeframe that this article focuses on is between 2015 – the start of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe – and the current moment, although it acknowledges that the unquestioned nature of borders in Europe and their desirability have a much longer history that, to some extent, traces back to the beginning of the oil crisis (1973) and consolidated in the mid-nineties, with the enforcement of Schengen. It is not uncommon that the condemnation of states' omission of the duty to rescue at sea and of human rights violations towards refugees often goes in simultaneity with criticisms of unregulated migration.

Struggles and mobilisations in support of refugees had been rife, yet the political imagination about migration has increasingly become an affair of populist and anti-immigration coalitions: In November 2023, Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Albania to relocate the processing of asylum applications for migrants rescued at sea on the Albanian territory, and in 2020, and for about 2 years, the Italian government used quarantine ships to identify and detain migrants upon landing; the Greek government is testing war technologies to deter and push migrants back at the Turkish border. Since 2023, Belgium has excluded single men who claim asylum from the reception system. In the UK, asylum seekers started to be sent to floating prisons, that is, to barges repurposed for containing migrants, which recall the infamous hulk prisons used to detain felons in the 19th century (Tazzioli, 2023). The British government has also approved in 2023 the Rwanda Plan, according to which people who seek asylum in the UK might be sent to Rwanda; a similar agreement had been signed with Rwanda by Denmark in 2020.

The Left in Europe has resorted to realist positions, shrinking the leeway for building what, borrowing from Stuart Hall (2021), can be defined as a ‘counter-politics’ on migration, meaning the production of a collective imagination that does not cling to the assumption that the mobility, presence and aspirations of some people constitute a problem to be managed. Migration, according to the realist positions, cannot remain unregulated, and border controls cannot be lifted, since this would lead to massive arrivals of migrants from poorer regions of the world. Statements in favour of ‘refining the system’ have prevailed in the Left over expansive demands for equal access to mobility and for the right to choose where to live. Recalling Mark Fisher’s (2022: 1) famous formula, borrowed from Frederic Jameson, that ‘it’s easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism’, the end of the border regime looks nowadays not only unreachable but also unthinkable. In Europe, many citizens who define themselves as anti-racist and human rights supporters have turned to leftist-realist positions on immigration.

‘Leftist-realist’ designates here citizens who are not against immigration per se and who endorse humanitarian discourses on the duty to rescue and host ‘deserving’ refugees and who, however, consider utopian and unrealistic claims for freedom of movement. At best, they have reservations about the possibilities of granting an equal access to mobility pointing to the unrealistic dimension of such a goal in the current context; at worst, they are active detractors, justifying racialised borders as a necessary evil, to prevent an unmanageable migrants’ presence in Europe in a time of economic crisis. As stressed by political scientist John Casey (2010: 15), advocating for open borders is deemed to be ‘a policy-irrelevant chimera and utopia’ or ‘a dangerous sedition’. But why is the *desirability of borders* so widespread and struggles for equal right to mobility are deemed to be utopian? It can be argued that in part, this is the outcome of past and recent defeats of pro-immigration campaigns and for the right to asylum. Yet, this article challenges this assumption and contends that an unquestioned racialised right to desire underpins criticisms raised to struggles for freedom of movement and to justify the multiplication of bordering mechanisms.<sup>2</sup>

The right to desire refers to people’s aspirations related to mobility and to choosing where to live, as well as to seek for life’s change and improvement. This article shifts attention from analyses that either advocate for or warn against the utopian character of claims for freedom of movement, towards the racialised *right to desire*,<sup>3</sup> which animates the fear of not governing migration enough. The stake, it suggests, is less freedom of movement as such – a principle that both liberal proponents and leftist-realists consider a socio-economic value – than the racialised predicaments that justify the desirability of bordering mechanisms. Choosing where to move and stay is not seen as a right or a generalised human need when it concerns women, men and children who are turned into illegalised migrants by national laws and bilateral agreements. The piece, inspired by the fieldwork I conducted in Greece and in Italy between 2018 and 2023, methodologically builds on the analysis of public immigration and electoral debates in Europe. It contributes to political philosophy’s debates on borders and the right to migrate (Bulley, 2016; Jones, 2019) and proceeds in three sections. It starts by questioning detractors of equal right to freedom of movement and stay that are grounded on numbers, showing that such line of argument can be easily twisted to the

advantage of discourses in support of border controls and that corroborate a state-based approach to migration.

