PUSHBACKS AND DISPERSAL AS TECHNOLOGIES OF MIGRATION DISPLACEMENT

ARTICLE

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In June 2021 activist groups and a few NGOs launched the campaign "End Pushbacks" to denounce the systematic pushbacks conducted at Europe's land and maritime borders, and demanding states to stop the practice. The campaign followed the publication of the report "Pushbacks and Rights Violations at Europe's Borders", which is one of the most complete repositories about the systematic pushback operations enacted at the internal and external frontiers of Europe. According to the report, pushbacks "increasingly constitute a systematic Europe-wide approach to migration governance."[1] Here I propose to rethink the notion of displacement by considering dispersal and pushbacks as key spatial governmental tactics of migration governmentality that nowadays are used in a widespread way across Europe. More precisely, I suggest bringing pushbacks and dispersal under the umbrella of displacement, by conceiving this latter as a series of heterogeneous measures enforced by state actors – at times in collaboration with non-state actors –, which consists of removing migrants from a border or from a place they have settled or chocking lives, dismantling infrastructures of liveability and stealing time. Understood in this way, displacement has become a key political technology of migration governmentality to harm migrants and violently obstruct them from accessing rights, safe spaces and asylum. Migrants are violently displaced from temporary border zones and informal encampments; they are chased away and dispersed from urban areas as well as from any site where they build temporary infrastructures of liveability. Displacing migrants and moving them back, far from the border (pushbacks), is used by states as a systematic spatial tactic for regaining control over unruly mobility.

The act of pushing migrants back in order to hamper them from claiming asylum and from officially entering the national territory is a police practice that is systematically used across Europe. Pushbacks often take place at the threshold of (in)visibility. Indeed, on the one hand, NGOs and activists have been trying to document and collect data about pushbacks to produce an archive of state border violence and human rights violations. On the other, opacity and partial invisibility characterise pushback operations, as long as, first, it is hard for non-state actors to monitor and take stock of every single pushback and, second, state authorities act at the edge of the law. Pushback operations are often enforced through states' bilateral agreements that circumvent European law and, at times, the Dublin Regulation.

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[1] https://refugee-rights.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/pushbacks-and-rights-violations-at-europes-borders.pdf (p. 79).

A case in point is represented by the so called Seehofer Deal, signed between Germany and Greece in 2018 and which, dodging the bureaucratic steps of the Dublin Regulation, established the possibility for Germany to return directly to Greece within 48 hours migrants who claimed asylum there. Along the Balkan Route, migrants are exposed to what NGOs have defined as "chain of pushbacks", meaning by that "forced expulsions across multiple borders, where migrants or refugees are – via an informal cooperation between different states – sent from one state (for instance Austria or Italy), through others (including Slovenia and Croatia) to a third country (e.g. Bosnia-Herzegovina), without often having been there in the first place."[2] While pushback operations have been enforced for a long time and simultaneously with the consolidation of the Schengen space, nowadays they have become a routine element of migration governmentality. Migrants are also targeted by dispersal measures – that is, they are chased away and harassed by the police as soon as they gather in border zones or in urban contexts. This happens on a daily basis in different sites across Europe, such as Calais, Paris, Ventimiglia and Dunkirk.

Migrants are violently chased away, the makeshift camps they built are dismantled and their personal affairs are destroyed. Calais is one of the border zones where, notably, over the last few years dispersal has been systematically used by the French police as a tactic of migrant deterrence, for both extenuating migrants and for turning the place into an unsafe environment for them. The politics of migrant dispersal is used for hampering migrants from gathering and temporarily settling in a certain place, and at the same time for preventing the formation and consolidation of migrants' collective political subjects. Indeed, by constantly scattering and dispersing migrants across space, state authorities actively obstruct the possibility of people on the move building transversal alliances and consolidating collective spaces of life. Similarly to pushbacks, dispersal measures have been increasingly used in a systematic manner by state authorities to regain control over migrants' mobility and presence. Like pushbacks, migrant dispersal is subjected to an uneven (in)visibility: at times, when massive evictions take place, migrant dispersal is reported in the news; other times, dispersal operations remain undetected and take place on the sly. Both pushbacks and dispersal measures are part of what might be called the *grey area of migration governmentality.*