Although, in some passages, I refer to policies adopted or proposed by non-EU countries (such as the UK), this article mainly focuses on the politics of migration containment pushed forward by the European Commission and on leftist-realist positions in EU's member states. The second section contends that, instead, a critique of racialising borders needs to unpack the unequal right to desire which sustains both sheer anti-immigration sentiments and *leftist-realists'* reservations towards freedom of movement and stay. It moves on by drawing attention to the incapacitation of the future that is associated to the unequal right to desire: The mutual entanglement between disrupted futurity and unequal right to desire enables tracing connections between migrants and (some) citizens, through the lens of dispossessed future. It concludes by showing that the allegedly utopian character of claims for freedom of movement does not depend on the failure of past struggles but on the unquestioned unequal and racialised right to desire.

### The slippery politics of numbers

Disputes over migrants' numbers and the (un)governability of the phenomenon pervade leftist discourses on migration. To the contrary, right-wing governments and anti-immigration coalitions have pushed forward measures and policies that violate international law and human rights. More than the fear of migrants' invasion as such, to be at stake across the spectrum of criticisms to freedom of movement and stay for everyone is, what I call, a zero-sum rights' game, that is, a detractive logic of rights according to which in a time of economic crisis, migrants' access to welfare, labour market and mobility will lead to the detriment of citizens. The zero-sum rights' game is grounded on the principle of economic scarcity, according to which due to the escalation of precarity in Europe, it is necessary to eke out socio-economic resources and regulate access to welfare. Whether or not anti-immigration policies pursued by right-wing government that breach the right to asylum are enforced, they raise the bar of what is acceptable and, relatedly, decrease the expectations of pro-migrant mobilisation, shrinking the political horizon of migrant solidarity – in terms of claims, goals and watchwords. The anxiety shared by *leftist-realists* in Europe towards an equal right to free mobility does not concern the goal of a fairly managed migration but the potential horizon in which border controls are lifted and everyone is allowed to move freely.

Following leftist-realists, an unmanageable number of migrants are deemed to come to Europe. The fear of uncontrolled migration prevails over the unacceptability of policy proposals or bilateral agreements – such as, for instance, the EU-Turkey Deal<sup>4</sup> – that infringe international law and the right to asylum. Instead, striving for equal access to mobility and freedom to choose where to stay is posited as unreachable and, ultimately, undesirable. In fact, the discourse goes, a world where everyone is granted the right to stay and move freely is not a potentially desirable scenario since it would lead to a substantial ungovernability due to the uncontrolled numbers of migrants – what I call the *politics of numbers*. At the same time, in the current context where to be at stake are fundamental rights and where European governments enforce a sheer politics of migration containment, *leftist-realists* consider unrealistic to challenge the desirability of borders. Hence, irrespective of whether or not unlawful immigration policies have been enforced, they have boosted a *race to the bottom* in the debates and campaigns about migrants' rights. This does not mean in any manner reproducing the division between reformist and revolutionary struggles, downplaying mobilisations that take place within the existing legal framework and that denounce human rights violations.

Indeed, as Marco Perolini (2023) aptly points out, right-based campaigns can carry on with 'non-reformist reforms that weaken border regimes in the short term'. Rather, the point is not to discredit expansive claims that coalesce around the unequal right to desire as utopian demands. In order to re-articulate a critique of the border regime, it is key to unravel these two mutually interlaced arguments – the politics of numbers and the unrealistic claims for freedom of movements. A slippery politics of numbers pervades

immigration debates and has shaped also *leftist-realists'* discourses that feebly support migrants' rights. For instance, many newspaper articles in Europe bring evidence of the failure of right-wing governments in deporting migrants or in decreasing migrants' arrivals by boat.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in so doing, they do not challenge the deportation system and migration containment; to the contrary, they de facto posit that a fair and successful migration politics should prevent a migrant invasion by partitioning between authorised migrants and genuine refugees on the one side and irregular migration and bogus refugees on the other. Second, the politics of numbers can be easily twisted to the advantage of anti-immigration politics – disputing over statistics or by demonstrating that the number of arrivals or people seeking asylum has increased.