In other words, states' accountability is quite minimal, as neither dispersal nor pushback can be easily or fully monitored.[3] Pushbacks and dispersal are characterised by legal opacity and unaccountability and are often enforced at the threshold of (in)visibility. Indeed, the leeway for states to disperse and push migrants back without being fully out of the law or without being monitored by activists or lawyers is quite consistent. Opacity and partial unaccountability are constitutive of both pushbacks and dispersal. For this reason, it is key to analyse together the opacity of pushbacks and dispersal measures, and the (partial) lack of traces about border violence – that is, what happens after displacement, evictions and pushbacks operations.

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[2] Ibidem.

[3] https://www.borderviolence.eu/statistics/push-backs/

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Thus, a spatial focus on displacement operations and the attempt to monitor these in real time should be intertwined with a temporal perspective that investigates what happens after displacement, and which traces are left at the level of collective memory. Indeed, "eviction", as remarked by van Baar and colleagues, "is also never just spatial; it also entails various temporal dimensions related to waiting, suspension, postponed or denied access, and the reconsidering and redirecting of life trajectories" (van Baar, 2021: 81). How are migrants affected by dispersal and pushbacks and what happens to them? What is left upon eviction? Similar questions can also be raised about the closure of official camps or the violent dismantling of migrants' makeshift camps. Nevertheless, dispersal and pushbacks usually concern people en route and on the move, and this makes it even harder to account for the aftermath of border violence and how these latter impact on migrant lives. Indeed, migrants are pushed back while they try to cross a border or soon after they enter a territory. Dispersal can entail the dismantling of makeshift camps but at times it is also enforced against migrants while they are on the move. The partial legal unaccountability of pushback and dispersal operations goes together with their partial numeric "non-countability".

An archive of displacement operations at the internal and external frontiers of Europe would necessarily be a partial one. Evictions, dispersal and pushbacks often happen on the sly – hidden from media visibility. Or even when they are documented, migrants disperse and disappear and, therefore, it is not easy to count and account for what happened. In fact, the numbers of individuals who are evicted from makeshift camps are approximate and vague, as confirmed by the language used in newspapers or NGO reports about it: "about 1200 migrants had been evicted this morning", "roughly 80 people had been violently chased by the police and their belongings destroyed", "we are aware of at least 30 migrants who had been pushed back last night". Ultimately, the state's inaccuracy in numbers about migrant displacement operations unveils a certain will *not to govern too much*. That is, on the one hand, states' disregard for what happens upon eviction is part of a mode of governing by harassing and disrupting migrants' lives; on the other, governing and regaining control over unruly mobility by *not governing too much* renders states unaccountable or with little accountability for displacement operations.

Hence, numeric and political opacity is a political technology that at times is also systematised at the level of police practices for dealing with incorrigible unruly mobility. Even if migrant dispersal is very difficult to map and to account for, and it is characterised by a numeric and political opacity, state authorities plan and partially count migrant dispersal operations. By being used as a political technology de facto, dispersal has been to some extent included in the archive of states' police repertoire.

However, far from being part of an exhaustive archive, overall but approximate data about migrants dispersal can be found only by confronting and crisscrossing information from different state and non-state sources. Producing evidence of pushbacks and dispersal operations is in fact the result of a laborious collection of disparate, scattered and partial information. Oral testimonies, real-time monitoring activities, secondary data and media reports are among the sources used by activists and NGOs for generating a counter-archive

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of states' opaque border violence. Confronted with states' systematic resort to pushbacks and dispersal, how can a critique of border violence be framed? Conceiving pushback and dispersal as modes of displacement, it enables, I suggest, rethinking the critique of the border regime as part of what Ruth Gilmore has called "abolition geography", according to which "freedom is a place" (Gilmore, 2017). That is, it involves challenging the exclusionary right to a place and multiple modes of displacement, which affect both migrants and citizens. In fact, a focus on displacement allows connecting violence exercised against those labelled and governed as "migrants" with tactics of destitution and eviction that target (some) citizens as well and that enforce degrees of non-citizenship.

References

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