Third, even in those circumstances when numbers are mobilised in support of migrants' rights – for instance, by proving that there is no evidence about a nexus between less border restrictions and arrivals – the politics of numbers takes for granted that migrants coming in high numbers can represent a problem in terms of ungovernability. In fact, the politics of numbers cannot but strengthen a security approach to migration, disputing over success and failure in controlling the phenomenon in a more efficient way. More precisely, the politics of number contributes to transform migration from a phenomenon into a problem (De Genova, 2017). The European Commission has demonstrated that most people who seek asylum do not come to Europe but go to neighbouring countries.<sup>6</sup> According to UNHCR's figures, in the time period 1997–2022, more than 52.5 million people have been displaced in non-European countries, while in Europe, the estimated number is of 17.3 million.<sup>7</sup> One of the key points often raised in public debates concerns the potential future scenario of a world without (enough) differential border controls. Opponents of freedom of movement and leftist-realists converge on the assumption that migrants' presence can be managed through policies that regulate, channel and select global mobility. The widespread concern about ungovernable migrants' numbers is related to the unfounded idea that the majority of citizens from non-Western countries yearns for coming to Europe; and thus, if they could, they would come.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, such an argument de facto accepts the unequal and racialised right to desire: That is, the aspiration to seek for a better life or to move are considered key European values, but they are seen with suspicion or as markers of un-deservingness when these concern migrants. Seeking for a better life is one of the main drives of citizens from EUs' countries affected by economic crisis with a high rate of unemployment. In many circumstances, it also depends on noneconomic factors, such as changing one's own lifestyle or building new social and affective relationships. When it comes to migrants, these aspirations are morally discredited as capitalist or consumerist aspirations. However, it would be misleading to posit a homogeneous desire, shared and pursued by all migrants on the move. To the contrary, people who migrate are driven by diverse individual and collective aspirations that are deeply shaped by class, gender and nationality. However, it would be misleading to posit something like a homogeneous desire, shared and pursued by all migrants on the move. To the contrary, striving for a better life encapsulates highly heterogeneous desires, as well as individual and collective aspirations that are deeply shaped by class, gender and nationality. In fact, borders work by differentiating people and by multiplying differences, and at the same time, the functioning of borders foreground class-based differences (Balibar, 2002).

From such a perspective, borders are polysemic not only because they 'give individuals from different social classes different experiences of the law, the civil administration, the police and elementary rights, such as the freedom of circulation and freedom of enterprise', but also, and primarily, because they 'differentiate between individuals in terms of social class' (Balibar, 2002: 81–82). Hence, unpacking the unequal right to desire entails taking into account how class, nationality and gender inflect the ways in which borders work and filter mobility (Pinelli, 2021). An analysis exclusively centred on demonstrating that many migrants who arrive in Europe are in need of protection risks to involuntarily replicate the divides between 'economic

migrants' and 'deserving refugees' at the core of centre-Left parties in Europe which push for signing more return agreements with third-world countries.

### Who has the right to seek for a better life?

The unspoken question 'who has the right to have certain desires, and who is not entitled to pursue them?' silently lies at the core of the moral questioning raised not only by anti-immigration parties but also by *leftist-realists* that put at the forefront the question about the risks of what might happen if border controls are lifted. The right which is encapsulated in the 'right to desire' (Butler, 2012) should not be understood in legal terms but as what is de facto consolidated and taken-for-granted entitlement that is grounded on exclusionary basis, since, as this piece shows, it is sustained by racialised predicaments. At the same time, I conceive desire here as the individual or collective aspiration at the core of the 'incurability of migration' (De Genova, 2010). Rather than claiming their right to desire, migrants enact it through their unauthorised presence (Honig, 2001). In this respect, it is worth taking a step back and pondering on the overturn which has occurred in the relationships between politics and utopia. Indeed, if utopian claims were part of social movements' struggles in Europe in the decade 1960s–1970s, as the most famous motto of the student mobilisations in 1968 reveal – 'we are realist, we demand the impossible' (Balestrini and Moroni, 1988) –, nowadays what at a first glance appears out of reach is no longer accepted as part of a political project and horizon worth to be pursued.

Migration, as a contentious political topic, is emblematic of the consolidation of *leftist-realist* perspectives that warn against proposals and struggles that are unattainable in the current context. Arguments in favour of freedom of movement are superseded by positions that end up justifying the legitimacy and necessity of racialised borders, in the name of (in)security and against the erosion of Europeans' socio-economic rights. The racialised unequal right to desire reveals that claims for freedom of movement and choosing where to stay cannot be disjoined from anti-racist and abolitionist practices (Davis, 2011; Mezzadra, 2020). Indeed, behind debates about the 'right to immigrate' (Huemer, 2010), there is a sedimented discontent about the racialised right to desire. Tunisian or Moroccan citizens who travel to Europe are often labelled as 'economic migrants', and their aspiration of seeking for a better life is used for proving that many who migrate are not fleeing persecutions and do rather try to alter socio-economic inequalities by enjoying the rights and benefits that (some) European citizens have.

The argument according to which migrants come to Europe only because they want to buy expensive iPhones, enjoy life and make their own business is quite commonly reiterated for criminalizing, in particular, citizens from North African countries and for tracing exclusionary boundaries between deserving and underserving migrants.

The same desires, if pursued by Italian or French citizens, demonstrate instead the individual will to improve. Thus, the moralisation of capitalist and liberal desires is turned into a marker of self-entrepreneurship when it concerns people whose mobility is not deemed to be problematic (Anderson, 2017). Yet, the stake is not much to advocate for an equal right to desire but to situate a critique of the border regime within an anti-racist politics that exceeds migration as such and aims at unsettling the neat distinction between migrants and citizens (Sharma, 2020). Actually, the relationship between border struggles and anti-racist movements is mutual: The former could not exist without the latter, and in turn, struggles for migrants' rights are 'the social movement of the XXI century', as Angela Davis (2015) noticed. This is not by any means because migrants constitute a vanguard but, rather, because they bring to the fore interlocking modes of exploitation and subjection that crisscross the migrant/citizen divide (Davis, 2015).

Stating this does not mean in any way reducing to racism, anti-immigration sentiments or widespread reservations about claims for freedom of movement. In fact, I suggest that anti-racist practices should be

entangled with a challenge to the zero-sum rights' game, that is, the detractive logic of rights which assume that migrants get rights – to mobility, welfare and jobs – to the detriment of citizens.

On the one hand, the detractive logic of rights is not a new phenomenon: rather, it is grounded in the historical functioning of capitalism and in contemporary globalisation, in which homogenising processes are combined with 'extensive differentiating effects' (Hall, 2021: 101) that, ultimately, multiply hierarchies of lives. On the other, the detractive logic has boosted in the last two decades in Europe with the curtailing of welfare and socio-economic resources and with the multiplication degrees of 'non-citizenship of citizenship' (De Genova, 2020: 193), that is, the hierarchies in enjoyment of rights and the multiple exclusions that are inherent to citizenship itself. Hence, the unequal and racialised right to desire is the outcome of sedimented postcolonial racism and, jointly, of the fear of losing socio-economic rights from a condition of protracted precarity. Within such a framework, claiming for equal right to move and to choose where to live appears to many as a demand which is unbearable, and not simply utopian and non-realistic, since it entails disrupting the acceptability of racialising borders and, thus, of the unequal right to desire. The stake at the core of a counter-politics on migration, not driven by 'the fear of small numbers' (Appadurai, 2006) and by a state-based approach that keeps seeing migration as a problem, consists in combining struggles for social and, I add, economic justice (against the politics of scarcity) with anti-racist practices.

In a way, migration is one of the main grounds where the interplay between these two interdependent factors – racism and politics of scarcity – is particularly visible and, at once, constitutes an analytical lens for highlighting their articulation. Laurent Berlant (2011: 2) has notably coined the concept of 'cruel optimism' to describe the current socio-political context, in which 'the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving'. Following Berlant (2011: 3), in the last two decades, with the increasing job precarity and the financial crisis access to 'upward mobility, job security, political-social equality and lively, durable intimacy' have become unreachable and enhance cruel optimism. Thus, cruel optimism can be conceived as the strive for something that appears unattainable and, yet, is desired and pursued. Migration has become one of the key topics around which cruel optimism coalesces, and at the same time, it further boosts cruel optimism and the impossibility of attaining the 'good life' (Fassin, 2018). That is, cruel optimism exacerbates the zero-sum rights' game and the detractive rights' logics. Migrants' cruel optimism, that is, their desire for a better life, teeter any optimistic scenarios since, in a condition of socio-economic scarcity and climate change, it is unaffordable that we all partake the same good life.

In this respect, legal scholar Tendayi Achiume (2019) has intriguingly advanced that migration from former colonies to Europe and Western countries constitute a practice of decolonisation in action. Achiume grounds her argument in the consideration that the political and economic subordination of third-world countries to Western countries has not ended and, rather, has continued under different guises (such as through extractive processes and financial regimes) after the formal end of colonial era. Thus, 'migration as decolonisation' is framed in terms of distributive justice as it refers to the fact that 'for some Third World persons, at least one available means of pursuing political equality and asserting sovereignty (the capacity to self-determine) – together, decolonization – may very well be migration' (Achiume, 2019: 1552).

Conceiving migration to Europe as a decolonial practice enables us coming to grips with migrants' expansive claims for freedom of movement by exposing and challenging the unequal right to desire and the moral blaming of migrants' aspirations towards a better life. The unequal right to desire at play in public discourses about migration emerges more blatantly in countries that are affected by economic crisis, but it is by far not limited to them.

To the contrary, since the start of what states have defined as a 'refugee crisis' in Europe in 2015, even northern European states, like Sweden, have progressively deprived asylum seekers of rights and

preventively turned them into illegalised migrants (McCluskey, 2019). The moralisation of migrants' desires is played out as a general assessment of their (un)deservingness in coming to Europe: Migrants are deemed to be driven by socio-economic aspirations, and the discourse goes, in a time of economic scarcity, this deteriorates the quality of life of European citizens. The declarations of the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2015) when many Syrians fled to Europe in 2015 are quite emblematic in this respect. Indeed, he firmly opposed 'unregulated mobility' and argued that 'the right to free movement should be limited if for no other reason than the fact that it does not exist among the refugees, whose freedom of movement is already dependent on their class (Žižek, 2015). Moreover, unlike 'refugee', the term 'economic migrant' is 'defined by a fair degree of political agency, and motivated primarily by the desire for a better life' (Achieme, 2019: 1513). This detractive logic of rights enacts a twofold obfuscation. First, it overshadows the socio-economic hierarchies at play in Europe, and that should refrain us from positing a homogeneous European space (Boatcă, 2021).

Second, it sidelines that the racialised right to desire does not concern migrants only, but it also affects some European citizens. Such moralisation of migrants' aspirations is also grounded at the level of daily practices and of the material reception conditions they are entitled to, among which accommodation and monthly cash assistance (European Union (EU), 2013). Across Europe, asylum seekers' right to shelter and to monthly financial support have been at the core of public debates on migration. As far as accommodation is concerned, the unequal right to desire is indirectly at stake, given that migrants are depicted as scaremongers, who take advantage of the hosting system without working and paying taxes for a while. Instead, the criticisms about the cash assistance they receive unveil the unequal right to desire more directly: Migrants are blamed not only for the amount they get but also for their use of the monthly financial support. The moralisation of asylum seekers' conducts spans across the political spectrum, and *left realists* are often at the forefront: as an employee of a NGO that run reception centres for asylum seekers in Italy stressed to me,

we give them the pocket money every week, and this is conceived for buying essential products that are not given to them in the center; and, instead, they use it for superfluous purchases, such as smart phones, fancy clothes and sun glasses.

In fact, the NGO's employee continued, 'the evidence that they are not needy or that in any case they are not able to manage themselves, is given by how they waste that small amount of money.'<sup>9</sup>

The depiction of asylum seekers as individuals *unable to manage themselves* with respect to accommodation and the pocket money foregrounds indirectly the unequal right to desire at play not only in blatantly anti-immigration discourses but also in criticisms raised to the refugee hosting system by *leftist-realists*. The implicit assumption that sustains the discrediting of refugees is that the same desires, aspirations and needs considered positive values for European citizens are markers of undeserving-ness when it comes to women and men seeking asylum or to non-citizens who are labelled as migrants. Considering the unequal and racialised right to desire leads us to radically rethink how to confront the widespread anti-immigration sentiment across Europe and, in particular, the reservations raised by *leftist-realists*. The unequal and racialised right to desire pushes us to focus on the asymmetries and inequalities of lives that sustain criticisms of equal right to move and choose where to live. This does not entail overshadowing the right to asylum. Indeed, the 'legal production of migrants' illegality' (De Genova, 2002) is also the outcome of the dismantling of the refugee system and of the preventive illegalisation of people seeking asylum. Not only is the majority of those who lodge an asylum application in Europe rejected by state authorities,<sup>10</sup> alongside that, many migrants are hampered from becoming asylum seekers, as they are declared inadmissible to the asylum procedure,<sup>11</sup> or they are physically obstructed from getting access to it.



Hence, the unequal right to desire suggests intertwining claims about asylum with a focus on racialised hierarchies of lives that underpin criticisms to freedom of movement. However, focusing exclusively on refugees deserving protection, the risk is to involuntarily corroborate *leftist-realists'* insistence on the need to discern between genuine refugees and the others, in order to prevent that the migration phenomenon could be out of hand. Indeed, since 2015 (access to), asylum has been at the core of debates and mobilisations both for and against migrants: The inadequacy of the definition of 'refugee' enshrined in the Geneva Convention with respect to current forced migrations on the one hand and, on the other, claiming asylum as one of the very few ways for temporarily staying in Europe regularly has turned the refugee system as a key ground of the 'contested politics of mobility' (Squire, 2010). As a result of such a conjuncture across Europe, the refugees' hosting system and related questions about costs and profit of sheltering asylum seekers have gained central stage. On the one side, for some years, the zooming on asylum has enabled, first, highlighting, how humanitarianism itself has become a strugglefield and a matter of contentious politics (Mezzadra, 2020), and second, it has opened up spaces for widening and rethinking the definition of 'refugee'.

Yet, on the other, and most recently, it has partially occluded the possibility of unpacking the unequal right to mobility. This is not only because of the progressive political anesthetisation in front of normalised migrants' deaths that hampers the production of the intolerable (Foucault, 2021). Besides that, a discourse only centred on humanitarian protection does not chip away the sedimented unequal right to desire that consolidate racialised inequalities and, rather, reiterates the differentiations between deserving and undeserving asylum seekers, obstructing the articulation of expansive claims, not grounded on exclusionary legal, moral and economic partitions. Overall, the analytical focus on the unequal right to desire invites us not to insulate migration as a self-standing topic and social phenomenon and, instead, to investigate the detractive logic of rights that unsettles the migrant/citizen divide (Sharma, 2020; Tazzioli, 2023). Indeed, the unequal right to desire does not concern migrants only: Taking this latter as a critical standpoint, it enables foregrounding that the zero-sum rights' game boosts degrees of *denizenship* among citizens as well. In this respect, Bridget Anderson (2019: 9) has observed that 'immigration enforcement itself is one of the mechanisms that help to create differentiated citizenship'.

Building on that, Anderson (2019: 9) calls for excavating the connections between exclusions *within* citizenship and exclusions *from* citizenship realising the potential to complicate arguments that set up 'a homogenised "migrant" in conflict with a homogenised "white working class" in a "natural" competition for resources and status'. On the one hand, migration can be a vantage point for shedding light on the interplay between socio-economic inequalities and racialised right to desire, and on the other, it is essential not to fall in the trap of insulating migration as a self-standing topic. What does it mean to dig into the unequal right to desire and taken-for-granted racialised hierarchies of lives? For addressing this question, it is necessary first of all to debunk the assumptions which sustain criticisms towards claims for equal right to freedom of movement and stay. More concretely, it means taking seriously the widespread opinion that migrants who arrive in Europe come for seeking a better life and to ask instead 'what if such an aspiration was denied to young Europeans?' and 'why the same desires and needs are discredited as capitalist or consumerist aspirations when are pursued by migrants?'. Many could object that unauthorised migrants do not have the right to access socio-economic rights in Europe, as they are not from 'here' and, plus, (some) Europeans who live inside the Schengen area can enjoy free movement. However, it is precisely by engaging with such a discourse that the racialised right to desire can be laid bare.

### The foreclosure of migrants' futurity

Bordering mechanisms work by containing, selecting and diverting migrants' movements and by suffocating their lives. Instead, to be less visible is 'the stolen time of migration' (Khosravi, 2018), that is, the way in

which borders (and migration policies) disrupt and occlude migrants' futurity. Not only is migrants' lifetime kept on hold; the possibility of planning their future is occluded and disrupted. Migrants' time is both an object of control – what states and non-state actors try to get an hold over – and a political technology for governing migrants – migrants' lives are choked by keeping their time in hostage and by occluding their future. Hence, the unequal right to desire is boosted due to the temporary or protracted disruption of migrants' futurity. The lives of people whose mobility is considered problematic are choked not only due to spatial restrictions but also through temporal borders that work differentially, that is, through the 'racialisation of temporality', which consists in 'withholding futurity, making impossible anything but a slowed (down) life, and immobilizing the body' (Puar, 2021: 404). Migrants' futurity that I refer to does not consist in a general, abstract time: To the contrary, it encompasses people's migratory plans, but also life plans at large, as well as subjective desires – which are in part desires shared with others, shaped by (post)colonial imaginations.

That is, governing migration through time – by disrupting and choking their lifetime and their future – is directly connected to the reproduction of the unequal and racialised right to desire. Refugees' time, in particular, inside the camps, is usurped, and they lose control over their own future plans, not only because they are slowed down but also because their near future becomes unpredictable: 'refugees are disciplined temporally but are also cut off from desired futures' (Poole and Riggan, 2020: 415; see also Secor et al., 2022). And yet, this does not mean that migrants give up to their desires or migratory projects; rather, they often re-adapt and forge partially new ones, in light of the state-produced uncertainty that shapes their lives and that force them to stay in a protracted empty present: That is, through processes of time-making, they 'exert agency over time and construct alternate kinds of temporality', which are often different from their original plans (Poole and Riggan, 2020: 405). In fact, from a condition of protracted stuckness or, in an opposite way, of hypermobility, new desires emerge, as a result of the need and aspiration of moving on or of re-gaining control over one's own future.

For instance, women, men and children who arrive in Greece and claim asylum often remain blocked in refugee camps – on the mainland or on the islands – for 1 or 2 years, before eventually getting a response on their asylum application. Most of them do not want to remain in Greece and they rather aim at reaching other European countries. Nonetheless, their lifetime and their migratory plans are not restored when they receive the outcome about their asylum application – in many cases, even when this latter is positive and they get the refugee status. Indeed, the protracted wait inside the camps and the condition of not-knowing when they might receive a response and if they will be allowed to move on lead many of them to revisit their migratory plans, not necessarily by giving up but rather by taking into account new possibilities – in terms of countries to go, student scholarships opportunities or jobs to seek. Hence, migrants' heterogenous desires are not fixed once and for all, and to the contrary, they are moulded and transformed during the journey. Introducing the temporal dimension in the autonomy of migration which 'prioritizes the subjective practices, the desires, the behaviours of migrants themselves' (Mezzadra, 2011: 121; see also Papadopoulos et al., 2008) means registering how the unequal right to desire is deeply inflected by the choking of migrants' futurity produced by racialised bordering mechanisms.

Disrupted lifetime and occluded futurity index that the right to desire is tangibly infringed by bordering mechanisms and migration policies that not only multiply spatial segregation and differentiate mobilities but also exercise a temporal hold over people's lives. Therefore, migration policies enhance the unequal right to desire by disrupting and partially occluding and crumbling migrants' futurity: 'what emerges is a crisis of futurability', Ann Secor (2022: 517) flags up, 'an incapacitation of the future in all its unactualized potentiality'. Thus, the heterogenous desires that inflect migratory plans are affected by such incapacitation of the future that migrants are confronted with. The feeling of being robbed of one's own time, and in particular of the future, does not concern only refugees stuck in camps or waiting indefinitely for the outcome of their asylum application.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the foreclosure of the future and the disruption of

lifetime is one of the distinctive features of migration (Bhatia and Canning, 2021). Thus, the unequal right to desire is both what remains unaddressed and unspoken in immigration debates and what is enhanced through racialising bordering mechanisms. Yet, the unequal and racialised right to desire should not lead to insulate migration as a self-standing object.

To the contrary, connecting the unequal right to desire to the incapacitation of the future can be turned into an expansive analytical lens, which enables connecting migrants and citizens' dispossessed future, without erasing the specificities of migrants' conditions (Ramsay, 2020). On the one hand, if the unequal right to desire foregrounds the racialised time of migration, on the other, it can be a vantage point for disrupting the migrant/citizen divide. Indeed, the unequal right to desire does not produce clear-cut asymmetries between migrants and citizens: Rather, it affects migrants in a differential way, since the possibilities to leave one's own country and to enter another one and stay differ in a substantial way depending, among other factors, on nationality and class. In this sense, by focusing on the unequal right to desire, we should be careful in not reifying migration as a homogeneous notion or condition. At the same time, such unequal right that entails an incapacitation of the future concerns some citizens as well, and it sheds light on the multiplication of degrees of denizenship.<sup>13</sup> Migrants' aspirations to travel, move to another country and seek for a better life are mobilised in public and political debates as evidence that they are not in need (of protection) and, all the while, are assumed aspirations that compromise European citizens' exclusivity to move freely and to get out of precarity.

Hence, the moral discrediting of migrants as individuals pursuing self-fulfilling goals goes in hand with the assumption that their aspirations might further deteriorate Europeans' quality of life. Deserving refugees are expected to have hope – towards the future – but not expectations and aspirations: Indeed, 'expectation' signals the irreducible subjectivity of migrants, and therefore, 'the worthy refugee is authorized to hope and dream, but not to arrive with concrete and worldly expectations regarding their standard of living' (Secor et al., 2022: 415).

## Conclusion

The spectre of ungovernability – the idea that migration could escalate up to a tipping point – haunts public debates on immigration in Europe. The desirability of borders, besides any discussion on their legitimacy, nowadays is not in question. Keshavarz and Khosravi (2022: 18) suggest, 'borders work more like magic than protocols', since they shape our perception of the reality and have the power of turning people and phenomena of something into something else, like 'neighbourhood into enemies'. Claims for freedom of movement are seen as unrealistic, out of reach and, ultimately, undesirable. However, it is not a matter of either pushing for or warning against utopian claims, as this would ultimately mean looking at migration from a state-based perspective that assesses rather or not the (un)feasibility of such a political horizon. Rather, this article has shifted the focus from debates over the (un)realistic dimension of struggles for freedom of movement towards a critical attitude that excavates and unsettles the racialised right to desire. Indeed, the zero-sum rights' game discourse that has gained traction in Europe, as a result, is underpinned by an unequal right to desire, on the basis of which the aspirations and the subjective drives of those labelled as 'migrants' are deemed to be illegitimate or untenable. Proposals and policies on the edge of the law or that clearly infringe the right to asylum are paradoxically perceived as less utopian, although deplorable, than the 'myth' of freedom for everyone to move and decide where to stay.

By positing claims for equal freedom of movement and stay as utopian, the racialised right to desire is enhanced, and migration is approached through a problem-solving logic. Framing migration as a problem means replicating the gesture of dividing up between deserving and undeserving migrants. Digging into the unequal right to desire which underpins detractors of claims for freedom of movement brings to the fore the sedimented – but often hidden – justification of racialising borders: The right to mobility is assumed by most European citizens as one of the essential freedoms, and however, it is not conceived as a freedom

that, by extension, should be granted to everyone. Bringing to the fore the unequal and racialised right to desire involves not narrowing the analytical focus to humanitarian support and, instead, to widen it to claims for a right to mobility and stay. While the politicisation of humanitarianism that occurred with the start of the so-called 'refugee crisis' has opened leeway of intervention to support migrants in transit (Fekete, 2018; Tazzioli and Walters, 2019), the hierarchies of migrants' (un)deservingness have gained central stage, occluding the space for expansive claims. Within such a context, it might be objected, pushing forward claims for an equal access to mobility might appear to many as utopian. So, what does it mean to envision a counter-politics on migration? Not framing migration as a problem and out of a problem-solving approach entails exposing the unequal and racialised right to desire and, jointly, showing that this does not concern migrants only.

That is, a counter-politics on migration undermines the containerisation of migration as a self-standing object towards a radical questioning of the detractive logic of rights which multiplies degrees of (un)deservingness, beyond the legal status (e.g. citizen, refugee). The unequal right to desire pushes us towards an abolitionist perspective that, rephrasing Gilmore (2017) and Davis (2011) on prisons, strives for undermining the conditions under which racialising bordering mechanisms became the solution to problems and to the progressive erosions of socio-economic rights. Unsettling the detractive logic of rights entails framing freedom of movement beyond individualistic perspectives and rearticulating it as part of the theoretical and political horizons of mobile commons and commoning (Trimikliniotis et al., 2016). As the feminist carceral abolitionists scholarship as fleshed out, far from being detractive, the logic of rights responds to a sedimentation of interdependent struggles – both for getting more rights and for not losing existing ones. In Davis' (1981: 59) words, Black liberation and women's liberation cannot be disjoined from each other, 'given that until Black people get their rights, women won't have theirs either'. Pushing this further, only when migrants get equal access to rights do all others get their rights or preserve the ones they are currently enjoying.

## Notes

1. Heller et al. (2017: 2) have introduced the term 'Europe' in order 'to problematise frequently employed usages that equate the EU with Europe and Europe with the EU and suggests, at the same time, that Europe is not reducible to the institutions of the EU'.
2. It would be misleading to conclude that the current attitude in the Left is the result of the absence of struggles and organised refusals: Individual and collective mobilisations and networks in support of migrants had been rife across Europe, some of which have also put in place practices for monitoring and reporting state's violations – such as Alarmphone and Border Monitoring Violence.
3. In this article, I build on Weheliye's (2014: 3) definition of racialisation, 'understood not as a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of socio-political relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans and nonhumans'.
4. The EU-Turkey Deal was signed in 2016 and established that migrants who arrive in Greece transiting from Turkey could be sent back to Turkey. The agreement also enforced geographical restrictions, obliging migrants who landed on the Greek islands to remain there until they receive the outcome of their asylum claim. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>
5. For instance, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/14/the-guardian-view-on-migration-this-bill-is-proof-of-the-governments-failure>
6. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/statistics-migration-europe_en)

7. <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>
8. This is first of all played out through the idea that migratory plans and desires are detached from socio-economic relationship in the countries of origin.
9. Interview with M., employee of the NGO Odissea, Lucca, 18/07/2019.
10. In the EU, the rate of asylum recognition in 2022 was overall 49% for first-instance decisions.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum\\_statistics&oldid=558844#Decisions\\_on\\_asylum\\_applications](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_statistics&oldid=558844#Decisions_on_asylum_applications)
11. This is for instance the case in Greece where asylum seekers from Bangladesh, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and Pakistan and who arrive via Turkey can be declared inadmissible to the asylum procedure, due to a Greek law enforced in 2021 which defines Turkey as a 'safe third country'.
12. In the case of asylum seekers stranded in camps or waiting for the result of the asylum application, the feeling of being robbed of one's own lifetime emerges more blatantly and with more disruptive effects.
13. The principle of scarcity and the detractive logic of right are central to the ways in which precarity, as a shared socio-economic condition, has been turned by states into a political technology of governmentality based on breaking workers' unity (Hardt and Negri, 2009).

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